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BOOK REVIEW: Private schooling for the poor

Marcus Winters

THE BEAUTIFUL TREE

By James Tooley

Cato Institute Press, \$19.95, 291 pages

Reviewed by Marcus Winters

It's not hard to understand why the affluent might choose to send their offspring to private school, especially when the local public-school alternative is not up to snuff. They want their children to be well-educated and successful, and they can afford to pay tuitions approaching \$30,000 in the hope of improving the odds.

Yet a willingness to spend money on education, even when a free alternative is available, can also be found among the less well-heeled. Of the 5 million children attending schools charging tuition, 1.9 million attended schools that charged on average less than \$3,500 in the 2003-04 school year, the last year for which data are available.

In addition, nearly a third of private schools enrolled populations that were 30 percent or more minority, and a fifth of them enrolled majority-minority populations. Almost half of all children attending nonpublic schools happen to be enrolled in Catholic parochial schools, many of them for reasons unconnected to the religious instruction offered.

The tuitions that the working-class and middle-class parents of these children pay might seem modest, but the sacrifices they must make to do so indicate a commitment to learning and upward mobility equal to that of society's most privileged members.

In his new book, "The Beautiful Tree," James Tooley, an education professor at the University of Newcastle in England, informs us that even the very poor may harbor the same values as America's strivers. In many of the world's poorest nations, people living on less than \$1 a day are escaping horrible public schools by paying to send their children to mostly secular, proprietary private schools. Among other things, these schools demonstrate the power of markets to step in when government has failed.

The peasants and slum-dwellers of India, Nigeria, Ghana and China have homes without toilets and one bed to a family. The way out of these circumstances, development experts say, is universal public schooling. The World Bank and large philanthropic groups have expended vast resources increasing the number of public schools in such nations. The facilities they have built rival those in the West, and they have made sure the teachers employed in them have attended education school and been certified.

The only problem with these schools is that very little teaching goes on in them. In part, that's because a third of the time or so, these public school teachers simply don't show up. Not that their presence makes much of a difference.

In their unannounced site visits, Mr. Tooley and his researchers found teachers who were often drunk, sleeping or just not teaching. The power wielded by their unions allows these teachers to neglect students without fear of punishment, let alone dismissal.

Though shocking to the uninitiated, such low teaching rates are a well-known problem that has spawned some clever interventions. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Esther Duflo and Harvard's Rema Hanna studied a program in rural Indian schools that gave teachers a small bonus for having their picture taken with their students at the end of the day. This simple policy reduced absenteeism from 40 percent to 20 percent and measurably improved students' academic proficiency.

To their donors, shiny new public school buildings are no doubt gratifying proof of tangible progress and their own laudable intentions. But to the parents of the neglected students within them, these buildings are essentially a mirage. Instead of resigning themselves to the fate that ensues from poor schooling, many of these parents use their meager resources to bypass the gifts that the developed world has bestowed.

First in India, and then in poor country after poor country, Mr. Tooley shows us, almost to the point of tedium, an expansive and indeed thriving market for private schooling for the poor. In some slums, they enroll somewhere between 35 percent and 60 percent of all students. Nonetheless, these schools are often unknown, even to the country's government officials. In the developing world as in the West, people are convinced that "private schools are for the rich."

Mr. Tooley's discovery of these schools a few years ago resulted in the publication of academic papers, the production of PBS and BBC documentaries and coverage in a variety of magazines such as Newsweek and the Atlantic. "The Beautiful Tree," though intended for a general audience, systematically evaluates these schools and compares them to their public and private counterparts.

In contrast to the newly built public schools, the facilities of these low-cost private schools are usually as dilapidated as the homes of the students who attend them. Yet in every country Mr. Tooley studied, these private-school students performed substantially better than nearby public school students on standardized exams in a variety of subjects, including English. That is at least in part because the mostly uncertified private-school teachers within them are much more likely than their certified public school counterparts actually to be teaching when they are visited unannounced.

In the West, private schools tend to be nonprofit and parochial. For the Third World private schools Mr. Tooley discusses, the great motivator is not God but profit. Though Mr. Tooley never explicitly says so (it would have been helpful if he had), these schools do not appear to be, for example, madrassas advancing religiously inspired but dangerous political goals. The schools charge tuitions that we find paltry -- the first school we visit charges the equivalent of \$1.33 to \$2.22 a month -- but those small sums, amazingly, allow their proprietors to make a sufficient financial return.

How do private schools outperform public schools with greater resources?

In both the United States and the developing world, a private school's most important advantage is its control over the teaching staff. Unlike teachers in the public schools, private-school teachers are at-will employees and are terminated when they fail to do their job. Freedom from teachers' unions gives these schools the ability to control their staffs. The market-induced need to attract tuition-paying parents gives them a compelling reason to do so.

If in addition to being directed to public schools, government funds were allowed to subsidize private-school tuitions, their impact would be enhanced. Unfortunately, society's squeamishness

about markets when the subject is education and its sentimental view of the role of public schools have prevented this from happening. Instead of ignoring the power of markets, we should adopt policies that leverage it.

Many of those who themselves have the resources to obtain quality schooling for their own children continue to insist without evidence that market-based institutions cannot educate the poor. Mr. Tooley's book demonstrates such schools' special power to satisfy human needs in the absence of, or even despite, government intervention.

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