

Parents and schools in the era of privatization and commercialization of Albanian Public Education

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how processes of privatisation and commercialisation are reshaping Albania's public education system. Based on qualitative data from ten semi structured interviews and document analysis, the study investigates two key developments: parents' increasing reliance on fee-based after-school centers and the introduction of school performance cards. The findings show that limited public investment and short school day, have led families to seek private alternatives. After-school centers, as an example of privatisation, while costly, provide flexible schedules and academic enrichment. Meanwhile, performance cards, as an example of commercialisation, are presented by the system as tools for improving school quality through competition and achievement measurement, but they do not represent substantive reform. The article argues that public education in Albania risks failing to fulfil its responsibility to serve the majority of the population. While privatization may introduce elements of choice and competition, it also risks deepening inequalities. Without substantial public investment and policy reforms that prioritize equity, the risk remains that education will increasingly become less public and more private.

KEYWORDS

Commercialisation, privatisation, after-school learning centers, performance cards, inequality

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine comment les processus de privatisation et de commercialisation transforment le système d'enseignement public en Albanie. Sur la base de données qualitatives issues de dix entretiens semi-structurés et d'une analyse de documents, l'étude examine deux développements clés : le recours croissant des parents aux centres extrascolaires payants et l'introduction des cartes de performance scolaire. Les résultats montrent que le faible investissement public et la courte journée scolaire ont poussé les familles à se tourner vers des alternatives privées. Les centres extrascolaires, en tant qu'exemple de privatisation, bien que coûteux, offrent des horaires flexibles et un enrichissement académique. Quant aux cartes de performance, en tant qu'exemple de commercialisation, elles sont présentées comme des outils d'amélioration de la qualité par la compétition et la mesure des performances, mais elles ne constituent pas une réforme significative. L'article soutient que l'enseignement public en Albanie risque de ne pas remplir sa mission de service à la majorité de la population. Bien que la privatisation puisse introduire certains éléments de choix et de concurrence, elle comporte également le risque d'aggraver les inégalités. En l'absence d'investissements publics substantiels et de réformes politiques axées sur l'équité, le danger persiste que l'éducation devienne de moins en moins publique et de plus en plus privée.

MOTS-CLÉS

Commercialisation, privatisation, centres extrascolaires, cartes de performance scolaire, inégalités

INTRODUCTION

According to Curren & Blokhuis (2011), by compelling all parents to send their children to school, the state ensures that every child has access to instruction and opportunities for social, economic, and civic participation beyond what their parents alone could provide. The public school system, commonly understood as a 'public good', suggests a particular set of relations and responsibilities that the state has to its citizens in regards to the provision of education (Hogan & Thompson, 2021). In this view, one of the core purposes of schooling is to compensate for the limitations of parents' resources and capacities, especially in the case of disadvantaged groups. As Crouch (2007) argues, the expectation is that schools should do better than parents alone, for two fundamental reasons: first, because if left entirely to families, many may fail to realise what is needed; and second, because school is the engine of social mobility - a place where, ideally, the 'social elevator' moves only upward. Curren and Blokhuis (2011) further affirm that, in principle, the best interests of both children and society are served when children are enrolled in common schools delivered through a public system.

Since the early 1990s, Albania has undergone significant transformations in the structure and financing of its education system. Once exclusively public, education now includes a growing private sector and increasingly market-oriented mechanisms within the public domain. Two of the most important changes in education reform in Albania are the introduction of private schools and the commercialization in the sector of public education. In the school year 2023-2024, 11.3 % of basic education pupils and 15% of upper secondary education students are enrolled in private education institutions; the pupil per teacher ratio in upper secondary public education is 11.5 and in private education institutions is 9.1 (INSTAT, 2023-2024). The share of private funding in primary and secondary education across OECD and partner countries is 15% (OECD, 2024). In contrast, private educational institutions in Albania do not receive any government funding. Consequently, private contributions - primarily in the form of tuition fees - play a significant role in financing these education institutions.

This article focuses on one particular manifestation of this shift: the rise of after-school learning centers and how they function as a form of silent privatization. The study also briefly addresses how school performance rankings contributes to the application of market logic in education. However, in the case of Albania, the increasing number of private educational institutions, particularly in pre-university level of education, combined with the state's low investment in education, has led to a failure to fulfil its responsibility to serve the majority of the population. The schooling is becoming much less public and much more private. And the fear is that in Albania, in the absence of new educational reforms and the financial support the public educational system cannot compete with the private one.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Commercialization is a term that is widely used in business. Recently, the term and the approach has been borrowed and found use also in the domain of public works. Easton (2013), when analysing commercialization of New Zealand, uses this definition: commercialization involves using as much as possible the model of private business enterprise to organize economic (and even non-economic) activity. The excuse is that the state is not able to do things as well as the

business, while the philosophical approach that is applied is: When a public service provided by the state does not work, privatization – which means selling it to the market - is the best solution. The same author, to illustrate the practice of delegating a public service to the private, brings the example of the companies dealing with waste collection: the firm receiving the service will do the best, otherwise another private company will take over the service. Easton (2013) concludes that commercialization it is not considered a practical solution to issues that require solutions, but it is transformed into a type of approach that applies throughout the public sector, regardless the fact that the issue is problematic or not.

For various reasons, researchers have examined how commercialization and educational policy reforms are reshaping public schooling. The clash between commercial/corporate culture and democratic values spearheads the war for education reform (Block, 2005). Building on critical perspectives, Easton (2013) and Molnar (2005) expose how commercialization strategies in education commodify students and reposition schools as market actors, raising concerns about equity and democratic accountability. Bok (2003) use commercialisation to refer efforts within universities to make a profit from teaching, research and other campus activities.

Inequality is one of the primary reasons why scholars have turned their attention to the privatization of education. As Walford (2005, p. VII) argues, “British private schools have long been considered central to the continuation of inequality in [our] society”. Similarly, as the 2000s progressed, Sweden’s school system began to show signs of increasing stratification, particularly in large urban areas, reflecting differences in school popularity and perceived status (Alexiadou & Lundahl, 2016). While there is insufficient evidence to directly attribute this stratification solely to privatization reforms, several studies link school choice policies and marketized systems to a growing segregation between different ‘types’ of schools (Östh et al., 2013).

Privatisation is the development of quasi-markets through institutional and policy structures that privilege parental choice, school autonomy and venture philanthropy, often with the state regulating for public accountability – it happens to school (Hogan & Thompson, 2021). This study draws on the work of Ball and Youdell (2008), who differentiate between two forms of privatization in education: endogenous privatization, where ideas, techniques, and practices from the private sector are adopted to make the public sector operate more like a business; and exogenous privatization, where the private sector becomes directly involved in designing, managing, or delivering aspects of public education. Privatisation reforms also change what is important and valuable and necessary in education (Ball & Youdell, 2008).

In European schools, privatization often takes the form of teachers’ performance-based pay schemes linked to test scores and performance evaluations of their pupils (Chamberlin et al., 2002). While Albania has not implemented such teacher-specific mechanisms, the evidence on the impact of performance-based pay on student outcomes remains mixed - particularly in low- and middle-income countries (Breeding et al., 2021).

The introduction of school performance cards reflects a similar logic of privatisation. By institutionalising ranking, competition, and outcome-based metrics within the public sector, performance cards embed commercial practices into school governance without direct privatisation. Both cases illustrate how market-oriented reforms can reshape public education systems, aligning them more closely with business values than with principles of equity and access. Education privatisation can happen *de facto* or for structural reasons that, to a great extent, are external to the education policy domain – namely states’ inaction in the face of a growing demand for education and/or the changing educational needs of an emerging middle class (Verger et al., 2016). In this paper, after-school learning centers are considered a form of privatization, as they operate independently of state funding, rely entirely on private tuition

fees, and primarily serve children from middle-class families whose parents consider public schools insufficiently effective or responsive to their expectations.

CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK: THE CHANGING NATURE OF PUBLIC EDUCATION IN ALBANIA

Arendt (2007, pp. 188-192) in the paper “The crisis in Education”, identifies three major crises that modern education is facing: 1. *The world of child-centered society*. This crisis arises from the creation of a society that revolves around children, where children participate independently of adults. In such a setting, the only authority dictating what should be done is external to the children themselves. Play is emphasized over work, reflecting a shift in priorities. 2. *Teaching and the professionalism of teachers*. There is a growing emphasis on teaching methods rather than on deepening teachers' expertise in the subjects they teach. 3. *Teaching methodologies*. This issue is encapsulated in the motto “learning by doing”. While this approach has its merits, it is often applied pragmatically and naively across all levels of education, without critical consideration of its limitations or context.

In Albania, the educational power is concentrated on the Ministry of Education and Sport of Albania, especially regarding pre-university education system: the state determines the educational objectives, curricula, criteria of evaluation, and provide the most of the funds for public schools (or state schools); further, the laws and regulations are determined by the central government and lawmakers. In Higher Education, the university reform recommended the Anglo-Saxon Model (Barjaba & Barjaba, 2023).

Within the Albanian public education system, it is the second crisis - the weakening of teaching professionalism - that appears most acute (Nathanaili, 2024). Teachers are legally permitted to choose their own professional development, based largely on what the market offers and what they can personally afford. Due to a lack of state funding, teachers must self-finance their training, which does not necessarily align with the developmental needs of their schools. The only formal requirement is that the training meet the legal standards for duration and credit value. Thus, the burden of professional development has shifted from the institution to the individual, without any systemic mechanism to ensure alignment with institutional goals or quality standards.

Private or fee-paying education exists throughout the entire structure of the education system in Albania, from preschool to the pre-university level, a provision that is stipulated in the Constitution of the Republic of Albania (Article 57, point 6): “Pupils and students can also be educated in non-public schools at all levels, which are established and operate based on the law”. These non-public institutions, also known as the private ones, unlike in England (Walford, 2005), do not receive government support. Nevertheless, when compared to their public counterparts in Albania, private institutions are often considered to offer a better quality of education. Proponents of the free market argue that the privatization of education encourages healthy competition, which in turn leads to improvements in schools and better educational outcomes for children (Block, 2005). However, in contrast to this view, public education - once regarded as a key mechanism for fostering social cohesion - is increasingly being transformed into a force contributing to social fragmentation (Molnar, 2005).

In Albania, the old and the only public educational system, inherited by the time of communism, is restructured over one decade and actually there is the perception that we have two parallel systems that offer two different realities, especially at the pre-university level - the public educational system (free fee paying), and the non-public (private) educational system (fee paying). Table 1 presents data on government expenditure on public education in Albania, and also the spending per student per year for both public and private schools.

TABLE 1*Government expenditure on education; case studies: Albania*

	Government expenditure on education	Spending per student /year at public primary education	Spending per student /year at private primary education
Albania	Year 2022: 2.7 % of the GDB	Year 2020, approximately 900 USD were spent per child;	Year 2024: from USD 4500 - USD 9000

The objective of policy makers to expand access to educational opportunities and to provide high-quality education can translate into higher costs (OECD), but in 2022, according to the World Bank Group (2024), government expenditure on education in Albania accounted only for 2.7% of GDP, while the European Union (EU – Eurostat) average (2023) is 4.7% of GDP. Albania’s government spending on education is significantly below the EU average, suggesting underinvestment in the sector and raising concerns about the quality of education. In 2020, public primary education in Albania received approximately USD 900 per student per year (UNICEF Albania, 2021), while in private primary schools, the cost ranged from USD 4500 to 9000 in 2024 or 5 to 10 times higher. Although these private school expenditures are more in line with the OECD average for European countries, this significant investment gap may lead to differences in educational outcomes between public and private school students. Private schools have been able to attract an increasing share of the pupil population within a short period. One of the most differences between those two ‘systems’ is the social background of the community of children: the second one is attending only from children who came from wealth parents or middle class.

These disparities in spending suggest that private institutions operate with substantially greater financial resources per student, which may translate into improved infrastructure, teacher salaries, or extracurricular offerings. Consequently, families with the means to do so may increasingly view private education - particularly at the upper secondary level - as a more attractive or competitive option, thereby influencing enrollment trends.

The legal framework for continuous professional development of teachers, as outlined in Article 58 of the Law on Pre-University Education (No. 69/2012), emphasizes the importance of teacher training. According to point 1 of this article: “Educational institutions plan the professional development of teachers based on their needs and in accordance with central, local, and institutional education policies”. Additionally, point 4 of the same article recognizes training programs provided by private institutions: “Training is conducted according to a ‘demand-offer’ system, based on requests from educational institutions and offers from training agencies represented by local educational offices. Durrës is one of the main urban centres in Albania. Durrës district has 53 basic schools, out of which 21 are located in city and 31 others in the villages (Durrësi, Local Educational Offices, 2023). Organization of the Local Office of Durrës that is up to the level of Regional Educational Directorate and covers a wider geographical area – with Order No. 234, Date 19.4.2019 “On the approval of the structure and organization of the Local Pre-University Education Offices” has only 9 employees.

Individual responsibility for professional development, based on the “demand-offer” system has a price in labour market: 1 credit = 10 to 20 euros. Almost all Albanian higher education institutions provide such courses, which are designed in compliance with the human resources and economic benefits of the HEIs, not of the needs of an individual teacher or of a school as a whole. Professional development for in-service teachers conducted through a demand-offer system is classified primarily as commercialisation, as it introduces market mechanisms into the public education system. When private training providers are involved, it may also reflect exogenous privatisation through the participation of private actors in service delivery.

Actually, in Albania there is an increased emphasis on school leaders. Based on the Law “On the pre-university education system in the Republic of Albania”, in Albania operates the “Center for School Leadership” (CSL). Since October 2018, CSL functions as an independent structure in terms of administration, information, and training programs management: “It accomplishes this through administration of Compulsory Training Program and certification testing process that follows the program, and provides on-the-job ongoing professional development training through the Ongoing Professional Development Program” (CSL). Until 2018, a person without a master’s degree in education obtained near a higher institution education found it very difficult to be employed as a school principal, especially in upper secondary education level. Since 2018, everyone (in-service, both principals and teachers) is invited to apply for a training near CSL: One of the main tasks of CSL is to “Develop, lead and monitor the process of initial training for in-service principals/ vice- principals and aspiring principals”.

In low-income countries, such as Albania, education remains one of the most neglected sectors. Albania faces significant challenge in providing quality education in low-density rural and mountains areas where 40% of the population live. Learning outcomes as measured by the national assessment and examinations and by PISA are lower in rural and remote areas than in urban centres (Maghnouj et al., 2020). Privatization of education, particularly through the reconfiguration of school ownership and the growing reliance on parental payments, does not represent a comprehensive reform strategy. Rather, it functions as a mechanism that reduces student enrolment in public schools and artificially inflates per-student public expenditure, thereby weakening the role of the state in ensuring equitable access to education. At the same time, privatization increases the financial burden on families, particularly in covering the cost of their children’s education. One of the most common strategies adopted by middle-class parents has been to enroll their children in public schools for the first part of the day, and then ensure continued learning and productive use of time through enrolment in after-school learning centers. This trend reflects both a lack of trust in the sufficiency of public education and a broader structural shift toward private supplementation. The urgent appeal is for greater accountability from state authorities, not only in expressing commitment to education, but in translating that commitment into concrete financial investment and policy action.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative and exploratory research design aimed at gathering evidence to better understand the mechanisms and implications of privatization and commercialization in Albania’s public education sector.

To trace how these dynamics, permeate the education system, the research draws on two complementary data source. First, semi-structured interviews with parents, presented analytically under the Witnesses reveal how market logics, such as supplementary services, are experienced at the household level. Second, a document analysis of annual school-ranking reports situates these lived experiences within the broader policy framework. Rankings, funding formulas, and performance indicators are examined for market-oriented language (e.g., competition, choice, efficiency) that legitimises the transfer of educational costs to families and reinforces a culture of performativity. Taken together, these two strands allow for cross-validation: parents’ narratives are interpreted in light of official discourse, offering a robust account of how commercial imperatives are normalised within Albania’s ostensibly public education system.

The research is guided by two specific questions:

1. Why do parents in Albania rely on after-school learning centers as a complement to public education?
2. Public school ranking performance cards: Do these tools contribute to school improvement?

Each of these questions focuses on a particular manifestation of privatization or commercialization within the public education sector and serves to build a broader understanding of how market mechanisms influence public education systems.

In this study, performance cards are conceptualised as a tool of commercialisation, insofar as they involve the adoption of techniques and practices from the private sector to make public education more business-like - a process that Ball and Youdell (2008) classify as “endogenous privatisation.” In contrast, after-school learning centers are treated as a form of privatisation, as they operate independently of the state and are financed entirely through private tuition fees.

Data Collection

The primary method of data collection included:

- Semi-structured interviews with parents, which are structured in a paragraph under the name “Witnesses”.
- Document analysis of national education policies: school ranking reports.

Ten parents of five different primary schools in Tirana whose children attend after-school centers were interviewed. Their responses - largely consistent with one another - were synthesised under the heading Witnesses 1: Pattern of Daily Life of a First Grade Child and Witnesses 2: School day. Parents were also asked to describe their child’s daily schedule in public school. These accounts, which were found to be largely uniform across institutions, were then compared to the schedules of private schools in Tirana.

Sampling and semi structured interviews

Parents were selected using a purposive and convenience sampling approach, with participants drawn from a public school located in central Tirana. The selection was facilitated through pre-existing personal and professional connections, allowing for access to participants who were willing and able to reflect meaningfully on their experiences within the public education system. While the sample does not claim statistical representativeness, it was strategically chosen to capture middle-income urban parents whose children attend a school where market-based practices are particularly evident. This allowed the study to explore how such dynamics are perceived and negotiated at the household level.

The semi-structured interviews were organised around two key thematic axes: the reconstruction of the child’s typical school day, and the identification of the starting and ending times of public school. This structure allowed for a comparative understanding of how daily routines are shaped by the organisation of the school schedule. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in informal settings, such as over coffee, to create a relaxed atmosphere and encourage participants to share their personal thoughts, experiences, and reflections on the issue. During the interviews, data were recorded through handwritten notes rather than audio recordings, in order to maintain a more natural flow of conversation and minimize discomfort; there were no significant differences in the participants’ responses, as a result, there was no need to pose additional questions beyond the planned thematic axes; content was quantifying in terms of predetermined categories. All participants were enthusiastic about sharing their thoughts on such a sensitive and important topic as the education of their children.

Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided consent. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process. The participants were made aware of their right to withdraw from the interview at any time if they felt uncomfortable or sensed that something was not going well.

Limitations

While the study covers diverse perspectives, it is exploratory in nature and does not aim to generalize findings across all contexts. Additionally, because each research question addresses a distinct phenomenon, the study does not claim a unified theory of privatization or commercialisation but rather offers a two-dimensional understanding of its impact. The task strategy in this paper was very specific: to gather evidence supporting privatisation and commercialization of public education in Albania.

FINDINGS

After-school learning centers: Why do parents in Albania increasingly rely on after-school learning centers as a complement to public education?

Witnesses

Witnesses 1: Pattern of daily life of a first grade child

“XX” Primary Public School is located in the center of Tirana. Dave (a fictional name to protect the child’s privacy) is attending first grade. Usually, Dave finishes school by 10:00 - 11.00 a.m. After classes, his parents have arranged for a driver to take him to a private after-school center, where he can complete his homework, learn English (more and better than at school), or pursue any personal interests, all for a monthly fee of 28.000 ALL.

Her mother explains the reason quite simply: “Both my husband and I finish work at 5 p.m., but the primary school day ends much earlier and the school doesn’t provide any meals throughout the day. So, we have to look for alternatives. After-school programs are the best option for us in terms of both cost and ensuring our son spends his time in a meaningful way. Most importantly, in an educational institution, under the care of a qualified staff”.

Witnesses 2: School day

In Albania, the duration of the school day varies significantly between public and private schools across all grade levels. School usually starts at 8 a.m. in both types of schools, but the length of the school day differs significantly between the two systems (Table 2).

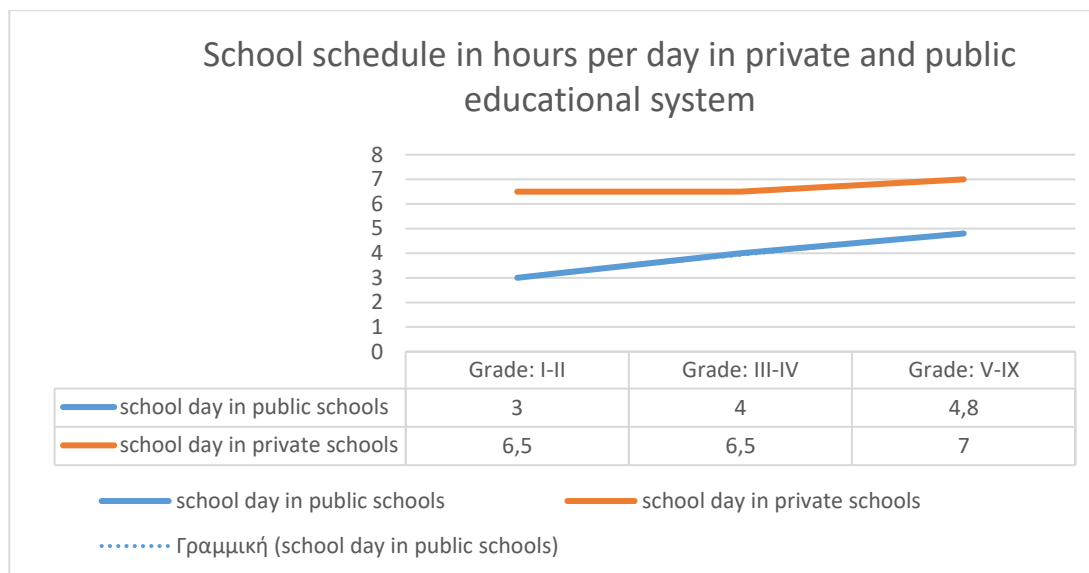
TABLE 2
School-day time table

Starts	Ends	Starts	Ends	Starts	Ends
Grade: I-II		Grade: III-IV		Grade: V-IX	
School day in public schools					
8 a.m.	11 a.m.	8 a.m.	12 p.m.	8 a.m.	1 p.m.
School day in private schools					
8 a.m.	2.30 p.m.	8 a.m.	2.30 p.m.	8 a.m.	3 p.m.

Private schools in Albania consistently offer longer school days across all grade levels compared to public schools, with a difference of about 2–3 hours more per day, particularly

significant in the early grades (I–II): In grades I–II, the school day in public schools is generally up to two times shorter than in private schools, while the data starts to improve for the upper grade (see Figure 1).

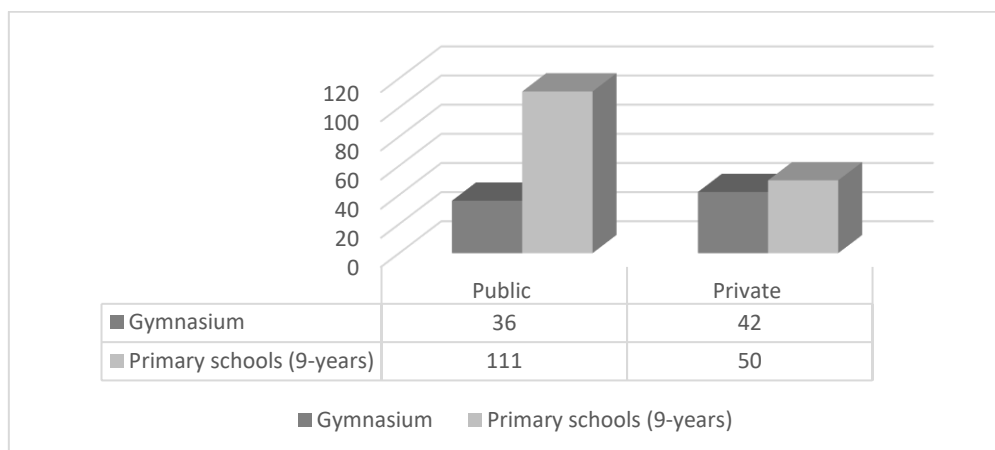
FIGURE 1



*School schedule in hours per day in private and public educational system.
Case study: Albania*

For a couple who have choose to enrol their children at a public school, this school schedule is not suitable. A good solution is those after-school centers: these small private after-school centers provide a flexible schedule that aligns well with parents' workdays and where parents paid the full tuition. A second reason to frequent those after school centers is that children can have additional hours, outside of school, in academic-related pursuits, such as math, physics, dance, piano or swimming classes, which are not offered at the public system. For parents, those extra classes help children improve their academic results, and offer more options for future success. A third reason is that if the children are busy than they would not have time for trouble (Coleman, 1966).

FIGURE 2



*Number of private and public educational institutions at pre-university level; case study:
Tirana; scholastic year: 2022-2023*

Data for the number of public educational institutions in Tirana are collected from the performance card (ZVA Tiranë, 2023), while those for the private educational institutions from the list of private educational institutions in different cities of Albania (Ministry of Education and Sport of Albania, 2018), both make available at the website of Ministry of Education and Sport.

Public school ranking performance card: do this tool contribute to school improvement?

In 2016, the Ministry of Education and Sport in Albania introduced the School Performance Card (Ministria e Arsimit, Sportit dhe Rinisë, 2016), a tool designed to rank schools based on 11 performance indicators and three questionnaires targeting students, teachers, and parents.

Performance Indicators:

1. Percentage of students who dropped out of school compared to the number of students registered at the beginning of the school year.
2. Percentage of classes missed by students compared to the total number of classes in a school year.
3. Percentage of students who passed the State Matura exams.
4. Average school grade in the National State Matura Exams.
5. Difference between the school's average grade in compulsory subject exams and the average grade in these subjects in 12th grade.
6. Percentage of students with a grade difference (in absolute value) greater than 1 between internal assessments and Matura results.
7. Achievement of the objectives outlined in the school's annual plan.
8. Number of school winners in national competitions (Olympiads, contests, and activities) organized by the Ministry of Education.
9. Number of school winners in local competitions (contests, activities) organized by the local educational office.
10. Results of teachers in qualification exams over the past four school years.
11. Percentage of high school graduates meeting the grade point average criteria to continue their studies in higher education institutions.

According to the Ministry of Education and Sport, schools are responsible for completing the School Performance Card through self-reporting. This card serves as an instrument for school self-evaluation and inspection by guaranteeing the quality of the school's educational offerings through standardized indicators; knowing the results of the indicators will help parents and the community judge achievements and needs for improvement. The performance data are publicly accessible on the websites of local educational offices for all schools, both private and public, within their jurisdiction. Based on this self-report, schools are ranked from best to worst, and is obligatory for both, private and public educational institutions.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

After-School Learning Centers as privatised compensatory mechanisms

The expansion of private educational services is often framed as increasing choice, yet in practice it magnifies inequality. Families with limited resources cannot afford after-school programs, thereby deepening educational disparities. This reflects Coleman's thesis (1966) that peer group and environment strongly influence educational outcomes.

The public education system in Albania faces significant challenges. Government expenditure on education in 2022 was only 2.7% of GDP. In 2020, the state spent approximately 900 USD per child at the public pre-university education level. One of the main characteristics of this underfunded public education system is the short school day, which makes it difficult for parents to rely solely on public schools. For children attending public primary schools, parents often prefer to enrol them in after-school centers. The primary reason is the limited hours spent in public schools compared to private institutions.

In public schools, children in the first and second grades typically spend only 2 - 2.5 hours per day in the classroom. While this increases slightly in higher grades, the growth is minimal. By contrast, children in private schools typically spend over 6 hours per day at school, which includes extracurricular activities, as well as breakfast and lunch breaks. Data shows that private primary educational institutions account for 31.05% of the total in Tirana. This suggests that, particularly in Tirana - the capital and the most developed city in the country - parents often opt for a combined approach: enrolling their children in public schools while compensating their education with after-school centers. This solution is both financially feasible and aligned with their desire for a higher-quality education for their children. The short duration of the public school day, as a structural deficiency, significantly contributes to the reliance on after-school programs.

However, these after-school centers, like private schools, do not receive funding from the government. They typically rely on parents' fees for support. So, for parents this means some extra expenditures for education. Consequently, this compensatory educational program could be affordable only by parents of the middle class. From the other side, growing income inequality in our society, has enabled more parents to choose not the scheme public school + after-school centers, but just private schools, especially when children come to the age of attending higher secondary education.

From data, the situation shifts significantly at the higher secondary education level. Private gymnasiums account for 53.8% of all gymnasiums in Tirana, indicating that at this stage, parents increasingly prefer private institutions, feeling they provide better educational outcomes.

The widespread licensing of private educational institutions is a defining feature of the privatisation of education in Albania, which works very good only for wealthy parents. This kind of privatisation of education doesn't make better the public educational system. On the contrary, it underlines the no-commitment of state to the public education. Further, the outcomes of an underfunded public educational system influence mostly the achievement of children that come from underprivileged background, the main population of this system.

Parents cited three main reasons for enrolling their children in after-school centers:

1. Short public school hours incompatible with working schedules. Public primary schools often operate only 2–3 hours daily for early grades, compared to 6–7 hours in private schools. This time gap highlights a structural disadvantage in the public system and drives parents toward private alternatives.
2. Academic enrichment opportunities (foreign languages, homework help).
3. A safe, supervised environment that prevents unstructured time.

The monthly cost (approx. 28.000 ALL) makes these programs accessible only to middle- and upper-income families, creating stratified access to support services.

While after-school centers are not state-regulated or supported, they have become necessary for many working families. This transfer of responsibility to parents illustrates a form of "silent" or de facto privatization.

Public school ranking performance card: competition and metrics

School performance cards operate on commercial logics. Ranking schools has failed to disrupt entrenched inequalities and does not enable real parental choice due to geographic enrolment restrictions. The School Performance Card in Albania present at least three contradicts.

1. On one hand, ranking schools based on performance is intended to encourage competition among schools to strive for the top positions on the list. On the other hand, throughout the 8-years long history of the School Performance Card, good schools continue to be good and the weak schools continue to be the same. Further, from the School Performance Card, the best public schools are at the center of the cities, populated usually from wealthy parents and the weak schools are at rural areas, populated usually by the poor. Paraphrasing Coleman (1966), the average achievement of pupils from underprivileged backgrounds may be more adversely affected by attending a low-quality school than that of pupils from privileged backgrounds. Also, is very important to emphasises that there is not tradition from private industry and commerce to help public schools.

2. On one hand, ranking schools based on performance is intended to serve as an instrument to held accountable mostly principals. On the other hand, there has never been a case where a principal was dismissed due to poor school achievements, or because the students had low results at PISA Tests.

3. School enrolment in every city is determined solely by geographical criteria. By Law on Pre-University Education, Article 25, point 3: “The educational institution where the child should be enrolled is determined by the local government bodies, upon the proposal of the local educational office”. In a free-market system, parents must have the freedom to choose – or at least the right to apply to - a school for their children on the basis of some personal criteria which for them constitute an added value, rather than being restricted to the school designated for their area (assigned school). According to Zapfe (2023), schools assume that parents may choose schools that promote high achievement. In Albanian context, the School Performance Card provides parents only with an overview of the quality of the public school in their neighbourhood. If the local school is not among the best, parents are left with limited options: enrolling their child in a private school or deciding whether to invest in extra classes at an after-school center.

Similarly, parents have had neither the opportunity neither the will to influence or change the core processes of public school enrolment or how the system operates. It takes time to change the system and no one has time to experiment with children. The lost here are children from disadvantaged economic background, who are left with each-other, in some low quality schools: pupil’s achievement is strongly related to the educational backgrounds and aspirations of the other students in the school (Coleman, 1966). Public school ranking performance should be evaluated only as a propaganda solution for a system that talk about change and improvement, but in reality this change or improvement never arrived at the school.

Performance cards, introduced as a tool for improving school quality, are critically assessed as symbolic measures that promote the appearance of reform without delivering meaningful change at the school level. For many working parents who continue to choose public schools, the limited and rigid school schedule is incompatible with their needs. In contrast, small private after-school centers offer flexible schedules and academic enrichment opportunities - ranging from math and physics to arts and sports - at full parental cost. These centers are perceived not only as a practical solution but also as a way to enhance children's future academic success.

The privatisation, evident in the rise of fee-based after-school programs, and commercialisation, reflected in the adoption of school ranking systems, have not strengthened

Albania's public education system, but rather contributed to the emergence of parallel educational pathways marked by unequal access and outcomes. Without substantial public investment and policy reforms that prioritize equity, the risk remains that education will increasingly become less public and more private.

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