A comparison of Catholic schools and public schools

Jeffory John Corkery

University of Northern Iowa

Copyright ©1987 Jeffory John Corkery

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp

Part of the Education Commons

Recommended Citation

https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp/2218

This Open Access Graduate Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Research Papers by an authorized administrator of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.
A comparison of Catholic schools and public schools

Abstract
Competency testing for teachers, voucher payments, and tuition tax credits are only some of the focal points which have fueled the fire of discussions about the advantages and disadvantages of private education (particularly Catholic) and public education. This paper will examine what is perceived by both the public and those in the educational field to be the advantages and disadvantages of Catholic schools, when compared to public schools.
A COMPARISON OF CATHOLIC SCHOOLS AND PUBLIC SCHOOLS

A Research Paper
Presented to
The Department of Educational Administration and counseling
University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

by
Jeffory John Corkery
May 1987
This Research Paper by: Jeffory John Corkery
Entitled: A Comparison of Catholic Schools and Public Schools

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

Date Approved: 4-15-87
Adviser/Director of Research Paper
James E. Albrecht

Date Approved: 4-16-87
Second Reader of Research Paper
Robert H. Decker

Date Received: 4-17-87
Head, Department of Educational Administration and Counseling
Norman McCumsey
Competency testing for teachers, voucher payments, and tuition tax credits are only some of the focal points which have fueled the fire of discussions about the advantages and disadvantages of private education (particularly Catholic) and public education. This paper will examine what is perceived by both the public and those in the educational field to be the advantages and disadvantages of Catholic schools, when compared to public schools.

According to T. H. Bell, "The strength of American education lies in its diversity and opportunity" (1984, p. 10), yet one of the persisting problems with that statement is the disagreement which exists about the successes and failures that private schools have had in comparison to public schools. While this discussion turns in part on values, it also depends on facts. First, how well do public and private schools work for children? Are private schools more easily managed than public schools, and if so, why (Coleman, 1981)?

The first part of this paper deals with the data from the High School and Beyond survey by James Coleman and associates, of over 58,000 sophomores and seniors from 1,015 public and private schools across the country. Based on the data from this report
Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore prepared a draft report titled Public and Private Schools which concluded that Catholic schools do a better job of educating children than do public schools. Criticisms of Coleman's report include the way he analyzed his data, the selectivity of Catholic school students, and the interpretation of this report by others in the field of education.

The second part of this paper then examines five specific areas in which Catholic schools are alleged to perform better than public schools.

The release of the first draft of Private and Public Schools presented startling interpretations and conclusions. Some of the findings which emerged from this report that support private schools are

1) Private schools produce better cognitive outcomes than public schools.

2) Private schools provide better character and personality development than do public schools.

3) Private schools provide a safer, more disciplined, and more ordered environment than do public schools.
4) Private schools are more successful in creating an interest in learning than are public schools.

5) Private schools encourage interest in higher education and lead more of their students to attend college than do public schools with comparable students (Coleman, Hoeffer, Kilgore, 1981, pp. 20-22).

Since Coleman's report and the majority of others that support private education reach the same general conclusions, this paper shall examine the reaction of other educators to these conclusions.

Coleman's report High School and Beyond (HSB), presented at the National Center for Education Statistics, has been criticized for its results, which critics say are based on testimonial evidence, subjective observations, and rationalization rather than upon empirical examination. Shanahan and Walberg (1985) summarize the impact of that criticism upon the first of the conclusions of the report: "Private schools, contrary to the Coleman, et al. (1981) report, do not appear to produce superior academic achievement" (p. 361).
One of the major criticisms of Coleman's report and others is the factor of self-selection. Public schools must educate all students who live in a particular area, while Catholic schools have the ability to pick and choose students. Studies have shown that at least part of the difference in the average achievement of children in public and private schools stems not from differences in school quality, but from differences in family backgrounds of children (Murnane, 1981).

Coleman's research indicates that Catholic and other private school students have higher academic achievement in the basic cognitive skills, and that should be the case. Because private schools have traditionally had more applicants than openings, applicants have been screened and the academic cream accepted. During the 1970's, tuition costs challenged the appeal of Catholic schools and the schools were faced with adopting more liberal admission policies. The result was the admittance of less able, but still significantly superior, students. On the other hand, public schools must educate all who have residential claim—regardless of academic achievement. "Thus, Catholic and other private schools should be expected
to surpass public schools in the area of purely academic achievement" (Rogers, 1983, p. 107).

Donald Erickson of the University of San Francisco disagrees that private schools produce superior achievement because he does not interpret the data as supporting this conclusion. Erickson insists that other factors should have tempered Coleman's conclusion (Williams & King, 1981). Although Coleman has factored out socio-economic backgrounds as a cause of academic differences, he does concede that "other unmeasured factors"—presumably including the motivation provided by parents who care enough to make financial sacrifices—may be at work.

A critical question to be answered is whether statistical techniques can be used to correct for the effects of self-selection. If students were randomly assigned to schools, the average characteristics of students in public and private schools would be the same.

When the HSB public/private data were reanalyzed with controls for both family background and ability, however, the difference between public and private high school seniors' achievement was minimal; the effect Coleman claimed to be an outcome of private
schooling appeared, in fact, to be a criterion for selection into private schools (Keith & Page, 1985).

Richard Murnane (1981) also offers a different view from Coleman's about the selection process. He believes the conventional methodology appears to be inappropriate for evaluating the relative effectiveness of public and private schools because selection mechanisms, the factors that influence which children attend which schools, and educational programs are not analytically distinct. Selection is integral to the educational process for several reasons:

First, one of the most effective ways to improve children's cognitive skills is to put them into an environment with other children who want to acquire cognitive skills and whose families support such learning.

Second, even a few unruly students can disrupt the sense of order and discipline that many studies have shown to be conducive to learning. Therefore, the right to dismiss disruptive students, even if exercised only rarely, is invaluable in creating order and facilitating learning.
Third, the use of selection mechanisms to create a student body that accepts discipline and values learning helps in attracting and retaining talented teachers (Murnane, 1981, p. 486).

When one looks past the problems of self-selection in comparing public schools to private schools, other apparent problems with the above-mentioned premises stand out.

The higher academic achievement in basic cognitive skills for Catholic secondary students tells educators nothing about whether Catholic high schools are superior to public schools in fostering academic attainment (Kirst, 1981). Most major differences in cognitive learning that separate private and public school samples appear to be due to fixed characteristics of students and to their outside school experiences (Shanahan & Walberg, 1985).

Jones and Krelis' studies (1984) have shown that the education of public school students is as good as, if not better than, the education of Catholic school students when measured by academic achievement and when the variables of college preparatory curriculum and verbal ability are controlled. In fact, public school children have the advantage of a more extensive
curricular offering, more opportunities for individual expression through extracurricular participation, and more exposure to more diverse backgrounds, which better prepare them for life. Kirst (1981) has found that the cognitive achievement differentials in favor of private schools may just be a matter of course selection based on the fact that private schools or students are selecting more classes that test cognitive achievements.

The difference in average scores between Catholic school and public school students seems to reflect the lower demands made by public schools (Hoffer, Greeley & Coleman, 1985). "In the one area in which Catholic schools do not make coursework demands greater than the average public school--i.e., science--there is no Catholic school effect" (Hoffer, et al., 1985, p. 96).

Comparing public and Catholic schools is difficult, and the difficulty of these comparisons may present an insurmountable problem. "Comparing them is not looking at two closely-related variants; rather, it is an attempt to span a chasm kindred to that of cultural difference" (Rogers, 1983, p. 107).

Nevertheless, according to Bell (1984), "The value-oriented education which Catholic schools provide has greatly furthered the ideal of all
To look at the advantages educators, sociologists, and researchers have shown to exist in Catholic schools is important and is the focus of this next section of the paper.

In five specific, and less controversial, other areas Catholic schools are alleged to do better than public schools:

1) Catholic schools involve parents better;

2) Catholic schools have increased expectations for the students who attend their schools (Nickerson, 1985);

3) Catholic schools maintain a positive school climate conducive to a focus on learning;

4) Catholic schools offer academic programs of high quality;

5) Catholic schools provide a rich and varied education in religion and values (Benson, Williams, & Yeager, 1984).

Each allegation is examined in order:

Parental Involvement

As previously noted, Murane (1981) believes important factors in increasing the cognitive skills of children are an environment with peers who want to learn and families which support cognitive learning.
Catholic parents, by making the decision to enroll their children in a Catholic school, have taken this first step. The sacrifices made by parents of children who attend private schools appear to lean toward more involvement by parents.

The choice between a public or a private education is one of the main elements of family and individual choice in the U.S. educational marketplace. Parents and students consider many factors in making this choice, such as tuition costs, the disciplinary climate, the racial mix, and the religious and moral values of the school; however, their first concern is the effectiveness of the school in producing academic achievement for their children (Willms, 1984, p. 113).

The National Catholic Educational Association (1985) found an average of 94 parents or family members per school contributed an average of 3,043 hours to each Catholic school in 1982-83. Eighty-four percent of Catholic high schools have parents' organizations. On the average, principals estimate that about one-third of parents are active in parents' organizations. "Private schools reflect what happens
when there exists the certain knowledge that a school's destiny is in its own hands: that its goals and the people driving it, its effectiveness with each of its students, and its reputation among its parents every school day in every year hold the key to its very existence" (Smith, 1985, p. 38). To insure the very existence of Catholic schools, involvement of its parents is a necessity; like most necessities, this involvement becomes a will of second nature.

One of Coleman's major contentions was that the ideal of "in loco parentis" has been lost to public schools for a variety of reasons, including the size of public schools and taking control of the schools from the local authority and transferring it into a larger bureaucracy. "An ideal of American public education has been the principle of 'in loco parentis.' Yet public schools have been less and less successful in acting 'in loco parentis'" (Coleman, 1981, p. 161). Coleman (1981) has observed that outside the public sector, the growth of church-operated schools has become the most prominent development, reflecting a desire by parents for a non-standard education and local control.

Increased Expectations
While various studies suggest that public schools can be improved by raising the level of teacher and student expectations, Catholic schools are in a better position to do this, since most prize and develop local community building and working together. Given this autonomy and caring, it is not surprising that many Catholic schools seem to embody more clearly some characteristics of "effective schools" (e.g. dedicated teachers, strong leadership, a clear sense of educational mission, orderly environment and high expectations for learning) identified in recent research (Bauch, 1983, p. 16).

Murnane (1981) supports the higher expectations allegation from the students' viewpoint. He feels aspirations for higher education are greater among students in Catholic schools than among comparable students in public schools. Coleman looks at the expectations from the school's viewpoint. The private schools make greater academic demands and maintain more stringent disciplinary standards. These demands result in higher aspirations, even when students from both private and public schools have comparable backgrounds (Coleman, 1981). Catholic schools can expect more from their students, based just on the homogeneity of their student bodies. While other
factors will come into play, private schools do have greater expectations for their students than public schools. "It is logical to assume that the 'Pygmalion' effect still applies; if schools expect and demand more from young people, they will attain it" (Nickerson, 1985, p. 104).

Positive School Environment

"School climate may be defined as those qualities of a school that affect the attitudes, behavior, and achievement of the people involved in its operation—students, staff, parents and members of the community" (National Association of Elementary School Principals [NAESP], 1984, p.18). Positive school climate has been described as a warm, friendly, and caring atmosphere. Staff and students care for, respect, and trust one another. There is a sense of togetherness.

A debate is still in progress as to the precise elements which create a positive school climate conducive to student growth and learning. Though the list of possibilities is quite long, some of the most frequently hypothesized ingredients are commonplace in Catholic high schools.

Evidence of each of the following key elements is found in most Catholic high schools: the principal
places high value on an atmosphere of community and academic excellence; an important factor in recruiting teachers is a commitment to the school's academic and religious mission; rules for student behavior are clear and enforced; teachers pay attention to individual student needs; the school staff communicates a sense of caring to individual students; and teachers actively support the religious mission of the school.

These elements provide a setting in which students feel a strong sense of order, purpose, and belonging. In this climate students thrive. This may be, in part, because the combination of structure and climate promotes student motivation. Students may also be motivated because discipline problems are scarce (Benson, Williams, & Yeager, 1984).

"Compared to the public schools, private and parochial schools can provide more homogeneity of values, specific religious training, common socio-economic status, and other kinds of similarity for their students" (Jones & Krelis, 1984, p. 12). For example, Coleman, et al. (1981) report that the relationship between social class and achievement is weaker in Catholic schools than in public schools. This finding is the primary basis for their conclusion
that "Catholic schools more closely approximate the common-school ideal" (Raudenbush & Byrk, 1986, p.2).

High Quality Academic Programs

Convey (1984) implies that the major studies which used the HSB data found that students in private schools, particularly those in Catholic schools, had better cognitive outcomes, higher levels of self-esteem, and more internal levels of personal control than did students from public schools.

An analysis of the HSB sample shows that truancy and troublemaking are reported less often by private school students than by public school students. Greeley (1981) reports similar findings in his analysis of the HSB sample. Private school students also appear to spend more time on homework than public school students and tend to complete assigned homework more often. In 1983 W. R. Morgan noted that these findings may explain why private and parochial schools are perceived as better schools despite the uncertainty surrounding differences in cognitive learning (Jensen, 1986).

Although A Nation at Risk points out that much of the day is wasted in many schools, it overlooks the fact that selectivity and homogeneity of the student body—the two chief ways independent schools differ
from public schools--allow for enormous efficiency in teaching and learning (Esty, 1983).

Coleman (1981) found evidence of higher academic achievement in basic cognitive skills (reading comprehension, vocabulary, and mathematics) in Catholic schools over public schools for students from comparable family backgrounds. The difference is roughly one grade level.

Recent research by Andrew Greeley shows that Catholic schools produce higher achievement in minorities than do public schools, even when background characteristics are controlled. "Although inadequacies existed in models used to incorporate controls for selection into Catholic schools based on student ability, there still remained a meaningful, albeit smaller, Catholic school effect" (Keith & Page, 1985, p. 345). Any positive effect, no matter how small, must still be looked at and applauded. For those religious and lay persons who have ministered in Catholic schools over the past years, Greeley's research is truly good news. For proponents of Catholic education, this research is heartening because it confirms what practitioners have felt all along--Catholic schools offer valuable educational opportunities (Bryk & Holland, 1983).
Catholic Schools: Their Impact on Low-Income Students, released in 1986 by Robert Yeager, tends to reaffirm Greeley's earlier research. There is irony, however, in this Catholic school success. The upwardly mobile students who benefit most are often non-Catholic. Catholic secondary schools appear to be providing the urban minorities, particularly Black students, the same opportunities offered the Catholic ethnics of previous generations. But as Bryk and Holland (1983) observed, the effects of Catholic schools on students whose parents are college-educated--typically the European ethnics of an earlier generation who themselves attended Catholic schools--are similar to public school results.

Religious Values and Character

A large percentage of the studies in the past decade indicate that church-related schools do a better job of educating youth than public schools. What did these studies find about students practicing their religion? Statistics show that over half of the people of the United States do not attend religious services on a given weekend. Also about 25% of those parents who send their children to a Catholic school and call themselves Catholic do not attend Mass on weekends.
Did these surveys find out whether Catholic school Catholics attend religious services more frequently than Catholics attending other schools? The answer is "yes." Sixty-four percent of the parochial school students attended religious services at least once a week, compared to 48% of the Catholic students attending other schools. In addition to this, these surveys found that the students attending Catholic schools gave a much higher rating to the importance of family, children, and friendships. Students in Catholic schools were less interested in having lots of money. For the most part, the findings of this analysis ought to be encouraging to Catholic educators. School goals extend beyond cognitive outcomes and the fostering of healthy personalities. "The Catholic schools in the HSB sample appear to be very successful in promoting most of these values and in fostering religious values and practices" (Convey, 1984, p. 49).

Conclusion
The debate about the advantages of private schools over public schools will never end. While a direct comparison cannot be made because of differences in student bodies, the results of public and Catholic systems should be decided on by results
from individual schools, not by the entire system. Perhaps the most insightful comment comes from Theodore Sizer, chairman of A Study of High Schools: "The American high school may be this century's most far-reaching and generous social invention. Unfortunately, and despite well-intentioned, sincere efforts, however, many schools are not uniformly productive and serve some of their students poorly" (Sizer, 1983, p.9). "In selecting a school, parents cannot assume that public schools are better than private schools or vice versa. Each school needs to be evaluated on an individual basis" (Willms, 1984, p. 133).
REFERENCE LIST


