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The Interplay of Principals and Politics in the Context of Ohio’s EdChoice Scholarship Program

*Adam J. Dufault*¹ and *Melodie Wyttenbach*²

Abstract: The role of a Catholic school leader is complex, dynamic, and changing, especially in states where parental choice legislation has been enacted. This study utilizes [Bolman and Deal’s \(2017\)](#) organizational framework to examine the political nature of the role of the Catholic school leader. Specifically, this study explores the ways the Catholic school leader navigates the politics of accessing and advocating for government funds. Drawing from interviews with eight Catholic school principals who have utilized the Ohio EdChoice voucher program, this study captures the experiences of these principals through the lens of the political frame. Findings reveal lessons learned on how principals deal with conflict management, assessing and engaging with sources of power, and what skills are needed for managing politics. Understanding how Catholic school principals engage with the EdChoice program and how they navigate the accompanying challenges also offers guidance for principal formation programs at institutions of higher education on how to better equip emerging leaders with the familiarity and confidence to navigate politics.

Keywords: leadership, principal formation, politics, school choice, parental choice

The job description of a Catholic school principal continues to grow as the scope of educational administration becomes increasingly large. [Ozar \(2010\)](#) found that the Catholic school principal’s role had become more complex over time, exceeding the ability of one person to handle all of the tasks necessary to be a faith leader, an academic leader, a facilities manager, and a staff supervisor. [Nuzzi et al. \(2013\)](#) summarized the Catholic school principal

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as “both the chief executive officer (CEO) and the chief operating officer (COO), ultimately responsible for all of the formal and informal educational activities of the school” (p. 1). Understanding the multitude of tasks that principals are asked to perform in their role provides insight on how schools function and may suggest changes to improve school performance and student learning (Grissom et al., 2015).

An emerging area of responsibility extended to Catholic school principals in the United States involves the usage and management of parental choice initiatives. Parental choice initiatives allow education dollars from the state government to be directed to students to fund attendance at the schools or participation in the services that parents determine are in the best interests of their child. Parental choice initiatives began in the early 1990s in Wisconsin, and now exist in 33 states through funding mechanisms such as vouchers, educational savings accounts, and tax credit scholarships (National School Choice Week, 2023). Accessing this government funding comes with a wave of paperwork and monitoring of the program to comply with state laws. In his examination of Catholic school participation in Ohio’s EdChoice Scholarship Program, Dufault (2021) found engagement in this parent choice initiative included direct impacts on principal workload and indirect impacts on building management and communications, namely: the need to hire staff members to manage the program; a need for communication with stakeholders—colleagues in other schools navigating parental choice in their schools or parents interested in participating; and an increase in the scope and range of principals’ job responsibilities (Dufault, 2021). The study also illustrated a need for Ohio Catholic school principals to remain aware of, and engaged in, the legislative process, as changes made by the government can have direct effects on the operation of a school. While leadership in schools is inherently political, this paper extends the examination of the role of the Catholic school principal in the state of Ohio to consider how engagement with government funds via parental choice thrusts the principal further into the political arena, and it examines the preparation of principals for their role in navigating politics.

Utilizing Bolman and Deal’s (2017) organizational framework, and with a specific focus on the political frame, this study explored the ways principalship has become political and examined the skills necessary for private school principals to navigate government funds. Finally, we offer suggestions for institutions of higher education that train Catholic school principals on how to better equip emerging leaders with the familiarity and confidence to navigate political contexts.

Background on Ohio’s Parental Choice Programs

Over three decades, the state of Ohio has seen significant growth of government funded voucher programs that allow parents to choose a non-public school for their child. The largest and most utilized of the state’s five programs are: (1) EdChoice, a program based on the recipient’s residence within the boundaries of an underperforming school district; and (2) EdChoice Expansion, a program based on the recipient’s income level. In 2017–18, the two EdChoice

programs accounted for 66% of all voucher distributions in the state (EdChoice, 2019). The dollars provided to schools or programs via families through these voucher programs provide significant funding to receiving institutions. The impact of public funds on private schools can be understood by the increase of funding over the past decade. In 2014, \$176.4 million dollars was allocated to the state voucher program; in 2023, the program received \$462 million, an increase indicative of Ohio lawmakers directing money into this parental choice program (Pruitt and Volker, 2023). At the individual family level, EdChoice awarded participating families up to \$4,650 per child for elementary education and up to \$6,000 for high school attendance during the 2020–21 school year (Ohio Educational Choice Scholarship Program, 2021). In July of 2021, a new state budget increased these funding levels to a maximum scholarship amount of \$5,500 for students in kindergarten through 8th grade and \$7,500 for high school students. These amounts were determined by state legislators considering the statewide average base cost for public school students, an amount that will likely increase in the future as the costs to educate in public schools annually rise (Ohio Legislative Service Commission, 2021).

Historically, Catholic schools have existed apart from, and parallel to, the public school system and outside of government funding models. Walch (2016) summarized this separation in his examination of the history of Catholic education, noting, “At the heart of the Catholic parochial school movement is the unwavering belief that the education of children is a primary responsibility of the family and the Church, not the government” (p. 3). This sentiment is still a foundational principle of Catholic education and is enshrined in Catholic Canon Law, which regards parents as the primary educators of their children (Canon Law Society of America, 1984). However, Canon Law also encourages parents to utilize any available government support that would facilitate a Catholic education for their children, “Parents also have the right to make use of those aids to be furnished by civil society which they need in order to obtain Catholic education for their children” (Canon Law Society of America, 1984; Canon 793).

With the rise of the parental choice movement in the United States, one funding mechanism of great interest for Catholic schools, particularly those in urban settings, has been the voucher program (Walch, 2016). The first voucher programs began in Milwaukee and Cleveland in the 1990s and now exist in 32 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico (EdChoice, 2019). Leonard DeFiore, the president of the National Catholic Education Association in the late 1990s, noted the impact that increasing public funding for Catholic schools would have on the system: “When the government provides dollars, regulation seems to follow” (Walch, 2016, p. 173). With this new engagement in the governmental sphere, leaders of schools and dioceses have needed to interact with state governments and actors in ways that are different from traditional Catholic school stakeholders, such as parents, pastors, and board members. Considering this expansion of government affiliated stakeholders, there is a growing need for explicit instruction in understanding and exercising behaviors that allow for leaders to successfully navigate the politics that come with engagement in the parental choice system (Winton & Pollock, 2013).

Review of Literature: Understanding the Political Frame and Power

We begin our literature review with an examination of the organizational framework of [Bolman and Deal \(2017\)](#), with a specific focus on the political frame, and provide an overview of the management of power in educational leadership.

Political Frame

[Bolman & Deal \(2017\)](#) described politics as, “the realistic process of making decisions and allocating resources in a context of scarcity and divergent interests” (p. 179). Given the context of scarcity and divergent interests, “power and conflict [are] at the center of organizational decision making” (p. 199). To maneuver amid conflict and power, the manager, or principal in a school context, must utilize “four key skills: agenda-setting, mapping the political terrain, networking and building coalitions, and bargaining and negotiating” (p. 204). A leader’s ability to execute these four key skills will determine their ability to change an organization and how they are able to lead that organization to effectiveness.

While the term “politics” often conjures negative associations, “politics can also be a vehicle for achieving noble purposes” ([Bolman & Deal, 2017](#), p. 216). For principals in Catholic schools, skillful engagement within the politics can provide funding resources for students and purchasing power for parents, which can ensure the long-term financial viability of a school. Bolman and Deal’s political frame has been applied to various educational settings across the literature, most commonly in research on higher education. [Parladé et al. \(2018\)](#) examined the changing of building names at Towson University through Bolman and Deal’s four frames. Using the political frame, they identified how student activists at Towson University navigated differences in perspectives among subgroups and formed coalitions with those who had converging interests to achieve their goals. [DeCourcy et al. \(2017\)](#) developed a framework and actionable tool called Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) in Canadian colleges, distinct from the framework of Canadian universities, using the Bolman and Deal model. [DeCourcy et al. \(2017\)](#) included consideration of varying perspectives on SoTL in the college context, the relationship of the college to other higher education institutions, and competing pressures on faculty time in relation to SoTL in the political frame.

[Thomas and Brower \(2018\)](#) expanded the political frame beyond internal factors to also consider external influences in their analysis of campus climates for political engagements. They included the influences of external parties such as political figures, families of students, and voting conditions in the context of the higher education community to consider factors shaping campus political climate. Finally, the implications of the use of Bolman and Deal’s framework in higher education in the Arab world have been explored ([Wilson & Sy, 2021](#); [Al Khaja & Dammak, 2021](#)). Researchers [Al Khaja and Dammak \(2021\)](#) examined the ways that the framework, which has taken hold in the literature on Western higher education, could influence scholarship on Arab higher education by studying the political influences on the rollout of an iPad initiative in a university in the United Arab Emirates.

Other applications of Bolman and Deal's model, especially in the K–12 sphere, typically center on the perceptions of teachers and leaders regarding their own or others' skill in navigating aspects of the political frame. [Whitmyer \(2016\)](#) focused on the perception of science teachers of their ability to serve diverse learners through the lens of their skill in navigating the political frame. The study found that while science teachers often entered the classroom with goals of imparting knowledge and affecting social change, power struggles among administrators, policy makers, and other stakeholders left them with less autonomy than anticipated to affect this change in actuality. [Whitmarsh \(2014\)](#) similarly examined self-perceptions of competency in the political frame, but for superintendents rather than principals. Superintendents, overall, rated their political skills highly, and high scores typically correlated with the effects of past work experience and strong mentorship.

[Frydén et al. \(2015\)](#) also applied the frame to self-perceptions of higher education professionals directing postgraduate medical program directors, finding a large variance in their self-identified ability to navigate political influences. [Snyder \(2018\)](#), on the other hand, examined teachers' perceptions of their leaders' work in this area, finding that teachers do not explicitly perceive leveraging political power as a principal's role, but do recognize the ways that leaders navigate collaborative relationships with teachers to receive input and provide transparency in rolling out initiatives. Thus, Bolman and Deal's political frame has been applied to the K–12 education and higher education spheres in a variety of ways, demonstrating the flexibility of this lens to understand the complicated role of school- and system-level administration.

For the purposes of our paper, we expand on Bolman and Deal's definition of politics, drawing from the work of [Winton and Pollock \(2013\)](#), who recognized that “schools are political organizations and the role of principal is inherently political” (p. 2). As actors in a system have different end goals, politics is not considered positive or negative, not red versus blue, but rather “may be defined as the way each of us, whether individually or working with others, tries to make the kind of school, community, or society we want to have” (p. 2). [Winton and Pollock \(2013\)](#) suggest that principals need to possess five complementary political skills. These are: (a) Be able persuade others; (b) Successfully bargain and negotiate; (c) Build networks and develop coalitions; (d) Understand their political terrain; and (e) Appropriate policy, i.e., interpret and implement.

As school leaders wrestle with how to organize systems, fund schools, and make decisions about curriculum, education becomes inherently political. To that end, we offer an expansion of our literature review to examine the management of power in education.

Management of Power in Education

Central to the political frame is the concept of the manager delicately navigating relationships with those who may have a different point of view ([Bolman & Deal, 2017](#)). “In a world of

chronic scarcity, diversity, and conflict, the nimble manager walks a tightrope: developing a direction, building a base of support, and cobbling together working relations with both allies and opponents” (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 204). Power, defined as the capacity or potential to influence the behavior of others, is an important concept when discussing leadership (Al-Omari, 2013). Having a particular job title or position may give an individual power, but positional power is rarely enough to accomplish the task (Al-Omari, 2013; Kotter, 1985). As stated by Bolman and Deal (2017), those that get and use power to their advantage will be “winners,” which makes it important for leaders to understand the political frame.

The management of power is a key area of tension within the political frame, where power is not always negative. Foucault (1975) noted that power produces reality. The concept has both a constructive and destructive connotation depending on how power is used (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Bolman and Deal specify nine sources of power that have been identified in the research of social scientists: (a) position or authority, (b) control of rewards, (c) coercive power, (d) information or expertise, (e) reputation, (f) personal, (g) alliance or network, (h) agenda, and (i) framing. Of these nine sources of power, those frequently detected in the data from this study—control of rewards, information and expertise, and coercive power—will be discussed further in the findings below. Understanding the types of power utilized by the different actors involved with the EdChoice scholarship helps leaders to better understand the complex and dynamic political environment of parental choice programs.

Research Design

The purpose of the original study conducted by Dufault (2021) was to understand the experiences of Catholic school principals with Ohio’s EdChoice Scholarship voucher program through a qualitative exploration of principal time usage. This paper extends the line of inquiry on the principal’s role in Ohio’s EdChoice Scholarship voucher program by examining the principal’s political engagement, with the focused research question being: In what ways do Catholic school principals’ participation in Ohio’s EdChoice voucher program shift their political engagement? This research question utilizes Bolman and Deal’s political framework for analysis, interpreting the principal experience of a state voucher program through the political lens.

Drawing from the existing data set from Dufault’s 2021 study, which used a narrative interview protocol, researchers re-analyzed the interviews conducted in 2021 of eight sitting principals from the state of Ohio utilizing Bolman and Deal’s political framework. The principals selected for the original study were purposefully chosen from a statewide sample of schools that had begun accepting EdChoice eligible students within the previous five years. The selected principals served in five of the six dioceses in the state of Ohio, namely the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, the Diocese of Cleveland, the Diocese of Columbus, the Diocese of Toledo, and the Diocese of Youngstown. The

selected principals and their schools reflect the geographic variation of the state, representing the distinct cultural, economic, and demographic regions of Ohio. Statewide, 19 principals fulfilled all of the criteria and were invited to participate in the study. Eight principals accepted the request to participate. [Table 1](#) summarizes the experience level of each of the participating principals. Specific, identifying information about each school has been coded to protect anonymity. The study included both high schools and elementary schools and included schools with both large and small enrollments.

Table 1

Descriptors of Participating Principals

Principal	Years in current role	Other principal experience
A	2	0
B	3	3
C	2	5
D	4	22
E	6	6
F	9	0
G	9	0
H	1	0

[Table 2](#) provides a summary of the descriptors for the schools that were included in this study, and there is correspondence between the school name code and the principal name code. For example, principal “A” serves at school “A.” The grade range served by each school is given along with the type of community served by the school, either urban, suburban, or rural. The enrollment at the time of each interview is given as well as the percentage of students who receive either an EdChoice Traditional or an EdChoice Expansion scholarship. The final column lists the year in which the school began accepting EdChoice eligible students. One school did not fully meet the criteria presented above. School E did not accept EdChoice at the time of the study. However, within the previous 5 years, the school both began and ended its participation in the program. Though it did not strictly meet the criteria of the study, the uniqueness of those circumstances and the fact that the same principal was present when school choice began and concluded suggested an intriguing narrative possibility, so we chose to include this data in this study.

All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and uploaded into a secure database for iterative rounds of open and axial coding ([Miles et al., 2019](#)). Axial coding, a process of identifying larger themes related to a research question, allows us as researchers to construct data relationships between and within categories ([Creswell, 2021](#)). Themes identified in this

Table 2*Descriptors of Participating Schools in 2021*

School	Grades	Location	Enrollment	% EdChoice ^c	Year Started
A	PK-8	Suburban	245	4	2019
B	PK-8	Rural	111	5	2017
C	PK-8	Suburban	380	7	2019
D	9-12	Rural	520	7	2019
E	PK-8	Suburban	350	3 ^a	2018 ^b
F	K-8	Urban	350	18	2019
G	PK-8	Suburban	315	29	2016
H	K-8	Urban	258	16	2017

^a In 2017.^b School opted out of EdChoice in 2018.^c EdChoice participation across schools ranged from 4–29% and was determined by financial need of the family at the time of program application.

study included: pushback, training and communication, benefits, challenges, and future plans, expanded upon below in [Table 3](#). Utilizing semi-structured interviews with a defined interview protocol, data was analyzed using the Dedoose platform. Since this paper presents a new analysis of interview data collected for the original study on principals' time usage upon adopting EdChoice, research team members re-read each interview transcript in light of the research question presented above regarding the political nature of the principalship. The Qualitative Charts Code Application function within Dedoose was used to identify the most frequently occurring codes contained in the principal interviews that related to the political frame, specifically around the concepts of agenda setting, mapping the political terrain, networking and building coalitions, and bargaining and negotiating. Researchers then generated a list of initial open codes in light of Bolman and Deal's political frame, and three rounds of coding were needed to reach saturation. In our coding it was clear that of the four areas examined—namely, agenda setting, mapping the political terrain, networking and building coalitions, and bargaining and negotiating—networking and building coalitions, and bargaining and negotiating surfaced greater connections to our work. Examples of codes that most aligned to these two themes of the political framework include pushback, training and communication, benefits, and challenges, all of which we expand upon in our findings section. One code that emerged inductively was future plans, and leaders began to have a distinct vision for how utilization of EdChoice would impact the direction of their school communities. [Table 3](#) summarizes these codes and the type of qualitative data included in each:

Table 3*Descriptive Coding Structure*

Code	Description
Pushback	Time impact of defending the program from external or internal challenges
Training and Communication	Comments related to time spent in training and engaging with communication about EdChoice
Benefits	Feelings about the positive effects of the EdChoice Program
Challenges	Perceptions of impediments or difficulties in managing EdChoice
Future Plans	Comments related to a principal's vision of future utilization of EdChoice

Findings and Discussion

Sources of Power

As noted in the literature review, understanding the types of power utilized by the different actors involved with the EdChoice scholarship helps leaders to better understand the complex and dynamic political environment of the voucher program. In the EdChoice program, the state displays power through the control of rewards. [Bolman and Deal \(2017\)](#) describe this power as, “the ability to deliver jobs, money, political support, or other rewards brings power” (p. 192). Participating schools experience this power by engaging with the state’s rules and requirements for information in exchange for funding. The requirements can feel tedious, as Principal H said:

Getting it done [applying for EdChoice] for the first time is just a little complicated. It gets tricky. You need the entire utility bill, the whole thing, all the way down to the end, not just the address and the name, all of it there. Or if it’s a lease agreement, it needs to be notarized, not just the signed document. So, it gets complicated if you haven’t done it before and you don’t know what that proof of residency means or what that all entails.

In order to authenticate funding recipients, the state requires parent signatures on checks, a requirement that can create frustration, as Principal A explained, “one of the most difficult parts is obtaining some information from people. I remember asking and asking and asking again and again.” Principal C agreed, “The biggest thing is always getting the parents to sign the check. That was always the challenge . . . we still have one or two families that we always need to chase after.” Failure to comply with the requirement from the state will result in the receipt of no funding.

Therefore, by requiring these signatures, the state exercises its power by controlling the reward of funding to these schools.

The state of Ohio also retains power through information and expertise about the structure and function of the EdChoice program. As [Bolman and Deal \(2017\)](#) noted, “Power flows to those with the information and know-how to solve important problems” (p. 192). To stay abreast of current information on the EdChoice program, principals stated that keeping aware of changes to EdChoice policies and procedures required their time and attention. To manage the awareness of changes in the rules, Principal G noted they have built a coalition of principals to exchange information, “We have our own little network of principals that we work together and ask questions and text each other like, ‘Did you hear this?’ ‘What is this?’ ‘This changed!’ and just trying to help each other keep up with all the info.” Many principals expressed appreciation for the support provided by the Ohio Department of Education (ODE).

Other principals identified a specific individual who provided them information on any changes to the program, this included an employee at the ODE, the diocesan superintendent, and a federal program specialist. Principal H said, “Luckily, ODE is very helpful. They know everything.” One principal described forming a personal relationship with an employee at ODE, “I had established a pretty good relationship with an individual at ODE who, when I needed to have an answer, I knew I could reach out to him and he’s very, very responsive. He’s kind of our unofficial liaison.” Diocesan central offices also play a part in supporting principals with questions or keeping them up to date on changes to the program guidelines. Principal A said, “Our superintendent tells us first . . . we get emails from him and from the state telling us about some of the guideline changes, so that’s how I hear about [changes to the program].” Principal B said, “So there was a real helpful person at the . . . diocese, she’s a federal program specialist. And she helped me get through a lot of [the changes] those first. She helped me maneuver it.”

Finally, the state of Ohio demonstrates coercive power, another source of power outlined by [Bolman and Deal \(2017\)](#), which they defined as resting “on the ability to constrain, block, interfere, or punish” (p. 192). Principal F expressed displeasure with the requirement that EdChoice students participate in state testing. She said, “In years past the testing thing was becoming a problem. You’d have to pull out the kids, and others would ask, ‘Why are those kids leaving?’ So that’s an identifiable thing that you don’t want to have.” She described an additional challenge in the responsibility of handling sensitive information:

I know that it is a huge struggle for us to have to be responsible for parent financial information because if something goes wrong, then it’s on us. So that’s a very difficult piece because a lot of the parents who are using these scholarships don’t have a savviness with the computer. They don’t know scanning documents. Some of them don’t even have stamps for envelopes to be able to mail stuff in, so we provide them with that.

Principals are keenly aware of the coercive power held by the Ohio State government, the creator—and potential eliminator—of the EdChoice program legislature, Principal G said, “The big question lurking is always, ‘What would happen if this went away? What would happen if [the state] took it all away?’” Principal E, who led the school that ended its participation in the program in 2018, shared that this uncertainty was a contributing factor to the decision to no longer accept EdChoice. Forecasting long-term financial plans at the school level was difficult with uncertain continuation of funding and support of the government in EdChoice. Principal F explained that if voucher funding were to end, there would not be sufficient alternative funding to maintain the same level of financial aid for families. The principal said, “My question is, ‘What is the sustainability of all this?’ This is obviously a larger question for our government and not so much for the people implementing this program, but where is this money coming from? At what point does the well run dry, and then what do we do with those families?”

Skills to Navigate the Political Terrain

After examining these three sources of power, we turn our attention to describing the 4 key skills that are required for a manager to successfully navigate the political world. These keys, as outlined by [Bolman and Deal \(2017\)](#), are agenda-setting, mapping the political terrain, networking and building coalitions, and bargaining and negotiating. In a school setting, the role of the manager is filled by the principal. As such, it follows that a principal who successfully navigates the political frame must share these same key skills. In fact, the findings collected during this study correlated to Bolman and Deal’s political frame skills of networking and forming coalitions, and bargaining and building coalitions. This correlation shows that principals engaged in voucher programs utilize these skills naturally, and if explicitly instructed in these political strategies, would likely employ them all the more.

Networking and Building Coalitions

The ability to network and to form coalitions are key political skills, “The basic point is simple: As a manager, you need friends and allies to get things done” ([Bolman & Deal, 2017](#), p. 209). Relationship development is a critical skill, as “success requires the cooperation of many others” ([Bolman & Deal, 2017](#), p. 209). Looking at the experience of the principals who participated in this study, the importance of networking and building coalitions is evident. One area in which the ability to network is crucial is in understanding the operation of the EdChoice program. When Principal C first started working at an EdChoice participating school, she recalled the experience as “the blind leading the blind. I was really thrown into the EdChoice role.” Given the unfamiliar terrain, Principal C relied on her network to inform her about such things as what paperwork needed to be completed by a given date, or when an important meeting was occurring that she needed to attend. A second leader, Principal G, explained that she learned about the program

by “Going to the meetings, doing the classes, talking with other principals.” It was during these discussions that relationships were built and information was exchanged. In many cases, this information sharing was a matter of efficiency given the expansive work that comes with adopting a parental choice program. Principal H explained, “I would love to say that I’ve spent a lot of time educating myself in all the changes for EdChoice, but I have not. Other people educate me, and I’m very grateful for that, they know what they’re doing.” While building these networks and forming coalitions was critical to orient the leaders to the program requirements, and to exchange important information about the program’s implementation, the strength of these ties became foundational during contentious moments where politics for parental choice differed. We expand on how the cohesion among the principals was essential for managing conflict as we discuss the political strategy of bargaining and negotiation.

Bargaining and Negotiation

Another key skill for navigating politics is the need for bargaining and negotiation as a method of managing conflict. [Bolman and Deal \(2017\)](#) describe, “successful negotiators must be inventive and cooperative in searching for a win-win solution” (p. 211). Principals must manage divergent opinions and keep harmony among often opposing viewpoints in order to successfully move a school forward. This study found bargaining and negotiating skills among interactions with parents, teachers, and local public school officials.

Several of the principals spoke about managing tensions within the parent population of an EdChoice school, as some parents resented the fact that others received state funding for tuition assistance while they did not. Principal E, whose school withdrew from the program, spoke about the difficulties of steering through this tension, “At some point, the conversation became, ‘Well, wait a second, I’m making sacrifices to pay tuition, and these folks here are, just based on where they live, getting to come to school for free.’ So, it was an uncomfortable conversation that our pastor wasn’t willing to take on.” Rather than engaging parents on this point, the school left the program, finding a win-win solution for the harmony of the school community through leaving. Other principals showed the level of emotion contained in this conflict, as Principal C described a negative interaction with a family angered by these tuition differences. She said, “One parent said to me, ‘You know, I make sacrifices to send my kid to this school and I never know how my restaurant is going to do, and here’s this family whose wife gets paid under the table for what she does and gets to go for free.’” Principal D utilized the win-win approach described by [Bolman and Deal \(2017\)](#) to address tensions by providing thorough and detailed information, “In the beginning, there were people who were saying—unfortunately—we don’t want these poor kids coming here, and that was the stigma. But that quickly dissipated. I did an information night, so I invited all of our people and kind of went through the whole thing. And then I think that really assuaged people’s fears, like, ‘oh, this is not what I thought it was.’”

The need for successfully negotiating between divergent positions also extended into interactions with the teaching staff. Principal G engaged in a conflict when her school began accepting EdChoice students. She remembered comments such as, “So if it was a family [that] doesn’t fit into what our [local] demographic would be, staff were saying behind my back, ‘Why would she take this student? They don’t go to this church!’ and ‘Oh, she took that family, they must be an EdChoice family.’” This teacher utilized shorthand labels to describe students perceived as being from outside the cultural and economic milieu of the school. Despite feeling “disheartened” by these early interactions, Principal G also utilized a strategy of providing a win-win scenario to resolve the conflict with this teacher, articulating the benefits of increased enrollment and diversity for the school and offering a clearer explanation of eligibility guidelines to demonstrate the benefits of program participation to both the school and the student.

In addition to negotiating challenges within the school population, several principals spoke about negative interactions with officials from public school districts. Principal A said, “I think it’s been this way since the beginning, where people are going to fight [having EdChoice]. The districts that are losing students don’t want this.” Principal C said, “The public schools are worried because there is a perception that ‘The Catholic schools are taking our money,’ and that we’re going to ‘take all of the kids in the public schools.’ It’s gotten better since the last list [the 2019 list of EdChoice Traditional eligible schools].” Both principals shared comments that indicated that their local public school districts viewed the students and the funding provided through EdChoice as theirs, and perceived the Catholic schools as taking these resources from them. Principals in this study attributed these opinions to a misunderstanding of the program, and discussed their efforts to repair their school’s relationships with the districts. In this scenario, the principals used a strategy of separating the people from the problem, as [Bolman and Deal \(2017\)](#) wrote, “the wise negotiator will ‘deal with the people as human beings and with the problem on its merits’” (p. 211).

Leadership is inherently political, and the cost of receiving the benefits of the EdChoice scholarship thrust Catholic school principals all the more into the political arena as they set agendas, map the political terrain, network and build coalitions, and bargain and negotiate. Most of the principals interviewed found that the challenges of the navigating politics were manageable and worthwhile for the financial benefit of the school. Principal A illustrated the value of the EdChoice program, “[Catholic education] really does change lives. A lot of great kids went on to colleges and they’ll make a difference because of what this meant for them. They wouldn’t have had that opportunity without this scholarship available.”

Conclusion

When examined through the lens provided by [Bolman and Deal’s \(2017\)](#) political frame, the experience of Catholic school principals in Ohio with the state’s EdChoice scholarship program

demands the use of multiple political skills and techniques. The ability to navigate politics is a real expectation of the principal's job, and one that will likely continue to grow as the interplay between state government and private education continues to develop in the future.

While writing this paper, the state of Ohio passed its biennial budget for fiscal years 2024 and 2025. Included was a provision that changed the eligibility requirements for the EdChoice Expansion program, creating universal vouchers for families in amounts that vary according to a sliding scale based on household income. All families in Ohio are now eligible for vouchers in amounts ranging from \$650 to \$6,165 for elementary school students and \$950 to \$8,407 for high school students ([Ohio Education Policy Institute, 2023](#)). This increase in access indicates that the historical separation of Catholic schools from the government dissolves as parent choice programs increase, and Catholic school principals must understand and be equipped for the successful navigation of the new political reality.

A growing need for explicit and direct training in the political frame in principal preparation programs for the U.S. Catholic sector is evident. "Thus, all principal preparation programs . . . must help principal candidates become comfortable and effective in their political role because their success as school leaders—and the success of the students, families, teachers, and communities with whom they work—depends on it" ([Winton & Pollock, 2013](#), p. 30). Those tasked with shaping principal preparation programs at the university level and those who provide principal training and on-boarding at the diocesan level are strongly encouraged to incorporate a thorough study of the political frame. Such explicit instruction on the political frame should focus on the dynamics of power, including the recognition of types of power and the understanding of power relationships. Further reviewing [Bolman and Deal's \(2017\)](#) four key skills for managing the political world, which are agenda-setting, mapping the political terrain, networking and building coalitions, and bargaining and negotiating, are critical. We recommend incorporating role playing and conflict assessment exercises during professional development for leaders, as this will provide them the necessary practice on situations they will face in the real-world. This includes examining case studies from the field will help new principals gain comfort and confidence in navigating the political sphere.

Finally, it is essential that Catholic school principals stay alert and engaged in the political arena of their state. Following the news from the legislature, understanding bills that pertain to education and their potential impact, and engaging in appropriate advocacy are all activities now on the principal's job description. Principals can find help and support from their diocesan offices and from state Catholic Conferences. Engagement at the state level further extends to the federal level, as national advocacy efforts for parental choice funding opportunities look to expand and Catholic school principals in every state bring a voice of support for such expansion. We encourage all principals at all Catholic schools to enter the political world with confidence and courage, as the financial and equitable access benefits of participation are too significant to ignore.

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