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Public High School Students Do As Well As Private School Students, Report Finds

No Difference Found Between the Academic Performance or College-Going Rates of Public and Private School Students

WASHINGTON—October 10, 2007—Contradicting decades of research, a new report finds that, once family background characteristics are taken into account, low-income students attending public urban high schools generally performed as well academically as students attending private high schools. The report, issued by the Washington, D.C.-based Center on Education Policy (CEP), also found that the students at public high schools are as likely to attend college as those attending private high schools.

According to the report, students attending independent private high schools, most types of parochial high schools, and public high schools of choice performed no better on achievement tests in math, reading, science, and history than students attending traditional public high schools. In addition, students attending any type of private high school were no more likely to attend college than those attending traditional public high schools.

The report also finds that young adults who had attended any type of private high school were no more likely to enjoy job satisfaction or to be engaged in civic activities at age 26 than those who had attended traditional public high schools.

The unique study is based on analyses of a nationally representative, longitudinal database of students and schools—the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988-2000, or NELS.

Unlike other studies that have attempted to determine whether a private school advantage exists, CEP's approach followed the progress of the same cohort of students over time, their achievement trends before entering high school, and aspects of family life that are critically important in shaping students' academic, civic, and economic lives such as socioeconomic status and parental involvement.

The report also looked at several long-term outcomes—not just achievement trends—and distinguished between the performance of students attending different types of public and private schools.

“Contrary to popular belief, we can find no evidence that private schools actually increase student performance,” said Jack Jennings, president and CEO of CEP. “Instead, it appears that private schools simply have higher percentages of students who would perform well in any environment based on their previous performance and background.”

This report does note two exceptions to its main findings. First, it finds that students who attended independent private high schools had higher SAT scores than public school students, gaining an advantage in efforts to enroll at elite colleges. Second, the report indicates that students attending some private Catholic schools run by holy orders (such as Jesuit schools) instead of a diocese did see some positive academic effects. However, there are very few of these schools nationwide, as most Catholic schools are operated by their diocese.

The report, *Are Private High Schools Better Academically Than Public High Schools?*, focuses primarily on the experience of low-income students in urban settings—those for whom policies of school choice are often aimed, on the grounds that they should have the same opportunities that wealthier students have.

“Parents assume that private schools will improve the academic preparation of their children,” said Harold Wenglinsky, author of the study. “But the higher performance at private schools is more likely a reflection of the collective resources and support that these parents bring to the school than to factors intrinsic to the school setting.”

The report is available online at CEP’s Web site: www.cep-dc.org.

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Based in Washington, D.C. and founded in January 1995, by Jack Jennings, the Center on Education Policy is a national, independent advocate for public education and for more effective public schools. The Center works to help Americans better understand the role of public education in a democracy and the need to improve the academic quality of public schools. The Center does not represent any special interests. Instead the Center helps citizens make sense of the conflicting opinions and perceptions about public education and create conditions that will lead to better public schools.