

## The Public School Advantage: Why Public Schools Outperform Private Schools

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The title is enough to gain attention among public school advocates who eagerly list this book as ammunition in their battles against private and choice schools. The lead author, a professor of education at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, previously co-edited *The Charter School Experiment: Expectations, Evidence and Implications* and *School Choice Policies and Outcomes: Empirical and Philosophical Perspectives*. These intellectual experiences enhance his credibility when comparing and contrasting public schools with other forms of school.

The authors and their families have experience with attending and sending their children to public, private, and home schools in this country and overseas. Like many parents, they have children attending their neighborhood school and magnet high school, "... owing more to convenience than conviction ..." (p. xviii).

Due to the authors' knowledge and perspective, readers in the first few chapters may feel they are reading a book about the superiority of private and charter schools. The

reasons that the market place is viewed as a better structure for education, especially by reformers, are vividly described. Government and bureaucracy are seen as ineffective and wasteful, creating monopolies that stifle competition and creativity. The result is "... complacency and even disincentives for employees to innovate or otherwise respond to the needs of their 'customers'" (p. xvi). The criticism of public school is fairly thick and consistent with generally acknowledged complaints, even from participants.

The private school sector and many choice alternatives are seen as simple and compelling models to reformers. The outcomes are better. "There, school employees have built-in incentives to work harder, or at least more effectively, at providing a better education, for fear of losing students, losing tuition funds, losing their jobs, or even seeing their school 'go out of business'" (p. xvi).

Common or public schools came into existence to educate young people for a changing society. A few centuries later the troubles with public schools are often framed as

a crisis which calls into question the very existence of the institution. The litany of reports and statistics of low achievement, high dropouts, poor behavior, etc. dominate the general discourse. Democracy is considered at stake. Achievement gaps between high and low socioeconomic, racial, and gender groups, as well as state differences in the US and between the US and other countries seem insurmountable. Public education is widely viewed as being incapable of transforming itself into a more productive version of itself. Politics is the driver of public education, along with expert opinion. With this background, wholesale alternatives to the dominate model of schooling are enticing.

The market place is considered to appeal to the self-interest of both the providers and the consumers. Those who offer enhanced schooling are rewarded along with their customers who benefit with better educated students. While politicians, researchers, educators and reformers endlessly debate what works best; "... markets bypass thee squabbles and give the ultimate power to the consumer." (p.16). "... the market solution is said to offer a tidy fix for our schools that bypasses all the political entanglements and expert debates of the other models. As market advocates have noted, market relationships can guarantee that everyone is happy: no one is forced to participate unless they recognize a distinct benefit for themselves" (p. 20).

The book's narrative starts to take a twist with the chapter titled "The Private School Effect." One of the opening lines reads: "The superior results achieved in private schools - including private schools that serve poor and minority students—strongly argue that these schools possess particular characteristics that are lacking in the lagging public school sector." (p.45) James Coleman's famous finding "... that achievement gaps were much less a result

of school inputs than of a student's family background and peers" (p.47) is presented with the researched reasons why parents select private schools. The research results of charter schools and vouchers have been mixed according to the authors.

Lamenting the fact that the true research gold standard, randomization, is difficult to utilize in education; they propose two other means of comparing results—cross-sectional and longitudinal. Then they introduce a mother lode of data, the National Center of Educational Statistics' High School and Beyond study. These authors cite other researchers who have "... identified an organizational advantage for private schools" (p.59). Quoting the authors, they "... find that although private school math scores are indeed higher than public school scores, this apparent private school advantage is due to the characteristics of the students they attract rather than to superior organizational effectiveness and, in fact, public schools are relatively effective" (p.59).

The next few chapters go into detail about the statistical designs and methods used to squeeze more findings from the research. Some readers may skim this material stopping at the findings which are likely of more interest.

Private schools have superior student achievement results. "Of course, the question is whether those superior student results are due to better private schools or to the fact that those schools tend to serve more academically advantaged families, that is, if differences in test scores between various school types—public schools, charter schools or Catholic and other private schools—are primarily due to inherent differences in the effectiveness of these various school types or to differences in the student populations served by these different sectors. If it is the former, then policymakers should seek to further replicate private sector

organizational models in the public sector, using approaches such as charter schools and vouchers to promote choice, organizational autonomy, and competition. But if it is the latter, then such structural changes are limited in their ability to address the roots of educational inequality and ineffectiveness in schooling” (p.61).

From the National Assessment of Educational Progress database, “...when adjusting for differences in student populations, public school achievement is roughly equal to or higher than other school types” (p.64). Furthermore, “After adjusting for demographic differences, no charter or private school means are higher than public school means to any statically significant degree; moreover, particularly at grade 4, public schools actually score scientifically higher than do private and charter schools” (p. 80). Some of the authors’ findings have been replicated by researchers at Stanford and Notre Dame.

Another interesting finding is that public school teachers tend to take part in more professional educational experiences both pre-service and in-service than Catholic school teachers. According to the authors, this calls into question the autonomy touted for non-public school personnel. Parents may make decisions about where to enroll their children on the basis of factors other than improving equity of student achievement. It is logical that safety is a prime concern along with the peer student body. The marketplace is

generally at conflict with many educational goals relative to diversity and equity of results. The authors conclude that while markets are effective in many areas of our society, “... universal education embodies goals that resist the simplistic imposition of market models for the organization and distribution of schooling for meeting those goals” (p.146).

This book is an important piece of the debate surrounding public schools regardless of one’s position before digesting the contents. Proponents of choice will be reinforced with the references to higher overall achievement at private schools, minorities doing better at private schools, the ease of the marketplace, and even quoted research studies such as Coleman which concluded that schools themselves make little difference, but families and peers are key factors. Public school advocates can tap some of the arguments presented against the effectiveness of the marketplace and that public school teachers may be better trained.

However, the strongest point is that when socioeconomic advantages are statistically discounted, public schools seemingly have higher student achievement, especially in fourth grade. While this work limits its attention to test scores, *The Public School Advantage: Why Public Schools Outperform Private Schools* still should be read by policy makers, reformers, and school administrators engaged in the topic.

### Reviewer Biography

Art Stellar is vice-president of the National Education Foundation an organization that assists superintendents in acquiring funds and resources. Having served as a superintendent for 25 years, he has been widely recognized for turning around school districts in both educational and financial terms. A life member of AASA, he has been acknowledged with national awards for “Leadership for Learning,” the Effie Jones Humanitarian Award, and Distinguished Service from AASA. He has served as president of ASCD, the Horace Mann League and the North American Chapter of the World Council for Curriculum and Instruction, as well as vice-president of the New York State PTA. He has authored over 500 publications and consulted with many educational organizations. E-mail: artstellar@yahoo.com

*The Public School Advantage: Why Public Schools Outperform Private Schools* is written by Christopher Lubienski and Sarah Lubienski, professors at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Chicago: University of Chicago, 2014; 276 pages, paperback, \$18.

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