Private School Enrollment

In fall 2015, some 5.8 million students (10.2 percent of all elementary and secondary students) were enrolled in private elementary and secondary schools. Thirty-six percent of private school students were enrolled in Catholic schools, 39 percent were enrolled in other religiously affiliated schools, and 24 percent were enrolled in nonsectarian schools.

Private elementary and secondary schools are educational institutions that are not primarily supported by public funds. In this indicator, private schools are grouped into the following categories: Catholic, other religious, and nonsectarian (not religiously affiliated). Catholic schools include parochial, diocesan, and private Catholic schools. The other religious category includes conservative Christian schools, schools that are affiliated with other denominations, and religious schools that are not affiliated with any specific denomination.

Between fall 1999 and fall 2015, the percentage of all elementary and secondary students who were enrolled in private schools fluctuated between 9.6 percent and 11.7 percent. During this time, the percentage of all elementary and secondary students who were enrolled in private schools decreased from 11.4 percent in fall 1999 to 9.6 percent in fall 2011. In 2015, the percentage of students enrolled in private schools (10.2 percent) was higher than in 2011.
Private school enrollment in prekindergarten (preK) through grade 12 was lower in fall 2015 (5.8 million students) than in fall 1999 (6.0 million students). During this time, private school enrollment was highest in fall 2001, at 6.3 million students, and decreased to 5.3 million in fall 2011. Private school enrollment then increased in each of the most recent years for which data are available, to 5.4 million students in fall 2013 and 5.8 million students in fall 2015.

Private school enrollment in preK through grade 8 followed a similar pattern during this time period, peaking at 5.0 million students in fall 2001, decreasing to 4.0 million students in fall 2011, and increasing in each of the two most recent years for which data are available (to 4.1 million students in fall 2013 and to 4.3 million students in fall 2015). Private school enrollment in grades 9 through 12 was higher in fall 2015 (1.4 million students) than in fall 1999 (1.2 million students), but showed no clear trend during this period.
In fall 2015, some 36 percent of all private school students were enrolled in Catholic schools, while 39 percent were enrolled in other religious private schools, and 24 percent of students were enrolled in nonsectarian private schools. The number of private school students enrolled in Catholic schools decreased from 2.7 million in fall 1999 to 2.1 million in fall 2015. This decrease was primarily due to a decline in the number of students enrolled in Catholic parochial schools (1.4 million in fall 1999 compared to 716,000 in fall 2015). The number of students enrolled in other religious schools in fall 2015 (2.3 million students) was not measurably different from the number enrolled in fall 1999 (2.2 million students). The number of students enrolled in nonsectarian schools was higher in fall 2015 (1.4 million students) than in fall 1999 (1.2 million students).
In fall 2015, half of all private school students (50 percent) were at elementary schools, 13 percent were at secondary schools, and 36 percent were at combined elementary and secondary schools. The share of private school students at elementary schools was highest at Catholic schools (67 percent) and lowest at conservative Christian schools (21 percent). A quarter of Catholic school students (25 percent) attended secondary schools, while 9 percent or less of students at any other private school orientation did so. The share of private school students at combined schools was lowest at Catholic schools (8 percent) and highest at conservative Christian schools (77 percent).
Figure 5. Percentage distribution of private school enrollment in prekindergarten (preK) through grade 12, by school orientation and race/ethnicity: Fall 2015

White students constituted the largest share of enrollment among Catholic (66 percent), other religious (73 percent), and nonsectarian schools (65 percent) in fall 2015. Black students made up the second-largest share of enrollment in other religious schools (11 percent), and Hispanic students made up the second-largest share of enrollment at Catholic schools (16 percent). A larger percentage of students were Asian at nonsectarian schools (9 percent) than at Catholic and other religious schools (5 percent each). Similarly, the percentage of students who were of Two or more races was larger at nonsectarian schools (6 percent) than at Catholic schools (4 percent) and other religious schools (3 percent). Pacific Islander and American Indian/Alaska Native students constituted 1 percent or less of enrollment at Catholic, other religious, and nonsectarian schools.

Endnotes:
1 For the purposes of this indicator, private schools exclude organizations or institutions that provide support for homeschooling.

Reference tables: Digest of Education Statistics 2016, tables 205.20 and 205.30

Related indicators and resources: Elementary and Secondary Enrollment; Elementary and Secondary Enrollment [Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups]; Public Charter School Enrollment

Glossary: Catholic school, Combined school, Elementary school, Enrollment, Nonsectarian school, Other religious school, Prekindergarten, Private school, Racial/ethnic group, Secondary school