Public versus Private Schools:
More Than Just a Debate

Christin Funderburk
Education 2120
Dr. Davis
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Public schools are government funded institutions that allow anyone to attend. Private schools are funded through other means than government and may have religious, financial, or further requirements for exception. For those who can afford it, parents have been struggling for decades on whether they should enroll their children in public or private school. Private school is becoming more accessible financially to a lot of middle class families which furthers the confusion over where to enroll children in school. While some professionals and specialists debate public versus private, others are focusing on issues such as class size, demographics, and the amount of parental involvement.

University of Illinois’ Christopher and Sara Lubienski did a study based on the 2003 National Assessment of Educational Progress report *Student Achievement in Private Schools*. The report showed that students attending private schools (Christian, non-Christian, and particular dominations) performed better than public or charter schools in the basic areas of study (reading, writing, math, etc.). The report also shows that public schools have higher percentages of black, Hispanic, low-income, and special needs students than private schools. The Lubienskis study took the demographics into account and concluded that public schools were just as good, and at times better, than private schools. The study is such a useful tool for parents in the dispute for public versus private that it was featured in a news article by Victoria Clayton in a 2005 MSNCB article as well as by Gerald Bracey in an article for *Phi Delta Kappan* (2006).

Ellen Goldring of Vanderbilt University and Kristie Phillips of Brigham Young University published an article that argues for parental choice in schools. They separate the parents into “choosers” and “non-choosers.” According to Goldring and Phillips, demographics, satisfaction with previous schools, parental involvement, educational priorities, and social networks are the five major differences on whether a parent is a “chooser” or a “non-chooser.” They suggest that demographically, parents with higher education tend to make more effort into educational options for their children, higher income families are more likely to choose private than lower income families (merely because higher income families can afford it, and lower income families cannot), and that racially more whites attend private schools that blacks or Hispanics, but based solely on attending private school for religion, blacks and
whites were about equal. Parental satisfaction in picking schools is usually based in dissatisfaction of the child’s previous school. Not only does choosing a school show parental involvement, but a parent who goes through the work of choosing a school for their child is more likely to be further involved in their child’s education. Academics, convenience, school characteristics, and safety are the educational priorities taken into account by “choosers” and whites tend to be the group most likely to choose academics as the reason for choosing a school. As for social networks, Goldring and Phillips break it down into two social groups: interpersonal networks and formal networks. Interpersonal networks consist of neighbors, family, friends, co-workers, and other social groups the parents belong to. Formal networks consist of publicly available information such as websites, brochures, and statistical data about the schools, etc. While these five categories are possible things taken into consideration by “choosers,” they are not all necessarily taken into account by each parent. Likewise, just because a family is a “non-chooser” does not mean that none of the five categories apply to them.

Parental involvement, not only in choosing a school, but helping the child on a regular basis with school assignments and maintaining a good relationship with the child’s teacher is essential to the child’s education whether the child attends a public school or a private school. Zeyu Xu and Charisse Gulosino of Columbia University did a study of teacher-parent partnership for kindergartens in public and private schools based on four areas: achievement scores, children demographics, family characteristics, and teacher and school characteristics. Xu and Gulosino state that for scoring, private school students perform better than public school students, but that they also go into school better prepared. As far as family and social characteristics are concerned, “private school children have smaller classroom enrollments, smaller family sizes, higher family income, higher parental education levels, and they are also more likely to have both biological parents present at home as compared with public school children (649). The comparisons of teachers show a major difference in favor of public schools. Xu and Gulosino provide that teachers in public schools tend to have higher degrees than in private schools. According to David Sadker and Karen Zittleman, authors of the textbook *Teachers, Schools, Society*, public school teachers also make more
money than private school teacher. Based on Gulosino and Xu’s study, it can be gathered that they believe private school students do better than public school students, but clearly not because of the teachers, but more likely because of things like class size and parental involvement.

In July of 2006, The New York Times published *Private vs. Public* based on new data released from the United States Education Department with scores for math and reading from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, an updated version of the same data used by the Lubienskis three years prior. The editorial stated that “private schools appeared to have an achievement advantage when raw scores of students were considered alone. But those perceived advantages melted away when the researchers took into account variables like race, gender, and parents’ education and income.” Based on the studies by Christopher and Sara Lubienski, Ellen Goldring and Kristie Phillips, and Zeyu Xu and Charisse Gulosino, the major debate over public versus private is not which is better. Public school can be equal to private school in most capacities. The debate should be about how the social factors make the difference between public versus private school, why parents who are “choosers” have the social and financial ability to even be a “chooser,” and how to show the “non-choosers” that they still have options with the public school system.
References


