

## **Joshua Benton: Can cash buy good schools?**

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It may cost \$20,000 a year or more. But is private-school tuition really worth the big bucks?

An interesting new study by two University of Illinois researchers seems to indicate it often isn't. And it gives further evidence that many folks can't spot a "good" school when they see one.

"More often than not when people try to judge the quality of schools, they look at who is walking in the doors of that school, not what the school is doing with them once they're there," said Chris Lubienski, co-author of the study with his wife and fellow professor, Sarah.

Their study looks at math scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. NAEP is the big federal test whose results researchers love to slice and dice, since it includes scores and demographic data for tens of thousands of students.

When NAEP scores are reported, they always show private-school students outperforming their peers in public school. It's been a consistent finding for decades.

But the Lubienskis were curious. Is that because private schools are really better? Or is it just because they generally enroll wealthier, better-prepared students?

So they built a way to try to remove social class as a factor. They gathered up data on the students taking the test. Were they poor enough to qualify for free school lunch? Did they have a computer at home? Did their parents graduate from college, or did they drop out of high school? They then compared how public and private schools fared when these socioeconomic factors were stripped away.

They found that, at all class levels, public schools had a small but consistent edge over privates. Their suspicions were supported by the numbers: The reason private schools look better on paper is because they serve more middle- and upper-class kids.

Or, to be even plainer: Poor kids in public schools did better than poor kids in private schools. Middle-class kids in public schools did better than middle-class kids in private schools. And rich kids in public schools did better than rich kids in private schools.

I've got no grudge here. I attended both public and private schools. And there may be plenty of reasons to send a child to private school that aren't about test scores – religion, for instance.

More affluent students

But the Lubienskis' findings make sense. Private schools generally pay their teachers less than public schools and often have fewer resources. The one edge they generally do have is a better-off student body.

Why does this matter? A few reasons.

First, it's a reminder of how important poverty and home life are to a child's academic success.

"All kids can learn" is a nice idea, and "no child left behind" is a nice slogan. But kids who come from poor, literacy-starved homes start school so far behind better-off suburbanites that the gap isn't closable on any large scale. Dallas ISD could corner the market on the world's best teachers and its test scores still wouldn't beat Highland Park's.

I once heard a researcher say that if you want to eliminate the achievement gap in American schools, the answer was simple: Just end poverty. Good luck with that.

Second, it shows we have a problem with how we evaluate schools.

Easy kids to teach

Real estate agents in the northern suburbs love to talk up how great the local schools are. Their scores have been among North Texas' highest for years. But were they "great" because they employed great teachers and brilliant principals? Or were they coasting on the fact they were handed a group of upper-middle-class kids with involved parents – the kind of kid that's easiest to teach?

Let's try a thought experiment. Imagine Plano West High's student body were suddenly switched with South Oak Cliff's.

Plano's test scores would collapse; South Oak Cliff's would skyrocket. But would that mean the teachers at Plano West have suddenly forgotten how to teach? Would it mean the maligned schools of Dallas' southern sector suddenly became world beaters? Nope on both counts.

The governance issue

Finally, the Lubienski study suggests that changing how a school is governed isn't an easy way to "fix" education.

In the 1990s, some education reformers argued that schools were being held back by the systems that run them. If you could just find a way to get rid of the school boards and the public-education bureaucracies, they argued, schools would flourish.

It's one of the core arguments for vouchers and charter schools. Change the governance structure – or let private schools get public dollars – and kids' performance will improve.

The Illinois study is just one study, and it's certainly an area that needs more research. But it's a sign that the old public-school model may not be as troubled as some argue.

"I'm a parent, and I like to have choices," Dr. Lubienski said. "But people were very excited about governance as a magic bullet 10 years ago. They're not as excited anymore."

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