

Secondary Schools and Inequality: Navigating the Fragmented Landscape of Educational Choices in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

□ CAP Paper 214, January 2019

Aigoul Abdoubaetova researches the growing gap in educational opportunities in Kyrgyzstan. She is Programme Manager of the MA in Politics and Security at the OSCE Academy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, and has over nine years of professional experience working in higher education administration. Previously, Aigoul worked for a number of non-profit organizations specializing in the areas of youth, international adoption, and other social issues. She holds an MA in International Studies from the University of Oregon and a BA in Foreign Languages from Osh State University.

As of 2018, Kyrgyzstan's GDP per capita was reported to be \$1,221.¹ Yet the cost of tuition at some private schools in the capital city, Bishkek, tells a very different story: annual tuition is \$23,800 at the QSI International School,² \$14,155 at the ESCA Bishkek International School, \$13,000 at the Oxford International School, and \$11,000 at the Cambridge Silk Road International School.³

Parents of students at these schools pay between 3.5 and 7.5 times the average yearly salary on education alone. These numbers are illustrative of growing socio-economic inequality in a

country that used to be a Soviet republic where citizens had more or less equal status and equal access to high-quality public education.

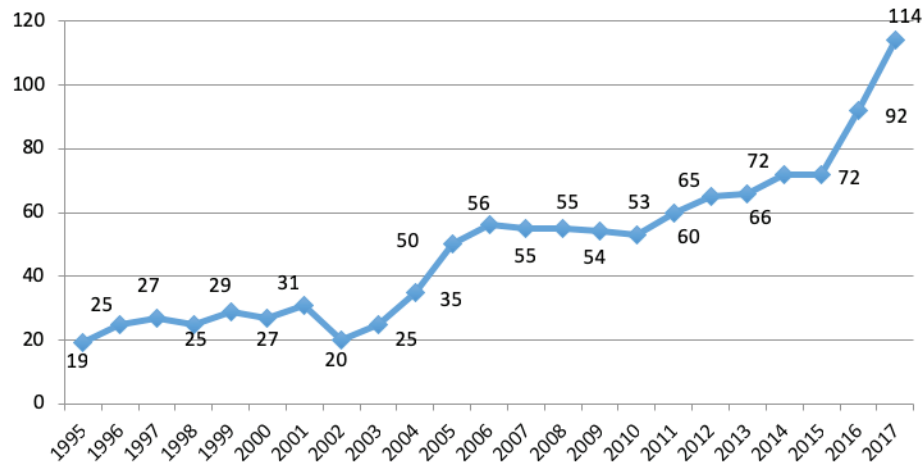
Over the past two decades, secondary educational opportunities in Bishkek have become more diversified, due both to the growing number and variety of private schools and to the division of public schools into different categories depending on the quality of education they offer. This paper explores growing inequality in accessing and obtaining secondary education in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, in the

context of this diversification and fragmentation of schools. The paper sets out to answer the following specific questions:

1. How do parents in Bishkek navigate the fragmented landscape of the secondary education system and choose schools for their children?
2. To what degree do parents' educational choices reflect and reinforce growing socio-economic inequality in a society that is undergoing significant transformations?

To answer these questions, we employed a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. Our main group of informants included parents of schoolchildren aged 7-17 who attend public and private schools in Bishkek. Religious private schools were not included in the study. We surveyed 115 parents using a questionnaire and supplemented this with 22 in-depth interviews. The survey included questions on parents' motivations

Figure 1. Number of private schools in Kyrgyzstan



Source: National Statistical Committee

and strategies for choosing their children’s schools, level of satisfaction with their choices, alternative/complementary ways of acquiring knowledge, and their child’s post-secondary plans.

Of the 115 parents who participated in the survey, 79 percent had children in public schools, 19 percent in private schools, and 2 percent in both. These 115 parents completed surveys about the educations of 175 children (87 boys and 88 girls). The majority of parents who participated in the survey were women (95 percent). Most of them had higher education degrees (78 percent). Twenty-eight percent of informants lived in the city center, 47 percent in the residential micro-districts, and 25 percent in the urban periphery. Sixty-seven percent of participants indicated that they had an average income, 25 percent higher than average, 2 percent high, 2 percent lower than average, and only 1 percent very low.

Of the 22 parents interviewed, 13 sent their children to public schools and 9 to private schools.

In addition, we interviewed the principals or top administrators of eight private schools in order to gain greater insight into the work of private schools. The sample included high- and medium-cost private schools. Finally, we conducted interviews with twelve experts in the field of education, who provided analytical insights into our research questions. We also drew on private schools’ websites and social media pages, as well as online news sources about schools and online forums for parents.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, it provides an overview of the state of secondary education in Bishkek and classifies existing school choices. Next, it explores parental motivations and strategies in choosing schools, before engaging in the wider debate about the link between education choices and inequali-

ty. Finally, it draws conclusions and provides recommendations.

Overview

Private schools emerged in Kyrgyzstan in the mid-1990s as a result of neoliberal reforms. Figure 1 shows the growth in the number of private schools in post-Soviet Bishkek: from 19 (1 percent of all schools) in 1995 to 114 (5 percent) in 2017. The number of students who attend these schools has risen from 0.3 percent to 2.5 percent of all students.⁴ More recent sources state that there are now 187 private schools in the country,⁵ most of which are located in Bishkek. While older private schools in Bishkek were often established in the buildings of former kindergartens and other municipal buildings, in recent years several new, elite-style private schools have been constructed. These new elite schools are located in the southern part of Bishkek, where many of the city’s wealthy and privileged families live.

Private schools in Bishkek are very heterogeneous, with a diverse mix of prices and services.⁶ Many of them have excellent infrastructure and facilities, small class sizes, and better-paid teachers (see Figures 2 and 3).

The boom in private schools is occurring in the context of acute shortages and the deteriorating quality of public schools. So far, very little has been done by the state to address the myriad issues facing public schools: the declin-

ing quality of education, the shortage of qualified teachers, and the poor maintenance of buildings.⁷ Due to high internal migration to the capital city and urban population growth in general, public schools in Bishkek have become extremely overcrowded.⁸ According to Chinara Isakova, Bishkek’s 97 schools currently have a 76,500-student capacity, but the actual number of students is double that. The number of school students is growing by around 10,000 students per year, most-

ly concentrated at the elementary level. Evidently, therefore, there is a serious need for more schools in Bishkek—but only two state schools are built per year.⁹ It has become common practice for first-graders to start their school year in classes exceeding 40, and in some cases even 50, students¹⁰ (see Figure 4). This problem is mostly observed in Bishkek and Chui region. Due to overcrowding, 1,657 of Kyrgyzstan’s 2,262 public schools have two shifts and 159 elementary schools have

Figures 2 and 3. Classrooms in the Cambridge Silk Road International School and Oxford International School



Source: “Gid Kaktus. Chastnye shkoly Bishkeka. Usloviia i tseny,” Kaktus Media, May 25, 2018, https://kaktus.media/doc/338956_gid_kaktus._chastnye_shkoly_bishkeka._ysloviia_i_ceny.html

Figure 4. Overcrowded classes in a public school in a *novostroika* in the Muras Ordo housing development, Bishkek



Source: “Shkoly Bishkeka. Po chetyre uchenika za partoi,” Azattyk, May 24, 2014, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/26568113/p2.html>

Figure 5 and 6. The deteriorating state of School #44 in Bishkek



Source: “Zdanie shkoly 44 v Bishkeke nakhoditsia v avariinom sostoianii,” Reporter Akipress, March 26, 2014, <https://reporter.akipress.org/print:28010>.

a flexible schedule.¹¹

Obviously, in such large classes, students do not get enough attention from teachers. This is compounded by the fact that the average monthly salary of a schoolteacher is 1.3 times lower than the national average, with the result that few people are interested in becoming teachers and existing teachers end up weighed down by ever heavier teaching loads.

Infrastructure is another issue. Having mostly been built in the Soviet period, these schools are now in need of serious renovation (see Figures 5 and 6), yet the annual budget that a public school receives from the Ministry of Education and Science for such purposes is extremely low: 20,000 soms (\$285).¹² Many schools are thus forced to collect money from parents¹³ or continue functioning in poor physical conditions. The Bulan Institute for Peace Innovations recently sent an official letter to President Jeenbekov highlighting these issues and warning that the secondary education system

could collapse completely in the coming 10-15 years.¹⁴

Yet the outlook for public schools is not altogether bleak. There are a few high-performing “elite” public schools (gymnasiums and lyceums) that achieve top results on the NST,¹⁵ a national merit-based selection system that tests the knowledge and skills of secondary school graduates applying for government scholarships to local universities.¹⁶ High-performing elite public schools are seen as prestigious and are difficult to get into. Even families that can afford to send their children to private schools may prefer these schools because of their reputations and excellent academic outcomes.

Landscape of Secondary Educational Opportunities in Bishkek

Based on our analysis and publicly available information, we have classified secondary school opportunities into six main categories: three types of private schools (based on tuition costs), two types of public schools, and

private tutoring/private learning centers. In this section, we discuss each category and summarize them in a table.

The first category of private schools includes elite international private schools with tuition fees above \$10,000 per year: QSI International, Cambridge Silk Road International, ESCA Bishkek International, and Oxford International. These schools boast international accreditation and international curricula different from the curriculum approved by the Kyrgyz Ministry of Education and Science. All classes are taught in English, primarily by international faculty but also by local faculty with solid English language skills. These schools have excellent infrastructure, facilities, and security, as well as small class sizes. They are licensed by the Ministry of Education and Science, and by taking some additional courses, students can also gain a local high school certificate. However, the primary goal of these schools is to prepare students to apply to colleges abroad; some students have been admitted even to some of the world’s top-ranked univer-

sities. These schools can therefore be described as preparing students “for export.” Many of their students do not take part in the National Scholarship Testing (NST) required for admission to local universities:¹⁷ if parents can afford to pay \$10-25,000 for schools in Kyrgyzstan, they can also afford to pay for universities in Europe and the US. It is only obvious that upon graduation from such universities, these students are going to have expanded life and career opportunities. Local students study in these schools alongside the children of expats: their share of local students at Cambridge Silk Road International, ESCA Bishkek International, and Oxford International ranges from 40 percent to 80 percent, but they comprise just 10 percent of the student body of QSI International.¹⁸

The second category of private schools is those with annual tuition costs between \$3,000 and \$7,000. Schools in this category include Turkish private schools such as the Silk Road International School and Turkish private lyceums that belong to the Sapat International Education Institution. Sapat private lyceums have established a reputation as high-quality schools.¹⁹ They are known for achieving very high results on the NST and in various knowledge-based competitions (Olympiads). The Silk Road International School, for its part, is known for being one of the oldest English-language private schools in the country and for charging much less than other international schools. Other schools in this price range, such as Bilimkana-AUCA High School, Bilimka-

na-European School, and Erudit, being relatively new, have yet to earn reputations that would justify their high tuition costs. With the exception of the Silk Road International School, which teaches in English, the language of instruction of the schools in this category is Russian or Kyrgyz. However, all of them claim that some subjects are taught in English or that they generally place a heavier emphasis on English. While some of them successfully prepare students to study abroad, they do not have international accreditation. These schools are successful in preparing their graduates to enter prestigious local universities and build successful local careers. Several of them see preparing the future elite of Kyrgyzstan as part of their larger educational mission. Local students constitute the vast majority of these schools’ student bodies.

The third category contains a longer list of various schools where the cost of education is below \$3,000 per year. These schools are not necessarily known for high-quality teaching or for the high performance of their students. Only occasionally do their names appear among the Gold Certificate winners on NST. Yet they still attract students, as they offer better facilities, better security, and smaller class sizes than state schools, as well as a student-friendly environment. Sending children to private schools, including those in this category, is very convenient for parents who can afford the tuition: children are safe, they are fed and cared for all day, and they come home having completed their homework. Extra services such

as transportation to and from school and some extracurricular activities can be arranged for an additional fee. Unlike in the first two categories, where some of the co-owners or top management are foreign citizens, the owners of these private schools are mostly locals. Some schools—like Ilim, Kelechek, Zvezdochka, and Evrika—are better known than others; they have been in the education market longer and have an established clientele. The average tuition cost is around \$2,500 per year. The Bilimkana school chain, which was established only a few years ago but is quickly becoming popular, also belongs to this category. We also include here some lesser-known or smaller private schools with relatively inexpensive tuition ranging from \$500 to \$800 per year. Some of them are located on university campuses. The price goes down for those schools where the school day is only half a day and where tuition excludes food expenses.

The fourth category is public schools, mostly gymnasiums and lyceums, whose students achieve a high level of academic performance. They can be described as the “top 10,” “top 5,” or “top 3,” depending on who ranks them. These are schools whose students get high NST scores and win various kinds of knowledge-based competitions. However, there is a hierarchy even within this category: three Bishkek schools continuously top the national school rankings for academic performance. On a scale from 0 to 100, School #61’s score is 91, School #70’s is 88, and School #69’s is 76, while the average score for the rest of the schools in the top 20 is

only 40.²⁰ Such schools maintain their reputations by attracting the most qualified teachers and imposing harsh study discipline, heavy study loads, and competitive selection. If students do not perform to the expected standard, they are either expelled or leave voluntarily, unable to cope with the heavy workload. Among the top three, School #61 stands out: since the launch of the NST in 2003, 215 students from this school have received Gold Certificates, meaning that one-third of all Gold Certificate winners nationally have attended this school.²¹ These schools are in high demand by parents despite the fact that their classes are overcrowded and children study in two shifts. Their students have high chances of entering local universities, universities in Russia, and even some foreign uni-

versities on the basis of merit.²²

The majority of schools fall into our fifth category: public schools with average or poor performance. These schools generally lack qualified teachers, produce poor NST results, have two or even three daily shifts, and have poorly maintained facilities. It is surprising that the achievement gap is so wide, considering that all public schools and many private schools follow the same curriculum.

Finally, we look at private tutoring and private learning centers, both as an important secondary education component and as an individual category. Such services are sometimes provided by teachers in schools, but most often they are offered outside the school system, in people's homes or in

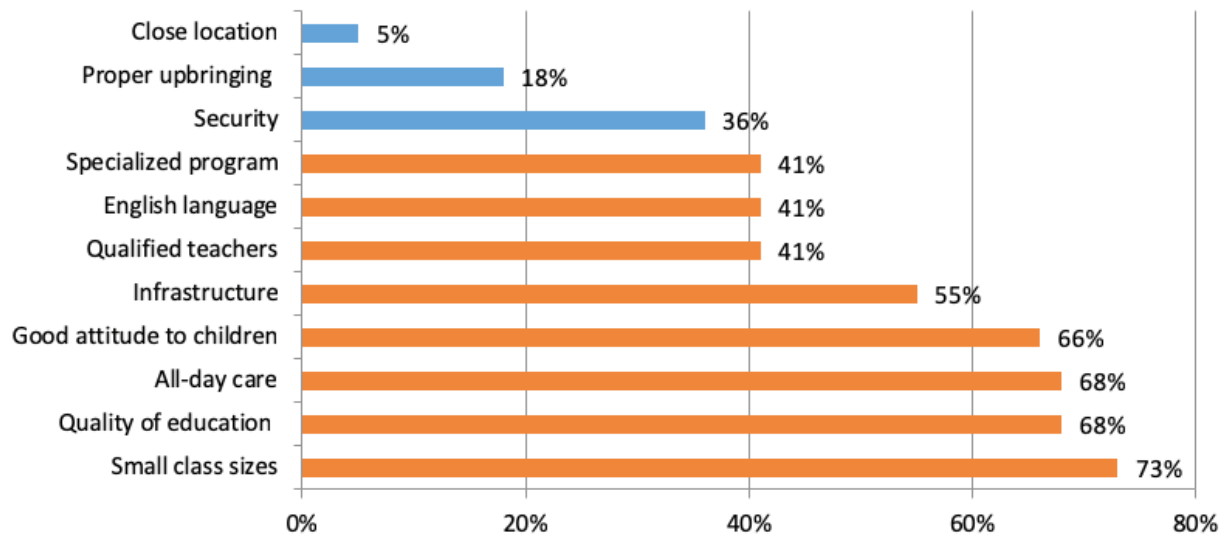
facilities specifically designated for this purpose. The most popular subjects are English and other foreign languages, but tutors are also increasingly engaged for traditional school subjects such as math or Kyrgyz and Russian languages. Such courses help children catch up if they lag behind in school or else learn something that is not on the curriculum.²³ They offer flexible hours and a more or less standard set of prices, which differ for individual and group classes. Nowadays, such tutoring practices and private educational centers have become so popular that it is almost impossible to imagine secondary school education without them.

Table 1 summarizes the main characteristics of all six educational categories, listing their average costs.

Table 1. Secondary educational opportunities in Bishkek

1. Top elite international private schools:
 - a. Tuition – \$10-25,000
 - b. Preparing students “for export”: international accreditation, all subjects taught in English
 - c. International teachers, excellent facilities, security, small class sizes, student-friendly atmosphere
2. Higher-fee private schools:
 - a. Tuition – \$3-5,000
 - b. Excellent prospects of entering top universities in Kyrgyzstan
 - c. Qualified and well-paid teachers, good facilities, security, small class sizes, student-friendly
3. Medium and lower-fee private schools:
 - a. Tuition—under \$3,000;
 - b. Financial (not always merit-based) opportunities for entering good universities
 - c. Select teachers, decent facilities, security, small class sizes, student-friendly atmosphere
4. High-performing public schools:
 - a. Free; collection of fees from parents for school needs—\$100-200 per year (estimated average)
 - b. Merit-based opportunities to enter good universities
 - c. Select teachers, average facilities, no security, large class sizes, harsh discipline, selective admission
5. Public schools with average and low academic performance:
 - a. Free; collection of fees from parents for school needs—\$50-80 a year (estimated average)
 - b. Limited prospects (both merit-based and financial) of entering good universities
 - c. Underpaid teachers with heavy loads, average or poor facilities, no security, large class sizes
6. After-school private tutoring and private learning centers:
 - a. \$2-4 per hour or \$80-150 per month to attend group sessions (3-4 times a week)
 - b. Flexible schedules and payment schemes; targeted choice of subjects

Figure 7. Parents’ reasons for choosing a private school



Parents’ Motivations and Strategies for Making School Choices

Having sketched the landscape of educational choices parents in Bishkek have for their children, we turn to explore their motivations and strategies when navigating this landscape. We distinguish between the motivations and strategies for choosing private and public schools.

Private Schools

The survey results shown in Figure 7 highlight parents’ most commonly mentioned motivations for choosing private schools. Small class sizes (73 percent) was the leading motivating factor, followed by quality of education and all-day child care, each of which scored 68 percent. Sixty-six percent of parents were swayed by a perception that private schools had better attitudes toward children. Good infrastructure (55 percent), highly qualified teach-

ers (41 percent), English language education (41 percent), a specialized program (41 percent), and security (36 percent) were also important.

In the following subsections, we unpack these and other motivations by interweaving the survey results with analysis of our interviews with parents, school administrators, and experts.

Small Class Sizes, Better Conditions, and Better Treatment of Children

One major factor motivating parents to consider private school for their children is the size of classes. In many public schools, classes are extremely overcrowded: several informants indicated that in a 45-minute lesson, the average child receives less than a minute of attention from the teacher. By contrast, classes in private schools are generally small; student numbers range from 10 to 25.²⁴ In choosing pri-

vate schools, parents expect closer teacher-student interaction and a more individualized approach. Parents interpret small class sizes as an important factor that contributes to the quality of learning.

Some parents were very concerned about their child’s health and wellbeing in overcrowded classes. One parent, whose child attends one of the high-performing public schools in Bishkek, expressed a wish to move her daughter to a private school so that she would have better study conditions:

I am satisfied with the quality of education that our school provides and the teachers are very qualified. However, if I had more money, I would transfer my daughter to private school because of the small class sizes and good conditions. There are 47 children in my daughter’s classroom which was designed to fit 25. There is a 40 cm gap between the blackboard and the desk in the first row, so the child who has to sit at that desk is

the most miserable, because he/she sits too close to the blackboard. In winter, when the heater is on, there is not enough air in the classroom. It's the same on hot summer days. Because of the high number of children, school happens in two shifts. The school cafeteria stops working at 4 pm and the child who is at school until 7 pm often goes hungry (Parent, public school #26).

A few parents, often who had lived abroad or had been exposed to Western-style education, were very critical of the teaching methods and communication style of teachers in public schools. They took a negative view of the top-down and authoritarian style of interacting with students, comparing it to the old Soviet style with its harsh disciplinary methods. For them, private schools offered an escape from the conservative style of teaching in public schools, promising better treatment of children and a more liberal and relaxed learning atmosphere. As one parent explained:

If I were to choose between two evils, I would choose private schools because at least they offer some relief, including better teaching and communication methods (Parent, private school).

All-Day Child Care Services

Most private schools in Bishkek provide all-day child care services. The school day in a private school lasts from 8 am to 5 or 6 pm. Schools provide breakfast, lunch, snacks, and in some cases an early dinner. They also organize after-school activities, such as language courses, sports, music, arts, and other interest-based clubs, on the school premises, as

well as reserving time for completing homework. Schools organize transportation to and from school, which can save parents time during rush hour. This approach is convenient for families, particularly in households where both parents work. An expert on education articulates this in the following way:

For some parents, especially of children in elementary school, it is convenient that their child is cared for during the day because they are at work. He eats there, rests, does homework. This takes a certain amount of pressure off parents (Expert, Ministry of Education).

As many public schools in Bishkek are underfunded and overcrowded, they work in two shifts and do not have the means or facilities to organize afterschool activities. This creates a burden on working parents, who traditionally reach out to grandparents or other extended family members for help with childrearing. However, this option is not available to everyone. Many residents of Bishkek come from various parts of the country and leave their elderly parents and extended families behind. Working parents therefore seek alternative help with child rearing, either hiring nannies, relying on local relatives, or choosing private schools.

In Kyrgyzstan, children's safety at school has been a problem for many years. There have been many reported cases of violence among high school children, as well as of school racketeering.²⁵ Only in very recent years have parents started to collect money to hire security guards or install camera surveillance at

public schools. Even then, private schools guarantee children's security far better than public schools, respondents noted:

Private schools are more expensive, but you are paying not for education but for security. There are 16 people in the class and you know that no one will hurt your child (Parent, private school).

An education expert echoed this view:

I think if parents could afford it, many would send their children to private schools just to make sure the child is looked after. This is especially important in the case of the security of teenagers, including informational security. Parents do not worry and their children are in a secure environment until they pick them up (Expert, Ministry of Education).

Thus, another motivation driving parents to choose private schools is this "all-day childcare" approach, which helps minimize parents' daily chores and ensure their children's safety.

International Private Schools and English as a Means of Entering Universities Abroad

The cost of a private school rises sharply if it offers a curriculum taught solely in English and has international accreditation. Interviews with school administrators and analysis of graduates' profiles revealed that these schools are heavily oriented toward preparing children to study abroad. Having native English speakers as teachers, an international curriculum, and college counselors who prepare applications to foreign universities all mean that

these students have more opportunities to access the global education system than their peers at other schools. These schools can also organize trips to European and U.S. universities (at parents' expense) to spark students' interest in studying abroad.

However, some parents and experts raised questions about the quality of this education for its high cost. One expert said:

As far as I know, in most private schools where the cost is very high, the emphasis is on infrastructure, good conditions, and English-speaking teachers. But I have reservations regarding the qualifications of teachers at these schools. Look at the results of republican Olympiads and Gold Certificates. Among them you will not find representatives of these elite schools, except for the Kyrgyz-Turkish Lyceums (Expert, education agency).

Interviews with representatives of some of the elite international schools suggest that their students do not achieve high NST results for three reasons. The first is language limitations: NST and local competition are conducted in Russian or Kyrgyz, while these schools' students study in English. The second is that many local students of international schools do not plan to apply to local universities: by the time the NST comes around, they have often already received admission letters from universities abroad. Third, the children of foreign citizens and expatriates who study in these schools are not interested in taking the NST. Instead, they take international exams such as the SAT, TOEFL, and IELTS, which are required for entrance

to universities in the West.

When it comes to private schools with a local curriculum and instruction in Russian, it becomes less clear how successful they are at preparing children for education abroad. Most of them allocate more hours to studying English than public schools and use English as one of their main marketing strategies. Some of them also organize study tours to Europe or the US for an extra fee. An interview with a representative of the Sapat lyceum (Sapat International Education Institution) administration revealed that the chain has big ambitions to send students to foreign universities in the coming years:

This year, out of 750, about 350-400 students went abroad. Fifty went on full scholarships to universities that are included in the world's top 100. We achieved this goal in just two years. Our plan for next year is to increase this number to 100. They took 25 students to Hong Kong. They have eight universities and five of them are in the top 100. All 25 [students] received scholarships. Tuition costs \$25,000-35,000 (Representative of Sapat International Education Institution).

The same representative of the Sapat school chain was critical of the local system of rating schools based on the NST, pointing to a number of flaws in that approach. He suggested that Kyrgyzstan should shift to thinking more globally and rely on international ratings, such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), evaluating schools' performance by the same standards under which foreign universities' students gain admission

rather than on the number of Gold Certificates or local Olympiads. The latter, according to him, are local and trivial matters.

Turkish Boarding Schools: Quality and Added Value

Many Turkish private schools in Kyrgyzstan belong to the Sapat International Education Institution system, which currently has two international schools, 16 lyceums (boarding schools), and four primary schools in the country.²⁶ Both international schools, two of the boarding schools, and three of the primary schools are located in Bishkek. Sapat private schools are known for their quality, proof of which can be seen in the number of international and local competitions their pupils have won and the number of Gold Certificates that students have received over the years. In addition to quality, other motivations prompted parents to choose these schools: they instill moral values and encourage an upright lifestyle. Students of the Turkish schools are often described as well-bred, hardworking, honest, and self-disciplined.²⁷ While the curriculum does not contain religious education per se, they try to school children in Islamic ethics within a universal moral framework; values such as respect for parents and the elderly, tolerance, compassion, altruism, brotherhood/sisterhood, etc., are important components of Sapat education. A representative of a Turkish school administration confirmed:

Our philosophy is to provide two things: quality education and proper

upbringing. These two things cannot be separated from each other (Representative, Turkish private school).

A parent whose child attends one of the Turkish elite private schools commented:

The reason why I gave my son to the school is English, but the ethics of the school were equally important to me (Parent, private school).

According to this parent, Turkish boarding schools are much more effective at promoting important values than non-boarding Turkish schools because their pupils have less contact with outsiders. Sapat boarding schools are segregated by gender in the upper-middle grades and high school students usually live at school during the week, going home for weekends. Teachers in boarding schools therefore have more control over the behavior of their students. Often, boys and girls are sent to Turkish boarding schools during their teenage years specifically for these reasons. One respondent said that whereas previously parents sent their children to a *mol-*

do (an Islamic scholar), they now send them to Turkish schools.

A representative of the girls' lyceum shared that boarding schools like his have become popular not just because of education, but also due to social/family circumstances. He explained that girls who live with stepfathers are frequently sent to boarding schools. He also discussed the role of migration. Boarding schools, especially in the south, have become popular among migrant families who live in Russia. Housing prices are too high in Russia to allow the entire family to live properly, and often both parents are labor migrants. It has thus become common practice among migrants in Russia to leave their children behind in Kyrgyzstan with grandparents or other relatives. For these families, private boarding schools have become a good option, giving children education as well as needed care:

Lots of parents work abroad or frequently travel abroad. They need someone who can take care of [their

children]. Parents may not always be interested only in the quality of education or school results. So our school, besides education, is also taking care of children and filling this social gap that we have in our society (Representative, Turkish boarding school).

Private Schools as Social Currency

In choosing schools, parents primarily rely on the opinions of their social networks: friends, relatives, or colleagues. According to the survey, 76 percent of all parents surveyed rely on the recommendations or reviews of friends and relatives in finding information about schools (see Figure 8).

Because private schools are relatively new and it is not easy to obtain information about their results and performance, parents normally seek suggestions from people in their social circles. We find that parents are more likely to send their children to a particular private school if other parents in their social circle send

Figure 8. Sources of information used by parents to choose a school

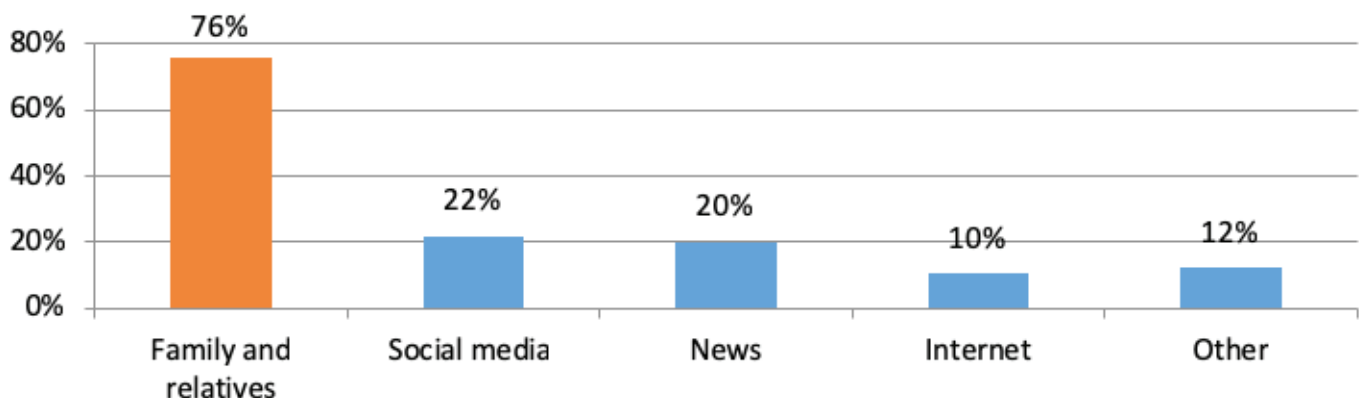
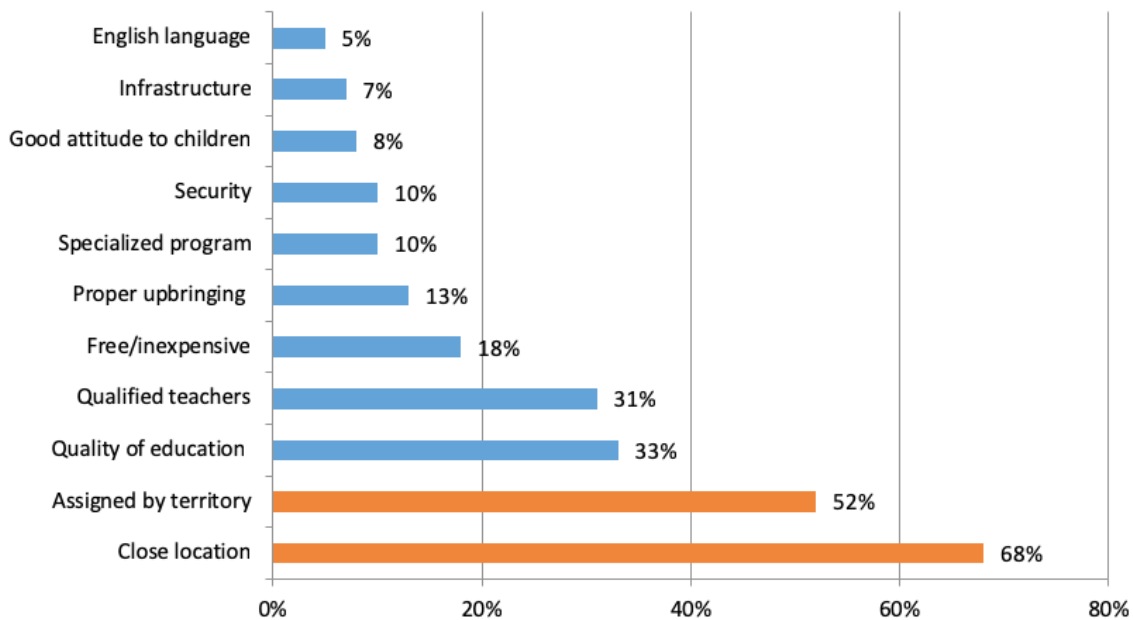


Figure 9. Parents’ reasons for choosing a public school



their children there and assess their experience positively.

Interestingly, such sharing of their experiences in obtaining private secondary education can also reinforce status competition among parents: if some families send their children to a prestigious school, others also feel social pressure to do so. One parent whose child attends the Silk Road International School told the story of how, when a more expensive branch of the same school was opened, wealthier parents moved their children there, even though, according to her, there was no difference between the curricula of these two schools. Parents send their children to more expensive schools to be “on trend” and “keep up with the Joneses.” We suggest that by sending children to private schools, parents implicitly seek to showcase their social status. In this sense, private schools serve as social currency for parents.

Public Schools

When it comes to parents’ motivations for choosing public schools, the survey results reveal a completely different picture. The figure below details the most commonly mentioned reasons for choosing a public school. The majority (68 percent) indicated that the proximity of the school was a major motivation, while 52 percent said that their choice was determined for them by the district in which they reside. Only 33 percent indicated that the quality of the education was a motivating factor, and all other factors were significantly less relevant.

Below, we analyze the most significant reasons why parents chose public schools, using both survey and interview results.

School Location

In line with the survey results, interviews confirmed that the most

significant factor in choosing public schools is their proximity. Parents choose public schools because they are located in the neighborhood or close to where parents work. In the Soviet era, Bishkek schools were planned in such a way as to be walking distance from any place of residence. This is still the case in the central parts of the city and in some micro-districts, while access to schools is more complicated in the new residential areas on the urban periphery. For families that live within walking distance of a public school, it is a very convenient choice.

Parents in Bishkek can send their children to the schools in their district or else try to place children in the schools of their choice in other districts. Our informants who send their children to public schools were divided between those who used neighborhood schools and those who bypassed this system in search of bet-



ter-quality schools. Among those who chose neighborhood schools, proximity was the single most important factor influencing their decision. When asked about their reasons for choosing their school, one parent said this:

I did not go and check out other schools. This school is located close to us, so I chose it. I don't know how it is different from other schools (Parent, public school # 87).

Sticking to a neighborhood school was also influenced by a lack of the resources associated with attending better ones, which would require extra cost and effort. One parent explained her experience with it in this way:

I have five children; four of them go to school. Before, two of them used to go to a gymnasium. After they finished elementary school, I had to transfer them to School #88 near our place of residence. The reason for this is that we would spend money on transportation and it would also require an adult to take them and bring them back. And that school would require more money for renovation and we would pay more money. So we have transferred them to the neighborhood school. You pay less for school fees here. It is only one stop away. The children walk to school (Parent, public school # 88).

Quality of Education

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, some schools were restructured into lyceums and gymnasiums. These differ from ordinary schools in that they have a more specialized curriculum, extra courses, and a heavier workload. The cost of these extra courses is partly covered by the Ministry of Education. The school principal's

ability to raise extra funding from parents and other sponsors helps these schools retain good-quality teachers. This, coupled with selective admission policies, leads to a differentiation in education quality and outcomes between lyceums/gymnasiums and average schools.²⁸ In Bishkek, some lyceums/gymnasiums are popular and in high demand due to their higher NST scores, which increase students' chances of entering more prestigious local universities.

The search for high-quality education was one of the major factors that influenced parents to choose such high-performing lyceums/gymnasiums. Those who lived in poorer new settlements in Bishkek and those who had no choice but send their children to low-performing neighborhood schools complained that schools were extremely overcrowded and understaffed, with a very high rate of teacher turnover. Parents who were able to place their children in high-performing public schools mentioned qualified and committed teachers, the school's specialized curriculum, discipline, high NST scores, and the number of competitions won by the students as important factors in their decision. When asked about her motivation, one mother said the following:

First, this school is very strong and my child will get a good education not only in physics and mathematics, but also in all other subjects. My son is good at mathematics and I want him to develop these skills further (Parent, public school # 61).

Because admission to these

high-performing schools is competitive, securing a place for a child requires certain skills and commitment from parents, such as early planning, preparation, hiring tutors, etc. One parent shared her experience of how being strategic and preparing well in advance helped her to prepare her children for the high-performing school #61:

I would prepare both my kids at home after they came home from kindergarten. They could read at the age of 4. I taught them math. I researched what schools are good, where they are located, what they teach. I planned ahead, thinking about which school to choose. I developed my own rating by asking parents about the schools their kids attend. I asked questions about which schools were the best. And then based on my personal rating, I decided that my kids should go to school #61. And then we started preparing for admission (Parent, public school # 61).

In choosing a similar type of school, another parent considered a combination of factors. First, she shortlisted the top three schools: schools #70, #61 and #26. She recognized that school #61 was the highest quality of all but considered her children to be better at humanities than at mathematics, and after considering the schools' locations chose school #26. Although their neighborhood school was also considered not bad, she decided to go with school #26 because it had much higher ratings. Additionally, she found out from her social circles that the principal of school #26 had a good reputation and made sure that the admissions process was transparent and based on merit. She hired private

tutors and successfully prepared her child for the entrance examination.

One common feature of parents who sent their children to high-performing public schools was that parents were themselves educated and interested in their children’s development. They were very resourceful and well-informed about schools in Bishkek, their ratings and performance, using their social and professional networks to find out information. Most importantly, they knew how to get their children into these schools: they actively encouraged and motivated their children to study. Many used the services of private tutors, while others prepared children at home themselves, investing their own time and energy and using their own knowledge and skills.

In an interview, an education expert reminded us that despite the presence of elite international private schools in Bishkek, for many residents, the dream schools remain the “elite” public

schools, such as #61, #13, and #6, attendance at which has been seen as a status symbol since Soviet times. He mentioned that until very recently, it was common to have to pay large bribes to be admitted to these public schools. Higher, unofficial parental fees paid to gain admission to these schools help explain why very poor parents cannot send their children there.²⁹

Flexible Afterschool Time

Attending public schools generally takes only half a day, in contrast to the full day at many private schools. Children are therefore left with ample afterschool time to do homework, tutoring, and various extra-curricular activities. Some parents indicated that the advantage of a public school is that their child can attend the Shubin music school, which is popular among many urban families in Bishkek. Afterschool time can also be used to attend various interest-based clubs, such as dancing, drawing, sports, chess, etc.

Many use these free hours to fill the gaps in the public education system in certain core subjects by attending private lessons. Private tutoring has become very popular among students of all types of schools, but more so in public schools (36 percent of students) than in private ones (23 percent) (see Figure 10). However, more private school students attended educational centers (41 percent) than did their counterparts in public schools (30 percent). One way to explain this is that students in public schools want extra help with core subjects such as math and English, and therefore seek out private tutors, while private school students tend to be enrolled in extracurricular classes for sports, music, arts, etc., which are more often group-based. More students in public schools received family help with homework (59 percent) than students in private schools (36 percent), as many private schools provide homework support at school.

Survey results showed that math and languages, especially En-

Figure 10. Strategies for obtaining additional knowledge outside the school curriculum, by type of school

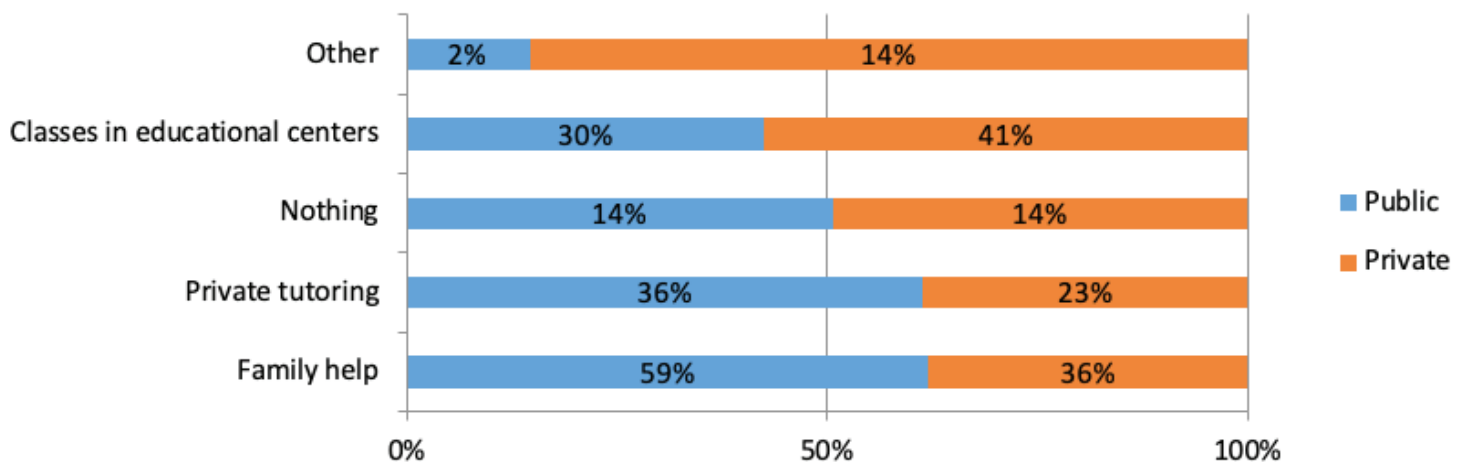
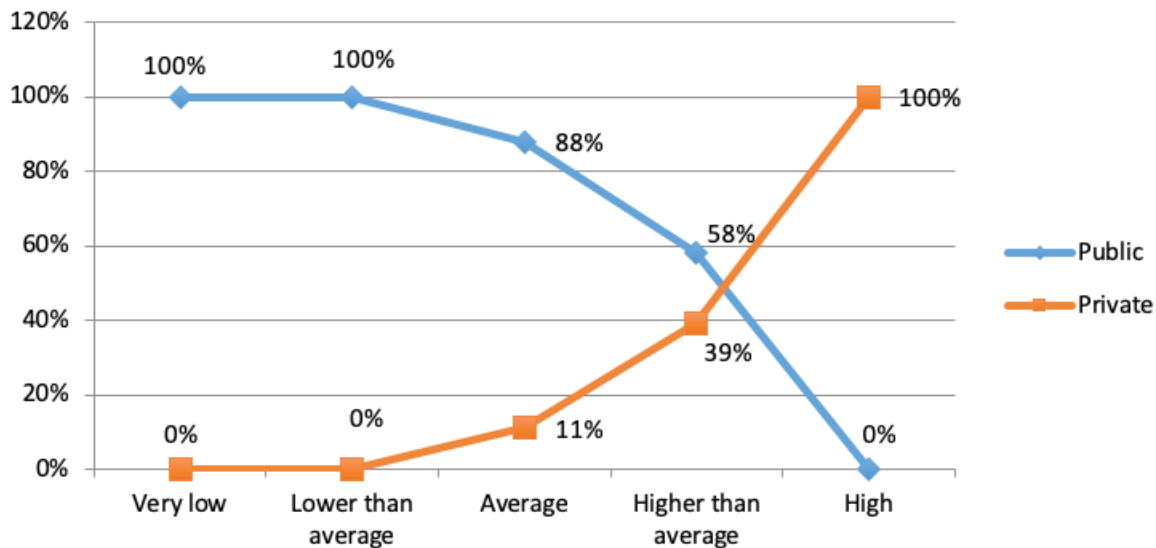


Figure 11. Choice of private vs. public school, by income



English, are the most popular subjects. One expert described the popularity of the private tutoring business in Bishkek this way:

I know very few schools where kids do not go to private tutors. Even the majority of kids in elite gymnasiums also go to private tutoring. Money flows there (Expert, consultant on education).

However, location and distance are important. Parents who lived on the outskirts of Bishkek complained about the lack of access to good tutoring centers in their area. The majority of private educational centers and places to do extracurricular activities are located in the city center. This also contributes to the popularity of such activities among long-term urban residents compared to newcomers, who overwhelmingly live in new settlements.

While private tutoring is not cheap, it can actually offer cost savings to middle-income families. Some such families find

it more strategic to send their child to a high-performing public school and compensate for the missing knowledge through private tutoring. For example, learning English privately is much less costly than attending an international private school. One parent, while convinced that high-performing public schools provide quality education, noted the advantage of private schools when it comes to English. For her, hiring a private tutor was the solution:

I have seen how well children from international schools speak English. As far as I understand, they are no different in terms of other subjects. Of course, it is not bad, but why would you overpay just for English? I need to hire a good tutor so that my child can compete with them. These schools also give academic writing skills. This is their big advantage; public school children do not have these skills. So this is a big disadvantage of public schools if you want to send your kid abroad. You have to get additional help in this (Parent, public school # 6).

Preparing Children for “Real Life”

Some parents find that public schools allow children to grow up in the authentic social environment of Bishkek and better prepare them for real life. Many parents who chose public schools were critical of the conditions in private schools, considering them too protective and nurturing and noting that children socialize mainly with others from similar social backgrounds. One expert shared the following opinion:

Many parents consider that private schools do not provide kids with the opportunity to become closely familiar with life and make them less adaptable (Expert).

Parents consider that public schools allow children to study with other children from diverse backgrounds and learn to socialize and survive. They see “real life,” take public transportation to school, become more independent and more disciplined, and

thus grow up to be more prepared for the difficult life ahead.

Discussion: Portrait of Educational Inequality

In this final section, we try to understand how these choices are shaped by the kinds of resources parents have at their disposal. This requires taking a hard look at the issue of inequality, which we do first by comparing families’ motivations and strategies and then by categorizing families by the different forms of capital they employ in providing education for their children.

Factors of Inequality

The most obvious factor that reflects inequality between public and private school parents is income. Figure 11 confirms the obvious, showing a direct correlation between income and choice of school. We see that parents with higher incomes can afford private schools, while public school users are those who have

average incomes or are poor. However, some families with higher-than-average incomes also use public schools.

Inequality can also be identified by comparing parents’ motivations and strategies. For example, location was the most important factor for parents of children in public schools—69 percent, versus only 5 percent for parents of children in private schools. This suggests that children in private schools are not limited by distance: their parents can take them across the city, usually in their own cars, or they can afford to pay for transportation organized by schools. Mobility is thus connected to income. Money also allows parents of private school children to access privileges: small classes with proper conditions, a good diet, and better treatment of children by teachers and staff. For families whose children attend public schools, these were not mentioned as factors in their choice.

The quality of education in private schools was rated higher (68 percent) than in public schools (33 percent). The comparison of parental satisfaction with their choice of schools shows that parents from private schools were more satisfied—4.29 out of 5, compared to 3.74 for parents of children in public schools. The reasons for dissatisfaction were different for public and private schools. The most common complaints about public schools included poorly qualified teachers, overcrowded classes, bad treatment of children, a lack of books, and collection of money from parents for various school needs. Complaints in private schools were more elaborate and related to the quality of food, the quality of education not being quite up to expectations, and fear of the experimental character of private schools and their innovative curricula.

One of the most noticeable gaps between the two types of schools is revealed in the future plans

Figure 12. Plans for children’s future, by type of school

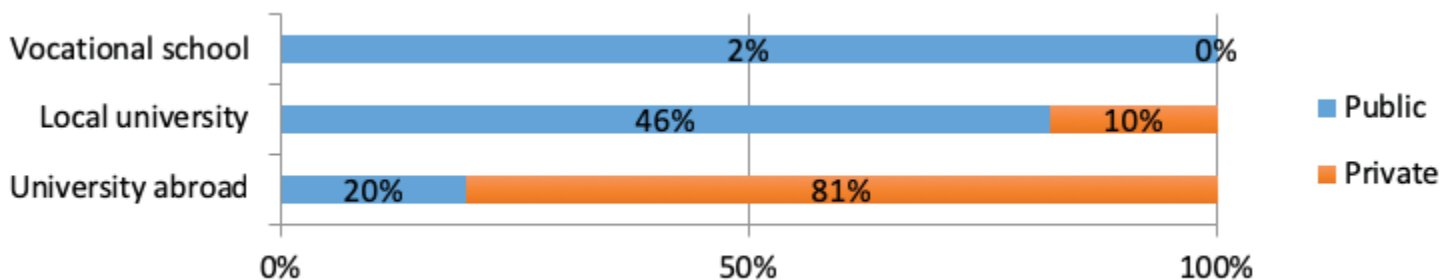
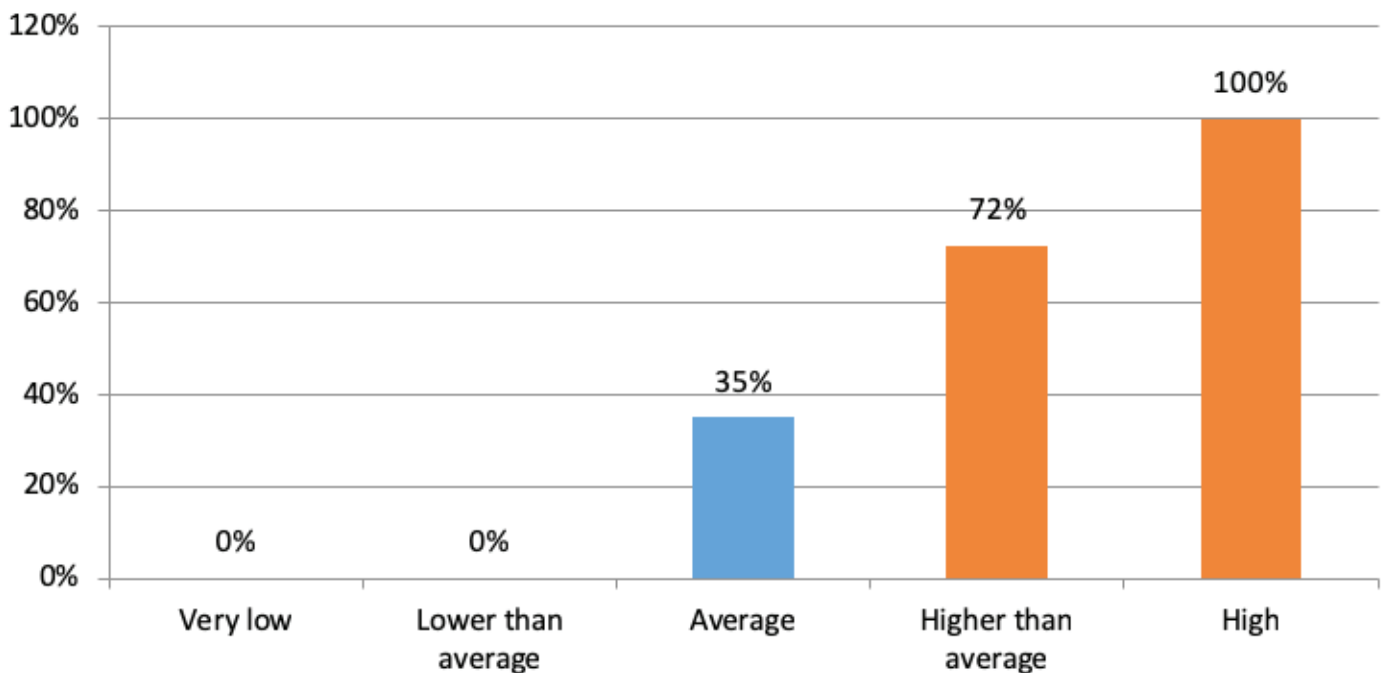


Figure 13. Study abroad plans, by income



that parents envisioned for their children. Figure 12 shows these differences: only 10 percent of parents of private school attendees were interested in local universities, compared to 46 percent of the parents of those attending public schools; 81 percent of parents of private school children indicated that their child would study abroad, compared to 20 percent of parents of public school children. The top destination for obtaining post-secondary education was Europe, followed by the US and Russia.

Besides a correlation between future plans and type of school, there is also a very strong positive correlation between future plans and income. This is shown in Figure 13.

Looking at all these figures and comparisons, one could suggest

a fairly straightforward correlation here: those who have money have more opportunities both for private education and for education abroad, while those who lack money have fewer. Yet the situation is more complex; looking at educational inequality only from the financial angle does not tell the complete story. In the next section, we incorporate other forms of capital into the discussion.

Three Forms of Capital and Categorization of Families

In order to see the full picture, we suggest looking at family resources by considering different forms of capital: financial, social, and cultural (human). This approach, pioneered by Bourdieu, has been explored by a number of other scholars. Non-financial forms of capital—social and cultural—are important resources that can con-

tribute to people’s wellbeing.³⁰

Social capital usually implies various forms of social relations that people can use to their benefit. In the context of Kyrgyzstan, social relations and networks have always been extremely important;³¹ indeed, tribal and family networks are believed to be at the core of Kyrgyz politics.³² In this research, we found that parents with wider social networks could access more information on educational opportunities. It is through their social networks that they sort out which schools are good and find out where to find qualified teachers and tutors. In some cases, having connections to school directors can even secure a discount at a private school or a place for a child in a highly competitive school.

Cultural capital refers to various

kinds of knowledge, skills, and information, including familiarity with how institutions work, that result in positive outcomes for upward mobility. It is a question of knowing the “rules of the game.”³³ Parents, even when they do not have much financial capital to invest in an elite private school, are still able to access high-quality education by sending their children to high-performing public schools. Knowing the rules of the game helps them make strategic decisions, such as preparing children ahead of time for admission to a competitive school or university; taking advantage of various extracurricular activities, such as music schools, drawing, choreography, etc.; seeking out additional learning opportunities through private tutors; and being actively engaged in their children’s education, constantly motivating and directing them.

Parents’ education also helps. Many parents who grew up during the Soviet era, when literacy was almost universal and schools and universities offered very high-quality education, possess a very good knowledge of core school subjects. These parents might not have the money to place their children in private schools or the social connections to secure them places in prestigious public schools, yet they are quite well-educated themselves and they devote their own time to studying with children.

Thus, having a wide range of social connections and cultural capital can increase parents’ access to schools and opportunities for obtaining knowledge.³⁴ When we take into consideration these

additional forms of capital, the portrait of educational inequality becomes more complex and nuanced. We see that those who do not have financial, social, or human capital are the ones at risk. Accordingly, we can distinguish several main categories of families by reference to the resources they have for placing children in schools. It is important to look at these categories as fairly abstract ones and bear in mind that many families belong to more than one category. Yet creating some form of typology helps us visualize the nuances of inequality. We start at the upper end in terms of resources.

Elite

This category includes representatives of the upper echelons of Kyrgyz politicians: parliamentary deputies, upper-level ministry bureaucrats, representatives of the Presidential Office, and high-ranking professionals working in international organizations. These are people who have at least two (financial and social) or even three (financial, social, and cultural) forms of capital. These families can afford to send their children to international English-language schools or else oblige school principals to accept their children to these schools for a lower fee (or no fee at all). Parents in this category have the widest range of choices for their children. Down the hierarchy of official positions, the range of choices shrinks: lower-ranked officials might still have social and cultural capital, but not necessarily financial capital.

“New Kyrgyz”

This category includes Kyrgyz businessmen who became wealthy by engaging in cross-border trade, the sewing industry, construction, or other businesses. Many of them came to Bishkek from the regions and built their fortunes by working hard over the course of many years. Such “new Kyrgyz” may not have strong urban cultural capital and may have only a modest education and social background. But they do have money, and depending on how successful their businesses are, they can afford different kinds of private schools, from the cheapest to the most expensive. For representatives of this category, sending children to an expensive private school might be a matter of social prestige, while placing them in cheaper private schools is a matter of convenience: kids are well looked-after and parents do not have to do homework with them.

Urban Middle Class

This category includes long-term city residents who themselves grew up in Bishkek or consider themselves urbanites. Members of this group have excellent Russian language skills³⁵ and urban-style manners. Many of them work as professionals in various fields, including the more or less well-paid positions in international organizations. Some might have small businesses. Even with higher-than-average salaries, their incomes might not be enough to afford private schools. The top choice for such parents is to place their children in the prestigious high-performing public

schools. To do so, they make the best of their social, cultural, and human capital. We interviewed parents who had graduated from such schools and whose children now attend the same schools. A feeling of belonging and personal connections with school principals and teachers help them in this. Being well-educated themselves, they can benefit from their human capital by helping children prepare to study in such demanding schools. These are the parents who are most likely to be critical of private schools, dismissing them as providing a poor quality of education, while justifying their own choice.

Urban Poor

This is the category of long-term urban residents in the lower socio-economic strata—those without regular or well-paid jobs. These include low-paid teachers, medical staff (nurses), and other low-paid government workers, whose only source of income is their salary. Unlike the urban

middle class, they are not able to generate additional income from small and medium businesses. Having a child attend a high-status public school can place a significant burden on such households, as these schools still collect higher parental contributions than average schools. The low status of their jobs means that they have limited social capital or professional connections. The only form of capital these urban poor might have, then, is their human capital—that is, their own knowledge of subjects. They are more likely to send children to the regular neighborhood schools and contribute to their children’s education by helping them with their homework.

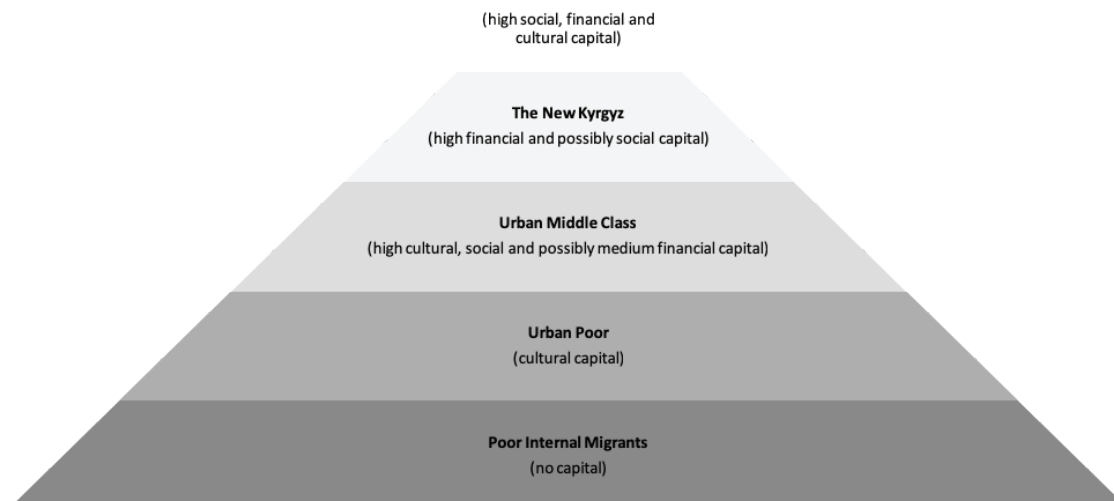
Poor Internal Migrants

Since Kyrgyzstan’s independence, Bishkek has attracted a large number of internal migrants, who have come to the capital in the search of income/survival opportunities. These families might not have any qualifications

or social connections that would help them in the professional or business realms. They live in the family dormitories in the city center or in the less prestigious *novostroikas* on the outskirts of the city. The only choice they have is to send children to the neighborhood schools. Unfortunately, because many *novostroikas* lack schools, their children have to travel long distances to attend the nearest school. These children are the most unfortunate because their parents do not have money or connections; being from rural areas, their social capital is built around kinship and relatives who live in the villages they came from. Nor do they have much human capital to help their children with homework or advance their educational opportunities.

These are the five categories of Bishkek residents, which summarize the inequality between families in terms of children’s access to education by looking at different forms of capital: financial, social, and cultural. What is

Figure 14. Categorization of families in regard to access to schools



the relative weight of each category in the overall composition of resource possession? Putting precise numbers on this is beyond the scope of this research, but by looking at average salaries and at the numbers of public and private schools in the city, we suggest that the composition is skewed toward the lower end. We propose that educational inequality in Bishkek can be understood as a pyramid (see Figure 14).

Conclusion

Parents' secondary education choices in Bishkek reveal that, as in many parts of the world, private schools serve wealthy and upper middle-income families. Despite some debates around the quality of education in private schools, privileged families in Bishkek opt for private education for a variety of reasons. Some see in private education an opportunity to escape the Soviet-style education system, which they perceive as outdated, while others value private schools for their conveniences. For a select few, private schools provide an easier path to leaving the country and entering global education, while for others, they provide a mechanism for securing higher status for children (and parents). As most private schools do not have strict and competitive admission policies, the only criterion for accessing such schools is the family's financial status. Thus, private schools sort out student composition according to parents' socio-economic backgrounds. This paves the ways for social segregation and inequality.

However, parents with strong so-

cial and cultural capital can place their children in the best public schools, which provide an education no worse than that in some private schools. This tells us that inequality in secondary education in Bishkek is layered and depends on how families can utilize their resources. It is those families that lack all three forms of capital whose children are at the highest risk and need serious attention from policymakers. It is disturbing to know that these poor families—who make up the majority of the urban population of Bishkek—are disadvantaged in accessing not only private schools, but also high-quality public schools.

Recommendations

The secondary education landscape in Bishkek is diverse and fragmented. This research divides secondary schools into five categories: three types of private schools differentiated by price (elite, high, and medium-fee schools) and two types of public schools differentiated by performance (high-performing and low-performing schools). Our research found that while wealthy families chose private schools, it was middle-income urban families who primarily accessed high-performing and competitive public schools. Poor families lack both the financial and non-financial resources to access high-quality schools and mostly attend low-performing neighborhood schools. To address such inequality in secondary education, policymakers should prioritize the needs of low-performing schools and increase poor families' access to quality education.

To the Ministry of Education and Science of the Kyrgyz Republic:

- Establish a program that pairs individual high- and low-performing public schools for mentorship
- Organize workshops for high-performing school principals to share knowledge and skills through training
- Foster a sense of community and collegiality among principals of all schools through a range of activities, such as social gatherings, workshops and social media networks
- Facilitate public-private school cooperation by sharing the best practices of high-performing private schools with low-performing public schools
- Establish incentives for private schools to conduct socially responsible activities and contribute to the improvement of the education system
- Reach out to international organizations and private donors, such as local businessmen, to sponsor scholarships for children from new settlements to cover expenses such as books, transportation, and meals at high-performing schools.

To International Organizations and NGOs:

- Establish community learning centers that offer low-fee or free educational courses and activities in new settlements. Such opportunities can supplement the Ministry of Education's efforts to help low-performing schools and increase their competitiveness with higher-quality schools.
- Provide expert assistance in

developing effective mechanisms of monitoring, evaluating and rating school performance. Such mechanisms can help parents and the wider community to access information about school performance and the means of addressing problems in low-performing schools.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Gulnora Iskandarova and Emil Nasritdinov, who participated in the research design and data collection.

I also thank my advisors Marlene Laruelle, Marintha Miles, Scott Morgan, David Abramson, and Christopher Kojm at the Central Asia Program, Elliott School of International Affairs.

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