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ABSTRACT

This papers explores the relationship between private and public schools. It challenges the assumption that competition between the private and public sectors is desirable and argues for a cooperative model in which public and private schools work together to educate children. Each sector has strengths that can help the other. These strengths include an emphasis on focused academic programs, communal organization, inspirational idealism, and decentralized governance. Increased cooperation would ease some of the recurrent problems in schools, such as private schools' relatively limited variety of electives and public schools' lack of social mobility where the poor are more likely to be encouraged to exit at a earlier age, are more likely to pursue weaker educational programs, and are more likely to attend less prestigious schools. Also, private schools typically have stronger cultural bonds than public schools since the former are generally smaller, choice-based, and more stable. Both schools could also improve their inspiration ideology, particularly public schools where teachers are hesitant to teach about values and beliefs, mostly because they have not been trained in these areas. Likewise, religious schools could learn from public schools the importance of trained leadership and professional support for administrators in school governance. Contains 21 references. (RJM)

Private and Public Schools: Cooperation or Competition

by

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Abstract:

The purpose of this study is to discuss the relationship between private and public schools. The author argues that competition hurts both types of school and suggests several ways in which they can cooperate.

Many authors today (e.g., Chubb and Moe, 1990) assume that competition between schools is a good. This competition will force ineffective schools to either close or to improve. Some of these authors argue that vouchers that allow the poor to attend private schools will enhance that competition.

Other authors (USDE, 1997) see almost any help provided to private schools as a threat to the public schools. These authors argue that the better students will leave the public schools and that only weaker students will remain within the public sector. Providing vouchers to the better students will only drain money from a public school system whose budgets are already strained.

The assumption in both of these positions is that the relationship between the private and public sectors should be one of competition. Is this assumption necessarily true? Is competition healthy? When one side wins and the other side loses, it is not healthy for either side.

Could not schools cooperate, as do public and private hospitals and providers of social services. Cardinal Bevilaqua of Philadelphia asked: "Why is it that religious institutions of all faiths are valid partners, valid vendors or valid providers of social services and medical services, yet we are viewed—by some—as suspect in the area of education? (Bevilacqua, 1998, p. 454).

Competition is not healthy for most private schools, especially those that are religious in their sponsorship. The religious sponsors of these institutions teach the power of love and cooperation to promote the good of all. Can competition that leads to the closing, the death, of a school be a good?

The largest group of private schools is that sponsored by the Catholic Church. Part of the mission of these schools is to promote social justice (Lee, 1997). Is it justice, even in the interim, to allow students, especially urban minorities, to congregate in schools that are dying, schools out of which the more academic and motivated children and parents have opted?

It is also not healthy for private, religious schools to label the public schools as "godless." The overwhelming majority of public school teachers and children believe in God and belong to a religious body. To label them "godless" is to create a strawman to be destroyed.

This competition is also not healthy for public schools and their clients. Studies (Greeley, 1982) have shown that private and religious schools have been more effective with some students, especially urban minorities. Although one could argue that the playing field is not level (Hoffer, 1997), this argument might blind some public schools to practices found effective (Byrk, Lee, and Holland, 1993) in private schools.

Public schools rally against private schools and seek to deny any public funds from passing to these schools. Private schools rally against public schools and view them as agnostic, atheistic, and valueless. As a result, private schools receive little money from the state. In suburban areas, where people by choosing neighbors in which to live have the free exercise of school choice, people have the financial resources to provide private education for their children. In the urban centers, private schools are being forced to close because parents are not able to pay the tuition and schools are operating with outstanding deficits. When a private school closes, closing also is "the last, best hope for many of the nations' poor children" (Doyle, 1997, p. 95).

The first schools in our country were all public schools. Schools that were church-funded, state-funded, or subscription-driven were all fulfilling a public good; therefore they were considered to be public institutions. Every school that takes its students from the public and returns them to the public is fulfilling a public good. (Buetow, 1989). Since private schools fulfill a public good, they should be a part of the public dialogue of education. Too often private schools, especially those that are sponsored by religious organization are neglected in the public discourse of educational reform. Educational reformers define school problems as either technical (how to raise standards and at the same time to improve scores) or social (overcoming the deficits of broken homes, shoddy neighborhoods, crime, and dislocation). "Unlike Britain, reformers in the United States have avoid—even rejected—the moral dimension of the problems and have overlooked the remarkable contribution of religious schools (particularly schools run by Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Seventh-day Adventist communities) to the education of the poor" (Cooper, 1996, p. 45).

Bryk (1996) opined that there are four factors that have found, in his research, to enhance the effectiveness of public schools: a focused academic program, a communal organization, an inspirational idealism, and decentralized governance. The same factors are found in many private schools, including those sponsored by other churches. A public dialogue, instead of a war of words, between the private and the public sector is needed. Can public schools become more effective by implementing one or more of these factors?

Private schools in general have offered a more limited variety of electives and programs than public schools. There are relatively few differences between the

expectations of teachers for lower track students and those of upper track students. Greeley (1982) has indicated that private schools, especially Catholic schools, have served as schools of high social mobility, bringing past generations of immigrants into the middle class, and now bringing a generation of the urban poor into that class. In public schools, however, Labaree (1997) argued that that there is a lack of social mobility—that the poor are more likely to be encouraged to exit at a earlier age, are more likely to pursue weaker educational programs, and are more likely to attend less prestigious schools. One lesson that public schools may be able to learn from private schools is the value of a narrow academic program, with high expectations for all children.

The second factor is communal school organization. Researchers (e.g., Johnson, 1990) have found little difference between the purposes of novice teachers in private schools and those of novice teachers in public schools. Both groups love to work with children, and are compelled by their interest in subject matter and pedagogy. Once in the school they are shaped by the culture of the school—Gesellschaft in many public schools and Gemeinschaft in most private schools. Gesellschaft is a social organization defined by hierarchical structure, task orientation, and bureaucracy; it is the world of business and public schooling. Gemeinschaft, on the other hand, is the social world of the community, based on the interdependence of individuals; it is the world of the family and the private school.

Bryk and Driscoll (1988) defined the communal school organization, first, as one in which there was a system of shared values, reflected primarily in beliefs about the purpose of the institution, about what students should learn and how they should obey,

and about kind of people they should strive to become. Secondly, there is a common agenda of activities that fosters interaction among students, among the staff, and between staff and students. Finally, there is an ethos of caring that is manifested in the extended role that teachers play.

The cultural bonds that unite the community are stronger in private schools because these schools generally are smaller, independent, choice-based, and more stable. They are smaller schools where people know one another and can interact. With fewer staff and students, members of the schools will be more likely to interact with one another more often during the curricular and extra-curricular activities of the school. Private schools are independent schools and can choose goals. Parents choose the schools because they believe that there is a good match already exists between the school and their child. And especially in urban areas, there is a greater stability among both the faculty and the students (Johnson, 1990).

In the past, public schools were neighborhood schools and did promote the cultural values of their neighborhoods. However, as schools were called upon to serve diverse population, frictions occurred. For example, in the middle of the nineteenth century, most public schools were very Protestant in orientation (Ruenzel, 1996). That reflected the values of the communities they served. However, problems arose when, as a result of the large, mostly Irish Catholic, immigration, neighborhoods became more diverse. Catholicism became the largest single denomination as a result of this immigration, and began in the mid-nineteenth century to demand that public schools reflect their Catholic values. When Protestants and Catholics could not agree on a set of values, all sectarian teaching was removed from schools and the schools. Today the

public schools, conscious that they must respect the diverse populations that they serve, do not have a shared sense of values (Levin, 1990). A lesson that public schools can learn from private schools is to create smaller schools that are more sensitive to the values of the neighborhoods they serve. Smaller public schools could serve the Mexican and Puerto Rican (and mostly Catholic) populations in Spanish culture schools, the Black (and mostly Baptist) populations in Black academies, and could differentiate between the education of young men and girls (AAUW, 1998).

An inspiration ideology is the third factor. Many in public schools are concerned about the teaching of values. Yet, teaching is a value-laden profession. Whether explicitly or implicitly teachers promote a set of values. Many religious people want values to be a part of the curriculum in the schools that their children attend because omitting them gives the child the impression that values are no important, or are less important that the items in the school curriculum (Buetow, 1989). Many public school teachers shy away from teaching about values and beliefs, because they have not been trained and have no experience in the teaching of values. Coleman (1990) noted that neglecting the religious and moral dimensions of students' lives, public schools are missing the opportunity to strengthen parental interest, involvement, and attention to the holistic growth of their children. Nel Noddings (1993) has argued that all schools need to teach values and beliefs to children. Private schools can be a tremendous resource to be used by the public schools in teacher and curriculum development on values.

Today, many religious schools, especially on the secondary level, require students to participate in direct service to the community. Many times these are found as requirements in religion classes. Other schools specify a certain number of hours of

service as a requirement for graduation. Values of service, commitment to the common good, and sacrifice can be learned in service. Why can't private and public school cooperate in implementing social service programs in their neighborhoods?

The final factor is decentralized governance of the schools. As Harris notes (1996), the decentralized management of many religious schools may arise solely from an inability to support financially a large central staff. At the same time, this decentralized structure may help private schools to be more responsive to the needs of the children and the values promoted within and by the community. Similarly Johnson (1990) found that because private schools generally were smaller and less complex and cumbersome that public schools, teacher perceived them as more inclusive and rarely reported problems of isolation and bureaucratic demands.

Private schools can also learn from public schools. Robert Kealey (1989), former president of the National Catholic Educational Association, wrote that the greatest challenge facing religious schools, especially Catholic schools, was to "use more effectively the lay leadership that has been fostered through school boards, development teams, and home –school associations" (p. 290). Although priests and ministers often were instrumental in starting religious schools, their ministerial duties compelled them to leave the administration of the schools in lay hands (O'Donnell, 1971). Today, as more and more administration and teaching in religious schools is being done by laity, religious schools can learn from public schools the need for trained leadership and professional support for administrators. Has any public school district invited local private schools to attend professional development seminars? Has any private school asked to attend one offered by the local board. As more and more private school administrators attend

graduate classes with public school administrators might a cooperative door be opened between the two systems?

Private schools need to be independent in order to preserve their identity. However, since both private and public schools serve the common good, why should we waste our resources on fighting with one another? Why can't we cooperate for the good of all?

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