



K-12 PRIVATE SCHOOLS

A Look At The Alternative: Private And Independent K-12 Schools

Private and independent K-12 schools are a vital and major component of American education, both in Hampton Roads and throughout the nation. Of the more than 115,000 schools in the United States, 27,223 (or approximately 24 percent) are “private” (a label often used as a shorthand for private and independent). Of the nation’s approximately 53 million students, 6 million (about 11 percent) attend private schools. According to the Projections of Education Statistics to 2010 released by the National Center for Education Statistics in August 2000, total K-12 enrollment is expected to increase to 53.5 million in 2005 and then start a slow movement downward. Assuming that future private-school enrollment patterns will mirror those of public schools, this suggests private-elementary enrollment has just about reached its peak. Secondary enrollment, however, is projected to jump 8 percent between 2000 and 2006.

Hampton Roads is home to 167 private secondary schools that complement public schools in the region by providing a wide variety of K-12 educational opportunities. In addition to the students in these schools, a growing number of students are being schooled at home.

The data reported here are based on the Private School Universe Study, produced by the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), and a survey of 63 schools in the region that are members of the Virginia Council for Private Education (VCPE). The VCPE is an amalgamation of 13 separate associations, with each association representing a distinctive type of private school; one example would be church-affiliated schools. All VCPE members must be nonprofit and have a racially nondiscriminatory membership policy. While there are certainly excellent schools that are not members, VCPE is the only organization that has recognition from the Virginia Board of Education and it supervises the critical task of overseeing the accreditation of private elementary and secondary schools in Virginia.

The Schools

The term “private school” is often used to describe all nonpublic schools, and the two terms can be used interchangeably. Within these broader categories are parochial/religious schools (Catholic and other religious schools); independent schools (those that are independently governed and receive no funding from churches or other organizations); and schools affiliated with other organizations. Most private schools are nonprofit organizations, but some are proprietary, or “for profit.” Schools are further differentiated by program, with most offering traditional programs, but some provide special-emphasis programs, such as Montessori, and others emphasize particular facilities such as special-education accommodations.

According to the NCES Private School Universe Study, of the 27,223 private elementary and secondary schools in the United States in the fall of 1999, 22 percent were nonsectarian, 30 percent were Catholic and 48 percent were other religious schools (Baptist, Lutheran and the like). The South, reflecting its history of racial segregation, is the region with the most private schools – 30 percent of the total.

In Virginia, 606 private schools were reported in the NCES study, representing 24 percent of the Commonwealth’s 2,540 schools. In Hampton Roads, however, private schools represent 30 percent of the total. The following table compares numbers of public and private schools in Hampton Roads, enrollment by city/county and numbers of students educated at home.

TABLE 1
Public and Private Schools and Enrollment in Hampton Roads

	Number of Public Schools	Number of Private Schools	Total Schools	Enrollment in Public Schools K-12	Enrollment in Private Schools K-12	Home-Educated Students K-12*	Total Students
Chesapeake	44	17	61	36,436	2,842	490	39,768
Franklin	3	2	5	7,023	179	31	7,233
Gloucester	10	2	12	6,576	201	103	6,880
Hampton	47	19	66	23,293	2,069	267	25,629
Isle of Wight	8	2	10	4,873	631	139	5,643
Mathews	3	na	3	1,292	0	4	1,296
Newport News	44	27	71	30,646	3,727	203	34,576
Norfolk	61	31	92	35,586	5,146	318	41,050
Poquoson	4	1	5	2,483	12	27	2,522
Portsmouth	29	10	39	16,187	1,384	138	17,709
Southampton	7	1	8	2,791	355	37	3,183
Suffolk	18	2	20	11,304	1,076	150	12,530
Surry	3	na	3	1,187	0	28	1,215
Virginia Beach	83	40	123	77,221	5,492	665	83,378
Williamsburg/ James City County	10	7	17	8,091	1,144	134	9,369
York	19	6	25	11,618	314	124	12,056
Total	393	167	560	276,607	24,572	2,858	304,037

Source: NCES Private School Universe Survey, 1999; NCES Public School Universe Study, 1999; Virginia Department of Education Report of Fall Membership, 1999; Virginia Home Education Association Fall 2000 Virginia Home Education Statistics; and, 2001 Survey of VCPE Schools in Hampton Roads. All data are for 1999 except the data for home-educated students, which are from 2000.

The Students

In 1999, approximately 5.2 million students were enrolled in private schools in the United States, representing 10 percent of the total elementary, middle and secondary school students. Nationally, more students were enrolled in Catholic schools (49 percent) than in other religious schools (36 percent). Sixteen percent of the students enrolled in private schools attended nonsectarian schools. Thirty-one percent of all private-school students were in the South.

In Virginia, 88,581 students attended 606 private schools, accounting for 7 percent of the 221,797 students enrolled in K-12 schools in 1999. In Hampton Roads, private-school students comprised 8 percent of the total number of enrolled students. Since 30 percent of all schools in Hampton Roads are private, this reveals that the typical private school is substantially smaller in size than the typical public school.

Of the VCPE schools offering classes through the 12th grade, 92 percent of their students in the class of 2001 were college-bound, with 85 percent matriculating at a four-year college or university, and 7 percent planning to attend a two-year college.

Minority students comprised 22 percent of the fall 1999 enrollment in private schools nationwide as reported in the NCES survey. Table 2 compares minority enrollment nationally, in the South and in Hampton Roads.

TABLE 2

Fall 1999 Minority Enrollment in Private Schools

	United States	Southern United States	Hampton Roads
White, Non-Hispanic	78.2 percent	80 percent	81.3 percent
Black, Non-Hispanic	9 percent	9.8 percent	10.5 percent
Hispanic	7.8 percent	7.2 percent	2.3 percent
American Indian/ Alaskan Native	0.5 percent	0.3 percent	0.3 percent
Asian/Pacific Islander	4.5 percent	2.6 percent	5.5 percent
Total Minority	21.8 percent	20 percent	18.6 percent

Source: (NCES) Private School Universe Study, 1999

School Programs

Private schools actively help shape the area’s educational agenda. They are a microcosm of the diversity of beliefs and varieties of education philosophies, and reflect the remarkable pluralism of options in American education. Approximately 66 percent of Hampton Roads private schools have a religious orientation, with the largest group composed of those affiliated with the Baptist church. The diversity of private-school options in Hampton Roads is seen in the wide variety of the religious schools, including other Christian, Jewish and Islamic schools. Thirty-four percent are nonsectarian, including “independent” schools. The schools encompass different missions and different governance structures. Some are recently founded; the oldest traces its history to 1728.

It is very difficult to generalize about the programs of private schools in Hampton Roads. Suffice to say, there is more diversity and variability in the programming of private schools in Hampton Roads than in the public schools. This stands to reason, because specific private schools often were created as a means to establish alternatives to public education. Programs available for nonpublic-school students vary depending on the type of school, and from school to school. Some offer a more traditional curriculum than one currently sees in public education, while others are highly experimental. Some offer a highly competitive academic atmosphere with strong emphasis on grades and class standing, while others provide a more nurturing environment.

Technology has a significant impact on budgets, curriculum and professional-development activities. Of the schools responding to the VCPE survey, the ratio of students to computers is 8:1, and 50 percent of the classrooms have at least one Internet-connected computer. Public schools nationwide reported a 5:1 ratio of students to computers, and 77 percent of classrooms with at least one Internet-connected classroom in a 2000 technology survey conducted by NCES. Thus, the typical private school has less technology available than the typical public school. This underlines the “nonstandard” approach of private schools to K-12 education. Some deliberately choose to avoid reliance upon technology in the teaching-learning process.

According to a survey of VCPE schools in Hampton Roads, advanced placement (AP) courses are offered by 60 percent of private secondary schools, with 9.2 being the median number of courses offered. Some schools offer as many as 18 AP courses. One independent school in the region intends to offer the highly rigorous International Baccalaureate Program.

Athletics are an important part of middle and secondary school programs, and the same sports played in public schools (and sometimes others) are offered in most private secondary schools. The schools compete against each other in several private-school leagues, and on occasion they also compete against their public-school counterparts.

Teachers

Teacher education requirements for nonpublic schools are not prescribed by the state or localities in Virginia, and may vary from school to school. However, the associations that accredit their member schools develop their own standards and the Virginia State Board of Education recognizes these standards through the school and association membership in VCPE. Thus, private schools have great flexibility in selecting their roster of teachers and are more likely than public schools to employ people with considerable experience in a specific disciplinary area (for example, music) who may not be certified to teach in a public school. Most observers view this as a plus.

The Virginia State Board of Education does offer state licensure to qualified nonpublic-school teachers, and several schools in Hampton Roads require their teachers and other professional staff to be licensed by the state. Teacher qualifications developed by accrediting associations are often similar to the state standards. Associations generally accept state licensure – in some cases with additional qualifications that must be met as well – as meeting the association’s requirement for teachers in its member schools.

Contrary to the notion that private-school teachers are paid more than their public-school counterparts, such is not usually the case. While some private schools pay their professional staffs salaries equivalent to public-school salaries, many pay significantly less. Table 3 displays 2000 public-school teacher salary ranges in Hampton Roads cities listed by the Virginia Education Association, compared with the ranges reported by VCPE schools.

Table 4 contains faculty experience/average salary information from the VCPE survey of private schools in Hampton Roads. Two of every five private-school teachers have five or fewer years of experience and their average level of experience is 10.5 years. Their mean annual salary level is slightly less than \$29,000. Thus, private-school teachers are about as experienced as public-school teachers, but (on average) earn substantially less. The VCPE survey also indicates that 40.7 percent of all private-school teachers hold a graduate degree. This is less than the comparable percentage for public schools, where salary schedules place a premium on master’s degree attainment.

Table 5 reports students-to-teacher ratios in Hampton Roads schools. In 13 of 14 cases where data are available, the ratios in private schools are smaller than those for the public schools in the same city. For example, in the region’s largest school district, Virginia Beach, the private-school students-to-teacher ratio is 11.9, whereas it is 14.7 in the city’s public schools. These data are consistent with the notion that small class sizes and individual student attention are among the most important reasons why parents choose to send their children to private schools.

TABLE 3
2000-2001 Public- and Private-School Teacher Salary Ranges

Hampton Roads Communities		Minimum Salaries	Maximum Salaries	Average Salaries
Chesapeake	Public	\$29,790	\$61,891	\$39,800
	Private	18,000	38,712	23,600
Franklin	Public	30,589	48,933	36,572
	Private	na	na	na
Gloucester	Public	28,112	48,893	35,466
	Private	na	na	na
Hampton	Public	29,250	50,689	37,264
	Private	22,887	27,432	24,300
Isle of Wight	Public	27,815	53,887	39,481
	Private	na	na	na
Mathews	Public	27,515	40,515	31,713
	Private	na	na	na
Newport News	Public	29,178	56,727	36,753
	Private	17,900	48,451	30,400
Norfolk	Public	30,000	51,100	37,663
	Private	18,000	66,994	37,000
Poquoson	Public	26,997	52,804	39,591
	Private	na	na	na
Portsmouth	Public	28,877	61,464	36,599
	Private	18,500	24,000	30,900
Southampton	Public	27,800	49,699	35,201
	Private	na	na	na
Suffolk	Public	29,318	48,714	36,961
	Private	24,300	48,599	33,100
Surry	Public	30,000	51,398	38,738
	Private	na	na	na
Williamsburg/ James City County	Public	28,500	59,097	39,215
	Private	na	na	na
Virginia Beach	Public	29,750	53,910	40,351
	Private	21,500	49,356	29,700
York	Public	29,018	49,137	38,050
	Private	na	na	na
Private Schools in Hampton Roads		17,900	66,994	28,300
Public Schools in Virginia		23,372	62,993	40,399

Source: 2001 Survey of VCPE Schools; Virginia Education Association: 2000-2001 Salary Schedules for Teachers; Virginia Department of Education 2000-2001 Teacher Salary Survey Results.

TABLE 4
2000 Private-School Experience/Salary

Experience	Percentage of Full-Time Teachers	Mean Salary of Teachers in the Group
1-5 years	40.9%	\$24,200
6-10 years	20.3%	\$29,300
11-15 years	13.5%	\$29,800
16-20 years	10.6%	\$32,500
21 + years	14.7%	\$38,200

Source: 2001 Survey of VCPE Schools

TABLE 5
Students-to-Teacher Ratios in Hampton Roads Schools

	Private Schools	Public Schools
Chesapeake	11.4	15.1
Franklin	10.6	12.1
Gloucester	13.0	14.3
Hampton	11.4	13.9
Isle of Wight	12.5	14.2
Mathews	—	13.4
Newport News	12.3	14.8
Norfolk	9.6	13.7
Poquoson	7.5	15.3
Portsmouth	9.3	13.4
Southampton	12.9	12.7
Suffolk	9.9	14.2
Surry	—	12.9
Virginia Beach	11.9	14.7
Williamsburg/James City County	14.5	13.9
York	20.6	15.6

Source: (NCES) Private School Universe Survey, 1999; 1999-2000 Salary Schedule for Teachers, Virginia Education Association, February 2000

Funding And Programatic Information

Studies of public perceptions of private schools indicate that the public perceives private-school students to be from financially affluent families. However, according to the report on Social and Economic Characteristics of Students released in October 1998 by the U.S. Bureau of the Census, 81 percent of K-12 students from families with annual incomes of \$75,000 or more attend public schools. That is, only 19 percent of these students from more affluent families attend private schools. **Among all private-school students, less than a third are from families with incomes at or above \$75,000. These data may surprise some; however, it should be remembered that private schools, especially those sponsored by religious denominations in large cities, tend to enroll many students who come from lower-income families.** Note that this does not necessarily imply the typical student attending an *independent* private school has a similar financial background.

Most schools provide some need-based financial aid to their students. The National Association of Independent Schools reports that member schools provided need-based aid to more than 16 percent of their students in 1999, with the average grant being over \$7,000. In Hampton Roads, 90 percent of the schools responding to the survey question grant financial aid. Ten schools in Hampton Roads, which are members of the Virginia Association of Independent Schools, provided a total \$3.36 million in need-based aid in the 2000-01 school year.

While school-funding formulae vary by type of school and from school to school, most private schools depend on tuition revenue to fund the bulk of school operations. Some parochial schools receive funding from the religious organizations with which they are affiliated. However, private schools are tuition-driven and hence their ability to attract and retain students is critical to their survival and prosperity. Contrast this to the typical public-school district, where the financial impact of losing a student is not as immediate, and generally is smaller in magnitude in any case.

Tuition rates vary widely in Hampton Roads private schools, as they do nationally. As Table 6 illustrates, tuition is higher in high schools than in elementary and elementary/middle schools. It also is true that tuition is generally higher in the independent schools than in the church-related schools.

TABLE 6

Average Tuition Rates in Hampton Roads Private Schools, 2000-2001

Grades	K-3	4-6	7-8	9-10	11-12
Rates	\$4,410	\$4,840	\$5,300	\$6,120	\$6,370

Source: 2001 Survey of VCPE School Hampton Roads Schools

Some federal programs allocate funds, usually channeled through state or local governments, to nonpublic schools for specific purposes, with funding usually based on the number of students. This funding is an infinitesimal percentage of the total school budget, and some private schools will not accept the funding because of a concern that accepting any government funding, no matter how small, could lead to government involvement in the operation of the school.

While Hampton Roads has not seen the appearance of publicly funded private schools, there is a growing national tendency to do so, as reported in a draft study on accreditation being conducted by the National Association of Independent Schools:

“Current and contemplated state actions challenge traditional relationships between the public and private educational communities. New publicly funded educational initiatives are blurring the lines between public and private schooling as, for example, states are creating magnet boarding public schools and chartering mission-driven schools deriving funding support from (both) public and private sources. Legislative bodies are expanding the scope of public oversight in education with an inevitable diminishment of the autonomy and independence granted to even nonpublic schools.”

Of course, public support of private schools, especially those sponsored by religious groups, poses significant constitutional questions. It is an issue that provokes emotional responses, not the least because that support frequently has been postulated in the form of tuition vouchers. There appears to be considerable public support, especially among minority citizens and in large cities, for some form of tuition voucher system. Such a system would help parents pay to send their children to private schools and introduce additional competition into K-12 education. However, public-teacher unions and their political confederates have come to regard this issue worthy of a fight to the bitter end.

Private schools typically engage in a variety of fund-raising activities to provide financial and in-kind support to supplement tuition revenue and help keep the cost of tuition lower. Some schools report that as much as 15 percent of operational expenses are met by contributions realized from fund raising.

Capital improvements – specifically new construction, modernization of buildings, purchase and replacement of major equipment and maintaining endowments – are funded by capital fund-raising efforts. Tuition revenue is rarely sufficient for capital improvements, and funds are raised primarily from constituents of the school – parents, alumni, relatives and friends of the school – and from endowments. As in the case of funding for operations, some schools get money from churches or affiliated organizations, and there are private foundations and corporations that provide some resources for capital improvements. Constituents, however, provide the bulk of the resources.

Private schools have significant impacts on the local economy. One such impact relates to the costs private schools enable taxpayers to avoid. In Hampton Roads, school divisions do not have to build, maintain and operate schools for the region’s 27,430 nonpublic-school students. One way to measure the magnitude of this contribution is to examine private-school operating budgets. In 2000-01, the private schools in the region had an estimated total operating budget of more than \$130 million, of which an estimated \$80 million was payroll. It is reasonable to assume that taxpayers would have to bear all of these costs (or more) if no private schools existed.

Further, 31 regional private schools reported having spent \$66 million on construction and capital improvements in the past three years. And, 31 schools indicated they plan to spend \$50 million on construction and capital improvements over the next three to five years. To some considerable extent, these capital expenditures would have to be financed by taxpayers were there no private schools in Hampton Roads and all private-school students began to attend public schools.

Accountability

Accountability remains a high-interest topic in education, no less so as applied to private schools. Typically, parents invest significant time and energy in identifying and applying to a private school and back their decision with tuition checks. Hence, accountability is a daily, crucial concern for private schools. Since parents and students who are not satisfied with the school may choose to withdraw their support, private schools that are not successful in meeting the needs of their constituency fail. While nearly all private schools are nonprofit in nature, they face the same bottom-line financial test as any for-profit business. Revenue must cover expenditures, or the enterprise will fail.

Standardized tests are one means of holding schools accountable. The Standards of Learning (SOL) tests are the “high visibility” standardized test in Virginia and Hampton Roads. Virginia public schools are required by legislative mandate to administer SOL tests, but private schools do not participate in SOL testing. However, the survey of VCPE schools reveals extensive use of nationally normed standardized tests to assess the progress of students. Among those frequently used are the Educational Records Bureau Tests, the Stanford Achievement Tests, Terra Nova, Assessment of Catholic Religious Education Tests, the Metropolitan Readiness Test, Brigance, and the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills. Many schools also place emphasis upon the Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test, given annually throughout the country to college-bound students in October. Others focus upon the annual national language exams in Latin, French, Spanish and German. Still others encourage students to take the College Board Advanced Placement Exams. Private-school parents pay close attention to such scores and often shop around to find the school they believe is most likely to produce superior scores for their children. Shopping in response to test scores, then, is much more common in private schools than in public schools.

Accreditation by state, regional and national organizations is another way private schools are held accountable to their constituents and to the accrediting associations to which they belong. Accreditation allows schools to maintain their independence, while providing credibility and accountability by complying with demanding standards for all aspects of instruction, administration and governance. The Virginia Board of Education recognizes private schools that are accredited by one or more of the accrediting associations that are members of the Virginia Council of Private Education.

Reasons For Choosing A Private School

The 1999 Public Opinion Poll conducted by the National Association of Independent Schools revealed that 77 percent of the Virginia respondents rated the quality of local public schools overall as “excellent” or “good,” with only 3 percent rating the quality of public schools as “poor.” Similarly, the poll found that when respondents were asked about educational preferences without regard to cost or proximity, 49 percent would send their children to public schools even if the costs or proximity were not factors in deterring attendance at a private school.

The reasons why parents and students choose private school are varied. When asked about educational preferences without regard to cost or proximity, 58 percent of the respondents in the National Public Opinion Poll indicated they would send their children to private schools. Of these, 28 percent said they would choose a parochial school, and 30 percent an independent school without religious affiliation. The principal reason for the choice of those who selected parochial options was a clear preference for attention to religious and moral issues (41 percent). The key reason cited for choosing independent schools was small classes and individual attention (35 percent). For respondents choosing public schools, the most frequently cited reason was a perceived lack of diversity at independent schools (20 percent). Twelve percent felt that independent schools do not offer education that is noticeably better than what is available at public school.

The poll highlighted different public perceptions of public and private schools. In many areas, poll respondents saw relatively little difference in the student performances generated by public and independent schools. However, there were some areas where differences in the perceptions of the two school categories were seen. Public schools were perceived as outperforming independent schools in the following areas:

- Having students from a range of cultures, races and income groups
- Having students involved in athletics and sports
- Being visible in the community
- Attending to the needs of children with learning disabilities.

On the other hand, private/independent schools were seen doing a better job in the following categories:

- Maintaining discipline
- Keeping class sizes small
- Encouraging moral and spiritual development
- Teaching values and manners
- Maintaining bonds with graduates.

The 1999 poll also revealed that the public believes the words “structured,” “safe,” “selective,” “personalized” and “caring” are descriptive of independent schools. The words “affordable” and “diverse” were not words the public associates with independent schools.

Looking Ahead

Respondents to the Hampton Roads Survey of Private Schools shared a panoply of concerns for the future. Leading the list in the minds of private-school leaders were funding issues: how to deal with rising operating costs and keep tuition affordable, the increasing need to rely on fund raising, and the desire to seek federal funding for textbooks and transportation. Of special concern was faculty compensation; repeatedly, the respondents cited the need for increased faculty salaries and benefits. We already have seen that the salaries of private-school faculty lag those of their public-school counterparts. Consequently, attracting and retaining excellent teachers was seen as an ongoing challenge, particularly in light of the current teacher shortage. Technology was seen as presenting additional major challenges. Finding the ways and means to support technology-driven instruction was a serious concern for most private-school leaders, though some regard technology as overemphasized and not strongly related to actual learning. The schools' desire to enroll a diverse student body was another frequently cited concern, as was improving support for special-needs students.

When all is said and done, these are concerns and challenges that differ little from those of public K-12 education. In this sense, private and public schools have much in common. Where differences do exist, they relate primarily to how these institutions choose to deal with these concerns and challenges. That is, there is much greater diversity in how private schools choose to organize their academic lives, find revenues and expend their funds. The choices that Cape Henry Collegiate in Virginia Beach or Trinity Lutheran School in Norfolk make are quite different from those made by Denbigh High School in Newport News or Dr. Hugo Owens School in Chesapeake.

Several of the private schools in Hampton Roads were founded as a means to avoid racial integration. To some extent, this perception continues to plague the region's private schools today, even though private-school student bodies have become much more racially diverse. While this motive may still be present in some cases, the overriding reasons why parents choose private schools for their children today relate to perceptions of educational quality. In particular, parents believe (correctly) that private-school class sizes typically are smaller than those in public schools and consequently that their children will receive more individual attention in a private school. Further, they hope their children will go to school with other children from highly motivated families. The result, they believe, will be a superior education.

From a financial standpoint, the existence of private schools enables taxpayers to avoid millions of dollars of annual expenditures upon public K-12 education. A rough approximation is \$150 million to \$200 million per year. In addition, private schools provide competition to public schools that presumably keeps them on their toes.

It is worth noting that early in the history of the United States, there was relatively little public K-12 education, as private schools dominated the scene. This changed dramatically early in the 19th century. Given the dissatisfaction of some with public K-12 education today, we may be witnessing a partial return to the country's private-school roots. Whether this is a good or bad development can be debated, but the winds of change are blowing, and K-12 education in Hampton Roads has not been exempt from this trend. Private and independent schools in the region likely will become increasingly attractive as more parents and students seek alternatives to public education.