

Comparative analysis of public and private secondary school education systems in the United States

Anni Lin

University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada

Annielam1225@gmail.com

Abstract. The American secondary education system is defined by a distinctive dual-track structure, where public and private high schools operate in parallel. These two systems demonstrate significant disparities in their governance and funding structures. These structural differences not only influence the experience and formation processes of the student but also have extensive implications for the achievement of educational equity and resource allocation. This research compares public and private high schools in the United States with three dimensions: analyzing teacher characteristics, student demographics, and curricula approaches, using National Centre for Education Statistics (NCES) data and academic research to explore key differences and their causes. These findings illustrate three key differences between educational systems. First, teacher certification and professional autonomy differ significantly, with public schools emphasizing formal standardized requirements and private schools offering more flexibility. Second, student demographics and academic outcomes differ, as public schools serve more diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, whereas private schools often have higher academic performance because of higher socioeconomic factors. Third, curriculum and assessment approaches diverge, as public schools focus on strict accountability and standardization, while private schools emphasize more operational autonomy and offer specialized curricula tailored to specific educational philosophies or student needs.

Keywords: private vs public high schools in United States, educational system, curricular approaches

1. Introduction

The U.S. secondary education system is characterized by a dual structure, comprising public and private high schools, each serving distinct student populations through unique governance models. Approximately 91% of U.S. students are enrolled in public schools [1]. In the past three years, most studies on the differences between public and private schools are often taken from a narrow perspective, focusing on individual aspects rather than multiple interconnected factors. These studies typically concentrate on specific areas such as teachers' difference development, student academic achievement, or school resource allocation, with limited consideration of how these elements interact with one another [2, 3]. However, this research provides a comparative analysis of public and private educational schools across three distinct dimensions. This comparison offers a more comprehensive aspect for understanding how public and private school systems differ from each other, thereby contributing a more detailed perspective to the existing body of knowledge.

This study aims to explore the differences between public and private high schools by analyzing three key dimensions: teacher characteristics, student demographics and experiences, and curricular approaches, based on existing literature and data analysis. In terms of teacher dimension, this study explores several variations across educational systems, including their teacher qualifications, compensation, classroom authority, and opportunities for professional growth. Regarding student's dimensions, the analysis discusses differences in socioeconomic backgrounds, levels of academic preparation, participation in extracurricular activities, and the pathways they pursue after post-graduation. The curriculum dimension should adopt strict evaluation through course options, instructional methods, assessment practices, and how much flexibility exists for innovation within each system. Although previous research has examined individuals' aspects of these two education systems, few studies offer a full comparison across these three essential areas.

By examining the complex interactions between teachers, students, and curriculum using qualitative interviewing and observations, this research provides a broader perspective on how learning can be made better and academic performance improved in different educational environments, such as urban, rural and multicultural settings.

2. Institutional differences

Public and private high schools in the United States are different in their structures, funding sources, and regulatory systems. These organizational distinctions affect the aspects of students' learning experience, learning environment, and numbers of opportunities for students in each system. In administration, public high schools are directly controlled by the government. Their policy and activities are managed by the local education boards, and student enrollment is usually determined by residential school districts. Private schools, on the other hand, typically rely on high tuition fees and donations to fund their operations; thus, they are more likely to attract students whose households are middle-income or high-income families. Their admissions policies are also flexible and not restricted by the school districts. As a result, students' socioeconomic backgrounds as well as racial diversity differ significantly in the school, unlike in the public school system. As it is in general, private high schools in the US are managed under an autonomous management system where there is greater flexibility in decision-making and curricula design. While this independence fosters innovation, it is accompanied by higher tuition costs; hence, privatization reduces the level of accessibility in terms of affordability for low-income households [4]. Unlike public schools that are required to follow strict state laws and accountability under federal law, public schools are free in operation, whereas private institutions have higher operational freedom and are often exempt from government-mandated assessments.

Funding is one of the key factors among public and private schools. Based on the data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics, public schools receive financial support from government sources: 8% from federal sources, 47% from state allocations, and 45% from local revenues [5, 6]. In contrast, private schools rely on tuition fees and private contributions. Although this funding model impacts affordability, it also allows for greater financial flexibility [7].

Regarding regulatory systems, private schools enjoy a great level of general autonomy, allowing them to establish their own admission standards and curriculum requirements. This flexibility allows for the integration of unique educational philosophies or the development of specialized programs to meet individual student needs. However, this independence often results in reduced external regulation.

3. Teacher characteristics

In terms of teacher characteristics, public and private schools show significant differences in hiring criteria and professional expectations. These include hiring requirements related to teachers' qualifications, salaries, work conditions, and classroom autonomy. These variations not only testified to teachers' career choices regarding their professions and development but also impacted students' learning experiences and quality. According to Imig et al., public school teachers are mostly required by states to acquire state certification, which is official permission to teach in public schools [8]. Goldring et al. also discovered that teachers in public schools are more likely to complete teachers' training courses and earn advanced education degrees [9]. By contrast, private schools follow more flexible hiring practices, often valuing deep knowledge of major subjects rather than normal teacher certification. In many private institutions, especially elite ones, subject expertise is often valued more than formal teaching credentials. For example, elite private schools may recruit educators who are holding advanced degrees in their specific academic disciplines even if they never completed a formal teacher certification program because they believe, in some cases, deeper knowledge of content may outweigh pedagogical training. Additionally, religious-affiliated private schools may expect teachers to align with particular faith-based principles and integrate those educational principles into their teaching. This requirement makes their recruitment process distinct from both public and non-religious private schools.

Teacher compensation and benefits also differ by school type. Public school teachers generally earn higher salaries and more comprehensive benefits packages than teachers in private schools. This disparity mirrors the two systems' different policies on hiring and finance structure [10]. Allegretto & Tojerow report that public school teachers typically offered standardized retirement plans, health insurance, and paid leave by their districts, which provided greater job security. Those benefits make a public school teacher more attractive to teachers who think about their work as a stable long-term career goal [11]. Interestingly, despite lower salaries, private school teachers often report higher job satisfaction. Smaller class sizes and fewer administrative demands make them feel happier. Furthermore, Ballou & Podgursky comment that while public school teachers face stricter accountability pressures through standardized testing and evaluations, private school teachers generally work in more flexible environments with more focus on innovative pedagogy [12].

Another major difference between public and private schools is the level of teaching autonomy they experience. James suggests that public school teachers are required to follow state-mandated curriculum standards and assessment requirements, which may limit their teaching strategies [13]. Teachers at private schools, on the other hand, typically enjoy having more creative control over their lesson plans and teaching methodologies. Private school teachers can engage in innovative methods and tailor curricula to meet students' unique needs because they are not constrained by state-mandated testing. They enjoy the same autonomy in professional development, with Ballou & Podgursky discovering that private schools frequently offer more specialized and personalized professional growth opportunities [12], which demonstrates that they are able to customize their growth programs to the needs of their teachers and students. In contrast, public schools tend to provide more standardized and structured professional development opportunities, which focus more on traditional training methods and requirements.

4. Student demographics and experiences

Student characteristics and academic outcomes differ significantly between public and private high schools in several key dimensions, including demographics, academic performance, and student development. These differences are primarily influenced by factors such as school admission policies, financial resources, and institutional priorities. Regarding student demographics, public high schools, which operate under government oversight, are required to accept all students residing within their designated school districts, leading to a more diverse student body in terms of race, socioeconomic background, and academic ability. They are required to serve all students in their attendance zones; that means they must accept all students within their district boundaries, including students with disabilities, English language learners, and those from lower-income households. However, private schools maintain selective admission policies. Those schools often require students to undergo some application processes, which include entrance exams, academic record reviews, interviews, and sometimes letters of recommendation [14]. Reardon & Owens also note that this selection process, combined with tuition costs and other associated fees, results in private schools mainly serving students from middle to higher socioeconomic backgrounds [14].

Academic performance metrics reveal key distinctions between the two systems, particularly regarding standardized test scores, access to advanced coursework, and college matriculation rates. According to Monto & Dahmen, they demonstrate that students in private schools tend to perform better on standardized tests like the SAT compared to public school peers [15]. Regarding access to advanced coursework, the Journal of School Choice found that private school students are more likely to take advanced courses, including Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB), than their public school counterparts [16]. Due to the increase in rigorous coursework, private school students have a competitive edge when applying to selective schools. College grade patterns differ between public and private high school graduates. According to Monto & Dahmen, public high school graduates have slightly higher college grade point averages than private high school graduates, this contradicting the assumption that private high schools better prepare students when they enroll in college [15]. However, these differences should be interpreted considering various factors such as student demographics and socioeconomic backgrounds. Private school students are more likely to attend elite universities due to their deeper college counseling services, smaller student-to-counselor ratios, and extensive alumni networks that facilitate admissions advantages.

Beyond academics, public and private schools offer different opportunities for student development, such as extracurricular activities, leadership experience, and civic engagement. Stearns & Glennie found that private schools generally offer more diverse extracurricular activities and international exchange opportunities. Larger schools and those with more affluent student bodies tend to offer a greater variety of activities, which can lead to higher participation rates among students [17]. However, Raskoff & Sundeen highlight that public schools often focus on engaging in local service projects, political activism, and volunteerism. This shows that public schools have higher rates of local community involvement [18]. This aligns with their broader mission of serving diverse communities and promoting social responsibility.

5. Curricular approaches

Public schools must comply with state education department guidelines and ensure that students receive instruction in standardized major subjects. Although it ensures a baseline level of education across different districts, it still limits their flexibility and ability to innovate in curriculum design. Both public and private systems offer similar core subjects, but private schools demonstrate greater flexibility in designing and implementing curricula. Moreover, private schools typically offer a wider range of diverse elective courses and specialized programs, particularly in foreign languages and arts education. This may be constrained in public schools due to budget limitations and governmental mandates.

Teaching innovation and instructional methodology present another difference between public and private schools. One of the main factors influencing this difference is the class sizes. On average, private schools maintain smaller class sizes, averaging 19 students per class compared to public schools with 25 students on average per class [19]. While this seems like a small numerical difference, it impacts teaching approaches and classroom strategies. Smaller class sizes in private institutions allow for more personalized learning strategies and project-based strategies, which tend to foster higher student engagement. Teaching methodologies differ extensively by two systems. Public school teachers often work within the confines of state-mandated academic standards and a unified curriculum requirement, which can restrict their instructional flexibility. Conversely, private school teachers enjoy greater freedom in curriculum development and lesson planning. This flexibility allows them to adapt to individual student needs and the school's unique education philosophies. This kind of autonomy not only enhances adaptability but also builds up the coherence between what is taught and what the institution stands for.

The evaluation methods used in public and private schools also differ as well. Public schools must adhere to state and federal laws regarding standardized testing, including the SAT, AP exams, and state-level subject tests. Unsurprisingly, this heavy emphasis on standardized scores often leads public schools to prioritize test preparation in both curriculum and classroom time. In contrast, private schools tend to use a wider range of evaluation methods. Rather than relying on standardized metrics, they more commonly utilize portfolio reviews, project-based evaluations, and qualitative feedback systems. These methods help private school students develop critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills, while public school students concentrate more on test performance.

6. Conclusion

Comparative research highlights notable distinctions between public and private high schools, particularly in three dimensions: teacher characteristics, student demographics, and curriculum approaches. Public schools are aligned with standardized education with stricter accountability policies, whereas private schools tend to operate with greater curriculum autonomy, maintain smaller class sizes, and promote diverse techniques of evaluation. The main causes of these variances include variations in legislative frameworks, governance structures, and funding sources. The outcome provides an opportunity for two systems to be cooperative. While private high schools might be able to gain from public high schools' expertise in technology planning and community involvement practices, public schools could, in turn, benefit from adopting the creative teaching methodologies and flexible assessment techniques found in private schools. A collaborative exchange between two systems has the potential to preserve the unique advantages while expanding educational opportunities for all students. The study's limitations are that it relies on aggregate data, which could lack comprehensive representations of given system diversity. Furthermore, the analysis concentrated on general trends and could potentially underrepresent the individual characteristics of certain school types, such as charter schools or religious high schools. In the future, further research should aim to explore specific schools in particular regions to provide a more detailed analysis.

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