

Study: Privatized Philly schools did not keep pace

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Public middle-grades schools placed under private management in 2002 as part of a state-run overhaul of the Philadelphia School District did not keep pace with the rest of the city's public schools, according to a study published in the *American Journal of Education*.

The study, which tracked schools through 2006, found that test scores had improved in the privatized schools, but scores in the rest of the city's public schools improved at a much faster rate, leaving the privatized schools in the dust.

"By 2006, the achievement gap between the privatized group and the rest of the district was greater than it was before the intervention," says study author Vaughan Byrnes, a researcher at Johns Hopkins University. "Both groups improved, but the privatized schools improved at a slower rate."

Philadelphia became a national proving ground for public school privatization in 2002 when Pennsylvania state government officials took over the city's schools. As part of the restructuring effort, 45 of the worst performing schools were turned over to Edison Schools Inc. and several other private education management organizations. The rest of the city's schools remained under the control of the Philadelphia School District, which instituted its own reform efforts.

Byrnes' study analyzed reading and math scores from the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment test from 1997 to 2006 at 88 middle-grades schools. Most of the schools had either grades 6-8 or a K-8

configuration. The data allowed Byrnes to look at trend lines before and after the state intervention in both privatized and non-privatized schools.

"The schools placed under private management were significantly worse off than the rest of the district in 1997," Byrnes says. "But our data show that they were gaining on the rest of the district from 1997 to 2002—before the takeover." After the takeover, improvement at the privatized schools accelerated, but the rest of the district accelerated faster. As a result, the privatized schools were further behind the rest of the district by 2006 than they were before the takeover.

Byrnes says his results are consistent with previous research on Philadelphia school reform efforts.

Supporters of privatization have responded to previous critical findings by arguing that improvement in the privatized schools is stunted because these schools were the worst in the district. But this study casts serious doubt on that argument, because according to Byrnes' data, the privatized schools were not the district's worst.

"Five of the absolute worst schools in the district were restructured but remained under public control," Byrnes said. "Those schools did much better after 2002, outpacing the privatized schools, and perhaps even the rest of the district. That rules out the argument that the privatized schools improved more slowly because they were worse to start with."

Byrnes says that his study was not able to address potential differences in funding between the district and privatized schools.

"[T]here is no way to know whether the total per pupil funding was more or less in the district schools or the EMO (privatized) schools," Byrnes writes. "Therefore, the financial context of the school privatization is an issue that we were unable to examine here."

Source: University of Chicago ([news](#) : [web](#))

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