

Private Schools vs. Public Schools: Comparing Student Performance on International Tests

Students who attend private schools tend to perform “significantly better “ on international achievement tests, but a [new report](#), commissioned by the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), paints a more complicated picture, after conducting a socio-economic analysis of the results. Given the OECD’s mandate, the detailed analysis focused as much on the perceived educational value of private schools as on reporting the actual student performance results.

In the [August 2011](#) study reported in *PISA in Focus*, private school students at 14-years-of-age were compared with the much larger public school cohort using results from the 2009 Program of International Standards and Assessment (PISA). Based upon straight results, private school students in 36 OECD countries, including Canada, scored 30 points higher in PISA reading scores, essentially equivalent to three-quarters of a year’s worth of formal schooling. The private school performance edge, according to the OECD researchers, was attributable to three key factors: the competitive school environment, greater teacher autonomy in deciding curriculum and allocating resources, and the ability to attract higher performing socially-advantaged students.

The OECD study bore deeper into the results for reading performance. Comparing socially-advantaged students from public schools with their private school counterparts, the OECD study claimed, effectively narrowed the advantage or removed it entirely in 13 of the 16 countries showing significant differences in raw results. Some three-quarters of the 30 point advantage disappeared when OECD compared the two socio-economically advantaged groups of students. The study of PISA reading results compared public and private schools, across the range of countries, in relation to four key criteria: higher (positive) socio-cultural-economic status; disciplinary climate; material resources for instruction; and shortage in supply of teachers.

The PISA in Focus report provided a valuable picture of the state of private education across the 36 OECD countries. The percentage of students attending private schools was reported, showing a great variation among the countries. Those with the highest percentages were Macao-China (95%), Hong Kong-China (92%) and Dubai-UAE (69%) and the lowest were the former Eastern Bloc countries. The United States (7%) and Canada (6%) were well below the OECD average of 15% private school enrolment. It also demonstrated that all private schools are not alike, making a clear distinction between private independent schools (like those in Dubai and Canada) and private government-dependent schools (such as most in Macao, Hong Kong, Ireland, and Chile).

The OECD study, like many applying SES factors, is inclined to explain away the sharp variations in actual results. The report’s contention that public schools with *comparable* student populations offer the same advantages is problematic because it’s difficult for parents to determine which public schools are better than others. While private schools and socially advantaged public schools do benefit the students attending them, the OECD study claims that private schools, perhaps because of their smaller numbers, do not “raise the level of the school system as a whole.” The broad conclusions will certainly be challenged by students, parents, and staff, basing their appraisal on more than SES benchmarked comparative test results, and likely more familiar with the true advantages of a private school education.