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Ontario’s Private Schools: Who Chooses Them and Why?

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Executive Summary

Private school attendance in Ontario has grown over recent decades from 1.9 percent of the student population in 1960 to 5.6 percent in 2006. What are the characteristics of private schools? Why are parents increasingly choosing them over public schools? What kinds of parents are choosing them for their children? This study is the most recent and comprehensive attempt by researchers to document the characteristics of private schools and the characteristics and motivations of Ontario parents of private school students.

Our study is based on a survey of parents (from 919 households) whose children attend private schools in Ontario. We considered two major groups of private schools: academically- or pedagogically- defined day schools (ADS) and religiously-defined day schools (RDS), schools which together served over 107,000 students in 2005-2006, or almost 90 percent of Ontario private school students. We did not include schools with a more specialized mandate: those specifically for special needs students (11%), schools that cater almost exclusively to international students, or publicly funded First Nations schools.

Private School Characteristics

- **Mission:** All of the schools saw their mission as being the provision of a superior education.
- **Size:** The schools range in size from a religiously-defined school enrolling 24 students to an academically-defined school enrolling just over 1500 students.
- **Governance:** The majority of the schools (70%), including all of the religiously-defined schools, are non-profit schools governed by elected boards, although a few of the religiously-defined schools are run directly by churches or other religious organizations.

Characteristics of Ontario's Private School Families

Our parent survey identified several differences between the average parent of private school children, and the average Ontario parent with school aged children, as reported in the 2001 census and in a 2003 Statistics Canada social survey.

- **Higher levels of parental education:**
 - ⇒ While a little over a third of the comparable adult population had attended university, three-quarters of private school parents had.
- **Higher status occupations and more self-employment:**
 - ⇒ Private school parents tend to be twice as likely (49%) as other parents with school aged children to be employed in management, health or teaching, and only half as likely to work in construction, trades, transport, manufacturing or as labourers.
 - ⇒ Of those that reported lower status occupations almost all (89%) were parents who send their children to religiously-defined schools.
 - ⇒ Fully 40 percent of private school families identified self-employment as a major source of income, while only 7 percent of comparison families did so.
- **Wide variety of household incomes:**
 - ⇒ Almost half of private school households surveyed reported incomes over \$120,000, whereas only a quarter of comparable census

families report similar (inflation adjusted annual) incomes.

- ⇒ Even so, 21 percent the private school families reported annual incomes below \$50,000, compared to 37 percent of comparison families.
- ⇒ Parents choosing religiously-defined schools reported notably lower income levels than those choosing academically-defined schools

- **Civic participation:**

- ⇒ Parents choosing private schools are more likely to vote in federal (98% vs. 61%), provincial (93% vs. 59%), and municipal (82% vs. 49%) elections than other Ontario parents with school aged children.
- ⇒ Private school parents are three times as likely to be members of a political party (9% vs. 3%, respectively).
- ⇒ They are almost equally likely to be involved in local sporting, cultural, or hobby organizations;
- ⇒ They are less likely to be involved in a union or professional association (20% vs. 27%, respectively).

- **Importance of religion:**

- ⇒ Fully 90 percent of private school parents (of both academically-defined and religiously-defined schools) say their religious or spiritual beliefs are important or very important to the way they lead their lives, compared to 75 percent of the Ontario parents of school aged children responding to the 2003 social survey.

Reasons for Choosing Private Schools

Disappointment with the public system:

- Disappointment with public or separate schools was a factor in choosing their private school for 94 percent of surveyed parents. 75 percent said this disappointment was a very important factor in their choice.

Various features of private schools were positive reasons for choosing private schools:

- Dedication of the teachers, emphasis on academic quality, and safety were rated as very important features of their private schools by almost all parents.
- Parents who chose religiously-defined schools frequently rated features concerned with morals, values, religion, family and character development as being very important to them.
- Parents who chose academically-defined schools consistently rated as highly important the quality of the teachers and classroom instruction, individualized attention, and a motivating, supportive, nurturing educational environment that instilled confidence and independence in the students.
- Parents in religiously-defined schools were much less concerned about class size and individualized attention than parents choosing academically-defined schools, but they were significantly more interested in relational and identity opportunities offered by the school community.

Experience in Private Schools

Parents were also asked to indicate the extent to which various features were present in the private school of their choice.

- The majority of all parents *strongly agree* their private school has the following characteristics:
 - ⇒ safe (ADS 71%; RDS 74%),
 - ⇒ dedicated teachers (ADS 71%; RDS 73%),
 - ⇒ emphasizes academic quality (ADS 66%; RDS 66%),
 - ⇒ educates the whole child (ADS 63%; RDS 63%),
 - ⇒ and develops student character (ADS 61%; RDS 62%).
- Parents at academically-defined schools *strongly agree* that their school has:

- ⇒ a good reputation (64%),
- ⇒ offers unique opportunities (64%),
- ⇒ and is motivating, supportive and nurturing (62%).
- Parents at religiously-defined schools *strongly agree* that their school:
 - ⇒ reinforced their religion (80%),
 - ⇒ taught right from wrong (78%) ,
 - ⇒ supported family values (74%),
 - ⇒ and valued parent-teacher collaboration (67%).

Parallels with “Most Effective” Public Schools

Our analysis found unanticipated but extensive parallels between the characteristics of private schools identified by parents and the characteristics of effective public schools identified in earlier research of the 1970s and 1980s. These characteristics include:

- strong leadership,
- clear goals,
- parent-teacher collaboration,
- flexibility,
- responsiveness,
- high expectations,
- and good discipline.

Parents seem to be attracted to schools with these features of effectiveness.

Conclusion

While parents choosing private schools for their children tend, on average, to be better educated, employed in higher status occupations, and display more indicators of civic participation than their peers who opt for state schools for their children, this study concludes that parents from all income, occupational, and educational groups do indeed send their children to private schools in Ontario and find value in the education they offer.



Introduction: Growth in Private Education

More and more Ontario parents have been choosing private schools for their children. Fewer than 2 percent of Ontario students attended private schools in 1960. Statistics currently available on the Ontario Ministry of Education web site show that this had risen to 5.3 percent by 2003. What's more, private sector growth has accelerated in recent decades. As figure 1 illustrates, while enrolment trends in public schools have remained fairly stable, enrolments in private schools doubled between 1960 and 1975 and more than doubled again by the turn of the century. Why should this be? More specifically, what features of private schools are attracting parents away from public schools? And what kinds of parents choose private schools? Is it the case, as some critics contend, that private schools are only for rich, privileged parents who are outside of the Canadian social mainstream? The answers given in this paper are based on responses from a 2006 survey of more than 1,800 parents with children in 38 randomly selected private schools across Ontario.

Public Policy Regarding School Choice

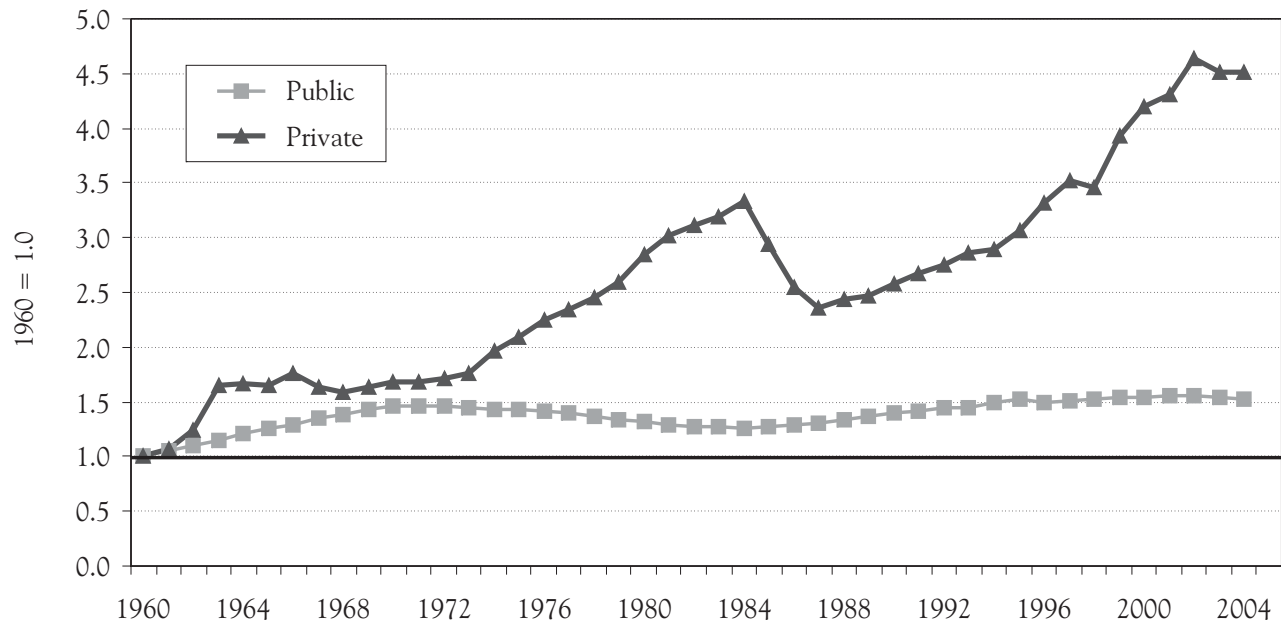
Each Canadian province has evolved its own policies toward private schools. Most provide some form of financial support, but this always comes with strings attached. To qualify for public monies private schools are typically required to comply with strategically important standards, such as conformity to provincial curriculum and employment of provincially certified teachers, with the amount of financial support typically varying with the extent of compliance. The latest available Canadian reports indicate growth in private schooling nationally. "In 1998/99, one out of ev-

ery 18 children in Canada, or 5.6 percent, attended a private school for elementary or secondary education. In total, 298,000 were enrolled in private schools; just under 5 million went to public schools" (Statistics Canada, 2001, p. 1) and "in the 1999/2000 school year, public school enrolment accounted for 93 percent of the total enrolment compared with 6 percent for private schools" (Statistics Canada, 2006a, p. 1).

Ontario is unique among Canadian provinces in that it neither provides direct financial support for private schools nor imposes any conditions on their establishment. Consequently, Ontario has Canada's least regulated market for school choice which offers parents a rich variety of alternatives. This makes the province ideal for studying the dynamics of school choice.

Ontario also offers a variety of publicly governed and funded educational options across and within its English Public, English Roman Catholic Separate, French Public, and French Roman Catholic Separate district boards, although various eligibility requirements apply. While more than 2.1 million students attended publicly funded and governed schools in 2004-2005, 32 percent of these Ontario students attended Roman Catholic Separate schools, more specifically: 33 percent attended elementary Roman Catholic Separate schools, and 30 percent secondary Roman Catholic Separate schools (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005a). French immersion programs are widely available within English language boards, while some larger boards operate various kinds of specialized schools such as bilingual schools, schools dedicated to self-directed learning in multi-age, multi-generational settings, academically rigorous schools boasting strong community

Figure 1: Trends in Numbers of Public and Private School Students Enrolled in Ontario Schools, 1960 to 2004 (1960 = base year)



Note: Public enrolments include Roman Catholic separate school students. The marked drop in private school enrolments in the mid-1980s is attributable to the extension of “full funding” to senior grades in Roman Catholic secondary schools, which brought them into the public sector.

Source: Ontario Ministry of Education statistics compiled by Neibert (2006), supplemented with more recent statistics from the Ministry web site (<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/quickfacts/2004-05/quickFacts04-05.pdf>).

connections, schools dedicated to year-round programming, schools that offer a life skills and cooperative education focus, and schools that promise small class sizes and university level courses (see the Toronto District School Board (2006) and the Ottawa Carleton District School Board (2006)). Taken together, these alternatives, which have multiplied in recent years, provide a respectable degree of regulated school choice within the public sector. Even so, increasing numbers of parents continue to choose private over public schools. In 2004, Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty pointed to one obvious reason when he recently declared “We’ve let public education slide to the point where the number of stories about our schools’ successes have been overwhelmed by others—about crumbling morale and schools, lost programs, and endless bickering” (22 April 2004, par. 21-29). Yet erosion of confidence in the “free” public schools cannot by it-

self explain the growing preference for fee-charging private schools. Parents must weigh anticipated financial costs against the marginal value offered by the preferred private school, balancing anticipated benefits against costs, both financial and otherwise.

Rationale for this study

Developing an informed understanding of Ontario parents’ growing preference for private schools has important policy ramifications for public schools if they are to compete effectively—to, in effect, retain their market share. It may also bear broader public policy implications by uncovering limits to the ability of public schools to satisfy expectations of today’s parents. Here, as in the broader analysis of school choice, the situation of the parents themselves is important. It is not sufficient to understand what parents find attractive about

private schools; we need an understanding of who those parents are, so as to better appreciate how their circumstances influence their choices. But before we can attempt this we need some appreciation of the choices available.

The market

One of the few legislated requirements for private schools in Ontario is annual registration with the Ministry of Education (see *Education Act*, R.S.O., c. E2, s. 16). The registration form is short and simple: schools are asked to provide name, enrolment, contact information, and to identify any affiliations. Returns are used to maintain a list on a website of all registered private schools in Ontario (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b). We began our study by using declared affiliations to classify the 869 schools on the December 2005 list into the six types shown in table 1, using school enrolment figures obtained directly from the Ministry of Education. Unfortunately, data were not available for all schools, and in such cases, and when other uncertainties arose, we sought additional information from school websites, affiliation membership lists and, on occasion, through direct contact with schools. Even so, it proved impossible to find further information on almost six percent of the schools and they remain unclassified in table 1. For the most part these schools appear to be very small, unaffiliated with any other school or organization, unique in their philosophy and/or clientele, and protective of their privacy. We used our additional information to adjust the data originally obtained from the Ministry. As a result of these adjustments, our final enrolment estimate of 128,299, as shown in table 1, is larger than the total private school enrolment number currently available on the Ministry web site.

Although they appear on the Ministry list, two types of school included in table 1 are not part of the private school market in Ontario. First Nations Schools are funded by federal transfers and enrolment is limited to a specific population, while international schools compete exclusively, or very nearly exclusively, for

off-shore, rather than Ontario, students. Once these schools are excluded, the private school market in Ontario as of December 2005 consisted of 791 schools or, as shown in table 1, 741 when we ignore those for whom we were unable to find information. We assigned each of these schools to one of the following three types:

Academically-defined schools, of which there are more than 250, are those which either pursue key tenets of a traditional liberal arts education or subscribe to a related pedagogic philosophy, such as the Montessori or Waldorf method. While not all academically-defined schools (ADS) are affiliated with the Conference of Independent Schools (CIS), those that are can be viewed as conforming to stereotypical images of traditional, elite, private schools, although not all of these schools welcome such a characterization. All CIS affiliated schools must nonetheless satisfy demanding qualification requirements before being admitted to the Conference, which include oversight by an arm's length Board of Governors and non-profit status. Ontario's academically-defined schools also include at least seven bilingual/immersion schools, at least twenty entrepreneurial for-profit ventures, and one military school.

Religiously-defined schools are those which have a declared religious or denominational affiliation. This does not necessarily mean that they exist primarily to teach a religious doctrine. To the contrary, some of the more than 400 schools in this group offer academic programs which are more comprehensive and demanding than can be found in some schools in the academically-defined group. Similarly, some provide accommodation for exceptional pupils and other special programming. Yet regardless of specific programming and pedagogy, schools in this group are distinguished from others by commitment to a declared religious affiliation or orientation. While the vast majority of religiously-defined schools (RDS) are not directly operated by a specific church, mosque, or synagogue, these schools, in some way, are defined by a religious perspective. A large majority of these schools, 80 percent, are Christian, with a wide range of denominations being represented includ-

Table 1: Ontario Private Schools, 2005-2006

Type	Schools	Details		Founded*	Students			
					Min	Mean	Max	Total*
Academically-Defined	253	CIS	42	1829-2003	15	461	1260	50,075
		Montessori	115	1961-2000	6	158	1486	
		Waldorf	10	1926-2005	29	134	427	
		Other	86	—	6	145	1514	
Religiously-Defined	410	Christian	329	1852-2004	6	198	1243	57,366
		Islamic	37	1992-2002	12	147	358	
		Jewish	43	1907-1995	8	316	1446	
		Sikh	1	—	—	187	—	
Special	78	Adult	1	2004	—	50	—	5,246
		Ballet	2	1959	50	95	140	
		Cooperative	2	1975-2003	—	50	—	
		Cultural	7	1973-2000	27	160	455	
		On line	5	1999	22	44	50	
		Special needs	36	1989-2002	6	43	284	
		Summer	6	1922-2001	—	125	—	
		Tutoring	3	1997	15	77	125	
		Other	16	1970-2003	6	60	123	
First Nation	34			7	161	730	5,436	
International	44			11	224	1285	7,753	
Unknown	50			6	48	283	2,423	
TOTAL	869			6	148	1514	128,299	

*Please note that these data are incomplete: not all schools provide founding dates in their information and some enrolment figures are estimates.

Source: Derived from data obtained directly from the Ministry of Education, adjusted by data obtained from individual schools and, where necessary, estimates.

ing Adventist (9), Amish (22), Baptist (4), Christadelphian (1), Jewish (43), Lutheran (4), Mennonite (78), and, perhaps surprisingly given Ontario's separate schools, Roman Catholic (18). Others, such as those schools affiliated with the Ontario Alliance of Christian Schools (67) and the Association of Chris-

tian Schools International (62), serve interdenominational Christian sectors. Jewish schools have long been a part of Ontario's private school sector, the oldest having been founded in 1907. In contrast, the 37 Islamic and the sole Sikh school were all established within the past fifteen years.

Special schools, of which there are at least 75, serve students with quite specific needs or interests. Half of the schools in this group cater to exceptional students, with some offering general special education programs (8) but most being dedicated to more specific needs, such as learning disabilities (17), autism (5), giftedness (4), or behavioural issues (2). Others address something specific such as summer outdoor education or parent co-operative education.

As summarized in the enrolment column of table 1, Ontario private schools exhibit considerable variation in enrolment, ranging from a minimum of only six pupils to 1,500. Overall, academically-defined schools have an average enrolment of 198, religiously-defined schools 140, and special schools 66. Larger schools typically offer classes across the full range of grades from kindergarten to secondary level, or specialize in the higher and middle grades. Many religiously-defined schools do not offer secondary level programs, but there are some notable exceptions. The enrolment base of six pupils is an artifact of the Ontario *Education Act* which defines a private school as an institution providing instruction for “five or more pupils” (§1). In consequence, private educational establishments with fewer pupils need not be registered. Similarly, parents who choose to homeschool their children do not have to register with the Ministry, although according to a directive to school boards (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2002), there is an expectation that they should inform the local school board of their intentions and provide some basic demographic information about their children. Informed estimates place the number of children currently being educated at home in Ontario at close to 2 percent of Ontario’s school

aged children, that is, about 20,000 in total (Ontario Federation of Teaching Parents, 2006).

While we believe that the three types of private schools discussed above are readily recognizable, the conceptual boundaries between the three groups can become less clear when attempting to classify specific schools. Some of the academically-defined schools, for example, have religious names, and some were originally founded as religious schools, typically Anglican. However, while some still boast chapels and hold religious services, their mission and culture are no longer defined by their original faith and they are more properly placed within the ADS category. There is a further classification issue that needs to be mentioned to avoid confusion with the studies undertaken by Davies and Quirke (2005b, p. 528). Their “third sector” explicitly includes schools subscribing to particular education philosophies, such as Montessori and Waldorf. Moreover, their “first sector” academic category is limited to CIS schools. In short, while both our approach and that taken by Davies and Quirke recognize three types of private schools, our first (academically-defined schools) and third (special schools) categories do not match theirs.

There were 50 schools in our original list which remained unidentified due to lack of data, and when these were eliminated along with the First Nations and International schools, 741 registered private schools remained, as of December 2005. Of these, we classified 253 (34%) as academically-defined, 410 (55%) as religiously-defined, and 78 (11%) as catering to special needs or expectations.



Approach to Inquiry

Our objective was to develop profiles of a random sample of Ontario private schools and the parents that had chosen them, with specific attention to the features which attracted parents. We decided to exclude the 78 Special schools as these appeal to specific expectations outside of the main private school market. Further, schools in this group have been studied extensively by Davies and Quirke (2005a and 2005b), while the special education schools that make up almost half of this group have been recently reviewed by Hepburn and Morzek (2004). In contrast, the majority mainstream academically-defined and religiously-defined schools have attracted relatively little research attention.

We proceeded by randomly selecting schools in each of the academically-defined and religiously-defined groups until we reached an estimated 1,000 families per group. Each randomly selected school was contacted and invited to participate in the study. If the Head of school or governing agency, as appropriate, agreed, parent questionnaires, up to a cap of 120, were delivered to the school for completion by willing parents. Heads of participating schools were also asked to complete a brief telephone interview to provide informa-

tion about school organization and operation. When a school declined to participate, the next school on the list of randomly selected schools in that group was approached. Ultimately, we approached 112 schools of which 53 agreed to participate. A total of 4,400 parent questionnaires were delivered to those schools.

We received 919 completed parent questionnaires from 38 schools¹: 523 (57%) from schools in the religiously-defined group and 396 (43%) from schools in the academically-defined sector. Within the religiously-defined group a substantial majority (93%) of our responses were from Christian schools, five percent from parents with children enrolled in Islamic schools, and two percent from parents with children enrolled in a Jewish school. The Christian schools included four Mennonite, three Amish, three Roman Catholic, and one Lutheran; the remaining twelve being affiliated with various Protestant organizations, including seven who were members of the Ontario Association of Christian Schools. Within the academically-defined group, 175 (19%) responses were from CIS schools, 137 (15%) from academic-for-profit schools, and 84 (9%) from Montessori schools. These distributions closely mirror provincial patterns as shown in table 1.

¹ The questionnaires collected data on a total of 1,801 parents in these families. A sample of this size is accurate within 2.3 percent 95 times out of 100.



Characteristics of Private Schools

The schools represented in this study typify the wide variety of choices within Ontario's private school market. They ranged in size from a Mennonite school enrolling 24 students to an academically-defined for-profit school enrolling just over 1500 students. More than half of the schools (61%) offered only elementary programs; five (10%) offered only secondary programs. The oldest school, an elementary CIS school, was founded in 1918; the newest, an academically-defined for-profit school offering only secondary credits, was founded in 2003. Most of the schools (70%), including all of the religiously-defined schools, are non-profit schools governed by boards, although a few are run directly by the church or mosque to which they are attached. Religiously-defined schools typically make stipulations regarding religious observance, accepting students from outside their community only if the family agrees to appropriate conditions.

Premises

The schools operate in a wide range of buildings from elaborate and elegant special-purpose structures to church halls or rented commercial space. The older schools were usually accommodated in designated school buildings, while newer schools were more likely to be located in rented space. Atypically, one religiously-defined school opened only a few years ago in a large custom-built building. Almost all of the participating schools reported having good playground and/or playing field facilities: one academically-defined school was described as being located on "thirty-seven acres, with a thirteen acre wood lot, designed with paths, three playing fields, four tennis courts and a river."

Staffing

The teaching and support staffs were also diverse. Half of the schools had less than ten teachers; only three had more than 50. On average about half of the teachers held Ontario teaching qualifications. Academically-defined schools in general, and those which operate for profit in particular, were most likely to have more Ontario qualified teachers. More than four-fifths of the schools have at least one Ontario-qualified teacher, and for the most part their teachers hold undergraduate degrees, with the exception of Amish and Mennonite schools, whose teachers often hold denominational qualifications instead. Only a few of the larger schools employ librarians, most relying on volunteers to staff libraries. Most schools have some clerical staff, although in very small schools the Head often attends to all clerical matters, while also teaching full time. About half of the schools employ custodians and/or night-time cleaning services, but some of the smaller religiously-defined schools rely on volunteers to clean the premises. Classroom assistants were common in the larger schools, a few of which also reported having cooks and/or kitchen staff, grounds-keepers, residence supervisors, and/or technical support staff.

Mission

As described by the Heads of the schools, all of the participating schools, whether religiously-defined or academically-defined, large or small, new or long established, see their main mission as being the provision of a superior education. Religiously-defined schools typically understand this as an education framed by the tenets, histories, and practices of their

religion, which informs all parts of the curriculum from their religious perspective. Academically-defined schools typically emphasize academic success, character development, development of self-confidence, and self-directed learning. All Heads of schools spoke to the sense of community within the school, stressing opportunities available for parents to belong to a group of like-minded peers.

Finances

While the main source of income for virtually all of these schools is tuition fees, the way in which fees are charged differs considerably: some charge a flat family rate, some charge solely by student, some have discounts for additional students from the same family, and some have sliding scales based on family income. Most also charge different rates for different curriculum divisions. The actual amount charged in tuition fees ranged from nothing at all at two of the Mennonite schools to a high of \$18,800 at one of the CIS academically-defined schools. On the whole, academically-defined schools reported charging higher fees than religiously-defined schools, and there was a slight tendency for non-profit schools to be a little more expensive than for-profit schools. Even so, fees for the three private Roman Catholic schools (all not-for-profit) were among the highest. The Head of one Mennonite school explained the school does not charge tuition fees as it is funded directly by the whole congregation. One non-profit Montessori school reported making occasional barter arrangements with parents in lieu of tuition fees. A few schools include transportation costs in tuition fees, and some include lunches, field trips, and supplementary materials. In schools which charge separately for such things, parents estimated additional costs ranging from \$10 to \$15,000 per child, with additional costs in religiously-defined schools typically being lower than those in academically-defined schools. Where charged, boarding fees for residential students ranged from \$500 to \$25,000.

Most schools, including for-profit schools, reported offering some form of financial assistance. Among the

families in our study, 69 (8%) reported receiving bursaries, scholarships, discounts, or subsidies from the school to help them with tuition fees. Almost as many families (64) reported receiving assistance from outside the school. Eight families received grants from the Children First School Choice Trust program of The Fraser Institute, which is funded through private donations and which offers grants to economically disadvantaged parents who seek a private education for their children. Eligible families, with incomes below an established level, enter a lottery and if successful are awarded half of the tuition costs, up to a maximum of \$4,000 per child per year. The most common outside source of assistance, reported by 38 (4%) families, was grandparents or other family members. Families with children in religiously-defined schools were more likely to receive aid from the school and from outside sources.

Many schools reported making use of outside resources to keep their costs down. Religiously-defined schools in particular raise additional funds and material support, occasionally very substantial support, from their wider communities. One Islamic school Head, for example, noted, "The Muslim community, locally, nationally and internationally, supports the school. A New York Muslim donated all the computers in the school; the use of the building is donated; and the Foundation raised \$100,000 this year." One Head of a Christian school noted that the school receives extensive support from "former families, grandparents and some churches" and also from supporters of Christian education at large.

Summary

The diversity of Ontario private schools is such that it is impossible to capture all variations in any sample, but the schools in this study appear to be sufficiently representative. Our sample includes schools which are very large and very small, and those in between. They are governed by elected boards, by churches or mosques, by boards of investors, or by sole proprietors. They offer elementary or secondary programs or both. They are staffed entirely by Ontario qualified teachers, or by

teachers with other qualifications, or by teachers with no formal qualifications at all, or by combinations of these. They operate in church basements, in converted commercial spaces, in surplus schools purchased from public boards, or in purpose-built facilities. They

charge very high tuition fees, moderate tuition fees, or no direct fees at all. They all, without exception, exist primarily to provide a superior education to students, but the definition of how it is achieved varies as much as do the schools themselves.



Characteristics of Private School Families

The parent questionnaire collected demographic information about each of the 1801 parents in the 919 families surveyed. Many questions were based on those used in the 2001 Census (Statistics Canada, 2006b, 2006c) and the 2003 General Social Survey (Statistics Canada, 2004) so as to facilitate comparisons with Ontario families with school-aged children in general.

Families

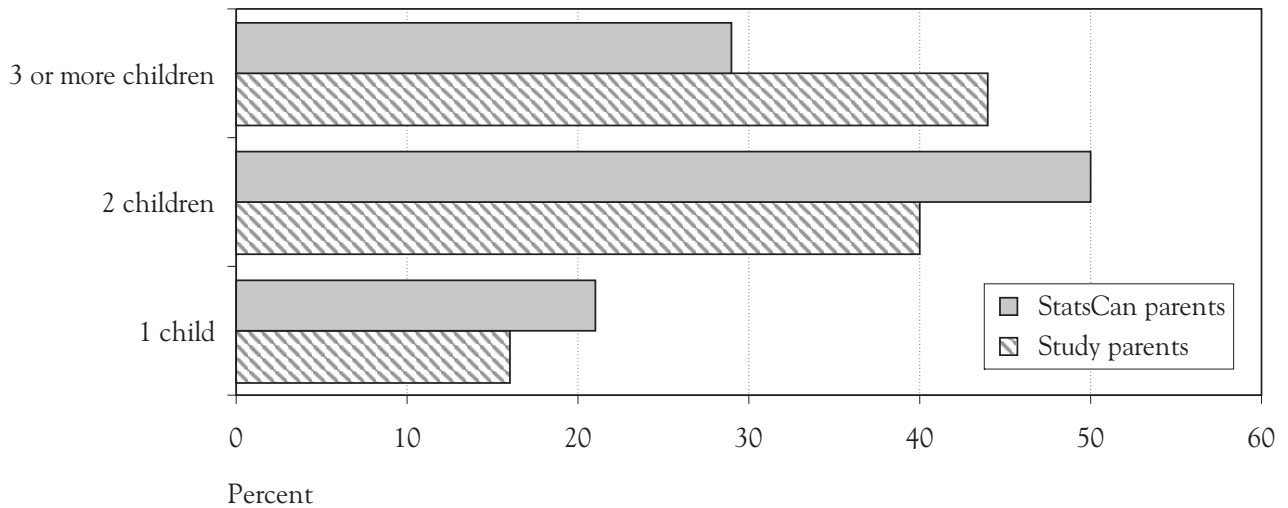
Fully 93 percent of participating families had two parents, compared to 80 percent of Ontario families with school aged children in the 2001 census. There were 36 lone parent families in our sample, 33 (92%) with a female parent, which is close to the 85 percent of female lone parent families in the Ontario 2001 census. A slight majority of our single parent families had children in academically-defined schools, as did all three of the families with two female parents. The 16 single-parent families with children in religiously-defined schools consisted of three with children in Islamic schools, and 13 in Christian schools.

With a median of 2.4 children, participating families appear similar to comparative 2001 census families, which had a median of two children aged 6 - 17. Yet

this sense of equivalency disappears when overall numbers of children are considered. As illustrated in figure 2, one-sixth (16%) of our participating families had a single child, somewhat lower than the 21 percent census comparison families. Half of the 2001 census families had two children, compared to only 39 percent of our private school families, while 45 percent of these families had three or more children, as compared to only 29 percent of the comparative census families. Parents with children in religiously-defined schools were likely to have more children. A parallel pattern is evident in the census data where families with parents who reported a religious affiliation tended to have more children.

Mobility

While the growing preference for private schools over public schools is clear, the movement of students is not always one way. Overall, more than two-thirds (68%) of the 2,117 school-aged or older children in our participating families were reported as having attended only private schools, and six percent only public schools. The remaining 26 percent had moved between public and private schools: 16 percent began in public schools and moved to private; five percent had moved from

Figure 2: Comparison of Family Size, Study Families, and Population at Large

Sources: Statistics Canada, 2001; Statistics Canada, 2004; Statistics Canada, 2006a; Statistics Canada, 2006b; Statistics Canada, 2006c.

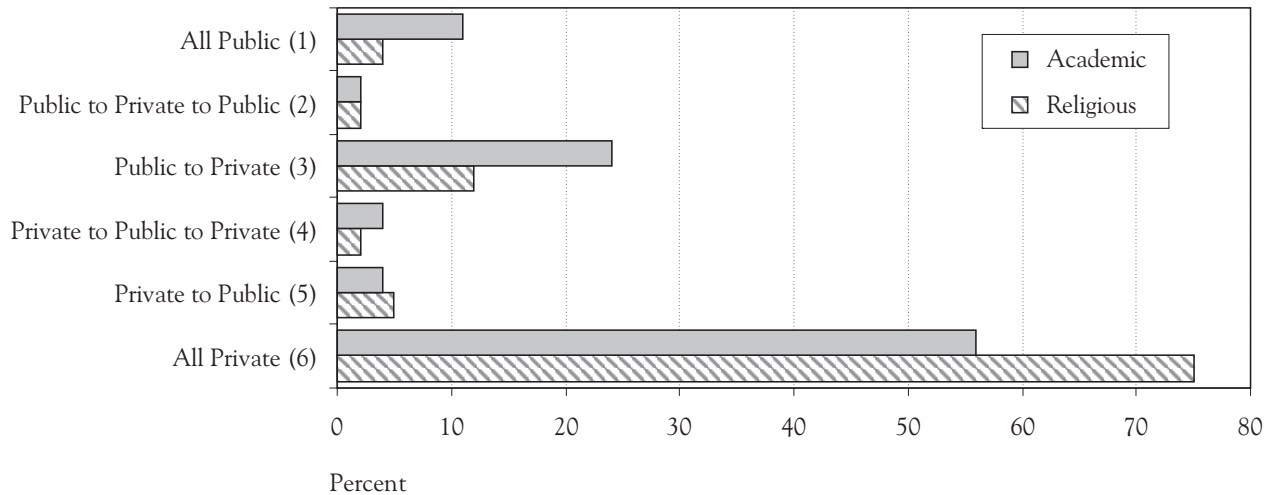
private to public schools; two percent had moved from public to private and back again; and two percent had moved from private to public and back again (see figure 3). Our data suggest the switch from private to public education happens most often at the beginning of secondary school, but there were also a notable number of students who were reported as having moved in the opposite direction at that point in their academic careers. Children from families associated with religiously-defined schools were more likely to have attended only private schools: 75 percent compared to 56 percent from families supporting academically-defined schools. The six percent of children from our sample families who had always attended a public school were mostly older children in families which now send their younger children to private schools.

Parents with children in a religiously-defined school were more likely to have attended a private school themselves. Even so, just over half of the parents with children in religiously-defined schools, and almost three-quarters of those with children in academically-defined schools, had spent some time attending publicly funded elementary and secondary schools. Only 12 percent of parents, mostly from religiously-defined schools, had never attended a public

school, but 62 percent of parents—evenly distributed between the academically-defined and religiously-defined groups—had never attended a private school at all. This offers eloquent testimony to the shift in parental preference for private over public education over the past generation. A very small number of parents (less than 1%) reported having been home schooled. This is not surprising given that less than two percent of contemporary Canadian home schooling parents were home schooled themselves (Van Pelt, 2004, p. 34).

Religious affiliation

The greater majority of parents responding to our survey (82%) reported a religious affiliation, the most common being some form of Christianity (72%), followed by Islam (5.5%), Judaism (3.3%), then very small numbers of Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh (1.3%) and other religions (0.4%), including one Wiccan. Comparative 2001 census estimates yield a close match to this general pattern, 83 percent of Ontario parents with school aged children declaring a religious affiliation, with 71 percent classified as Christian, 4.5 percent Islamic, 3.1 percent Jewish, and 4.1 percent Buddhist, Hindu, or

Figure 3: Patterns of School Attendance, All Children in Sample Families

- (1) All public—student has only ever attended a publicly-funded school.
- (2) Public to Private to Public—student first attended a publicly-funded school, then a private school, then a publicly-funded school.
- (3) Public to Private—student first attended a publicly-funded school, then a private school.
- (4) Private to Public to Private—student first attended a private school, then a publicly-funded school, then a private school.
- (5) Private to Public—student first attended a private school, then a publicly-funded school.
- (6) All private—student has only ever attended a private school.

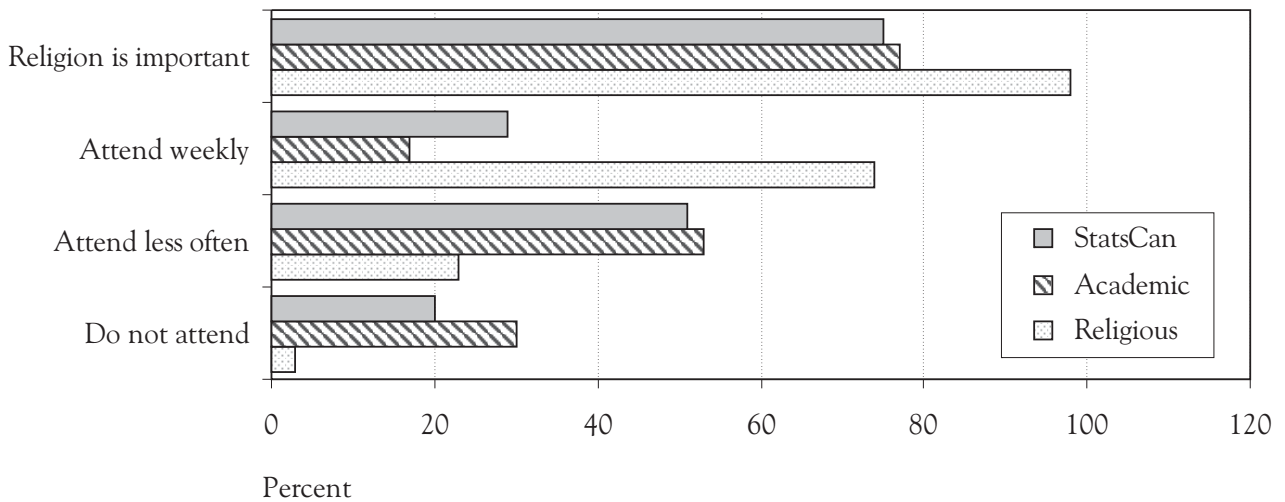
Sources: Statistics Canada, 2001; Statistics Canada, 2004; Statistics Canada, 2006a; Statistics Canada, 2006b; Statistics Canada, 2006c.

Sikh. These numbers imply higher proportions of Islamic and Judaic families are likely to choose private schools than are families with other non-Christian religious affiliations. Moreover, the proportions of Buddhist, Hindu, and Sikh parents in our sample were notably lower than the 2001 census population estimates, suggesting parents with such religious affiliations are likely to send their children to public schools. None of the schools in our sample were defined by one of these religions and our broader inquiries identified only a very few in the province. Most of the families with Buddhist, Hindu, or Sikh parents in our sample sent their children to academically-defined schools, while a handful sent their children to Christian schools.

The 71.5 percent of parents reporting some form of Christian affiliation in our survey was virtually identical to the comparable 2001 census estimate of 71.2 percent. There was a smaller proportion of parents identifying themselves as Catholic or Orthodox Chris-

tians in our data (20%) than was the case in the 2001 census (37%). This is to be expected given the ready availability of publicly funded Roman Catholic Separate schools in Ontario. Indeed, the most interesting point that arises here is what appears to be a relatively high proportion of Catholic parents who choose private schools over public—and thus tuition free—alternatives. Slightly over half (51%) of our respondents fell into the category of Protestant or other Christian denominations, which is a substantially greater proportion than the 34 percent of comparable parents in the 2001 census. This reflects the many and varied non-Catholic Christian private schools in our sample and the province at large. Even so, 34 percent of the Christian parents in our survey sent their children to academically-defined schools.

While the proportion of parents in our survey declaring a religious affiliation was very similar to the comparative 2001 census estimate, they appear to attach much

Figure 4: Importance of Religion and Religious Attendance

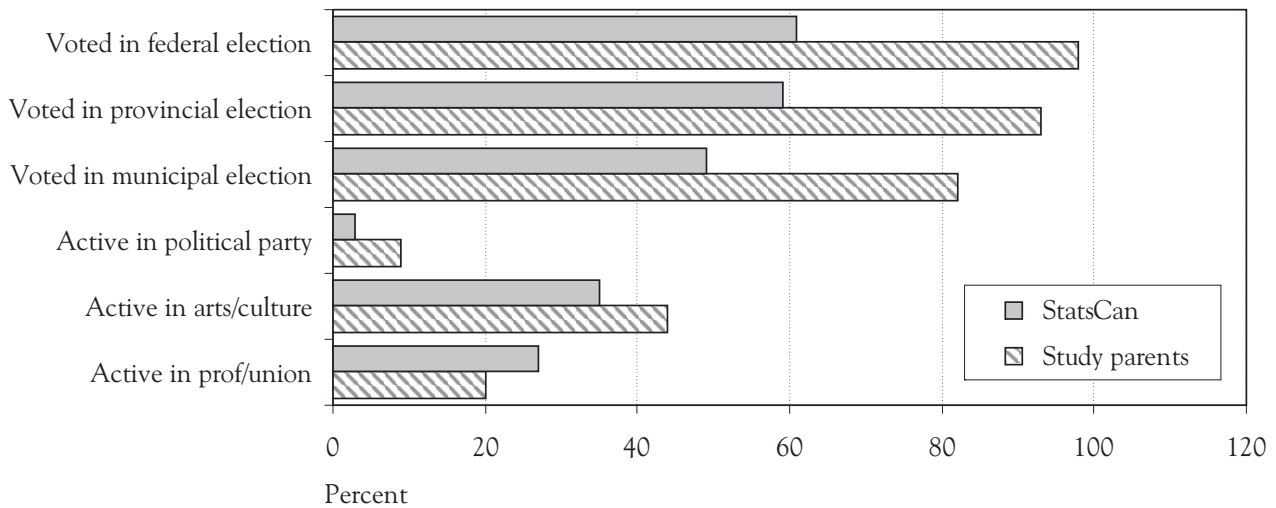
Sources: Statistics Canada, 2001; Statistics Canada, 2004; Statistics Canada, 2006a; Statistics Canada, 2006b; Statistics Canada, 2006c.

greater importance to their religious beliefs than respondents to a 2003 survey (Statistics Canada, 2004). Ninety percent of our private school parents declared their religious or spiritual beliefs to be important or very important to the way they live their lives, as compared to 75 percent of Ontario parents in the Statistics Canada survey. As indicated in figure 4, virtually all (98%) parents with children in religiously-defined schools declared their religious or spiritual beliefs to be very important to them, but so did many (77%) parents with children in academically-defined schools. A little over half (53%) of private school parents reported attending religious services or meetings at least once a week, but this was so for only 29 percent of the comparison group from the Statistics Canada data. Three quarters (74%) of parents with children attending religiously-defined schools reported attending religious services at least once a week, but only 17 percent of parents of academically-defined schools reported attending as frequently.

Community participation

Private school parents in our data were more politically active than their counterparts in Ontario society gener-

ally. As figure 5 indicates, almost all (98%) private school parents reported voting in the last federal election, 93 percent in the last provincial election, and 82 percent in the last municipal election. In contrast, Statistics Canada's social survey data (Statistics Canada, 2004) show only 61 percent of Ontario parents with school aged children reported voting in the last federal election, and 59 percent and 49 percent in the last provincial and municipal elections. Nine percent of private school parents also reported being actively involved in a political party or group, as opposed to only three percent of comparison parents. Our data also provide grounds to think that parents who choose private schools are just as likely to be involved in social and fraternal activities as are other parents: 44 percent of our parents reported being active in sports and recreational organizations as compared to 35 percent of comparable Ontario parents, the respective proportions for participation in cultural, educational, and hobby organizations being 17 percent and 19 percent. Private school parents reported being less involved in union and professional association activity (20%) than did parents in the comparison group (27%), a difference that could be explained by the high incidence of self-employment which is discussed below.

Figure 5: Comparison of Community Involvement

Sources: Statistics Canada, 2001; Statistics Canada, 2004; Statistics Canada, 2006a; Statistics Canada, 2006b; Statistics Canada, 2006c.

Education

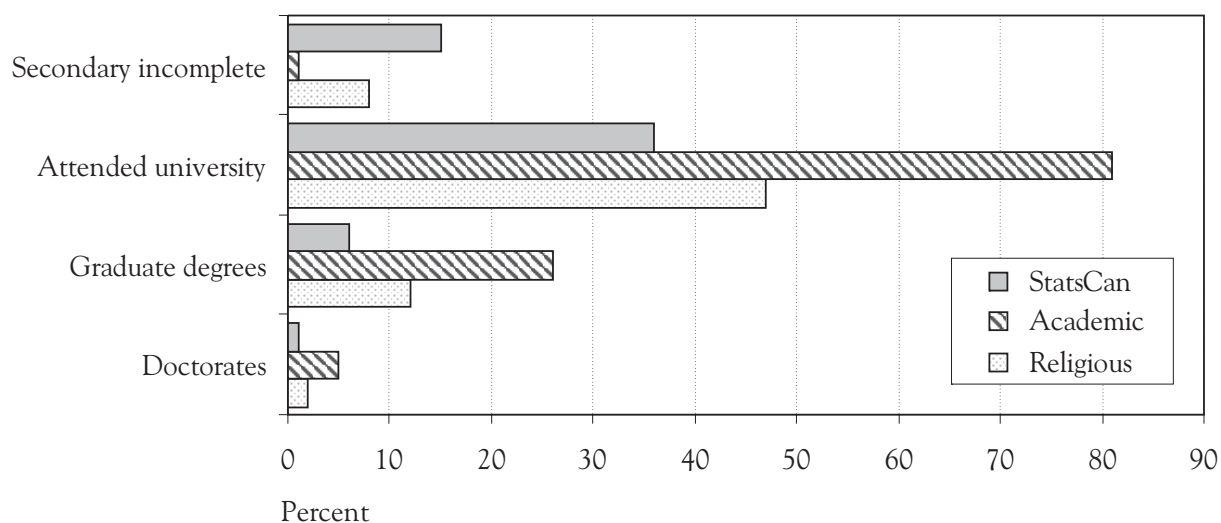
Private school parents appear to be much better educated than other Ontario parents with school aged children. While five percent had not completed secondary school, most (75%) had attended university, and almost a quarter (21%) held graduate degrees, nine percent doctorates.² Among comparative parents in the 2001 census, more had not completed high school (15%) and only 36 percent had attended university, of which six percent had completed a graduate degree, one percent a doctorate. Moreover, private school parents who had not completed a Bachelor's degree were much more likely to have earned another post-secondary credential (55%) than were parents in the census comparison group (36%). The most common areas of post-secondary study among our private school parents were medicine and related health fields, which accounted for twelve percent of the reported fields of study, followed by business and commerce (11%), and then education, recreation or counseling (10%); respective proportions for the 2001 census

comparison group are 4 percent, 4.5 percent, and 5 percent. Parents with children enrolled in religiously-defined schools typically had lower levels of education than those with children in academically-defined schools, but they still tended to have higher levels of education than parents in the general population. Less than one percent of ADS parents had not graduated from high school, compared to eight percent of parents supporting religiously-defined schools, and whereas three-quarters of ADS parents had at least one university level credential and 14 percent a doctorate, 43 percent of RDS parents had a university credential, and five percent a doctorate (see figure 6).

Employment

As indicated in figure 7, 12 percent of private school parents reported being employed as professional health workers, as compared to three percent in the comparison census population. Business occupations provide an even sharper illustration of the effect of parents' education. A quarter of private school parents (24.7%)

² Including medical degrees (5.7% medical doctorates, 3% PhDs).

Figure 6: Comparison of Parental Education Levels

Sources: Statistics Canada, 2001; Statistics Canada, 2004; Statistics Canada, 2006a; Statistics Canada, 2006b; Statistics Canada, 2006c.

worked in management positions, as compared to 13 percent of 2001 census parents, and six percent of the private school parents were senior managers, compared to just two percent of comparison Ontario parents. Overall, half (49%) of private school parents reported working in management, health, or teaching occupations, as compared to a quarter (24%) of comparative Ontario parents in the 2001 census. In contrast, almost one-fifth (19.3%) of census parents were classified as working in construction or other trades, as transport or equipment operators, in manufacturing, or as trades helpers or labourers, compared to ten percent of private school parents. Of the ten percent of the private school parents who reported working in lower status occupations, most (89%) enrolled children in religiously-defined schools, but not all. Specific occupations reported by parents within this ten percent group were truck driver, construction worker, house cleaner, labourer, factory worker, and taxi driver.

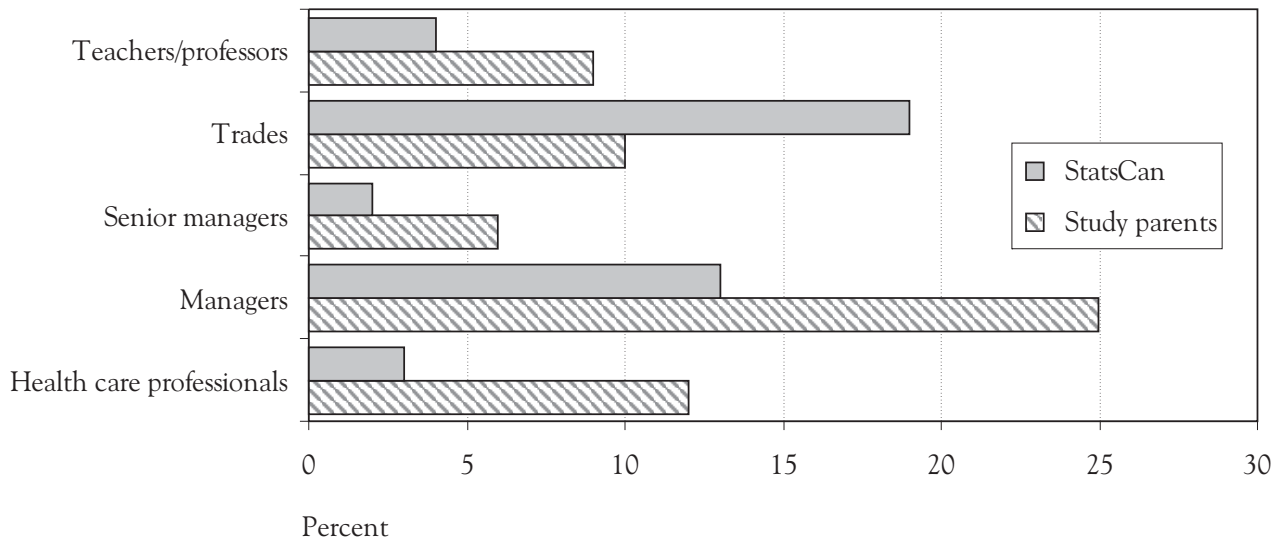
Nine percent (154) of our respondent parents held a teaching qualification, and most (71%) were currently teaching, 45 percent in publicly-funded schools. Slightly over half (58%) of these public school teachers sent one or more of their children to a religiously-de-

fined private school. The 2001 census estimates show four percent of parents with school-aged children employed as “teachers and professors.” This shows at least a modest tendency for professional educators to enrol their children in private schools.

Finally, 237 respondents (14%), three of whom were male, listed their occupation as “Homemaker.” There is no comparative occupational category in the 2001 census data, where such responses were classified as not applicable, together with responses such as unemployed or retired. The total of such inapplicable codes among our 2001 census comparison group accounted for 12 percent of all responses, the comparative proportion in our data being 15 percent. Families with children in private schools thus appear more likely to have a parent who regards himself or herself as a full-time homemaker.

Income

As would be expected from the comparative education and employment patterns, most families responding to our survey had relatively large incomes. Even so, the private school families captured in our data spanned

Figure 7: Comparison of Types of Parental Employment

Sources: Statistics Canada, 2001; Statistics Canada, 2004; Statistics Canada, 2006a; Statistics Canada, 2006b; Statistics Canada, 2006c.

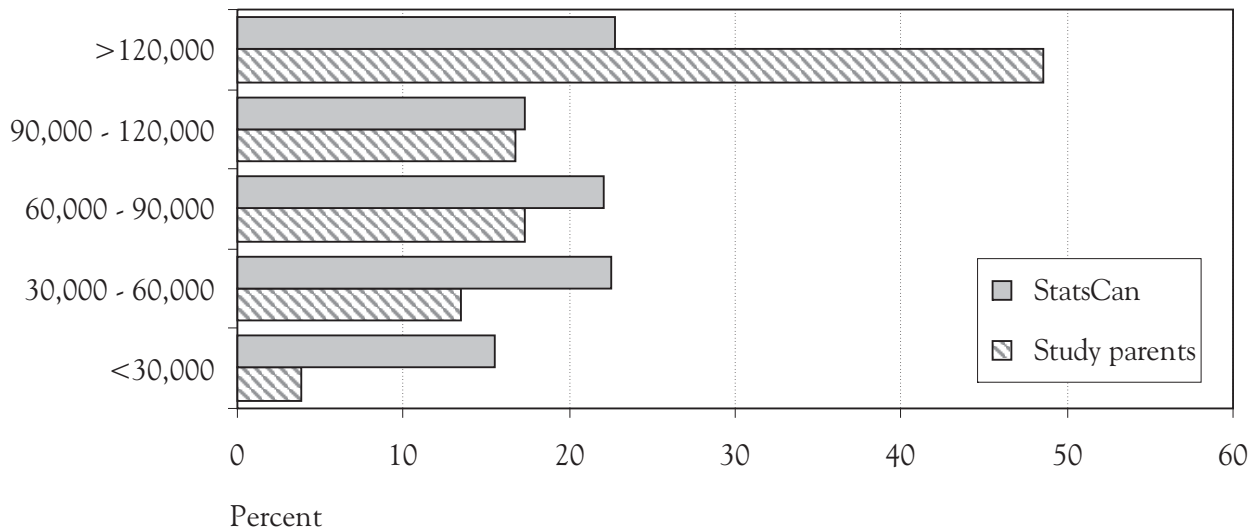
the full income spectrum, ranging from 18 who reported annual incomes of a million dollars or more to 27 with incomes of \$30,000 or less. As shown in figure 8, almost half (49%) of the private school households reported total incomes of \$120,000 or more, which is slightly more than twice the proportion (23%) of comparative census families with such incomes.³ This pattern closely mirrors comparative distributions reported in an earlier Statistics Canada (2001) analysis of incomes among private school households. That earlier study reported that “twenty-one percent of private school students come from families with less than \$50,000 in income, while 37 percent of public school students are from this group.” Our data conform to this general pattern, with 18 percent of total private school family incomes being reported as \$60,000 or less, com-

pared to 38 percent of inflation-adjusted 2005 family incomes in the census data. Some 32 (5.6%) of our respondents reported family incomes of \$33,000 or less, which approximates the 2005 before-tax Low Income Cut-off (LICO) for families of four living in larger urban areas (Statistics Canada, 2006d).⁴ All but three of these families had children in religiously-defined schools.

Families with children in religiously-defined schools typically had lower incomes, with only one third (33%) reporting total incomes of \$120,000 or higher, compared to more than three-quarters (77%) of families sending children to academically-defined schools.⁵ This pattern is even more marked when schools supported by the top and bottom income echelons are

³ The 2001 census data reports incomes for 2000 whereas our survey collected income summaries for 2005. The census figures were all adjusted to approximate 2005 values using Consumer Price Index figures for Ontario.

⁴ There are several technical difficulties in sensibly applying the LICOs to our data, not the least of which is that Statistics Canada calculations are for economic families, which are not necessarily comparable to households in our study. Published LICOs vary with family size and location. The 2005 LICOs for families of four were \$26,579 for rural locations, \$30,238 for communities with populations of less than 30,000, \$33,000 for those with populations of 30,000 - 99,999, \$33,251 for populations of 100,000 - 499,999, and \$38,610 for urban areas with populations more than 500,000. See Statistics Canada (2006d).

Figure 8: Comparison of Family Income Levels

Sources: Statistics Canada, 2001; Statistics Canada, 2004; Statistics Canada, 2006a; Statistics Canada, 2006b; Statistics Canada, 2006c.

compared. Of the 101 families with incomes of \$310,000 or more, 75 percent sent children to academically-defined schools, 53 percent of this top income group enrolling children in CIS schools. In stark contrast, 90 percent of the 93 families with incomes of \$59,000 or less had children in religiously-defined schools. Yet, in contradiction of stereotypical expectations, three of these 93 families with the lowest incomes sent children to CIS schools.

Fully 83 percent of comparative 2001 census families identified their major source of family income as wages and salaries, compared to 57 percent among private school families, with a further 10 per cent declaring that wages and salaries were combined with another source as the major sources of family income. And whereas forty percent of private school families identified self-employment as their major source of income, or one of their major sources of income, only seven percent of the census comparison families did so. A little over a third of private school families (37%) reported receiving the Child Tax Benefit, compared to three-

quarters (75%) of the census families. Eighty-one percent of the private school parents receiving the Child Tax Credit sent children to religiously-defined schools.

Culture

A notably higher proportion of private school parents (62%) were born in Ontario than were Ontario residents with school aged children in the 2001 census (53%). Ten percent were born elsewhere in Canada, compared to 11.5 percent of our census comparison group. Although nine percent of our participating parents were born in Asia, they were nonetheless under-represented when compared to the 16 percent Asian-born among comparison census parents. A greater proportion of private school parents held Canadian citizenship (92%) than did comparable 2001 census parents (87%), with a lower proportion of private school parents being citizens by naturalization (19%) than was the case in the comparative census data (30%).

5 Examination of the 2001 census data found no statistically significant difference between mean total incomes of parents declaring a religious affiliation and those who did not.

Higher proportions of private school parents identified English as their sole mother tongue (70%) and as the language they most often speak at home (84%), the comparative 2001 census proportions being 64 percent and 78 percent respectively. The next most frequently identified hearth languages among private school parents were Dutch, (5%), German (5%), Italian (3%) and Chinese (3%). Comparative census estimates being Dutch 0.4 percent, German 0.8 percent, Italian 3.4 percent and Chinese 6.3 percent. The over-representation of Dutch languages mirrors the relatively higher proportion of our private school parents who were born in the Netherlands (2% in our data, 0.23% in the 2001 census data). This might be a result of parents from the Netherlands being more readily disposed to private schools as a result of the wide availability and acceptance of non-state schools in the Netherlands.

While English clearly dominated the hearth and home languages identified by the private school parents, respondents nevertheless identified no less than 56 different hearth languages overall, 38 of which survive as languages most often spoken at home. The strong tendency for private school parents to be Canadian or European-born English speakers is reflected in the lower proportion of visible minority parents among our respondents (15%) than in the comparative census data (23%). More specifically, our data contain smaller proportions of parents in each of Statistics Canada's visible minority categories (Chinese, South Asian, Black), the greatest discrepancy being in the Black category which accounted for only one percent of our respondents as compared to the census estimate of four percent of Ontario parents with school-aged children.

Summary

When viewed alongside comparable population estimates, the private school families captured in our data tended to have more children, and fewer were lone parent families; a higher proportion of parents were Ontario-born English speakers who were Canadian

citizens by birth, and a lower proportion were visible minorities. While 57 percent of our parents sent children to religiously-defined schools, the proportion of the full sample reporting a religious affiliation (82%) was comparable to that in the Ontario population at large (83%). Even so, a markedly higher proportion of private school parents said their religious or spiritual beliefs were important to the way they live their lives than did Ontario parents generally.

Parents sending children to private schools typically had much higher levels of education and tended to work in professional or semi-professional and administrative occupations. Unsurprisingly, then, private school parents tended to have higher incomes than their counterparts in the general population. Yet, as found in earlier research, many private school families reported relatively modest incomes, and some can be fairly regarded as poor. It is also clear that parents sending children to academically-defined schools will likely have higher levels of education and income than those with children in religiously-defined schools.

Even so, exceptions were evident to each of the dominant patterns emerging from our data. While most private school parents were highly educated, five percent had not graduated from high school; while most worked in higher status occupations, some had much more ordinary jobs; while the great majority were Ontario-born, English speaking Canadian citizens, some were non-English speaking recent immigrants; while the great majority of private school families had two married parents, there were both female and male lone-parent families as well as same-sex families in our sample. In sum, parents sending children to Ontario academically-defined and religiously-defined schools tend to be highly educated, employed in high-status occupations, and relatively rich—except, that is, for those who are plainly not rich, are less well educated, and are employed in comparatively lowly work. Our short answer to the question of who sends their children to private school is thus “anyone.”



Parental Reasons for Choosing Private Schools

Other North American researchers have studied the reasons parents give for choosing private schools. After considering Bell (2005), Bosetti (2000), Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth and Families (2004), Davies and Quirke (2005a, 2005b), Erickson (1986), Mirski (2005), Paquette (2000), Ungerleider (2003) and other sources, we generated a list of sixty-one features and characteristics of private schools. Our parent questionnaire asked respondents to rate how important each was in their selection of a private school for their child and to rate the extent to which they agreed the characteristic was indeed a feature of their chosen school. Consequently, two lists could be created, a ranked list of reasons for choosing private schools and a ranked list

of the features present in private schools. These reasons and features were further examined by considering the responses for parents choosing academically-defined schools or religiously-defined schools.

Top ten reasons for choosing an Ontario private school

The most highly rated reason for choosing any private school was the dedication of the teachers, which was seen as very important by 91 percent of all parents. In addition, more than 80 percent of all parents declared as very important an emphasis on academic quality. Teaching right from wrong and school safety were also

Table 2: Top Ten Very Important Reasons by Type of Private School

Academically-Defined Schools		Religiously-Defined Schools	
This school ...		This school ...	
92%	› has dedicated teachers	90%	› teaches right from wrong
87%	› emphasizes academic quality	90%	› has dedicated teachers
85%	› motivates students	88%	› supports our family's values
84%	› is a safe school	86%	› is a safe school
84%	› has outstanding, quality teachers	83%	› reinforces our religion
84%	› instills confidence in the students	79%	› emphasizes academic quality
82%	› teaches students to think for themselves	79%	› has good student discipline
82%	› offers individualized attention	77%	› values parent-teacher collaboration
79%	› offers a supportive, nurturing, educational environment	77%	› is conducive to character development
77%	› offers outstanding classroom instruction	77%	› educates the whole child

Common reasons are in bold type.

**Table 3: Commonalities and Differences
Very Important Reasons for Choosing
the School**

ADS	RDS	Common reasons
76%	77%	› educates the whole child
68%	69%	› sets high expectations for students
65%	66%	› is well administered
64%	64%	› offers frequent, detailed and open reporting to parents
57%	56%	› graduates typically accepted at universities of choice
57%	56%	› caters to the particular needs of our children
38%	39%	› has teachers who regularly assign homework
RDS	ADS	More important in religiously-defined schools
90%	70%	› teaches right from wrong
88%	52%	› supports our family's values
83%	5%	› reinforces our religion
77%	54%	› values parent-teacher collaboration
56%	18%	› has parents participate in decision making
44%	20%	› provides valuable networks to our family and children.
43%	20%	› community brings meaning to our lives.
42%	26%	› gives us a sense of belonging.
34%	11%	› is part of our family's identity.
29%	13%	› is attended by our children's friends
27%	10%	› is less expensive than others we considered.
ADS	RDS	More important in academically-defined schools
85%	67%	› motivates students.
82%	66%	› offers individualized attention.
75%	53%	› has small class sizes
40%	24%	› offers a broad appreciation of the arts and culture.

ADS = Academically-Defined Schools.

RDS = Religiously-Defined Schools.

very important in the choice of private school. Differences between the top ten most highly rated responses from parents enrolling children in religiously-defined or academically-defined schools are shown in table 2. While more than 79 percent of both groups of parents rated the same three features as very important in their choice of school (presence of dedicated teachers, academic quality of the education, and safety) there were differences between the groups on other top reasons. Respondents from religiously-defined schools gave particularly high ratings to features such as teaching right from wrong, supporting family values, and reinforcing the family's religion within a context of parent-teacher collaboration and student discipline. Strong ties to home, faith, cultural heritage, and family are very important to parents who choose these schools.

These findings were also reflected in the short answers parents gave when asked to describe, in one sentence, their most important reason for sending their children to a private school. One family with children in a religiously-defined school said, "This school educates the whole child including social responsibility, arts and culture, tolerance, personal and spiritual growth." Another RDS response said, "[we choose this school] to preserve the values and traditions that our forefathers stood for." Another said, "There were several reasons: size, focus/values, and a feeling of community (i.e. parents, teachers, and students all working together)." Several RDS families made similar remarks about consistency: "We want our children to receive a faith-based education that complements the teaching of our home and church," said one.

Table 4: Top Ten Most Recognized Features of the Schools by Type of School

in Academically-Defined Schools		in Religiously-Defined Schools	
This school ...		This school ...	
71%	› is a safe school	80%	› reinforces our religion
71%	› has dedicated teachers	78%	› teaches right from wrong
66%	› emphasizes academic quality	76%	› has no danger of teachers going on strike
65%	› has no danger of teachers going on strike	74%	› supports our family's values
64%	› has a good reputation	74%	› is a safe school
64%	› offers opportunities unavailable in local public schools	73%	› has dedicated teachers
63%	› educates the whole child	67%	› values parent-teacher collaboration
62%	› motivates students	66%	› emphasizes academic quality
62%	› offers a supportive, nurturing, educational environment	63%	› educates the whole child
61%	› is conducive to character development	62%	› is conducive to character development

Common reasons are in **bold type**.

In contrast parents with children in academically-defined schools identified features such as outstanding quality of the teachers, the outstanding quality of the classroom instruction, a supportive, nurturing educational environment that motivates students, builds confidence, teaches independent thought, and offers individualized attention as being very important in their choice. Parents enrolling children in academically-defined schools thus appear to value instruction by outstanding teachers concerned with individual student well-being and growth. As one such parent told us, the most important reason for choosing was “Quality education in a controlled environment, with good teacher/student ratio and a successful track record.” Comments from parents with children in academically-defined schools frequently referred to dissatisfaction with the public system: “Character building within community, academics, confidence, and a sense of being a person, not a number as in the public system” said one; and “Disappointment with the public school, teachers spending too much time on discipline and not enough time on instruction,” said another.

Commonalities and differences

Were there any features that parents from one group would be significantly more likely to claim were very important in selecting their schools when compared with parents from the other group? Table 3 explores commonalities and differences in parental ratings of very important features by school type. Parents from both kinds of school, religiously-defined and academically-defined, were equally likely to select as “very important” features such as educating the whole child, setting high expectations for students, being well administered, offering frequent, detailed and open reporting to parents, preparing graduates who are more likely to be accepted at the universities of their choice, catering to the particular needs of children, and having teachers who regularly assign homework.

Parents choosing religiously-defined schools were significantly more likely than parents choosing academically-defined schools ($p < .000$ in all cases, that is,

there is less than one chance in a thousand that the results occurred by chance) to rate the following items as very important: the schools' support of the family's religion, values, and morals; involvement of parents in decision-making and collaboration with teachers; and embedded family identity in the school, its community, and its networks. An emphasis on the importance of such features indicates an important enculturation function that religiously-defined schools appear to provide to their supporting families.

Parents enrolling children in academically-defined schools were significantly more likely to rate as very important to their choice features such as offering a broad appreciation of arts and culture, motivating students, and offering individualized attention ($p < .000$ in all cases). In essence, parents choosing academically-defined schools appear to prize the provision of individualized and enriching environments for students.

In sum, parents supporting both types of schools were equally likely to be looking for a school that would be interested in the welfare of the whole child and his/her particular needs, and which would provide quality and effective education with sound school administration. Parents choosing religiously-defined schools appeared to be more specific in their expectations concerning religious values and moral teaching, and most particularly in their search for a sense of involvement, community, and belonging. Parents choosing academically-defined schools were attracted by the individualized focus and broader cultural appreciation.

Top ten most recognized features in Ontario private schools

Parents were also asked to indicate the extent to which each of the sixty-one school features was present in their private school, using a four point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The majority of parents agreed their private schools are indeed safe, supportive, nurturing, and have good reputations; that

their teachers are dedicated and not likely to go on strike, and that the education provided focuses on the whole student, offers quality instruction, character development, and a moral perspective that supports the family's values. Table 4 shows differences between responses by type of school. Parents of religiously-defined schools strongly agree that their schools reinforce the family's religion and values, teach the difference between right and wrong, and value the role of parents in parent-teacher collaboration. The presence and influence of the home and the emphasis on morality emerged as distinctly recognizable features of religiously-defined schools, indicating, again, the important enculturation function that these schools offer. Parents with children in academically-defined schools tended to strongly agree their school had a good reputation, offered opportunities unavailable in local public schools and motivated students in a supportive, nurturing, environment. These recognized features point toward ways in which these schools do indeed provide opportunities for individualized enrichment.

Satisfaction

In the vast majority of cases the features that were very important to parents in their choice of private school were found to be features of the chosen school. Thus, as might be expected, parents for the most part said that their schools delivered the features they were looking for when they chose them. Parents supporting religiously-defined schools said that their schools did indeed support the family's religion, values, and morals, and did involve parents in the school and its network. Parents choosing academically-defined schools identified more emphasis on extended activities and enrichment programs offered by the school. These differences imply that parents choosing academically-defined schools may appreciate the additional value-added features and conveniences that "round out," the individualized, motivating academic emphasis characteristic of these schools even though those items were not the most important factors in their choice of the school.

Past experience

The parent questionnaire asked parents to rate how important their disappointment with other school options was in choosing their current private school. Fully 94 percent of respondents said that disappointment with public or separate schools was a factor in their choice of private school. Indeed, 75 percent said it was a very important factor in choosing their private school. More than half (54%) of the parents who had at some time had a child in a publicly-funded Roman Catholic separate school said that their disappointment with the separate school was a very important factor in their choosing their current private school. About a third of these parents now send their children to a private Roman Catholic school, a third to another religiously-defined school, and a third to academically-defined schools. More than half (58%) of the parents who had at some time had a child in the secular public system said that their disappointment with public schools was a very important factor in choosing their current private school. Half of these parents now send children to religiously-defined schools and half to academically-defined schools. Thus, while 75 percent of students in religiously-defined and 56 percent of students in academically-defined schools have always at-

tended such schools (figure 3), when past experience with a publicly-funded system was a factor in the parents' decision they were equally likely to choose either a religiously-defined or academically-defined school.

Summary

Parent ratings of private school features show that in general they overwhelmingly chose private schools because of the dedicated teachers and their outstanding quality; safe, supportive, nurturing, motivating, confidence-enhancing educational environments; and an emphasis on quality academics. In addition, parents who chose religiously-defined schools typically view a focus on faith, morals, character, family, and community as very important. Those who chose academically-defined schools typically see a focus on individualized growth, confidence, and motivation as very important and they are more likely to have tried a publicly-funded option before choosing a private school for their children. Altogether, we conclude that both kinds of private school are seen as providing a high quality education and different added value properties, with religiously-defined schools providing specific enculturation functions, while academically-defined private schools emphasize individualized enrichment.



Private Schools as “Effective Schools”

Our data revealed striking but somewhat unanticipated parallels between parent perceptions of private schools, both religiously-defined and academically-defined, and features characteristic of public schools that have been identified by scholars as “effective schools.” For decades research on effective schools has sought to identify the characteristics of those public

schools which achieve at higher levels than expected, given their inputs and socio-economic-cultural context. Purkey and Smith’s (1983) widely cited summary identified thirteen characteristics of effective schools. We have summarized these in the first column of table 5, and in the second column we have listed items from our survey which correspond to these features, along with the

percentage of parents who agreed or strongly agreed that these were features of their chosen private school.

While we have adopted Purkey and Smith's wording in this discussion for consistency, subsequent work has extended and refined the features characteristically associated with effective schools. Currently recognized core features of effective schools include a strong sense of identity, commitment and purpose, typically associated with and supported through cooperation and collaboration. Such schools also emphasize student instruction and student progress, have high expectations for academic achievement and behaviour, which is shared by staff and parents and typically accepted by pupils. They also regularly assess student progress, have an orderly school climate, and nurture consistent, mutually supportive efforts by home and school. A subsequent landmark study by Coleman and Hoffer (1987) expanded on the importance of the school community. They identified two forms of school community: a "functional" community where the school serves a distinctive community, as might be expected in religiously-defined schools; and a shared "values" commu-

nity, where parents (and staff) independently choose a school on the basis of its ideals and world view, as is evidently the case in many academically-defined schools.

Responses of parents participating in this study show that features of effective schools are also features of private schools. The first of Purkey and Smith's characteristics, school level decision making, is a defining property of private schools which, by their very nature, are self-governing and self-managed. As such, private schools enjoy far greater scope for local initiatives than are normally possible in a typical public school. Purkey and Smith's second characteristic, support for local school leadership and collaborative decision making from central (district) administration, may at first only appear relevant to public school systems. Yet while it is evident that private schools are not directly governed or funded by a central agency, all, or virtually all, benefit from advice, guidance, direction, and support available through their affiliations with one or more supporting organizations. As table 5 shows, strong parallels to each of Purkey and Smith's remaining features emerged from our data, with the overwhelming major-

Table 5: Purkey and Smith's (1983) Characteristics of Effective (Public) Schools Compared to Reasons Parents Choose Independent (Ontario) Schools

Purkey and Smith's (1983) characteristics of effective schools	Percentage of all parents identifying similar feature as important or very important in their independent school
1. School site management and democratic decision making	Ontario independent schools in Ontario are by nature locally managed and responsible for their educational decisions.
2. Support from the district level for school-level leadership and collaborative decision-making	The various affiliations to which most Ontario independent schools belong can provide supportive direction and guidance as required.
3. Strong leadership by administrators and by and through teams of administrators, teachers, and others	94% – This school is well administered. 94% – The principal of this school provides strong leadership. 95% – This school values collegial relationships amongst staff members.
4. Staff stability	99% – This school has dedicated teachers. 95% – There is no danger of teachers at this school going on strike. 92% – This school has a long tradition of success.

continued next page

Table 5: Purkey and Smith's (1983) Characteristics of Effective (Public) Schools Compared to Reasons Parents Choose Independent (Ontario) Schools

Purkey and Smith's (1983) characteristics of effective schools	Percentage of all parents identifying similar feature as important or very important in their independent school
5. A planned, coordinated, integrated curriculum that addresses student needs	98% – This school is conducive to character development. 98% – This school teaches right from wrong. 96% – This school offers a supportive, nurturing, educational environment. 96% – This school educates the whole child. 92% – This school is flexible and responsive.
6. Staff development	95% – This school has outstanding, quality teachers.
7. Parental involvement and support	97% – This school supports our family's values. 95% – This school values parent-teacher collaboration. 93% – This school offers frequent, detailed, and open reporting to parents.
8. School-wide recognition of academic success	98% – This school has a good reputation. 96% – This school recognizes student success.
9. Priority given to teaching and learning	97% – This school teaches students to think for themselves. 97% – This school motivates students. 96% – This school offers individualized attention. 95% – This school emphasizes basic skills. 95% – This school instills confidence in the students. 93% – This school offers outstanding classroom instruction.
10. A sense of community	98% – The students at this school seem happy. 95% – This school offers a supportive community.
11. Collaborative planning and collegial relationships	95% – This school values parent-teacher collaboration. 94% – The staff at this school has a collaborative approach to problem solving.
12. Commonly shared clear goals and high achievable expectations	99% – This school emphasizes academic quality. 97% – This school has high achievement standards. 97% – This school has clear goals. 97% – This school frequently evaluates student progress. 96% – This school sets high expectations for students. 93% – This school has high expectations for teachers.
13. Order and discipline	100% – This is a safe school. 96% – This school has good student discipline.

ity of parents reporting that their schools exhibit these same features of effective schools. Their schools are locally managed and locally accountable. They are led by strong principals and boast collaboration amongst administrators, teachers, and parents. Parents overwhelmingly report private schools have clear goals and prioritize learning and teaching. They evaluate student performance and recognize academic success. The school climate is ordered, safe, disciplined, and has a sense of community. In this respect there is broad agreement that, regardless of the socio-economic status of the families, and regardless of the curricular orientation of the school, parents choosing private schools identify similar key features in their schools and these features map onto those exhibited by those schools identified as being particularly effective in earlier research. This may have important implications about where parents might begin to search when seeking a more effective school for their child.

Our findings clearly show that that the private schools studied were notably strong with respect to the core characteristics of effective schools. This is perhaps to be expected given the emphasis on identity, distinct climate, and strong purpose characteristic of privately founded and sustained schools. Most distinctively and completely such schools are communities in one of the two senses identified by Coleman and Hoffer (1987). In the case of religiously-defined schools that community will be defined by the religious identity that defines the school. A broader sense of community is likely in academically-defined schools, depending on the values and pedagogy defining the school. In both cases the sense of community is formed and sustained by parental choice. The extent to which other common features of effective schools are present will be influenced by the collective commitments of the governors, administrators, teachers, and parents in the school.



Conclusions

Parents everywhere desire the best education available for their children. Perhaps nowhere else is this better displayed than by those who are able to choose a private school for their children. Decade by decade, the percentage of Ontario students enrolled in private schools has increased, until today an estimated 6.5 percent of Ontario elementary and secondary school students attend private schools in the province. This increase includes growing numbers of students in attendance at private Roman Catholic schools despite the presence of fully-funded, state-provided Roman Catholic Separate schools in the province. This study investigated what these private schools are, why they are being chosen, and who is choosing them.

Schools and the reasons parents choose them

A vast array of schools operate across the private school sector. They range in size, facilities, staffing, governance, and financing, but all of them see their main mission as being the provision of a superior education. While parental reasons for choosing either religiously-defined or academically-defined schools emerged as different from one another in some respects, and while the parents from each group emerged as being different not only from the general population but also from each other, we nevertheless found a coherence in why parents choose their

schools and how they characterized their schools of choice.

According to the parents who choose them, private schools consistently embody distinctive characteristics which have been previously identified through large scale comparative research as components of effective schools. As such, private schools are self-governed and managed, and typically operate within a supportive and collaborative atmosphere provided by broader school affiliations. Strong local leadership, collegial collaboration between principals, teachers, and parents, a focus on learning and teaching, high expectations, and an ordered environment were features overwhelmingly identified by the parents as characteristics present in their private school of their choice.

Although we did not set out to identify whether Ontario private schools exhibited characteristics of effective schools, those characteristics nevertheless surfaced, unambiguously, and forcefully. The parallels between the majority of Ontario private schools reported in this survey and effective schools in general is intuitively sensible. The current move by Ontario's publicly governed schools toward ever greater standardization and hierarchical accountability runs counter to the findings of effective schools research. Parents are compelled to search elsewhere for such features in schools for their children.

According to the parents who choose them, distinct differences do exist between religiously-defined and academically-defined private schools and their parents. Academically-defined schools tend to place greater emphasis on individuality whereas religiously-defined schools focus more on community. Academically-defined schools are appreciated by parents for the enriching educational environment and opportunities they offer for the individual child. Religiously-defined

schools are valued by the parents for their specific enculturation functions and the ways they support, reinforce, and enhance the religious and/or cultural heritage of students and their families. Many parents choosing academically-defined schools have tried publicly-funded schools and have found them inadequate. Parents supporting religiously-defined schools believe that public schools simply cannot achieve the educational goals they value for their children. It appears that relatively few give public schools a try, most preferring to collaborate with others of like mind or circumstances to provide alternative, more apt venues for their children's education.⁶

Parent characteristics

Parents who choose private schools differ from the general population of Ontario families with school age children in several ways. Their family size, religious appreciation, civic and political involvement, education levels, employment status, income source, and income levels all tend to be more extensive or higher than the average Ontario parent with school aged children. These differences might be expected given the larger financial contribution Ontario parents must make towards their children's education should they choose outside of the government-provided systems. Demographic differences also emerged between supporters of schools in the academically-defined and religiously-defined groups. There are marked differences with regard to levels of education, employment and income between the two sets of parents. While, on average, those who chose religiously-defined schools were better credentialed and lived with higher household incomes than the general population, they were not nearly as highly educated nor as wealthy as those who, on average, chose the academically-defined private schools.

6 Our dataset contains rich and varied stories of why parents choose private schools for their children. In this report we focused mainly on the demographic characteristics of the families that choose and on their selected reasons for choosing. It is our intention to further analyze and report on the stories that parents shared with us about choosing their private school for their children.

In summary

Many Ontario parents are unable to choose the school their children will attend. A close examination of those parents who have chosen a private school for their children reveals that while they represent all levels of education and income, and have a wide range of ethnic heritages, religious preferences, and countries of origin, and are employed in a diversity of occupations, they all choose private schools because they want a superior education for their children.

Their preferred schools, while offering a safe educational environment, sound academic content and dedicated teachers, will likely give priority to one of two

functions. Either they will respect the child's individuality and enhance his or her unique potential by offering various kinds of enrichment, or they will respect the child's participation in a distinct cultural or religious group and actively promote this enculturation.

A common bond exists among all parents choosing Ontario private schools. They have been persuaded, by direct experience or by belief, that the superior education they desire for their children, whether driven by an explicit individual need of the child or by the child's cultural or religious identity, cannot be adequately met in the educational experiences currently provided by the state.



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