

## Private School Is Becoming Out of Reach for Middle-Class America

These days, private school really is just for rich kids. While the enrollment rate for children from middle-income families in U.S. private elementary schools has declined significantly over the last five decades, the level for high-income families has been relatively steady, according to a National Bureau of Economic Research study released this month — a trend that could come to perpetuate the nation's growing wealth divide.

The shift is most apparent in urban areas, where the enrollment gap between kids from high- and median-income families increased from 5 percentage points in 1968 to 19 points in 2013, according to the study, which used national survey data on private elementary-school enrollment by family income over the last half century.

Part of the decline in middle-class enrollment coincided with the closing of many Catholic schools, though it's unclear how much of that was due to changes in the religious makeup of cities and how much stemmed from the Catholic Church's struggle to maintain schools with the same relatively low tuition rates that parishes had historically offered.

But it's not just Catholic-school closures causing the fall in middle-class enrollment. Soaring tuition has kept private-school education out of reach for most American families, for whom household income has risen at a much slower pace.

"The combination of rising income inequality and rising tuitions has meant that middle-class families increasingly can't afford private schooling," said Sean Reardon, a Stanford University professor of poverty and inequality in education, who co-authored the study with Harvard University economist Richard Murnane.

Measured in 2015 dollars, the average tuition at nonsectarian private elementary schools — where the percentage of students from high-income families has risen substantially — surged from \$4,120 in 1979 to \$22,611 in 2011, according to the paper.

While the real income in 2015 of families at the 90th percentile of the income distribution was 65 percent higher than it was in 1973, families at the 50th percentile saw only a 21 percent increase, and those at the 20th percentile saw an 8 percent drop, the authors note.

Higher-income families "increasingly live either in the suburbs or enroll their children in private schools," they write in the report, describing how, for many well-off families, it's made more sense financially to purchase pricier housing in the suburbs in exchange for better-quality public schools rather than face mounting tuition expenses year after year.

Less than 10 percent of American children attend a private elementary or secondary school, the authors note. But the shifts in enrollment over the past few decades reflect how increases in family wealth inequality have contributed to increases in income-based school segregation.

The authors also make the point that parents who send their children to private schools may be less invested in the quality of their local public schools. And whether or not children at private schools receive a superior education, they're building relationships with peers from wealthy and well-connected families that could prove invaluable years later in a competitive labor market.

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