

# **Idaho's Private School Landscape: A Brief Overview**

Dr. Bas van Doorn  
Senior Research Analyst  
Idaho Office of the State Board of Education  
2/16/2024

WORKING PAPER

## **Guiding Question: What do we know about Idaho private schools?**

### Research Summary

*About 5% of Idaho grade 1-12 students attend private institutions. The absolute and relative size of the private school student population is larger now than in the past. A majority of private schools have a religious affiliation. There is great geographic variation in the number of private schools, with some counties having many private options, whereas others have none. School size is similarly varied, with enrollment ranging from less than a handful to well over 1,000, with larger population counties having larger schools on average.*

### **How many private schools does Idaho have?**

There is no publicly available comprehensive list of Idaho private schools, but we can combine data from several different sources to gain a relatively complete picture. The Idaho Department of Education's most recent list of private schools contains 119 institutions, 114 of which offer at least some elementary or secondary education. Combining this list with information from the U.S. Census Bureau's Private School Universe Survey (PSS) and the Private School Review website produces a list of 155 private schools offering instruction in at least 2 grades in the 1-12 range. Out of this set of schools, 117 offer at least two grades of elementary education and 107 offer at least two grades of secondary education. It's important to point out that many schools do not offer a full 1-6<sup>th</sup> and/or 7-12<sup>th</sup> education. For example, there are only 56 private schools statewide that offer 12<sup>th</sup> grade instruction.

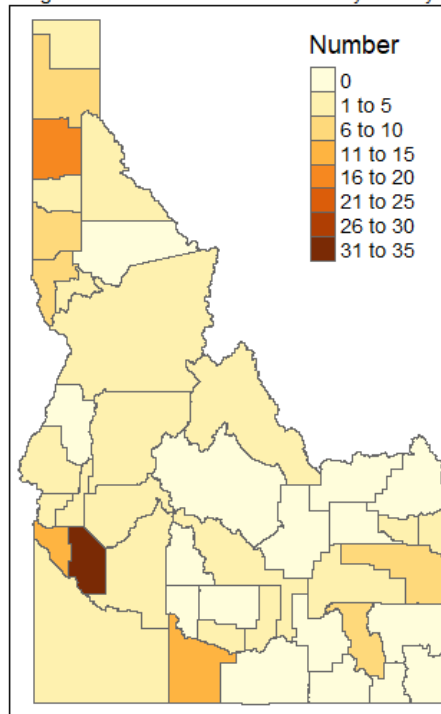
### **What type of private schools does Idaho have?**

Most private schools in the state are religious schools. Out of all 155 schools, 99 (64%) have a religious affiliation. Roman Catholic schools make up 20% (20) of this number, with the bulk of the remaining portion spread across various Protestant denominations. Many of the non-religious schools (9) are Montessori institutions.

### **Where are these schools located?**

Private schools are not equally distributed across counties (see: Figure 1). With 32 total, Ada County has by far the highest number of private schools, followed by Kootenai County, which has 18. Canyon County, which has a larger population than Kootenai County (more about this below), only has 10 private schools.

Fig. 1: Number of Private Schools by County



Many counties (15 out of 44) have no private schools at all. More than a third (16) have no private elementary options and even more (18) have no private secondary options.

### **How many students are enrolled in these schools? Has the number changed over time?**

As with and partially because of the challenges in counting private schools, it is not easy to come up with total private school enrollment figures. Combining data from the 2021-22 PSS, Private School Review, and some additional sources<sup>1</sup> produces an estimate of 16,843 private school students in schools offering grade 1-12 education. This compares to 312,643 students in the public school system, meaning that about 5.1% of grade 1-12 students are enrolled in private schools. To get a sense of over-time change, we can only turn to PSS data because it is the sole source of relevant longitudinal data.

---

<sup>1</sup> These include school websites, [www.greatschools.org](http://www.greatschools.org), [www.classicalchristian.org](http://www.classicalchristian.org), [www.niche.com](http://www.niche.com), and [www.usnews.com](http://www.usnews.com).

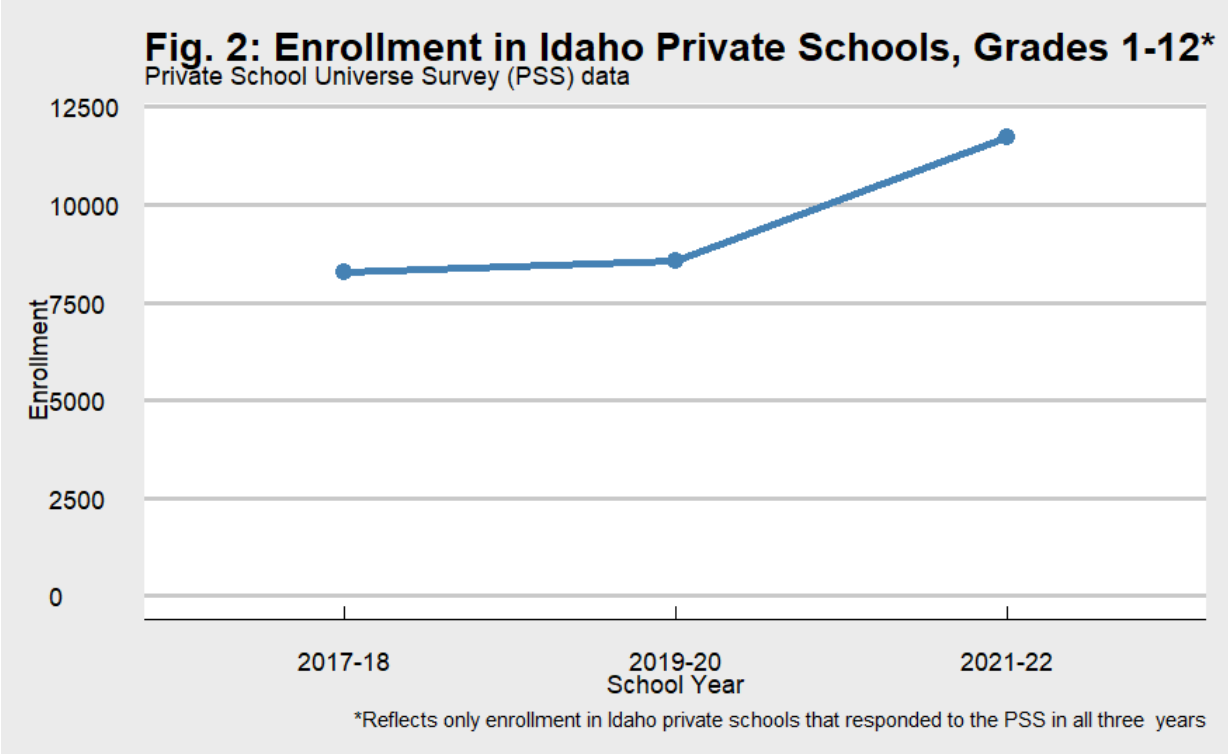


Figure 2 shows a significant absolute increase in private school enrollment over the last half decade or so. The most significant jump occurred in between the 2019-20 and 2021-22 school years, and it is likely the COVID-19 pandemic played a role in this. It is too early to tell whether this increase is permanent. The share of total enrollment this group of PSS schools represents also went up during this period, from 2.7% to 3.6%, suggesting that the amount of private school enrollment went up in both absolute and relative terms.

**What role do population and school size play?**

An important factor associated with the prevalence of private schools is county population size. The three largest counties by population (Ada, Canyon, and Kootenai) contain 43.8% of grade 1-12 private schools. In other words, while they represent about 7% of Idaho’s 44 counties, they have more than 40% of its private schools. Interestingly, though, these three counties actually have a relatively *low* share of private schools when accounting for population size: they contain 48.8% of the state population. Ada County’s state-high number of 32 private schools amounts to 6.47 schools per 100,000 residents. Boundary County, meanwhile, has only 4 private schools, but this translates into 33.18 schools per 100,000 residents.

Knowing the school to population ratio in an area only tells us so much, though, because schools come in many sizes. As it turns out, there is tremendous variance in private school size in Idaho: the smallest school in the database has only 2 students, while the largest has 1,110. Importantly, larger schools tend to be located in high population counties, with Ada County (3, including the top 2) and Canyon County (1) containing the four biggest schools (range: 742-1,110 students). This helps resolve the somewhat puzzling finding discussed above that more populous counties have fewer per capita private schools: these fewer schools have, on average, higher enrollment than schools in lower population counties.

Fig. 3: Average Private School Size by County

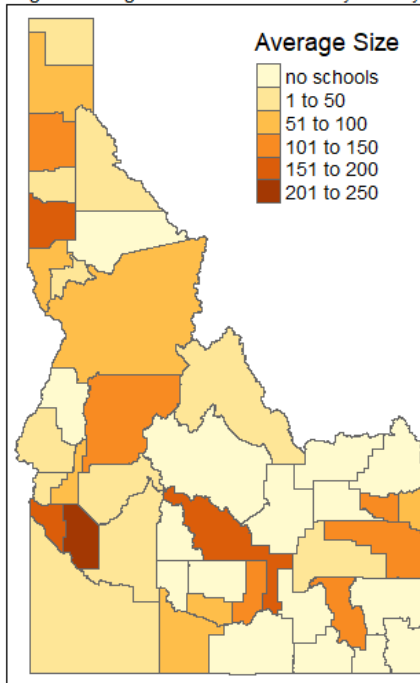


Figure 3 illustrates this point. Boundary County, which had the highest number of private schools per capita, is shown to have very small private schools (42.75 students per school), whereas Ada County, with its low per capita number of schools, is shown to have the biggest private schools on average (208.1 students per school).

**Data Sources:**

Idaho Department of Education private school list:

<https://www.sde.idaho.gov/school-choice/private/shared/Idaho-Private-Schools.xlsx>

Private School Universe Survey (PSS):

<https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/pss/>

Private School Review:

<https://www.privateschoolreview.com/idaho>