

The Status of Private Schools in Utah

Research Report #651, May 2002

Lesson Summary

Utah has one of the smallest private school populations in the nation. Private school students do better on achievement tests, but it is not clear if instruction is better or if the students are simply a more select group. Low private school enrollment in Utah is reflective of a variety of social factors in Utah and the West.

Related Websites

- National Center for Education Statistics: www.nces.ed.gov
- Utah State Office of Education: www.usoe.k12.ut.us
- National Catholic Education Association: www.ncea.org

Utah Core Curriculum

- **Standard:** 6200
Objective: 6200-0602
Explore how the unequal distribution of resources affects economic development.
- **Standard:** 6210
Objective: 6210-0302
Explore current issues affecting local governments, i.e. spending, state vs. local control.
Objective: 6210-0502
Examine how the private and public sectors contribute to an economic system.

This lesson plan is provided by Utah Foundation to assist in using the accompanying Research Report in high school or middle school classes. Please feel free to copy the Research Report for your students.

Find overhead masters for this lesson on our website at: www.utahfoundation.org/schools.

Vocabulary

Advent: The coming or arrival.

Auxiliaries: Individuals or groups that assist or function in a supporting role.

Conducive: Tending to cause or bring about; contributing to; helpful.

Correlated: Influenced by or related to.

Emigration: Leaving one region to settle in another.

Exacerbate: Aggravate, make worse.

Homogenous: Having similar characteristics or traits.

Impediment: Something that gets in the way; a hindrance or obstruction.

Impetus: An event or force that causes something to happen.

Qualitative: Related to quality; information that cannot be easily expressed numerically.

Quick Questions

1. How did Utah public schools rank on the TIMSS-R exams compared to private schools? Compared to the national average?

Answers: Math: UT Public: 29th, UT Private: 15th, US: 26th.

Science: UT public: 25th, UT Private-6th, US: 23rd.

2. What is “skimming?”

Answer: “the notion that private schools take the best and brightest out of the student population.

3. List the three types of private schools.

Answer: Catholic, other religious, and non-sectarian.

4. Why are comparisons between public and private schools difficult?

Answer: Because they don’t operate under the same rules. (And/or) there is no central data-gathering agency for private schools.

5. Has public school performance on NAEP exams changed compared to private school performance?

Answer: Not significantly.

6. How do Utah students’ scores on AP tests compare to public and private school students’ scores nationally?

Answer: Utah private and private school students do worse than the national private school average, but better than the national public school average.

7. What percentage of Utah’s students attend private school? How does this compare to the nation?

Answer: 2.8% (Utah) and 10% (Nationally)

8. Private school enrollment as a percentage of total school enrollment is predicted to decline over the next ten years? What are possible reasons for that decline?

Answer: Increased enrollment in charter schools and home schooling is expected to offset growth in private school enrollment.

9. Why is the debate on public school alternatives currently important nationally? In Utah?

Answer: Nationally interest has grown in voucher programs. In Utah a tuition tax credit for private schools has been introduced.

10. What are some reasons that evaluating private school and public school performance with AP tests could be misleading?

Answer: Because not all students take AP exams.

11. Why isn’t a state’s high median household income correlated to private school attendance?

Answer: Social and historical factors change people’s attitudes toward private education regardless of income.

12. How did *Zorach v. Clauson* affect the number of private schools in Utah?

Answer: It allowed for religious education in secondary schools provided that it occurred during “release time,” this decreased the need for LDS schools in Utah.

13. Do you attend school in an area with many private schools? How does that affect your school's performance? Demographics?

Answer: (Will vary). Public school performance can be adversely affected by a large number of private schools. A school's demographic make-up may be more diverse if a large number of private schools are attracting a more homogenous population.

Critical Thinking Activities

1. Have the students brainstorm in groups if competition between private schools and public schools would improve school performance and if so, how? If they believe it would improve the school, have them explain in what specific ways competition from a private school in your community would improve your school. If they do not believe it would improve your school, have them explain why not.
2. Analyses of Utah's test scores have shown that schools in rural areas often struggle on these exams. Arguments for increasing the use of private education, such as providing a tax credit for parents who send their children to private schools, include that this increase would spur competition with public schools, increase the number of private schools, decrease the overpopulation in public schools, and give all pupils a better education. However, almost all of the private schools in Utah are located in urban and suburban areas.

Have the students work in small groups to consider what kinds of costs someone would undertake to start a new private school in a rural area. How would they obtain funding to build the school? How would they decide what price to charge for tuition? How would they market the school to prospective students and parents? How would they find teachers and other employees to work in the school? What kinds of staff would they need? How could they ensure a quality educational program for the school?

Have the students discuss other strategies that will benefit rural students through the existing public school system or some other means.

3. Create a 2-column chart showing the advantages and disadvantages of both private and public schools. Based on your analysis, what recommendations would you make to lawmakers regarding tax credits for private school? What recommendations would you make to public school officials wanting to improve the academic qualities of their schools?
4. If expense were not an important factor in determining what type of school you attended, which would you rather attend, a public or private school? Why?

Quiz Page

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