



ARE PRIVATE SCHOOLS REALLY BETTER?



It is conventional wisdom: Private schools are “better” than public schools. But is it really true? A growing body of evidence suggests the answer is no. A [recent installment](#) of the *Washington Post*’s Answer Sheet column reported on the results of a [study](#) conducted by Robert Pianta and Arya Ansari of the University of Virginia. They tracked more than 1,000 public and private school students from birth to age 15. At first glance, the private school students appeared to be performing better on multiple measures. But the differences were deceptive. As soon as the researchers accounted for family income and parental education levels, the advantage evaporated. Private school students did not outperform their public school peers on academic tests, assessments of social adjustment, attitudes and motivation, or on behavioral metrics.

These most recent findings echo those of a 2013 book, *The Public School Advantage*, co-authored by the husband-wife team of Sarah Theule Lubienski and NEPC Fellow [Christopher Lubienski](#). They too found that, compared to their private school counterparts, public school students performed the same if not better on achievement tests once demographics were taken into account.

Other studies have found that children do worse when they use vouchers to move to private schools—studies that NEPC Fellows Kevin Welner and Preston Green discuss in a [2018 working paper](#) for the UCLA Civil Rights Project.

Combined, this research casts serious doubt on the idea that private schools are somehow better. The simple truth is that schools are “better” when they provide richer opportunities to learn. Some private schools have the resources to make this happen; others do not.

This research also raises obvious questions about the merits and wisdom of voucher programs that funnel public funds into private education via cash payments or tax credits. Such programs are popular with current U.S. Department of Education Secretary Betsy DeVos.

Earlier this year, for example, DeVos [proposed](#) using public funds to help military families' children attend private schools—until the plan met with [opposition from military groups](#) that did not want their public schools undermined.

Additional Resources on Public versus Private Schools:

Dynarski, M., Rui, N., Webber, A., & Gutmann, B. (2017). *Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts after one year* (NCEE 2017-4022). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20174022/pdf/20174022.pdf>

Figlio, D., & Karbownik, K. (2016, July 7). *Evaluation of Ohio's EdChoice scholarship program: selection, competition, and performance effects*. Washington, DC: Fordham Institute. <https://edexcellence.net/publications/evaluation-of-ohio%E2%80%99s-edchoice-scholarship-program-selection-competition-and-performance>

Lee, J. (2007). *NEPC Review: Are private high schools better academically than public high schools?* and *Monopoly versus markets: The empirical evidence on private schools and school choice*. Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. <https://nepc.colorado.edu/thinktank/review-two-reports-addressing-achievement-students-private-and-public-schools>

Lubienski, C. & Lubienski, S. (2006). *NEPC Review: On the public-private school achievement debate*. Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. <https://nepc.colorado.edu/thinktank/review-on-public-private-school-achievement-debate>

Lubienski, C & Lubienski, S. (2013). *The public school advantage*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. <https://www.press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/P/bo16956223.html>

Mills, J.N., & Wolf, P.J. (2017, February 17). Vouchers in the bayou: The effects of the Louisiana scholarship program on student achievement after two years. *Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 39(3), 464-484. <http://journals.sagepub.com/stoken/default+domain/rny5Jru8VdKdTrgeRBkd/full>

Pianta, R. & Ansari, A. (2018, July 9). Does attendance in private schools predict student outcomes at age 15? Evidence from a longitudinal study. *Educational Researcher*. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X18785632>

Welner, K. & Green, P. (2018). *Private school vouchers: Legal challenges and civil rights protections*. Los Angeles, CA: The Civil Rights Project. https://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/integration-and-diversity/private-school-vouchers-legal-challenges-and-civil-rights-protections/Welner-Green-JT_022818-for-post.pdf

NEPC Resources on Private Schools

The National Education Policy Center (NEPC), housed at the University of Colorado Boulder School of Education, produces and disseminates high-quality, peer-reviewed research to inform education policy discussions. Visit us at: <http://nepc.colorado.edu>