

The psychosis of the PISA report and best practices

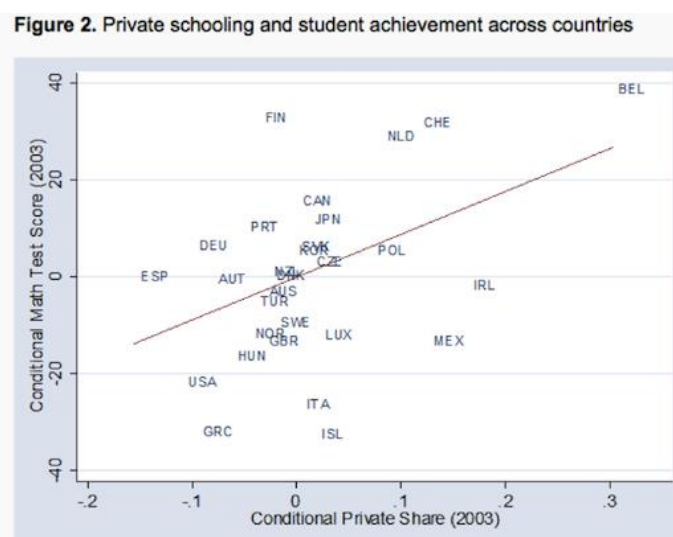
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The enemies of school reform have something of a champion in Finland's Pasi Sahlberg. In a recent [comment piece](#) for the Guardian, he discusses his self-invented bogeyman, the 'Global Education Reform Movement' with the evil-sounding acronym 'GERM'. GERM has failed, he says. In his story, choice, competition, and accountability have spread like a virus around the world, infecting education system after education system. But, according to Sahlberg, there's no evidence the policies work! Only that they increase school segregation, which in turn may have a negative effect on equality in outcomes. He tries to quote the latest 2012 PISA survey to prove his point.

Except there's a problem: the OECD report to which Sahlberg refers has nothing, I repeat nothing, to say about effective practices and policies for raising performance. This is because it's a non-academic report that can't separate causation from correlation. If one is interested in understanding what works in PISA, an understanding of the academic research is therefore key.

There's no reason why Coffee Housers should have read Sahlberg's piece, but it is worth paying attention to because it won't be long before his errors are cited by those trying to crush Britain's current school reform experiment. Academic research (as opposed to pretending PISA league tables say what they don't) is important.

And [research](#) published in the Economic Journal by Martin West of Harvard University and Ludger Woessmann of the University of Munich finds that private/free school competition raise PISA scores, and that pupils in state schools benefit just as much as pupils in private/free schools. The causal impact on mathematics achievement is displayed below. Competition also lowers costs so the efficiency gains are quite significant.



I [have pointed out](#) that researchers analysing PISA scores have actually found zero impact of school choice and competition on school segregation. So Sahlberg is, to put it politely, talking out of his hat.

Even more importantly, researchers find that having more free schools decrease the impact of parental background on PISA (and TIMSS) achievement. If Sahlberg wants more equality, he should tell countries to privatise education provision, not spread myths based on the lack of correlations in a report that wouldn't be accepted as a BA economics dissertation.

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