

Is There a Lack of Diversity in Private Schools?

Numbers show private schools are less diverse than other options, but many schools are working to fix the issue.

By [Jere Downs](#) | Oct. 20, 2021, at 10:02 a.m.



Experts say parents looking at private schools should measure inclusiveness as they weigh different options. (GETTY IMAGES)



As millions of people took to the streets last year to protest for racial justice across America, Black students began to relay stories about what they experience in private schools on a popular Philadelphia-area platform called [Black Main Line Speaks](#).

The students told of white students using charged racial slurs without consequences, teachers overlooking academic success and administrators dispatching unfair discipline.

More than a year later, complaints about racial insensitivity in private schools continue, with students of color saying that education about diversity is confined to reading “To Kill A Mockingbird” and that some faculty and students continue to insist “all lives matter” in response to the Black Lives Matter movement.

Stories like these may be considered extreme by some but they highlight the challenges for private schools, which often excel in academics, extracurriculars and college admission but sometimes struggle as a group to create diverse environments, despite good intentions and strong efforts at many individual schools.

Government statistics show that the student population at private schools nationwide is two-thirds white.

“The teaching and learning process is enhanced when students are able to engage in the exchange of ideas, perspectives and experiences with other students from diverse backgrounds,” Dean Cantù, a professor and chair of the department of teacher education at Bradley University in Illinois, wrote in an email. “Diversity includes not only racial and ethnic, but socioeconomic as well. Students bring with them to the K-12 classroom a variety of experiences that they share with other students.”

Private School Diversity Numbers

Roughly 5.7 million students were enrolled in private elementary and secondary schools in 2017, or about 10% of the U.S. student population, according to the [National Center for Education Statistics](#). Roughly 67% were white, while 11% were Hispanic, 9% were Black, 6% were Asian and the remaining 7% were students from different ethnic groups or those who identify with two or more races.

While the U.S. population grows more diverse, private school student demographics have not, according to the [The Civil Rights Project](#) at the [University of California—Los Angeles](#). Where white students made up about half the population in public schools nationwide at almost 49%, [according to the 2018 report](#), they made up about 69% of students in private schools. White enrollment at private schools remains mostly unchanged since 1995, the report says, while minority enrollment at private schools actually dipped slightly nationwide.

Economic inequality is even more stark, with students from low-income families standing at 9% in private schools compared to more than 50% at public schools, according to the report.

“Private schools do disproportionately serve white and higher-income families,” the report says.

Cost is a Major Factor

While most private schools offer scholarship money, education experts say the cost of private schools is often the largest barrier to creating more racial and ethnic diversity.

The average annual cost of tuition at a private K-12 school nationwide is \$12,350, [according to Educationdata.org](#). That goes up to about \$16,000 for high schools. Costs also vary substantially by locale and they can get far more expensive in some areas. For example, in Connecticut the average K-12 private school tuition is almost \$24,000 and average high school tuition is more than \$33,600.

“The single biggest factor impacting diversity in private schools is tuition,” Mike Tenney, head of The Tenney School in Houston, Texas, wrote in an email.

His private school, which opened in the 1970s, offers one-on-one education and serves about 60 students in grades 5 to 12. It has students from all over the world, but Tenney spoke candidly about the difficulty of maintaining diversity in private school.

“It is very difficult to find diverse families who can also afford private school tuition,” he says.

“Private schools do attempt to attract diverse students through scholarship programs, but at the end of the day, there will be some tuition to attend a private school. Some diverse families may be able and willing to pay some tuition to attend a private school, but it is difficult to compete with free public schools.”

A [report on U.S. household income](#) in 2019 released by the U.S. Census Bureau in 2020 showed the median household income for white families was almost \$71,700 while that number was almost \$55,700 for Hispanic families and about \$43,900 for Black families.

A lack of diversity can impact students directly, Tenney says. “As a result, private school students often have an incorrect picture of what the majority of the U.S. is like beyond ‘the bubble’ of their private school,” he says. “To be fair, ‘the bubble’ students experience in wealthy area public schools is similar.”

Measuring Diversity In Private Schools

Education experts say that parents looking at private schools should come armed with a framework they can use to measure inclusiveness as they weigh different options. Here are some of the things that parents can look for:

- Commitments to diversity articulated in school publications.
- Course offerings, especially in the humanities, featuring diverse voices and perspectives.
- Books in the school library.
- Art on school walls.
- Student affinity groups or clubs.
- Programming for students and parents around diversity awareness.
- A diversity director or coordinator on staff.

"A lot of those things represent the dominant culture of the place," says Scott Prince, a veteran independent school educator at schools in Ohio, Colorado and Kentucky, where he served as head of the Louisville Collegiate School.

Besides a school's demographic characteristics and culture, the lack of an administrator in charge of diversity and inclusion, "should tell you something," he says.

Parents can also scan the makeup of parent associations, booster groups and student governments, says Prince, now a private education consultant. Faculty diversity counts too, he says.

"In terms of faculty, I have always used the forest metaphor. If all the trees in the forest are the exact same kind and the exact same age, that forest is at risk for disease," Prince says. "Your faculty should always have a core of veterans but always have some fresh blood and new perspectives."

A Commitment to Diversity

Many private schools are working hard to build diverse communities. The National Association of Independent Schools, representing more than 1,500 independent, private K-12 schools in the U.S., offers [principles for equity and justice](#) to its member schools.

"We expect member schools to create and sustain diverse, inclusive, equitable and just communities that are safe and welcoming for all," the organization says on its website. "We recognize that to do so requires commitment, reflection, deliberate planning and action, and ongoing accountability."

Indeed, there are many private schools that are actively working to increase diversity. At William Penn Charter School in Philadelphia, a Quaker school that is more than 300 years old, 34% of the population are students of color. The school also works to improve geographic diversity, drawing students from more than 100 different zip codes in metropolitan Philadelphia. Roughly 40% of students receive need-based financial aid, and the school made roughly \$12.8 million available in the 2021-22 school year. Penn Charter also has a director of diversity and inclusion on staff.

Sharon Sexton, a spokeswoman for the school, says Penn Charter “seeks to build a community representing diversity in race, religion, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, gender, sexual orientation – as well as learning style, opinion and hometown.”

Like many private schools, Penn Charter also pledges to improve. A statement on the school website says that “our community is not immune from the racism, sexism, homophobia and intolerance that challenge this city and nation. Our diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) work is not finished.”



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