

# Determining achievements in the choice of school

Life



Every parent wants what is best for their child. Though parents do not have control over everything in their child's development, education is one they do control. A person's education is one of the most important factors in determining whether or not they will become a productive member of society. Because education is so important, what kind of education is best? Whether or not a public or private school is best may be an issue worth addressing. The debate over which is better is a battle that has gone on since private schools were first introduced as an alternative.

It seems most people are of the opinion that private schools are superior; the issue is simply if it is worth the money. However, this may not be the case. Therefore, how does one gauge the superiority of a school? This very difficult question has no easy answers. The most common and maybe the only way that researchers can rate and measure the effectiveness of a school is by measuring achievement. The American Heritage Dictionary seems to define achievement as "something that has been accomplished successfully, especially by means of exertion, skill, practice, or perseverance.

This definition is not exactly what researchers are speaking of when they refer to achievement. Though they all seem to define it slightly different, achievement is referred to as an improvement in overall academic excellence that did not exist before or outside the classroom. Many researchers used achievement tests and SAT scores in longitudinal studies for this measure. These reports seem to suggest that public schools seem to perform at equal levels with private schools. But are SAT scores and achievement tests all that are important to a school and what it can provide for children?

This question cannot be addressed with these The fact that I was raised in a private environment seems to suggest that I may not be better off than my private counterparts. Since a young age, I have attended private schools. From Kindergarten through all four years of high school, I have been in home schooling with my other brothers and sisters. I was raised on the idea that private schools are better than public ones. My parents and most of my peers still believe this. I might still think this also but with much less fervor. After high school, I then went on to Meramac, my first public school.

It was here that I learned, in that large and diverse environment, and from talking to my friends now at public colleges, that maybe the average public and private system are not so different. I am not saying that high school and college are comparable, they are not. Maybe just the idea that private schools provide a superior education is false. I seem to be getting the same if not better education where I am now, at Meramac, than I would at some private college. I am afraid to ask how much my parents have spent on my education.

Would I be in the same place today had I gone to public schools, only having a more However, one must keep in mind that the issue over whether private schools are superior to public ones cannot be calculated for just myself or any other individual. The facts and data stated here are averages, not necessarily the best and most accurate information for all children. Also, not all public schools are the same and not all private schools are the same. Again, the results here are supposed to be averages of each. Many schools are not even addressed. Public magnet schools, independent schools, and special education schools, are some examples.

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Another thing to bear in mind is that there are many more public schools than here are private ones, thus skewing the data some. With that I mind, I have found six journals written on, or pertaining to, the subject of achievement and whether private or public does a better job of promoting it. However, all of these researchers did not just pick a hundred public students and a hundred private ones, test them, and then see who scored higher. Many variables must be taken into account to make the two groups as equal as possible.

This logical step included the factoring out of variables such as economic backgrounds, gender, age, race, IQ, and others. By liminating or lessening these characteristics and others like them, more equivalent groups can be made, with a smaller chance of non school influences affecting score results. Before the mid 1970's, the issue of the better type of school had not been seriously addressed. This may be because most students enrolled in private schools were there primarily for religious reasons. This is why most private schools are Catholic. The Coleman report, released a before the 1980, began the battle that still continues to this day.

Their conclusion stated that, after all the data was collected, and all the important ariables accounted for, private schools produce better achievement than their public counterparts. Shortly after this research became public, numerous studies have been documented as stating that their conclusion was false. Some of those studies shall be stated here. One of the first reports that confronted the Coleman report was released in 1981 by authors Goldberger and Cain. This study did nothing but address the validity

of the report by Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore, which was a document that contained 233 pages + appendices.

They found that " the method and nterpretations employed fall below the minimum standards of acceptability for social-scientific research".

Goldberger and Cain do not only disagree with the results that Coleman and his associates released but attack them with a fair amount of vemenance.

Their research methods, or, their execution of the methods, are replete with flaws. The presentation of their style are one-sided -- pro-private. It is as if they decided to write a brief for the proposition that society shift to the subsidization of private schools and away from the subsidization of public schools.

Goldberger and Cain therefore, are not saying anything referring to which type of school is better. They are simply stating that the results shown by the Coleman report are not accurate, and therefore, there is simply no evidence suggesting that private is better. However, in 1983, Alexander and Pallas not only discredited the Coleman report but also did a study of their own. Though a little more discrete in their judgments, they again find the Coleman results flawed. They also address the fact that because most private schools are catholic, it would be wrong to generalize the private school data set by including all private schools.

Instead they address the issue as a public-Catholic one. Attempting to correct the errors in the Coleman report, they do a study of their own. Using the NLS and HSB studies, they find that there is not a substantial difference in the results and that private schools are not better. They do however, point

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out their shortcomings; that " SAT scores are only available for those students who elected to sit for the test" and that the data are only sampled of sophomores and Another study that furthered the argument that public schools are just as good as private ones were one put out by Sassenreth and her colleagues.

In 1983 they used a study that was already in progress, SOMPA, to analyze the correlation between the two. Though the study was extremely brief, by comparing IQ's of students already in the survey, they found that ". . . the public schools are able to hold their own, despite having to enroll an student (good or bad) in their residential area and having to offer a wider range of courses". With 49 public school students and 49 private school students matched by their IQ and with all outside variables taken into account, " private and public schooling has (on the average) about the same nfluence on academic achievement".

However they are also the only study reviewed which infer that the decision to select a private school might be for other reasons than achievement.

Some of the more recent data no longer refers to the Coleman report, suggesting that it is either outdated or has been successfully discredited. In 1991 Gibbons and Bickel use three SAT data sets to compare public to private. Though SAT tests " were originally designed to measure aptitude rather than achievement" the authors feel that they are just as good a measuring tool as any.

They again find that, once accounting or certain variables, " public high schools appear to perform better than private high schools, at least with Also

in 1991 Rock and associates address the issue of trying to ascertain what promotes achievement. Though it does not specifically address the conflict of private versus public schools, it does seem to provide useful information concerning some of the variables addressed by previous researchers and why they were factored out.

Before the following variables are accounted for, \* Students from private independent schools perform considerably better on all test than students from Students in private independent schools are more likely than public or Catholic school students to be proficient at higher level math problem solving (private independent: 63 percent, public: 18 percent, Catholic: \* Students from Catholic schools have higher mean scores I all tested areas (except higher-level math problem solving) then do public school students.

Age, race and ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, also play a significant role in a students performance. Their data seems to suggest however, that the differences in achievement among public schools and rivate schools seem to stem from variables that are not school related. But what about the things that researchers cannot prove. Many parents, especially those whose children are or have been in private schools, would argue that achievement is only part of the big picture. Lynn Stevens, a public schoolteacher, has three daughters.

Though they all began in public schools, two of them attended private high school. Mrs. Stevens feels that her children received a better academic background in a private school but, due to the variety and larger size of a public school, she feels that they might have suffered. She feels that they

might have been " more involved in a larger variety of things" in a public school. Jennifer and Meredith Stevens, Mrs. Stevens' older daughters, attended Marist, a high pressure, high achievement, private school.

Therefore, because it is so competitive, Mrs. Stevens feels it inappropriate to call Marist an " average" private school,. However, upon discussion of the advantage of social diversity of a public school, Jennifer added that she " received a more positive influence at Marist" than she would have at Roswell. Jennifer also senses from her youngest sister, now attending public high school, that there is almost pressure to not do well. Mrs. Stevens also feels that public schools, especially at the elementary level, cannot meet the demands of all the different ability levels present in the large classes.

Private schools on the other hand, though not able to help each child as much as possible, can perform a much better job of this with their smaller class sizes. One argument against private schools is that they do not provide a " real world" type of atmosphere, and that this is a serious disadvantage when the child grows up. Mrs. Stevens feels that this does not necessarily matter. However, because of Amanda's greater opportunity to achieve amongst her peers at public school, Mrs. Stevens would not put her youngest daughter in Marist.

Another reason, though not addressed in the interview, for her sending her daughters to private school is due to the religious influence that it provides, which is unavailable in public schools. Basically, it depends on the student, and what will be best for him or her. It seems that for the average student, private schools do not provide better achievement than do public. But what



does achievement have to do with the big picture? Will higher SAT and achievement scores reduce a happier, more well rounded, positive, and more self confident youth?

Probably not. Every child is unique and has their own strengths and weaknesses. The same things hold true with schools. Some private schools are poor just as many public schools are good. The decision whether private schools are worth the money is another issue. Again, it depends on one's own situation. Therefore, though achievement may be part of the decision making process, it should only be a small concern in a sea of other ones. It depends upon the child as to which concerns are large and which ones are small.