

Silly, Debilitating Public-Private Comparisons

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“Are private schools better than public schools, is a silly question.”

NCPA CEO John Goodman, 1/9/13

“People who think this is a legitimate issue invariably are making errors in economics or committing errors of logic (Goodman),” or they are addressing the unfortunate political relevance of something that should not matter much to policymakers. It should not matter much because the critical public-private issue is why our current system creates such a low performing public-private mix; a menu of schooling options poorly suited to the diverse student population we have. It is silly, but debilitating because except for the rare elite private schools, we are making a dangerously misleading comparison. It means comparing the performance of politically-crippled [by the system] public schools and economically-crippled [by the system], under-motivated private schools. The results have already been seen by many as ‘why bother with school choice’, when the actual meaning is that the system is rotten; nearly all schools are greatly diminished by it.

We need to implement school system reform that will improve both. Because we have a very low-performing system, policymakers should not be giving a lot of attention to policies that would leave the public and private schools mix as is, but they are. We have a [‘Nation at Risk’](#) transformation imperative – a need to change the menu of schooling options – but the vast majority of ostensible reforms do not aim for a menu change, rather they aim to move the least fortunate to better existing menu items. The key ‘emperor has no clothes’ fallacy underlying policymaking to facilitate movement among current menu items rather than menu transformation is [that better schools are good; something that is sadly, largely false](#), and easily demonstrably so

in [unacceptably low rates of proficiency](#) in the vast majority of schools, school districts, states, and countries.

All that being said, we have another book making a big deal about their version of the differences in the public and private schools created by the very similar funding and governance policies of every state. And because the political process sees those differences as relevant to policies under consideration, the leading *Education Next* forum commissioned a detailed [rebuttal](#) of the books findings. The rebuttal was in the form of disagreement on data and statistical issues; no dispute of the underlying premise that the issue is important.

The public-private comparisons document the limited potential for improvement in student academic progress through policy change that leaves the key elements of the current system intact. The kind of policy entrepreneurship needed to escape this debilitating self-delusion may be forthcoming in the likely next Texas Governor and Texas Lieutenant Governor; Greg Abbott and Dan Patrick, respectively. Both have strong positions on breaking the public school, public finance monopoly, which is what is needed to productively transform the menu of schooling options, public and private.