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Here's the public-
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Morgan Gracyk,
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TESTIMONY OF AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS

PRESIDENT ALBERT SHANKER

BEFORE THE

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES'

COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND LABOR

SUBCOMMITTEE ON

ELEMENTARY, SECONDARY AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

JULY 11, 1991

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, on behalf of the 750,000-members of the American Federation of Teachers/AFL-CIO, I appreciate the opportunity to present the AFT's comments on President Bush's legislative package, H.R. 2460, specifically on its reliance on so-called private school choice as a strategy for educational improvement.

The package of education bills before the 102nd Congress was created in a context that promised an unprecedented degree of federal ingenuity in dealing with this nation's ongoing education crisis. That context, of course, is the six national education goals that were adopted by President Bush and the nation's governors in 1989. That this is the first time our nation has had national education goals — let alone a set that was the result of bipartisan agreement — is perhaps the clearest sign of the extent of our education crisis. That these goals also represent the first federal assertion of responsibility for the overall improvement of public education, rather than only for solving discrete problems, is also a mark of how profoundly our poor performance in education is affecting every other sector in our society. Never before has the national interest in a sound public education system been more obvious.

The AFT welcomed the Education Summit, and we strongly support the six national education goals. It is difficult not to. In fact, I can't think of a group or individual in or out of education or politics who has not supported the goals. The question is: Does support for these goals mean motherhood-and-apple-pie rhetoric or a commitment to action? Does support for these goals mean pronouncements about where we want to go or does it extend to developing the ideas and programs necessary to take us there?

The Administration has performed very well on the first part of these questions. It has assumed leadership in focusing the American public on the education goals, and it has clearly articulated the gravity of our education crisis and our mutual responsibilities for overcoming it. Judging, however, from H.R. 2460, the Administration itself still does not grasp the seriousness of our education problems, nor does it yet realize how urgently we need to match the rhetoric of the national education goals with ideas and policies to achieve them.

There is no more striking indication of the Administration's failure to meet the educational challenges it so forcefully talks about than its preoccupation with public aid to private education — or, as it prefers to call it, school choice. In fact, when you add up all the money, private school choice turns out to be the centerpiece of H.R. 2460. Look at Chapter 1, which represents the federal government's largest single expenditure on K-12 education and its most successful program for disadvantaged children: private school choice. Look at Chapter 2: private school choice. Look at the incentives to state and local education agencies: they're for private school choice. There is virtually no place you can turn to in "America 2000" without coming to the conclusion that to the extent the Administration is committed to the national education goals, it is as a fig leaf for implementing private school choice.

The question is, where would private school choice get us? How far would it advance us toward achieving the national education goals, or even one of them, like being first in the world in math and science?

Let's say that all the objections to private school choice that you've no doubt heard and that the AFT shares have been overcome. Let's say, for example, that the Supreme Court has ruled public aid to religious school permissible; that private schools, like public schools, won't be able to select their students; and that public and private schools will be subject to the same rules and regulations and reporting and accountability requirements so that there can be a true and fair competition between the two sectors. Let's pretend these and other objections to giving public aid to private and religious schools and fostering competition in education have been met. Would we still have an educational crisis on our hands?

Many people in this country, including the President and the Secretary of Education, believe we would not. The reason they give is that private schools, by virtue of market control, are superior to public schools, and the proof they offer is that private school students achieve at much higher levels than public school students.

Is this the case? Not according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

We have all heard a great deal about the disastrous performance of our students on the recent NAEP exams in mathematics — one-third of eighth graders cannot perform at a fifth-grade level, and fewer than half of high-school seniors are able to do seventh-grade math. These results are shocking, but they are not news. What is news, and it is shocking, are the results of the public and private school comparisons NAEP allows us to make. And what they tell us is that if half or even all our public school students were to "choose" private schools tomorrow, we'd still have an educational crisis on our hands.

It is true that a little over half of the twelfth graders in Catholic and other private schools can do seventh-grade math, while only a little under 50 percent of twelfth-grade public school students can handle this level of math: problems involving decimals, fractions and percents. This is a private school advantage, but hardly one to boast about. It certainly isn't enough to make America number one in math by the year 2000. But it is also true that whereas 5 percent of twelfth-grade public school students reached the highest NAEP math level — generously speaking, the level necessary to handle college-level math — only 4 percent of Catholic and other private school students reached that level.

This 5 versus 4 percent clearly represents a public school advantage — and a nail in the coffin of private school choice. But what if the figures were reversed. What if 5 or even 6 or 7 percent of private school students achieved at the highest level? We would still be faced with an educational disaster, especially in light of the fact that 20 to 30 percent of students in other industrialized countries meet standards that are equal to or higher than NAEP's highest levels by the time they graduate from secondary school, if not sooner.

These and similar results from other national studies of student achievement are especially devastating to the arguments for private school choice given what we know about the differences between public school students and the youngsters who attend Catholic and other private schools. In fact, these differences are so dramatic that the wonder is not that private school students performed slightly better, but that they didn't leave public school students in the dust.

Of course, the basic difference is that private schools can and do select their students and reject applicants who fail to meet their standards. For example, 71 percent of Catholic high schools require an entrance exam, as do 43 percent of other religious schools and 66 percent of private schools. Moreover, 80 percent of Catholic high schools require that entering students have successfully completed their previous year of school, and 71 percent of principals of Catholic high schools cite student discipline records as their chief admissions criterion. In sharp contrast, the chief admissions criterion for public schools is residence of the student. In other words, private and religious schools are not obliged to take all comers as public schools must. They also are free to get rid of students who do not work out. Why, then, did private schools only manage to get half of their twelfth-grade students to perform at the seventh-grade level?

Consider, too, that only 19 percent of public school students had parents who completed four or more years of postsecondary school, while 30 percent of religious school students and 57 percent of other private school students had parents with these higher educational levels. Among the sample of twelfth graders NAEP tested, 25 percent of the mothers and 31 percent of the fathers of public school students graduated from college, while the comparable figures for the mothers and fathers of private school students are 36 percent and 47.5 percent. (Some graphs are appended to this testimony illustrating these figures.)

College education usually translates directly into higher family income and all the advantages this brings. True to the pattern, here, too, the difference between public and private school students is immense. For example, while 31 percent of public school students had family incomes of less than \$15,000, only 12 percent of religious school students and 10 percent of other private school students were this poor. At the other end, only 11 percent of public school students had family incomes of \$50,000 and more, but 20 percent of religious school students and 38 percent of other private school students came from families who earned that amount. Why, then, didn't private schools post better results? Consider, too, that the majority of Catholic and other private school students follow an academic program, while public school students may choose a "general" or vocational curriculum. In 1980, for example, 72 percent of Catholic schools students and 71 percent of other private school students were in an academic track in comparison with 36 percent of public school students. Why, then, did Catholic and other private schools fail to get more than 4 percent of their twelfth graders prepared to handle college-level math? Why were the more privileged private school students outperformed by public school seniors?

The point of demonstrating that, despite their considerable advantages, Catholic and other private schools do no better at educating students than public schools — indeed they do a little worse — is not to crow. The sad fact is that neither sector is performing well. The undeniable fact is that if we are serious about our students' meeting world-class standards — or even being able to do seventh-grade math by the time they leave high school — private school choice is not the answer. And the inescapable conclusion is that the centerpiece of the Administration's education legislation is a strategy for getting nowhere.

Why, then, is the general level of learning so low, even among the kids who are chosen by the schools they attend and who have educated, relatively well-off parents who spend money to send them to these private schools? It's not that American kids are dumber than kids in other countries. But unlike kids in other countries, they have no reason to work hard in school. Most of the kids who want to go to college know they can get in without working hard. (Nearly 60 percent of all high school graduates go on to postsecondary schools, and about 80 percent of the graduates of private schools do. And the large majority of high school graduates get into the school of their first choice.) The kids who plan to get jobs know the same thing: Working hard and doing well in school won't make any difference in the kind of job they get or the pay they'll be offered. American businesses, unlike those in other industrialized nations, do not ask for high school transcripts or recommendations from teachers. All they care about is the possession of a high school diploma.

Imagine the plight of teachers. It's hard enough, even under the best of circumstances, to persuade youngsters that studying history or algebra or science is "relevant" to their future lives no matter what their aspirations. But when kids can retort, "That's not required by the college I want to go to or for the job I want" or "If I take these hard courses, they'll pull down my grade point average," teachers are practically helpless. To think that this lack of external incentives for working hard in school makes no difference in what students do is to believe that American youngsters are some special breed of humans who are strictly motivated by an internal love of learning and an understanding of its relationship to a productive adult life.

And the parents? Whether their kids are in public or private schools, most parents are not going to nag their children about taking challenging subjects and doing a lot more work if the kids can say, "That's all I need to do to pass and get into college or get a job." Parents know they won't get anywhere.

No reform will raise the achievement of our students if they can meet the prevailing standards without having to work. That's where reform has to start — with incentives for students to work hard in school rather than with incentives for schools to attract customers. Because the message the NAEP results, and a variety of other indicators, are giving us is not about spending money to send kids to private schools. It's about how kids, like adults, will only work when they have incentives to do so.

How do we start? A good model is Senator Edward Kennedy's (D-Mass.) ACCESS bill (S. 1134), which provides a full scholarship for students who complete and do well in a college preparatory course. But we also should tighten college and university entrance standards so that students know they have to acquire their high school education in high school rather than college. If colleges and universities will not do this willingly, we should consider tying the federal aid available to them to their adoption of a set of national standards and their attention to students' performance on a set of national examinations. Similarly, we should consider conditioning student aid on a student's performance in a new national examination system.

Of course, this could not, and should not, be done right away. New curriculum frameworks, standards and examinations take time to develop. Clearly, I am not talking about a one-shot, make-or-break, multiple-choice test taken towards the end of a student's high school career. But although the system I am talking about will have to be phased in, it should not take forever — and it need not if the sums devoted to public aid to private schools in the Administration's education package were instead designated for the development of such a system.

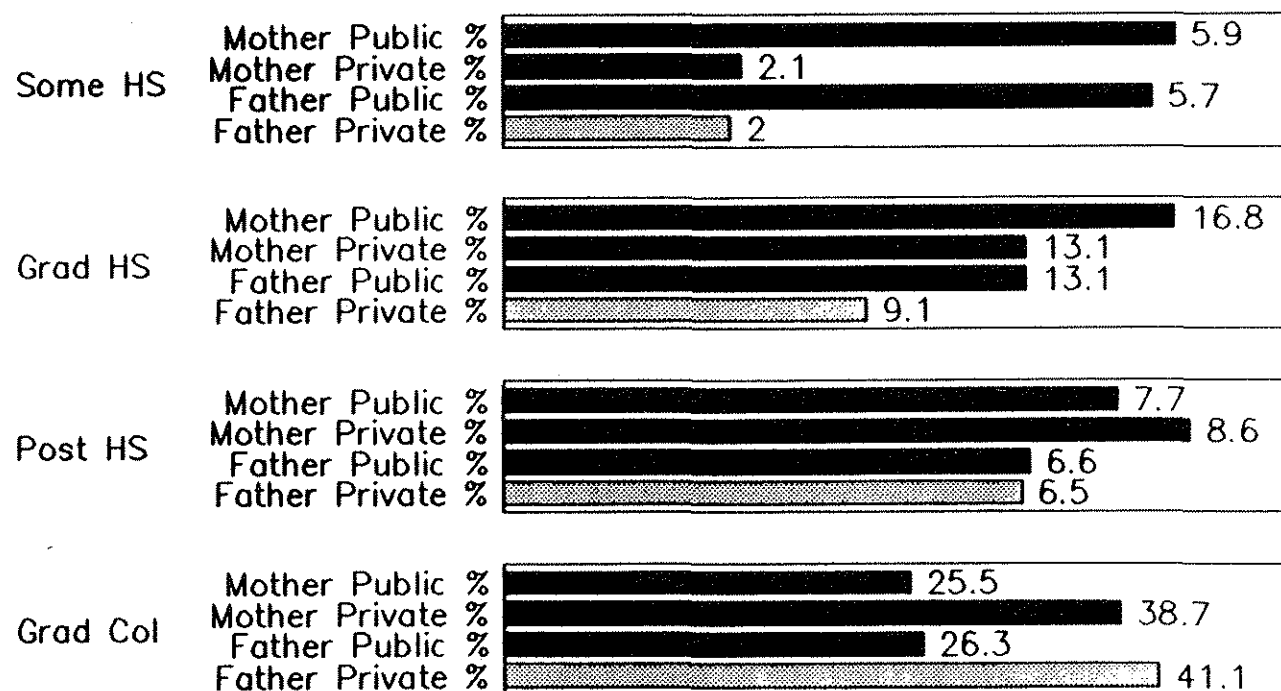
We also need to provide incentives and support for those students who are not going to college. Every one of our competitor nations does so, and we have much to learn from them and the results they obtain. We could do no better in understanding the problems of America's school-to-work transition than to study the findings and recommendations of a recent report from the National Center on Education and the Economy, "America's Choice: High Skills or Low Wages!" It, too, calls for the development of curriculum frameworks, standards and a national examination system for students. And it, too, underscores that, unless businesses reward work-bound students who have worked hard and performed well in school with better jobs and higher wages, all our talk about improving achievement and, ultimately, productivity, will be just that: talk.

None of this will be easy, and none of this will be cheap, if we want to do it right. But it's a lot easier than turning our education system upside down with so-called private school choice. And it will be a lot cheaper than having our nation go under because the Administration chose to rearrange the deck chairs on the Titanic. For that's what the NAEP results tell us private school choice would mean: without a change of course, it does not matter much whether our students sit in a public or private school chair; they are going under.

NAEP Results by Education Level

Percent By Level of Education

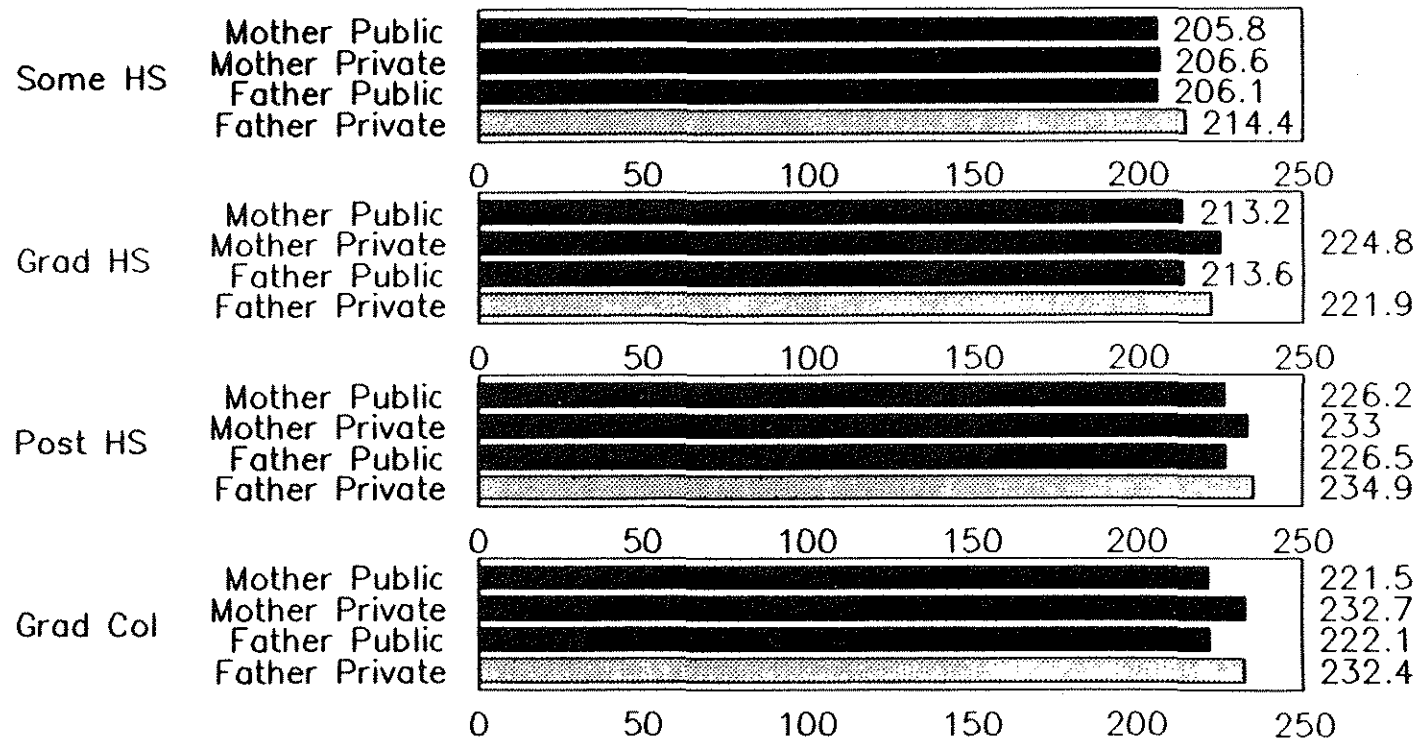
Grade 4



NAEP Results by Education Level

Math Composite Proficiency Means

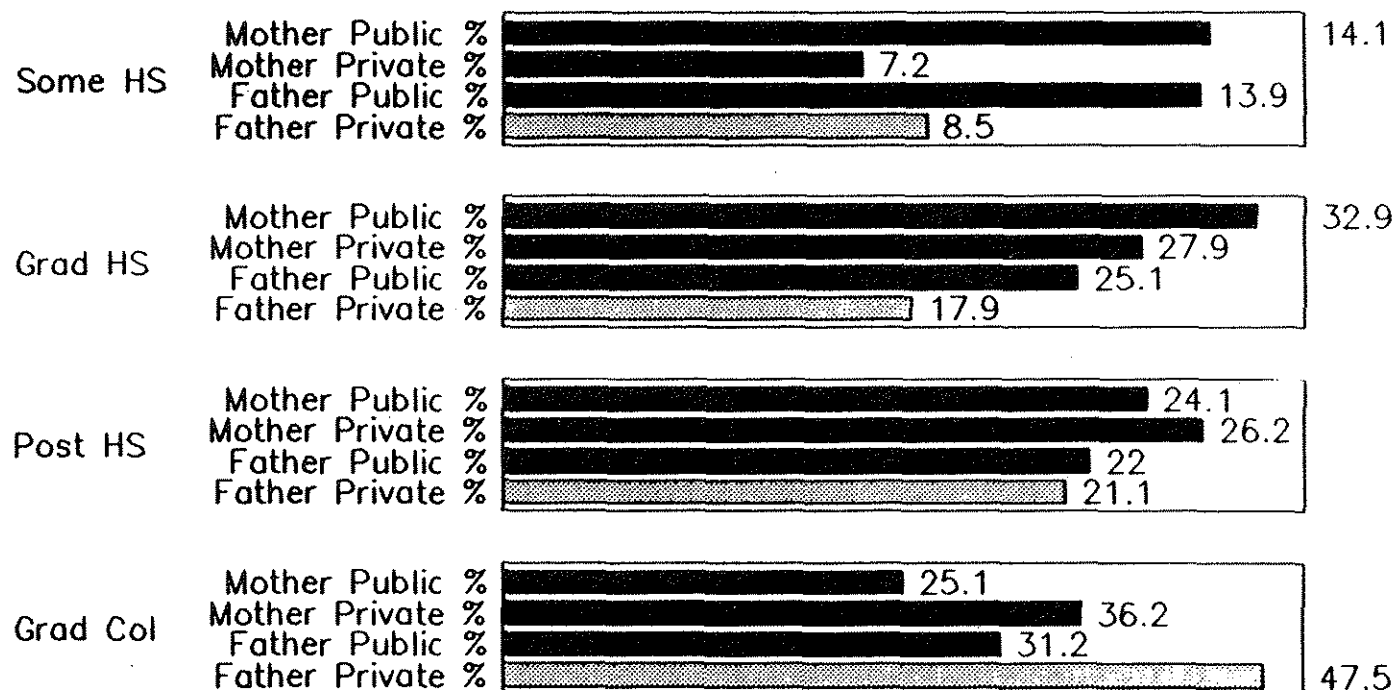
Grade 4



NAEP Results by Education Level

Percent By Level of Education

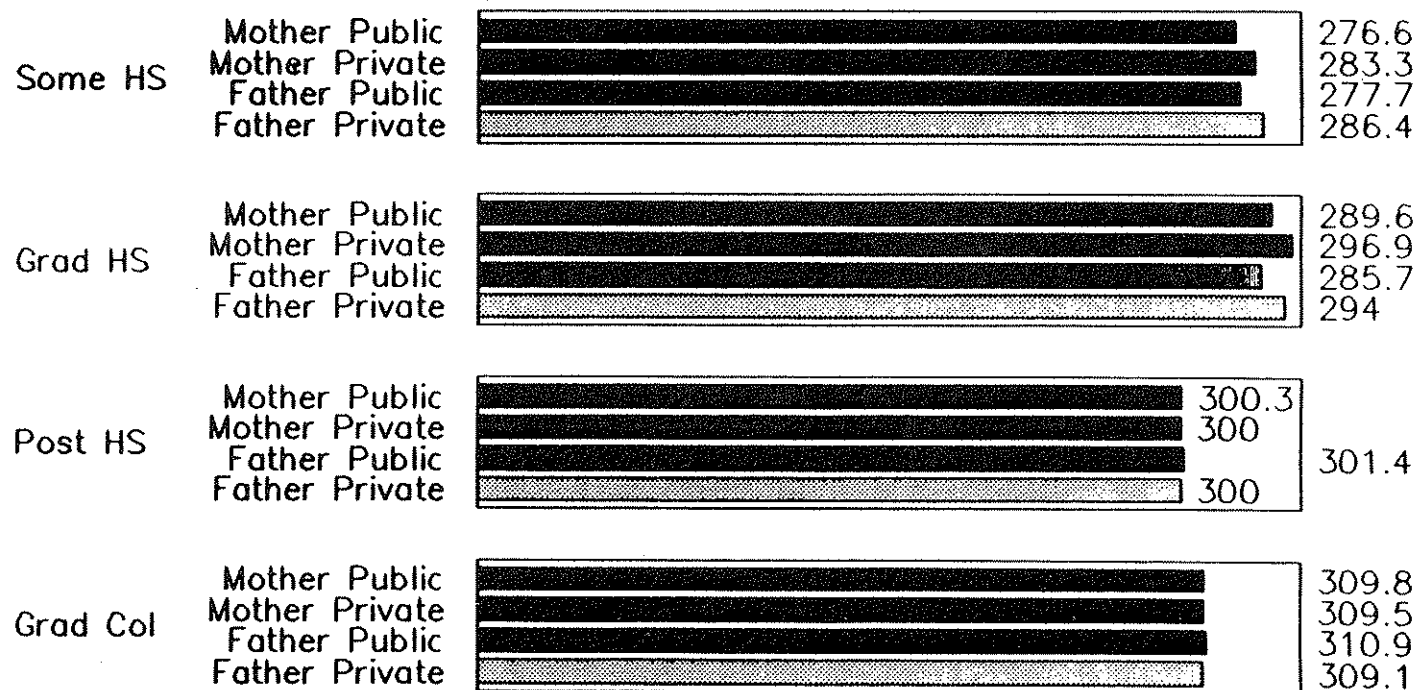
Grade 12



NAEP Results by Education Level

Math Composite Proficiency Means

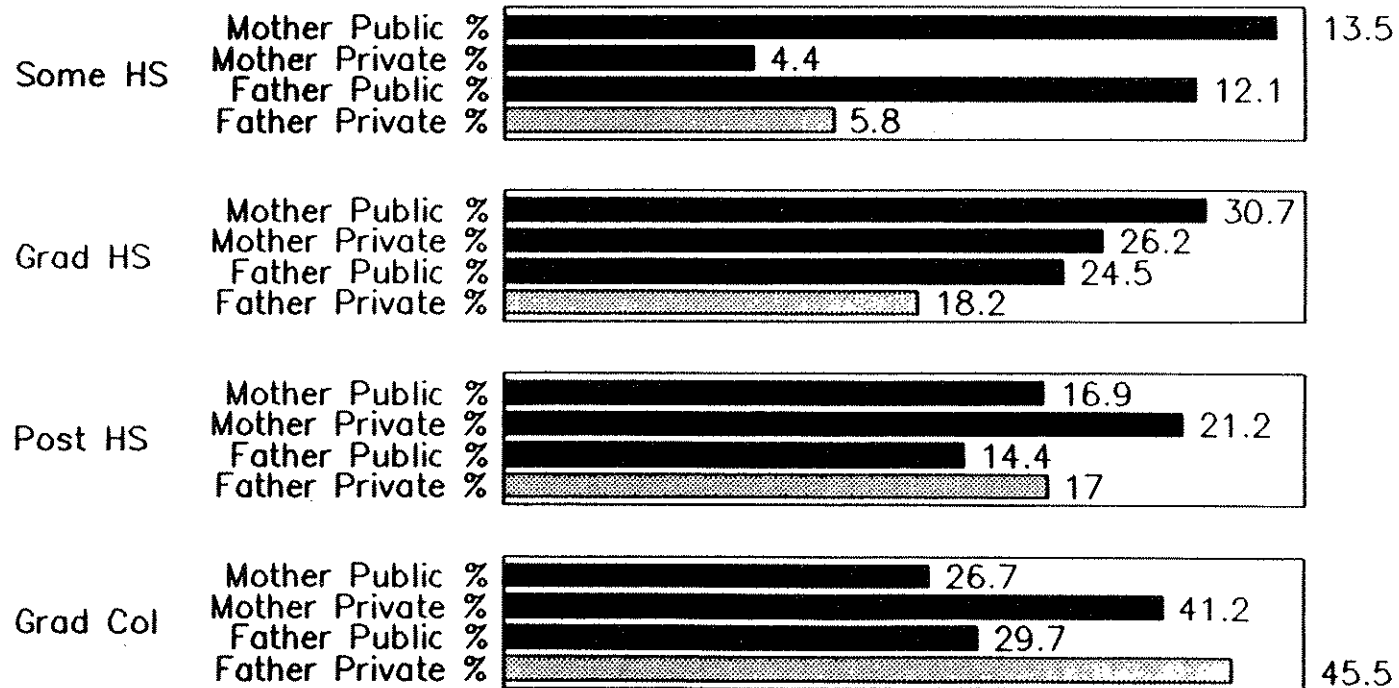
Grade 12



NAEP Results by Education Level

Percent By Level of Education

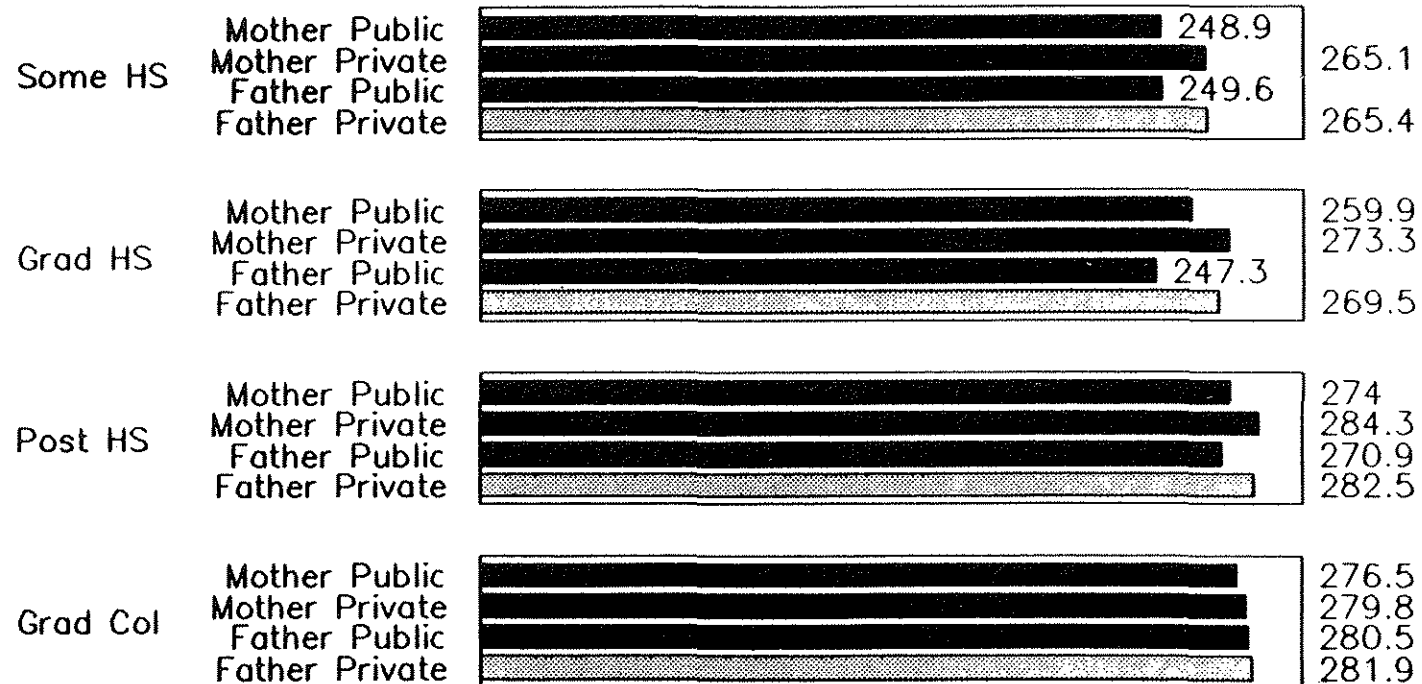
Grade 8



NAEP Results by Education Level

Math Composite Proficiency Means

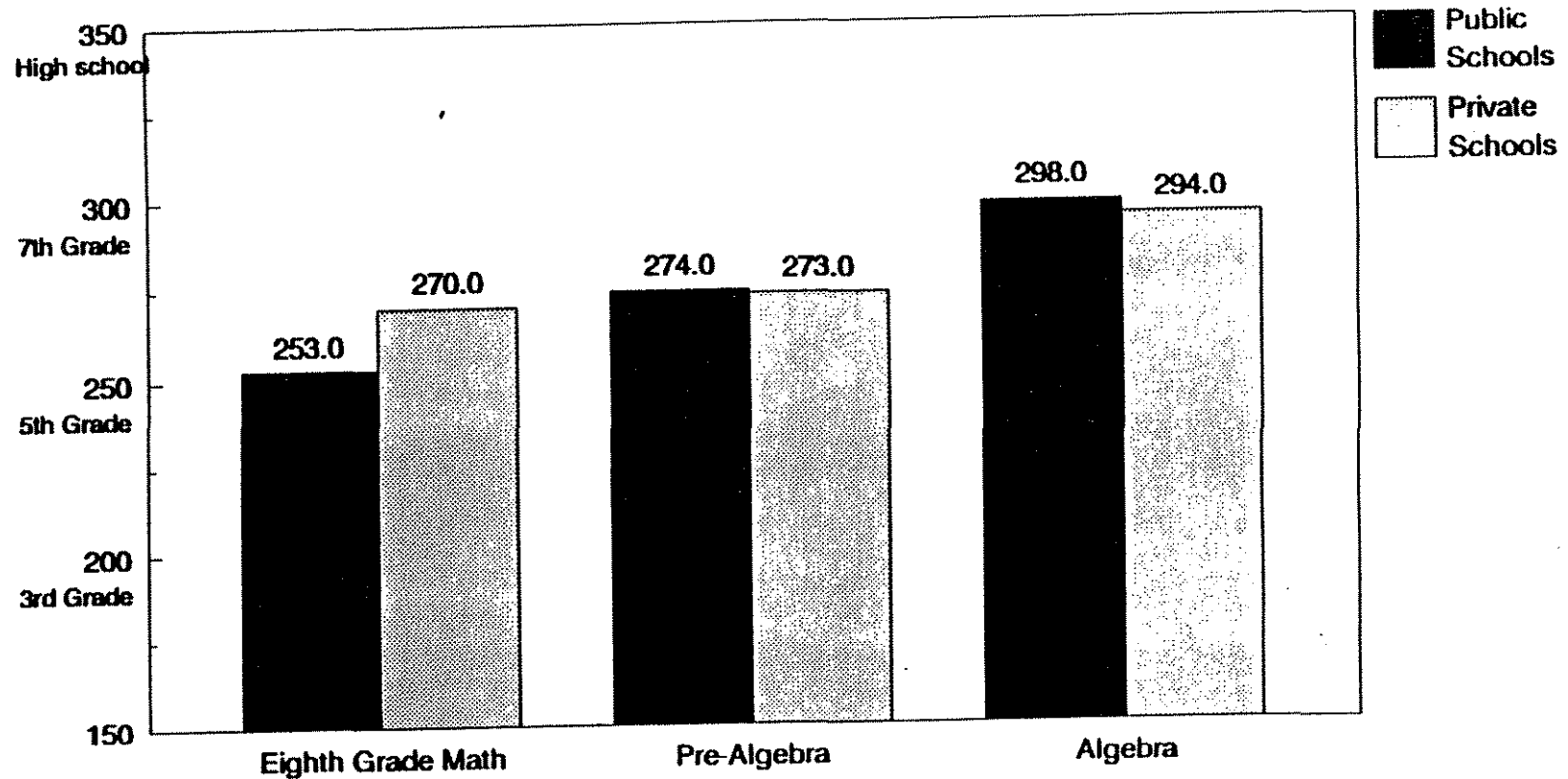
Grade 8



Average Overall Mathematics Proficiency

By Students Taking Similar Courses

Grade 8

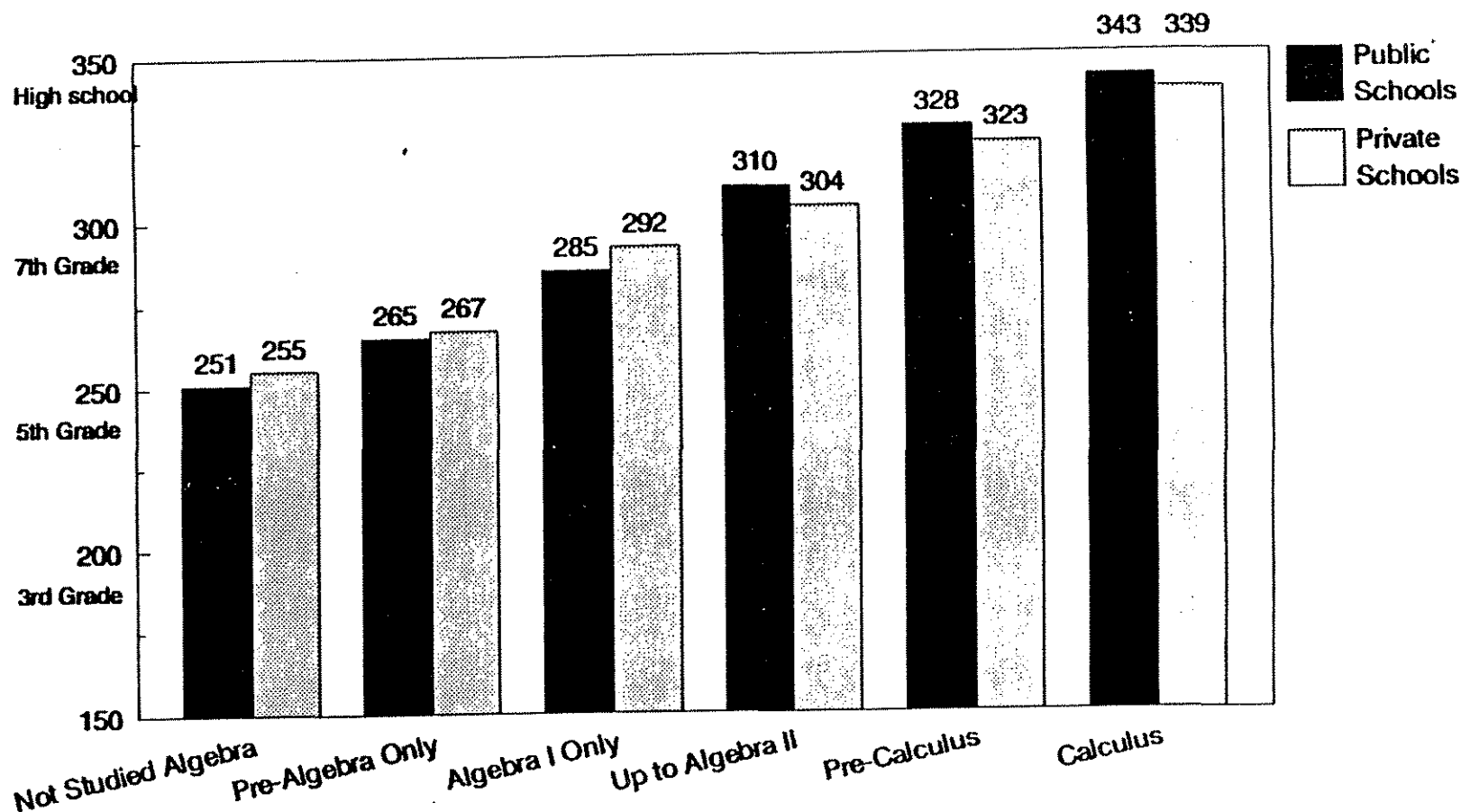


National Assessment of Educational Progress 1990
Student Data

American Federation of Teachers

Average Overall Mathematics Proficiency

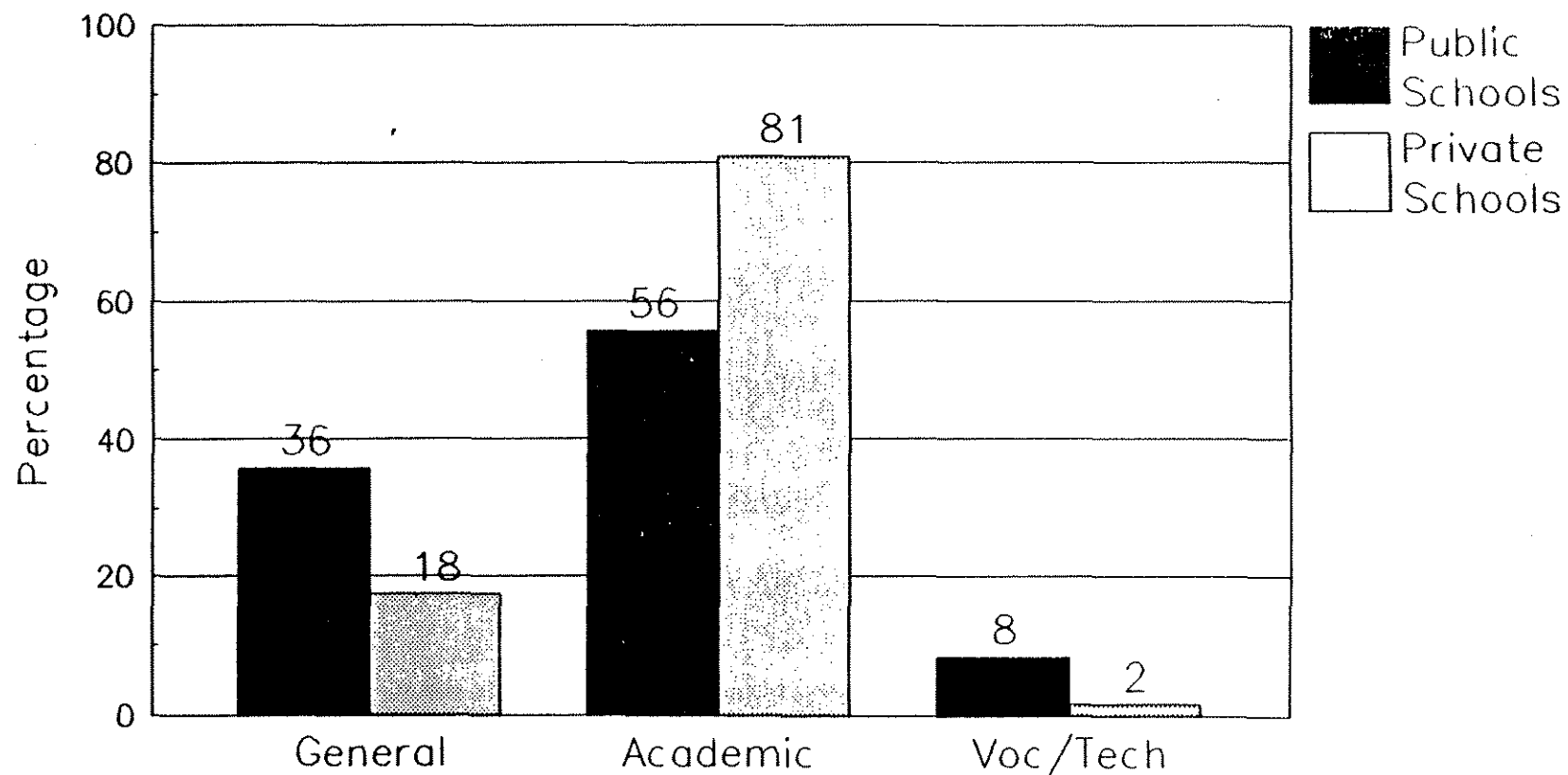
By Students Taking Similar Courses: Grade 12



National Assessment of Educational Progress 1990
Student Data

American Federation of Teachers

Percentage of Students Enrolled By Program Grade 12



National Assessment of Educational Progress 1990
Student Data

American Federation of Teachers

MYTHS AND FACTS ABOUT PRIVATE SCHOOL CHOICE

from the American Federation of Teachers

MYTH: Private school choice simply means being able to choose private, as well as public, schools at public expense.

FACT: Giving families tax dollars to choose a private school for their child does not mean that the private school has to or will choose their child. Public schools have to take all comers. Private schools don't. And generally, they won't, unless the child is a member of the "right" socioeconomic class or ethnic group or religion or has the "right" behavior or "right" combination of intellectual, athletic and creative abilities or otherwise fits into the "market" niche the private school has established. Moreover, because private schools are private, the public can't know or do anything about their admissions policies.

The phrase private school choice is therefore misleading because money alone isn't the only barrier to choosing a private school, especially a reputable one. Indeed, just ask any wealthy family whether money alone is enough to get a child into a private school of choice. The answer is no.

Should public dollars be used to support the selection and sorting of children according to private criteria?

MYTH: Many private schools are now as non-selective, open and diverse as public schools.

FACT: Eighty-two percent of private schools are religious schools, and 86 percent of private school students are enrolled in religious schools. Moreover, according to an analysis by Professor John Witte of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, public schools, whether urban, suburban or rural, enroll students in the lowest socioeconomic group and the highest proportion of minority students.

For example, while 31 percent of public school students had family incomes of less than \$15,000, only 12 percent of religious school students and 10 percent of other private school students had such low family incomes. At the other extreme, only 11 percent of public school students had family incomes of \$50,000 and more, but 20 percent of religious school students and 38 percent of other private school students came from families who earned that amount.

Parental education tells a similar story. Twenty-five percent of public school students had parents who completed fewer than four years of high school. The comparable figures for religious school and other private school students are 10 percent and 8 percent. And while only 19 percent of public school students had parents who

completed four or more years of postsecondary school, 30 percent of religious school students and 57 percent of other private school students had parents with these higher educational levels. (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, "Private Schools in the United States: A Statistical Profile, with Comparisons to Public Schools," Feb. 1991.)

What about the recent claims that Catholic schools are a different case, that they, at least, are as open and diverse as public schools? Again, the facts indicate otherwise. As Witte's analysis shows, there are almost no Catholic schools — 2.2 percent — in the bottom quarter of schools by student socioeconomic status (SES). On the other hand, 70 percent of Catholic suburban schools (by far the most prevalent type) are in the highest student SES quartile, while 57.3 percent of Catholic schools overall are educating students in the highest SES quartile.

What about urban Catholic schools? Aren't they comparable to urban public schools? Not exactly. Only 9 percent of urban public schools are in the highest student SES quartile, while 16 percent of urban Catholic schools fall in this category. And whereas 42 percent of urban public schools are in the lowest student SES quartile, only 17.5 percent of urban Catholic schools are.

But what about the Catholic schools that are admitting many poor and minority children, many of whom are non-Catholic? Aren't they, at least, as open and diverse as public schools? Again, not exactly: Catholic schools get to select their students, and public schools don't. In fact, according to a national survey of Catholic school principals, Catholic schools' admissions are based chiefly on student ability and aptitude and a good discipline record. Urban Catholic schools, then, do indeed admit some poor youngsters, including some who do not fit their usual admissions criteria. But, unlike public schools, they are free to pick and choose, limit their risks and expel their mistakes.

MYTH: Public aid to private education would promote competition between public and private schools, and competition is healthy.

FACT: Competition is healthy — at least when all sides have to play by the same rules. But that's not the case with public and private schools.

For example, public schools must take all children; private schools can select the children they want. Public schools must obey due-process and public-disclosure rules when they want to suspend or expel their students; private schools are under no such obligation. Public schools must obey federal, state or local regulations pertaining to health and safety; civil rights; including bilingual and special education; curriculum and textbooks; credentials of staff; number of library books — the list goes on. Private schools are either wholly or largely exempt from such regulations. Public schools must use state- and locally-prescribed tests to test their students and must report the results to the public. Private schools don't have to. Public schools are democratically controlled and must conduct their business in public. Private schools are controlled by their owners and boards of trustees, and they need not involve anyone, including parents, in their governance.

In the name of fair competition, are proponents of choice ready to subject private and religious schools to all the rules and regulations now governing public schools? Not a chance. Are they proposing to ask Congress, state legislatures, local school boards, the courts and the public to roll back the laws and regulations governing public schools, and in one fell swoop allow public schools to behave like private schools? Of course not. Can a competition be fair if competitors play by different rules? And can its results prove anything of value? No on both counts.

MYTH: Choice between public and private schools would increase accountability in education.

FACT: An expansion of public aid to private schools would decrease accountability. The reason is simple: Private schools do not have to account to the public. They do not have to account for their admissions and discipline policies. They do not have to account for the nature and quality of their educational program. They do not have to account for the source of their funds or for how they spend their funds. They do not have to account for their student outcomes. Indeed, in most states, they do not have to account for anything.

This is not because private and religious schools are irresponsible. It's because what they do, and how they do it, is not supposed to be the public's business and can't be the public's business — unless religious schools want us to break down the constitutional wall between church and state or independent schools want to give up their independence. At a time when we're seeking more accountability in education, there is no justification for giving public aid to schools that are not accountable to the public.

In a "competition" between public and private schools, how would the public even know who's winning, or why? How would parents get the information they need to choose among schools, if public verification of private schools' advertising claims would invite church-state entanglement and an abrogation of the privacy of independent schools? Should we just assume that all private schools would be honest? Should we just trust that there would be no buyers or sellers of the educational equivalent of junk food? Should we just ignore the history of the many private proprietary schools that have misused public dollars and misled their clients? (See, for example, "Abuses in Federal Student Aid Programs," report made by the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Committee on Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate, May 17, 1991.) And should we just tell parents and the public that the new rule governing the education of children is caveat emptor — let the buyer beware?

MYTH: The research proves that private schools outperform public schools and the reason is market control.

FACT: The research proves no such thing. True, John Chubb and Terry Moe claim that their book, Politics, Markets, and America's Schools, contains proof that private schools outperform public schools because of market control. It is also true that their claim has been widely publicized in the popular media. But when researchers and statistics-savvy journalists examined Chubb and Moe's analyses, they found that Chubb and Moe's

conclusions were not supported by their evidence. Nor have James Coleman's claims about the superior performance of private schools withstood peer review.

So what does the research tell us? First of all, given that private schools select their students, and thus have students whose socioeconomic backgrounds and parent education levels are much higher than those of public school students, you'd expect private schools to substantially outperform public schools. The surprise is they don't: Private school students score only modestly better. Moreover, this private school advantage disappears when researchers take into account the difference between the socioeconomic backgrounds, academic tracks and course-taking patterns of students in the two types of schools. In fact, some studies that have taken these factors into account have found a public school advantage in achievement, and some researchers have speculated that public schools would look even better if it were possible to control statistically for the differences between public and private schools' admissions criteria. So, to the modest extent that private schools outperform public schools, it's not because of market control but mostly because of the far more advantaged student bodies they enroll.

The latest confirmation of this comes from the June 6, 1991, National Assessment of Educational Progress report on the mathematics achievement of 4th, 8th and 12th graders. As one would anticipate, private school students outperformed their public school counterparts. The big surprise was that the difference in scores was small and, in the 12th grade, tiny. Indeed, the 12th grade's top achievement level was reached by a modestly higher percentage of public school students than either Catholic or other private school students.

None of this is anything to crow about. The sad fact is that neither public nor private school students are performing well. Public schools should not be excused for the poor performance of their students, but at least they have some explanations: They educate the overwhelming majority of America's poor children, and both the percentage of such children and the desperateness of their condition have increased. But how can we explain the poor achievement level of private school students given the advantages they enjoy?

Consider, for example, NAEP's analysis of the parent education levels of the students it tested. While 25.5 percent of the 4th-grade public school students' mothers and 26.3 percent of their fathers graduated from college, 38.7 percent of the 4th-grade private school students' mothers and 41.1 percent of their fathers are college graduates. The dramatic difference in the parent education levels of public and private 8th-grade students is similar, and so is the difference between public and private 12th graders: 25.1 percent of the public school mothers and 31.2 percent of the public school fathers graduated from college, while the comparable figures for the mothers and fathers of 12th-grade private school students are 36.2 percent and 47.5 percent.

The fact that private schools, despite their considerable advantages, do not perform much better than public schools — and both sectors are doing poorly — indicates that private school choice is not a panacea. The inescapable fact is that, even if all public

school students were to choose and be accepted by private schools tomorrow, we'd still have an educational crisis on our hands.

MYTH: The Milwaukee voucher program proves that private school choice works.

FACT: The Milwaukee voucher program graphically demonstrates the risks of private school choice, in terms of equity, educational quality, social cohesion, church-state entanglement, fiscal responsibility and public accountability. And it also shows that the risks far outweigh the purported benefits of such a policy. Indeed, the main benefit of the Milwaukee voucher experiment is that it has given the American public the concrete evidence it needs to separate reality from fantasy in the debate over private school choice.

The Milwaukee voucher experiment was limited to children of low-income families, excluded religious schools and prohibited private schools from charging voucher holders more than the value of the voucher. Never before, then, was a voucher experiment more favorably designed to prove that private school choice could pass muster on constitutional, equity and educational grounds. What happened?

The program offered a \$2,500 voucher out of the public school budget, so that each child who left a public school left that school \$2,500 poorer. The program was open to a maximum of 1,000 low-income children in a school district where about 60,000 children fit the program's definition of poverty. The families of 600 to 750 children (estimates vary) applied for the voucher, but only seven of the approximately 21 eligible private schools in Milwaukee volunteered to take voucher students. Estimates for how many of the 600 to 750 applicants were selected by these private schools range from 341 to 390.

With very few exceptions, the students ended up in segregated schools with an ethnocentric educational program. That was hardly surprising, since, with very few exceptions, the majority of schools that volunteered to take voucher students were segregated and promoted ethnocentric curricula. Many of the participating schools, which had been charging far less than \$2,500 tuition to the families of children who were already in the school, nonetheless pocketed the entire \$2,500 carried by the voucher students. Moreover, many of the schools were in financial straits when they volunteered for the voucher program. One such school that took in a large number of voucher students had been a religious school until it decided to participate in the program. The non-voucher parents then became unhappy with the switch, feuds broke out and religion classes were reintroduced. In the middle of the year, the 63 voucher students were suddenly expelled, and mostly into the public schools. And only then did the public discover that the claims this private school had made to attract customers were mostly bogus, that it had done a terrible job of feeding, transporting and providing books or desks for the kids and that its facilities violated many safety standards and were even more decrepit than those of the public schools. As for education, little, if any, seemed to take place. The entrepreneurship of the Juanita Virgil School's owner notwithstanding, the school collapsed. The fate of the school's non-voucher students, who lost a year of schooling, is unknown.

The tale of the Juanita Virgil School is dramatic, but it is not unique. Another school has folded, and some of the remaining private schools that participate in the program are still financially and educationally unstable. The Bruce Guadalupe School, for example, was sold in the hopes of bringing about financial stability. The result, instead, has been educational chaos: the teaching staff slashed by a third, with the remaining teachers fearful of reprisals if they speak on record about the school's problems; the elimination of the second grade and the reassignment of its students to first and third grades; a merger of the seventh and eighth grades; a 50 percent cut in the bilingual education program; and a struggle over who determines the education program, the principal and staff or the new owner of the school.

Nor are Juanita Virgil's voucher students the only ones who have been expelled. Some other private schools expelled students because they behaved badly or had learning problems. And, of course, because of a U.S. Department of Education ruling, no private school had to accept students with special educational needs. At the end of the school year, a maximum of 259 voucher students remained in the participating private schools.

The major exception to the horrific record of Milwaukee's private school choice experiment is the Urban Day School, an established African-American private school that has received good reviews from the parents of its voucher students. But Urban Day raises, if anything, an even more fundamental set of concerns about public aid to private education — concerns that have less to do with evidence than with fundamental values about the role of public education in a democracy. Should the citizens of a pluralistic, multicultural society spend their tax dollars on ethnocentric education? Should we use public monies to aid and abet the creation of even greater divisions in our society? Are we ready to turn our backs on the common school ideal and support the balkanization of our education system — indeed, of our society — or must we redouble our efforts on behalf of social cohesion and the perpetuation of a pluralistic democracy?