

# Is the highest-ranked school the right one for your child?

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## Q Is the highest-ranked school the right school for my child?

**A** As a Singaporean economist working on issues in education, I am often asked by parents to recommend the best school for their children. Invariably, what such parents were really asking me was to identify a highly ranked school that their child had a decent chance of getting into.

But this raises a dilemma - is a highly ranked school really the most suitable school for a child?

Adults may recall school environments as idyllic places, but we forget that classrooms have now become arenas where fierce competition takes place among classmates.

In today's schools, students take part in academic tournaments where better test results, compared to those of their peers, bring greater opportunities for scholarships and allow access to better schools. Those who do not excel in these tournaments may lose their incentive to compete and ultimately drop out of the academic race altogether.

This is where my work provides some guidelines for parents weighing the pros and cons of being in a more competitive school.

Last year, a fellow researcher, Mr Yoshio Kamijo, and I conducted a two-day experiment where we first tested the maths ability of 132 Secondary 2 students in a school in Shandong, China, through maths pre-tests on the first day.

Afterwards, we categorised the performance of our students into four groups, based on those pre-tests: low maths ability, average maths ability, high maths ability and a mixed group with low-, average- and high-ability students in one class.

We were interested in comparing the performance of students in a mixed class with those in a class with similar-ability students.

Our experiment aimed to see how students in each class performed in another maths test given on the second day, under a competitive environment where winners received rewards and losers were given punishments.

The point of the exercise was to investigate whether being grouped with similar- or dissimilar-ability students mattered to students of different abilities.

Just like a scientific experiment, by controlling for their pre-ability, their performance in our competition captured how such students responded to the knowledge of competing against similar or weaker/stronger opponents.

Our final results were not that surprising. We compared the results of students in the mixed class with similar-ability peers.

We found that those in the mixed class had different reactions towards their competitors depending on their ability level: the low-ability students were discouraged and performed poorly, the middle-

ability students were more motivated and did better in a mixed class than in a class with similar-ability students, while for the high-ability students, no real difference was seen.

The difference in performance was significant.

On average, low-ability students in a mixed class scored 25 per cent lower than low-ability students in a homogeneous group, while middle-ability students in a mixed class scored 12 per cent more than their counterparts in a homogeneous group.

Some of these results confirm what education economists have predicted. Particularly, we observe that low-ability students find it too costly to expend greater effort to win against superior opposition (simply because stronger opponents have lower costs of effort while they also place a higher value on winning than the low-ability student).

What is surprising from our experiment is that middle-ability students outperform their peers if placed against superior competitors.

Perhaps an explanation for this result is that the performance gap between average-ability and high-ability students is not too great, and middle-ability students are willing to expend greater effort, especially because they value winning more than high-ability students.

Our results show that average-ability students are more likely to perform better when placed in classes with higher-ability students, while those with lower ability will only falter.

This suggests that we need to consider where a child will stand in his class, whether it is a neighbourhood school or a more prestigious one.

Given your child's ability, going to a prestigious school may place him "below average" in his class. This might discourage him from competing with the better students because of the wide performance gap.

However, if the gap is not too wide between himself and the high-performers, this might actually motivate your child to perform better in a higher-ranked school.

If your child might be one of the weaker students in a prestigious school, and you know that he does not appreciate competition, then perhaps it would be best that you choose a neighbourhood school where your child will be among better students.

Therefore, it is not always true that the higher-ranked school is the right school.

Actually, the right school is the one where the student can perform at his best.

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