

POLICY *brief*

Goldwater Institute

No. 09-06 | September 9, 2009

Tough Crowd: Arizona High School Students Evaluate Their Schools

by Matthew Ladner, Ph.D., Vice President for Research, Goldwater Institute

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Arizona's tax code makes it difficult for parents who want to send their children to private schools by making them pay for education twice: both with their taxes and private school tuition. That's a mistake. The findings detailed in this report show that aside from being less expensive and more effective, students themselves are more satisfied in a private school environment than their public school counterparts.

In November 2008, Strategic Vision, LLC, surveyed Arizona high school students at both public and private schools. Students were asked to evaluate their schools based on a number of factors including the overall level of academic focus, the degree to which schools offer challenging courses, and whether or not their school's staff cares about the students. Students also assessed whether their schools treat all students with respect regardless of race and ethnicity.

Several disturbing findings emerged: Among Arizona public school students, 59 percent gave their schools an overall letter grade of C, D or F; only 40 percent agreed that their schools treat all students with respect regardless of race or ethnicity; 48 percent believe that their school has high expectations of them; and only 44 percent report challenging classes or academically challenging work.

Most revealing was the difference a private school made in the students' attitude toward going to school in general. Only 47 percent of public school students said they "look forward" to going to school, compared with 66 percent of private school students.

Unfortunately, although the data shows students are significantly more satisfied in private schools, too few Arizona students are able to access private school education. Arizona lawmakers should expand opportunities to attend private schools through a much more robust system of education tax credits. This would not only provide greater opportunity for students, but also would put competitive pressure on public schools to improve.

GOLDWATER
I N S T I T U T E

Arizona Public and Private Schools: A Survey of Student Satisfaction

Arizona passed the nation's first scholarship tax credit law in 1997. This law allowed taxpayers to contribute to non-profit organizations that provide children with scholarship assistance to attend private schools. Today, individual taxpayers who make a \$500 donation and couples who file jointly with a \$1,000 donation receive a dollar-for-dollar credit against their state income tax liability.

In 2007, Arizona school tuition organizations (STOs) gathered more than \$54 million in contributions from the original scholarship tax credit. In that same year, 27,153 students used these scholarships to attend private schools. The scholarships averaged \$1,788, much less than the \$9,700 per student per year the state spends to educate the same student.

A 2006 Goldwater Institute survey of Arizona's private schools reported an average annual expenditure of \$5,545 per student.¹ But what do we know about the schools these students attend? It would be of limited long-term benefit, after all, for students to attend inexpensive but low quality private schools.

It would be of limited long-term benefit, after all, for students to attend inexpensive but low quality private schools.

Nine separate studies of students participating in school voucher programs have assessed the academic gains of students using vouchers, chosen by random lottery, to an almost identical group of students who did not receive vouchers. The consistent finding of these studies is that students exercising school choice perform better over time.²

Arizona's tax credit laws, however, do not require random lottery selections, making such an evaluation of student test scores impossible. In this study, we employ a much more straightforward method to evaluate the relative quality of Arizona public and private schools: we asked students for their assessments.

In November 2008, the Goldwater Institute commissioned Strategic Vision to survey Arizona public and private high school students regarding their schools. The company conducted a poll of 1,350 Arizona public and private high school students on November 21-23, 2008. These students were randomly selected from commercially available databases, and live polls were conducted by telephone. The results have a margin of error of plus or minus three percent.

The demographics of the public school sample broadly match those of the public K-12 population.³ This report details the results of the students' school evaluations.

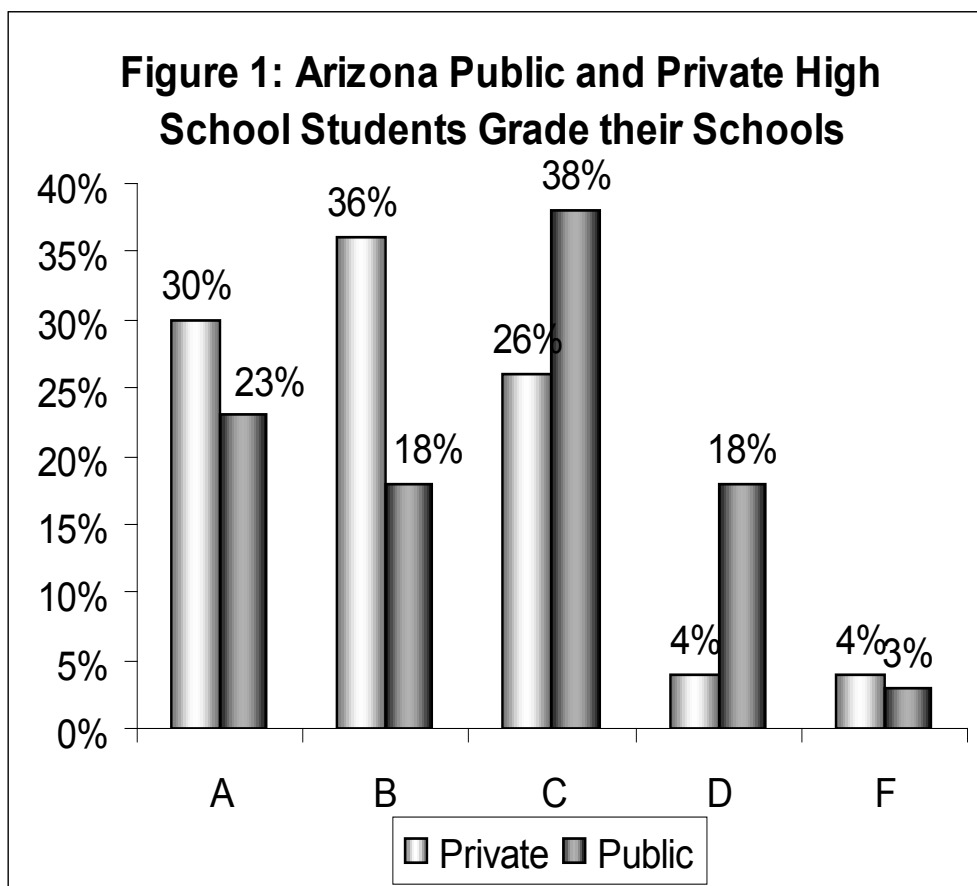
An item by item examination of the data, however, reveals no significant

differences between students attending private schools with the assistance of a tax credit scholarship (43 percent) and those not receiving such aid.

The data reveals Arizona's private school students consistently rate their schools much higher than public school students, often by profound margins. The evidence indicates that the tax credit program delivers both a more affordable, and a superior quality education.

Arizona High School Students' Overall Assessment

The survey began with some broad assessments of school quality. Students were asked to grade their schools on overall quality (Figure 1 presents the results).



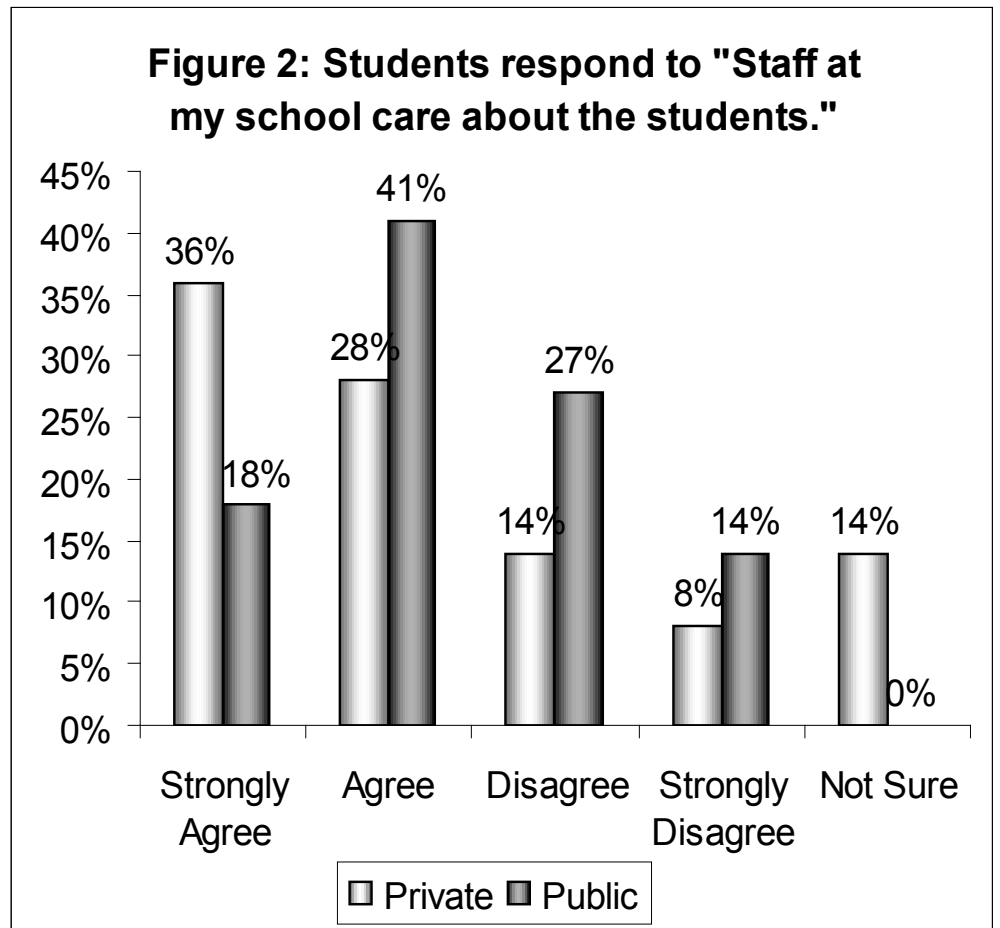
The data reveals Arizona's private school students consistently rate their schools much higher than public school students, often by profound margins.

Private school students gave their schools much higher grades than did public school students. Most notably, public school students were almost three times more likely to grade their schools D or F than were private school students. A minority of public school students gave their schools an A or a B (41 percent) with 59 percent of public school students giving their school a C, D, or F.

Next, students were asked to respond to a series of statements with either “strongly agree,” “agree,” “disagree,” “strongly disagree,” or “not sure.”

The first of these statements was, “The staff at my school cares about the students,” (Figure 2 presents the results).

Most notably, public school students were almost three times more likely to grade their schools D or F than were private school students.



Private school students were twice as likely to respond that they strongly agreed with the statement, while public school students were almost twice as likely to disagree with the statement. Seventy-five percent were more likely to strongly disagree.

The next statement on the survey was, "My school treats all students with respect regardless of race or ethnicity." This question is especially interesting given some of the rhetoric school choice opponents advance to the effect that private schools are bastions of racism and segregation.⁴

Figure 3 shows the reality of the situation: private school students are more than four times more likely to strongly agree with the statement, "My school treats all students with respect regardless of race or ethnicity," than are public school students. Almost half of public school students disagree or strongly disagree with this statement.

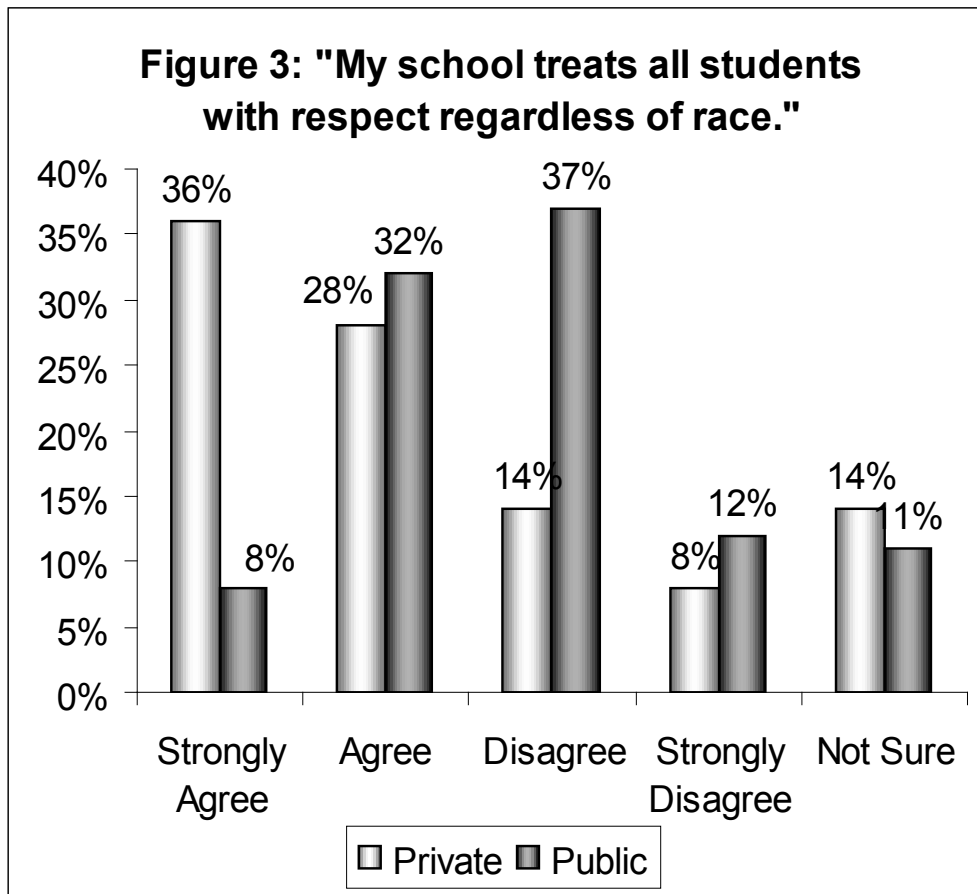


Figure 3 shows the reality of the situation: private school students are more than four times more likely to strongly agree with the statement, "My school treats all students with respect regardless of race or ethnicity," than are public school students.

The overall conclusion to draw from the first three survey questions is that private school students have higher overall opinions of their schools and report more caring school staff and better treatment for minorities.

Academic Focus and Expectations

Using the question format, the survey asked students a series of questions about the level of academic focus in their schools. The first statement was, “My school has high academic expectations of me.”

Indeed, high academic expectations are the bedrock of effective schooling. The essence of an effective school—public or private—always includes a strong school culture led by the principal and teachers and focused on academic achievement.

The essence of an effective school—public or private—always includes a strong school culture led by the principal and teachers and focused on academic achievement.

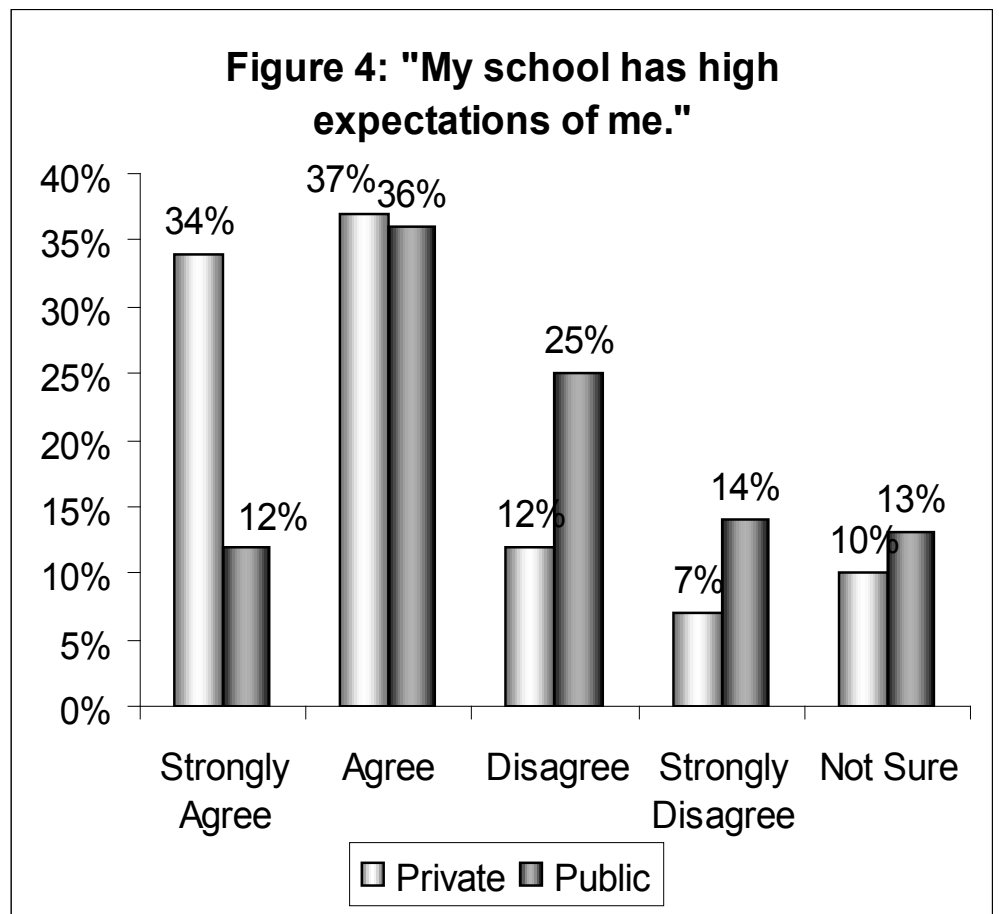
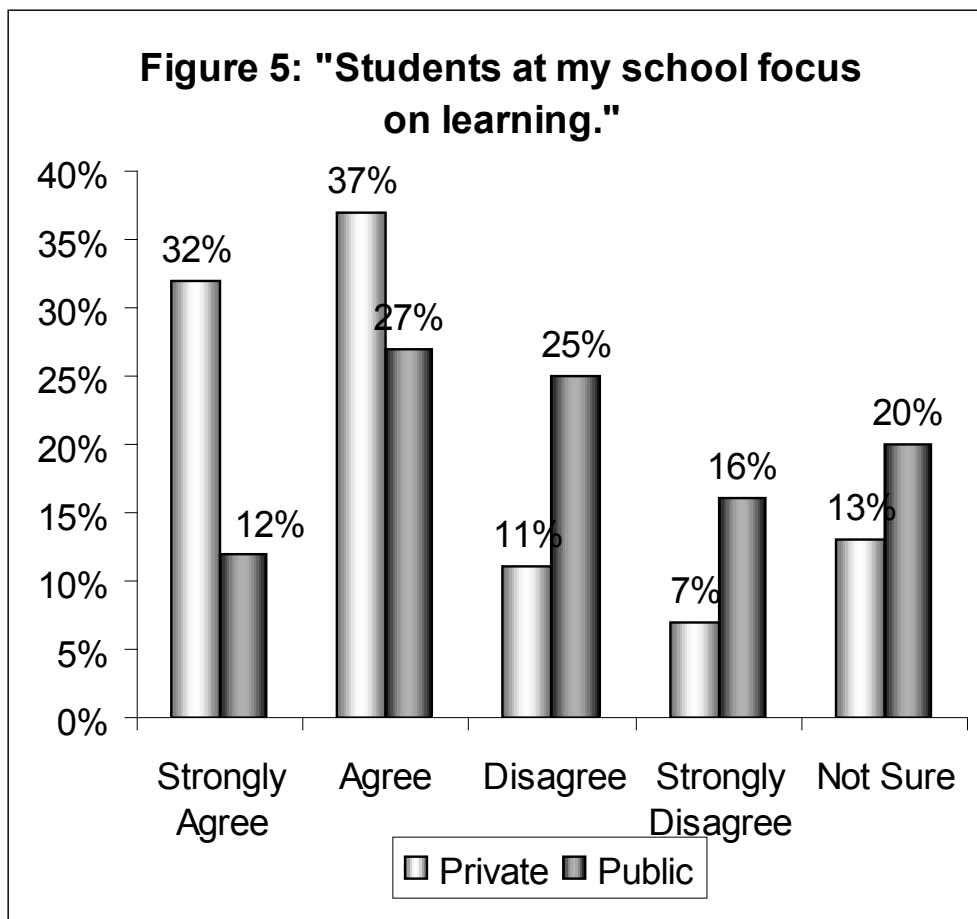


Figure 4 demonstrates that far more Arizona private schools than public schools have a strong academic focus. Private school students were almost three times more likely to strongly agree that their school has high academic expectations while public school students were twice as likely to either disagree or strongly disagree with the statement. Alarming, fewer than half of public school students either strongly agreed or agreed that their school had high expectations of them.

This finding is reinforced by the responses to the next statement, "Students in my school focus on learning." Figure 5 illustrates the students' responses.

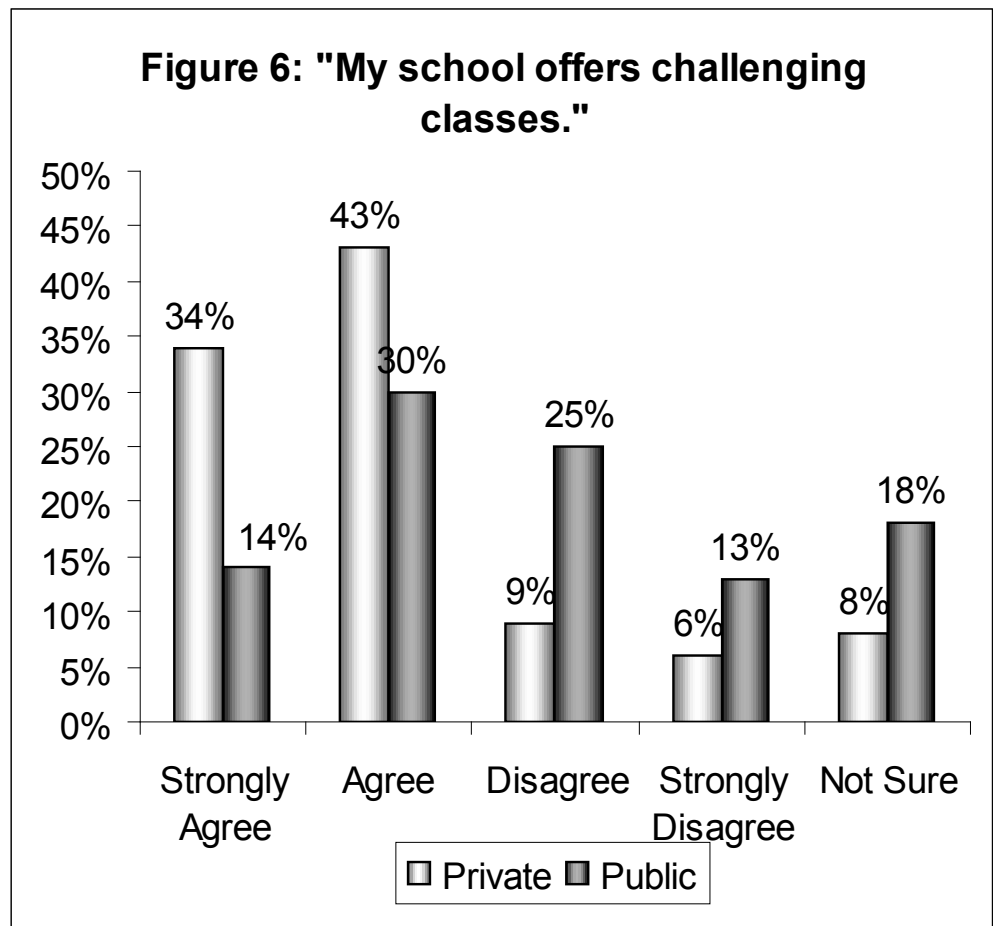


Sadly, only 39 percent of Arizona's public high school students reported that the students at their schools were focused on learning.

Sadly, only 39 percent of Arizona's public high school students reported that the students at their schools were focused on learning. This result casts doubt on the overall effectiveness of our public high schools.

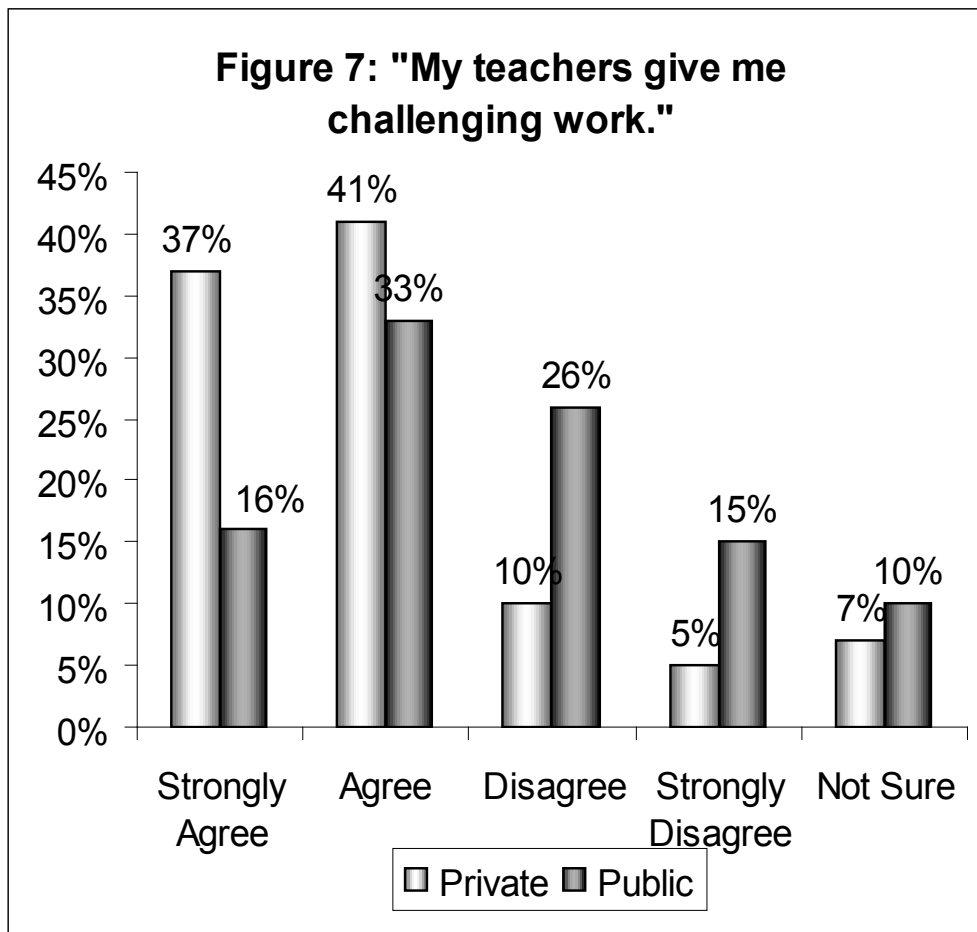
Next, students responded to the statement, “My school offers challenging classes.” The results are shown in Figure 6. Public school students were almost three times as likely to disagree with that statement and more than twice as likely to disagree strongly.

77 percent of private school students report having challenging classes.



Meanwhile, 77 percent of private school students report having challenging classes.

The difference in academic focus was again revealed in responses to the statement, “My teachers give me challenging work.” Again, we see a pronounced difference between public and private school students. Less than half of Arizona’s public school students report receiving challenging work.



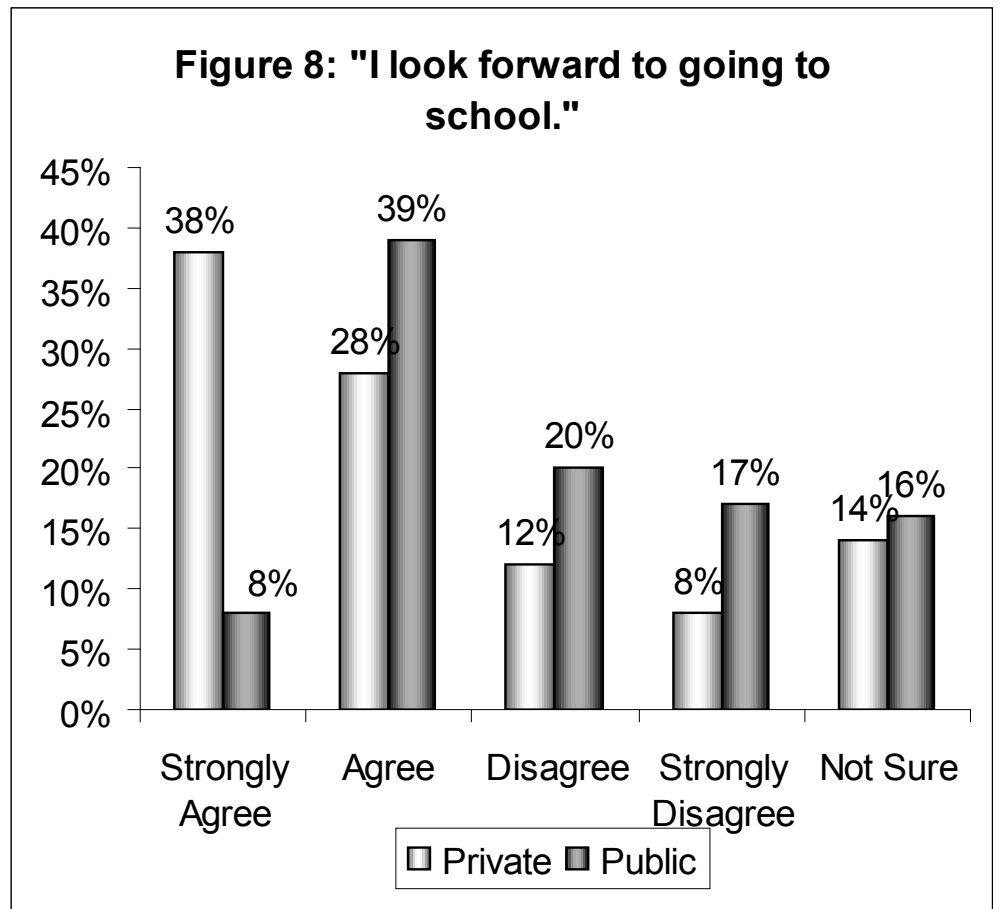
Less than half of Arizona’s public school students report receiving challenging work.

Measures of Overall School Climate

Sociologist James Coleman explained the difference between effective and ineffective schools as a battle for control of the school culture between the staff and the students. In the worst schools, students control school culture and socially stigmatize academic achievement. There also is an implicit bargain struck between the students, the teachers and the administrators: you don't require us to do anything and in return we won't brutalize you. Of course, little academic learning occurs at schools with an anti-academic culture.⁵

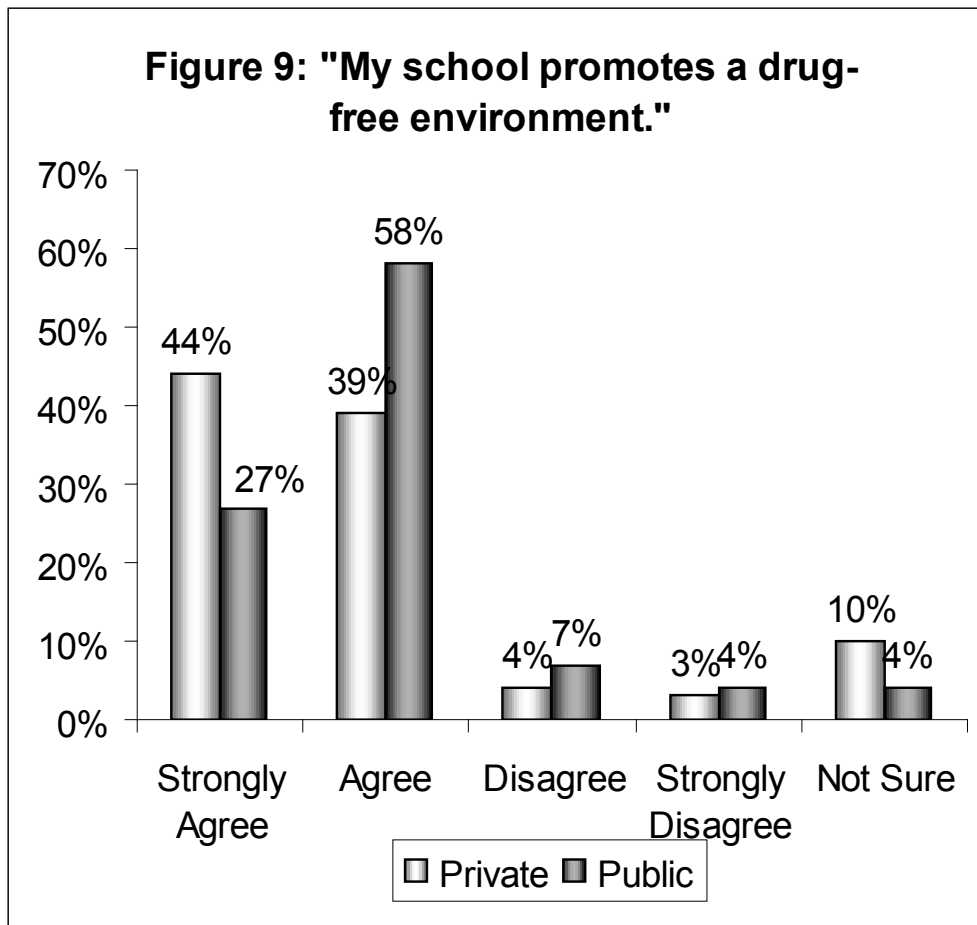
The next set of statements asked students to assess the climate of their schools, beginning with the statement, "I usually look forward to going to school." Figure 8 presents the results.

The percentage of private school children strongly agreeing that they look forward to going to school is almost five times higher than among public school students.



The percentage of private school children strongly agreeing that they look forward to going to school is almost five times higher than among public school students. A solid majority of private school students strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, while less than a majority of public school students felt the same.

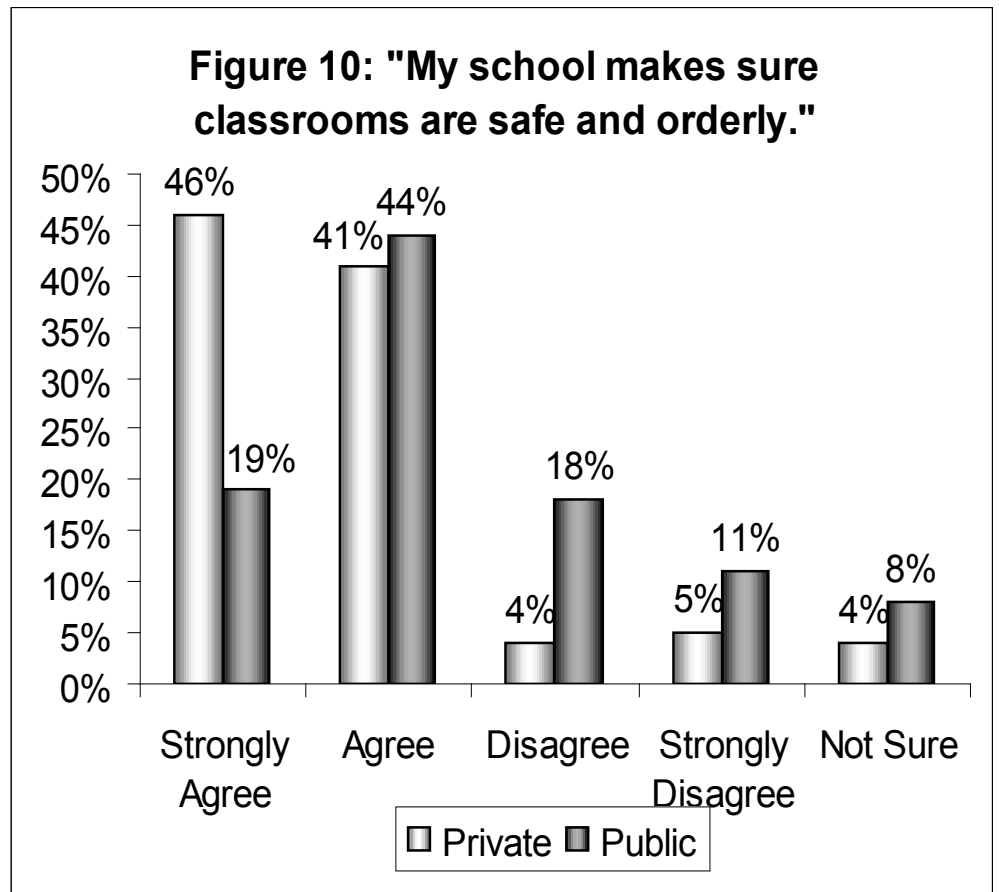
The next statement was, “My school promotes a drug free environment,” (see Figure 9). There is good news here as both private and public school students largely agree with this statement while only small minorities disagree or disagree strongly. The only significant difference between students in the two sectors was in the percentage who strongly agreed as opposed to simply agreeing.



There is good news here as both private and public school students largely agree with this statement while only small minorities disagree or disagree strongly.

Finally, we asked questions about the safety and orderliness of schools, presenting students with the statement, “My school makes sure classrooms are safe and orderly.” As presented in Figure 10, private school students were more than twice as likely to strongly agree with the statement while public school students were more than four times more likely to disagree and more than twice as likely to strongly disagree.

An overwhelming majority of private school students strongly agree or agree that their classrooms are safe and orderly (87 percent).

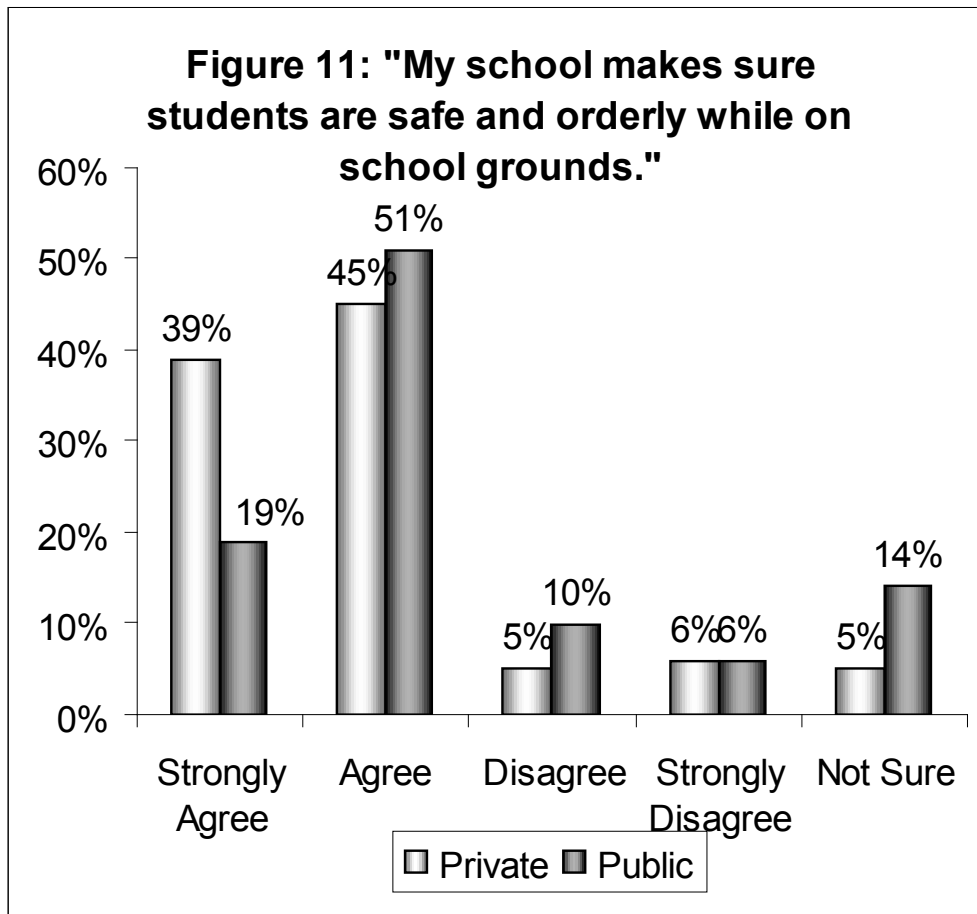


An overwhelming majority of private school students strongly agree or agree that their classrooms are safe and orderly (87 percent). Sixty-three percent of public school students hold the same opinion about their classrooms.

We also presented students with the statement, “My school makes sure students are safe and orderly while on school grounds,” (see Figure 11). Again there is some good news here as strong majorities of both public and private school students either agree or strongly agree with the statement.

Conclusion: Private Schools Serve the Public Good

Given the choice between sending a child to a public school for \$9,700 or a private school for \$1,800, it is likely parents and taxpayers would choose the latter. ⁶ Based on our survey findings, it appears that private schools in Arizona are providing a more academically focused, racially tolerant, and orderly learning environment at a lower cost to taxpayers.



Given the choice between sending a child to a public school for \$9,700 or a private school for \$1,800, it is likely parents and taxpayers would choose the latter.

However, Arizona’s tax code makes it difficult for parents to send their children to private schools because all residents of Arizona pay taxes for public schools. Parents wishing to send their children to private schools must, in effect, pay twice: once for their school taxes and once again for private school tuition. With average Arizona private school tuition at \$4,300 and average scholarships of \$1,800, parents are left to cover at least \$2,500 in tuition. That makes it difficult for most families, especially larger families or lower income families, to send their children to private schools.

A larger question, though, is how to improve Arizona public schools. While there are some very high quality public schools here, judging from the responses of our students, they are in the distinct minority. Few public school students believe their schools are focused on learning, or that they are receiving challenging work or taking challenging courses. Less than a majority of public school students report that their schools have high expectations of them.

Thankfully, both the inaccessibility of private schools and the ineffectiveness of public schools share a common solution: a much more robust system of tax

credits. This would simultaneously increase the number of high quality schools accessible to low- and middle-income students and place strong competitive pressure on public schools to improve. Studies demonstrate that public schools make significantly higher academic gains when facing competition for students. Stanford Economist Caroline Hoxby, for instance, found that Arizona public schools facing significant competition from charter schools improved both their fourth grade reading and math scores by 1.4 national percentile points a year. Those improvements were above and beyond their achievement trends before charter competition.⁷

In the 2007-2008 school year, 48 percent of district school funds came from the state of Arizona, amounting to a subsidy of approximately \$4,600 per pupil. The remaining funds came from local school district and federal funds.

Thankfully, both the inaccessibility of private schools and the ineffectiveness of public schools share a common solution: a much more robust system of tax credits.

Ignoring local and federal funds, the state of Arizona should be neutral regarding whether students attend public or private schools. A straightforward way to achieve neutrality would be to create a personal use tax credit for parents placing their children in private schools, worth up to a maximum of the current state aid per pupil.

With the creation of an individual credit, the existing scholarship tax credit programs could be refashioned to exclusively provide aid to low-income families and large families with modest incomes in order to help make private schools more accessible.

Arizona lawmakers should also take additional steps to improve our public schools.⁸ In particular, they should emulate Florida's successful education reforms. After a decade of serious reform, Florida's low-income Hispanic students now outscore the statewide average for all Arizona students on fourth grade reading in English.⁹

This survey shows that too many public schools are failing to provide students a suitable learning environment. Ensuring our students get a quality education requires meaningful reforms and an emphasis on parental choice and school competition. Giving parents the power to choose the best schools for their children will deliver more satisfied students and parents and better focused public schools.

NOTES

1. Andrew Coulson. 2006. *Arizona and Private Schools: A Statistical Analysis*. Goldwater Institute Policy Report Number 213, available online at <http://goldwaterinstitute.org/article/1851>.
2. For a review of the academic literature on school choice, see Patrick Wolf, 2008. "School Voucher Programs: What the Research Says About Parental School Choice." Article appeared in the Brigham Young University Law Review. The article is available on the internet at <http://lawreview.byu.edu/archives/2008/2/90WOLF.FIN.pdf>.
3. The percentage of surveyed public school students who were Anglo was somewhat higher than that for the entire K-12 system data (50% in the survey, 41.9% in the 2006 Arizona K-12 population). This difference was expected however because of differences in dropout rates by ethnicity and possible differences in age by ethnicity.
4. See a typical example of this on the website of the Anti-Defamation League, at http://www.adl.org/vouchers/vouchers_public_schools.asp.
5. See James S. Coleman and Thomas Hoffer. *Public and Private High Schools: The Impact of Communities*, New York: Basic Books, 1987.
6. The Arizona Superintendent of Public Instruction's Annual Financial report can be viewed on the internet at <http://www.ade.state.az.us/AnnualReport/AnnualReport2008/Vol1.pdf>. , The report shows that all revenues collected by Arizona school districts from all sources was \$9,232,916,095. Dividing that figure by the enrollment number for districts (X number of students), gives \$9,707.45 in total revenue per student.
7. See Caroline Hoxby. 2001. *Rising Tide*. Article appearing in the Winter 2001 edition of Education Next, available online at <http://educationnext.org/rising-tide/>.
8. See Matthew Ladner. 2008. *Fortune Favors the Bold* Goldwater Institute Policy Report Number 225, available on the internet at <http://goldwaterinstitute.org/Common/Files/finalpdf%20Fortune%20Favors%20the%20Bold.pdf>
9. See Dan Lips and Matthew Ladner. 2008. *Demography Defeated: Florida's K-12 Reforms and Their Lessons for the Nation*. Goldwater Institute Policy Report Number 227, available on the internet at <http://goldwaterinstitute.org/Common/Img/Demography%20Defeated.pdf>.