All Else Equal: Are Public and Private Schools Different?


"Public schooling has been discredited in the past generation, attacked as dominated by bureaucratic rules and rigid labor unions, blind to the interests of children and parents, and laced with violence and immorality. Some analysts have advocated private schooling as an efficient, competitive antidote to this failing public education system."

Researchers on both sides of the private vs. public school debate compare inputs and outcomes for more ammunition in this contested battle. "Researchers want to estimate how much the teachers and school environment contribute over and above the contribution of family environment or particular race or ethnic community conditions." If private schools are selective in choosing their student body, they have an easier time achieving notable academic outcomes, while public schools teach all students within the community. Social science findings are mixed: some evidence suggests that private education produces higher achievement and attainment than public schools. But equally compelling evidence suggests that students from similar backgrounds achieve about the same whether they attend private or public schools.

Are private schools really better? Do they do things differently from public schools? Does a market in education, in which private schools compete with public schools and with each other, make for better teaching, more parent participation, and higher achievement? Major findings from the authors' study of 16 schools: 1) we found few of the differences we expected to find between public and private schools in similar communities; 2) the most important variations between schools may be between schools of all types in different communities, not between public and private schools in the same community; 3) private schools were not noticeably more accountable to parents than public schools; 4) indeed, the staff of public and private schools in very affluent communities complained of too much parent involvement, including interference in the daily curriculum and inappropriate challenges to school goals; 5) we observed both high- and low-quality classroom management and academic instruction in both public and private schools; and 6) "the social, cultural, and economic backgrounds of the parents and the community in which the school was located seemed to be the main determinant of variation, much more so than a school's public or private character or, within the latter group, whether it was religious or secular." These findings challenge the assertions of advocates for markets in schools, who argue that privatization and student vouchers would increase the variety of education models and choices open to parents. [NOTE: A sober contribution to the public vs. private school debate, one usually polarized by ideologies. (twb)]

(public vs. private school compared)

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"When politicians offer solutions to the problems confronting failing inner-city schools, they fixate on a policy gimmick or a cure-all—more testing, charter schools, choice, vouchers—as if there were a silver bullet or special formula that quickly and easily could solve the problems and fix the schools." Unfulfilled promises and the long record of failure in the most troubled schools fuel the perception that the task of improving public education is simply too big, too complex, and too intractable for the US, the most powerful, wealthiest, and most technologically advanced nation in the world.

"America simply does not care that large numbers of children from inner-city schools and neighborhoods are not properly educated." Indeed, the fact that the US tolerates the failure of so many urban schools suggests that there is either a pervasive belief that poor children are not entitled to anything better, or an active conspiracy to ensure that the majority of children who are born poor, stay poor.

Reformers should treat conditions of oppression as "limit situations"—problems that require critical reflection, engagement and praxis. When poverty is concentrated and poor people are socially isolated, the health and welfare of children and families suffer. External factors such as poverty affect the quality of urban education, but these constraints should not be ignored or treated as factors beyond the reach of schools. Schools that succeed at educating poor children are guided by a coherent mission: one that is embraced enthusiastically by teachers, students, and parents.

Social capital plays a tremendous role in determining how communities are served by schools and other public institutions. Minority and disadvantaged children, lacking social capital, tend to do less well in school than white or affluent students. Asian-American students tend to do well academically because their culture emphasizes the importance of hard work and the pursuit of academic excellence. Other immigrant student populations also do well in school. Middle-class black students tend to underperform academically, and perform less well than low-income White and Asian students on most standardized tests. Yet, "explanations of academic performance that emphasize the importance of culture generally ignore the fact that what we think of as culture—customs, beliefs, and practices associated with particular groups—is constantly subject to change." Low expectations by teachers for the low-income minority students can lead to academic failure, result from it, or both. "Blaming uncaring parents, lazy students, or a society that does not provide adequately for the needs of poor children serves as an effective means to avoid taking responsibility for one's role as an educator." (49) The threat of violence is pervasive in many urban areas, but many of the measures taken to secure schools are largely symbolic. [NOTE: One would hope school conditions can be altered to break the link between culture and achievement, but the chapter describing the Diversity Project at Berkeley High School is not encouraging. (twb)]

(US lacks will to improve urban schools)
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