

What Works Clearinghouse



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WWC Quick Review of the Article “Getting a Feel for the Market: The Use of Privatized School Management in Philadelphia”[†]

What is this study about?

The study examined whether shifting public schools to private management improved the academic achievement of eighth graders.

The study analyzed data on eighth graders in 88 schools in the Philadelphia City School District from 1996–97 to 2005–06.

Academic achievement in reading and mathematics was measured using the schools’ mean eighth-grade scale scores on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment exam.

The study measured the effect of changing to private management by comparing annual test score gains for schools before and after being shifted to private management to the gains over the same period for schools that remained under district control.

What Types of Schools Were Contrasted?

In 2002, the Philadelphia City School District shifted management of its lowest-achieving schools to a set of private organizations, including both for-profit and nonprofit institutions. Twenty-two of these schools included eighth graders.

The district’s other schools remained under district control but underwent significant curriculum and staffing reforms. Sixty-six of these schools included eighth graders.

The authors compared trends in eighth-grade achievement tests from the 22 privately-managed schools to those from the 66 schools that remained under district management.

WWC Rating

The research described in this article is not consistent with WWC evidence standards

Cautions: The groups compared in the study were not similar at baseline. The schools that were shifted to private management had higher proportions of low-income and minority students than the schools that remained under district control. In addition, the privately-managed schools had much lower mean baseline test scores than schools that remained under district control. Although the authors use statistical techniques to adjust for some of these differences, there could be other differences between the groups of schools they compare that could influence trends in test scores and that are not controlled for in the analysis. For these reasons, differences in achievement gains between the two groups cannot be attributed with confidence to the effect of private management.

What did the study authors report?

Four years after the management change, the study found that test score gains in both reading and math were lower for the privately-managed schools than for the schools that remained under district control.

However, the WWC does not consider these results to be conclusive because there is evidence that the groups were not initially equivalent. The reported differences might reflect differences in the student populations of the schools rather than the effect of private management.

[†]Byrnes, V. (2009). Getting a feel for the market: The use of privatized school management in Philadelphia. *American Journal of Education*, 115, 437–455.