PISA IN FOCUS 7

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Private schools: Who benefits?

- Students who attend private schools tend to perform significantly better in the PISA assessments than students who attend public schools; but students in public schools in a similar socio-economic context as private schools tend to do equally well.
- Countries with a larger share of private schools do not perform better in PISA.
- Parents seeking the best educational opportunities for their children are willing to pay more to secure the better resources offered by private schools – even though similar resources may be available in public schools that serve advantaged student populations.

At some point in their child's education, many parents have considered whether it would be worth the expense to enrol their child in a private school. For parents, private schools may offer a particular kind of instruction that is not available in public schools. If private schools also attract higher-performing students and better teachers than public schools, parents will also feel that they are securing the best possible education for their child.

Some school systems also promote private schools under the assumption that, with the flexibility that accompanies autonomy in designing curricula and allocating resources, private schools may be seen as stimulating innovation in the school system. And since that innovation helps private schools to compete for students, public schools may then have to re-think their own approaches to education to remain competitive.

Detractors of private schooling argue that private schools segregate students and reinforce inequities in educational opportunities, particularly when those schools charge parents a fee. With greater financial resources, detractors argue, these schools can afford to attract and recruit the best students and teachers.

The private school "advantage"…

In 16 OECD countries and 10 partner countries and economies, the typical private school student outperforms the typical public school student. This private school "advantage" shows itself in PISA reading scores that are 30 points higher – the equivalent of three-quarters of a year's worth of formal schooling – among private school students than among public school students in the OECD area.

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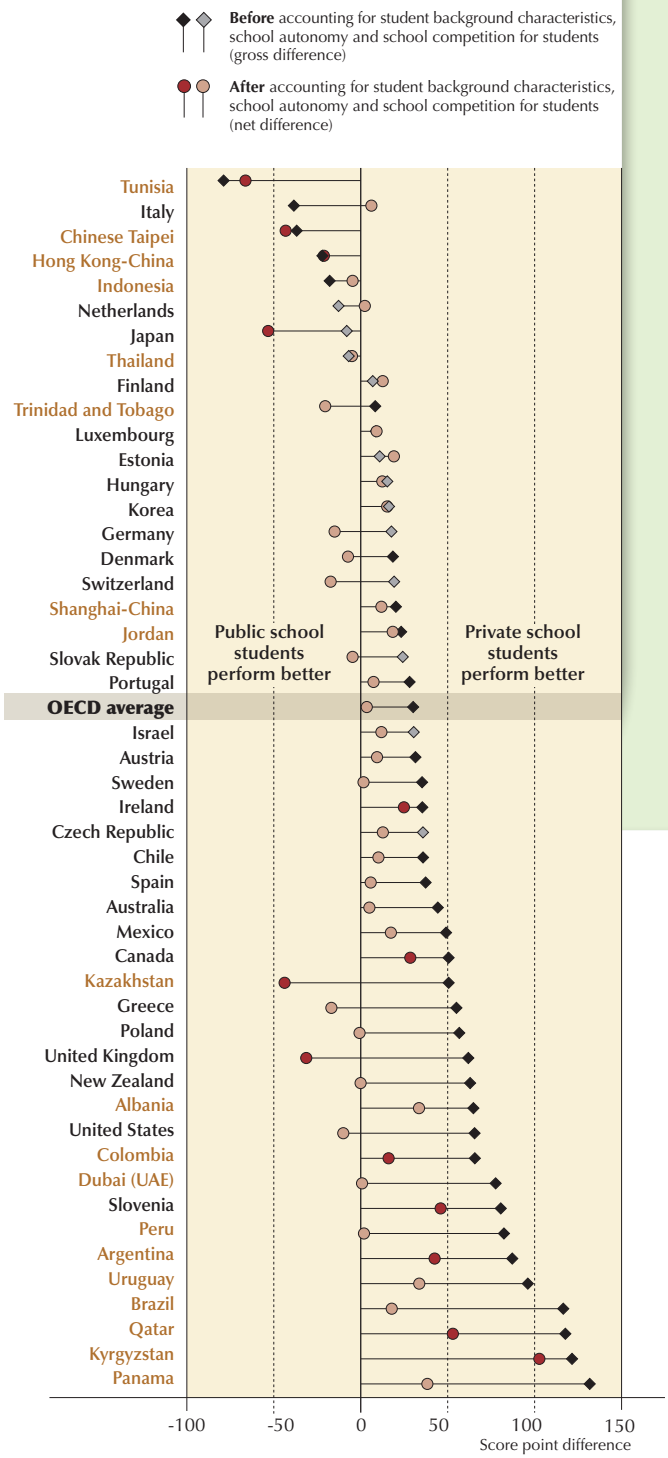
Difference in reading performance between private and public school students



Notes: Only countries and economies with sufficient data are considered.
Statistically significant differences are indicated with darker tones.
Countries are ranked in ascending order of the gross difference in performance between private and public school students.
Source: *PISA 2009 Results: What Makes a School Successful? Resources, Policies and Practices* (Volume IV), Tables IV.3.9 and IV.2.4c.

Around one-tenth of this private school advantage is the result of competition and the higher levels of autonomy in defining the curriculum and allocating resources that private schools enjoy. But more than three-quarters of that 30-point difference can be attributed to private schools' ability to attract socio-economically advantaged students. Schools that attract advantaged students are also more likely to attract better-performing students as well as greater resources. In fact, in most school systems, private schools have a more advantaged student population, more material resources, fewer teacher shortages and better disciplinary climates than the public schools in those systems.

...may be less than it seems.

In other words, after taking into account the socio-economic backgrounds of the students who attend these schools, and the related material and instructional advantages that accrue to the schools, the small performance difference between public and private school students that remains is associated with higher levels of autonomy over curricula and resources among private schools. In fact, PISA has found that when public schools are given similar levels of autonomy as private schools, and when public schools attract a similar student population as private schools, the private school advantage is no longer apparent in 13 of the 16 OECD countries that showed this advantage.

Public schools are managed by a public education authority or agency.

Private schools are managed by a non-government organisation, such as a church, a trade union or a private institution. Private schools can be either government-dependent or independent of the government. Government-dependent private schools are managed independently but receive more than 50% of their core funding from government agencies. Private schools that are independent of the government are similarly managed, but less than 50% of their core funding comes from government agencies.

PISA defines private schools as those that are managed locally, without regard to funding sources. Under this definition, private schools may or may not require parents to pay enrolment fees.

Difference in school characteristics between private and public schools in OECD countries

	Average PISA index of social, cultural and economic status *(positive signs indicate higher socio-economic status in private schools)*	Average index of disciplinary climate *(positive signs indicate better disciplinary climate in private schools)*	Average index of material resources for instruction *(positive signs indicate better resources in private schools)*	Average index of teacher shortage *(positive signs indicate more teacher shortages in private schools)*
Australia	+	+	+	–
Austria	+			–
Canada	+	+	+	
Chile	+	+	+	
Czech Republic	+			
Denmark	+			–
Estonia				
Finland				
Germany				
Greece	+	+		–
Hungary	+			
Ireland	+			
Israel		+		–
Italy	+	–	+	–
Japan	+	–	+	
Korea		+		+
Luxembourg			+	–
Mexico	+		+	–
Netherlands				
New Zealand	+	+	+	–
Poland	+			–
Portugal	+	+	+	
Slovak Republic		+		
Slovenia	+	+	+	+
Spain	+	+		
Sweden	+	+		
Switzerland	+			–
United Kingdom	+	+		–
United States	+	+		

Difference in school characteristics between private and public schools in partner countries and economies

	Average PISA index of social, cultural and economic status *(positive signs indicate higher socio-economic status in private schools)*	Average index of disciplinary climate *(positive signs indicate better disciplinary climate in private schools)*	Average index of material resources for instruction *(positive signs indicate better resources in private schools)*	Average index of teacher shortage *(positive signs indicate more teacher shortages in private schools)*
Albania	+		+	–
Argentina	+		+	–
Brazil	+	+	+	–
Colombia	+		+	–
Dubai (UAE)	+	+	+	–
Hong Kong-China				
Indonesia				+
Jordan	+			
Kazakhstan	+		+	–
Kyrgyzstan	+		+	+
Liechtenstein			–	+
Macao-China	+		+	–
Panama	+		+	–
Peru	+		+	–
Qatar	+	+	+	–
Shanghai-China				
Chinese Taipei		–		
Thailand	+		+	–
Trinidad and Tobago	+	–	+	–
Tunisia	+			
Uruguay	+	+	+	–

Note: Only countries and economies with sufficient data are considered.
Positive (negative) signs indicate a positive (negative) and statistically significant difference between private and public schools. No sign indicates that differences between public and private schools are not statistically significant.
Source: OECD, *PISA 2009 Database.*

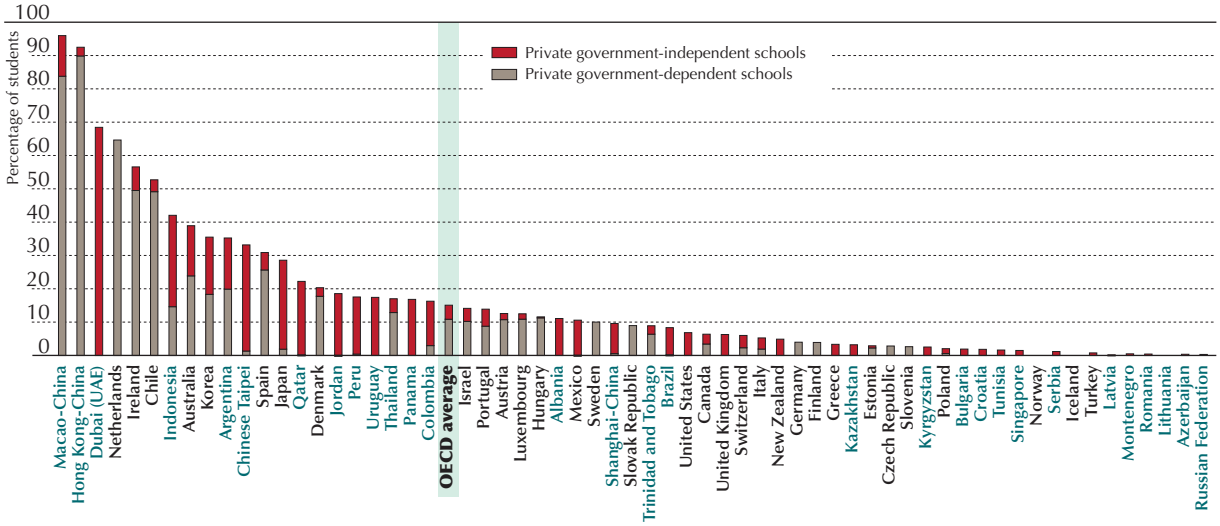
In many cases, it's the students who make the school.

When given a choice, parents choose what they think is the best-performing school for their children. School performance generally depends on the quality of instruction provided, the backgrounds of individual students and the composition of the school's student body. Throughout the OECD area, and especially among partner countries and economies, schools – whether public or private – that serve advantaged students tend to have access to more resources for education and to suffer less from teacher shortages. In addition, advantaged students tend to have more positive attitudes towards education, so the disciplinary climate in classes populated by these students is generally more conducive to learning.

So when parents choose a private school over a public school for their child, they are selecting the greater probability that their child will attend classes with peers of similar or higher socio-economic status, that the resources devoted to those classes, in the form of teachers and materials, will be of higher quality, and that those classes will be orderly and even inspiring.

PISA shows, however, that public schools with *comparable* student populations offer the same advantages, even if the *average* public school, with a more diverse student body, generally does not.

Percentage of students attending private schools



Countries are sorted by the total percentage of private schools.
Source: *PISA 2009 Results: What Makes a School Successful? Resources, Policies and Practices* (Volume IV), Table IV.3.9.

Since both public and private schools can compete for students and enjoy autonomy in matters of curricula and resources, and since the number of advantaged students – and their impact on the quality of educational opportunities in both public and private schools – is a constant in an education system, PISA finds no relationship between the percentage of private schools in a school system and system-level performance.

The bottom line: Private schools – and public schools with student populations from socio-economically advantaged backgrounds – benefit the individual students who attend them; but there is no evidence to suggest that private schools help to raise the level of performance of the school system, as a whole.

For more information

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See *PISA 2009 Results: What Makes a School Successful? Resources, Policies and Practices* (Volume IV)

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