



The Public School Advantage: Why Public Schools Outperform Private Schools

Christopher A. Lubienski, Sarah Theule Lubienski

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Nearly the whole of America's partisan politics centers on a single question: Can markets solve our social problems? And for years this question has played out ferociously in the debates about how we should educate our children. From the growth of vouchers and charter schools to the implementation of No Child Left Behind, policy makers have increasingly turned to market-based models to help improve our schools, believing that private institutions—because they are competitively driven—are better than public ones. With *The Public School Advantage*, Christopher A. and Sarah Theule Lubienski offer powerful evidence to undercut this belief, showing that public schools in fact outperform private ones.

For decades research showing that students at private schools perform better than students at public ones has been used to promote the benefits of the private sector in education, including vouchers and charter schools—but much of these data are now nearly half a century old. Drawing on two recent, large-scale, and nationally representative databases, the Lubienskis show that any benefit seen in private school performance now is more than explained by demographics. Private schools have higher scores not because they are better institutions but because their students largely come from more privileged backgrounds that offer greater educational support. After correcting for demographics, the Lubienskis go on to show that gains in student achievement at public schools are at least as great and often greater than those at private ones. Even more surprising, they show that the very mechanism that market-based reformers champion—autonomy—may be the crucial factor that prevents private schools from performing better. Alternatively, those practices that these reformers castigate, such as teacher certification and professional reforms of curriculum and instruction, turn out to have a significant effect on school improvement.

Despite our politics, we all agree on the fundamental fact: education deserves our utmost care. *The Public School Advantage* offers exactly that. By examining schools within the diversity of populations in which they actually operate, it provides not ideologies but facts. And the facts say it clearly: education is better off when provided *for* the public *by* the public.

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