



The effects of school choice on achievement gaps between private and public high schools: Evidence from the Seoul high school choice program



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ABSTRACT

In 2010, Seoul launched a universal school choice program for academic high schools. The implementation of school choice introduced autonomy, competition, and sorting, which barely existed when public and private schools were under the strong control of the government. Using school-level panel data, we investigate how this newly introduced school choice affected the achievement gaps between private and public high schools. We find evidence that competition has minimal impacts on the achievement of private and public high schools. However, we find that student sorting significantly increases the achievements of private high schools widening existing gaps with public high schools.

1. Introduction

Private schools in South Korea (hereafter Korea) are publicly operated. In order to guarantee equal educational opportunities, the Korean government put public and private schools under its control and regulates them by adopting uniformed and centralized policies for curriculum, finance, and school operations. The government also equalized the composition of student bodies by randomly assigning students across different public and private schools, which is known as *random student assignment* (Kang, 2007; Park et al., 2010). These policies made private schools quasi-public and, at the same time, eliminated both endogenous sorting and competition existing between public and private schools. Findings from Mintrom and Walley's (2013) study reflect these unique features of private schools in Korea. The authors found a small achievement gap between public and private schools in the analysis of the PISA 2009 reading scores; controlling for student socioeconomic backgrounds rarely changed this achievement gap, which suggests that public and private schools have equivalent student bodies.

A universal high school choice program implemented in Seoul in 2010, however, radically altered this landscape. Under the new program, middle school graduates are required to apply to a high school in Seoul regardless of school types or districts, introducing both sorting (as students choose schools) and competition (as schools have to compete for these students) between public and private high schools for the entering cohorts since 2010. Also, the government converted about 20% of the private high schools into autonomous private high schools by giving them a greater level of authority in their decision making.

Seoul's school choice policy provides researchers with a unique opportunity to investigate the effects of school choice, especially because competition and sorting were newly introduced with the implementation of the high school choice policy. In the United States and much of the world, the presence of private schools or choosing a school through residential decision has created some degree of competition and sorting within a public education system even before school choice policies were introduced. In contrast, in Seoul, competition and sorting barely existed in the public education system due to random student assignment. Sudden exposure to competition and sorting provides an opportunity to examine how they affect student achievement, presenting a sharp contrast with the previous school system under strong governmental control.

By using the rollout of the universal high school choice program, we investigate how competition, autonomy, and student sorting affect existing gaps in achievement between public and private high schools under random student assignment. We find that competition and autonomy have limited impacts on performance gaps between public and private high schools. In contrast, we find that student sorting significantly increases the achievement of private high schools compared to public high schools.

We proceed by explaining the context surrounding Seoul's school choice policy. Then, we describe the data used for analysis and our strategies for estimating the effects of competition, autonomy, and sorting. After which, we present the results of our analysis. Finally, we discuss the implication of our results for a future policy.

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2. Institutional backgrounds

Prior to 1974, when students were allowed to choose their high schools, there was fierce competition among graduating middle-school students for prestigious high schools. Because these schools selected students based on academic achievement, they cream-skimmed high-achieving students, which increased student stratification by ability and, presumably, by socioeconomic status (SES). Also, admission criteria based on academic achievement increased students' dependency on the use of tutors and extracurricular cram schools (Sorensen, 1994). Furthermore, low-secondary schooling was geared toward preparing students for high school entrance examinations.

In order to ease the competition for high schools and normalize lower secondary education, the Korean government passed the High School Equalization Policy (HSEP) of 1974 that banned entrance exams from most high schools and opened up secondary education to the wider public (Sorensen, 1994). Under this law, the Korean government heavily subsidized public and private high schools and regulated them by introducing standardized policies for curriculum, finance, and other aspects of school operations. The compositions of schools' student bodies were also equalized through within-district random student assignment (Kang, 2007; Park et al., 2010). School choice was fundamentally forbidden in the regions that adopted the HSEP. Choosing a school through residential relocation was not possible either because transferring students were also randomly assigned to a new school within a new school district (Kang, 2007).

Because private high schools are publicly operated under the HSEP, there are few differences between public and private high schools (Kim, 2017). In exchange for substantial financial support, private high schools are mandated to follow a national curriculum and a teacher salary schedule set by the government. Private high school tuition, which is set by the government, is equal to public high school tuition (public high schools in Korea have set tuition rates). Even enrollment sizes in private high schools are decided and managed by the government. The main difference between public and private high schools is that only private high schools have autonomy in teacher hiring decisions. Once hired, most private high school teachers work at the same school until they retire. For public high schools, seventeen provincial education offices (PEO) directly hire teachers and rotate them across different schools every five-year in order to equalize teacher quality.

Overall, these policies made private high schools quasi-public in Korea. Private high schools are not under competitive pressures as their seats are filled through random student assignment. In this situation, private high schools may not have incentives to adjust their programs tailored to the needs and preferences of educational consumers nor do they have means to differentiate their programs, as there exists high level of governmental control for school curriculum and funding.

Two decades after the implementation of the HSEP, opinions were divided about its success. The HSEP had been successful in guaranteeing equal educational opportunities. However, under the HSEP, parents and students did not have the right to choose a school that fit their interests and values. Also, the HSEP was criticized for lowering the efficiency and effectiveness of schools by artificially removing competition across schools. As a result, some PEOs started modifying random assignment in order to accommodate parents and students' school preferences in their school assignment policy from 1996. In contrast, Seoul adhered to the HSEP random assignment method; incoming students in Seoul were randomly assigned to public and private high schools within their school district until 2009.

The 2010 Seoul high school choice policy, however, radically changed the school system in two different ways: the expansion of school choice and the establishment of autonomous high schools. Under the new policy, middle school graduates are required to apply to any high schools of their choice in the city. Moreover, the school choice policy introduces autonomous high schools, most of which were converted from traditional public and private high schools, into the school system.

Table 1
High School Assignment in Seoul.
(Source: Choi and Hwang, 2017)

| | First Stage | Second Stage | Third Stage | Forth Stage |
|-------------------|--|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| District. | anywhere in Seoul | anywhere in Seoul | own school district | own or adjoining school district |
| School types | special purpose autonomous private school's own criteria | traditional autonomous private | traditional autonomous public | traditional autonomous public |
| Assignment method | lottery among applicants | lottery among applicants | lottery among applicants | lottery |

2.1. Expansion of school choice

Before the policy was introduced, families exercised very limited school choice by applying to special-purpose high schools (for example, science or foreign language schools). The new policy greatly expanded school choice by requiring every incoming high school student to apply to schools of their choice regardless their districts of residence and school types. Table 1 summarizes the application procedures.

Under the new policy, assignment procedures start with the selection of students based on their middle school GPA by the Seoul Local Education Authority (LEA). Selected students then apply to an autonomous private high school or a special-purpose high school. In order to apply to autonomous private high schools, a student's middle school GPA should be above the median, which opens up the possibility for them to cream-skim high-achieving students. When schools are over-subscribed, these two types of schools are allowed to use their own criteria to select students.

Those who did not win admission during the first stage of application, along with the rest of the students who did not apply to autonomous private or special-purpose high schools, then apply to any two traditional high schools of their choice regardless of school type. In addition, if students wish, they can apply to one autonomous public high school. In this stage, 20% of seats in each school are filled via lottery. In the next stage, students who have not been assigned to any school during the second stage again apply to two schools among traditional public, traditional private, or public autonomous high schools within their own school district. Then, another lottery is conducted to fill half of the remaining slots (40%) in each school. In the final stage, the remaining students are randomly assigned to the open seats within their own or adjoining districts. Even though some aspects of the previous random assignment method are retained in the final stage, the school choice policy is still a dramatic departure from the previous random assignment in that it allows students to apply to schools regardless of their original school districts.

2.2. Introduction of autonomous high schools

Not only does the policy greatly expand school choice, but it also introduces autonomous high schools. During the first year of the school choice policy, there were seven autonomous public high schools out of 90 public high schools and 13 autonomous private high schools out of 142 private high schools. These numbers increased to 17 and 27 in 2011, respectively (see Table 2). A superintendent at the Seoul LEA has the authority to approve a school's application to become or establish itself as an autonomous private high school. In order to widely distribute autonomous private high schools across Seoul, the superintendent approved one or two applications per school district.

Autonomous private high schools are different from traditional public or private high schools in several ways. First of all, in exchange for financial independence from the government, autonomous private high schools enjoy greater flexibility in school operation and

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