

New Kid on the

A CLOSER LOOK AT AMERICA'S PRIVATE SCHOOLS

Peter W. Cookson, Jr.

From roughly 1830 to 1980 public schools held center stage in the great American drama of equal opportunity and upward mobility. Private schools were small, even suspect, players.

Though the first colonial schools were private, by the end of the 19th century private schools were identified with class and religious interests. The economic elite established its own prep schools on the model of England's Eton and Harrow. Religious organizations, particularly the Roman Catholic Church, founded their own schools to combat Protestant indoctrination in public schools. Not everyone believed families should have the option of leaving the public schools. It took a 1925 Supreme Court decision (*Pierce v. Society of Sisters*) to settle the matter.

Over the past 15 years, however, the tables have turned. Public schools, the institution long championed as part of the solution to the dilemma of inequality, are now seen as a serious part of the problem. Particularly in the inner city, the public schools are failing in the mission of providing children with the skills to live productive lives and gain a foothold on the ladder of success.

Now private schools are in the spotlight. The parochial school is touted as the "real common school," the institutional embodiment of something sociologists call "social capital." Apologists hold it up as a promising alternative to public education. Some analysts and policymakers propose to privatize all public education through a system of universal vouchers, others to provide vouchers to enable inner-city children to escape the miserable schools in



their neighborhoods and attend private schools.

But the world of private schools is more complicated than its apologists would have us believe. What are private schools like? Are they better managed than public schools? More economical? Do similar students learn more at private schools than at public schools? Do private schools really have a lock on social trust? Do they promise upward mobility?

The Landscape of Private Schools

The term private school covers a multitude of educational alternatives. Researcher Don Erikson has identified 15 major categories of private schools: Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Jewish, Seventh Day Adventist, independent, Episcopal, Greek Orthodox, Quaker, Mennonite, Calvinist, Evangelical, Assembly of God, special education, alternative, and military. Most private schools are on the east and west

Peter W. Cookson, Jr., is director of the Center for Educational Outreach and Innovation, Teachers College, Columbia University. He is the author of School Choice: The Struggle for the Soul of American Education (Yale, 1994) and, with Jerome J. Hanus, of Choosing Schools: Vouchers and American Education (American University Press, 1996).

coasts; Connecticut has the highest share of private school students (17 percent) and Wyoming the lowest (1.5 percent).

The approximately 27,000 elementary and secondary private schools in the United States enroll about 6 million students—some 12 percent of American school children. Private schools constitute 25 percent of all elementary and secondary schools. The overall percentage of students who attend private schools has been remarkably stable over time. Since the 1960s the big loser in terms of students and schools has been the Roman Catholic Church. From the mid-sixties

where students study Latin and Greek and go on to prestigious Catholic colleges and universities;

- a school for students with learning and behavior problems where the faculty-student ratio can be as low as three to one;

- a progressive school where students write curriculum, address teachers by their first names, and travel to Paris on a field trip;

- a military school where the sons and sometimes the daughters of middle-class families seeking educational structure learn the value of order and discipline;

- a Christian Evangelical school where the Bible is the main text, evolutionary biology is despised, and religious conformity strictly enforced.

There is no one world of private schools. It is a mosaic of institutions that vary by mission, size, and social exclusivity. While it is true that some poor families make great sacrifices to send their children to private schools, most private school families are wealthier than public school families. Approximately 29 percent of all students attending public school receive publicly funded lunches, while only 6 percent of private school students receive such lunches and only 4 percent receive Title I services. The elite private schools, while providing some scholarships, enroll children from some of the country's wealthiest families. Contrary to the image created by some private school advocates, the overwhelming number of students in private schools are white. Approximately 46 percent of private schools enroll less than 5 percent minority students. Only a small percentage enrolls more than 50 percent of their students from minority populations.

One of the key differences between public and private schools is that the latter are almost exclusively academic, while the former are nearly evenly divided among academic, general, and vocational programs. On average, private school students spend more time on their homework and write more than public school students. Private school students tend to feel more positive about their schools and feel safer.

Private schools, it is often claimed, are cheaper to operate because they are not bureaucratically driven, and little money is spent on administration. As noted, however, most private schools are small elementary schools that are far less expensive than high schools to run and require far less managerial attention. Moreover, many private schools receive public support for transportation and special education, usually pay no property taxes, and rely on private donors for contributions. Because private schools can be selective, they can exclude academically or socially difficult children, eliminating many services required in the public sector. Few private school faculties are unionized, and as a consequence private schools generally

to the mid-eighties Catholic schools experienced a 46 percent drop in students and a 29 percent drop in schools. During the same period Evangelical schools experienced a tremendous rate of growth—627 percent. The vast majority of private schools are elementary schools; only one in thirteen private schools enrolls students in grades 9–12. Private schools tend to be very small. Half enroll fewer than 150 students. Less than 3 percent enroll more than 750 students. Most of the larger schools are Catholic. The diversity in the private school sector is striking. In the past 20 years I have visited scores of private schools.

A private school can be:

- a tiny school in California where students live in shacks they build themselves, cook two meals a day, and study poetry under the trees;

- a prestigious prep school in New England where the well-to-do send their children to be socially polished and primed to enter an Ivy League college;

- a Catholic school in the inner city where all the students are poor and only a few are Catholic;

- a Catholic school in an elite city neighborhood



TOP LEFT: NATIONAL CATHEDRAL SCHOOL, WASHINGTON, D.C. (PHOTO BY PIERCE ATKINS)

BOTTOM LEFT: ST. AUGUSTINE CATHOLIC SCHOOL, WASHINGTON, D.C. (PHOTO BY NESTOR HERNANDEZ)

BOTTOM RIGHT: ST. JOHN MILITARY SCHOOL (UNIPHOTO PICTURE AGENCY/JOE SOHM)

pay their teachers very low wages. I know of no credible study of the economics of private sector education that convinces me that when all the relevant variables are taken into account, private schools are either more economical or better managed.

Private schools are status communities. Families are attracted to them because of certain special interests, including religious orthodoxy, social snobbery, academic specialty, or educational philosophy. Many private schools are excellent, the best are outstanding. Some, however, are mediocre, and the worst are appalling. Some private schools have facilities and resources far greater than many colleges, but in others the children do not get enough to eat, discipline is brutal, and the life of the mind is stifled. In short, the social, educational, and economic geography of the private school world is highly varied, more akin to the geography of California than of Kansas. Simplistic statements about this geography create the context for questionable research results and misguided policy suggestions.

Private Schools: Better Academically?

In 1982 James Coleman, Thomas Hoffer, and Sally Kilgore published *High School Achievement: Public, Catholic, and Private Schools Compared*. Like much of Coleman's work, this study was highly controversial. He and his colleagues found that the average test scores of private school sophomores exceeded those of public school sophomores in every single subject area. In reading, vocabulary, mathematics, science, civics, and writing tests, private school students outperformed public school students, sometimes by a wide margin. The authors of the study wondered whether these differences were due to student selection or to school effects on cognitive skills. When they controlled statistically for the effects of family background on academic achievement, the differences between public and private school students were reduced, but remained substantial.

According to the Coleman study, private school students outperform public school students for two reasons: private schools more successfully engage students academically, and private school discipline is more consistently enforced. In several follow-up analyses and discussions Coleman and his colleagues attributed private school superiority to the "community" effects of these schools. Catholic schools, in particular, were seen as exemplifying communities where value consensus was enforced and there was a close parallel between school values and family values.

The Coleman study produced a firestorm of discussion and reanalysis. Noted sociologists and economists of education scrutinized the Coleman data and concluded that the private school effect was

extremely small, perhaps nonexistent. Sociologist Christopher Jencks concluded that "the annual increment attributable to Catholic schooling thus averages .03 or .04 standard deviations per year. By conventional standards this is a tiny effect, hardly worth study." Others found that sector differences had little to do with differences between public and private schools, but a great deal to do with student body characteristics and depth of academic offerings. Good schools looked similar regardless of whether they were public or private.

Political scientist John Witte and others began to point out the fundamental inferential problems of Coleman's work (an analysis of high school achievement applied to private schools generally) and flaws in the basic research design (for example, student family background characteristics and educational experiences were based primarily on students' self-reports). Measured student achievement was based almost entirely on a set of six multiple-choice achievement tests given to 72 students in each school. Questions were raised about the tests' validity and reliability. Most telling was that while Coleman and his colleagues found statistical differences between public and private school achievement, the size of the effects was so small that sociologists Karl Alexander and Aaron Pallas estimated that changing public schools to look like Catholic schools would shift the public schools from the 50th to the 53rd percentile ranking on standardized tests.

Researcher Richard Murnane found that private school students score higher on achievement tests than public school students because they come from more advantaged homes and bring more skills to school with them. Moreover, when comparisons between public and private schools take into account the selectivity bias of private schools—who is admitted, who is expelled, and the quality of the student body—the differences virtually disappear. Research shows that the contextual effects of education, particularly as it relates to peer relations, are critical in determining the variation in a host of outcome measures. Most of these awkward facts have been ignored by the popular press and policymakers.

In short, comparisons between private schools and public schools are extremely problematic. Comparisons in terms of inter-sectional achievement scores are misleading because they fail to take into account selectivity bias—and the differences between scores are quite small in any case. Statistical comparisons between private and public schools regress toward the mean and, in doing so, draw a silhouette of public and private schools that fails to convey the complexity, subtlety, and richness of the educational alternatives in both sectors.

Private Schools and Upward Mobility

Many of the benefits of attending a private school have little to do with the schools' abilities to raise student achievement, but a great deal to do with the types of status the schools confer. Private school attendance is related to social power. After teaching in a public school, I taught for several years in a private school that was, in my estimation, no better academically than the public school. When I asked a father why he paid the tuition to send his child to the private school, he responded without hesitation, "Because of the other parents." Status is related not only to class, but also to religion, sports, ethnicity, and gender. The upper class, for instance, has not only an old boys' but an old girls' network.

A school's institutional power has been called, by sociologist John Meyer, its "charter." Schools are chartered to produce socially recognizable graduates who are identified by institutional gatekeepers as possessing special attributes. According to sociologist David Kamens, "schools symbolically redefine people and make them eligible for membership in societal categories to which specific sets of rights are assigned."

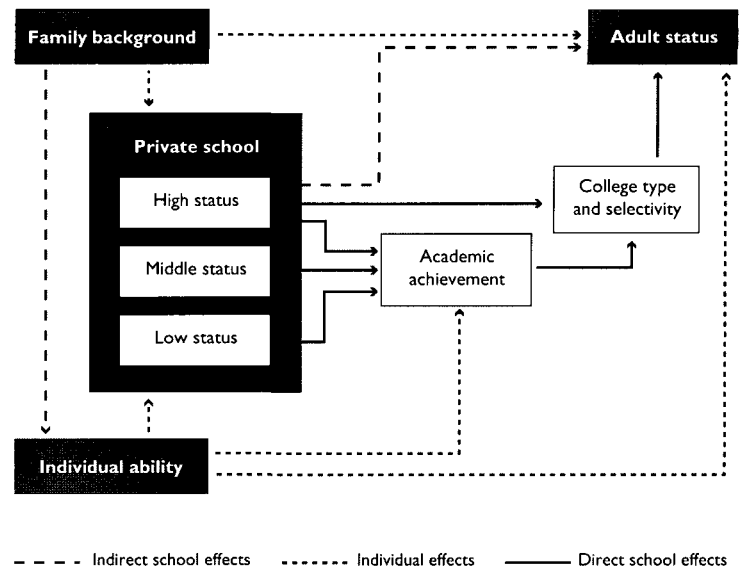
The diagram opposite is a schematic representation of the relationship between individual student characteristics (including family background), private schools, academic achievement, college type and selectivity, and adult status. Family background and individual ability are of course highly related to adult status. And all private schools, whether of low, middle, or high status (as determined by the institutional power of its charter), affect a student's adult status by affecting academic achievement and, through academic achievement, where he or she goes to college. But only high-status private schools directly affect where students go to college and indirectly affect adult status.

Private Schools and the Public Good

Private schools are educational laboratories. They are also expressions of religious freedom and intellectual dissent. In our rush to embrace market solutions to public policy problems we would do well to consider a hands-off policy concerning private schools. When Canadian private schools began accepting public dollars in the 1980s, they began to look a lot like public schools. Our major private school policy goal should be to protect private schools as they now exist.

Our goal should not be to increase enrollment in private schools through the use of vouchers to create more educational opportunities and pursue upward mobility. Such a policy will most likely *decrease* mobility because creating more middle- and low-status private schools will have no impact on

A MODEL OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PRIVATE EDUCATION AND UPWARD MOBILITY



mobility but will remove vital resources from public schools.

Recently researcher Charles Manski conducted a sophisticated computer simulation that modeled the market for schooling in various situations. Manski tried a wide range of government subsidies—up to \$4,000 (significantly above any existing subsidy)—of private school enrollment. But he was unable to find any type of voucher system that would equalize educational opportunity across income groups. Whatever the value of the voucher, young people living in wealthy communities receive higher quality schooling than those living in poorer communities. Moreover, high-income youth in a given community receive higher quality schooling on average than do low-income youth. In short, the public funding of private education will have virtually no impact on increasing upward mobility or creating greater educational opportunities for those who do not come from the financially favored classes.

Americans have been scared silly about their schools. Certainly urban education is a disaster, but more because of failed urban policy than of failed educational policy. But many public schools, especially in the suburbs, are far better today than they were 25 years ago. The overwhelming majority of American children do and will attend public schools; privatizing public schools based on an inaccurate picture of private education will undermine both.

Reinventing Welfare ... Again

GARY BURTLESS AND
KENT WEAVER

THE LATEST VERSION OF REFORM NEEDS A TUNE-UP

Welfare reform was the focus of fierce partisan debate in the last Congress. President Clinton promised to “end welfare as we know it” in his 1992 campaign, but failed to submit reform legislation in time for congressional Democrats to act on it before they lost their majority in the 1994 election. Last winter, Clinton vetoed the Republican Congress’s budget reconciliation bill and a stand-alone welfare reform bill. Both would have fundamentally restructured the safety net on GOP terms. Last August Congress passed a modified version of the Republican plan—the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act—and the president signed it over the objections of many Democrats in Congress and senior officials in his own administration.

While the new law may appear to settle the issue of welfare reform, at least temporarily, political pressures and implementation problems could soon put it back on the congressional table. Even as he signed

the welfare bill Clinton promised to try to soften some of its harshest provisions. Social conservatives, disappointed that most of their preferred remedies for illegitimacy were left out of the new law, may also press for change.

Welfare has been on the nation’s agenda for more than two decades. It is deeply unpopular. Most voters believe that the old Aid to Families with Dependent Children program discouraged work and encouraged illegitimacy and family breakup. It provided too little help to keep families from falling into poverty, but too few incentives to push able-bodied adults into self-sufficiency. The 1996 reform addresses some of AFDC’s worst problems, but it creates some big new problems for state and federal policymakers. And it imposes serious and unnecessary risks on the nation’s poorest children. To improve their prospects, welfare should be fixed—again.

The New Welfare Law

The new welfare law changes the nature, organization, and financing of a vital part of the U.S. safety net. Under AFDC, Washington offered states open-ended grants for cash welfare benefits for needy children

and their adult caretakers. States had to match the federal dollars to get the grants, but federal spending had no fixed limit. States were free to define need, establish benefits, and determine eligibility, leading to a great deal of interstate variation.

The new law replaces AFDC with a federal block grant called Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. Though small exceptions will be made for low-income states with fast-growing populations and states in recession, most states’ TANF grants will be determined by their federal AFDC grants during the past few years. The new law ends the individual entitlement to benefits. Under new state programs, poor children may no longer be automatically entitled to cash benefits. The new law gives states more program flexibility in many areas, but it also imposes new federal requirements. For example, each state must ensure that a rising percentage of its adult aid recipients engages in approved



Gary Burtless is a senior fellow in the Brookings Economic Studies program. Kent Weaver is a senior fellow in the Brookings Governmental Studies program.