

Study: Academic outcomes of public and private high school students: What lies behind the differences?

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Students at private high schools tend to outperform their public school counterparts, but this appears largely due to the more favourable socioeconomic backgrounds of private school students and their peers. A new study examining differences in the academic outcomes of public and private high school students found that no differences in outcomes were attributable to school resources and practices.

The study used a survey sample of 7,142 15-year-olds who were registered in Grade 10 in public and private high schools and subsequently followed them until age 23. It focused on standardized test scores in reading, mathematics, and science at age 15, as well as on educational qualifications obtained by age 23.

On average, students in the sample who attended private high schools scored 8% to 9% higher on standardized tests than students who attended public high schools. By age 23, those who had attended a private high school had also, generally, obtained higher educational qualifications than former public school students. For example, 35% of private school students had graduated from a university program by age 23, compared with 21% of public school students.

Students who attended private high schools were more likely to have socioeconomic characteristics positively associated with academic success. This includes having higher family incomes or university-educated parents. As well, public and private schools were concentrated in different provinces and thus, may have followed different curricula. In contrast, school resources and practices differed only slightly between public and private schools.

Two factors consistently accounted for a substantial portion of the differences in all academic outcomes examined—the socioeconomic characteristics of students and those of their peers. Combined, these factors accounted for about one-half of the difference in average standardized test scores and about two-thirds of the difference in university graduation rates.

The province of school attendance also accounted for a substantial portion of the differences in academic test scores and high school graduation rates. But this was less true with regards to postsecondary outcomes. School resources and practices played little to no role in the differences in all academic outcomes observed.

Definitions, data sources and methods: survey numbers [4435](#) and [5060](#).

The research study "Academic Outcomes of Public and Private High School Students: What Lies Behind the Differences," which is part of the *Analytical Studies Branch Research Paper Series* ([11F0019M](#)), is now available from the *Browse by key resource* module of our website under *Publications*.

A shorter article "Why Are Academic Prospects Brighter for Private High School Students?," part of *Economic Insights* ([11-626-X](#)), complements this research study and is also available from the *Browse by key resource* module of our website, under *Publications*.

Similar studies are available in the [Update on Social Analysis Research](#) module of our website.

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