

Hidden Demand

Most parents would send their kids to independent schools if they could afford it.

By Terry M. Moe

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At the heart of the debate over school vouchers is a controversy over the numbers and types of parents who want to go private, what motivates them, and what a shift of parents from public to private would mean for the larger society.

The critics of school vouchers charge that going private has little to do with school quality. They say that the real motivations are largely social — and pernicious. Private schools have special appeal to people with money and education, they say, people who want their children separated from ordinary kids. And they have special appeal to the devoutly religious, who want schools of their own.

So far, these critics argue, the social downside has been limited because only 10% of children go private. But if choice were expanded, pernicious motivations would be unleashed, and the education system would become more inequitable, more segregated, and more penetrated by religion.

How does this seem to square with the facts? I have carried out research, based on a nationally representative survey of American parents, that provides some tentative answers.

Who Goes Private Under the Current Situation?

On average, private parents have higher incomes and more education than public parents, and they are more likely to be white. They also display the religious and partisan characteristics commonly associated with private schooling: they are more likely to be Catholic, born-again Christian, and Republican.

The existence of social biases, however, does not necessarily mean that the rest of the critics' indictment, about pernicious motivations, is supported by the evidence.

Do Public Parents Want to Go Private?

The results of my survey are striking. They show that most public parents, 52%, would be interested in going private if money were not a problem, compared with 43% who say they would stay in the public sector. This is consistent with a 1999 survey by Public Agenda, which asked public parents a similar question and found 57% to be interested in going private.

The desire to go private is even stronger among low-income inner-city parents. In this group, 67% said they would be interested in leaving the public system. This is an early indication that, as advocates claim, choice has special appeal to the disadvantaged — and is not a policy whose support is grounded in élitism.

Why Do Public Parents Want to Go Private?

While the expected reasons (such as inequity, ideology, prayer, moral values, parent influence, and school size) appear to play a part, performance is by far the most powerful influence on the desire to go private. When satisfaction with public school performance drops from high to low, the probability that a public parent is interested in going private increases by 37% — which dwarfs the effects of all other variables.

What Would be the Effect of Funding Private Schools?

Let's begin by recognizing that, in reality, only some of the 'swing' parents (the public parents interested in going private) would actually make the switch. There may be all sorts of reasons they would eventually stay put. Moreover, the private sector would have to expand tremendously to absorb them all, and it could not immediately do this. For the short run, demand would exceed supply, leaving many swing parents in the public sector.

In the analysis that follows, I assume that half of the swing parents switch from public to private, and the public sector retains about 75% of its families overall. How do the new systems compare to the original ones?

Even when just half of the swing parents go private, an expansion of choice dramatically transforms the private sector along almost every social dimension. Compared to existing private parents, the new recruits are substantially lower in income and education and more likely to come from disadvantaged districts.

When these recruits become part of the new private sector, the usual social biases associated with private schooling are vastly reduced. Indeed, minorities now make up 33% of the transformed private sector. There is one social bias, however, that is reduced only slightly: religion.

This same expansion of choice does not lead to major changes in the public sector. It remains pretty much as before, except that it is somewhat higher in income, contains proportionately fewer minorities, and retains more parents who are from better districts.

Overall, the public sector is not affected by the expansion of choice to nearly the extent the private sector is. The public sector is already large and heterogeneous, and it remains so even after many parents leave.

For the most part, the evidence from this study tends to support the claims of voucher advocates. Low-income parents would disproportionately take advantage of an expansion of choice in education — and their shift from public to private should tend to produce a very substantial measure of social moderation, rather than the worsening of social biases that critics say would occur.

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