Reflections for private high school administrators

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9. Reflections for Private High School Administrators*

Spelling out the practical implications of research reports for educational practitioners is a dubious enterprise. Subsequent decisionmaking of school administrators more often than not seems minimally influenced by the results of such reports. The research and development community regularly laments the fact that "the rapid growth of education knowledge has not been accompanied by a parallel surge in educational reform."¹ As this study itself suggests, high school principals may have developed the capacity to deflect intrusion of outside forces and agencies by performing certain rituals that suggest the conformity and cooperation necessary to "legitimate" the school in the eyes of the public.²

The perennial problem involves the differing time perspectives and reward systems of the practitioner and the researcher.³ For the practitioner the value of a survey such as this does not derive from the broad policy implications that may have an impact over a relatively long span of time; rather, the significance of this study for the practitioner must address the immediate or medium-range practical problems within the environment for which the practitioner has current responsibility. The intent of this chapter is to bring the survey results within the time frame and range of interests of administrators of private schools. What follows are a former private school administrator’s reflections on the practical implications of the survey’s general conclusions.

Private School Programs

Private schools, in general, have a distinctive purpose centered around the selection of a more academically able student body than the public schools enroll.⁴ Consequently, private schools sponsor programs that focus more narrowly on academic pursuits. For most private schools, a traditional academic core is supplemented by a religious educational program. Even alternative programs in private schools, many of which were initiated in response to late 1960’s demands for greater

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¹This chapter was written by Robert R. Newton, Boston College.
adaptation to student needs and interests, were translated by private schools into courses that strengthened the academic tone of the school rather than intensifying the "relevancy" of programs. Public schools, on the other hand, focus on a more heterogeneous student population and thus offer programs that meet a wide range of backgrounds and needs.

Two factors are emerging that may have a significant impact on the narrowly defined private school programs as they emerge in the survey; they are factors whose implications will produce contradictory pressures on private school programs. The first is the declining birthrate (especially among the Catholic population), which threatens to disrupt the homogeneity of private school enrollments and thus force changes in these programs. The second is the "back to the basics" movement already visible in the responses of private school administrators in the survey.\(^5\)

The decline in the general pool of students who will be entering high school can be expected to produce a greater competition for those students both between public and private schools and among the private schools themselves. For example, the significant decline in Catholic elementary school enrollments between 1975 and 1979 has created fewer applicants for Catholic high schools.\(^6\) Diminished numbers of applications have caused the selection of students to come from a wider range of ability levels and have decreased the homogeneity of private school populations. To keep up enrollments, a more heterogeneous student body, less concentrated in the upper levels of academic aptitude/achievement, has been admitted. Admissions standards are modified, and cutoff scores are lowered to maintain operations at present levels or, in some cases, merely to survive.\(^7\) The reaction of private schools to the declining pool of applicants will be similar to that of the private colleges that found their applicant pools declining. Student populations will become more diverse, and programs will undergo corresponding changes.

Two additional forces must be added to the phenomenon of declining numbers of applications: the escalation of private school tuitions and, simultaneously, the decrease in discretionary income available to the general population. Vitullo-Martin argues that economic forces and Government tax policies already have begun to deny Americans money left after taxes and necessities that has traditionally been used to make private choices.\(^8\) As the Government increasingly provides services for citizens, ordinary persons will be priced out of some markets, such as for housing and for educational alternatives for their children. The combination of escalating costs and diminishing discretionary income will further reduce the pool of families/students able to consider private schools, thus forcing private schools to become even more comprehensive in their search for students to fill their classrooms.

The parallel implications for private school programs are obvious. A more heterogeneous student body will mean a more diversified program. All students will not possess the same basic skills or be capable of the same college-oriented program. Sequences focusing on alternatives other than higher education will be introduced; remedial programs will become more important than they have been in the past.

As any administrator knows, more diversified programs demand larger student bodies to produce the options necessary to support full alternatives. The small size of many private schools, regarded in the survey as a source of strength by most
private school principals and as a problem by public school principals, may emerge as increasingly problematic for private schools.9

The survey reports that a majority of the private school administrators noted that there is a greater emphasis on basic reading, writing, and mathematics skills than there was 5 years ago. In the return to basic skills, the private schools have a shorter journey to make since, as the survey intimates, even through the period of student unrest in the 1960's, private schools maintained their primarily traditional academic focus. Thus, although the “back to the basics” movement will be applied differently in private than in public schools, the goal will be the same.

During the late 1960's and early 1970's, schools shifted a portion of their curriculum from an emphasis on what should be taught to a concern for what students wanted to learn or what the faculty, in an attempt to maintain or recover student attention, wanted to teach. The current movement can be seen as a return to the principle of what should be taught and learned, rather than what seems to be of immediate relevance or interest. This return to what should be taught will focus on content and skills. Content will shift from focus on the relevant to communication of a significant portion of the cultural heritage. The latter will be accomplished mainly through the study of the enduring books and ideas that are the “basics” of our civilization. There also will be a return to traditional skills, e.g., clear and cogent writing and speaking, mathematics and reading competence, and study skills.

Thus, private schools will face contradictory pressures. The homogeneity, which has allowed a specialized and relatively narrow focus, will be challenged by trends that require incorporation of a more varied student population. At the same time, a back to basics movement, already firmly underway in private education, will work toward narrowing the mission of private schools. Some observers suggest that the academic emphasis will continue and actually will be revitalized, but the schools will apply and adapt this emphasis to a more diverse population. Within the traditionally narrow academic focus of private schools, there will be an increased range of programs to meet wider students needs and interests.

Management And Organization In Private Schools

The conclusions of the survey results on school management suggest that private schools do not follow the bureaucratic model: there is little specialization, minimal coordination through rules, and infrequent formal evaluation.10 Authority is shared with faculty members who are involved in decisionmaking, especially in their areas of professional competence. Although the principal’s authority is strong, there are few rules regarding instruction. Principals in private schools have a stronger voice in selecting and dismissing faculty and in budgeting and planning processes than do their public school counterparts. Private schools have not created elaborate structures in response to environmental demands; instead, the structures that do exist emphasize managing the internal environment and avoiding the demands of external forces. Private schools are islands unto themselves.

The picture of private school managers and their management practices that emerges from the survey is not a surprising one. The role of the private school administrator has been interpreted in terms of the concept of traditional authority.
rather than in more formal or legal terms. Their authority has been both derived from, and exercised in, a manner not emphasizing legal prerogatives and responsibilities.

A review of the results of the survey combined with current trends in private education suggests a number of implications for the future of private schools. These implications focus around (1) the organizational context of private schools, (2) the internal environment of private schools, and (3) the nature of authority and governance in private education.

**The Context Of Private Education: Islands Unto Themselves**

An understanding of the management and organization of private schools must begin with the assumption that they are relatively independent operations. Although they may be included in a “system” of schools such as that of a diocese, private schools are for the most part responsible for charting their own destinies. Private schools exist primarily as a result of the initiative and continued support of those who attend the schools and those who operate them. At a critical moment, some higher official may intervene; or the Federal, State, or local government may insist on compliance with a new rule or regulation. For the most part, however, private schools are expected to be responsible for attracting their students; devising their programs; raising their funds; and governing and deciding for themselves who they are, and what and how they will accomplish their goals. The local Catholic school systems, which represent 70 percent of the private schools, are not so much systems or districts in the public school sense, but, as the superintendent of one of the larger Catholic dioceses suggested: “loose federations of basically independent schools.” The superintendent of a diocesan school system focuses energies more on coordination, service, and consultantship than on decisionmaking and control. Independent schools, outside any system other than a voluntary association (such as the National Association of Independent Schools or local or State organizations), are even more dramatically uninvolved in and unattached to a controlling superorganization.

At the same time, private schools, especially those that are religiously oriented, are involved in and indirectly guided by the values of the communities they serve. A religiously oriented school is expected to reflect and promote the values and beliefs of the sponsoring religious tradition. The *Evaluative Criteria for the Evaluation of Secondary Schools* directs private schools to consider the parents of their students as the community they serve, rather than the geographical areas that public schools regard as their communities. The religiously oriented school derives its identity from its relationship to a religious tradition; its philosophy and objectives are directed toward service of that same tradition.

Consequently, the principals of private high schools are in an unusual position. They are expected, sometimes with the help of guidelines from a central authority, to produce a local implementation of the values of the tradition in a particular school. In a sense, they are given a task and then told to take responsibility for its further specification and implementation. The central office, if one exists, is willing to help, will occasionally attempt to direct, but generally prefers to leave the operation of the schools to those active locally. Although in systemic private schools
values emerge from a central source and authority, their adaptation and implementation is delegated to local administration. In many, the school stands as its own central source of authority.

The implications of this independent status are generally positive. Individual schools, given the freedom to work out programs, can adapt their programs to their clienteles and also adjust these same programs to the physical and personnel resources available to them. As the survey reports, individual schools have either control or strong influence over the two major components of their schools' operation: personnel and budget. The majority of the religiously oriented schools have the advantage of involvement in larger organizations that share the same value orientation. As a result, although control may be minimal, many of the services and coordination that can enhance individual schools are available to private schools. The diocesan structure, for example, provides an informal network of relationships that can promote the diffusion of ideas and practices.

At the same time, there presently exist "centralizing" tendencies that may create tension with the "independent" mode of operation of many private schools. Governmental agencies, through increasing regulation of private schools, could significantly reduce the freedom with which such schools currently operate. Competency tests, for example, which determine the outcomes of high school programs, are intended not only to affect but ultimately to determine the content of those programs. At present, the minimal levels demanded by competency tests pose no threat for the vast majority of private schools. However, the insistence of this movement, combined with the power inherent in the ability to determine outcomes, could exert significant control over the operation of private schools. Another obvious example is the attempt by the Internal Revenue Service to pressure religious schools by threatening review of their tax-exempt status unless they are able to prove that they are not discriminating against minority students.

A similar tension should continue to develop within the largest segment of private education, the Catholic schools. In the form of guidelines for religious instruction or prescription of outcomes for religious educational programs, for example, the central office can exert more specific and precise control over programs. Similarly, the emergence of lay teachers' associations has shifted to the center of the system additional power and discretion, not only in terms of centralized determination of compensation and allocation of resources, but also in terms of more uniform personnel policies—an area previously in the hands of local school authorities. The diocesan personnel handbook could relieve the local principal of the obligation to devise such policies and simultaneously impose a set of regulations and procedures only partially suited to the local situation.

The Internal Environment

The general lack of control exerted by outside agencies over private schools is mirrored in the freedom given to faculties within the school environment itself. As indicated in the survey, teaching faculty are allowed wide participation in decisions affecting their professional interest. Although teachers are subject to a variety of rules, there are fewer rules in instructional than in noninstructional areas, and fewer still the closer the area is to the daily practice of instruction.
The division of responsibilities is similar to the Interacting Spheres Model proposed by Hanson, in which predominantly instructional decisions are regarded as teacher prerogatives and systemwide decisions are regarded as administrative prerogatives. The teachers' area of decisionmaking parallels their area of competence and focuses on the instructional; the administrative sphere is comprised of the more formal decision areas: *allocation* decisions—utilization of material and human resources; *security* decisions—legally mandated supervision of transportation, food service, discipline, etc.; *boundary* decisions—representation of the school to its publics, e.g., parents, the central office, etc.; and *evaluation* decisions—supervision of faculty and programs. Teachers are allowed to participate or make decisions in areas where they have immediate contact with problems, special competence, and responsibility for implementation. Because of the relative freedom from outside central regulation in the past (e.g., in the choice of textbooks, in the determination of teacher responsibilities, etc.), significant accommodation could be made to the instructional personnel in allowing them decisionmaking authority in their sphere of competence. The movement toward centralization (e.g., in diocesan systems) will create a tendency toward greater uniformity and away from local adaptation.

Collective bargaining, where it has existed, has had the effect of eroding areas of exclusive local administrative discretion and made legitimate bargaining items not only of teacher compensation, but also of teacher/student ratios, out-of-class assignments, free time during the school day, classroom supervision periods, vacation schedules, etc. Simultaneously, the movement toward accountability, which has affected education generally and has influenced private schools as well, aims at increased involvement of administration in classroom activity through the specification of precise outcomes for classroom instruction. By defining and evaluating specific objectives, the administration is able to insert itself into a domain previously thought the exclusive arena of the teacher.

As the survey indicates, teachers in private schools presently have more influence in areas for which they have immediate responsibility. Administrators have been content to allow instruction to proceed relatively without interference. Private school administrators generally have acted without significant outside or inside interference in areas for which they had direct responsibility. Although it might be argued that, given the minimal evaluation of instruction currently being implemented, additional effort might be appropriate, the happy compromise of administration/faculty noninterference indicated in the survey results may be threatened not only by movement toward more uniform, centrally determined personnel procedures, but also by the desire for more precise and consistent school outcomes.

*The Nature Of Authority In Private Schools*

The survey findings indicate the minimal presence of bureaucratic elements in private schools. Bureaucracy in Weber's ideal type was based on legal authority wherein obedience was owed to the legally established impersonal order. The rational/legal approach prescribed the careful development of rules, specialized competence, hierarchical control, careful descriptions of the function of each office, etc. The movement toward the creation of a more impersonal, rational order has,
in part, been resisted by private schools because they have continued to operate on the basis of traditional authority, i.e., the convictions that there is something sacred about the education of the young and that teaching is a vocation. As rights and responsibilities have been defined more carefully and precisely through the use of collective-bargaining agreements in public education, there has been a shift from the idea of teaching as a vocation and education as a sacred rather than a secular endeavor. Private schools, because they have been less exposed to the more legalistic forces that have been imposed on the public schools (e.g., collective bargaining, court rulings on disciplinary procedures, State tenure laws) have been able to preserve a more traditional view of education. In the religious schools, which are the vast majority of the private schools in the United States, teaching has been regarded as a special ministry that called not only for teaching competence but also for special dedication.

Erickson's research in British Columbia seems consistent with this interpretation. He found that the private schools in his studies were best described by the "Gemeinschaft" model, "... the condition that exists when the people associated with a school are strongly held together by commitment to each other, to the enterprise as a whole, to the 'special' goals of the enterprise, and to their various tasks in the enterprise." Erickson defined commitment as the tendency to approach one's work with intense feeling. The study found that the private schools surveyed were marked by a much higher level of mutual commitment of parents, students, and teachers. The school was not thought of merely as a formal institution serving a function in society, but as a community based on common beliefs and mutual commitment.

Contributing to this Gemeinschaft was transference, or the tendency to transfer to the principal and teachers of a religiously oriented school the same feeling that one has about religion and the Church. The school was seen as an extension of the Church, and the principal was believed to possess authority similar to that of the pastor of the Church. Erickson notes that one of the amazing findings of his study was that, despite salaries $10,000 less, on the average, than those of the public school teachers surveyed, the level of commitment among private school teachers was significantly greater.

It might be suggested that what the private schools have maintained is a basis of authority for their operation—traditional rather than legal/rational—which appeals to intrinsic satisfaction rather than extrinsic rewards. At the same time, the forces that have shifted the public schools from a traditional to a legal/rational basis are beginning to impinge on the private schools, in the form of collective bargaining, more precise and uniform definition of rights and responsibilities, specification of evaluative procedures, and redefinition of the limits on administrative authority and discretion.

At present private education has maintained the more traditional basis for its authority. How long this will be maintained in the face of societal trends toward legal/rational direction is uncertain. What does seem clear is that once the basis for authority has shifted to the legal/rational, it is unlikely that it will return to the traditional.
Competition for Clients

As noted above, the increasing competition for a declining pool of applicants potentially will present the problem of a greater supply of private educational opportunities than there is demand. By necessity, private schools must promote greater information about themselves as distinctive options if they wish to maintain their student bodies, both in terms of size and academic level.

In addition to more complete and systematic diffusion of factual information, private schools will need to become more sophisticated about how the choice for private education or for various private schools is actually made. Two factors seem especially important: (1) the identification of private school students and their parents with the group sponsoring the school; and (2) the impact on choice of the informal, highly personal, social networks through which objective information is filtered and interpreted.

The primary reason that those involved in a religious tradition choose a religiously oriented school is their incorporation in that religious community. The vast majority of students in Catholic schools are Catholic; the vast majority of students in Jewish schools are Jewish. Similarly, the vast majority of students in protestant fundamentalist schools are from the protestant fundamentalist sects. Parents and students have chosen these religiously oriented schools because of their desire and commitment to raise their children within a particular religious tradition. Thus, there is a fundamental predisposition to be open to whatever consumer information is available about those schools. The case could be made that the private schools serve a particular socioeconomic and intellectual elite that traditionally attend independent schools; it is incorporation into this elite community that creates the basic disposition to choose private education.

The second consideration seems as important as the first. Numerous studies have advanced the theory that what is most decisive in individual choice is most often not objective information about the various choices but the personal opinions of significant others about those choices. Commenting on this phenomenon, House remarks: "... one does not buy a radio when he hears about it; he buys it when he hears that his neighbors and friends have bought one. The focus then shifts from information about objects to information about persons." Perhaps equally as important as investigation of what those who have chosen private education know about the option they have chosen is an exploration of the patterns of social interaction through which their contact with the school and their opinion of its strengths and weaknesses was formed. The social network surrounding the school is probably more important than the objective information available on the school. At the very least, it is through and within this social network that the information is transmitted, processed, and evaluated.

Conclusions

The implications of the issues raised propose significant challenges for private schools as they find their way to the year 2000. Declining pools of students in the population in general, and especially in geographical areas where the majority of private schools exist, inevitably will mean the demise of many private schools (and
colleges). Those that remain will be challenged to mount programs to meet the needs of more heterogeneous student bodies. The transition to a broader spectrum of academic abilities will not be easy for faculties accustomed to different roles and tasks—faculties in which there will be minimal turnover. Administrators can anticipate the same reluctant adaptation that has characterized the faculties of small liberal arts colleges, which are now faced with more diverse, less academically capable, more career-oriented students. The focus of the transition may be as much on the retraining of faculties as on the development of new programs.

The tension between centralization and independence will intensify in the next 2 decades. Attempts by outside agencies to control education at the local school level (e.g., State minimum competency testing and diocesan guidelines for religious education) will jeopardize local determination of educational outcomes, and, consequently, local design of programs. As Glass and Smith note, such movements are but a modern version of the perennial battle over who will control the schools. The tension between increased centralization and continued independence will likely be resolved in accordance with the old adage that “he who pays the piper will call the tune.”

The increasing legal-rational spirit of the times may emerge as the most serious threat to the maintenance of private schools as we have come to know them. Rehder, reflecting on the “bureaucratic drift” of American higher education, has presented an analysis that may very well prefigure the form of private secondary education in the coming decades. He traces the transition of small private colleges from informal, consensual forms of governance to more formal modes of authority concerned with standardization of procedures, the fear of litigation, and the centralization of power and decisionmaking. This shift has created a different organizational environment for higher education—one that does not always support academic values and purposes. It seems clear that the majority of colleges and universities have shifted from traditional authority to legal/rational authority. The question that lies ahead for private schools is whether forces such as collective bargaining, court decisions, and government regulation will require a similar shift away from the traditional image of education to a more bureaucratic form of operation.

Finally, the private schools, to adjust to changing environments and enrollment patterns, will be challenged to explore more fully the distinctive appeal of private schools to traditional and potential clienteles. The importance of identification with the group sponsoring the schools, as well as with the network of social interaction in which the school is involved, should become the subject of increasing attention. The future of many schools may lie: (1) in the degree to which they demonstrably serve and support the values of the sponsoring group, and (2) the effectiveness with which they promote and utilize the communication networks that permeate and hold together the religious and socioeconomic communities they serve.

The challenges confronting private schools as they move toward the 21st century are many and varied. In numerous instances, they parallel the challenges faced by private higher education during the past 20 years. Whether or how these movements will work dramatic changes on private secondary schools remains unclear at the moment. In some ways, the forces—enrollment decline, rising costs, the increasing legal/rational tendencies—seem inevitable and unstoppable. At the same time, the
very essence of private schools in the past has been their capacity to chart their own
course, or to accept or reject other influences in order to serve their distinctive values
and purposes. In looking to the future, it would be unfair to the history of private
schools to assume anything other than that the future of private high schools will
be determined and measured by the vision, imagination, and commitment of those
who sponsor and lead American private secondary education.

NOTES

2. See chapter 7 of this book.
3. The concepts of differentiation and integration that Lawrence and Lorsch develop with reference to func-
tional departments in business organizations (i.e., research, production, sales) seem applicable to the discus-
sion of the different perspectives of educational practitioners and researchers. Based on the distinctive
tasks, there are substantial differences in time perspectives, reward systems, and interpersonal relationships,
which, while constructive in terms of the function performed in and for the organization, create problems
Differentiation and Integration* (Boston: Harvard University, 1967).
4. See chapter 3.
5. Item 51 indicates that 61 percent of the principals report a greater emphasis on basic skills than was present
5 years ago. See chapter 3.
6. For example, two of the largest dioceses report significant losses in elementary school populations between
1975 and 1979. In the Diocese of Brooklyn, the number of Catholic elementary school children declined
from 117,025 to 96,785 (17.3 percent); in the Archdiocese of Chicago, the decline was 161,407 to 139,527
7. The number of high schools in the dioceses noted above declined between 1975 and 1979 from 76 to 69 in
the Archdiocese of Chicago and from 29 to 24 in the Diocese of Brooklyn. *The Official Catholic Directory
9. See chapter 5, figure 20.
10. See chapters 4 and 6.
12. Examples of the articulation of community religious values intended to guide the operation of individual
schools are *To Teach as Jesus Did* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1972); *Sharing
the Light of the Faith: The National Catechetical Directory for Catholics of the United States*,
13. The "social interaction model" of change has been widely discussed in the literature on social change. See
the summary statements on this model and its strengths and weaknesses in Ivor Moorish, *Aspects of
1978).
15. See chapter 4.
16. E. Mark Hanson, "The Professional/Bureaucratic Interface: A Case Study," *Urban Education* 11 (October


21. Ernest R. House summarizes the research that points to the importance of personal information in *The Politics of Innovation* (Berkeley, Calif.: McCutchan, 1978).

