

# School Choice:

## »» A Private Shift

What growing primary & secondary private school enrollment could mean for the U.S.

About the Issue: Author: Sam Reinecke

The importance of policy and decision-making in terms of the primary and secondary education system in the U.S. is widely agreed upon across parties. How this system is maintained, corrected and carried out can have vast implications on our country's future. Over the past 30 to 40 years, there has been a growing trend in the percentage of primary and secondary school students whose parents are choosing to enroll in private schools over and in place of their local public education systems. This rise can be seen most clearly at the upper/wealthy class level but has also run true within middle class families.<sup>1</sup>

This shift has stemmed from growing concern in two major issues. For one, there has been seen to be a rising gap in trust and confidence between adults with or planning to have children, and the local public school systems,

especially in metropolitan areas (as shown in Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> This has been the result of a disparity between private and public school systems in terms of factors like achievement, teacher quality, and resources/funding. Couple this trust gap with the growing necessity of a college degree in the modern economic climate, the advantages of private education are becoming more and more glaring for families to consider within their budget.

"In fall 2015, some 5.8 million students (10.2 percent of all elementary and secondary students) were enrolled in private elementary and secondary schools."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator\\_cgcs.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cgcs.asp)



<a href="https://www.freepik.com/free-photos-vectors/school">School vector created by freepik - www.freepik.com</a>

**In your local area, is it the public schools or the private schools that...**

*generally provide a better education?*



*do a better job teaching academic skills?*



*do a better job maintaining discipline and order?*



*do a better job teaching kids to get along with people from different backgrounds?*



■ Private      ■ Public

*Base: People who have private schools in local area (n=679)*

Figure 1: <http://www.capenet.org/facts.html>

### What is at Stake?

The widening shift to private education has numerous implications on the social fabric of local American communities, and on the progress of young people within society. One major effect of lowered public school enrollment amongst middle class families is what has become known as "resegregation" within the public school system. This phenomenon describes the racial stratification occurring within public schools especially in inner-city regions.<sup>3</sup> The growth of private school enrollment has been mainly the case for white families. This forces a higher segregation rate in middle class public schools across the country, which leads to a growing disparity in school resources, teacher quality, and subsequently, academic achievement in the areas compared to more racially integrated districts. It is becoming more and more visible that the poorest schools in America have the highest minority percentages and visa versa (shown in Figure 2).

A second effect of the private shift is a continuously lowered rate of teacher quality/performance in public schools, once again mainly in low-income areas. The best teachers have been observed to more and more often choose the best schools, usually being private systems or public schools found in high-income, white areas.<sup>4</sup> The drop in teacher quality for the schools left over could mean continued lowered achievement for those schools.

### Roadblocks:

There are several obstacles when it comes to dealing with this issue in terms of what policy efforts should be addressed in response. One big issue standing in the way of obtaining a clearer statistical foundation of this juxtaposition within school enrollment is the rise in charter school enrollment that has run mostly parallel to the growth seen in private systems in recent years. Charter schools are publicly funded, but privately run. Since there is an argument to be had over the institution of charter schools and the resources/achievement of said schools in comparison to public schools, it is hard to distinguish them as more homogenous with private or public school systems. This makes it difficult to place data and analysis from charter schools into the discussion of this issue. Another obstacle for potential solutions to the issue can be found in the comparison in resources and teacher quality between private and public schools. It can become arduous to deduce whether the disparity in achievement between private and public school students (as shown in Figure 3 for an 8th grade sample) has more to do with things like teacher quality and access to reliable academic resources, or more to do with the socioeconomic status and home/social environment advantages that a student in an affluent home might have over a student in a middle-to-lower class home. Comparing and surveying these types of situations is a large part of what goes into a parent's decision to enroll their child in a public versus a private schools system and visa versa. There must be a clearer understanding as to what factors should and do matter more or less than others.

### NAEP 2011 Writing Report Card

Percentage of Students in Public and Private Schools At or Above Various Achievement Levels

Grade 8		
	Private	Public
Basic	92	79
Proficient	41	26
Advanced	6	3

Figure 3: <http://www.capenet.org/facts.html>

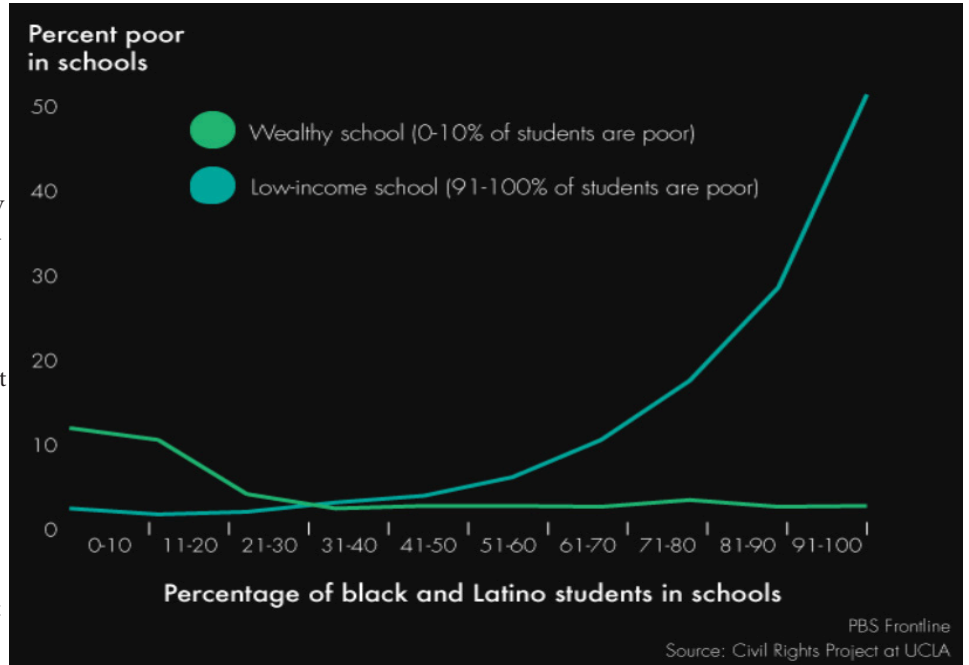


Figure 2: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/the-return-of-school-segregation-in-eight-charts/>

### Solutions:

William Sander's case study for the Illinois public school system gives us a prime example of what potential solutions that can be and are being carried out in public school districts to both bring a spike back to public school enrollment and improve achievement within those public schools. Sander found that one way Illinois has been combatting the issue is through funding projects and resource evaluations within public schools carried out on a district by district basis.<sup>5</sup> Meaning that the state has decided to break down the disparity of private and public school achievement with a close look at geographic school districts and their respective percentages of both private versus public enrollment as well as socioeconomic status. Using statistics from each district, the local government and the local boards of education can carry out more effective and targeted funding and programming efforts, with incite on the particular needs of that district. This method is what will push public education back where it needs to be in America with an emphasis on the importance of educating all students from all backgrounds in all regions. We can not treat all school districts the same because each district has a very particular and unique set of needs and requirements to attain the highest levels of achievement.

For this to work the right way though, it is necessary that more continuous and elaborative studies on achievement and resources within schools needs to be implemented. There is a decent amount of research in this area but it is not sufficient. It is worth noting that maybe if public schools in some areas are failing, then this growing trend in private school enrollment is not a bad thing. People are making a cost-benefit decision and choosing private schools as the best option for their children. There is nothing wrong with that, but in order to better society as a whole, and to push our country forward to a brighter future, public school improvement will always be the answer.

#### Endnotes

- 1 Thomas, William V. "Private School Resurgence." In *Editorial Research Reports* 1979, vol. 1, 285-304. Washington, DC: CQ Press, 1979. <http://library.cqpress.com/cqresearcher/cqresrre1979042000>.
- 2 Schmidt, Amy B. "Private School Enrollment in Metropolitan Areas." *Public Finance Quarterly* 20, no. 3 (July 1, 1992): 298-320. doi:10.1177/109114219202000302.
- 5 Sander, William. "Private Schools and Public School Achievement." *The Journal of Human Resources* 34, no. 4 (1999): 697-709. doi:10.2307/1464133. Renzulli, Linda., and Lorraine Evans. "School Choice, Charter Schools, and White Flight." *Social Problems* 52, no. 3 (2005): 398-418. doi:10.1525/sp.2005.52.3.398.
- 4 Gerritsen, Sander, Erik Plug, and Dinand Webbink. "Teacher Quality and Student Achievement: Evidence from a Sample of Dutch Twins." *Journal of Applied Econometrics* 32, no. 3 (2016): 643-60. doi:10.1002/jae.2539.
- 3 Fiel, Jeremy E. "Decomposing School Resegregation." *American Sociological Review* 78, no. 5 (2013): 828-48. doi:10.1177/0003122413496252.