

PRIVATE SCHOOLS AREN'T
REALLY BETTER
THAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

It is often claimed that private schools do not really deliver a better education than public schools. While it is widely known that students in private schools demonstrate higher academic achievement than those in public schools (they have higher test scores, higher graduation rates, higher college attendance rates and so forth), these results are often attributed to other factors.

The Facts: Choice And Competition Produce Better Academic Achievement In All Students

Typically, the demographic difference between public and private schools is pointed out. Students in private schools tend to come from more advantaged backgrounds, thus explaining the higher academic achievement.

Another issue often cited in the comparison of public and private schools is what is known as “selection bias.” Students attend private schools of the financial sacrifice made by their families. The argument is that the higher value on education expressed by the parents explains the students’ higher test scores. In addition, private schools may be selective in admitting students.

These problems are not insurmountable. Empirical studies utilizing sound scientific methods allow us to draw a fair comparison between public and private schools, weeding out the influence of demographics and selection bias in order to isolate the impact of school quality on student outcomes.

The gold standard for empirical science is the method known as “random assignment,” the method used for medical trials. Subjects are randomly divided into a group that will receive the treatment being studied (such as a medicine) and a control group. Because the two groups are separated only by a random lottery, they are likely to be very similar in every respect other than the treatment. Thus, if the two groups have different outcomes, we can be confident that the difference is due to the treatment.

Random assignment studies are very rare in social policy. However, when voucher programs are oversubscribed, a random lottery often is used to determine which students will be offered vouchers. Applicants who are offered vouchers as a result of the lottery are a naturally occurring random-assignment treatment group, and applicants who are not offered vouchers are the control group. Both groups are made up of students whose parents applied to participate in the program; they are separated only by the result of the lottery.

The Evidence: Top-Quality Studies Consistently Find Vouchers Improve Learning

Ten analyses of school voucher programs have used random-assignment methods. In all ten studies, the voucher group had better academic outcomes than the control group. In nine of the studies, these positive results achieved a high level of statistical certainty commonly referred to as “statistical significance,” meaning we can be very confident that the better results in the voucher group were due to vouchers and not a statistical fluke.

In some studies, the positive effects of vouchers achieved statistical certainty only among large student subgroups, rather than in the population as a whole. For example, in some cases the positive effects are only statistically certain for black students, who made up the majority of voucher users in those programs. These studies do not find any negative voucher effects on any student groups, and they find statistically certain voucher benefits for most students.

One of the ten studies produced no statistically certain results, but some researchers have identified a number of serious violations of proper scientific methods in that study. If these flaws were corrected, the study would have achieved statistical certainty.

The Bottom Line

Numerous top-quality studies have examined vouchers and found that they produce better academic outcomes. No such studies find that voucher students had worse outcomes.

9
... top-quality studies find that
vouchers improve academic
outcomes.

160,000
... students currently attend
private schools through
vouchers and tax-credit
scholarships.