

# Aren't Teachers Responsible for Educational Outcomes?

by Matt Brenner  
[mbrenner@k12math.org](mailto:mbrenner@k12math.org)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) began 10 years ago, and has resoundingly failed to produce better educational outcomes. A ceaseless torrent of blistering newspaper and magazine editorials, blog postings, and movies like *Waiting for Superman* have been blaming public school teachers and their unions for every educational failure so loudly, for so long, and with such muted objection that it has become the conventional wisdom. But is it so?

First, it is interesting to note that the longer that NCLB has been failing, the louder and more sustained the attacks on public school teachers and their unions have become. Perhaps the architects and believers in NCLB hope that pointing a finger will divert attention away from their failure. In the early days of NCLB all its proponents sang the *Choice and Accountability* song. No convincing case can be made that choice and accountability have improved educational outcomes, so now they sing the *Teachers and Their Unions are to Blame* song.

Second, while public school teachers sit in the hot seat, nobody says a word against private school teachers. Mustn't we assume they are doing a much better job? For, if we accept that public school teachers are doing a poor job, and we also find that private school teachers produce similar outcomes, then mustn't we conclude that *all* teachers are doing a poor job? There are 3 million K-12 school teachers—more than the numbers of physicians, lawyers and engineers combined. Is it possible that as a group they're just no good? What does it even mean to say that an entire profession is to blame? Before we try to answer this question, let's see if it's one we need to answer. Before we accept the assertion that public school teachers are to blame for our country's educational failures, shouldn't we see how the private school teachers are doing?

The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), the source of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (*The Nation's Report Card*) conducted a careful statistical study. In 2006 (using reading and

math test data from the 2003 assessment) they compared public and private school student performance in math and reading for grades four and eight (see NCES 2006-461). The study shows that private school students, on average, earned higher scores than public school students. Raw averages, however, don't offer good explanations. Why do private school students perform better in math and reading? Is it because private schools have better teachers? Could there be other factors? Even if the student populations in public and private schools were indistinguishable in every way, there might be important differences between public and private schools that have nothing to do with the students or the teachers (e.g. facilities). The NCES analysis looked very carefully at characteristic differences between public schools and private schools (e.g. teacher experience), and also at characteristic differences between their student populations (e.g. socioeconomic status). They used well-established and uncontroversial statistical methods to adjust for these differences.

The somewhat surprising result of the analysis, when factoring in student and school differences, is that the public schools achieve slightly *higher* average NAEP math scores than private schools, and the difference, though small, is statistically significant in grade four (4.1 points,  $p=.00$ , effect size: .15), while the difference was not statistically significant in grade 8. The results of the comparison are essentially the same when only differences between student populations are factored into the analysis. There were no statistically significant differences in reading scores between public and private schools after adjusting for student characteristics.

Private schools aren't achieving better outcomes than public schools (when we take into account student characteristics). Does this mean public school and private school teachers are all poor, or must it be something else? As for unions, we must recognize that private school teachers don't have any unions at all, and every private school can fire any "bad" teacher at any time. If unions are at the

root of the problem in public school education, shouldn't we expect to see private schools—none of which are unionized—doing much better than public schools? Also, virtually every analysis of the correlation between teacher unionization rates and test scores (SATs, NAEP, etc.) shows a statistically significant, and moderately strong, positive correlation: in states with higher teacher unionization rates students tend to have higher scores, and in states with lower teacher unionization rates students tend to have lower test scores. Perhaps it is time to look beyond the false villains of teachers and their unions to improve education.