Private Secondary Education in Uganda: Implications for Planning

by W. James Jacob, Donald B. Holsinger & Christopher B Mugimu — 2008

Purpose of Study: A fundamental question for educational planners and policy makers is which secondary school providers are most efficient in raising student learning for the most youth, given an available level of resources. Considerable attention has been devoted in recent years to the proposition that private providers offer efficient alternatives to government-financed and administered secondary schools. This study examines the rise of private secondary schools in Uganda and calculates a unit cost estimate for representative samples of secondary schools, both private and government.

Setting: A unit cost analysis was conducted among 28 randomly selected secondary schools in Uganda.

Research Design: A national sample of secondary schools was stratified in three ways. First, schools were selected according to the type of school, allowing half of the sample to be government schools and the other half private schools. A second stratification involved urbanicity, so both urban and rural schools were included in adequate numbers to allow subsequent comparison. Finally, the school sample was stratified by the four primary geographic regions in Uganda: Central (n = 10), Eastern (n = 6), Northern (n = 6), and Western (n = 6) Regions. All findings are based on analysis of sample survey data derived from randomly selected administrators, teachers, and parents of students. Using secondary school leaving examinations as the measure of effect, the article examines the relative cost effectiveness of private and government schools.

Results: Private schools in Uganda appear to be attractive, low-cost alternatives to government secondary schools. Per-pupil spending is significantly related to learning achievement, regardless of whether a student attends a private or government school. Thus, if higher performance is the desired ultimate student outcome, additional spending will be required. For their per-pupil cost, this article shows that private schools produce good learning gains—better, in fact, on a dollar basis, than government schools.

Conclusions/Recommendations: Unit cost data, when combined with reliable and valid measures of student learning achievement, are helpful to policy analysts and policy makers in determining the most efficient use of money. Although the comparatively high unit costs of government schools in this study are affected by the inclusion of capital costs, there is strong evidence to support the contention that private schools are a cost-effective alternative to government schools in the provision of general secondary education. Recommendations for future research include extending the analysis beyond the comparison of costs and examination scores by also considering the intangible component gains of schooling experiences in both private and government schools.
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