



# Parents' Choosing Without School Choice

## College Board Data and Parental Choice

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## SUMMARY

Rhode Islanders want school choice. They prove it answering polls, and they prove it in their behavior.

- Strong majorities — of 56% and higher — favor policies that allow parents to choose schools other than regular public district schools.
- When asked what type of schools they would pick if they had a choice, 68% named something other than a district school.
- Among states in which a majority of students take the SATs, RI was second in the number of SAT-taking students in private schools, and first in the number attending religiously affiliated schools, which tend to be less expensive.
- Looking at SAT scores, RI public school students perform worse than the average for high-participation states, while private school students perform as well as or slightly higher than the average for such schools, which is significantly higher than the average for public schools.

## POLL: RHODE ISLAND WANTS SCHOOL CHOICE

On October 29, 2013, the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice released the results of a poll that it conducted in cooperation with the Rhode Island Center for Freedom and Prosperity, gauging Rhode Islanders' interest in policy reforms to increase families' ability to choose the schools to which they send their children.<sup>1</sup> The Center also released a report analyzing the poll and addressing six common myths about school choice.<sup>2</sup>

Rhode Islanders are highly supportive of school choice. The interviewer explained each reform, and:

*Given the opportunity, 54% would send their children to private schools, the highest such result anywhere that Friedman has asked the question.*

- 62% said they favor charter schools, which were explained as “public schools that have more control over their own budget, staff, and curriculum, and are exempt from many existing public school regulations.”
- 57% said they favor “tax-credit scholarship systems” that “give tax credits to individuals and businesses if they contribute money to nonprofit organizations that distribute private school scholarships.”
- 56% said they favor school voucher systems that redirect “tax dollars currently allocated to a school district” to allow “parents the option of sending their child to the school of their choice, whether that school is public or private, including both religious and non-religious schools.”

Given this high level of support for educational alternatives, it isn't surprising that Rhode Islanders express dissatisfaction with and pessimism about their state's public schools. However, the degree to which they have those feelings is eye opening:

- 60% of all Rhode Islanders rate the state's public schools as only “fair” or “poor.”
- 60% of Rhode Islanders with school-age children say that the public schools are “on the wrong

track,” the highest such result in any of the 20 states in which Friedman asked the question.

- 54% of Rhode Islanders would choose to send their children to private schools, if given the opportunity, again the highest among the 21 states in which Friedman asked the question, and 68% would choose private schools, home schooling, or charter schools.<sup>3</sup>

Within a week of the poll’s release, nationally known school choice opponent Diane Ravitch responded on her blog, citing isolated examples across the country that support for school choice is not universally strong in every context.<sup>4</sup> As easily dismissed as Ravitch’s response is,<sup>5</sup> it does indicate a need to find corroborating evidence of the poll’s results.

## RHODE ISLAND’S UNIQUE SCHOOL MAKEUP

### College Board Data

One place to look for such evidence is within the data that the College Board releases annually about the students who’ve taken SAT tests within the past

year.<sup>6</sup> Among the demographic data on which the College Board reports is a state-by-state tally of test-takers by the types of schools that they’re attending:

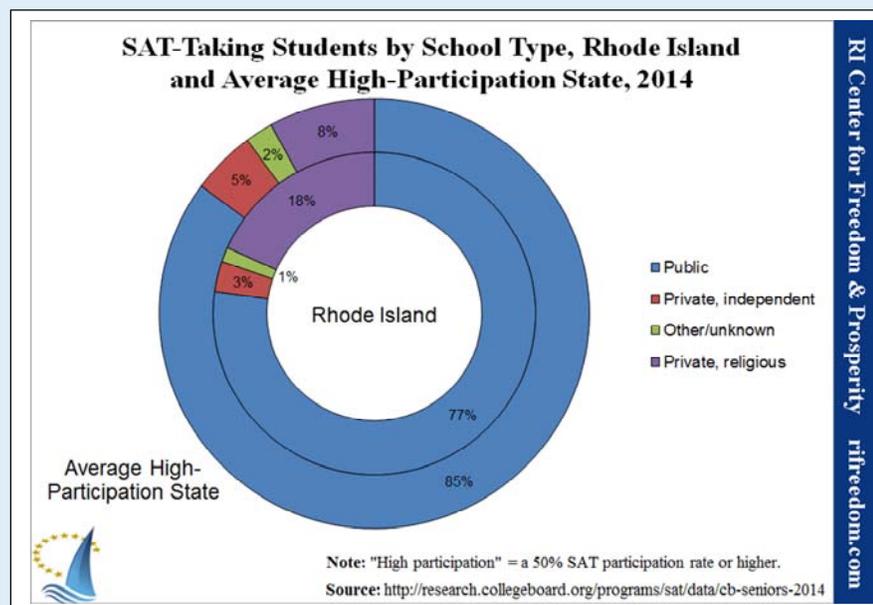
- Public
- Private, religiously affiliated
- Private, independent
- Other or unknown

The Center looked at data from the 23 states in which at least 50% of high school students take the SATs.<sup>7</sup> This narrowing of states is necessary because in states in which taking the SATs is not part of most students’ high school careers, the students who actually take the test are self-selecting — mainly including those who are college bound and targeting competitive colleges. Among these 23 states, Rhode Island’s participation rate is almost exactly average, so to the extent that the percentage of students taking the test corresponds with other results, one would expect them to be average, as well.<sup>8</sup>

The chart below shows RI’s school-type breakout versus the average for the 23 states under examination.

## Schools Attended by SAT-Taking Students

*Among the 23 states in which 50% or more of students take the SATs, RI has the most in religiously affiliated private schools.*



## Rhode Island’s Lead in Religiously Affiliated Schools

Rhode Island is second, after Hawaii, in the number of SAT-taking students who are *not* in public schools. However, RI is number 1 by a large margin in the percentage of students in religiously affiliated private schools. When it comes to independent (non-religious) private schools, Rhode Island is in the middle of the pack, ranking 14<sup>th</sup> of the 23.

An initial response to this finding might be that Rhode Island is known as “the most Catholic state,” explaining greater attendance at that Church’s schools. While it’s possible that the Roman Catholic Church has a greater propensity toward operating schools than other religious groups that dominate in other states, that explanation seems unlikely to account for the large difference.

Only 5% of respondents to the Friedman poll cited “morals/values/ethics” as the most important reason for choosing a school. Moreover, while Rhode Island and New England are more Catholic than the rest of the country, they are also less religious.<sup>9</sup>

## SAT Results of Rhode Island Religious School Students

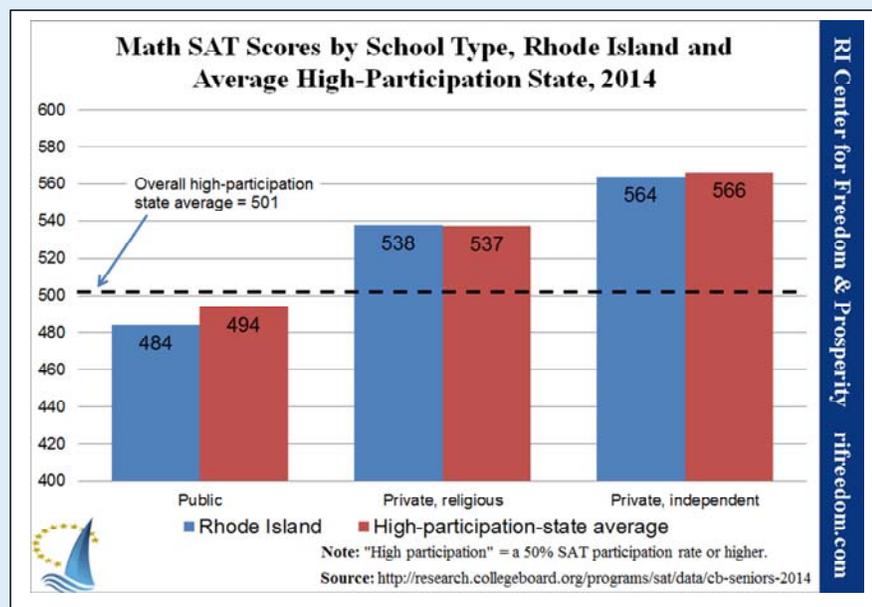
If RI parents were utilizing religiously affiliated private schools more often than parents in other states because they are more religious, one might expect that to affect the schools’ comparative SAT scores. The more the private school population matches the public, demographically, the more its SAT results might be expected to do the same.<sup>10</sup>

As the chart below illustrates, that is not the case. Both types of private schools in Rhode Island rank near the middle for math SAT scores among the 23 states — at 11<sup>th</sup> for religious and 15<sup>th</sup> for independent — while Rhode Island public schools rank closer to the bottom, at 17<sup>th</sup>.

It is worth noting, here, that Rhode Islanders’ beliefs about the public school system in their state are justified, as is their much more favorable view of private schools (see end note 1). At least as measured by math SAT scores, private schools in Rhode Island offer parents an opportunity to provide their children an education comparable to that available in such schools in other states.

## Math SAT Scores by School Type

*Among the 23 states in which 50% or more of students take the SATs, RI public schools rank in the bottom third while private schools rank near the middle of their respective categories.*



## RELIGIOUSLY AFFILIATED SCHOOLS AS SCHOOL CHOICE

### A Lower-Cost Alternative

One explanation for the fact that Rhode Islanders utilize the state's network of religiously affiliated schools to such a high degree while utilizing independent private schools a little less than those in other states is that the former are a relatively low-cost alternative to public schools.

Additional research by the RI Center for Freedom & Prosperity (based on the 2011-2012 school year) finds religiously affiliated schools to have tuition well below their independent counterparts, with both lower than a public school costs per students.<sup>11</sup>

#### Average Tuition or Per-Student Expenditure by Grade Level and School Type, 2011-2012 School Year (\$)

	K-8	9-12
Public	14,144	15,314
Private, religious	5,701	11,664
Private, independent	15,537	28,518

**Sources:** RIDE uniform chart of accounts;  
independent survey of private schools

Schools within the Roman Catholic Diocese of Providence, by far the largest group after public schools, are significantly less expensive than the religious school averages: \$4,912 for K-8 and \$9,963 for high school. Moreover, given their relationship with religious organizations, all religious schools tend to have in place multiple sources of aid or other means of lowering the actual cost to students' families.

## CONCLUSION

Even spending only a few thousand dollars per year on a child's tuition — above and beyond one of the highest state and local tax burdens in the country<sup>12</sup> — represents a substantial challenge and investment for many Rhode Island families. Nonetheless, data from the College Board shows that Rhode Islanders are making those sacrifices more often than their peers in other states.

Nearly one-quarter of SAT-taking students in Rhode Island were not attending one of the state's public schools. Over one-half of survey respondents say that they would send their children to private schools if they had that option.

Analyzing education in Rhode Island will be an ongoing process, but three themes are strengthened with each step taken:

- Rhode Islanders are right to be concerned about the schools their government operates.
- Rhode Island parents very much want alternatives to those schools.
- The people of Rhode Island have a right to shape education policy in a way that ensures that all children can realize their potential.

A broad and inclusive school choice reform that gives parents flexibility with the tax dollars that are set aside for education would immediately open doors of opportunity for Rhode Island's children. It would also create a strong incentive for government-run schools to expand and improve their offerings in order to win back the confidence of the communities that they serve.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul DiPerna. Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice. “Rhode Island K-12 & School Choice Survey: What Do Voters Say About K-12 Education?” October 29, 2013. [www.edchoice.org/Research/Reports/Rhode-Island-K-12-and-School-Choice-Survey.aspx](http://www.edchoice.org/Research/Reports/Rhode-Island-K-12-and-School-Choice-Survey.aspx)

<sup>2</sup> Justin Katz and Michael Cirrotti. Rhode Island Center for Freedom and Prosperity. “The School Choice Idea in Rhode Island: Myths, Opinions, and Realities.” October 29, 2013. [www.rifreedom.org/2013/10/the-school-choice-idea-in-rhode-island-myths-opinions-and-realities/](http://www.rifreedom.org/2013/10/the-school-choice-idea-in-rhode-island-myths-opinions-and-realities/)

<sup>3</sup> Justin Katz. *The Ocean State Current*. “School Choice in Rhode Island: A Matter of Education.” October 29, 2013. [oceanstatecurrent.com/analysis/school-choice-in-rhode-island-a-matter-of-education/](http://oceanstatecurrent.com/analysis/school-choice-in-rhode-island-a-matter-of-education/)

<sup>4</sup> Diane Ravitch. *Diane Ravitch’s blog*. “An Intelligence Test for Rhode Islanders.” November 2, 2013. [dianeravitch.net/2013/11/02/an-intelligence-test-for-rhode-islanders/](http://dianeravitch.net/2013/11/02/an-intelligence-test-for-rhode-islanders/)

<sup>5</sup> Justin Katz. *The Ocean State Current*. “Ravitch’s Lather-Without-Rinsing Rhetorical Style on School Choice.” November 4, 2013. [oceanstatecurrent.com/analysis/ravitchs-lather-without-rinsing-rhetorical-style-on-school-choice/](http://oceanstatecurrent.com/analysis/ravitchs-lather-without-rinsing-rhetorical-style-on-school-choice/)

<sup>6</sup> The College Board. “The 2014 SAT Report on College & Career Readiness.” September 2014. [research.collegeboard.org/programs/sat/data/cb-seniors-2014](http://research.collegeboard.org/programs/sat/data/cb-seniors-2014)

<sup>7</sup> Jessica Barnett. Commonwealth Foundation. “SAT Scores by State 2013.” October 10, 2013. [www.commonwealthfoundation.org/policyblog/detail/sat-scores-by-state-2013](http://www.commonwealthfoundation.org/policyblog/detail/sat-scores-by-state-2013). (Note that a more recent source was not available, but that the pool of states to which the criterion applies does not vary greatly from year to year.)

<sup>8</sup> In the 2013 data, Rhode Island’s participation rate is 72%. Looking only at the states within five percentage points of that result, either plus or minus, does not significantly change the Ocean State’s relative standing by the measures that follow. This suggests — and deeper analysis confirms — that participation rate does not correlate with scores or school type mixes above the 50% mark. The correlation does begin to reemerge, however, in the three states with over 90% participation, as the near-obligatory nature of the test leads to lower-aptitude students’ reducing overall average scores.

<sup>9</sup> Justin Katz. *The Ocean State Current*. “Misplaced Grand Pronunciations of New England Catholics’ Practices.” May 3, 2013. [oceanstatecurrent.com/opinion/misplaced-grand-pronunciations-of-new-england-catholics-practices/](http://oceanstatecurrent.com/opinion/misplaced-grand-pronunciations-of-new-england-catholics-practices/) See also the interactive maps based on the PewResearch Religion & Public Life Project, Religious Landscape Survey: [religions.pewforum.org/maps](http://religions.pewforum.org/maps)

<sup>10</sup> It’s possible that some other factor correlates with both religious devotion and academic success. For our purposes, here, we will assume that the state’s percentage of Catholics is an independent variable from studiousness.

<sup>11</sup> The data used for this comparison came from the 2011-2012 school year. Using the Rhode Island Dept. of Education’s uniform chart of accounts data for government-run schools, we removed as many categories as possible of spending for which private schools would typically charge extra (or not cover at all) for an apples-to-apples comparison.

<sup>12</sup> Rhode Island Center for Freedom and Prosperity. “Report Card on Rhode Island ‘Competitiveness.’” 2014. <http://rifreedom.org/RIReportCard/>