

School Choice Programs Growing More Rapidly Outside the U.S.

By David J. Hoff
Washington

The growth in school choices for American precollegiate students has been dwarfed by the increase in options available to their peers in some other industrialized countries, a report released last week shows.

Over the past decade—as the United States saw the introduction of charter schools and experiments with publicly financed school vouchers—countries such as Belgium, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Spain have posted expanding numbers of students attending privately run K-12 schools that receive government money, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

"It's a fairly new trend," Andreas Schleicher, the deputy head of the education- and labor-statistics directorate for the Paris-based consortium of 29 countries, said at a video press conference held here to discuss the digest of statistics comparing its members' education systems. "Now, it's larger than it has ever been."

In the United States, though, the expansion in charter schools and private-school-voucher programs has had no statistical impact on enrollment figures. Public schools enroll about 90 percent of American K-12 students, with private schools educating most of the rest, according to "Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators."

The number of students in publicly subsidized private schools isn't large enough to have much effect on the U.S. school system, Mr. Schleicher added.

About 500,000 American students attend charter schools, according to the Center for Educa-

tion Reform, a Washington-based group that promotes and tracks the movement. That number is less than 1 percent of the fall 2000 enrollment in all public and private schools reported by the Department of Education. U.S. experiments with taxpayer-financed vouchers remain confined to just a few cities and serve limited populations in those jurisdictions.

Lessons for U.S.?

Promoters of vouchers and charter schools in the U.S. education system argue that the dramatic rise in choice elsewhere can provide lessons to American policymakers.

Most successful programs are ones that incorporate "ongoing efforts" to inform families about all aspects of the school, said Joe Nathan, the director of the Center for School Change at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities.

The design of choice programs has an even bigger impact on participation, added Mr. Nathan, a founder of the charter school movement in the early 1990s.

Choice grew fast in the Netherlands, he said, because Roman Catholic and Protestant politicians agreed to offer tuition reimbursement to religious schools that follow a national curriculum and administer national tests.

It's a model that's unlikely to take hold in the United States because of the country's resistance to a national curriculum and its constitutional separation of church and state, he added.

The Dutch policy ensured significant participation in the program, Mr. Nathan said. More than three-quarters of Dutch students attend a private school that receives public money, according to the OECD

report, which updates data published regularly since 1992. Almost 60 percent of Belgium's students enroll in such schools, as do 31 percent of children in the United Kingdom and 25 percent of Spanish and Australian students.

The trend isn't as pronounced in countries such as Denmark, Germany, and Norway, where fewer than 5 percent of students go to such schools.

Early-Childhood Study

In a separate report released last week, the OECD said that improving children's access to high-quality early-childhood-education programs is a growing policy issue in the United States and abroad.

In a comparative study of early-childhood policies in 12 countries, the group found that most countries are seeking to give children at least two years of free preschool before they enter the primary grades. And in some countries, such as Sweden, access to early care and education programs is a legal right and begins as early as age 1. The report finds, however, that the supply of care does not always meet the demand.

The report, "Starting Strong: Early-Childhood Education and Care," concludes that to improve access to services for young children, a country should have a "systemic and integrated approach to policy development," have a strong partnership with the nation's educational system, take a universal approach while still focusing on groups in need of special support, and focus on training and working conditions for staff members.

Assistant Editor Linda Jacobson contributed to this story.

Public, Private, and In Between

The following shows the distribution of primary and secondary students in OECD countries by the type of schools they attended in 1999.

	Public	Government-dependent private	Independent private
Australia	74.8%	25.2%	—%
Austria	93.0	7.0	—
Belgium	41.7	58.3	—
Canada	94.8	2.0	3.2
Czech Republic	96.2	3.8	—
Denmark	88.7	11.3	—
Finland	96.2	3.8	—
France	79.2	16.8	4.0
Germany	94.9	5.1	—
Greece	94.1	—	5.9
Hungary	94.2	5.8	—
Iceland	97.3	2.7	—
Ireland	99.3	—	0.7
Italy	93.7	0.8	5.5
Japan	89.1	—	9.9
South Korea	78.3	21.0	0.7
Luxembourg	87.7	5.9	6.4
Mexico	90.0	—	10.0
Netherlands	23.3	76.3	0.5
New Zealand	93.7	1.4	4.9
Norway	96.0	4.0	—
Poland	97.7	2.3	0.1
Portugal	89.4	—	10.6
Slovak Republic	95.1	4.9	—
Spain	69.8	24.5	5.7
Sweden	97.7	2.3	—
Switzerland	94.4	2.2	3.4
Turkey	98.2	—	1.8
United Kingdom	65.1	30.7	4.2
United States	89.3	—	10.7

NOTES: Blank spaces denote such factors as unavailable data, disaggregated data, too few schools to count, or the absence of a specific type of school in a given country.

SOURCE: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

"Education at a Glance" is available for \$49 from the OECD, 2001 L St. N.W., Suite 650, Washington DC 20036, (800) 456-6323. It is also on the Web at www.sourceoecd.org. Ordering information about "Starting Strong" is available by going to the Bookshop entry at www.oecd.org.