Introduction

Despite the United States’ robust public school system, approximately one in 10 children attending grade school are enrolled in a private school. Hailed by some political scientists as generators of competition and innovation, while decried by others as indefensible due to their generation of inequality, private schools are hotly debated by concerned citizens and economists alike.

A key empirical question in this debate is posed simply: are private schools bad for kids in public schools? Using data from the Educational Opportunity Project at Stanford University (SEDA) and HIFLD, I aim to explore the relationship between the percent of students enrolled in private schools within a county on the surrounding public schools.

Several studies have been conducted on this question at a state level. Marlow find that the

Various theories about private schools predict contradictory effects on public school performance. One line of reasoning supposes that private schools siphon off the wealthiest and highest achieving students (with the most proactive parents) from public schools, reducing both the resources available to the school and the network benefits from having high-performing students. Another suggests that private schools force public schools to compete and provide better educational services in order to keep their students.

Of course, unravelling the causal link between private schools and public schools is experimentally much more complicated. For one thing, private school enrollment may in part be determined by public school performance (rather than the other way around), if a low-quality public school increases the likelihood parents withdraw their kids to a private option. Second, private schools have been around in communities for different amounts of time. Shon and Jilke use panel data from New Jersey schools to show that the presence of privately managed charter schools increases public school performance; however, their expansion causes decreases. With purely cross-sectional data without information about the founding dates of the private schools, it is difficult to disentangle these more complicated effects.

This project uses cross-sectional data to explore general trends between private school density and public-school performance. Furthermore, I aim to investigate how private school density affects educational disparities between black and white students (within public schools). Without wading too far into causal inference, I aim to explore whether private schools cause public harm or benefit.