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Private and Public School Effectiveness

A Reappraisal

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PRIVATE AND PUBLIC SCHOOL "EFFECTIVENESS": A REAPPRAISAL

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Two stylized facts dominate current educational policy thinking in America. The first is that public schools are ineffective. The second is that they are ineffective because they are not accountable for producing high academic achievement.

At one extreme, these stylized facts are interpreted to mean that public education *cannot* be made more efficient. According to this view, the public sector is structurally incapable of delivering high quality educational services to the diverse student populations in schools. It is too bureaucratic, too unionized, and a monopoly. Improving schooling requires that the management of education must be shifted out of the public sphere into the private, where market forces could make schools more productive. This interpretation is gaining ground, so bears careful analysis.

To do such an analysis, we go back to basics. We examine whether this characterization has substance in real schools. Along with a team from Harvard University's Graduate School of Education, we studied a highly diverse sample of 25 schools—roughly half located in a major metropolitan area on the East Coast and roughly half in two metropolitan areas on the West Coast. Our sample represented public, private, and charter elementary, middle, and high schools. Private schools included parochial and independent. We also targeted schools within each "sector" (private, public, or charter) that served different social class populations. In every school, we spent time in classrooms, and interviewed teachers, administrators, parents, and/or students.

Our purpose is to discern how these various schools work, especially how they construct their own conceptions of accountability. We seek to understand (a) how teachers, administrators, students, and parents think and behave around accountability in schools, and (b) what the *range* of responses that schools of various types formulate to the problem of accountability is, so that we can better judge whether the critics of publicly-managed education are correct in opting for markets in education.

One critique of a study that uses cases rather than a large, random sample of schools is that we have not chosen a representative set of schools, hence cannot draw conclusions regarding either accountability systems, nor possible differences or similarities between private and public schools. It is true that our sample is not random. It was drawn to represent a range of possible variation rather than as distributionally representative of the population of schools. It is also true that we can say less concerning high schools, since there were only five in our sample, and high schools are more complex institutions than elementary schools.[1] But by visiting a reasonably substantial number of public and private schools catering to higher and lower socio-economic background students in three metropolitan areas, we should be able to find the kinds of differences in accountability systems claimed by market advocates. Their claim, after all, is that market-driven behavior is *observably* and *significantly* different from bureaucratically-driven behavior. If that is the case, such differences should be observable in a sample of 25 schools. If they are not observable in this sample, then it is really up to market advocates to show what it is about our schools that would produce this result.

The intellectual justification for markets in education

Since the mid-1950s, when Milton Friedman revived the idea that government should not administer education,[2] many social scientists have been converted to the view that public schools are inherently inefficient and that privately-run schools can provide services more effectively. The most important of this argument's many parts is that a publicly-run system restricts parents' choice and that without "fair" competition, public schools do not have to be responsive (accountable) to parents'

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[1] In the current round of our continuing study of accountability, we are focusing on high schools in three states, precisely because we are interested in the added complexity of possibly differing accountability systems in various high schools departments.

[2] Adam Smith and his contemporary Thomas Paine both wrote that education would be much better privately provided.

demands. Friedman argued that by giving parents the possibility of sending their children to any school that met minimum standards, parents could "express their views about schools directly, by withdrawing their children from one school and sending them to another, to a much greater extent than is now possible," and that "here, as in other fields, competitive private enterprise is likely to be far more efficient in meeting consumer demands than either nationalized enterprises or enterprises run to serve other purposes."[3] Friedman never specified the underlying organization or behavior of schools that would lead to this result.

Years later, political scientists John Chubb and Terry Moe used an "institutional perspective" to flesh out the Friedman argument.[4] Like Friedman, they see the public school system as bureaucratic and political. To show that the institutional context of public schools really does shape the way they behave, Chubb and Moe compare public school organizations with their private counterparts, which are situated in an allegedly different institutional context. Private schools, controlled "indirectly—by the marketplace" serve as a contrast with public schools, controlled by democratic politics. [5] Because of the nature of these institutional settings—markets and politics—school organizations, they claim, tend to be very different in private and public schools. The main

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[3]Milton Friedman, "The Role of Government in Education," in Robert Solo (ed.), *Economics and the Public Interest*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1955, pp. 129. For Friedman, public schools are inefficient because nothing *makes* them be efficient, at least in terms of delivering the kinds of services that parents want. Public schools do not have to compete on the same ground with other schools that might deliver more and better education. And with a "monopoly" in neighborhood education, public schools are likely to produce education in a way that serves purposes other than parent wishes.

[4] John Chubb and Terry Moe. *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*. Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1990.

[5] Although this "carries no value judgment," since "all organizations of any size are in some sense bureaucratic" and all government agencies are political, Chubb and Moe claim that the "public school system suffers from very serious problems along both these dimensions ... Its bureaucracy problem is not that the system is bureaucratic at all, but that it is too heavily bureaucratic—too hierarchical, too rule-bound, too formalistic—to allow for the kind of autonomy and professionalism schools need if they are to perform well. Its political problem is not that it is subject to any sort of democratic politics, but that the specific political institutions by which the schools are governed actively promote and protect this over-bureaucratization" (p. 26).

differences are that private schools have a great deal more discretion in terms of choosing what they do and how they do it, that they are less conflictual because of greater homogeneity of interests among parents, and that their teachers and administrators are not accountable to hierarchical public bureaucracies. On the other hand, Chubb and Moe characterize public educational practice as

> ...a world of rules imposed on the schools by local, state, and federal authorities . . . rules about curriculum, about instructional methods, about the design of special programs, about textbooks, about time spent on various activities, about what can and cannot be discussed. In addition, there are all sorts of rules—monitoring and reporting rules—designed to ensure that teachers are doing these things and not evading hierarchical control . . . [These rules] cause [schools] to depart from what they might otherwise do, and thus to behave in ways that contradict or fail to take advantage of their professional judgment" (p. 59).

Private schools, to the contrary, are free to adopt whatever practices they want in order to achieve the school's mission, as long as they attract a specialized clientele that values what they do. They also have an incentive to "take advantage of the expertise and judgment of [their] teachers" (p. 60).

Chubb and Moe test statistically for organizational differences in schools, but their results are derived from secondary data based on questionnaires given to school personnel, not direct observations in schools.[6] Yet, if their and Friedman's view of public schooling is correct, we should be able to observe obvious differences between public and private schools as they organize around bureaucratic or market-driven forces. Specifically, teachers and administrators in public schools should

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[6] Their statistical methodology has been sharply criticized elsewhere by Anthony Bryk and Valerie Lee. First, some of the components used to construct the organizational variables are not organizational properties of the schools but organizational *consequences*; these, in turn, are correlated with student outcomes, including student achievement. Second, about one-fourth to one-third of the "organizational quality" effect is due to differences in the proportion of students in the academic track. Bryk and Lee argue that this misses the point: academic tracking does not pick up the impact of courses taken by students on their achievement; thus, the variable underestimates the effect of the internal organization of schooling on student performance (See Anthony Bryk and Valerie Lee, "Is Politics the Problem and Markets the Answer? An Essay Review of *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*" in *Economics of Education Review* , 11, 4 (1992), p. 444). Chubb and Moe create a third major (unreported) problem when they divide the sample into high- and low-performing schools: the sample weights were not designed for such partitions of the data, potentially seriously biasing the results. A fourth problem: Chubb and Moe combine reading/vocabulary test score "gains" with math score "gains" in the junior and senior years of high school when, in fact, reading and vocabulary are not taught in high school. So the combined "gain score" measure used is at least in part not likely to be affected by schooling. For another, similar critique, see Peter Cookson, Jr. *School Choice*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994, pp. 83-86.

conceptualize accountability in rigid and bureaucratic terms, whereas teachers and administrators in private schools should lean towards parent and student demands. [7]

Studying accountability in schools

For this empirical study, we developed a relatively simple working theory of school accountability, which is developed more fully in an earlier paper from this same project. [8] The theory is based on the premise that schools actually have conceptions of accountability embedded in the patterns of their day-to-day operations, and that a school's conception of accountability significantly influences how it delivers education. We assume that the school must solve the problem of accountability in some way in order to function, and that the way it solves this problem is reflected in the way teachers, administrators, students, and parents talk about the fundamental issues of schooling. We also assume that formal, external accountability systems—such as state or district bureaucracies, or market forces—are only one among many factors that influence a school's internal sense of accountability.

Schools form their conceptions of accountability from a variety of sources, including individual teachers' and administrators' beliefs about teaching an learning, their shared understandings of who their students are, the routines they develop for getting their work done, and external expectations from the parents, communities, and administrative agencies under which they work. To capture this construction of accountability, our theory posits a relationship among three tiers—the individual's sense of accountability, or *responsibility*; parents', teachers', administrators', and students' collective

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[7] Although much of the data used by Chubb and Moe suggest that bureaucracy is particularly onerous in low-income, urban areas where school clientele are less-educated parents, they leave out the urban location variable in predicting effective school organization and equivocate on whether parental background affects school autonomy. See Anthony Bryk and Valerie Lee, "Is Politics the Problem and Markets the Answer?" 1992, p. 447.

[8] See Charles Abelmann and Richard Elmore with Johanna Even, Susan Kenyon and Joanne Marshall, "When Accountability Knocks, Will Anyone Answer?" Consortium for Policy Research in Education, March, 1999 (mimeo).

sense of accountability, or *expectations*; and the organizational rules, incentives, and implementation mechanisms that constitute the *formal accountability* system in schools. These accountability mechanisms represent the variety of ways, formal and informal, in which people in schools (including parents, in some cases) *give an account* of their actions to someone in a position of formal authority inside or outside the school. Mechanisms are *formal* when they are recorded in a policy handbook or part of a union contract. *Informal* mechanisms refer to a set of measures that school actors respond to, regardless of what bureaucratic rules and regulations in fact say, that are "organic" to that particular school culture. Mechanisms can also vary in the consequences they carry for success or failure. They can be *low stakes*, resulting only in approval or disapproval by, say, the principal. Or they can be *high stakes*, involving public disclosure or financial sanctions and rewards.

Accountability mechanisms are what most people, including Friedman and Chubb and Moe, envisage when they discuss bureaucracy and markets. Teachers in public schools are characterized as subject to complex *formal* accountability mechanisms requiring adherence to bureaucratic rules and regulations that have little to do with maximizing pupils' academic performance.[9] The principal of a public school is characterized as enforcing these externally imposed mechanisms. The market is also an accountability mechanism, and an allegedly *high stakes* one, since failure to conform to market signals implies loss of clientele.

In our working theory, responsibility, expectations, and accountability operate in a mutual relationship with each other, and this relationship varies from school to school. A given school's response to the problem of accountability is a product of how it resolves the conflicts and

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[9]It is not clear, however, whether such bureaucratic mechanisms are high or low stakes. Most critics of public schooling claim, on the one hand, that school bureaucracies spend their time enforcing rules and regulations. On the other hand, these same critics complain that teacher labor unions are able to blunt any attempts to sanction teachers who do not conform to these rules. This would suggest that public schools are organized around complex, bureaucratic (external), *low stakes* accountability mechanisms.

complementarities between individuals' internalized notions of accountability, their shared expectations, and formal and informal mechanisms that push them to account to someone else for what they do. Schools are likely to have a more "operative" internal accountability systems if their formal and informal mechanisms are *aligned with* individuals' internalized notions of accountability (responsibility) and collective expectations of the school.[10] At the other extreme, there is a high degree of incoherence among the three levels of accountability and a relatively weak or even dysfunctional internal accountability system. This would be the case, for example, cited by Chubb and Moe, where a principal forces teachers to adhere to rules that they know result in poor academic outcomes.

Schools not only vary on the degree of alignment between the different levels of accountability, but also on *what* they consider themselves to be accountable for. A school can exhibit a high degree of alignment around student academic achievement or it may organize itself around order and discipline in the classrooms with little or no coherence with regard to academic goals. As we will show, just because a school exhibits a high degree of alignment, it does not mean that it is aligned around academics.

Chubb and Moe and others who champion markets in education *explicitly* assume that both public and private schools are highly aligned in one sense: they adhere closely to external accountability systems. In the case of public schools, they are aligned with bureaucratic goals, and in the case of private, with clients' (parents') taste for academic achievement. They *implicitly* assume that this is much more likely to result in aligned internal accountability (coherence between parents'/teachers' expectations, internalized notions of accountability, and the school's formal accountability system) in private schools, where markets reward academically excellent schools with

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[10] Abelmann, et.al., "When Accountability Knocks, Will Anyone Answer?" April, 1998.

more students. Concurrently, they assume that public schools lack alignment. Bureaucratic goals conflict with teachers' notion of good teaching, conflict with parents' demand for academic excellence, and produce formal accountability systems unrelated to maximizing academic achievement.

We were not able to observe this dichotomy. Rather, we found a few public and private schools with a high degree of internal alignment around academic goals, and many public and private schools' academic programs dominated by "atomized" behavior, in which the individual teacher defines what takes place in the classroom, unencumbered by parent expectations or formal school accountability. Given our sample, we cannot determine whether a higher proportion of private schools than public are aligned around academic achievement. At the high school level, others have found some evidence that Catholic schools do slightly better than public schools, in part, it is argued, because of a sense of community missing in public high schools and the implicit trust that parents have in Catholic schools' mission. [11] This supports the idea of greater internal alignment. But the differences in achievement are small, and Bryk, Lee, and Holland specifically reject this as an argument for the kind of alignment produced by markets. [12] Market-driven alignment means that school personnel are pushed toward teaching for high academic achievement because they are rewarded for that behavior by the formal accountability system and because such teaching is also consistent with their notion of professional excellence. We did not observe that kind of alignment in the private schools we visited.

What do we find in schools?

Assume that the market-driven educational models as propounded by Friedman and Chubb and Moe are correct. Since public schools in those models are steered by bureaucratic principles while private schools have a greater deal of discretion to determine their actions, we would expect to find

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[11] Anthony Bryk, Valerie Lee, and Peter Holland (1993). *Catholic Schools and the Common Good.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

that private school organizations tend to be very different from public school organizations. We would also expect to find that public schools are less responsive to parental demands (expressed expectations) than private schools, hence are less likely to align responsibility with expectations. And finally we would expect to find that, since parents allegedly demand mainly higher achievement, private school should focus more on student achievement than public schools, hence be more likely to develop formal accountability systems that reflect parents demand for high academic achievement. The implication of these last two expectations from the standpoint of accountability theory, is a much lower likelihood of coherence in public schools than in private between individual responsibility, parent/teacher/administrator expectations, and formal accountability rules and incentives.

In the 25 schools we studied, we were not able to observe any such systematic differences between private and public schools. Let's go through these alleged differences one at a time.

1. Are public schools steered by bureaucratic principles while private schools have a greater deal of discretion to determine their actions?

If markets have a big influence on education, we would find the organization of private schools to be considerably different from public ones. We would expect public schools to be bogged down by centrally driven bureaucratic requirements—such as curricular mandates, lesson plan registers, teacher evaluation procedures, and so on and so forth—that bind the work of teachers and administrators and ultimately constrict their capacity to adapt school norms and direct classroom activities to the particular needs of their student population. Private schools would be free of such exigencies and enjoy greater discretion to assess and determine what kind of school organization and classroom behavior suit best the pupils they serve. Consequently, private schools would tend to tailor educational services to the specific demands of the children enrolled at any point in time.

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[12] Bryk and Lee, 1992.

Public vs. private school administration: Bureaucracy for all, or maybe bureaucracy for none. Chubb and Moe's characterization of the public/private dichotomy contrasts starkly with what we actually found in the public and private schools we studied. Formal administrative and classroom organization in public and private schools are strikingly similar. Administrative staff and teachers attend to comparable duties and espouse similar educational goals: principals tend to management issues and oversee the overall functioning of the school while instructors are mainly responsible for pedagogical classroom concerns. In both public and private schools, teachers are *formally* accountable to the principal, and principals are accountable to a superordinate body—district officers in the case of public organizations, church officials in parochial schools, or a board of directors (usually not parents) in private independent schools. Since most private schools in the United States are run by the Catholic Church–the parish priest or archdiocese oversee primary/middle school principals and the archdiocese, high school principals–Church bureaucratic rules and control can be just as onerous or laissez-faire as district/state bureaucracy, depending on the parish/archdiocese. Yet, little of the bureaucracy in either public or private schools is directed at controlling teachers.

The principal at a Catholic school, for example, told us the following about the barrage of bureaucratic demands she encounters, none of them aimed at classroom concerns:

> We have what we call the archdiocesan regulations and guidelines. And every principal has overall administrative handbooks. And then they have curriculum guidelines that are always current. We look at the guidelines carefully, but we do have the freedom to adapt those guidelines according to the needs of the students . . . There are certain textbook sets we're given . . . And they have come out with technology guidelines for the school . . . The Archdiocese recently came up with a new policy for financial policies. Both parishes and schools. And we have to adhere to those very strictly . . . They have deadlines for different reports that you have to hand in dealing with the federal government . . . They really keep close tabs so they know exactly who hands in what and at what time. At the beginning of the year, it's a very pressured time, especially September, October when you're having to get all these reports in, you have to get them in. No one is exempt from that . . . We have a survey of school population, finances, staffing, how many credentialed teachers, salaries, years of teaching, etc. And a budget statement for the previous year, how much and what are we projecting for this year. It's pretty comprehensive. And then they're very interested to know what the ethnic makeup of your school is . . . I believe that [bureaucratic demands reflect general] legalistic demands on all schools, no one's exempt. Whether you're in the public sector or in the private sector, you've got to be prepared. You've got to follow these regulations to protect yourself. It's harder. When I first started out, none of this existed. I can see where there's a lot that's good but still it does take a lot of time. Sometimes I really get very annoyed because I want to spend more time in the area of curriculum or staff development and working with teachers. And literally I walked in here the first month of school and I have to do those reports.

> And I get real resentful toward that because that's a very important part of the year. It's when the new children, students have come in and some teachers are new and they need your support. But this has to be done.

Private schools are often involved in bureaucratic conflicts, the kind normally associated with public schools. The battles may be different, more likely to involve religious matters than academics, but conflicts, or potential conflicts, can place constraints on teachers in private parochial schools as they do in public. In two of the parochial schools we studied, one a Lutheran school and another, a Catholic school, major struggles that affected what teachers did developed between the church hierarchy, the principal, and parents.

In a Lutheran school we studied, the school was riven by conflict over the principal's decision to adopt the "Lee Kantor Assertive Discipline" program for the school. Upon this adoption, discipline became more predictable and less flexible, and parent complaints to the pastor and the congregational school board increased. The result of these complaints was a theological fight, in which one faction of the school board, led by the pastor, attempted to overrule the principal (one church newsletter, for example, had as its front page headline, "Assertive Discipline is All Law and No Gospel"), while another faction, including most teachers and many parents, supported the principal. One of the teachers, himself an ordained Lutheran minister, responded to the church newsletter with a leaflet of his own, citing Scripture in defense of the principal and the assertive discipline system. At the time our case study observations ended, the school had reached a stalemate. The congregational school board had fired the principal and had advised each teacher in the school that his/her contract would not be renewed for the following school year. However, the principal had refused to leave his position, and was continuing to run the school, while the board apparently did not feel it had sufficient congregational support to force the principal to leave (for example, by refusing to pay him or by calling the civil authorities to evict him from the school). The significant thing to us about this conflict

is that it had nothing to do with curriculum or academic achievement. In none of the parochial schools we studied in low-income neighborhoods did we find a conflict of comparable importance around the academic issues that private schools, according to the theory, are better designed to confront. While the issues of discipline were important in the Lutheran school, we observed many curricular failures that were equally, if not more important. Yet neither the school nor the church administration, and not the parents, were focused on any of these failures.

In one of the Catholic schools we observed, there was a conflict regarding academic issues, but not the sort of conflict that addresses the academic accountability that privatization theory promotes. In this school, the principal (a nun) was anxious to have high test scores as a sign of the school's success. These scores would help the school attract parents with an academic orientation. Because of this goal, the principal carefully screened potential students, admitting only those who passed an academic test showing that they were at or above grade level (i.e., the 50^{th} percentile) on norm referenced tests. The parish priest, however, to whom the principal was nominally accountable, strongly disagreed with this policy, because its result was to give admission preference to high achieving children from families who might not be as "good Catholics" (measured by participation in parish activities) as families whose children, because of low test performance, might not be admitted. In practice, this meant that the children of lower-income, but more devout, parishioners were denied admission in favor of the children of more middle-income, but less devout families. Nowhere, however, in this dispute between principal and priest, did supervision or review of the curriculum for children who attended the school arise. The dispute revolved entirely around admissions procedures. (This dispute was not a public one, but an ongoing private dispute between the principal and the priest. The priest, nominally the responsible party, deferred to the principal when the dispute could not be resolved, because he realized that over-ruling her philosophy would require him either to take a more

active role in running the school or to fire the principal and find a new one, alternatives he was unwilling to consider.)[13]

Curriculum traditionally remains the main control over teachers' use of classroom time, and this, too, is just as true of private as public schools. But in *both* private and public schools, curricular controls tend to be loose rather than tight. In most states' public schools, teachers must use some approximate version of state curricular frameworks. In the majority of private schools we studied, school curricula are directly borrowed from the state frameworks or, in the case of parochial schools, must strictly follow the directives of the clerical hierarchy. In a Jewish day school we studied, the lay curriculum was copied from the neighboring public school district. Neither can teachers in parochial schools decide how much time they officially spend on a particular academic subject. They have to comply with the time allotments previously determined by church officials, or in the case of the Jewish day school, with the school's parent-run board. Yet, beyond the time constraints, we found almost no direct control enforcing what and how teachers taught.

One teacher in an elite Catholic high school put it this way:

> . . . I think one of the good things about the school is that the faculty feels a freedom to really teach what they really want to teach . . . I don't think there's a lot of bureaucracy.

Another teacher in a Catholic elementary school serving low-income families said that teachers follow the faculty handbook directions about lesson plan books, but because those directions allow for the principal to receive the plan after lessons have occurred, there is little in this monthly ritual that provides any evidence of what actually happens in the class. "I can be lying in the plan book and giving her one plan and doing the opposite."

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[13] Both these conflicts were resolved in favor of school autonomy. That might or might not be the case in a public school district, where principals popular with parents often can maintain their positions, but where the district office certainly can and does win disputes by removing school administrators. In New York City's District 2, for example, the superintendent fired one -half of all the principals in the district over a three-year period because they would not implement new, district-led policies.

However, public school teachers say exactly the same thing about lesson plans. For example, a teacher at a public school in a low-income neighborhood suggested that she and the other teachers at the school rarely prepared their plans:

> We turn them into the principal, and they often say the reason behind it is case of an emergency, but none of us writes lesson plans that are detailed enough that a sub could actually follow them . . . to do a week's worth at a time is really just a big deal for me. So a lot of us are really bad at doing that . . .

If teachers are less trained and less skilled, they are less able to deviate from a bureaucratically imposed curriculum. We observed many teachers in the Catholic and Lutheran schools who rigidly followed the curriculum. They went as far as teaching lessons by having students stand in turn and read aloud from the assigned textbook chapter. Of course, this happens in public schools as well, and our survey does not lend itself to estimating whether private or public school teachers are more likely to use poor teaching techniques. But one of the factors contributing to this in private schools we observed was the presence of untrained teachers who were hired without teaching credentials and for whom there was inadequate on-site training and curricular supervision once they came to the school. Several teachers expressed to us a desire to learn how to use manipulatives and other constructivist techniques in teaching math. They had had no training in them.

We also found that in at least seven of the private *and* public schools where we interviewed academic programs are driven (or heavily influenced) by the contents of standardized tests. Whether these are based on state-mandated testing instruments, off-the-shelf commercial examination, or the Scholastic Aptitude Test, exams run by external bureaucracies are used in schools as pupil evaluation instruments and, in both public and private schools, can drive the curriculum. For example, a private international school we studied affiliated the French section with the French public school system, rather strictly followed the French official curriculum (teachers still had considerable freedom within the classroom in *how* they taught the curriculum), and had made changes in the way they covered the

curriculum in response to official French government tests taken by all third and sixth graders at the beginning of the school year. The changes had resulted in improved test scores. Parents and teachers in a public school located in a high-income, suburban neighborhood were also acutely aware of pupil scores on state tests (they were very high). Another private school with a highly-educated parent clientele had never given any standardized tests to students, but, despite teacher opposition, would start doing so in the next academic year because of parent pressure for some measure of pupil performance (and teacher evaluation) and for meeting accreditation requirements. Parents in this school want to have some measure of how the "school is doing" compared to local public schools, also attended by children of highly-educated parents.

However, test-driven curricula are not just the domain of schools attended by pupils from families with higher-educated, higher-income parents. In one public elementary school located in a very poor community, we observed lower-grade teachers administering a reading assessment every three months in an effort to improve reading scores. The assessment was having a clear impact on curriculum and teaching, and teachers felt overwhelmingly positive about its effects.

In both private and public schools, bureaucratic mandates regulate the relationship between teachers and schools and between principals and bureaucratic hierarchies. Teacher evaluation procedures and the role of in-service training are comparable. In most schools, whether private or public, although teachers regularly confront *potential* evaluations of their classroom teaching, teacher evaluations are rarely an accountability tool. In our sample of schools, recent hires in public and private schools did express concern over their performance review. As teachers settled into their positions, administrative evaluations caused less anxiety and carried less influence. Once public schools teachers obtain tenure or private school instructors become established members of their school community, they recede in frequency and prominence. Teacher evaluations are then largely ignored or are yearly formulaic procedures without major significance. At best, they represent an opportunity for

teachers to reflect on their work and obtain a second opinion on how to improve their effectiveness as classroom leaders. One public middle school teacher told us:

> I think it's every two years for me. I'm not sure about that. The director of instruction comes around, you know, sits in class . . . most of us have been here for a long time. This is my twenty-eighth year. If I don't know what I am doing by now, I should have quit a long time ago..

Despite institutionalized teacher evaluation tools, such as formal curriculum controls, student test results and a hierarchical structure that makes principals formally responsible for regularly evaluating teachers, in the schools we observed, we found that teachers were almost entirely autonomous in their classrooms. In most schools teachers were not held accountable for more than the most elemental bureaucratic details, such as taking attendance, showing up regularly, and more or less teaching the prescribed curriculum. It is difficult to understand

An unexpected distinction we found between public and private schools is the ability of private schools run by the same administrative apparatus to set different goals for schools serving different clientele. This can also be observed within the public system, as magnet and "exam" high schools suggest, but even in those cases, mission definitions are less different than are the clientele recruited.[14] Two Catholic elementary schools in the same archdiocese, one catering to children from very low income families, the other to children from middle income families, had *explicitly* different missions. Gateway is a school in which the children are treated very kindly, but teachers have very low academic expectations. Instead, the school has the explicit goal of preparing the pupils in a safe environment for *moral, blue-collar* lives. In contrast, St. Aloysius is a school where teachers are expected to hold pupils to a high academic standard because the archdiocese has defined that as the school's mission. There is a consensus at the school level and in the archdiocese that these different schools serve different purposes. The accountability system operates to support that variable mission. At St.

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[14] Where a public school becomes a charter school, it usually separates itself from a larger jurisdiction (the school district, for example) because it wants to define its mission differently from other public schools in the district.

Aloysius, if the principal wanted to get rid of a teacher because of poor teaching skills, every indication is that she would get support from the archdiocese in that effort. At Gateway, the principal could not get rid of a teacher for poor teaching because he was perceived to be "good with the kids & that's what we're about here." Unlike public school district administrations, which officially must set the same mission of "high academic standards" for all schools in their jurisdiction, this archdiocese appears to have the freedom to establish differentiated goals for different schools. Even though in practice public schools in the same district catering to different social class clientele do operate in a differentiated fashion, they are not *supposed* to do that. From an accountability standpoint, all public schools are officially held to the same mission of achieving high academic results. In the case of the low income neighborhood served by Gateway, this means that parents have a choice between a neighborhood public school where the child will receive poor teaching or a neighborhood parochial school where the child will receive equally poor teaching but attention to affective needs that might foster his/her innate abilities. Without benefit of charter status, the neighborhood public school doesn't have the option to define itself as something other than an "academic" school.

One obvious distinction between public and private institutions lies in the power of private schools to fire teachers. The tenure system in the public system makes the removal of a classroom instructor an arduous procedure. Because teachers can be more easily terminated at a private school, we would assume that the teacher evaluation process in private schools should have greater significance than in their public counterparts. We found little evidence that this is the case. For example, in one of the Catholic schools we observed, both the principal and vice-principal stated that "I've never had to fire a teacher." In another Catholic school, two *new* instructors were asked to withdraw because, although offered several opportunities to improve their performance, they had continued to be evaluated as "substandard." This is precisely the same degree of control as in public schools where all new teachers are effectively on "probation" for three years before being considered

for tenure. It is relatively easy not to renew a public school teacher's probationary contract. Our data suggest that *experienced* teacher firing in private schools is a discretionary power that is seldom used and reserved for those rather extreme cases that could have also resulted in administrative action in a public school. For example, a teacher was fired in one private school in our sample for "yanking a child's arm while in line."

In two low-income Catholic schools we observed, principals told us that they were as limited by due process rules and regulations in removing teachers who were not performing as any public school. Though these schools had no union contracts and were not bound by the due process procedures of the state's education code, the principals were bound to follow the Archdiocese due process rules in disciplining teachers, which allow the teacher to have a hearing before an Archdiocese-appointed panel. These rules were as restrictive as those in public schools. Fear of lawsuits resulting from deviation from these rules seemed to be the primary motivation in guiding principal supervisory behavior. In one case that developed while we were observing in a Catholic school, an unmarried female teacher became pregnant during the school year. Although the teacher had signed a contract promising to obey Catholic moral teaching, and although the school principal and pastor believed that the teacher was setting an unacceptable example for the students, they felt powerless to dismiss the teacher. The teacher was asked to resign, and when she refused, the matter was dropped and the visibly pregnant teacher was permitted to continue teaching.

As in public schools, these Catholic schools seem able to dismiss teachers for extreme violent or abusive behavior, but not for incompetence or lack of instructional effectiveness. Part of the reason for this is the due process requirements by which the Catholic school principals feel constrained. Equally important is that the school principals have little time or inclination to supervise instruction and to mentor teachers whose instruction is ineffective. Principals in these Catholic schools are prevented from being "instructional leaders" for the same reasons as principals in public schools are so

prevented: their time is consumed with administrative details (including, for Catholic school principals, a necessary obsession with collecting tuition payments and organizing fund raising activities) and, in low income parishes, there are no additional support staff (e.g., vice principals) who can assume the role of instructional leader in their places.

Thus, whereas experienced teacher dismissal for poor academic performance should be more likely in private schools, it appears to be a rare event in the schools where we interviewed. This finding might be explained by more careful initial selection of private school teachers, or greater likelihood of careful screening of younger teachers. In several of the private schools in our sample, parents and administrators stressed teacher selection as a key factor in school success. As the principal at one of the high-income private schools we studied explains,

> I set up a situation in the school where no teacher comes in to the school unless all the teachers have seen them teach, have interviewed them and we agree that this would be an asset to the faculty. So every teacher who comes in to this school, all the teachers feel are excellent teachers, as well as I feel that. In fact, what I basically do is I bring maybe three candidates that I think would be excellent for the school. Then we put them through this testing and interview process. So, when I hire a teacher, I feel this is someone who can bring something really good to the school.

The principal of a Catholic school in a low-income neighborhood also told us:

> I think you really have to look for someone who buys into your philosophy . . . Now I know my sixth grade teacher will not be returning next year. And so I'm going to start interviewing in January. But I'd like the person to come and spend time in the school, teach, mingle with the staff, and get input from the staff. (St. James)

Another Catholic school principal (catering to students from high-income families) said virtually the same thing:

> . . . by virtue of things I said, people came to understand what I valued . . . When some of those people left at the end of that year, I was able to hire new people...each time that's happened, I've hired someone whose sense of education and philosophy is very much in keeping with my own.

Private school teachers are paid less than public. We found some support in our interviews for the widely-held view that especially in schools in low-income neighborhoods teachers may choose to work in a private school for less pay because of "better working conditions." Our study of a Catholic

primary school quotes one teacher as saying ". . . that taking the cut in pay to work at St. Barbara's (not the school's real name) was compensated by being in a supportive atmosphere in which she could openly discuss Christian values with her students."

But this is not always or even generally the case. One independent private school where we interviewed was marked by extremely high turnover. Our case study write-up of that school notes:

> Contrary to the high rate of student retention, teacher turnover seems to have become somewhat of a phenomenon . . . In fact, it was reported that, across the school's 18 full-time classroom teachers and 6 area specialists, at least 40 percent of the teaching staff is new every year. When we asked parents, teachers, and administrators what accounted for this phenomenon, they included such things as "low pay," lack of professional growth," "depressing facilities," and "noise level" as contributing factors. The school librarian–one of the more veteran staff members–went as far as to list low salaries as the single most important factor contributing to the high teacher turnover . . .

Public school principals in many of the schools we saw also had considerable say in the teachers they chose to hire. In one public high school, for example, the principal had, over five years, systematically replaced retirees or teachers he managed to ease out because of philosophical conflicts. In their place he hired younger teachers who fit in with the new programs he was implementing.

In sum, despite the widely-held view that private school teachers are likely to be "better" than public school teachers because of initial selection and fear of termination for poor performance, most private schools we observed were no more selective than public schools serving a similar socio-economic group of students, nor were likely to fire a teacher. If the teaching is better in one school than another, it does not seem to be attributable to differences in private/public contractual differences.

The default mode in schools: Imposed bureaucracy or atomized accountability? Our observations suggest that bureaucratic requirements on teachers and principals are not very different in public and private schools. But do teachers in private schools enjoy greater latitude to determine their actions than those in public schools? We found no evidence that teachers in public schools had less freedom in the classroom than private school teachers. To the contrary, we found that personal

discretion and adaptability is the dominant feature of classroom teaching in public and private institutions alike.

Although public school behavior is usually portrayed as an outcome of imposed bureaucratic mandates, most teachers enjoy a large degree of autonomy in their classrooms. There may be certain pedagogical methods that are favored, but instructors have substantial flexibility to adapt them, adopt new approaches, or experiment with an amalgam of district-sponsored methodologies and their perceptions of what would work best to enhance student learning.

We also found that almost all teachers interviewed maintain that they feel most accountable to a personal and internalized sense of professional responsibility that reaches far beyond a school's formal rules and regulations. The principal at a public elementary school describes her staff in these terms:

> If we were to draw a broad stereotype, teachers tend to be of a personality type that wants to follow the rules, wants to do well, wants to behave, wants to do what's expected . . . The accountability structure here is very often self-imposed by the teachers. They want it in on time because they're supposed to get it in on time. They want to do well for the kids because they're here because they care about education. If you were to survey—and you're probably familiar with studies where they asked teachers why they went in, and overwhelmingly teachers report it's because they want to help, they want to make a difference . . . So their accountability to what they're doing with their children, I think, relates to their deep beliefs about why they're there and how they can help and what kids need . . . For instance, they know they have to let me do a formal interview and they have to come in and have this conference with me; most of them welcome it. They usually—they want to know how they're doing—but I really think the biggest accountability is self-imposed in a group of teachers. All these other things are there, and if they don't turn in x y z in a reasonable time I might pop a note in their box, "did you forget x, y or z?" but there's a big self-imposition. That's why they're here so late; there's no such thing as 9 to 3. That's a rare, rare, rare teacher who goes home right at the end of the day. And there's no one telling them they have to have these four lessons planned or this many things to hand out or cut out those many things, they impose that on themselves. And I think that's a piece that the newspapers miss—the personal dedication that these people feel.

Teachers report that the most important motivation for their classroom behavior is "to do what is best for students" and that they feel the greatest sense of accountability towards "doing what is most effective" for their students. If pressured to follow bureaucratic regulations that may be perceived as damaging to children, teachers oftentimes choose to disregard or sidestep such directives.

This is also true of private schools. For instance, a lower-grade teacher in a low-income parochial school confessed that, under pressure, she sometimes cuts down her daily mandated Catechism period in order to emphasize reading or math skills:

> We're supposed to teach, theoretically, a certain amount of minutes of every subject every week, and it changes per grade. For example, [my grade] really concentrates on language arts, and you mostly teach language arts. . . . What I end up doing since religion is a 45-minute-a-day subject, if I need to cut into some subjects or not do a subject that day because we need to get to other things, I usually end up cutting out religion. I'll feel kind of guilty about it. This is a Catholic school. But then I'll do something at the end of the day, like if we say a prayer at the end of the day, and I'm like, all right, well we might not have read it in the religion book today, but we said a prayer today, and in all fairness, if I had to pick between something with language or math or cutting out religion, I'm going to cut out the religion, just because it's something you can go over again, but English and language and math are just so important.

In short, bureaucratic requirements are a feature of both public and private educational institutions, but these rules and regulations do not fully fashion what actually occurs in schools. Public and private school teachers exercise a large degree of discretion to put into practice what they personally deem most appropriate to further student achievement. An atomized sense of professional accountability can and does take precedence over strictly bureaucratic structures in the public as well as in private education.

2. Are private schools more responsive to parental demands than public schools?

According to market-driven educational models, because private schools depend on consumer satisfaction for their survival, they are expected to be more responsive to parental demands than public institutions. Schools that are not in touch with the needs of parents and students would theoretically be eventually forced out of the market. Public schools, on the other hand, have less incentives to respond to parental concerns for two reasons: (a) parents and students are a captive constituency, and (b) parental expectations are only one of a large host of competing demands public schools confront.

Yet again, the data from our sample of schools challenges the accuracy of these assertions.

All the schools in our sample–private and public alike–display very similar organizational channels to encourage parental participation. Most schools have parent-teacher organizations that are in charge of voicing parental issues and regular parent-teacher conferences that allow families to raise matters of concern. At the beginning of every year, teachers invite parents into their classroom and request their assistance in performing clerical and administrative duties, supporting pedagogical exercises, or taking part in field trips and special school-wide events. Both public and private schools public and private schools ask parents to donate a certain number of volunteer work hours in various school activities as a means to defray the costs of schooling.

But this raises another important point. In all of the private schools we studied, requirements for parental volunteerism were part of the parent contract. However, in each of these schools, the principals found it impossible to enforce compliance with this provision. In each of them, the schools had a policy permitting parents to "buy" back their volunteer commitments by making additional financial contributions in lieu of volunteering. And in the low income parochial schools, even these financial contributions were difficult to collect.

When teachers and principals in low income private and public schools were asked what they most wanted to change in their schools, they all said, irrespective of private or public status, they wanted to see more parental involvement in their schools. One of the Catholic elementary schools we observed implemented a policy of requiring parents to walk into the classroom to pick up children after school each day, to force a contact between teacher and parent. This policy seemed to work well for the school, and most teachers were able to use this structure to develop an ongoing relationship with each parent. However, even this school was able to implement the policy only for the lower grades.

Parent engagement in these school or classroom activities is not necessarily a measure of school responsiveness to parental demands. The terms of parent involvement are often dictated by the

schools themselves. Parents often act as guests or as an extension of the school staff. They implement the school's own educational directives. A different picture emerges when we assess the degree to which parents may organize as a distinct group that strives to affect directly school policy or classroom behavior.

Parental influence in private schools: Muted voices. Parents must make an explicit choice when selecting a private school, but there is strong indication that much of their ability to affect the educational experience of their children stops there. In the first place, private schools—and especially those considered highly desirable or elite institutions—may place barriers to entry. Only those who students whose parents can afford their tuition fees and who satisfy discriminating selection criteria are admitted. Students that exhibit educational and behavioral difficulties have little to choose from.

We found that even in the selective private schools parents and students are not influential in the way claimed by Chubb and Moe. Particularly in the more expensive schools, highly-educated parents who are the typical clientele of such schools often feel that they have the "right" to intercede in educational decisions. For example, the principal of a high-cost, private religious elementary school reflected that

> [I]t's like an entitlement situation here where parents feel—I think because they're paying money—they feel more empowered to tell you every specific thing, every issue that they have, as if the child was in a home schooling away from home.

Yet, it is important to note that this is typical of higher-educated parents in public as well, and that in both private and public schools this position taken by such parents is generally not supported by school administrators and teachers. School personnel, whether private or public, do not consider it parents' responsibility or prerogative to make pedagogical determinations. Parents are viewed as not possessing the professional qualifications needed to make such decisions. A board member of the same private school puts it in these words:

> The school does not exist to serve parents. The school exists to deliver excellent education to families and it takes more than the parents' view to accomplish that.

The principal of this institution agrees:

> The position of this school is that parents and the school are not on equal footing. [Our school] has a right to set its own rules and guidelines. The school is open to input from parents but it is not a cooperative. There is no shared decision making. Parents put their money and have a say in what goes on, but the ultimate decision is of the school.

And the same sentiments are reflected in the statement of an upper-grade teacher:

> There's pressure from the parents about what they think should be taught in classes and it may not always be based on an educational framework of knowledge. And they don't always have the information they need to know what is the best thing. And because they're paying for the school sometimes they feel that—and this is a community school and they want the chance to be involved—but they sometimes think that it means that they are the ones that should decide what needs to be done.
>
> When you pay attention to what people are saying . . . it becomes very clear, very quickly that a lot of people [are not informed] . . . And responsible leadership has to figure out who they're hearing what from. And spend the time to know whether that person actually has any clue what they're talking about. My experience is that they often don't.

As private institutions, private schools have the capacity to shield teachers and administrators from parental demands. School decisions are school prerogatives. It is not the place of parents to set educational policy. Their obligation is to backstop the efforts of the school, not to determine its mission. They do not have ownership—hence, a mandate—over the school; they are primarily consumers of educational services. Ultimately, families are presented with two choices: to accept the school as it is or to find a different institution that better suits their educational expectations. In other words, parents may have the choice to exit private schooling, but they do not necessarily have a voice to shape what occurs in them.

Our data suggests that parents are willing to make great concessions to private schools. For instance, parochial schools make Catechism a compulsory subject within their curriculum. Although non-Catholic students are usually a large proportion—if not a majority—of the student body, parents agree to have their children partake daily in a forty-five minute religious course without exception as well as in many other religious activities. This may amount to approximately 15 to 20 percent of the total time that students spend in school.

Parental influence in public schools: In a different voice. Our case studies suggest that, the claims of private market supporters notwithstanding, parents in public schools command as much as or more control over educational issues than parents in private. On careful reflection, this makes sense. Public education is a public service, in principle serving the public good. Parents should be able to influence what goes on in the public school, although they are not the only ones who should have a say in shaping the education of their children. Society has an interest in the kind of education its children receive, and this may not always coincide with parental interests or desires. Parents of children in public school may have limited opportunities for exit (sometimes the only alternative is having the means to afford a private education), and their interests may in fact compete with a host of demands from other school and district sources, but parents can and often do constitute a powerful pressure group that can set change in motion, if not at the school level, at least at the district and state level through the ballot box. The *threat* of such *collective* influence at these multiple levels, if school personnel feel it might be exercised, is as important as the threat of individual parent exit.

Families may affect what happens in the classroom in two different ways: (a) By providing resources to the school and determining how those resources are to be used, and (b) by raising their concerns with the appropriate public authorities and demanding that the school act on them.

We observed a public elementary school in an upper middle-class neighborhood where parents donate a substantial amount of resources to support its educational mission. Participation in school affairs through volunteerism, in-kind donations and monetary contributions raises parental visibility and entitles parents to have at least some control over resource allocation in the school. For example, the parent-run School Foundation provides funding for several classroom aides; consequently, aides are not only accountable to teachers and the school administration for their work but are closely monitored by the Foundation board of governors. An evaluation of resource teachers and classroom aides was conducted by a Foundation-appointed team to assess whether students received more

individualized attention. Teachers were requested to keep a log of aides' time every day for one week and classrooms were formally observed by a team of parents. Formal assessments were written-up and results were reviewed with the school administration at a School Site Council meeting. The report estimated that "in the primary grades, 77 percent of aide time was spent working with small groups or individual students and 23 percent was spent in clerical duties. In the upper grades, 38 percent of aide time was spent in working with small groups or individual students and 62 percent was spent in clerical duties." The latter was found to be unacceptable, and the principal was requested to discuss "appropriate use" of classroom aides with the upper grade teachers.

Even if they disagree, teachers in this school are aware that they must respond to parents' agenda:

> It's very evident to me that [parents] have their own expectations, and they're not willing to look elsewhere. Like, for instance, they have funded . . . an upper-grade teacher and a primary-grade teacher to work along with teachers to help with lowering class size. And that's their main focus . . . But then on the other hand, it's almost like they dictate. We have aides—they pay for our instructional aides—and it's been an issue how the upper-grade teachers use their aides, because we mostly use our aides for more clerical type of stuff, not working with students and so forth. And it's been brought to our attention . . . It seems like they want to dictate [what happens]: "We're not going to fund it unless you're doing it our way."

The principal expressed a similar view:

> Sometimes the upper grades tend to use the aides for more clerical than instructional use; the Foundation gets very nervous about that. "We've got those aides there to reduce the adult-student ratio, you've got them on the computer," so this is a constant tussle. When the upper grade says, "Yes, but if they do that work on the computer and my grade book has all of these things in there then I can see which children need the extra help, and therefore I'm going to give those kids better education." "Yes, but," the Foundation says, "we want kids to be with adults in groups of fewer than thirty." They're funding those aides, and they can just as easily say, "Well, we're not going to give aides to the upper grades any more." They have their purpose.

We found a parallel situation in a public high school with a majority of upper-middle class, well-educated parents who were concerned about their children's access to good colleges. When asked to whom he was most accountable, the principal answered: "To the forty percent of highly vocal parents."

These two examples suggest that parents of public school pupils, when they act collectively, can be a powerful pressure group that evaluate as well as influence classroom curricular policies,

pedagogical approaches, or the handling of children's socio-emotional development. If dissatisfied with the school's response, parents often turn to district officials or to elected school board members to air their concerns. The principal of the elementary school in the high-income neighborhood told us how parents spearhead change in public schools:

> The fortune for these children is that the parents are well educated. They maybe haven't been in a school since they were in school, but they have a pretty good notion of what they want for their children, what the school should look like, how their children should be acting because of having been in school, meaning how much homework they're doing or how well they're doing on tests or how well they exhibit their multiplication tables—that's a big one here. And these parents, by virtue of their fortune—which they may not always have had but where they are now—know how to use the system. They know how to access the system. A big piece of what goes on here . . . is access. The parents here know how to tweak the system. If they didn't like what I did, they know who to go to. They know who my boss is. They're not shy about calling the superintendent if they have a problem. So they're able to get what they need because they know how to get it. I would say that that is—the access issue, by virtue of their knowledge and not being shy, they don't think of me as anybody up on a pedestal, and they're very free to come in and tell me what they think. Very often it's positive. But they have access.

Parental involvement, however, does not characterize all public schools. Although similar opportunities for participation are present in most public educational settings, less-educated parents tend to participate much less in their children's schools, public and private. Socioeconomic factors help explain this difference. Less-educated parents are more likely to have younger children at home, both work full-time, and be impeded from freely communicating with school staff by limited English-language proficiency. Less-educated parents also often perceive teachers and administrators as professionals of a higher social standing and do not feel qualified to evaluate and challenge their practices. Higher-educated parents tend to be more vocal and exert more demands; they feel entitled to making judgments about the quality of education provision their children receive and demanding that deficiencies be redressed. Less-educated parents tend to be less vocal and participate less; they are usually "invited" into the school to participate and their role is often limited to supporting school directives. As this same elementary school principal explains:

> If I contrast that with [another] school where I was before I came here, those parents cared just as deeply and emotionally and passionately for their children as the parents here, but they don't know how to access the system. They don't speak English, perhaps, or they think their English isn't good enough, or they came from a country where you wouldn't have the audacity to go talk to the teacher about what they're doing, that's the

> teacher's business . . . So they maybe aren't at the school because even though we say over and over and over and over and over "Come here, come be in this conference, we'll come to your home, come to this meeting, bring your kids to Family Night," there's still a reticence. Some of them have no way to take care of the other children they have at home so they can't come to a daytime PTA meeting, and maybe they don't go out at night because that's not appropriate. Because women don't go out at night. And Dad doesn't go to school, that's the mother's job, but she can't go out at night because that's not appropriate—there may be questions of culture that are in play, but there are also the questions of education. They don't know who to call. They don't know I have a boss, maybe. And if they don't like what I did, maybe they actually got themselves all dressed up and came in and talked to me and I explained it away. Off they went and they really aren't happy and they don't know what to do next. That's not every parent, but in a community where there's an extreme amount of poverty and then also, perhaps, an inability to communicate—even though at the school we had more people who spoke Spanish than who didn't. And I could understand them, I just wouldn't dare talk back because I would be embarrassed at my Spanish, so I know how they feel with their English. But I really feel that one of the major differences—I mean, it's money, because they don't have the money to get the education to be there, but then beyond money and resources, it's just that knowledge of how to access the system.

There is also a qualitative difference between public and private schools in responsiveness to parental influence. Private schools can shield themselves from parental influence behind their entitlement to follow their own educational mission and vision. Parents' main recourse is exit. Families often find themselves in a situation either to accept or reject the package of educational services *they have freely chosen*. They are usually limited in *changing* that package or the way it is delivered. For example, parents sending their children to Catholic school may like the school's academics but not the disciplinary philosophy or the amount of religious education. Yet, the school administration usually argues that parents agreed to the school's educational philosophy when they enrolled their child.

Public schools have at least a legal mandate to respond to their local constituency. Families may choose to exit to the private school system, but they may also exercise their ability to try to change what goes on in schools. Less-educated parents usually don't do so, but they *are* entitled to voice their dissatisfaction and push for changes in education provision. Parent organizations, as we have seen, may also provide, collect and directly control educational resources. The appropriateness or effectiveness of parent-led initiatives, however, is not a guarantee of educational excellence; this is the subject of our third and final discussion point.

3. Is responsiveness to parental demands a measure of enhanced efficiency and greater student academic achievement?

Educational models based on consumer sovereignty deem that learning in market-driven private schools is delivered more "efficiently" than in public schools. Moreover, they contend that private schools favor staff incentive systems that focus on student achievement—rather than on bureaucratic aims—because this is what parents expect. Since private schools depend upon customer satisfaction for their survival, they must align themselves with consumer demands for higher achievement in order to endure. Once again, the interviews and observations we did in private and public schools contradict these assumptions.

Private schools in low-income neighborhoods: Selling safety. The private schools in our sample depend financially on their ability to attract parents willing to pay for educational services. But parents do not necessarily pick private schools because student test scores in the school are higher than in the public alternative. In the case of private institutions in low-income neighborhoods, the majority of parents, teachers, and administrators that we interviewed said that what attracted them to the school was its safe environment Private schools are considered secure and free of violence. Hence, many low-income parents send their children to neighborhood parochial schools in order to provide a safe institutional setting. Neither academic nor religious considerations play a significant role in their decision-making. The following testimonials from an inner-city Catholic elementary school illustrate this. One parent, for example, emphasized that she brings her son to this school because:

> I see the door [closed], the gate to the door . . . and now it's very dangerous. Here you have to ring the bell to get in, nobody can open the door. The students are good and I like it because I believe all the teachers are looking for security for their children . . . I believe that all the parents send their students here because they feel safety and security and they feel the teachers are good.

The principal agrees wholeheartedly with this characterization:

> I think if you were to ask most parents why they send their children, especially send them to a private school, Catholic school, would be safety. Twenty years ago [they wouldn't have said this]. It's a safe environment. Discipline and maybe religion would sit somewhere down the line. But that's not a top priority. And we stress the fact that we're a religious school. And I think subconsciously it's there. But when you talk to them, "I like

> my children here because I feel safe with my children in this school. Nothing will happen to them. I trust the people who are taking care of my children during the day." I think that's the number one that I hear. It's not "I'm sending my child to this school because I want to pass the faith on to my children." I don't hear that. I did thirty, forty years ago, but not now.

And a lower grade teacher concurs:

> A lot of [parents] send their children to a Catholic school as an alternative to the public schools . . . In the past it used to be you really wanted your child to have a Catholic education. That's why you came here. But now, I mean there still are some of those families but you get a lot that just don't want to send their kids to a public school. So they'll agree to the religion and stuff because they want their kid in a safe place. Like we lock the doors here, for example. People have to ring the doorbell to get in.

Overall, we found no indication that these schools are organized to excel in academic achievement. In fact, their organization does not differ substantially from their public counterparts. Student expectations tend to be low; and teachers feel constrained by the lack of resources as well as by the social and emotional baggage that many of their students bring from home.

In addition, we found no evidence that the academic productivity of private institutions in low-income neighborhoods is higher than in their public counterparts. Although measures of school educational outputs—such as standardized test results—are widely publicized for public schools, in most cases, the outcomes of equivalent achievement measures for private *primary* schools are not immediately available to parents. The reputation of these private schools rests largely on safety and discipline maintenance or on the quality of other services, such as religious/moral education. There are no strong incentives for them to align with high academic achievement goals.

In secondary schools, the situation is considerably different, since dropouts and college admissions are transparent indicators of a school's academic success easily accessible to all parents. Our sample of high schools was much smaller, but in those where we interviewed, one public high school had low expectations for its students from low-income families, but another, with a more dynamic principal, had an innovative program that raised academic expectations by incorporating such students into a curriculum designed also to appeal to the college-bound. A teacher in the former school, for instance, told us that students

> . . . do the work in my class, but once they leave, their parents don't have the same expectations from them. If their parents don't ask them for their homework and stuff, they're not going to do it. So I'm only one person. I can take more time and more effort out of my schedule to try to . . . to call home and try to talk to their parents, but if their parents are not going to help me out, it's going to be a lost cause.

In contrast, a teacher in the latter high school exclaims:

> I have high expectations for everyone . . . for every kid to do the best he can do all the time . . . I expect them to perform the best they can in homework, in classwork, general attitude, tests, the whole thing.

Finally, private schools have the prerogative to refuse admission to applicants and to return students with academic or behavioral problems to the public system. When private schools cannot cope, parents are advised to transfer their children to public schools where there are "more resources" and students can receive "better and more appropriate services" to their needs.

At the high school level, admission policies in parochial schools can be restrictive or open, but once in the school, students are also much more subject to effort-based evaluation (and expulsion) than in private primary schools. Selection takes place in public middle and high schools as well. One public middle school in our sample used selective admission for a fast-track, college-bound program drawing city-wide, and open admission for neighborhood young people who did not qualify for the selective track. Although relatively few students selectively admitted ever dropped out from the fast-track, such reassignment did occur. Another public high school in our sample with a minority, low-income clientele became a charter school in 1993, but even in its previous incarnation as a district-run school had been city-wide selective. Of 900 applications to the school, the district forwards 245 drawn by lot to the school, from which the school administration chooses 210 for its entering class, based on parent/student interviews. The main criterion for admission at that point was parents' and students' "commitment" to the school's college-oriented curriculum. Not surprisingly, expectations and academic requirements are correspondingly higher than in non-selective schools with similar socio-economic background students.

Schools in high-income neighborhoods: The costs and benefits of parental involvement. Regardless of their private or public financing (or management), schools with students coming from highly-educated families are associated with high student expectations, school-centered principals, teachers with high self-esteem, tracking of students into academic courses, and involved parents providing educational support. An academic orientation is not the exclusive domain of private institutions.

Although educational consumer-sovereignty models postulate that responsiveness to parental demands can make schools more *academically* productive, our data suggest more caution. Parent participation is the norm in schools catering to children with highly-educated parents. Parents in these schools tend to express their expectations to school authorities and demand changes in school organization and classroom behavior if they perceive that their needs are not being attended to. But a coherent vision of the curriculum or better teaching are not necessarily automatic outcomes of external parental demands. For instance, our observations at a public school located in a high-income suburb whose affluent families demand the very best education for their children show that parental involvement produces mixed responses. Having school staff directly accountable to actively-involved vocal parents with the highest expectations should have a positive impact on school organization. Yet, typical of such schools, teachers and administrators are unconvinced that parents know better. Indeed, much of the principal's and staff's time is spent responding to and rechanneling pressures coming from parents instead of furthering student achievement.

In several of the private schools we observed, conflicts with parents over curriculum and discipline also produced mixed responses, with the principal and teachers playing a similar role of protecting the school's "sovereignty" in its educational decisions. In an elite private parochial school, college counselors spent most of their time making parents' expectations "more realistic" regarding the colleges their child applied to. So parent expectations are a key factor in affecting *what* schools are

accountable for, but it is much less clear that parents can affect the organizational capability of the school to deliver these services effectively. This is particularly true for delivering academic achievement, but it is also true for discipline and the quality of college acceptances.

Private high schools do have an advantage in meeting parents' college expectations because the schools are more likely to be organized around college entrance, particularly if the school advertises itself as "preparatory." One such school in our sample had three counselors for 300 hundred graduating seniors compared to a more typical one counselor for 200-300 seniors at the public high schools where we interviewed. The private school counselors also visited colleges every year on specially-organized counselor "tours." But the main feature of private preparatory schools that allows them higher success rates in placing students is student selection and greater resources devoted to college placement, not necessarily more academic value added. Catholic high schools also feed into a network of Catholic colleges with close personal ties to Catholic high school college counselors. This is consistent with Peter Cookson and Caroline Hodges Persell's research showing that the greater success of private secondary schools in placing students in college has largely to do with the personal connections made by college counselors in prep schools.[15]

Some conclusions

The Chubb and Moe/Friedman models propose that a freer market in educational services, represented by parent choice and the private management of schools, provides an external accountability system that raises schools' allocative and technical efficiency in delivering academic achievement. This external accountability system is posed against Friedman's "public monopoly" or Chubb and Moe's "bureaucratic democracy." In either, bureaucratic norms satisfying a host of interest

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[15] Peter Cookson, Jr. and Caroline Hodges Persell. *Preparing for Power*. New York: Basic Books, 1985. See especially Chapter 9.

groups other than parents dominate school organization, resulting in dissatisfied teachers, frustrated parents, and much lower student achievement.

In the more than two dozen schools where we spent hundreds of hours interviewing teachers, parents, students, and administrators, as well as observing classes and parent meetings, we were not able to find evidence that the market/bureaucratic democracy dichotomy is a useful theory for understanding how schools organize themselves to deliver higher academic achievement. In terms of our notion of accountability systems, neither the market nor a typical public school district bureaucracy seems very effective in "aligning" schools around academic achievement. This is not to say that the market does not affect private school organization, nor that bureaucratic demands do not condition public education. Some of the things that Chubb and Moe, for example, say about school organizations are true. But we found that private schools can operate in markets without aligning themselves internally around improving academic achievement, and public schools can operate in public bureaucracies without being any more aligned to bureaucratic norms than most private schools. For most private and public schools, the default position on academic accountability is atomized teacher behavior. Nor is the role of parents in private schools very different from those in corresponding socio-economic environment public schools. It is true that private school parents have made a choice, but that *per se* does not seem to give them any more "right" to influence educational decisions in the school than parents have in public schools.

From our case studies, it appears that at least some private schools also have an option to lower costs by selecting students that are less "costly," in the sense that they require less effort to bring to high achievement levels. Parents who get their children into such schools pay for a "peer effect." Public schools are much more constrained in lowering costs. The constraint is not mainly due to bureaucratic democracy but to just plain *democracy*: the vast majority of parents believe that community public schools should not reject students on the basis of class or race or learning

difficulties. Of course, parents may try to live in communities populated, on average, by low-cost students with highly participative parents, avoiding public schools where a significant proportion of children do have learning difficulties.

In any case, not all schools would be able to pursue selective policies. If all schools attempt to select lower cost students, many schools would become depositories only for high cost students.[16] Examination public schools and a relatively high concentration of private schools in some U.S. cities have produced this result.

One of the most important things we discovered in our interviews is that most schools, whether private or public, are not "aligned" on producing achievement. They generally have "weak" internal accountability systems, which means that individual teachers are left largely to their own devices to produce achievement in the way that each believes most appropriate, somewhat constrained by school or district required curriculum and by the required time allocated to various subjects. Further, we discovered that many of the private schools appeal to parents less through building reputations for producing high levels of achievement in standard math, literary, or science skills, and more through their capacity to produce non-achievement educational services, such as moral education, discipline and order, "specialized achievement" services such as a second language, or simply a safe environment. At the high school level, one of the main services a private school promises is "peer effect," where a family is assured that their child will be surrounded by "desirable" adolescents; another service is a high level of college counseling and a focus on college entrance.

Yet some schools, again *both* private and public, do align on teaching and learning, and therefore, on achievement. High expectations from parents is the incentive for such alignment in the market model. However, few of the private schools we studied had strong internal accountability

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[16] This issue emerges in an interesting piece on Jersey City charter schools. See Michael Winerip, "School for Sale," *New York Times Magazine*, June 14, 1998.

systems organized around producing student learning. High expectations for student achievement by parents, teachers, and administrators, usually in private *and* public schools with mostly "low-cost" students and highly-educated, highly involved parents are associated with high student achievement. But the quality of teaching in such schools is often not exceptional and the organization of the school is often not aligned around learning. What, then, makes a school develop a strong internal accountability around learning? We were not able to answer this question, but the clues provided by our survey suggest that teachers and administrators inside the school have to be willing and able to respond to external incentives such as parent expectations or bureaucratic accountability systems that are themselves focused on improving learning.

This means that external forces such as a market are not enough to produce high achievement. If demand in the market is made up of parent utility functions, in order for schools to line up on producing more learning based solely on market forces, parents' utility functions have to include a clear notion of what constitutes a good learning environment, good teaching, and a "high" level of value added. However, we found that most parents' utility functions tend to be based on other measures of school quality largely because they cannot distinguish clearly between "high performance" classrooms and orderly, "nice" classrooms.

Our interviews also suggest that schools as organizations also have to be willing and *able* to respond to parents' demands. The assumption usually made is that schools know the technology of improving learning, but don't implement it because they are maximizing other outputs. That may not be the case. The technology may require organizational skills in short supply in schools. And schools may resist responding to parent demand particularly if the parents are not able to articulate clearly-defined notions of what they mean by good teaching or high achievement.

Our case studies suggest something more. If the strength of a school's internal accountability system depends on the alignment of responsibility, expectations, and internal accountability mechanisms, the effectiveness of external accountability systems is a function of how well internal accountability is aligned with the external system. For example, attempts to impose state incentive systems that reward academic performance gains won't do very well with schools whose internal systems are either incoherent or aligned around discipline. Neither would the market, seen as an external accountability system, work very well in making private schools focus on student test scores if school organization were aligned around student discipline or religiosity, or if it were not well aligned altogether. Public school choice or competition from private schools won't necessarily improve academic performance in public schools with weak internal accountability or internal accountability that aligns around order and discipline but not academic performance. In such cases, the school's response to the external system would not likely be academic improvement.[17]

[17]Indeed, recent studies of the sixteen year-old Chilean voucher plan show that increased competition and market pressures had a negative effect on academic performance in public schools. In large part this is the result of "cream-skimming," where private schools attract higher-performing students from public schools. But the point is that most public schools are not organized to respond to competition without organizational and capacity-building help from external agents. See Martin Carnoy and Patrick McEwan, "Public Investments or Private Schools? A Reconstruction of Educational Improvements in Chile," School of Education, Stanford University, November, 1997; Patrick McEwan and Martin Carnoy, "Competition and Sorting in Chile's Voucher System," School of Education, Stanford University, March, 1998.