

What If America Didn't Have Public Schools?

Imagining an entirely different educational system reveals some strengths—and flaws—of the current one.

[Julie Halpert](#) Mar 4, 2018

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On a crisp fall morning, parents lined the school's circular driveway in Audis, BMWs and Land Rovers, among other luxury SUVs, to drop their high-schoolers off at Detroit Country Day School. Dressed in uniforms—boys in button-down shirts, blazers with the school crest, khaki or navy dress pants, and ties; girls in largely the same garb, though without the ties and the option of wearing a skirt—the students entered a lobby adorned with green tiles from the nearby Pewabic Pottery, a legendary Detroit ceramic studio.

The school's facilities rival those of the most exclusive country clubs. Plush green carpet covers the floor of the pristine, naturally lit cafeteria, which serves students many organic, locally grown options provided by the food-service division of a nearby gourmet market. There's a studio for art mediums including photography and metalworking, and a separate one for painting and drawing; a fibers and textiles class with sewing machines and dress molds allows teens to give fashion design a try, while those interested in the performing

arts have access to a studio theater and a professionally designed performing-arts center. Thanks to an indoor field house large enough to host a football game, students can play team sports during the winter months.

These vibrant extracurricular settings are counterbalanced by an atmosphere of calm in the classrooms, where the average number of students is 15. The classrooms are teeming with serious learners: 100 percent of seniors are accepted to a four-year college annually, and over the past three years, its graduates have been admitted to more than 132 schools in 32 states and five countries. In 2018, Detroit Country Day boasted 20 national-merit semifinalists.

Parents, unsurprisingly, pay dearly for these academics and amenities: High-school tuition is a little over \$30,000, with about 20 percent of students receiving financial aid.

Detroit Country Day School's lower and junior schools are in a neighborhood known as Bloomfield Hills, which has a [24-percent](#) private-school enrollment rate—more than twice the [national average](#). Yet it's not as if private schooling is Bloomfield Hills families' only option for a quality education. With a tax base bolstered by one of Detroit's wealthiest suburbs, Bloomfield Hills High is the kind of public-school districts elsewhere would only dream of having: In addition to the rigorous International Baccalaureate Programme, its menu of academic and extracurricular options includes five languages, five choirs, three bands, a campus radio station, horseback-riding, and figure skating. Approximately [80 percent](#) of students there go on to attend college.

So why do Bloomfield Hills parents like Lina Desai, a pharmacist, and her physician husband Shailesh choose the pricey Detroit Country Day instead of the free public high school? The couple has sent their two children, a 17-year-old daughter and 14-year-old son, to private school since they were in sixth grade—and Desai says the money is well worth it. “More individualized attention was our first priority,” she said. Smaller class sizes and higher academic standards were also a big draw. The school is so small—691 students in the upper school—that Desai is acquainted with everyone in her daughter’s grade. She also pointed to the value of the school’s extracurriculars, like the myriad types and levels of team sports that even Desai’s daughter, who’s never thought of herself as an athlete, was able to try her hand at: field hockey, volleyball, and rock climbing.

The United States has witnessed heightened interest in the role of private schools in the broader K-12 education landscape since Donald Trump [tapped Betsy DeVos](#) as the country’s education secretary in 2016. DeVos is a vocal proponent of voucher programs, which allocate taxpayer money to families—namely those who couldn’t otherwise afford it—that want to enroll their children in private schools. Parents choose to send their kids to private schools for all kinds of reasons—religious affiliation, single-sex classrooms, specialized curricula, strong academics, and location, among others. For some parents, a small, specialized campus is the dream setting for their child; others are afraid of parochial schools teaching their kids as much about the Bible as it does math. Many other parents still, of course, are simply happy with—and often prefer—the default public option in their neighborhood.

A thought experiment might contribute some clarity and perspective

to the intensifying debate over whether parents have too much or too little choice when it comes to their kids' education. In this thought experiment, parents wouldn't have a choice at all—in one scenario, every child would have to attend private school, and in the other, every child would have to attend public school. Which scenario would be more likely to improve or worsen kids' educational outcomes—and, by extension, the health of American society? Few believe that an entirely public- or private-school world is ideal, let alone feasible. But imagining a world in which K-12 education is either all private or all public could help clarify the current discussion on education policy.

So, let's picture these two scenarios—first an all-private-school world and then an all-public-school one. For this thought experiment, let's assume the government would provide education vouchers for tuition up to a certain amount. Let's also assume that public charter schools (which are privately run) and homeschooling don't exist. Which would you choose, the first scenario or the second one? Which would be better for the nation?

Many of the country's oldest high schools are private, among them West Nottingham Academy in Colora, Maryland, founded in 1744, and Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, founded in 1778. It wasn't until the 1830s that the perception of education as a public good took hold, largely thanks to the education reformer and Whig politician Horace Mann. Mann championed the concept of bringing children of all different backgrounds together as a way of building community, and spearheaded the movement for the "common school." By the late 19th century, states were actively attempting to assimilate all students into a single education system.

While the single system thrived, Mann's good intentions didn't always result in the kind of diversity he envisioned. As Jack Schneider, an assistant professor of education at the College of the Holy Cross, explained, public schools often assumed that everyone was—or should be—Protestant, and included religious discussions in class. This led to an anti-immigration bias, as many immigrants were Catholics, who in turn created their own private parochial schools.

States interpreted the massive growth of such institutions as a spurning of public schools and an affront to national values; politicians found the trend so concerning they even tried to ban private schools outright. But in [*Pierce v. Society of Sisters*](#) in 1925, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down an Oregon statute requiring all children to attend public school. The Court ruled that families had the right to decide where to send their children to school and thus had the right to choose private education.

Such tensions have only intensified in the years since. As Andy Smarick, an education fellow at the conservative American Enterprise Institute, pointed out, the amount of authority parents should have when it comes to choosing a school for their child remains, nearly a century later, one of the most contentious subjects of debate in education.

While the *Pierce* decision solidified the right of private schools to exist, it did little to alter the status quo in which public-school attendance was the norm. The private-school enrollment rate has remained relatively stagnant at around 10 percent for decades. What has shifted are the kinds of institutions providing such education. Catholic schools, which once dominated the private landscape, now comprise

only 20 percent of private K-12 institutions, according to [U.S. Department of Education Data](#); nearly half of those institutions are affiliated with other religions. Nonsectarian schools, meanwhile, make up roughly a third of the private K-12 institutions.

Regardless, what all private schools do seem to have in common is a desirable campus culture. In a [survey](#) by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, parents ranked a “better learning environment” as one of the top motivations for choosing private schools.

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Twenty students sat riveted in Omar Hakim’s “Theory of Knowledge” literature class at Detroit Country Day as they studied motifs in Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. Hakim engaged the students in conversation, often peppering them with questions even if they hadn’t raised their hand. “David, what do you notice when you look at that picture?” he asked as he showed the students works of art to help them explore the concept of motifs. “Jessica, what do you notice? What do you think I’m trying to demonstrate?”

Hakim previously taught in a public high school where he had six class sections with some 30 students in each, making it difficult to focus on any individual teen. At Detroit Country Day, not only does he teach four sections with a maximum of 20 students in each, he was also able to create his own course, “Contemporary Multicultural Voices.” At an independent school, he said, “you have the opportunity to use your creativity to create something new without the barriers in place in public school.”

Elite private schools like Detroit Country Day are undoubtedly equipped with resources that enable them to deliver the kinds of premier learning experiences that simply aren't available in most public schools. Combined with those resources is, at all kinds of private schools, the freedom from a massive bureaucracy that might otherwise hinder experimentation and positive changes. Of course, not all private schools fall in the same category as Detroit Country Day. And that's an important caveat to consider when imagining an all-private world, where reliable information on school quality would likely be all but nonexistent.

Private schools by definition operate independently—they are not a common good. As a result, they're generally not subject to rules holding them accountable for a certain level of student performance. No rules mean no agreed-upon measures, which mean no standardized assessments whose results parents and policymakers can consult. In other words, in an all-private-school world, there wouldn't be an apples-to-apples way of judging the quality of individual institutions, which could have wildly different curricula and expectations.

Even if there were universal assessments, private schools likely wouldn't be obliged to provide parents with such data, including that on teacher-to-student ratios, college-acceptance rates, average GPAs, and attendance numbers; the only available information would be that which the school itself opts to provide. In this world, therefore, parents would largely be forced to make decisions based on word-of-mouth and inconsistent or selective information on student outcomes.

In reality, critical information about a particular public school is

generally accessible to anyone. This accountability reduces “the possibility that parents could be duped,” said the College of the Holy Cross’s Schneider. It’s a safeguard that wouldn’t exist in an all-private world—especially given the slick marketing campaigns some private schools employ. In that hypothetical universe, the information void could hurt student outcomes. Research by the education-policy scholars Christopher A. Lubienski and Sarah Theule Lubienski [showed](#) that allowing schools to operate with total autonomy and no standards could undermine kids’ academic performance. Why strive if no one is looking? By contrast, the researchers found that public education’s raft of requirements—including publicly reported test scores and universal learning benchmarks, as well as policies like teacher-certification rules—have a positive impact on school improvement.

But many education scholars argue that private schools are subject to *more* accountability than public ones because parents vote with their wallets. Indeed, Neal McCluskey, who directs the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom, said private schools are incentivized to do a good job: If they don’t, parents will simply stop paying for their children to attend that school. This market-based approach to ensuring school quality, he argued, is far more effective than the systems on which policymakers rely in reality, which include the federal Every Student Succeeds Act and a hodgepodge of state policies. Because people disagree on what the goals of education should be, McCluskey says, one central model—and thus one central accountability strategy—won’t work for every child.

Of course, a parent has to be able to afford those good private schools to get good student outcomes—and, absent reliable data, parents don’t always know what they’re getting for their money. As Schneider

argued, schools are not a consumable good like breakfast cereal. "You can't take one bite and know whether you like it," he said. The upshot, according to Schneider, is that in an all-private-school world, the wealthy would almost always fare better than the poor: They could pay for private schools so high in caliber that the schools would be eager to publicize their academic data. For everyone else, a lack of transparent, easily comparable metrics could mean gravely divergent results for students depending on their family income.

This logic helps explain why, in areas where private schools are common, inequality is even more pronounced. Linda Darling-Hammond, a Stanford University professor emeritus and the president of the Learning Policy Institute, pointed to Chile as evidence of the adverse effects that a highly privatized system might have on educational equity. In Chile, more than [50 percent](#) of students attend private, subsidized schools, an outcome of the free-market education system [established in](#) the 1980s by the dictator Augusto Pinochet. Today, the government provides school vouchers to allay the costs of tuition, but those subsidies aren't enough to cover the costs of the best and most elite private schools. As a result, the wealthy retain access to higher-quality schools, and the poor are stuck in the lower-quality ones whose tuition the vouchers can cover.

It's examples such as this that researchers cite when arguing that universal private schools would amplify the stratification that already dogs U.S. education. As Peter Levine, the associate dean for research at the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University, argued, private schools spend lots of money recruiting the students who they perceive to be well-behaved and academically advanced. Levine's prediction for an all-private-school world? "You'll have this

very intensely competitive market in which every child would be assessed," he said, "and if your child has behavioral issues, they won't get as good a deal in the market." Those less-desirable children would be forced to attend less-desirable schools where the average family income, parental education, and student reading levels, among other measures, would be much lower than they'd be at the more-sought-after schools. The best teachers wouldn't be drawn to these types of schools, and because *how* kids learn depends a lot on *whom* they learn with, this would in turn hinder the ability of these less-desirable institutions to achieve strong academic outcomes.

Ethan Hutt, an assistant professor in the College of Education at the University of Maryland, College Park, offered a similar take. He argued that private schools, even more than public ones, have an incentive to take students who are the least costly to educate—the kids who don't require interpreters, for example, or don't rely on other customized support services. (In the real world, a robust sector of privately operated schools exist to cater to special-needs children—but these are often extremely expensive and [may not guarantee students the same rights as public schools](#).) Even Barbara Gee, the co-director of the nonprofit Private Schools with Public Purpose, acknowledged that students who have, say, dyslexia are better served at public schools, which are legally required to provide special-education services.

An all-private-school world, then, would foster a system that thrives on selectivity. As Levine emphasized, private schools can't just scale up like companies can because small size is often a selling point in K-12 education; the best schools are those that don't accept large numbers of students.

A related concern is that segregation in this scenario would be more pronounced. Christopher Loss, an associate professor of education and history at Vanderbilt University, pointed to Nashville, where private-school enrollment is [significantly higher](#) than the national rate—largely, he said, the result of desegregation efforts that prompted white families to seek educational settings where their kids wouldn't be forced to learn alongside black children. While some of Nashville's private schools make an effort to achieve a racially diverse student body, they are not obliged to do so—and that's [evident](#) in the makeup of their classrooms, as with that in their counterparts across the country.

Data from the National Center for Education Statistics show that public schools across the country are much more diverse than private schools: In 2013, for example, [70 percent](#) of private-school students were white, [compared with](#) just 50 percent of their public-school counterparts. The segregation that an all-private system would likely perpetuate—largely because of the free-market forces detailed earlier—would have profound ramifications. [A growing body of research](#) shows that segregation can have an extremely negative impact on children's academic and social outcomes.

Private schools, of course, are not all homogenous or identical. With the ability to select who attends, many private schools create intentionally diverse student bodies. Tim Bearden, Detroit Country Day's chief academic officer and upper-school director, stressed that the school is committed to socioeconomic and ethnic diversity. Although the school doesn't track data on ethnicity or race, Bearden noted that 50 different languages are spoken by families at the school. Indeed, Desai, the Country Day parent, said its diversity is one of the

elements she most prizes: "There are kids from all walks of life who come here." The takeaway? If society values diversity, then the schools will value it, too.

Eliminating public education altogether and replacing it with tens of thousands of private schools dotting the American landscape would likely create all kinds of problems. As in Chile, an all-private system could just stratify society into something resembling the status quo, whereby the best and most elite schools would cost far more than the tuition vouchers provided. Access would still come down to the ability to pay given that, in the real world, tuition costs are a big reason private schools only draw about 10 percent. Parents dedicate a percentage of their income to taxes that they know are being invested in public education; it's often hard for families to justify paying additional money for private schools. For millions more, of course, the price tag renders that debate moot. And again, many opt to bypass these stark choices altogether by living in areas with strong public schools.

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Just 40 minutes away from Detroit Country Day School lies Ann Arbor, home to the University of Michigan and several neighborhoods that boast high-performing public schools. One unseasonably warm morning last October, as the leaves were changing color, I watched as parents pulled up in shiny SUVs at Pioneer High School to drop off their children, most of whom appeared white. Some teens conversed as they looked at their smartphones, sporting new-looking backpacks, shorts, and Birkenstocks; many carried band instruments and lunches.

At this school, roughly [53 percent](#) of students are white, while most of the remainder are black or Asian. After graduation, [66 percent](#) of Pioneer High's students will attend four-year colleges, compared with [approximately 45 percent](#) on average nationally. The school's above-average college-attainment rates [could be attributable](#) to its location in an academics-oriented college town that enjoys a population of parents with social and cultural capital.

If this scenario were scaled up—if there wasn't such a thing as private education to steer more-affluent families away from public schools—the United States might be able to boast stronger academic results than it can in the real world. Students in countries where private schools don't exist often fare better than their counterparts around the world. For example, [research shows](#) that in both Cuba and Finland, where all schools are run by the federal government, students outperformed by a large margin their peers in countries with similar cultural and geographic profiles.

On a regional [assessment](#) conducted by the United Nations between 2004 and 2008, students in the all-public Cuba [outperformed](#) the largely private Chile in sixth-grade reading and sixth-grade math. In fact, Cuba is the [only Latin American country](#) with scores significantly higher than the regional average in both math and reading. Even the best students in Chile, Darling-Hammond of the Learning Policy Institute says, "couldn't come close to touching" Cuba's results.

Then there's Finland, which Darling-Hammond [has called](#) the "poster child of school improvement." Considered by many measures [the best](#) education system in the world, Finland consistently scored at or near the very top of the [Programme for International Student Assessment](#)—

which measures 15-year-olds in reading, math, and science literacy every three years—since it began in 2000 (although Finland’s scores have been [on the decline](#) since 2012). The United States hovers closer to the [PISA average](#) than to the top echelon.

Whether or not the structure of these countries’ school systems fully explains academic success, experts tend to agree an all-public-school world would make the United States a higher-functioning, and more harmonious, place by exposing students to peers from different backgrounds. Lisa Lefstein Berusch, who lives on the outskirts of downtown Cleveland, decided to send her two white daughters to public school all 13 years. “I believe in public school as the future of our country,” Berusch said, noting that her children received “a wonderful education” including plenty of Advanced Placement classes.

The demographics of Cleveland’s public schools—in the Beruschs’ neighborhood school district, 66 percent of students were economically disadvantaged as of 2016—aren’t reflective of the city’s population, as few of its upper-income white families send their kids there. Berusch estimated that in her own neighborhood of Cleveland Heights, home to many affluent white people, fewer than half of the families on her block sent their children to public school. “It was really good,” she said, “for my children not to go to school only with others who were like them.”

Christina Suh lives in a Boston-area neighborhood known as Brookline, where the median home value is over [\\$840,000](#). Suh said her public high school provides as many—if not more—opportunities for her two children compared to the smaller-area private schools. Her kids can,

for example, participate in an annual Shakespeare play, a student-directed drama festival, acapella groups, and a wide array of courses. Like Berusch, Suh wants her children to be in an environment that mimics the real world. While acknowledging the advantages of private education, where counselors are often assigned far fewer students to manage and mentor, she suggested that an all-public-school world might create an impetus for constantly experimenting with and improving the experience of public education.

Tufts's Levine echoed this point. If all schools were public, he said, everyone—including wealthier families—would be responsible for every school, so more people would step up to address any problems in those institutions than they do in the real world. School boards and after-school enrichment programs, for example, would have more volunteers; campus-improvement efforts and textbook upgrades would get more funding. "Trying to force everybody to be part of the same education system," Levine said, "is a way to make everyone feel responsible for its success."

[Emma Verdet](#)

But this concept could be more of an ideal than it would be a realistic result. Pioneer High suffers from a wide racial-achievement gap. According to recent [research](#) by Sean F. Reardon, a professor of education policy at Stanford University, these gaps are often especially large in college towns like Ann Arbor, where many public-school parents are middle-class university employees who are well-versed in what it takes to boost a child's chance at success.

And even in the most rigorous public schools, money can easily

distinguish educational outcomes: Well-resourced kids who have access to private tutoring or college-prep services, who can study instead of work part-time, who get to take private dance or language lessons to enhance their worldview unsurprisingly tend to fare better than do kids who are less fortunate.

In turn, it's unlikely that a universal public-school system would eliminate the segregation that plagues education today, particularly if property taxes continued to fund the bulk of education. Segregation exists even in ostensibly integrated schools, where whites are disproportionately enrolled in AP and honors classes. Assuming the schools in an all-public world were funded as they are now—with a mix of federal, state, and local sources—the quality of education children receive would largely be based on where they live.

Wealthier families tend to buy homes in more expensive areas where the steep taxes result in greater school funding—and are often correlated with higher-quality schools. A study by the Brookings Institution of the country's 100 largest metro areas [found](#) that housing costs tend to correspond with schools' test scores: On average, home prices near high-performing schools were \$205,000 more expensive than they were in areas with low-performing ones. This suggests that in an all-public-school world, those with means would likely buy real estate in well-resourced districts—removing their resources from more needy school communities and diluting from those poorer areas the pool of high achievers who experts say can benefit lower-performing students.

Wealthy people might even try to secede from poorly resourced areas and create their own districts. That's what [71 U.S. communities](#) in the

real world have sought to do since 2000, ostensibly in part so their children could be educated with children from similar racial and socioeconomic backgrounds.

The victims of this phenomenon are often systems like Lincoln Consolidated Schools in Ypsilanti, Michigan, a lower-income area 20 minutes from Ann Arbor. Only [28 percent](#) of the students at Lincoln Senior High School, roughly a [third](#) of whom are African American and approximately [59 percent](#) of whom are white, will attend a four-year college after graduation, according to state data.

And that's not necessarily because Lincoln is an inherently low-quality school. Rather, it's likely because it has a reputation for underperformance, which in turn becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. This is a common phenomenon. As Schneider, the College of the Holy Cross professor, [wrote](#) in a piece for *The Atlantic* last year about stigmas against urban schools, this happens when "privileged families presume city schools to be failing and, in taking flight from them, bring about a real decline."

Jennifer Towler Aris witnessed this kind of self-fulfilling prophecy when reflecting on her family's schooling experience. When a breakup forced her and her children to leave Ypsilanti, she decided to move to Saline, a city near Ann Arbor with a reputation for good schools: [72 percent](#) of students at Saline High, where the vast majority of kids are white, attend a four-year college after graduation.

Attending a school that colleges looked more favorably on was a plus, Aris said, but she didn't feel that Saline offered anything that their Lincoln educations didn't. In fact, her daughter told her she was

learning things in her Saline classes that she had already learned the year before at Lincoln. "What they got by moving to Saline was a perception of a better education, but I am not sure that it was any better," Aris said. In Ypsilanti, that perception became the reality, with school segregation putting its already-disadvantaged youth at a further disadvantage.

An all-public world could also put unconventional learners at a dramatic disadvantage. Parents say specialty schools are crucial for responding to the needs of students not well served by traditional public schools—from those with learning disabilities to those who are extremely talented. Peter Margules decided to send his son, now 8, to Steppingstone School in Farmington Hills, Michigan, a school for academically exceptional students, after the child was discovered to have an IQ score that was two standard deviations above gifted. The public-school teachers "were throwing their hands up in the air," Margules said. "They didn't have the resources to tailor anything for him."

In a similar vein, Andrea Allan, who lives in New York City, pulled her 13-year-old son out of public school after third grade. She had him tested and found out he had mild dyslexia and some language-based neurological differences that affect his learning style. "The public school was pulling him out of class [to provide special instruction], which was disrupting his in-class learning," she said. So, she enrolled him in the Stephen Gaynor School, geared toward bright students with language-based learning differences. The school has a very low student-to-teacher ratio and a customized learning plan for each child. After spending fourth and fifth grade there, Allan's son is now back in a public school and thriving. "He received the tools he needed to

succeed," she said.

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Today, *school choice* has become a polarizing term, pitting those who favor market-based approaches to education against those who say such approaches undermine public schools and the children they serve. But imagining a world with only private schools or with only public ones reveals just how easy it is to overlook a simple truth: These are not mutually exclusive aims. Just as liberty in America means citizens have the freedom to choose for themselves, that power comes with a responsibility to the public good. Opting into the private-school system does not mean forsaking the public system—at least, it shouldn't. And embracing the public schools does not mean there aren't powerful reasons for families to go private.

A school is more than just a school. Ultimately, it is a foundation for the future and a reflection of societal values. "Diverse approaches to education encourage people to think differently when they reach adulthood, leading to developments in business, industry, and the arts," said Donna Orem, the president of the National Association of Independent Schools. "Would America be as creative if all the schools in the country were the same?"