Internal Issues in Private Education

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One of the keynote addresses at the Private School Research Conference held at the University of Dayton in November of 1997 focused on "Internal Issues in Private Education." This paper addresses several salient points and then poses research questions related to this topic and to issues which embrace school participants, school organizations and management, school climate and culture, and academic programs and support services in private schools.

The enormous diversities represented in this nation's more than 26,093 elementary and secondary private schools identified in the 1993-94 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) present challenges to those who attempt both to identify and to analyze the internal issues related to these schools.

Private schools, which represent almost 25% of all U.S. schools, educate approximately five million or 10.7% of this nation's school-age children. Over three-fourths (78%) are sponsored by or identify with one of the four religious groupings reported by the U.S. Department of Education in its listing of seven categories of private schools. The percentages of private schools and students represented by each category, shown in Table 1, represent one example of great diversity (McLaughlin & Broughman, 1997).

Table 1: Percentage of Private School Students by Category

	% of Private Schools	% of Private School Students
Roman Catholic	32%	51%
Conservative Christian	18%	13%
Unaffiliated Religious	16%	9%
Affiliated Religious	13%	12%
Regular Non-sectarian	10%	11%
Special Emphasis	7%	3%
Special Education	5%	2%

In addition, these schools vary considerably in age. While Trinity School in New York City, founded in 1709 by the Church of England's Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, is said to be the oldest continuously operating school in the United States (Hunt & Carper, 1993), 20% of today's Catholic, Friends, Lutheran, and National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) schools were founded before 1904. Conversely, more than two-thirds of currently operating special education, Jewish, Montessori, Evangelical Lutheran, and Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) schools were established after 1954 (McLaughlin & Broughman, 1997) and 134 new Catholic schools opened between 1985 and 1995 (Meitler, 1997).

Private schools tend to be small. Only one-fifth have more than 300 students and a quarter have fewer than 50 students. Only one in 20 accepts boarding students and middle schools are not often found within the typical organizational structure of private schools. The majority are organized as preK-8, 9-12 or preK-12 (McLaughlin & Broughman, 1997).

The examples of diversities in organizational affiliation, age, and size make almost meaningless the generic category of private schools and create a situation where significant and appropriate differences regarding internal issues exist among them. It is understandable, therefore, why researchers often compare private and public schools rather than consider private schools as a separate category. However, it should be noted that some private schools, especially Catholic ones (probably because of their numbers), have been the subjects of considerable study.

While respecting these diversities and hoping to avoid making inappropriate generalizations about private schools, this article provides background information to identify and discuss some internal issues which offer challenges to private school supporters and suggests topics for a research agenda in the four major areas of Key Participants, Organization and Management, School Culture and Climate, and Academic Programs and Support Services.

KEY PARTICIPANTS

Chubb and Moe in *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools* (1990), while recognizing the great diversity within private schools, propose that all schools in the private sector "...have two important institutional features in common: society does not control them—directly through democratic politics, and society does control them—indirectly through the marketplace." This marketplace control makes private schools very different from public schools in two key areas, sources of support and attendance by choice, and affects significantly the key private school participants: students, parents, and faculty.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Students

Because a school determines admission policies based on its mission and goals, student bodies among private schools differ greatly in areas such as students' intellectual abilities, academic and physical needs, and, in many instances, religious beliefs and practices.

One characteristic which almost all private schools share is the lack of racial and ethnic diversities among their student populations.

Less than 20% of the private school student population is black or Hispanic; however, there are individual schools which are totally black and some whose student bodies are quite diverse.

According to their teachers, private school students, for the most part, do not bring serious problems to school. Within the private school sector, the presence of these problems seems to depend on the location of the school. The responding teachers report that the use of alcohol is the most serious problem affecting student performance. This problem varies from central city (12.4%), to urban fringe (9.4%), and rural (10.5%). The same variations occur among the responses as to the seriousness of drug abuse: central city (5.5%), urban fringe (2.8%), and rural (3.7%) and poverty: central city (3.6%), urban fringe (2.5%) and rural (3.7%) (Choy, 1997).

Parents

Since higher family incomes facilitate school choice, one can presume that on average, private school parents have higher annual incomes than other parents of school-age children.

Private school parents are likely to be very satisfied with their children's school, its teachers, the academic standards, and discipline (Choy, 1997). Their opinions on parental choice as reported in the "29th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll on the Public's Attitude Toward the Public Schools" (Rose, Gallup, & Elam, 1997) are significant, given differences in responses based on how specific questions were worded.

When asked, "Do you favor or oppose allowing students and parents to choose a private school to attend at public expense?" in 1997 over half (52%) of nonpublic school parents indicated a favorable response with 44% of these same parents opposing such a proposal. Just a year earlier, 60% favored and 38% of this same cohort opposed this same plan. The results are very similar when the question uses the word government rather than public; 44% oppose and 50% favor.

However, when the question was phrased differently: "A proposal has been made that would allow parents to send their school-age children to any public, private, or church-related school they choose. For those parents choosing nonpublic schools, the government would pay all or part of the

tuition. Would you favor or oppose this proposal in your state?" the results are dramatically different. "Both public school parents (55%) and nonpublic school parents (68%) favor allowing parents to send their school-age children to any public, private, or church-related school they choose, with the government paying part or all of the cost." (Rose et al., 1997).

Effective schools, according to current research findings, are most likely to have supportive parents and are most likely to reach out to them (Deal & Kennedy, 1984). Well over 80% of private school seniors reported that school personnel had requested their parents to volunteer at school (86.2%) and well over 50% were contacted to discuss post-high school plans (69.1%), academic performance (60.8%), and the academic program (59%). Approximately one-third were informed as to how to help students with school work (31.8%) and a few parents were contacted regarding attendance (25.7%) and behavior (18.5%) (Choy, 1997).

Faculty
Qualifications and experience of teachers and principals
The majority of private school teachers (59%) have BA degrees. Only 7% of them have no BA degree while 30% have masters and 5% doctorate degrees. Of the private school principals or heads, 14% have doctorates and 52% have masters degrees while 8% have no BA degree.

Years of experience for private school teachers range from fewer than 3 years (14%), 3 to 9 years (34%), 10 to 19 years (31%), and 20 years or more (21%). Principals, on the other hand, are more experienced. Their terms in years range from fewer than 3 years (3%), 3 to 9 years (13%), 10 to 19 years (31%), and 20 or more years (54%) (McLaughlin & Broughman, 1997).

Salary levels
Approximately 83% of private school teachers earn less than $30,000 a year, while 47% of principals of these schools earn from $30,000 to more than $40,000 a year (McLaughlin & Broughman, 1997).

Satisfaction with teaching
While only 42% of private school teachers reported satisfaction with their salaries, very significant numbers are satisfied with class size (84%) and the cooperation of staff (91%). More than three-fourths (78%) would choose teaching again (McLaughlin & Broughman, 1997).

Ratings of moderate or serious student problems
Regarding their perceptions of student problems, private school teachers rated apathy/unprepared (26%) and attendance (23%) highest among concerns and dropouts (2%), alcohol/drugs (8%), robbery/vandalism (9%), phys-

ical conflict/weapons (10%), and poverty/racial tension (13%) lowest among issues of teachers' concern.

INTERNAL ISSUES REGARDING PRIVATE SCHOOL PARTICIPANTS

1. Lack of racial/ethnic diversity among students and faculty.
2. Limited positive responses to opinion polls regarding government and/or public financial support to parents so that they could have the means to exercise their right to choose their child's school.
3. Lack of experience and turnover among teachers and public perception that private school teachers may not be qualified because of low salaries and lack of state certification.
4. Low salaries for teachers and principals and related teacher turnover.

ORGANIZATION AND MANAGEMENT

Current research findings indicate that site-based management and local decision making are frequently supported as means of improving school effectiveness (Chubb & Moe, 1990).

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Decision making for school and classroom

According to the 1993-94 SASS report, well over three-fourths of private school principals (84%) indicated that they have a great deal of influence over curriculum design by the control they exercise in the school. This same group reported believing that 72% of their teachers, only 30% of curriculum specialists, and 38% of school boards or governing boards have some influence.

Both private school teachers and principals think they exercise a great deal of influence over certain school policies. At least 84% of private school principals indicate that they have a great deal of influence over the following school policies: setting discipline policy (95%), teacher evaluation (94.6%), hiring full-time teachers (90.9%), in-service training content (88.4%), establishing curriculum (84.1%), and school budget decisions (84.3%).

In these same areas, more than 55% of private school teachers have influence in setting discipline policy (59.2%) and establishing curriculum (55.7%). Well over three-fourths of these same teachers thought they had a great deal of control over these classroom practices: evaluating and grading students (91.6%); selecting teaching techniques (91.6%); determining amount of homework (87.4%); disciplining students (84.3%); selecting content, topics, skills to be taught (74.6%); and selecting textbooks and other materials (67.9%) (McLaughlin & Broughman, 1997).

Governance

Depending on the sponsoring group, the governance structures for private schools represent a wide range of authority. Some function with separately incorporated jurisdictional boards with complete authority for operating the school, including hiring the principal; others with separately incorporated boards or boards constituted with limited jurisdiction whose sponsoring body has some reserved powers. Some, especially religiously affiliated schools, function with advisory or consultative boards or councils and others have no formal governance structure other than the principal or head who is completely in charge of the operation of the private school (O'Brien, 1987).

Funding

The primary source of funding for private schools is tuition payments. However, many private schools, especially religious ones, also receive financial support from their sponsoring or affiliated religious groups and the majority of all private schools rely on additional funding from grants, charitable donations, and endowments.

Given the diversity among private schools, it is not surprising that tuition charges vary considerably. While the average tuition charged is about $3100, the range is from a low of approximately $1600 in Catholic parochial schools to a high of over $10,000 in some nonsectarian secondary schools (Choy, 1997).

INTERNAL ISSUES REGARDING ORGANIZATION AND MANAGEMENT

1. What is appropriate involvement of teachers in decision making?
2. What are the most effective governance structures for different private schools?
3. What are the best balances among tuition charges, endowments, and fundraising?

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND CULTURE

Culture, as defined by Webster, is "the integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thought, speech, action, and artifacts and depends on one's capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations." A more popular definition, attributed to Marvin Bower, for years managing director of McKinsey & Company, is "the way we do things around here" (Deal & Kennedy, 1984).

Studying successful organizations, Deal and Kennedy (1984) identified some elements present in those with strong cultures. These are environment,

values, heroes and heroines, rites and rituals, and a cultural network. A strong culture, according to these authors, "is a system of informal rules that spells out how people are to behave most of the time" and this strength "enables people to feel better about what they do, so they are more likely to work harder."

In developing the School Culture Inventory, Jacobs (1996) posits that school culture includes the assumptions, values, and norms which people in schools share. It "represents an individual school's unique self-expression as an educational community." While the emphasis may vary, all private schools have important values and practices based on articulated or implied assumptions.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Given the number of private schools with religious affiliation, it is not surprising that 42% of private school principals rated religious development as most important, while 17% noted that academic excellence is most important, 18% rated literacy skills as most important, and 10% indicated that personal growth and self-esteem are most important (McLaughlin & Broughman, 1997).

Because parents choose schools that possess those religious, educational, or cultural values they believe most reflect their own and ones they want their children to acquire and develop, each private school has its own unique culture or "way of doing things." Even among the religious affiliated schools, many different cultures exist. For example, Seventh-Day Adventist schools have among their special features a commitment to avoid highly competitive activities, and Greek Orthodox religious schools are committed specifically to instruction in Greek language, history, culture, and religion. The culture of Catholic schools is influenced greatly by their unique relationship to the Roman Catholic Church and by the charisms of the religious congregations of sisters, brothers, and priests which founded and have staffed these schools for generations (Hunt & Carper, 1993).

INTERNAL ISSUES RELATED TO SCHOOL CLIMATE AND CULTURE

1. Communicating unique culture of a particular school to current and prospective parents.
2. Developing system of identifying aspects of a school culture.
3. How does a private school effectively communicate its core values?

ACADEMIC PROGRAMS AND SUPPORT SERVICES

In spite of the numerous examples of diversity cited among private schools, these schools share many similarities with public schools in the United States simply because of the nature of schooling itself and the many requirements and expectations of governments and accrediting bodies. Therefore, it is not surprising that most private schools are influenced somewhat by recent national efforts at school reform, especially by those implied in Goals 2000, National Standards, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and the new national testing program proposed for voluntary use at grades four and eight.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Elementary schools

In private elementary schools, teachers spend most of their time on four core subjects: English, mathematics, social studies, and science. Religiously affil-iated schools teach religion or Bible in addition to providing a variety of additional classes and activities. Homework is assigned (98%), collected, and corrected (82%) by private school teachers.

Approximately 48% of private schools provide extended-day programs.

On the whole, private elementary students score at or above the average in all subjects and grades tested by the National Assessment of Education Progress (Choy, 1997).

Secondary schools

Students in private secondary schools are likely to have taken a rigorous aca-demic program. Most of them graduate having passed four years of English and three each of mathematics, social studies, and science. In addition, most are required to take at least two years of a foreign language. Many of these are advanced or honors courses.

Private school students are very likely to remain in school, graduate, and apply to and graduate from college. Many of these schools, especially Catholic secondary schools, are particularly effective with low-income and minority students (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993).

Services to students

Given the nature of their student bodies and financial and legal constraints, it is not surprising that private schools' academic support services to some stu-dents are limited. For example, few private schools offer bilingual (4.2%) and ESL (11.3%) programs; and less than a quarter offer Chapter 1 (22.7%), disability (24.8%), and gifted and talented (24.9%) programs. In the same study, many private schools provided remedial (54.5%) and diagnostic

(43.5%) services, and a significant majority have library facilities (80.3%).

Similar variations occur in the area of health-related services. While over 70% had drug and alcohol prevention programs, few provided substance abuse counseling (14.4%); less than a quarter provided free or reduced-price lunches (22.4%); and less than a third had on-site medical services (31%) (McLaughlin & Broughman, 1997).

Access to advanced telecommunications

While almost all private schools (95%) were equipped with computers in the fall of 1995, only 9% of these computers had Internet access; therefore, only 25% of private schools had access to the Internet. This one-fourth of private schools enrolled 41% of all private school students.

Access to the Internet varied according to size and instructional level. Larger secondary schools (57%) were more likely to have this access than were small elementary schools, and Catholic (35%) and nonsectarian (32%) schools were almost twice as likely to have Internet access as other religiously affiliated schools (Heaviside & Farris, 1997).

INTERNAL ISSUES REGARDING ACADEMIC PROGRAMS AND SUPPORT SERVICES

1. How do/should private schools respond to public school reform efforts?
2. What effect do advances in technology, especially access to the Internet, have on teaching and learning in private schools?

QUESTIONS FOR RESEARCH AGENDA

1. What is the effect on the missions of private schools sponsored by or affiliated with religious groups when a significant percentage of the student body and/or faculty does not belong to the sponsoring or affiliated religious group?
2. How do private schools identify, prepare, develop, and retain teachers and administrators who subscribe to and promote the mission of the school?
3. What influences the attitude of private school parents on the issue of government or public financial support of school choice?
4. Is there a more appropriate salary scale for private school teachers and administrators than comparisons with public school ones?
5. What is the correlation between Internet access and student achievement and the teaching/learning process in private schools?

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