

Policymakers should embrace greater school choice to include private and faith schools to address the achievement gap.

*For decades education policymakers have been concerned with the achievement gap between school students from low and high income backgrounds. **William Jeynes** argues that one way to tackle this problem would be to allow greater school choice, which would include private and faith schools. He writes that faith schools yield better educational results for students than traditional public schools or charter schools, and do so at much lower cost.*



Economists have known for centuries that a strong education system is conducive to economic efficiency. In recent decades, researchers have become increasingly concerned over the educational ‘achievement gap’ between those on low and high incomes. Could this persistent gap be – at least in part – due to an insistence on policymakers’ part limiting the number of educational options that are used? I argue that a policy of greater school choice that includes private schools may bring about a number of economic benefits in the US.

School choice has the potential of significantly enhancing economic efficiency for two reasons. First, school choice programs that include private schools will likely reduce the achievement gap. When the achievement gap is reduced and youth from homes of low socioeconomic status or are of color do well in school [their chances of occupational success are enhanced](#). Research using [meta-analyses and nationwide data sets](#) indicates that the achievement gap, both racially and by socioeconomic status is 25 percent narrower in faith-based schools than they are in public schools.



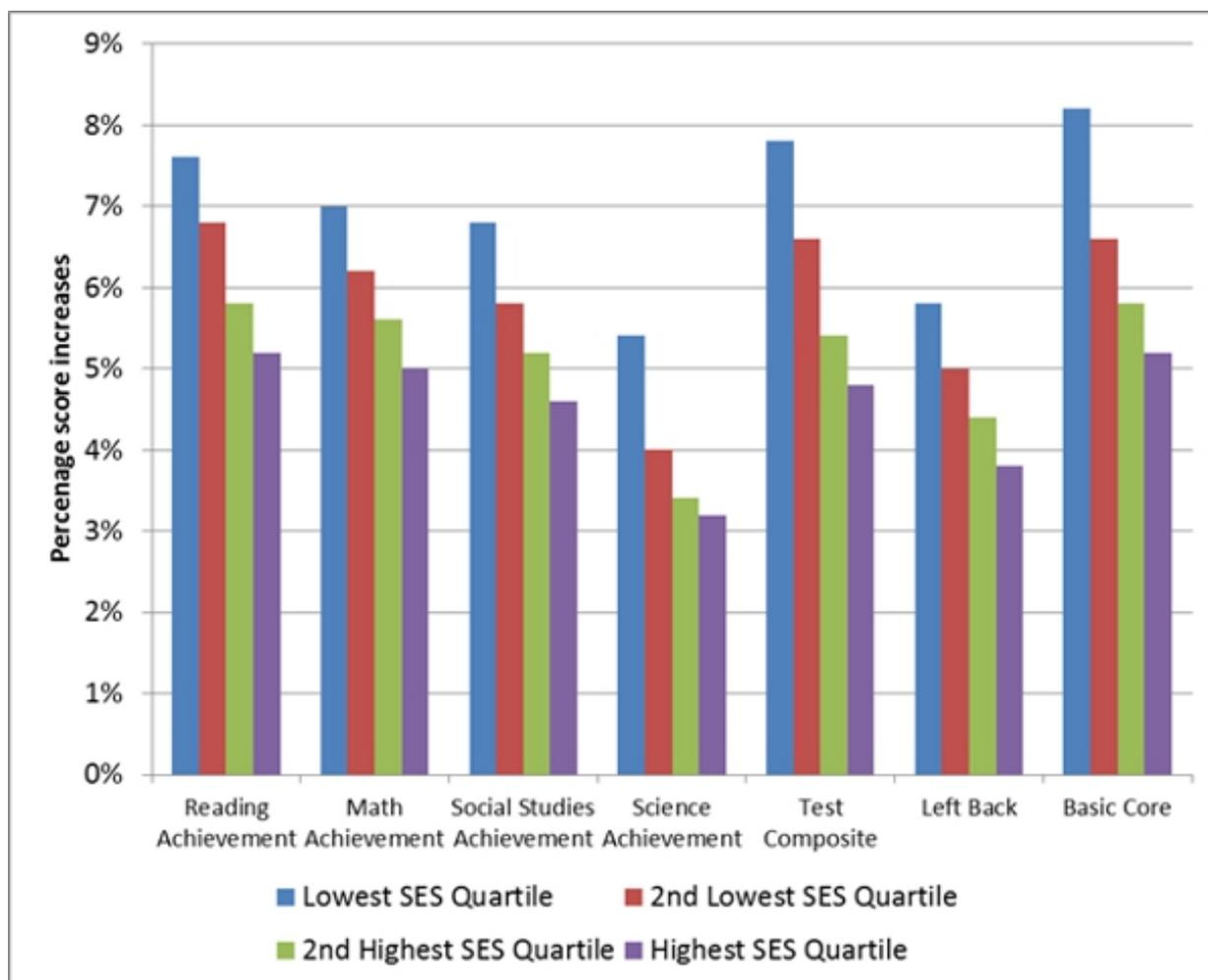
Loomis Chaffee School in Windsor, Connecticut. Credit: Russ Glasson (Creative Commons BY NC SA)

A second reason why a school choice program that includes private schools could increase economic efficiency is because private Christian schools are able to operate at roughly 60 percent of the cost per student that public schools do and a [huge percentage of state budgets are dedicated to public education](#). For example, nearly 50% of California’s state budget is dedicated to public K-12 and college education. Much of that spending is unnecessary. Public schools overpay administrators, purchase high-tech equipment that is rarely used, and offer profligate perks to their employees. Like all monopolies, the American public school system is [inefficient](#).

Recent meta-analyses and the quantitative analysis of nationwide data sets have been instrumental in understanding the potential benefits of a program of school choice that [includes faith-based private schools](#). A meta-analysis statistically combines all the relevant existing studies on a given subject to determine the

aggregated results of that research. The results of nationwide data sets and meta-analyses indicate that religious private schools [benefit](#): 1) African American and Latino students more than their white counterparts and 2) the lowest socioeconomic status (SES) quartile of students the most (see Figure 1), the second lowest quartile of these youth the second most, and the highest quartile of students the least. It therefore appears that one of the easiest means of narrowing the achievement gap will not require billions of dollars of additional government support, but rather simply facilitating schools of faith to do what they already do quite well.

Figure 1- Effects of private schools on the academic achievement of twelfth-grade children by SES Quartile



Source: NELS Dataset: N = 20,706

Second, faith-based schools yield better results for students than either traditional public schools or public charter schools. According to a meta-analysis of studies with sample sizes of over 1 million students, students from faith-based private schools averaged about 9 months ahead of their counterparts in both traditional public schools and charter schools. Most of the faith-based school advantage remains intact, even when one controls for socioeconomic status, school selectivity, race, and gender. The results have even greater salience, because Christian schools and other religious schools operate at a much lower cost per student than do public schools.

What this means for economic policy

The results of the meta-analyses and quantitative analyses raise an important question. After five decades of trying, with only very limited success, to reduce the achievement gap, could it be that this nation's failure to bridge the achievement could rest in its insular insistence on limiting the number of options utilized to bring about progress? Could it be that educators typically limit the range of options to something less than the full gamut because they consider options available only in the public sector? To the degree that this might be so, social scientists should at least examine the possibility that a school choice rubric that includes private schools could provide [at least some of the solutions](#).

It is ironic that during one of those times when the virtual monopoly that the U.S. government has in K-12 schooling and faith-based schools might help the most, the dominance of public school schools is increasing. The growth of the strength public sector, and in education the dominance of the public schools, has yielded two realities. First, public schools tend to limit solutions to educational challenges to the public sector with private religious schools being almost entirely ignored as potential partners in crafting solutions to problems such as the achievement gap. Second, the increasing relative power of the public schools through taxation is producing a financial chokehold on many religious private schools. Ironically, with this development American society may be truncating one of its best hopes to reducing the achievement gap.

As one would only expect, the private schools under the most acute pressure are **usually** religious schools operating in some of the poorest sections of the country, e.g., the inner city and in rural areas. According to White House estimates between 2000-2006 1,162 inner city faith-based schools were closed and nearly 425,000 students lost, mostly due to insufficient funding. By definition, these schools **were not founded with the goal of making a profit**. This is not only axiomatic, because churches and other faith-based organizations are non-profit, but because efforts to school in these areas are viewed as a divine and altruistic attempt to help those who are less fortunate.

Unfortunately, in spite of the harm these school closures are having on those students who need assistance the most, it is very rare to find a public school educator concerned about the health of religious schools. In fact, a plethora of teachers are **antagonistic toward** Christian schools, for example. Nevertheless, given the findings of such large compilations of data that include meta-analyses and nationwide data sets, it seems that it is time to jettison one's own biases regarding public vs. private education. Rather, it is time to embrace what is best for children.

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