

Education Policy Analysis Archives

Volume 5 Number 1

January 6, 1997

ISSN 1068-2341

A peer-reviewed scholarly electronic journal.

Editor: Gene V Glass Glass@ASU.EDU.

College of Education

Arizona State University, Tempe AZ 85287-2411

Copyright 1997, the EDUCATION POLICY ANALYSIS ARCHIVES. Permission is hereby granted to copy any article provided that EDUCATION POLICY ANALYSIS ARCHIVES is credited and copies are not sold.

Markets and Myths: Autonomy in Public and Private Schools

[Sandra Rubin Glass](#)
Arizona State University

Abstract

School choice is the most controversial education policy issue of the 1990s. John Chubb and Terry Moe's *Politics, Markets and America's Schools* stimulated this investigation. They concluded that teacher and administrator autonomy was the most important influence on student achievement. They assumed that the organization of private schools offered greater autonomy resulting in higher student achievement and that the bureaucracy of public schools stifles autonomy limiting student achievement. The research undertaken here elaborates, elucidates, and fills in the framework of teacher and principal autonomy in public and private secondary schools. Interviews of more than thirty teachers and administrators in six high schools, observations, field notes, and analysis of documents collected in the field form the empirical base of this work. The sites included three private, independent, nondenominational secondary schools which are college preparatory and three public secondary schools noted for high graduation rates and offering numerous advanced placement courses.

The feelings expressed by both public and private school participants in this study testify to equally high degrees of autonomy. Issues that emerged from data analysis in this study which mitigate and shape autonomy include the following: conflicting and contradictory demands, shared beliefs, layers of protection, a system of laws, funding constraints and matters of size of the institution. These issues challenge oversimplified assertions that differences of any importance exist between the autonomy experienced by professionals in public and private high schools. This study reveals the complexity of the concept of autonomy and challenges the myth that teachers and principals in private schools enjoy autonomy and freedom from democratic bureaucracy that their public school counterparts do not.

Table of Contents

- [The Problem](#)
- [Review of Literature](#)
- [Methods of the Study](#)
- [The Schools in the Study](#)
- [Findings](#)
- [Summary & Conclusions](#)
- [References](#)
- [The Interviews](#)

About the Author

Sandra Rubin Glass

sandy.glass@asu.edu

Sandra Rubin Glass is a Faculty Associate in the College of Education at Arizona State University where she received her PhD in Educational Leadership & Policy Studies in 1993. Her M.A. (1974) in the Teaching of Earth Sciences is from Northeastern Illinois University; her Bachelors degree (1968) is from National-Louis University (formerly National College of Education).

Dr. Glass holds an appointment in the Office of Professional Field Experiences at ASU where she develops and implements training and workshops for student and beginning teachers. She is a former teacher and administrator in both public and private schools, and once taught on the Navajo Indian Reservation.

Copyright 1997 by the *Education Policy Analysis Archives*

The World Wide Web address for the *Education Policy Analysis Archives* is <http://olam.ed.asu.edu/epaa>

General questions about appropriateness of topics or particular articles may be addressed to the Editor, Gene V Glass, glass@asu.edu or reach him at College of Education, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 85287-2411. (602-965-2692). The Book Review Editor is Walter E. Shepherd: shepherd@asu.edu . The Commentary Editor is Casey D. Cobb: casey@olam.ed.asu.edu .

EPAA Editorial Board

[Michael W. Apple](#)

University of Wisconsin

[John Covalesskie](#)

Northern Michigan University

[Alan Davis](#)

University of Colorado, Denver

[Mark E. Fetler](#)

California Commission on Teacher Credentialing

[Greg Camilli](#)

Rutgers University

[Andrew Coulson](#)

a_coulson@msn.com

[Sherman Dorn](#)

University of South Florida

[Richard Garlikov](#)

hmwkhlp@scott.net

[Thomas F. Green](#)
Syracuse University

[Arlen Gullickson](#)
Western Michigan University

[Aimee Howley](#)
Marshall University

[William Hunter](#)
University of Calgary

[Daniel Kallós](#)
Umeå University

[Thomas Mauhs-Pugh](#)
Rocky Mountain College

[William McInerney](#)
Purdue University

[Les McLean](#)
University of Toronto

[Anne L. Pemberton](#)
apembert@pen.k12.va.us

[Richard C. Richardson](#)
Arizona State University

[Dennis Sayers](#)
University of California at Davis

[Michael Scriven](#)
scriven@aol.com

[Robert Stonehill](#)
U.S. Department of Education

[Alison I. Griffith](#)
York University

[Ernest R. House](#)
University of Colorado

[Craig B. Howley](#)
Appalachia Educational Laboratory

[Richard M. Jaeger](#)
University of North
Carolina--Greensboro

[Benjamin Levin](#)
University of Manitoba

[Dewayne Matthews](#)
Western Interstate Commission for Higher
Education

[Mary P. McKeown](#)
Arizona Board of Regents

[Susan Bobbitt Nolen](#)
University of Washington

[Hugh G. Petrie](#)
SUNY Buffalo

[Anthony G. Rud Jr.](#)
Purdue University

[Jay D. Scribner](#)
University of Texas at Austin

[Robert E. Stake](#)
University of Illinois--UC

[Robert T. Stout](#)
Arizona State University

Background

School choice, the prerogative of parents to elect the school their children attend, is the most controversial education policy issue of the 1990s. As many as ten states had formally adopted open enrollment or educational choice provisions by Spring 1991. In the general election of 1992, Colorado voters resoundingly voted down a proposed voucher amendment to the state constitution that would have permitted choice between public and private schools. Several other states currently offer informal open enrollment or choice provisions or are planning legislation that would mandate some form of school choice (Bierlein, Sheane & McCarthy, 1991). The publication in 1990 of Chubb and Moe's *Politics, Markets & America's Schools* gave pro-choice advocates a rallying point. Chubb and Moe argued that sense of autonomy and freedom from bureaucratic pressure are the most powerful determinants of a school's success in advancing academic learning. They asserted that these conditions are more prevalent in private schools (which "seem to be better performers," p. 24) than in public schools because of "market forces" (p. 37). Although their analysis looked at the relationship of autonomy and student achievement *only within public schools* (because of what they regarded as limitations of their data sources, namely the High School and Beyond Survey), Chubb and Moe argued that teacher and principal autonomy should be greatly different between public and private sector schools. They advanced no evidence on this question of public and private school differences, but merely speculated about it. Although Chubb and Moe confined their final recommendations to the public sector (acknowledging that privatizing America's schools is an impractical fantasy), their work has become the foundation for many who would extend school choice to encompass both public and private schools.

School choice advocates believe that educators in public schools are constrained by bureaucracy from acting to improve the conditions of education. They assert that, in contrast, principals and teachers in private schools enjoy greater autonomy and have more control over significant decisions like teaching methods, curriculum and personnel. Consequently, private schools produce a higher quality educational experience for the students. They view private school educators as responding primarily to the needs of pupils and the directly expressed wishes of parents: in effect, responding to their clients' expressions of market preferences. They view public school educators as locked into a bureaucracy that stifles initiative and effort and insulates employees from public pressures. This view of the difference between public and private education may be greatly oversimplified. Private school teachers may respond to parents, whereas public school teachers may respond to parents acting as a "school board." The difference may be important, or it may be a distinction without an important difference. Moreover, the needs created by children's circumstances may motivate public school teachers as strongly as they motivate teachers in private schools. To the extent to which teachers in private and public schools encounter children with similar needs, they may act similarly. What seems to have occurred in thinking about public and private education is what Freire described as "mythicizing reality": attempting to conceal certain facts which explain the way persons exist in the world (1981, p. 22). That the myths have been successfully transmitted is evidenced by journalistic excesses such as the following: "Study after study has shown that the more schools are freed of outside bureaucratic control, the more likely they are to succeed." (editorial, "The Arizona Republic," November 12, 1991)

It may be that the size and complexity of an organization, like a school, determines the degree of autonomy felt by participants rather than whether its governance is private or public.

Moreover, in today's complex world, public controls of many and varied types often extend to private institutions, because they participate through loan programs or grants or contracts in governmental programs or fall under the jurisdiction of courts. Chubb and Moe (1990), Coleman and Hoffer (1987), and most others attempting to think about the implications of organization and control for administrator and teacher actions are merely engaging in speculation about that which few have studied directly.

The Problem of Teacher and Principal Autonomy

The study reported here did not assume that there are clear and distinct differences between workplace conditions in public and private schools. Rather, it attempted to bring to the surface those conditions which otherwise may be overlooked or neglected, conditions which constrain teacher and principal autonomy in both private and public schools. Another aspect of the problem under investigation here is to detail the differences that may or may not exist between principals' and teachers' sense of autonomy and control in private and public school settings. The need for such an investigation is clear to persons on all sides of the issue of school choice: "Case studies and other more narrowly focused research into schools could help develop an understanding of these relationships that could guide both educators and policymakers in determining the appropriate role of autonomy in school improvement" (Glass & Matthews, 1991, p. 26).

To limit the scope of this study, a specific type of private school was selected from the broad range of possibilities. The college preparatory independent school without denominational affiliations was chosen because it operates in an environment more like the legal description of a public school located in an upper-middle class community. The student populations are similar in many social and economic circumstances, both having students whose parents reflect the behaviors of those with the greatest choice of school type.

What Has Already Been Written on this Problem

The literature on bureaucracy and autonomy is huge within sociology, and substantial within the specialty of the sociology of education. The works of Powell (1990), Lightfoot (1983), Ball (1987), Sedlak and others (1986), McNeil (1986), and Firestone and Bader (1991) are most influential. This literature, at times tenuously connected to empirical research, holds ideas and conceptions of teacher autonomy that may foreshadow many of the ideas to be encountered in the field in the pursuit of this research.

Private schools appear to be subject to fewer apparent constraints than those encountered by public schools. Their governance and financing make them directly responsible to a constituency which they must satisfy to stay solvent (Powell, 1990). They have no direct obligation to the whole of society (Grant, 1988).

In contrast, public schools must serve the needs of children as seen by elected or appointed representatives of the public at local, state and federal levels. While such external government mandates, court decisions, and union contracts have, perhaps, a marginal impact on the independent school, certainly these schools are not immune from public regulations concerning health, safety, and civil rights. Nor are they protected from the not-so-subtle intrusions of publishers, external testing, and especially college admissions requirements (Powell, 1990). The subtle curricular power of the Advanced Placement (AP) examinations, for example, exerts a pressure on the curriculum and accountability of private high school teachers similar to that of state mandated testing in the public sector (Powell, 1990).

Surely both public and private schools are subject to organizational constraints that stem from "external structures (subjects, periods of time) . . . occupational norms (order in the classroom, class rules and so on) . . . [that ensure] some minimal level of uniformity" (Elmore, 1987, p. 64). Ball (1987) went further and suggested that educators ask, "How autonomous is the organization and its actors from its clients, publics, superiors and audiences or the basic social and economic structures of the society?" He suggested the notion of relative autonomy: ". . . organizations are not independent or self-sufficient phenomena" (p. 247).

There is a generally held perception by society that private schools are successful educational businesses. This is not necessarily the case. In preparation for her research on public and private high schools, Lightfoot (1983) participated in a scholars' seminar. Invited scholars included those whose work centered on the history, policies, and practices of schools. The assumption that all private schools are thriving was called into question.

But the common assumption that the private schools were thriving and flourishing was unsettling, and was experienced by some members [of the seminar] as a disregard for the great variation in success and resources among them (p.8).

Indeed, Chubb and Moe (1985) concluded, "Relative to public schools, private schools appear to delegate significant discretion to their teachers, and to involve them sufficiently in school level policy decisions to make them feel efficacious" (p. 37). This common sense mythology perpetuates the misconception that the private school community shares one view of what constitutes a good school. The reality may be, as Powell (1990) suggested, that private schools often vary sharply in content and process and espouse a wide variety of purposes (single-sex schools, boarding schools, schools that cater to a particular ability level) based on the type of community they serve. While public schools are traditionally depicted as being more diverse, this diversity is more a matter of economic differences. There are schools for the poor,

schools for the middle class, and schools for the suburbanites. Within the private school context of general affluence there is more cohesiveness of purpose, and more shared experience. Image and reliance on this mythology of academic excellence may be what allows some private schools to compete in the marketplace along with other private and public schools (Powell, 1990).

Autonomy may be experienced by teachers as a school runs smoothly and little administrative attention is apparent. While teachers may enjoy a great deal of autonomy in these circumstances, their autonomy may actually operate within a narrow range of discretion (McNeil, 1984). The degree of discretion may rest with the administrator. In addition, Corbett found that, "Community preferences lurk constantly at the borders of the school organization, and the superintendent and the principal are the entry points" (Corbett, 1991, p. 93). Indeed, Chubb and Moe's (1990) enthusiasm for autonomy results from their discovery of a statistical correlation between "autonomy" and "student achievement test score gains." They assumed that the causal influence ran from the former to the latter. Glass and Matthews (1991) contended that it was even more likely that the causal direction was reversed in that teachers and principals were granted more autonomy when their test scores were in good shape. Hence, they suggested that it may be achievement levels causing autonomy to be granted rather than the other way around. If Glass and Matthews are correct and Chubb and Moe are not, then granting autonomy would not be expected to result in increased achievement, nor would more autonomous private schools enjoy *ipso facto* greater effectiveness.

Indeed, the role played by the administrator is a key element in teacher autonomy or the reform initiative of "empowering" teachers (Powell, 1990; Lightfoot, 1983; McNeil, 1984). Powell pointed out that it is not clear how empowered teachers can coexist with strong site-based managers, a primary requirement of a private school head (p. 130). Apple and Teitelbaum (1986), however, found that within Weick's model of a loosely-coupled organization different types of professional can retain control and authority without changing or being changed by the decisions of other professionals. Teachers in any school organization are free to conduct their individual classrooms as they see fit without reducing the autonomy of the principal.

Although private school teachers may be freer of distant bureaucratic rules, regulations and procedures, they are subject to the pervasive authority of a headmaster and school board of directors. Based on the wide discrepancy between the salary of the administrator and teachers in private schools, the power exercised by the headmaster is considerable, perhaps even greater than that held by the public school principal. In some schools, observed Lightfoot (1983), the "unquestionable dominance and benign power" of the head only underscores the faculty's "relative powerlessness and reinforces the childlike impulses" (p. 341). Even in the case of more democratic and benign leaders, private school teachers are well aware that reappointment and references for one's resume depend on satisfying the head (Baird, 1977). Since services must be "sold to potential clients," some teachers may find themselves "caught between incompatible interpretations of their own self-interest" (Ball, 1987, p. 269).

It may not be possible to understand teacher autonomy merely from examining the obvious governmental or organizational forms that are set up to direct their actions. The working conditions of both public school and private school teachers may contain any number of what appear to be constraints on their autonomy: federal, state, and district policy; school board and administrator demands; pressures from state mandated or college testing (Noble and Smith, 1994; Smith and Rottenberg, 1991); the need to please parents, students, other teachers, and community; standardization practices such as career ladders (Firestone and Bader, 1991; Popkewitz and Lind, 1988). But how teachers manage those constraints is crucial in defining their work life. Sedlak and others (1986) pointed out that, historically, teachers acquiesce to centralized authority yet, once they close their classroom door, most teachers are able to exercise enormous discretion. The current spate of reform initiatives produces constraints which treat teachers as passive receivers of external advice and undermine their professional authority.

Elmore suggested that rather than reform, the "result is teacher resistance and student disengagement" (1987, p. 60). Faced with challenges to their autonomy, some imaginative teachers "have used their ingenuity and skill in order to arrive at a way out" (Kozol, 1981, p. 51) or participated in the "strategy of 'omissive action' (like non-cooperation . . .)" (Ball, 1987, p. 268). Indeed, Feiman-Nemser and Floden asserted that, based on their review of several studies of teacher culture, current research replaces the image of "a passive teacher molded by bureaucracy and buffeted by external forces" with the image of "an active agent, constructing perspectives and choosing actions," (1986, p. 523).

Methods

The methods employed in this investigation were those of the multi-site qualitative case study: interviews from multiple data sources, observations and field notes from a variety of on-site meetings and visits, and analysis of documents (brochures, teacher handbooks, policy manuals, meeting agendas). An intensive study of three secondary schools of each type (public and private) was conducted. Fourteen private school teachers, fifteen public school teachers and their associated principals, heads, and assistants were interviewed at each site.

Site Selection

To sharpen the boundaries of this exploration, I focused on the type of private schools known as "independent" schools. There are two analytic advantages to this selection (Powell, 1990, p. 113). First, compared to the full range of private schools, independent schools are less inculcated with denominational religion and, therefore, operate in an environment more like the legal circumstances of public schools. Because they are the most expensive of the private schools, they are chosen by families who can afford any type of school, public or private. The fact that such schools serve primarily high-income families reflects a population that has the financial ability to choose a type of school based on preference provides the second advantage. They are the most privileged private schools, which then served as a guide by which to identify particular public schools which became their comparison group. Public schools located in the most affluent school districts serve a type of high income family similar to those who patronize independent schools. These public schools, therefore, came under consideration for selection for this study.

Another criterion for site selection was secondary schools that focus on academics. The selection of private schools was based on their accreditation or application for accreditation by North Central Association as college preparatory (North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, 1990). A focus on academic excellence is the key marketing strategy of these schools as evidenced in brochures describing their mission to prospective clients. Graduation rates and percentages of students applying to college are the best descriptors of academic excellence in the public high schools. The state department of education and the district office of each of the three public secondary schools served as sources for these data. Recommendations by educational specialists were also given consideration.

The three private schools selected were located in two cities in the same state in the southwestern United States. A similar process was used to gain access to public secondary schools; however, the initial contact was sometimes made through a district level administrator. The three public schools are located in very different sections of the same city and vary in the length of time they have been in existence.

Informant Selection

Interview data were collected from approximately thirty teachers and their associated administrators at each school. The number of informants contacted was guided by the understanding that each participant provides information about the conditions under which they and their colleagues work; therefore, they actually inform the researcher of the actions and beliefs of a few or many more.

The line which separates administrator from teacher in the private school is often unclear since many serve in both capacities. In one school selected, it is required that each administrator, except for the head, teach at least one class. It was explained that this requirement kept all administrators in touch with the needs of the students. Coincidentally, the requirement has some financial advantages for the school as well. In these cases, those who were labeled teachers are those whose primary responsibility is teaching. If only one class was taught and the primary responsibility was administration, the individual was considered an administrator. Department chairs in one public secondary school in this study have the equivalent of half-time teaching responsibilities with the remainder of their time being delegated to administrative duties. These individuals were labeled teachers for purposes of this study. In any event, the difference between teachers and administrators in this work proved not to be crucial, since each reported willingly and convincingly on their own actions and beliefs and those of their supervisors or subordinates.

Teachers were selected by a purposeful sampling from among those who were considered to be well-situated informants. For the purposes of this study, teachers who qualified for participation were those who had at least five years teaching experience and at least three years experience in their present school. Another criterion was to have a variety of subject areas represented. Each principal or head of school was asked to prepare a roster of full-time teachers from which the sample could be drawn. The interviews were conducted in the spring of the school year and pressures that naturally occur in all schools as they prepare for graduation and final exams precluded any scientific selection of interviewees. The reality of school life meant that principals or heads either asked for volunteers at faculty meetings, through department heads, or asked particular teachers if they would be willing to participate in the study. It is unlikely that a more scientific selection of interviewees would have resulted in any important differences in the outcome.

Data Collection

Good research practice obligates the researcher to triangulate, that is, to use multiple methods and data sources to enhance the validity of research findings. Mathison (1988) advised ". . . it is necessary to use multiple methods and sources of data in the execution of a study in order to withstand critique by colleagues" (p. 13). For this reason, multiple methods and sources of data collection were employed. Interview protocols were developed in such a manner that included, but of course was not limited to, questions from the High School and Beyond Survey (Moles, 1988) and Blase's (1991) study of power relationships between principals and teachers. It is the questions from the High School and Beyond (HSB) Administrator and Teacher Survey upon which Chubb and Moe (1991) based their index of teacher and administrator autonomy.

An interview protocol was designed (see Table 1) to explore these and related issues and utilized open-ended questions and probes. The purpose was to elicit reflective answers that go further than the type of surface response typically produced by a mailed survey.

Table 1

Administrator and Teacher Interview Protocols

Administrator Protocol

1. Can you tell me about an incident that happened to you or someone you know in which your work life was influenced or shaped by the (then A through L below). For example, staffing decisions, budget allocations, scheduling of classes, how you deal with discipline or behavioral problems, decisions about pursuing advanced degrees, how parent communications

are handled?

- A. superintendent
- B. department chair
- C. school board
- D. state or federal programs or regulations
- E. North Central or AIS (Association of Independent Schools)
- F. legal or judicial judgments
- G. parents
- H. professional organization with which you identify; teacher's association
- I. inservice training or your own continued education
- J. students
- K. colleagues
- L. colleges

2. Describe the degree of control and discretion you are able to exercise over each of the following activities:

- A. establishing curriculum;
- B. determining instructional methods used in the classroom;
- C. allocating funds;
- D. hiring new, full-time teachers.

3. My research is directed at a current debate in education. It is claimed (by Chubb & Moe) that:

A). Private school teachers have greater autonomy to innovate, adapt curriculum and teaching to meet the needs of their students, and that in doing so they are primarily influenced by the students and the parents and not by school bureaucracy.

Whereas:

B). Public school teachers are subjected to a variety of influences and pressures that restrict their autonomy in meeting students' needs; among these influences are:

- 1.) state and federal regulations;
- 2.) unions;
- 3.) court orders or the threat of litigation;
- 4.) organizational rules called "bureaucracy."

What do you think of this? (Probe: For example, suggest he or she compare Private school X and Public school Y in respect to the above question. Or ask the interviewee to imagine Public school Y and Private school X being the same size, then how would teacher autonomy differ between them, if it would at all.)

Teacher Protocol

1. Can you tell me about an incident that happened to you or someone you know in which your work life was influenced or shaped by the (then A through L)? For example, your selection of curriculum materials, what you teach or how you teach, how you group students, how you deal with discipline or behavioral problems, how your classes are scheduled, decisions about pursuing advanced degrees, how parent communications are handled?

- A. superintendent
- B. department chair
- C. state or federal programs or regulations
- D. school board
- E. North Central or AIS (Association of Independent Schools)
- F. legal or judicial judgments
- G. parents
- H. professional organization with which you identify; teachers association
- I. inservice training or your own continued education
- J. students
- K. colleagues
- L. colleges

2. Can you describe, out of your own experience or that of someone you know directly, a creative attempt made to improve the classroom, teaching methods, the curriculum, or student achievement that was thwarted or substantially altered by any of these (A-G in Question 1) sources of influence?

3. Can you describe for me a failed attempt by any of these sources to influence you that you resisted? (repeat A-G to remind participant of categories to consider) What are the ways that you have been able to work around those influences?

4. What does it mean to you when people talk about bureaucratic constraints on teachers?

Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. Substantive field notes were maintained and reviewed at the end of each on-site visit and interview. All interviews were conducted by the author. Documents that were examined included Teacher's Handbook or Policy Guide, marketing brochures, school board and faculty meeting minutes, government regulations, and other printed matter deemed relevant to this study.

Data Analysis

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim with dialog attributed to each speaker. Data derived from these extensive interviews, field notes, and documentation were reviewed for recurring themes utilizing the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1978; Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). Transcripts of the interviews were read repeatedly in a search for quotations that transcended the idiosyncrasies of individual circumstances and thus suggested a theme or idea about autonomy. It proved useful during the process to create charts as an aid to data reduction and analysis. Data display (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Wolcott, 1990) allows for the sorting and categorization of data in a way that seemingly discrete data may be linked in previously unrecognized ways. A grid was devised by which to organize and identify objects of influence on teachers and principals and the source of those influences. Developing themes were labeled and evidence was categorized accordingly. Then, quotations were extracted from transcripts and collected into files, with each file representing a distinct idea or theme. Quotations in files retained identifying codes that linked the quotation to its source interview. These "theme files" or categories were then read, edited and organized into a core set of ideas about teacher and principal autonomy. The core set of ideas was then reorganized by coalescing, splitting or eliminating themes until a satisfactory framework for reporting the findings was obtained.

The interpretation of categories became the basis for formulating a framework for conceptualizing the differences that may or may not exist between principals' and teachers' sense of autonomy and control in private and public school settings. The conceptual framework was

used to describe the ways in which public and private school teachers and principals share a perception of autonomy, where they are different, and how they experience constraints on their autonomy.

In this study, the analysis of data and the reporting of interpretations are uniquely tied together. Below under Findings, each quotation that illustrates a concept of the interpretative framework is hyperlinked to the transcript of the interview in which it appears. By clicking on the icon beside each quotation, the reader can move to the quotation in the context of the full interview from which it was extracted. This feature of presentation of findings allows a check on the interpretation by the reader. In addition, the full text of all interviews [is available](#) to anyone who wishes to reanalyze the original data.

Methods

The methods employed in this investigation were those of the multi-site qualitative case study: interviews from multiple data sources, observations and field notes from a variety of on-site meetings and visits, and analysis of documents (brochures, teacher handbooks, policy manuals, meeting agendas). An intensive study of three secondary schools of each type (public and private) was conducted. Fourteen private school teachers, fifteen public school teachers and their associated principals, heads, and assistants were interviewed at each site.

Site Selection

To sharpen the boundaries of this exploration, I focused on the type of private schools known as "independent" schools. There are two analytic advantages to this selection (Powell, 1990, p. 113). First, compared to the full range of private schools, independent schools are less inculcated with denominational religion and, therefore, operate in an environment more like the legal circumstances of public schools. Because they are the most expensive of the private schools, they are chosen by families who can afford any type of school, public or private. The fact that such schools serve primarily high-income families reflects a population that has the financial ability to choose a type of school based on preference provides the second advantage. They are the most privileged private schools, which then served as a guide by which to identify particular public schools which became their comparison group. Public schools located in the most affluent school districts serve a type of high income family similar to those who patronize independent schools. These public schools, therefore, came under consideration for selection for this study.

Another criterion for site selection was secondary schools that focus on academics. The selection of private schools was based on their accreditation or application for accreditation by North Central Association as college preparatory (North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, 1990). A focus on academic excellence is the key marketing strategy of these schools as evidenced in brochures describing their mission to prospective clients. Graduation rates and percentages of students applying to college are the best descriptors of academic excellence in the public high schools. The state department of education and the district office of each of the three public secondary schools served as sources for these data. Recommendations by educational specialists were also given consideration.

The three private schools selected were located in two cities in the same state in the southwestern United States. A similar process was used to gain access to public secondary schools; however, the initial contact was sometimes made through a district level administrator. The three public schools are located in very different sections of the same city and vary in the length of time they have been in existence.

Informant Selection

Interview data were collected from approximately thirty teachers and their associated administrators at each school. The number of informants contacted was guided by the understanding that each participant provides information about the conditions under which they and their colleagues work; therefore, they actually inform the researcher of the actions and beliefs of a few or many more.

The line which separates administrator from teacher in the private school is often unclear since many serve in both capacities. In one school selected, it is required that each administrator, except for the head, teach at least one class. It was explained that this requirement kept all administrators in touch with the needs of the students. Coincidentally, the requirement has some financial advantages for the school as well. In these cases, those who were labeled teachers are those whose primary responsibility is teaching. If only one class was taught and the primary responsibility was administration, the individual was considered an administrator. Department chairs in one public secondary school in this study have the equivalent of half-time teaching responsibilities with the remainder of their time being delegated to administrative duties. These individuals were labeled teachers for purposes of this study. In any event, the difference between teachers and administrators in this work proved not to be crucial, since each reported willingly and convincingly on their own actions and beliefs and those of their supervisors or subordinates.

Teachers were selected by a purposeful sampling from among those who were considered to be well-situated informants. For the purposes of this study, teachers who qualified for participation were those who had at least five years teaching experience and at least three years experience in their present school. Another criterion was to have a variety of subject areas represented. Each principal or head of school was asked to prepare a roster of full-time teachers from which the sample could be drawn. The interviews were conducted in the spring of the school year and pressures that naturally occur in all schools as they prepare for graduation and final exams precluded any scientific selection of interviewees. The reality of school life meant that principals or heads either asked for volunteers at faculty meetings, through department heads, or asked particular teachers if they would be willing to participate in the study. It is unlikely that a more scientific selection of interviewees would have resulted in any important differences in the outcome.

Data Collection

Good research practice obligates the researcher to triangulate, that is, to use multiple methods and data sources to enhance the validity of research findings. Mathison (1988) advised ". . . it is necessary to use multiple methods and sources of data in the execution of a study in order to withstand critique by colleagues" (p. 13). For this reason, multiple methods and sources of data collection were employed. Interview protocols were developed in such a manner that included, but of course was not limited to, questions from the High School and Beyond Survey (Moles, 1988) and Blase's (1991) study of power relationships between principals and teachers. It is the questions from the High School and Beyond (HSB) Administrator and Teacher Survey upon which Chubb and Moe (1991) based their index of teacher and administrator autonomy.

An interview protocol was designed (see Table 1) to explore these and related issues and utilized open-ended questions and probes. The purpose was to elicit reflective answers that go further than the type of surface response typically produced by a mailed survey.

Table 1

Administrator and Teacher Interview Protocols

Administrator Protocol

1. Can you tell me about an incident that happened to you or someone you know in which your work life was influenced or shaped by the (then A through L below). For example, staffing decisions, budget allocations, scheduling of classes, how you deal with discipline or behavioral problems, decisions about pursuing advanced degrees, how parent communications

are handled?

- A. superintendent
- B. department chair
- C. school board
- D. state or federal programs or regulations
- E. North Central or AIS (Association of Independent Schools)
- F. legal or judicial judgments
- G. parents
- H. professional organization with which you identify; teacher's association
- I. inservice training or your own continued education
- J. students
- K. colleagues
- L. colleges

2. Describe the degree of control and discretion you are able to exercise over each of the following activities:

- A. establishing curriculum;
- B. determining instructional methods used in the classroom;
- C. allocating funds;
- D. hiring new, full-time teachers.

3. My research is directed at a current debate in education. It is claimed (by Chubb & Moe) that:

A). Private school teachers have greater autonomy to innovate, adapt curriculum and teaching to meet the needs of their students, and that in doing so they are primarily influenced by the students and the parents and not by school bureaucracy.

Whereas:

B). Public school teachers are subjected to a variety of influences and pressures that restrict their autonomy in meeting students' needs; among these influences are:

- 1.) state and federal regulations;
- 2.) unions;
- 3.) court orders or the threat of litigation;
- 4.) organizational rules called "bureaucracy."

What do you think of this? (Probe: For example, suggest he or she compare Private school X and Public school Y in respect to the above question. Or ask the interviewee to imagine Public school Y and Private school X being the same size, then how would teacher autonomy differ between them, if it would at all.)

Teacher Protocol

1. Can you tell me about an incident that happened to you or someone you know in which your work life was influenced or shaped by the (then A through L)? For example, your selection of curriculum materials, what you teach or how you teach, how you group students, how you deal with discipline or behavioral problems, how your classes are scheduled, decisions about pursuing advanced degrees, how parent communications are handled?

- A. superintendent
- B. department chair
- C. state or federal programs or regulations
- D. school board
- E. North Central or AIS (Association of Independent Schools)
- F. legal or judicial judgments
- G. parents
- H. professional organization with which you identify; teachers association
- I. inservice training or your own continued education
- J. students
- K. colleagues
- L. colleges

2. Can you describe, out of your own experience or that of someone you know directly, a creative attempt made to improve the classroom, teaching methods, the curriculum, or student achievement that was thwarted or substantially altered by any of these (A-G in Question 1) sources of influence?

3. Can you describe for me a failed attempt by any of these sources to influence you that you resisted? (repeat A-G to remind participant of categories to consider) What are the ways that you have been able to work around those influences?

4. What does it mean to you when people talk about bureaucratic constraints on teachers?

Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. Substantive field notes were maintained and reviewed at the end of each on-site visit and interview. All interviews were conducted by the author. Documents that were examined included Teacher's Handbook or Policy Guide, marketing brochures, school board and faculty meeting minutes, government regulations, and other printed matter deemed relevant to this study.

Data Analysis

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim with dialog attributed to each speaker. Data derived from these extensive interviews, field notes, and documentation were reviewed for recurring themes utilizing the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1978; Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). Transcripts of the interviews were read repeatedly in a search for quotations that transcended the idiosyncrasies of individual circumstances and thus suggested a theme or idea about autonomy. It proved useful during the process to create charts as an aid to data reduction and analysis. Data display (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Wolcott, 1990) allows for the sorting and categorization of data in a way that seemingly discrete data may be linked in previously unrecognized ways. A grid was devised by which to organize and identify objects of influence on teachers and principals and the source of those influences. Developing themes were labeled and evidence was categorized accordingly. Then, quotations were extracted from transcripts and collected into files, with each file representing a distinct idea or theme. Quotations in files retained identifying codes that linked the quotation to its source interview. These "theme files" or categories were then read, edited and organized into a core set of ideas about teacher and principal autonomy. The core set of ideas was then reorganized by coalescing, splitting or eliminating themes until a satisfactory framework for reporting the findings was obtained.

The interpretation of categories became the basis for formulating a framework for conceptualizing the differences that may or may not exist between principals' and teachers' sense of autonomy and control in private and public school settings. The conceptual framework was

used to describe the ways in which public and private school teachers and principals share a perception of autonomy, where they are different, and how they experience constraints on their autonomy.

In this study, the analysis of data and the reporting of interpretations are uniquely tied together. Below under Findings, each quotation that illustrates a concept of the interpretative framework is hyperlinked to the transcript of the interview in which it appears. By clicking on the icon beside each quotation, the reader can move to the quotation in the context of the full interview from which it was extracted. This feature of presentation of findings allows a check on the interpretation by the reader. In addition, the full text of all interviews [is available](#) to anyone who wishes to reanalyze the original data.

The Schools

Three independent secondary, college preparatory schools and three public secondary schools were studied. Four of them are located in one large city, two in another. Independent high schools are defined as those being non-religious and, in this study, college preparatory.

St. John's College Preparatory School

St. John's is an independent, coeducational, college-preparatory school located in a quiet neighborhood in a city of nearly a half-million population in the southwestern United States. The grounds were originally a residence in a neighborhood more than a century old, although the school itself did not open until 1980. By a quirk of geography, the school is now located in an area marked by the influx of affluent families. The population of St. John's is more than 90% Anglo. The school has devised programs to entice greater student diversity; these efforts have met with little success. It has increased its Hispanic population to nearly 10% although the city in which it is located is as much as one-third Hispanic. Once recruited, many students tend to remain. Over half of last year's graduating seniors completed all four years of high school at St. John's. The withdrawal rate is low, only 1 to 2% annually.

As of the 1990-91 school year, there were 22 full-time teachers (11 women and 11 men) and 10 part-time teachers (five women and five men). The school reports that 23 of the 28 members of the faculty have masters degrees and three hold doctorates. The ratio of teachers to students is one for every nine. Full-time teachers are required to teach five classes. The teaching loads average between 63 and 65 students per teacher. The head of school held this position at St. John's for four years. He has over 25 years of experience in similar positions at three other independent secondary schools. He holds both a bachelors and masters degree from a prestigious eastern university. The position of head of school is described in St. John's self-study in part as one who "administers the school according to the policies set by the board of trustees" and has "complete authority for faculty, staff, and student selection, evaluation, and dismissal." Other administrators include an assistant head and dean of students. Both report directly to the head and, upon request, to the Board of Trustees. The head of school fulfills both the superintendent and principal functions of a public school system.

Tuition for the 1991-92 school year is listed as \$6,650 for high school students. Students will incur additional costs for books and certain special events or trips. Some share of the funds, raised through annual giving, is allocated by the board to provide financial aid in the form of need-based scholarships. Student admissions decisions are made by an Admissions Committee. Qualifications for admission are based on admissions test scores (the Stanford Achievement Test is used), a transcript from previous schools attended, former teacher references, and a personal interview. No precise standards on these criteria are publicly stated.

Verde Valley Country Day School

Verde Valley Country Day School has the longest history of any independent school in the state. It began as a ranch style boarding school in the thirties, then closed its resident department and changed its mission to that of a four-year college preparatory high school. Verde Valley Country Day School is a non-sectarian, co-educational, college preparatory day school for students from grades 4 to 12. The school is located in a residential community which has seen the

more affluent families migrate to newer areas of development within this growing city of nearly a half- million population.

Verde Valley Country Day School has a total student population of 188 for the 1991-92 school year; 105 of those are high school students. The student population is predominantly Anglo despite efforts to increase the ethnic mix in the school. The board and administration wish to attract a student and faculty population more representative of the city in which the school is located. All three of the independent schools in this study publish a lengthy list of elite colleges to which their graduates have been accepted.

Verde Valley Country Day School's full school faculty totals 24 full-time and 12 part-time teachers. Many of its high school faculty also have teaching responsibilities in the Middle Level School as is common in the other private schools in this study. Most teachers hold a bachelors degree; many hold one or more masters; a few hold PhD degrees. The administrative staff consists of the head of school, director of admissions, director of development, business manager, and assistant head. As is the case with each of the private schools in this study, the head functions as both superintendent and principal when compared to the public school system. Verde Valley Country Day School's Self Study states: "It should be noted that the key function of a head in an independent school is raising money and there is no question regarding this duty in either assessment [of the head in superintendent or principal roles]."

Tuition for all grades at Verde Valley Country Day School is \$6,670 per year. Additional expenses include books, various field trips, a week-long program held each spring, and bus transportation. Financial assistance is allocated by a committee and based on need. Published information from the school states: "Each year a substantial portion of the school budget is allocated to financial assistance, making such assistance available to more than 35% of the student body, with grants in aid ranging from 90% to 7% of tuition for the year." Students are accepted for admissions to Verde Valley Country Day School on the basis of transcripts and standardized test scores from their previous schools, an aptitude test administered by Verde Valley Country Day School, recommendations from previous teachers, and an interview.

Crestwood Country Day School

Crestwood Country Day School is an independent, co-educational, college-preparatory day school for students from Pre-Kindergarten to grade 12. Of its total enrollment of 575 students, 169 are enrolled in secondary school. The school was founded over thirty years ago at its current location in an affluent residential suburban area imbedded in a city with a population of approximately two million. It enjoys a long and distinguished reputation in the area and is the only independent high school in or adjacent to that city. It competes only with public and parochial schools for its students and is generally viewed as an elite school by the community. Unlike the casual attire worn by the administrators at St. John's College Preparatory School and Verde Valley Country Day School, the male administrators are often seen wearing ties and jackets; the female administrators customarily wear suits. The philosophy of Crestwood Country Day School, as expressed by the assistant to the head, is one of a non-profit business accommodating the needs and wishes of its clients. The assistant to the head is also the director of admissions.

Crestwood Country Day School's student population is primarily Anglo although programs of financial aid exist to encourage a more diverse student body. Graduating classes average 40 students each year with 99% enrolling in four-year colleges immediately. Eighty percent of those students attend colleges out of state. Crestwood Country Day School is proud to include in its marketing materials a lengthy list of elite colleges to which graduates are accepted

Crestwood Country Day School employs 20 academic faculty in the Upper School. It is unknown how many of these teachers are full time. Masters degrees or higher are held by 80% of

this faculty. Each administrator, with the exception of the head of school, is required to teach at least one course. The result is a teacher-student ratio of one to nine. Some of the administrators who are responsible for the Upper School serve the same function for the entire school. For example, the director of admissions is responsible for managing admissions for pre-kindergarten through 12th grade admissions. The top administrator is a woman with previous experience in the same position at eastern private schools who prefers the title "Head of School." She has been head of Crestwood Country Day School for seven years. There is a director of admissions who also has responsibilities as an assistant to the head of school.

Tuition for Crestwood Country Day School's Upper School students is \$8,500. Students are also required to buy their books and may incur fees for special activities. The Board of Trustees has allocated a portion of the school's operating costs to provide an active need-based financial aid program.

In its marketing materials, Crestwood Country Day School clearly states that it "maintains a policy of selective admissions, recognizing that there is a range of students the School's programs serve best." Students are admitted based on an interview, testing and, presumably, other unstated criteria. Admissions decisions are made by the director of admissions and his assistant. The head chooses to participate when certain cases are considered.

Sunset High School

Sunset is a large, modern public high school housing approximately 2400 students. The state department lists the graduation rate at 83% with one of the ten lowest drop-out rates in the state. During the current school year, eleven National Merit finalists were identified. It is known in the community for having high academic standards and successful students. The community is primarily Anglo and affluent. The principal describes the student population as being 99% Anglo and possibly 1%, no more than 2%, other which would include African-American, Hispanic, and Asian students. While the district is largely middle to upper middle class, it contains small pockets of lower middle to low income families. Among the goals outlined for the school in its Teacher Policy Handbook is a commitment to "make a significant contribution to the needs of college-bound students . . ." and to maintain effective communication with students and parents "to best meet the educational needs of each student."

The superintendent has earned a national reputation for effective management and promoting academic excellence in the schools. She works well with the Board and the very active local Teachers Association. Policy is set by the Board with the guidance of the superintendent. The superintendent is then charged with the implementation of those policies. The implementation of these policies within each school is delegated to each principal. Teachers in the classroom are thus distanced from the Board by these layers of administration. The Board meets twice monthly to carry out their charge much of which is prescribed by the State Department of Education and applies to each of the public high schools in this study. Policies of the district are to be in harmony with state statutes. The state also determines the number of board members (five), term of office (four years), assumption of office, and fiscal year. Many of the board duties involve financial decisions, property management, and personnel discipline issues.

There are about 100 certified staff on the faculty of Sunset High School. They teach five classes a day and are limited to 160 contacts [students] per day. This means they average 32 students per class. Most teachers have been with the school since its beginnings, many have served in the district throughout their careers.

Portales High School

Much like Verde Valley Country Day School, Portales suffers from the migration of many of its more affluent families to the suburban areas of the city. It still retains a reputation for high academic standards, high graduation rate, and a significant number of National Merit Scholars. The community is facing a widening encroachment of lower middle to low income families, many of whom speak primarily Spanish. The student body reflects the community. It is about 90% Anglo, the remainder being primarily Hispanic and a few African-Americans. There are 980 students attending Portales in the 1991-92 school year.

The roles of the superintendent and board are identical for Portales, Sunset, and Montevideo High Schools. Their responsibilities of each are mandated by the state.

There are 43 faculty at Portales; about 55 if librarians, counselors, and part-time teachers are included. It is a mature staff, most of whom have worked within the district, if not the same school, for much of their teaching careers. Many hold advanced degrees as is prevalent in public schools where salary is tied to both years of experience and continuing education. Teachers are responsible for five classes and have between 25 and 30 students per class. The student-teacher ratio is 25.5 to 1. Portales has recently embarked on a move toward site-based management in which the principal encourages shared decision-making. Decisions, including the hiring of new faculty, are made by a group or team of those who have a stake in the outcome.

The current principal has two histories with the school, the past and the current. He had been principal from 1979 to 1987 including the period of the closure controversy. It was a time when the parents clearly made a choice for their community school. The principal left for a district level administrative position only to be recruited back as principal when his successor was removed under unclear circumstances. Most teachers report the removal was due to his inability to work with faculty in shared decision-making, others state a legal controversy around athletics. While the current principal appears ambivalent about his return to Portales, it is apparent that his quiet demeanor and stated trust in the competence of the faculty endears him to the teachers.

Montevideo High School

Although Montevideo was established as a high school seventeen years ago, it was housed within an existing district high school for its first year which required conducting a year of double sessions. The first graduating class, therefore, did not graduate from the present facility. After that first year, Montevideo has been housed at its own facility on its own campus. Its current principal opened the school and has remained with it until his retirement scheduled for the end of the current school year.

The school community is composed of middle to upper middle class families. The current student population of 2750 reflects the larger community, essentially Anglo and either LDS (Latter Day Saints or Mormon) or Catholic. Approximately 93% of the students are Anglo, the remainder include a small number of Asian, African-American, and Hispanic students. The graduation rate is over 90%. The current school year has produced eleven National Merit Scholars. The district spends approximately \$3400 per student.

Early in the school's history, the assistant superintendent of the district began a study of the community by asking, "When your students graduate, what do you think they should have learned?" The school was, thus, established as an outcomes-based school from the beginning. Parent expectations have been reaffirmed three times since this first study utilizing a survey of parents and students. Through the survey, parents not only described their expectations, but they also ranked them in importance.

While the principal has complete control over his budget, he dislikes this role and prefers being an instructional leader, working with teachers and parents, and conducting long-range planning. He claimed almost unbridled autonomy in his work noting, "If you produce a good

product, they're [district] going to leave you alone."

There are about 125 faculty who are described by the principal as "damn good faculty . . . intelligent, dedicated." They give much of their own time for tutoring students and they all incorporate mastery learning. They teach five classes and average 142 students within that teaching load. Only five faculty members were assigned to Montevideo, the remainder were essentially hired by the principal. Similar to each of the public schools in this study, the faculty is mature with many teachers having accumulated their teaching experience within the district, if not within the same school. They run their departments much in the same way one would expect to observe in a business.

The principal demonstrates confidence in those he has hired and allows teachers a tremendous amount of latitude. Teachers feel his support and express considerable freedom. In anticipation of his retirement, teachers report a general feeling of anxiety over the question of who will replace this principal.

Alike and Different

The six schools that participated in this study share some important characteristics, yet differ in a number of equally important ways. All serve primarily middle to upper-middle class clientele who are racially homogeneous. This characteristic is a result of two distinct factors: public school locations in relatively expensive residential communities and high tuition charged by private schools. All six schools are oriented toward college preparation. Each boasts of high graduation rates with large numbers of students accepted to both in-state and out-of-state colleges, including many elite colleges. Many students are academically motivated and earn academic recognition on both the state and national level. Parents are actively involved in the school, participating on the school board or on any number of committees. They are welcomed on each campus and their voices are heard. The parents are described by each principal or head as being generally well-educated and, consequently, understand how to get what they want through either the private or public school system.

The schools are remarkably different in size. The three public schools are all much larger than the three independent schools in both the size of the campus and student population. It is perhaps because of size that the public schools include a district level in their organization. Another difference is the amount spent to educate each child. Per pupil spending varies between public (\$3400, \$3700, \$4000) and private (\$6,650, \$6,670, \$8,500). While the public schools are forced to function and provide educational services to its students within its means, the private schools depend on fundraising to supplement tuition so as to cover the true cost of educating each of its students. Public schools are mandated to provide an education to all students, whereas private schools are selective of students and their parents.

Findings: Teachers' and Administrators' Perceptions of Their Autonomy

This section presents a discussion of teacher and administrator beliefs about autonomy. In a subsequent section, teacher and administrator beliefs about constraints to autonomy are examined.

Teachers and administrators in both public and private schools reported, to a strikingly similar degree, a general feeling of autonomy. Teachers describe ways in which they experience autonomy: opportunities to participate in decision-making, support from the administration, and the ability to work around or ignore selected policies. School administrators also tell of having a sense of autonomy. Participants in this study described the effects of organizational size on their feelings of autonomy, how the administration acts to protect their autonomy, and the effects of teachers associations on autonomy. Their conversations brought to light the question of autonomy versus like-mindedness.

Teachers and Principals Experience Autonomy

I chart my own course through my pinball machine of life and I don't hit the bumpers unless I want to hit the bumpers.

Throughout the interviews numerous instances of expressions of autonomy can be found. Teachers in private and public school settings frequently expressed great difficulty, even frustration, in trying to rank the areas of control in their classroom work life. Participants in this study reflected Sedlak and others' (1986) contention that teachers today enjoy more freedom and autonomy than their predecessors (p.115). Certainly stipulations about professional codes of conduct of the 19th and early 20th century, sometimes viciously enforced by unbending administrators, are no longer the standard. The experiences reported by teachers in this study support the popular belief further pointed out by Sedlak and others (1986) that once they close their classroom doors, teachers are "able to exercise enormous discretion" (p.121). Public school teachers join private school teachers as they describe their sense of autonomy:

I'll tell you what; we as teachers have a lot to say about all of these [items listed on questionnaire]. So, I would want to say that up front.

It's kind of hard [to respond to the questionnaire] because I think . . . I could have number one, most control, on all of them; on every single one of them. [Click on the icon to the right to see this quotation in the context of the original interview.]



They are joined in their views by private school teachers:


I'm very autonomous actually as far as my own classroom goes.

In terms of my autonomy--you can see from my responses there--I feel a great sense of autonomy here.




Participation in the decision-making process.

Teachers in both public and private schools find expression of control through participation in curriculum or policy- setting committees. Many feel encouraged by the school administration to participate in decision-making; others feel they can participate by direct communication with the principal or head of school. Public school teachers described opportunities for participation in school decisions:


In this district, anything that becomes policy has input from the teachers. . . . 
There are ongoing committees, and they are made up of a conglomerate of representatives. We have advisory boards in various areas. I think our school is one that utilizes teachers.


What we have gone to is a system where the faculty itself has more of a hands-on approach to the administration of their particular program rather than going through chairs. Chairs still exist, but we are more of a local autonomy school now. We have a committee that meets and decides things with the principal.

A public school principal reported:


Everything that I do is a collection of information and input from teachers in this building, the department chair people in this building . . . They give me an awful lot of input. I'm constantly asking them for direction. 

Private school administrators talked about how teachers are encouraged to create avenues of participation:


The faculty have a big role in curriculum development . . . and usually it's a grass roots kind of thing . . . curriculum change comes from faculty within the department 

There are many decisions that I'll just leave up to the faculty. The bottom line is that if you're going to have anything happen, you have to have the people who are responsible for enforcing it . . . part of the decision-making process. 

A teacher in a private school typified the feelings of many in the small private school where faculty members feel and act like family members:

If the headmaster does something which offends me, I go to the headmaster and we work it out. 

Yet this same teacher allowed,

I would say the majority of the senior faculty are at a stage where they know even if he [head] doesn't like what I say I have a right to say it and he needs to listen to it Junior faculty might be a little too young to handle that. 

Administrator support and encouragement.

Teachers in great numbers report they feel freedom in their work life because the principal or head or department chair has confidence in their expertise in content area and teaching skills. These are, in most instances, the very same principals and heads of school who hired those teachers in the first place. A school head tells how private school teachers gain autonomy:

. . . [I] find very well qualified people with good imaginations to create good curriculum, and I support them and give them all the encouragement in the world to be able to do that.



Private school teachers described the atmosphere of autonomy due to administrative support:

[We have] highly competent people. [The administration] lets them do their work and they either stay away by design or they are so busy they don't have too much time to get involved.

I just really feel that she [department chair] has confidence in me and I have a pretty free reign.

Administrators have confidence in those they selected to be part of the school family. Yet, some teachers admit that this confidence may be tenuous. Support is evident as long as there are no parent complaints. Autonomy and administrative attention are felt by these teachers, but with the caveat added by McNeil (1986): "as long as the school runs smoothly". A private school teacher confirmed:

The headmaster's role here--I look on it that he is very encouraging, that the office handles details like the scheduling and that kind of thing, but as far as how I run my classroom, it is pretty much up to me. I have a feeling that if there were a lot of parental complaints, I know I would hear about it. As far as structuring my curriculum, my teaching methods, even the way I handle discipline, I am pretty much free--as long as the head feels that I'm effective in what I do.

Private school teachers respond to the invitation of their administrators to utilize their perceived autonomy:

Every creative thing that I've ever attempted has been encouraged at this school and people love my ideas and I've tried some pretty, you know, some things that I'm taking some risks doing.



I get to design the whole course for the year of what I'm going to do in my classroom myself. I mean people know I've got a body of knowledge that I'm an expert at.



A public school teacher added:

He [principal] really relies on the department chairs . . .and as a department chair, I rely on what the teachers in my department want. It's a lot better way of communication and they feel like they have input; I feel like I've got input.




Another public school teacher shared:


All the principals that I have had have trusted me as a professional to handle my professional work the way I see fit. I have never had anyone tell me specifically what to do.

Ignore selected rules and regulations.


Despite what might be construed as constraints imposed by the larger bureaucracy of state departments of education on public schools or large district level administrations, public school teachers frequently maintain autonomy. They take control by ignoring, working around supposed constraints, or using what Sedlak and others (1986) refer to as "passive circumvention" (p.120). Using such methods, teachers are able to experience freedom in a bureaucracy that is unable to monitor actions or provide consequences for offenders. Kozol (1981) found that "imaginative teachers . . . have used their ingenuity and skill in order to arrive at a way out [of following mandates]" (p. 51). Indeed federal, state, and district regulations may operate in such a way as to limit the range of possibilities available to teachers; but, as Ball (1987) noted, "They certainly do not exercise absolute control within that range" (p. 247). A public school department chair stated:

His [district administrator's] proposal was to decrease failure rates by changing the syllabus, by changing what we do. Of course, this is one we would love to mount the barricades for, and I side-stepped it at this school . . . by finding a creative way to enhance student performance in a real sense. . . . something called an Algebra Homework Initiative. . . . It reduced our failure rate by about 50%. It really side-stepped the issue of failure rate without diluting the curriculum to accomplish it. 


Another public school teacher related:


Individual teachers pretty well make up their mind as to which text they are going to use. The state has a list that they give out to districts. The department discusses the different kinds of textbook but individual teachers [make their own choices]. I teach from an entirely different textbook than my fellow teachers at [the other high schools in the district]. 


The same teacher went on to discuss the effects of a state mandated curriculum:

The coursework that you are to teach and the other requirements that you have to have by law are really minimal. . . . You have the standard things you go by . . . but for the most part, it is pretty much that you do your own thing. 

Even those teachers in private schools not subject to the same government mandated policies as apply to public schools, also find themselves in the position of ignoring or working around school policy to preserve control of their work life:

There are certainly plenty of rules and policies that I don't agree with, but very often I just ignore them. . . . in the faculty handbook, teachers are supposed to wear shoes, not sneakers. So I wear them [sneakers] and nobody says anything and that's that. 


One time they [school administrators] imposed an in-service program on us. We behaved so badly they have, since then, let us determine what goes into them. So I would say currently we have a great deal of control. 

I resist bitterly and strongly changing my teaching style . . . I resist and I do it either overtly by speaking out--expressing it; or, if that fails, one can very simply do it covertly in the classroom. Simply not do it. 


This last response is exactly what Ball (1987) referred to as "omissive action;" simply not to do what one is instructed to do (p. 268). The teacher stated the obvious fact that behind the


classroom door is where the greatest teacher autonomy exists, whether public or private.

Principals, heads of school, and other administrators also speak of feelings of autonomy. Although they may admit to sensing pressures from an administration or state regulators from above or parents, they perceive themselves as charting their own courses on behalf of the faculty and students to whom they acknowledge a responsibility. Both public and private school administrators who participated in this study were mature individuals. They have many years of educational administration experience behind them and understood how to work within their given system. They know how to make the system, public or private, work for them. In this sense, they were able to express a great deal of autonomy. A public school principal spoke about his feelings of autonomy:

There are always parents in asking for this, asking for that, wanting this I work personally on a scheme of a frame of reference that does not let or works at not letting people impact me. It's my own personal--my wellness program of "I'm not a yo-yo and I'm not a pinball machine." 

Heads of school firmly stated these convictions:

It is our responsibility to be service-oriented and to be responsive to our parents, but it is not our responsibility to place them in the position of calling the shots. . . . Our job is to please, our job is to serve, our job is not to allow parents to run the school. 

You can say I have a lot of authority and it would be a great deal on one hand. On the other hand, one could say the teachers have a great deal [of autonomy] determining what the curriculum is. 

There seems to be a conflict of ideas here. If teachers are given a great deal of autonomy on issues of curriculum, hiring of faculty, and other policy issues, the autonomy of the principal is eroded. Powell (1990) questioned the compatibility of the an empowered principal who is to function as a leader and site-based organization which empowers teachers. He suggested that one must forfeit some degree of autonomy for others to become empowered. Yet, as Apple and Teitelbaum (1986) found, within Weick's model of a loosely-coupled organization different types of professionals can retain control and authority without changing or being changed by the decisions of other professionals. Teachers in public and private schools conduct their individual classrooms as they see fit without reducing the autonomy of the principal.

Organizational Size and Autonomy

In the public school we have a bigger organization so there may be more levels of bureaucracy because there are more people involved.

Both public and private school teachers and their corresponding administrators describe a work life with few constraints on their autonomy. Common sense, however, dictates a focus on some obvious differences between the public and private institutions which create different reasons for a feeling of freedom. An obvious difference between the public and private secondary schools in this study is their size. Montevideo, Sunset, and Portales High Schools have student populations of 2750, 2400, and 980, respectively. The independent schools have populations of 275 (St. John's College Preparatory, grades 7 - 12), 104 (Verde Valley Country Day School, grades 9 - 12), and 169 (Crestwood Country Day School, grades 9 -12). Questions of size, who gets hired, the role of the principal and head of school will be discussed in terms of how public

and private school teachers acquire autonomy.

Some of the autonomy in curriculum matters reported by private school teachers derives not from the organizational structure but from the fact that private schools are small requiring fewer demands for cooperation and coordination among teachers teaching the same subjects. In this section the necessity of a standardized curriculum to maintain continuity in large districts, layers of authority required of large organizations, and response time will be discussed. These issues are matters of the size of an organization that distinguishes between a public and private high school.

Curriculum decisions in large schools require discussion among the department faculty. The math department at Sunset High School, for example, has a faculty of sixteen. Faculty representatives in each content area pursue curriculum discussions with their counterparts in the other high schools within the district as well as coordination with the middle schools which send students to the high schools. There is a close articulation of curriculum to preserve continuity in both the scope of a subject and its sequence. Teachers influence curriculum through participation on curriculum and textbook selection committees.

Contrary to Lortie's (1975) description of the isolation and separation of teachers into the eggcrate conception of teaching, teachers in modern high schools have centrally located conference and work areas. Each of the public schools in this study had such a meeting area available for each subject area department. It is in these areas that teachers held department meetings, met with students, conferred with parents, collaborated on instructional and student needs, and prepared for instruction. A number of interviews were conducted in rooms of this type. The small size of the private school precluded a convenient area for teacher collaboration. A combination workroom and faculty lounge was where teachers could meet and confer unless a classroom were available.

A new teacher to the public school is expected to build his or her course around a given district curriculum to maintain continuity among the schools of a large district. While the public school expects teachers to follow the district curriculum guides, they are just that-- guides. An established curriculum does not mean there is no room for innovation. The presence of a curriculum does not deny creativity. An assistant principal of a public school stated:

I think it came out when we had district-wide curriculum meetings, when the high schools were talking to middle schools and other high schools and we sat in rooms made up of representatives of the various schools. We talked about their relationship in the curriculum. I think there was discussion about the rigidity and that you shouldn't impose this upon teachers, but let teachers be more creative. I think that discussion was there and I think the realization was there that you also are tied in to some curriculum guide.




Teachers in public schools talked about how a district curriculum does not constrain autonomy:


On the district level we have curriculum that we must follow. . . . there is no specific pressure or anything like that, but in a district the size of [ours] you have to have some coordination and articulation. . . . we have committees that work out curriculum problems, et cetera and select textbooks . . . we are expected to abide by those guidelines. But I don't consider that to be something that has come from on high. That is something that is logical. You would want all the schools in one district to basically follow the same core curriculum, but the core curriculum is only meant to be about 60% of the curriculum. Forty per cent of the curriculum we can decide on.




In a private school, new teachers will generally define the curriculum predicated on their own content knowledge and interest. Because of smaller faculty numbers, there may be two or three other teachers with whom to coordinate curriculum; yet each teacher specializes in a particular facet of that content area. While each of the three independent schools in this study have either a middle school or middle and elementary school as part of its organization, students come from a variety of other schools. Consequently, coordination is a matter of interest only within the upper school. Any coordination of curriculum is accomplished within the institution, as described by this private school teacher:


I think we're all on the same track, which you might attribute to the fact that it is a small school. It is a college prep school. They're [students] all basically going through the same thing, and that certainly could be a strong positive as opposed to a larger school, particularly a large public school where you're serving many, many different peoples and one of those might be the college prep oriented students. 

It was during a discussion of size of the institution and teacher autonomy that the head of a private school stated:

I stress that not only can they have the pleasure of a great deal of autonomy here, they have the responsibility of it. No one will hand them a course outline and for some candidates that's very uncomfortable . . . They'll even say, "You mean no one will tell me what book to use and what materials to use?" 


Layers of bureaucracy appear to be necessary for the functioning of large districts and large high schools. A principal of a public school plainly states, "In the public school we have a bigger organization so there may be more levels of bureaucracy because there are more people involved". Despite the large size of the public schools, autonomy need not be compromised as confirmed by many of the public school teachers and principals in this study. It is because of size that the department chair functions in a role similar to the principal in terms of leadership and support. The department chair involves teachers in decision-making and communicates their position to the principal. The chair can also be another buffer to protect teachers from external pressures as will be discussed in the following section. It is size that requires teachers to work together, as these public school teachers reported:

The principal has picked department heads that are facilitators, that can help that department be cohesive and bring out the best in the people there. . . . he [chair] has an interest in everything and can build a rapport and make this a cohesive, dynamic group. No one is ever stuck with all the dribble courses. You know, we always laugh, "Into each life some freshmen must fall." 


I don't have a lot of department meetings because I'm always seeing them . . . I teach three classes and because it's such a large department, I can get out the rest of the day and be with them. I'll be in the classroom and I do most of the observations. I'm in the classroom even if I'm not observing, and that's when you really see what's going on anyway. 

It is generally acknowledged that size slows down the response time of problem solving or making changes in policy or curriculum. In a public school there often is a hierarchy to be accommodated: one or two levels of administration, perhaps the school board, committees, and others from whom response is necessary. A comparison between public and private school life

was made by a public school principal who had former experience as a head of school:

I get frustrated here sometimes in that between the conceptualization of an idea  and implementation it takes time; but the danger of the [private school setting] is that you are relying entirely on the head to make all those decisions. . . . It is not always so good . . . I'm not always right and sometimes I make mistakes. I think sometimes it's better if an idea is looked at carefully, if it's bounced off other people . . . but I don't feel in most cases that our classroom teacher performance is held back by that.

This same principal of a large public school states:

Things that hold back the classroom teacher performance probably deal with other factors to me. One deals with class size. . . . When I see the teacher too busy to go back and spend a few minutes with one, two or three kids, that's a problem. 


Principals Protecting Teacher Autonomy

I guess that's the one thing about my department head, my principal, my superintendent; they don't crumble when there's a cranky parent.

Although size of the institution plays a primary role in the perception of quality, the role it plays in the autonomy felt by public and private school teachers and administrators is more complex. The roles of the principal or head, superintendent, school board, and department chair; teachers' association; and the determination of who gets hired all contribute to the sources of autonomy that can be found in schools.

Contrary to the beliefs of some, administrators in both private and public schools often act more as buffers protecting teachers from pressures from outside groups than they act as sources of pressure themselves (Blase, 1991, p. 736). The image of the non-supportive administrator who saddles teachers with trivial tasks and burdensome paperwork (Boyer, 1983, p. 142) was not found among participants in this study. Nor was there evidence of the type of principal that talks at and delivers commands to teachers or staff meetings that concentrate on administrative details ignoring matters of educational policy as described by Boyer (1983, p. 224).

In the private school, the role of the heads is such that they act as both superintendent and principal. They determine the philosophy of the school and train the board as to their policy making and fiscal responsibilities. The head or superintendent, once hired by the board, is charged with seeing that the school board or board of trustees separates policy making function from that of the principal or head who sees to the daily management of the school. When heads or superintendents do their jobs well, the teachers feel no constraints from the school board or board of trustees. Teachers in both public and private schools generally agreed that the board "stay[s] out of the daily running of the school," as stated by a teacher in a private school. Another private school teacher opined:


There's a layer between me and them [board of trustees], and that layer is  [head] and [assistant head]. . . . You know, I might be doing some things which are driven by board decisions and I just don't know it.

The head of a private school added:


We don't have an education committee on the board. I view an education 

committee on the board as potentially dangerous because, in fact, there was one when I came and I let it die . . . that is an area where they can easily lose sight of their responsibility . . . when you have a formalized structure it can get dangerous, as opposed to an informal structure where just some parents are saying that would be great if we has this or that . . . once you formalize it, it can become a problem.


A public school teacher acknowledged how the principal worked on behalf of the teachers:

Our principal was spearheading, and he did get permission of the board to do it, even though it meant working the system a little bit. It is a pilot program, but it's not being called that because, if it were called that, he would not be able to do it in the middle of the year. 


Principals, heads of school, and department chairs are generally seen by both public and private school teachers as being supportive and protecting them from external pressures. Knowing these buffers exist allows teachers greater flexibility and freedom in their work life. Public school teachers commented on the support and protection their administrators provide:


I guess that's the one thing about my department head, my principal, my superintendent; they don't crumble when there's a cranky parent. All the lines of communication are followed in a correct way, and I'm helped along the way. They don't give in to that parent, parental pressure when it's just a cranky person out there not getting their way. They're very articulate about it. They're very professional, but the buck does stop here with the department head, with the principal and with the superintendent. 

A public school principal related this story:


I recently went through hell, two weeks ago, with a mother and a father over a boy who didn't graduate and the parents were insistent that I graduate him. [They went] all the way to the superintendent level, bringing the assistant superintendent out here because we were not being fair with that kid. The teacher was being very fair with that kid, very fair, and I supported the teacher and the kid did not graduate . . . They wanted the teacher to go back and change a grade and I'm not going to make a teacher do that. 

Teachers in independent schools described similar feelings of support:

I think [the head] screens and keeps us away from parents who would stop some program. He very much wants the teachers to have the feeling of freedom to teach whatever they want to. 

Basically what he said and I've heard him say publicly is that we aren't going to change our curriculum to suit an unhappy parent. We're willing to look at our curriculum and see if it's what we ought to be doing, but we're not going to be in the position of, you know, changing because a parent is unhappy about something. So we have a lot of support for that. 

A private school administrator responded to parent pressure to fire a teacher:

You positively get a lynch mob going in a situation because in the second week 


we had people calling us to fire this woman . . . we toned them all down and even some of the other parents would say to the rabid parents, "Isn't it fair to give her a little time to get adjusted?"

Teachers Associations Affect Autonomy

Our teachers association is very active and it affects my work life every day.

There is an acknowledged criticism of teachers associations in the realm of public opinion and among critics of public school systems. This study was conducted in a right-to-work state in which teacher unions are virtually non-existent, but teacher associations are predominant. These associations are seen as variously strong or weak depending on locale. Only one of the three public schools is in a district having a very strong teacher association. Most, if not all, of its teachers are members of the association and quite a few are active in its leadership. The other two schools are in districts that negotiate teachers' contracts with the association, although the faculty are much less active. Teachers in all three public schools, however, reflect on the efforts of the teachers' association to preserve their autonomy. If educational researchers (such as Chubb and Moe) promote autonomy as the key to freeing teacher creativity and innovation, they should applaud the efforts of the teachers association which acts to preserve the due process upon which teachers have come to depend for a sense of freedom in their work life. It is the teachers association that can require a district to seek advice from teachers, to protect teachers from pressures to change grades, and to provide good working conditions.


While the association does protect specified areas of teacher autonomy, it also institutes a management system based on the model of industrial unionization leaving many teachers feeling more powerless than before (Russo, 1990, p. 193). Despite the price they may pay, Firestone and Bader (1991) credit the teachers association for the extent to which teachers participate in program design within a school system (p.84). Both public school teachers and principals, who at times may feel constrained by the presence of the local teacher association, express positive reactions toward the association. One public school teacher explained:

He [former superintendent] was dictatorial. It's this way because he would sit back and smoke his pipe and he would smirk at you, and his aim was divide and conquer . . . I think that is when our association became the dynamic force it is because he was so bad and that was when the parents realized that there was a dynamic force out here called teachers, and their [teachers] main goal was good education, not paychecks. It was like we are your comrades, not your enemy. 

A public school teacher who formerly worked in a union state on the east coast speculated about why unions or teacher associations are important in protecting teacher autonomy:


. . . and there we actually had more autonomy and I feel that way because it was unionized. . . The only reason that I believe unions have ever appeared is because they had employers who are less than honorable and kind of impose their will . . . they were autocratic and we wouldn't have a need for an association or union if you didn't have individuals such as that.

A principal in the public schools said:

The administration seeks their [teacher association] opinion. We let them know  when decisions are being made that we think are going to have a significant impact on the faculty. . . We include them a lot, we treat them as equals, we value

their judgment and input, and I think there's a good working relationship.

The teachers association can interpose itself between the teachers and the principal and protect teachers from unfair or unjust decisions (Grant, 1988). One public school principal stated:


I have a reputation for dismissing teachers, that I'm Atilla the Hun, if you will,  about evaluation and I am. People will tell you, "You can't do that with a professional organization." My organization works beautifully with me because I dot the i's and cross the t's and I treat the person humanely as I'm doing it. Therefore, they never have grounds to come in and say you didn't follow procedure or you treated these people like dirt. As such, I usually end up with very strong support from them.

Autonomy or Like-Mindedness?


I find very well qualified people with good imaginations to create good curriculum, and I support them and give them all the encouragement in the world to be able to do that.


Much of the autonomy felt by teachers in each school derived from the fact that they were in agreement with their administrator. Principals and heads hire teachers who agree with their philosophy. It is only on occasion, with declining school enrollments and concurrent reduction in teaching force, that a public school principal is forced to accept a possibly unwanted teacher on transfer from another high school within the district. Otherwise, they feel great control in selecting new teachers.

In both the public and private schools, the principal or head screens the potential teacher candidates before seeking advice from the faculty. At times the teachers in the private schools in this study had to fight to participate in the hiring of new faculty. Perhaps heads are less willing to share the task because their jobs rest on the selection of teachers who must be perceived by parents as effective to maintain the school's very existence. A head of school relates:

. . . [I] find very well qualified people with good imaginations to create good curriculum, and I support them and give them all the encouragement in the world to be able to do that. 

Retaining control over the hiring of new faculty for both the public school principal and private school head ensures a faculty with a philosophy shared by the administrators. Teachers expressed their consternation over being left out of some aspects of the hiring process. These two private school teachers described their role in hiring colleagues thusly:

We're in the process of hiring a new teacher. It's been quite a frustrating experience. . . . I am not allowed to see recommendations, but I am the art department chairman. I have interviewed several candidates. I have looked over 85 resumes for this job, and I've yet to see one letter of recommendation. I don't know, I've never been told Apparently now the only person who sees them in this school is the headmaster, and one other person-- and I find that to be a little degrading. 

They began the process of hiring a new drama teacher, reading through resumes and inviting some [candidates] without ever letting me know as head of the fine arts department that they were considering this person. And you don't do that. You don't do it. Well, I went in and jumped up and down and raised holy hell 


and the response there was copious apologies giving me the resumes to look at, asking for my opinion.

Knowing that faculty view education through a similar set of beliefs, principals and heads can comfortably allocate greater autonomy. They can give support and show trust in teachers with the knowledge that teachers are "like-minded." Also, as long as a school, public or private, is perceived by the community and parent body as successful the principal or head is less likely to interfere with teacher freedom. Perhaps the issue of autonomy is derived from the principal or head and faculty acting in ways that have the approval of the parents. Knowing what parents want and sharing those expectations translates into autonomy for teachers. The support of parents adds, as well, to the principal or head's autonomy. Private school teachers talked about fitting in at their schools:


In my last school where I worked my department chair caused me to be fired. . . . If it matters, I'm much better [off] here than I was there. I mean I was a square peg in a round hole there and here, it's a much better fit.

I'm pretty much free as long as the head feels I'm effective at what I do.

A public school teacher reported:

We were rolling along at this school. This school was a great school, and it was  because of the teachers. We were heading in the right direction and so on, but the difference that I see is that he [principal] has come in and given us some direction, come in with some new ideas. The ideas we had before he has improved upon, given us freedom to do these things.

A head of school described his hiring practice:

I'm the one that will usually go through all the applications, bring it down to  about ten, call them in, interview these different people, then I make the final three selections. Then I'll bring in at that point the department head or a couple of other teachers You know, it's generally my decision almost alone.

Public school principals reported having considerable freedom in selecting teachers. If a reduction in force is in effect in a school district due to declining enrollment, principals are required to accept transferring teachers. One principal explained that of his current faculty of 125, only about five were not of his choice. Another principal explained how the school organization is becoming increasingly more site-based. Department teams screen, interview, and hire new teachers for the department. The principal may be part of the team. Sharing the hiring process removes some autonomy from the principal, yet he has trust in the faculty to make good choices. Perhaps if there was a lack of trust, the process would be different.

Teacher Autonomy in Public and Private Schools Compared

"I think we have fully as much freedom in public school as they have in the private school."

The teachers who participated in this study view themselves as active participants in making many of the decisions that affect their work life. They describe many opportunities to participate in and influence policy decisions. They talk about having control over what happens

in the classroom even if they retain control by ignoring or working around bureaucratic constraints. One public school teacher described what many of his colleagues also believed: "Bureaucracies within our district are . . . as far as influencing what happens to me as a teacher, almost nonexistent".

Private school teachers also report having a great deal of freedom in the same areas, but attribute it to a freedom from state and federal constraints: "Being an independent school, we aren't bound by the required [state] curriculum I don't feel shaped by the federal government. . . . I feel very fortunate that I sense control in an inordinate amount of things here". Principals also talk about taking control and responsibility for their work lives. A public school principal reflects the views of his colleagues: "I think we have fully as much freedom in public school as they have in the private school". Heads of private school view their position as one permitting immense freedom and having the ability to define the roles of others who work within the institution: "It's always up to the headmaster to help educate people when they are overstepping their bounds." Another head reflects: "We have the autonomy to change a program entirely if we want to"

Teacher and Principal Autonomy, As They Tell It

Teachers and administrators in public and private high schools in this study feel that they experience a great deal of freedom in their work life. Equally evident is the fact that none can claim unrestrained autonomy.

Whether public or private, teachers' explanations for feelings of autonomy are similar. Participation in decision-making gives them a sense of influencing school policy. When they are encouraged and supported by the administration, teachers feel free to take risks in teaching and they adopt creative and innovative strategies (Blase, 1988; McNeil, 1986). Often when externally imposed rules, regulations, or mandates infringe on this freedom, experienced teachers and administrators ignore them or work around these obstacles.

Teachers and principals in public and private high schools also described three features of school organization that enhance and protect autonomy: (1) the size of the organization, (2) administrators acting as buffers, and (3) the teachers association. First, teachers and principals in large public schools find that factors related to the size of the organization help to protect and maintain autonomy. It is acknowledged that there is a vast difference in size of organization between public and private institutions. Contrary to the popular belief that layers of bureaucracy act as obstacles to autonomy, the organizational structure of large schools enhances autonomy by clarifying roles so that public school teachers are faced with less ambiguity. Within the role and within the classroom, teachers described a sense of freedom. Public school teachers are expected to work within the curriculum guidelines of the district and state, but are given broad latitude within which to innovate and be creative. Size also requires some standardization to accommodate articulation of curriculum content from middle schools to high school and between high schools of the same district. Private school teachers, on the other hand, may enjoy even greater freedom in that they often write their own curriculum. Although two or three private school teachers of the same subject may share ideas, there is little need for cooperation since it is unlikely any two of them teach the same course to the same grade level student. If one could imagine a private secondary school of two to three thousand students, it would likely function in much the same way as an upper middle-class public school with regard to administrator and teacher autonomy.

Second, autonomy is protected and maintained as principals and heads of school act as buffers to protect teachers from external influences. In public schools, the assistant principal and department chairs form additional layers that protect teacher freedom. Even the public school board can act to support teacher autonomy in the classroom. Heads of school do the same. All of

these groups expressed, orally or in writing, a philosophy of management that shields teachers from external pressures. The board of trustees of a private school does not share this perspective since they are kept away from the daily business of running the school. Rather, the function of a private school board is to establish or approve policy and to raise funds, both roles lying far from the classroom door.

Third, public school teachers are given some guarantee of protection of working conditions by the teachers association. They cannot be subject to unjust firing. The association protects teachers in ways that leave them fearless in the face of some external pressures. For example, public school teachers cannot be pressured by parents or administrators to change a student's grade, the number of student contacts (number of students per class) is limited, and teaching responsibilities are often specifically delineated. The teachers association also negotiated mandatory teacher participation in decision making through committee work. Private school teachers have no similar protections though they are subject to few of the public teachers' concerns because of the size of the organization and the heterogeneity of the student body.

Findings: Constraints on Teacher and Principal Autonomy

Any attempt to clarify and elaborate the concept of autonomy would not be complete without an investigation of those pressures that act to constrain autonomy. Despite the strong sense of autonomy reported by those interviewed, they also acknowledged areas that compromise their autonomy: pressures exerted by parents of college-bound students, a context of laws that apply to both public and private institutions, financial constraints, and maintenance of an atmosphere which is responsive to parents. Public and private school teachers and administrators are often subject to similar, if not identical, constraints.

College Admissions Pressures

When you sign on for an AP, you're largely signing on to mandated curriculum.

Teacher autonomy in both public and private secondary schools is sharply compromised by the demands of parents wishing that their children gain admission to prestigious colleges. It is not uncommon in private schools to hear of parents and alumni wholly preoccupied with admittance rates to colleges (Lightfoot, 1983, p. 295). In its marketing materials, each private school in this study included a lengthy list of prestigious colleges to which their graduates have gained admission. The principal of each public school boasted a high graduation rate with many graduates being accepted at the best colleges. Each also expressed pride at offering a wide range of advanced placement (AP) courses and producing a number of National Merit Scholars. Parents in both the public school and private school communities are acknowledged by the faculty of each school to be highly educated, professional, and generally to be upper middle to upper socioeconomic in social class. It can be presumed that one of the reasons parents place a child in a college preparatory independent school or locating the family in a particular school district where the school has an reputation for academic excellence is the strong desire for the child to be accepted by a prestigious college. These parents are often actively involved in school activities or participate on committees. The demands of these parents are made known to administrators and teachers through direct contact or participation on school committees. Administrators may be more intrusive in this arena because the stakes are highest where parents are outspoken. Private school teachers described parent pressures:

Occasionally you see parent pressures. Sometimes we have parents that are pretty pushy with their kids . . . we're dealing with some parents who are, you



know, where both the parents are professional people and very busy and they essentially think that once they pay their tuition that you're going to take over dealing entirely with the student's education.

Parents wanted that course [AP calculus] . . . if there are enough [parent] voices behind there, it would have an effect [in making these curriculum changes].



In college counseling, parents play a tremendous role, and they can put incredible pressure on me as a college counselor. "Johnny has got to get into college. I want you to do everything you can to get him in that school." And often people like that, and it doesn't mean just Harvard it can be Westminster College, will try to wield power over you. Again, it's [not] that you have to do this work, but, "I'm telling you how to do it," undermining in a sense maybe your professionalism, your training, your experience and expertise.



This year AP class had to be geared to college expectations. I really had to adhere to what would be tested. In some ways, [I] lost some of my freedom in that class because I had to focus on college expectations.

Private school heads and administrators similarly described parent pressures:

Parents who send their children to private schools occasionally behave as if they owned the faculty, as if their amount of tuition were paying the faculty, each faculty member's entire salary.

. . . if it [what a teacher is doing] also achieves all of our other goals for college preparation, things that we are trying to be sure we are doing for kids, we're able to allow more autonomy and we're able to try to work with parents in terms of informing them in a more cohesive way.

Pressure exerted by parents of college-bound students are felt and reported by public school teachers as well. Textbooks and curriculum choices are seen as examples of teacher responses to these pressures:

I've been department chair now, it's been about seven or eight years. . . [principals] override specific decisions about placement into honors courses. . . . placement is not supposed to be determined by parents or principals, it's supposed to be based on certain criteria . . . I should say at least once a year, principals override those decisions because of parental pressure.




Our particular community here around [school] is very achievement-oriented most of the time, so there's a lot of pressure for kids to get good grades, and getting a B for a lot of students is a disaster. . . . I think there's pressure there to offer more AP courses because more and more parents are allowing their students to take advanced placement and try to get college credit before they get out of high school.




Most of our kids talk college. We do have an academic program that is very heavy in that regard . . . more advanced placement classes being taught . . . a number of A level classes that would be appropriate for a kid going to a four-year or to a highly selective school; and we put a lot of emphasis on that, because the public is asking us to.



The public school principals in this study are very supportive of advanced placement courses and programs geared to the academically talented or college-oriented student. One principal boasted:


We have the largest advanced placement program in the stateWhen we began to excel in advanced placement and did a lot of publicity, [the superintendent] mandated that all the high schools in [the district] would have advanced placement programs. . . . We're about the top three percent in the United States in advanced placement participation and success.. . . we've had a remarkable run. I've had great influence that way. 

A private school administrator added,

". . . when you sign on for an AP, you're largely signing on to a mandated curriculum." 

College requirements and the College Board which produce the advanced placement exams influence public and private high schools to an equal degree. Parents of college-bound students in both public and private schools expect to have such courses available to their children. Teachers of core subjects, therefore, tend to look to these requirements when selecting textbooks and planning curriculum. All six high schools in this study contain college bound student populations. Preparing those students for college is a high expectation of parents and, consequently, a priority for the schools.


Since there is so much emphasis and concern placed on advanced classes in the core curriculum areas, it is interesting to look at how the teachers of non-college preparatory courses view their work life. Teachers in both public and private schools experience greater autonomy when their subject is not a college preparatory course.


I may have more freedom than teachers in some academic areas . . . there is no set of standards and curriculum in the arts that high school students are expected to have by the time they finish high school. Therefore, I don't have anyone breathing down my neck to say, "You aren't doing this and this standardized test requires that you do that." So the subject area allows for considerably more freedom. 

Threat of Litigation


We all feel the influence of lawsuits and insurance demands.

Autonomy of both private and public teachers is limited to an equal degree by a system of laws. Laws that have to do with civil rights, health, and safety are binding on the private institution as well as the public. These laws and the possibility of legal action compromise autonomy. Teachers have forgone some of their freedom knowing that lawsuits have only multiplied in recent years (Grant, 1988, p. 141). Heads of school explained how they are subject to the same constraints placed on their public counterparts:

Any time that regulations come down through the federal government, it's pervasive in terms of health reasons, you know, it's pervasive throughout our society. We obviously have to adhere to those things. . . . We have to adhere to, of course, general health standards that exist in [the county] and the state. We test our water on a regular basis . . . we adhere to fire regulations; we have our fire drills once a month. 

We are subject to virtually all federal laws regarding discrimination. We publish a disclaimer in all of our publications stating that [the school] does not discriminate on the basis of race, creed, color, et cetera. A violation of that would and should mean that we, as an institution, should be closed or lose our non-profit status. 


The teachers, principals, and heads of school were very aware of the threats of a litigious society and make conscious efforts to avoid such difficulties. Fear of lawsuits constrains public and private school decisions alike. Private school teachers reported how the fear of lawsuits has altered their work life:

We all feel the influence of law suits and insurance demands than we used to . . . It's that level of influence. I don't feel quite as free to do some things just because people sue each other these days. 

One head of school described how he felt somewhat more secure in a small, private school setting than he would anticipate in a large, public school when it came to thoughts of being sued:

Now it's not that we can't get sued as well [as public schools], but at a smaller institution you're more family-oriented. Things are based on more of a civil way of handling things, and you try to figure out how you're going to manage the problem other than just automatically jumping to think you're going to get sued.

External forces mandate and regulate schools and teachers so as to "provide adequate instruction to all their students, to equalize access to knowledge" (Sedlak et al., 1986, p.118). Ball (1987) reported, "The more diverse the school community, the more difficult it will be for any school to respond to all expectations" (p. 251). Even in public schools with little diversity, these constraints are experienced. The fear of litigation was felt by public school teachers and principals to the same degree as their private school counterparts:

At the beginning of the year, we had a parent who came to us with an order from her attorney that they were going to proceed with bringing action against the district if, in fact, we did not change a grade that her son received because he was diagnosed late in the year as having attention deficit disorder and she felt that not every teacher did make adjustments in the teaching procedures to reach that child we met with the teachers a number of times and finally the teachers, out of a sense of inadequacy and frustration, felt that they did not want to go through a legal situation, so they changed the grades in some cases. 


Financial Pressures

. . . we are becoming more like the private school, where the willingness to fund the institution determines its success


Yet another constraint placed upon both public and private schools is finances. Private and public schools are plagued to an equal degree by the shrinking value of the dollar and an unstable economy. The tax base upon which school funding rests is dwindling while the number of families who can afford a private education is stable, at best; certainly the numbers are not rising. The private school is also necessarily dependent on its fund-raising abilities; tuition alone does not cover the cost of educating each student. A head of school described the private school's quest for financing:

Our [private school] burden is raising money. The tuition pays for maybe 80 percent of what we do and the other 20 percent we have to raise one way or the other; through fees or through fundraising or whatever . . . they [public schools] don't have that same burden, although they have to go through elections and bonds and trying to get the public vote.


A public school principal dispelled the myth that public and private efforts to acquire funds are so different:


We are attempting to work more closely with the community, with business and industry partnerships, things like that which is more like fundraising. It's more like what's being done in the private schools In that way we are becoming more like the private school, where the willingness to fund the institution determines its success. 

Decisions on class size, the ability to offer additional classes and to purchase books and equipment are all dependent on the financial support available to each school. Some of these decisions are made by school boards and Board of Trustees, others are made by the principals, superintendents, or heads of school as they prepare their budget requests. The results affect the autonomy and work life of the private school teacher and the public school teachers in vastly similar ways. Frustrations in the private institutions were heard:

Many constraints that we have are bottom-line dollar kind of restraints. . . . That doesn't mean we sell out to the dollar; it does mean, sometimes, that we have to give in or buy in where we would prefer not to. . . . because of the monetary factors alone, because of fewer people doing more different jobs, some of the autonomy is not quite as great as one would like. 

And from the public schools came teacher and principal comments:

The school board, two years ago, did away with a cap that we had on English class enrollment. We wanted to limit it to 125 students a day or 25 in a class and we'd had that cap for eight or ten years and because of budget constraints, they did away with that two years ago and now our classes are 30, in the 30s, up to 30, over 30. That's had a great deal of effect on us. 

Well, constraints, in terms of the amount of staff that we have, money becomes the bottom-line issue. If we could have five more teachers, we could have more and smaller classes. 

Parental Expectations and Demands

I mean, one call [from a parent] in a district as large as this means a lot and that's just the attitude of this district.

Proponents of school choice often describe private schools as small businesses that must be responsive to clients, assumed to be the parents, in order to survive. Indeed, teachers and administrators in the private schools who participated in this study affirmed the expected and incorporated the language of business:

You know, private schools are small businesses essentially, and you have to do 

business. The customers are the parents, but give them what they want, not as far as grades; don't give them the grades they want for their kids, but what the heck, if they want more feedback, they've got it.

In a private school . . . you've got people paying \$6500 a year to send their kids to school. You tend to appease parents a lot more than would ever happen in a public school. . . . a situation where perhaps I would have come down pretty hard on the situation . . . and if caught in that position, well, what do you do? You have to consider where your bread and butter is coming from.

. . . you've got to be smart about it; you have to know how to market your school properly. You have to keep your customers satisfied . . . and you have to have good communications. So those are things one has to consider and therefore, parents are a very important aspect of the school.

Contrary to the myth that has been perpetuated by some, the existence of a bureaucracy does not necessarily imply insensitivity to the desires of parents. Indeed, there appears to be no lack of sensitivity to parents among public school teachers who report frequent and important contacts with parents, no more or less than occurs in private schools. Both teachers and administrators understand the expectations of the parents and make considerable effort to be responsive to those expectations. Some public school teachers acknowledged that limits to their autonomy are frequently set by community standards. If teachers are of like mind with the parents in the school community, they have a greater sense of freedom. If they do not, they feel constrained:

I've changed the way I react to a negative parent. I think I tended to put them on the defense too much, and I'm like, well, "What is it that you want from me at this point? What is it that I can do to make your child be the best they can be?" I've learned that from [department chair]. . . . he makes them a member of the team rather than a member of the enemy.



The assistant principal of a public school explained the kind of response to parents mandated by the district:

Parents' calls mean a great deal. We have a procedure here that if they're not satisfied with my answer, they can go to [the principal] who is very, very responsive and receptive to parents and if they're not satisfied there, they can go to the assistant superintendent who, again, will direct-- call back to the school and say, "Remedy the situation. Do something about it." Sometimes we have to tell parents things they don't want to hear, but I do think we go out of our way to accommodate parents. . . the reason we do that is not for fear they're going to drop out of school because we don't think that's going to happen, but I think it's because of an attitude in this district that says that parent calls are very, very important. . . I think that the tone that the school board even sets. They have these open microphones at every board meeting . . . the superintendent will receive a call, for example, and she will personally call the school and ask what the situation is. I mean, one call in a district as large as this means a lot and that's just the attitude of this district.



Teacher and Principal Constraints, As They Describe Them

Private and public schools are subject to many of the same constraints. Constraints appeared in the form of requirements imposed by college admissions and the College Board, financial pressures, the threat of litigation, and parent demands.

College admissions requirements force prospective students to take specified courses. The College Board, through advanced placement testing, delineates a specified curriculum in specialized subject areas so that students taking the test will be successful. Passing the test confirms that the student has fulfilled the curriculum equivalent to an entry-level college course. The same admissions requirements and the same advanced placement tests apply to all secondary schools regardless of their organization or distinction as public or private. Teachers and administrators alike pay a great deal of attention to this area because both parents who send children to college preparatory independent schools and parents of college-bound public school students expect their children to take the courses required by the better colleges. The stakes, therefore, are highest in this area. Little constraint, however, is felt by teachers, whether public or private, of non-college preparatory courses. Parents, and therefore administrators, pay little attention to these courses, thus permitting these teachers considerable freedom.

Financial constraints limit options available to any type of school and its teachers. In both the public and private schools, finances often determine class loads and class size. The availability of many instructional resources is largely determined by available funds. Private schools spend considerable time and effort soliciting additional funds for these purposes. Indeed, the primary function of the board of a private school is one of raising funds and, for the schools in this study, establishing an endowment fund. The public schools rely on support from the community at large when requesting additional funds through bond elections.

The threat of litigation affects public and private schools equally. Civil laws and laws regarding the health, safety, and welfare of students and employees do not differentiate between public and private institutions. Since schools of any organizational structure are equally susceptible to litigation based on the same set of laws, all schools experience this constraint to the same degree. It is acknowledged, however, that some laws pertain to public schools and exempt private schools since private schools are able to avoid students with special needs. Public schools serve the needs of all students and are obliged to provide equitable services. Additional federal and state mandates require public schools to function in a bureaucracy at least large enough to handle their administration (Boyer, 1983, p. 226).

Chubb and Moe (1990) painted a picture of public school educators oblivious to the opinions and wishes of parents, tending a bureaucratic institution that has lost touch with its clients. These were not the educators who spoke of the pressures they felt to meet parents' expectations. There is no lack of concern for the expectations of parents of children who attend public schools. Parents of college-bound students are often highly educated professionals who are vocal in making demands on the schools and teachers. Grant (1988) reported that "in the aggregate parents as a whole may now be more educated relative to teachers and thus are likely to be more critical of teacher performance" (p. 149). Whether public or private, teachers and principals reported frequent contact with parents, making parents feel part of the team or family, and sharing the same expectations as parents for the children. In the public schools, that response at times included a response from the school board. Parents in large public school districts use the bureaucratic layers as alternative audiences to make their voices heard.

Autonomy in Public and Private Schools

The feelings expressed by all of the participants in this study, both private and public, testify to a high degree of autonomy. The responses to interview and survey questions alike clearly dispel the myth that autonomy is generally high in private schools and generally low in public schools (Chubb & Moe, 1990, p. 183). Autonomy is generally high in both types of school studied here. Issues that emerged in the course of this study from teacher and administrator descriptions of their autonomy are: conflicting and contradictory demands, shared beliefs, layers of protection, a system of laws, funding constraints, and matters of size of the institution. These issues challenge oversimplified assertions that differences of any significance exist between the perception of autonomy held by professionals in public or private high schools.

Before embarking on a detailed examination of the concept of educator autonomy, it is well to emphasize the particular characteristics of the sites examined here and how that characteristic may shape what has been learned. The educators who consented to be interviewed practice in upper-middle class college preparatory public and independent, non-public secondary schools. One might not expect to learn the same things about autonomy in religious affiliated private schools, though it is unclear whether the autonomy would be expected to be greater or less. One must also be cautioned about extrapolating the insights garnered from this research to other levels of school, such as elementary.

The schools examined here enjoy success in all conventional senses of the term. This favorable environment may shape the way the political system treats educators and how educators respond in return. One might have reason not to expect the same organizational effect obtaining in schools under the duress of poverty and social dislocation. The following themes that emerged from this research should be viewed with these cautions in mind.

Conflicting and Contradictory Demands

Contrary to the popular myth of public school bureaucratic insulation and insensitivity, both the public and private high schools in this study showed a sensitivity and prompt response to parent concerns. Parents are listened to and given serious consideration. Parent and teacher communication are encouraged in both the public and private high schools. Parents have access to the administration as well as teachers. In the larger system of the public schools, parents receive additional attention from the superintendent and school board. In all cases, board meetings are open to parents with one public system, in particular, scheduling an "open mike" segment prior to handling business on the agenda. Another public school conducted a survey of parent expectations that determined the goals of the school.

Being responsive to parents has the potential, however, of constraining the very autonomy that some deem a requirement for creative and innovative teaching. The principal or head of school prevents responsiveness to parents from becoming a constraint on teacher innovation by virtue of a strong belief about how students are best served. The criterion which defines the degree of autonomy granted is based on the perceived success of the school and its students. But underlying the freedom of teachers and principals is a clear understanding of what parents and the community expect of the schools. If parents perceive the school to be doing what they say they are doing, public or private school teachers and administrators experienced greater freedom and fewer external pressures.

Being responsive to parents prompted an assistant head of a private school to claim they must work "on the conservative side." It is what led one public school teacher to admit, despite opportunities to have a voice in decisions that affect her work life, that she felt little freedom and great frustration knowing those decisions must be responsive to a conservative parent body. This unspoken tension between autonomy and obligation requires teachers and administrators in both

public and private schools to "negotiate competing demands" (Hawthorne, 1988, p. 231). Hawthorne's study found this negotiation process for the teachers she studied to be as individual as the negotiators (p. 231). In this study the manner in which teachers balance the demands of parents, administrators, or others who attempt to influence them with their own need for control was, similarly, an individual matter. Some chose to ignore certain rules or policies which they deemed insignificant, others relied on the support of their principal, head, or department chair.

Both public and private school teachers and their administration demonstrated a responsiveness to parents by focusing on the needs of college-bound students. A college preparatory independent school and public high school housing a student body for whom college admission is a high priority are forced to meet the requirements of those colleges and the college advanced placement program. The curriculum of AP courses offered in both the public and private high schools are extensively defined by the College Board, which administers the exams students take to earn college credit. The advantage of size of the public institutions is that they can often offer a larger number of AP courses. Their size necessitates the offering of a number of the same courses to meet the demands of those students who qualify. Teachers of non-college preparatory courses describe the greatest degree of autonomy in curriculum decisions and all areas of teaching. An acknowledged lack of parent interest gives them this heightened sense of freedom.

Parents of college-bound students are vocal in the public schools. The voice of parents of the college-bound student is heard and heeded. The demands and pressures placed on the school are felt to an equal degree in the private schools. Both types of schools must balance autonomy and obligation to parents.

The private school response must include a consideration of consequences to the institution. If parents are not satisfied, the funds upon which the school depends can be withdrawn. The existence of the private school depends on satisfying the parent community. Even within the college preparatory private school, however, there exists a range of demands to which the head must respond. Those who imagine that private schools are very responsive to "customer" (or parent) demands or needs overlook one significant fact about American education: even small, homogeneous publics make conflicting and often contradictory demands. How is the school supposed to accommodate these wishes when one faction calls for greater emphasis on algebra and another calls for less? All three of the private schools in this study are small, with a constituency composed of middle-class to high income families and a desire for the kind of academic program which will enhance college admission. Even within this situation, heads of these schools found themselves taking a stand. Could they really afford to finance an advanced calculus program despite the demands of a few parents? Should a teacher whose personality was not tolerated by some parents be fired?

It is because of conflicting parent demands within the small private school setting that a head of school declared, " It is our responsibility to be service-oriented and to be responsive to our parents, but it is not our responsibility to place them in the position of calling the shots." Not every parent can get his or her way. The head must take a stand to protect the autonomy of the teacher. Although the public schools in this study were selected because they, too, focused on academic preparation for college, they were likewise not able to escape contradictory demands of parents. One principal stated, " . . .they [parents] impact me on a daily basis, but they don't drive me."

Principals in public schools are not necessarily threatened by withdrawal of a student, but they are under pressure by the community at large to respond to the needs of the students and demands of their parents. The bureaucracy works to the parents' benefit. If satisfactory recourse is not forthcoming from a teacher or principal, parents may voice their concerns to a superintendent or school board which has been elected to represent them. Educated and politically active parents know how to get things done despite a large bureaucracy. In turn, these layers of administration

can preserve teacher and principal autonomy by providing support or acting as a buffer.

Shared Beliefs

Teachers in independent schools talked about the freedom they have to design their own curricula, utilize any variety of teaching methods, and select their own textbooks. Coordination among faculty within a department or between a lower and upper school is often informal if it occurs at all. They share basic educational beliefs. These teachers were, for all practical purposes, hand-picked by the head for just that reason. The head of an independent school can comfortably allocate substantial portions of autonomy to these teachers.

Principals in public schools also report considerable freedom in selection of faculty. They, too, choose teachers who share the same philosophy and an understanding of the expectations of the parents. It is with confidence, they can trust teachers to make appropriate decisions and provide the autonomy that teachers experienced. As long as the school runs smoothly, there is little need to question teacher autonomy. Indeed, the goal of site-based management within individuals schools assumes teachers will make the kind of decisions that support parent expectations and the goals of the school. In site-based schools teams of same subject teachers hire new faculty. There are, admittedly, times when principal freedom to select teachers is curtailed. This occurs when the relocation of a teacher from another high school within a district is due to a reduction in student population, therefore, a reduction in faculty. In this case, a principal would be required to take a particular teacher.

The concept of shared beliefs of teachers and principals, schools and the community is the issue from which the perception of autonomy stems. In some sense, the autonomy that teachers, whether public or private, feel in relation to their principals is like the proverbial equity allocated to both beggars and rich men:

The law in its majestic equality, forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets, and to steal bread. (Anatole France, *Le Lys Rouge*)

What sort of freedom is it if it is never tested by conflict? When a principal selects teachers who generally agree with the principal's beliefs and values, there will be few conflicts and few instances when the teachers have to be told what to do by the principal. Some would say, then, that the principal has not, in fact, granted autonomy to the teachers, or that the limits of their autonomy are untested. They seldom chose to do that which would be overturned by their principal.

Much of the autonomy that teachers feel may be of this type. If so, teachers might be better described as "like-minded" with their superiors rather than autonomous in relation to them. In either case, however, the image created by this view of like-minded or autonomous teachers is quite different from the image drawn by some in which teachers are portrayed as deadened and oppressed by a hierarchical bureaucracy. The challenge of making schools creative, interesting and productive environments for students may be more a matter of stimulating teachers and principals who have fallen into complacency than to free them from some ill-conceived notion of an repressive and domineering bureaucracy. It is important to recognize, however, that the above situation could be quite different in elementary schools or in secondary schools suffering the effects of under-investment and the pressures exerted by special social problems.

Layers of Protection

Unlike the traditional perception of public high school bureaucracy, the hierarchy that

exists is built out of a necessity to manage large numbers of people and a complex institution. The teachers have a number of layers to protect them from external influences. The department head is one line of defense and a person who speaks on behalf of the faculty of that department. The principal and assistant principal also protect teacher autonomy. Equally strong is the sense of control teachers feel because of the security that the teachers' association provides. The superintendent can also be a buffer between the principal and teachers and the school board. The trust that principals and department chairs expressed in their faculty is not unlike that described by the heads of school in this study. Acting as a buffer, however, does not mean to ignore the wishes of the parents.

While public and private school teachers have the advantage of protection from administrators who demonstrate support in their professionalism, public school teachers have access to an additional entity. Membership in teachers associations provides another layer of protection for private school teachers. Those who claim that teacher autonomy is a requisite of the best education should applaud the teachers associations for giving teachers the kind of security they need to feel truly autonomous. This protection, in many cases, gives teachers the sense of control they need to try out innovative or creative ideas. Knowledgeable principals and teachers in public schools are able to use the teachers association to preserve their autonomy.

A System of Laws

Freedom in both public and private high schools is constrained to an equal degree by a system of laws. These laws protect the health and safety of the inhabitants of both types of school. All schools have fire drills and public safety requirements. Health issues are promptly dealt with by both public and private institutions. Worker rights are addressed in the private schools by the same type of union that protects workers in any institution. Civil laws protect the basic rights of teachers and students. The threat of lawsuits has an equal effect on both public and private schools and influences many decisions made by teachers and administrators.

Funding Constraints

A lack of an appropriate level of funding is yet another constraint on teachers, principals, and heads of school alike. Private schools cannot offer the range of courses offered in the public schools because the small numbers of students enrolled in each class will not support the cost of an additional teacher. Decisions constrained by finances result in large class size in the public school. The availability of certain instructional materials, such as computers, is often determined by finances rather than choice. Financial constraints put limits on the autonomy of both public and private schools.

A Matter of Size

The three private schools in this study are small in student population, faculty, and facility. The public schools by comparison are larger in each category and require a degree of bureaucracy to manage the sheer size. The size also necessitates articulation of curriculum among grades and a means for frequent communication among groups of teachers. Teachers in the public schools are encouraged to participate individually or through their representatives in policy making. Bureaucracy may make greater demands of teachers' time to participate in decisions that affect them. But it is apparent that it does not impinge on teacher freedom over those decisions that matter most to them--the decisions that affect what occurs in the classroom.

Because of the size of the public institution, teachers rely more on their colleagues and

department chair both for advice on decisions that affect them and for protection from external influences. They have opportunities for participation in decision-making through committee work, access to department chairs, and access to the principal. Teachers in private schools express autonomy in similar ways. They have less of a need for a department chair to be a spokesperson merely because of the proximity of the head. The size of an organization cannot be ignored; however, but neither can it be called a determinant of teacher autonomy.

Little of the quality of what occurs in the classroom can be defined by the size of the institution. There is a general belief that private schools equate with academic excellence. The perception of academic excellence in private schools may stem from a belief that small schools are less complex and small classes necessarily produce a quality education. Large public schools do not offer small classes, but they can offer college preparatory courses and advanced placement classes. What occurs within each classroom is under the control of individual teachers whether public or private, as the teachers in this study have described.

When Chubb and Moe described "ineffective" and "effective" schools, they were essentially referring to public and private schools, respectively. Their critique of the organizational structure of each does not involve a comparison of organizational units of the same size or of like populations between the two types of schools. As reported by Hogan (1992b), since "public and private schools are very different kinds of schools that recruit different populations, pursue different objectives and tasks, and develop different tools to achieve them, comparing them is like comparing apples and oranges" (p. 93).

Conclusion: The Myth of the Market

The findings of this research challenge directly the assertions made in one of the most visible research documents on the question of school choice, viz., Chubb and Moe's *Politics, Markets and America's Schools*. (1990). They acquired their data from the High School and Beyond Survey (Moles, 1988) and performed a secondary analysis of this government survey to collect information on effective schooling. Several critics argued that there were weaknesses in their analyses and their interpretation: Witte (1992), Hogan (1992a, 1992b), Goldstein (1992), and Glass & Matthews (1991). Some said that they were unable in their book and in their analysis to determine whether it was effective schools that were granting autonomy to their teachers and administrators or whether autonomous teachers and administrators were producing more effective schooling (Glass & Matthews, 1991). In other words, the direction of the influence may be reversed; that it may be the perception of a successful school (advanced placement courses, National Merit scholars, high graduation rate, admission to elite colleges) that confers autonomy to teachers and administrators. In addition, even though in their book, they tried to argue that private schools would necessarily grant more autonomy to teachers and administrators than public schools, Chubb and Moe never once analyzed or reported data from the High School and Beyond Survey on that question. In fact, they presented no data whatsoever from private schools, claiming that the data base in the survey was inadequate for making any generalizations. However, that did not stop them from making claims about the superiority of private schools (and, hence, the superiority of choice as a policy) because they assumed private schools grant more autonomy and demonstrate more responsiveness to parents and market pressures than public schools. Among the assertions made by Chubb and Moe, three are directly refuted by the findings of this research study: markets, bureaucracy, and the role of teachers unions or associations.

On Markets

Chubb and Moe sought to perpetuate the myth that only private sector schools experience

the goading of the market- place. They wrote:

Under a system of democratic control, the public schools are governed by an enormous, far-flung constituency in which the interests of parents and students carry no special status or weight. When the markets prevail, parents and students are thrust onto center stage, along with the owners and staff of schools; most of the rest of society plays a distinctly secondary role, limited for the most part to setting the framework within which educational choices get made (p. 35).

If responding to market pressures means responding to parent demands, the public schools are doing just that. To a very substantial degree, market pressures of various kinds have shaped and continue to shape educational politics and the institutions affected by them. The relatively decentralized structure of educational politics in this country actually enhances the vulnerability of school officials to popular political pressures, and, thus, to the market forces that shape educational politics. Parents are not without choice, or voice. Hogan (1992b) pointed out, "Savvy school officials . . . respond to the underlying anxieties and aspirations [of parents] by rigorously tracking . . . or by creating magnet schools or in any number of ways--parent choice being the latest--to keep their middle-class constituency from fleeing the public schools" (p. 193). The parents to whom he refers are those who believe college is the route to attain or maintain a middle to upper social class standing that they want for their children. The admittance of students to what Powell and others (1986) call top-track "specialty shops" (p. 124) forms the basis of the willingness of parents to enroll their children in public school system. These are not unlike the communities to which the public schools in this study belong. Student achievement within such schools is a matter of residential pattern, social demography, patterns of political participation from members of the community, and leadership in local educational politics. Parents whose children attend private schools may not share the same residential community, but they do share social demographics as well as participation and leadership in the workings of the independent school. In this study, teachers and administrators in both the public and private high schools supported Hogan's contention that they are responsive to parent expectations. College preparatory courses were given a great deal of attention and advanced placement courses were instituted. The public schools use advanced placement and upper level content courses as a tracked curriculum and become like a private school within a public school in response to parent demands.

On Bureaucracy

Chubb & Moe decry the oppression of bureaucracy in the public schools and commend the private schools for their lack of bureaucracy, therefore, creating greater autonomy than possible in the public school. They claimed:

. . . we show that private schools are organized more effectively than public schools and that this is a reflection of their far greater autonomy from external(bureaucratic) control (p. 24).

Chubb & Moe further stated:

Its [public school] institutions of democratic control are inherently destructive of school autonomy and inherently conducive to bureaucracy (p.47).

Teachers in both kinds of institution reported feelings of considerable autonomy in such matters as determination of curriculum, dealing with students, parents, curriculum development. Not only was there a strong statement of autonomy on the part of these teachers, it was

impossible to distinguish any difference in the strength of those feelings between public and private institutions. Additionally, two questions were also analyzed from the High School and Beyond Survey that Chubb & Moe had given and yet never used to report a comparison of public and private school teachers. When analyzed to compare teacher ratings of autonomy in several areas of their functioning (determining student behavior codes, content of inservice, curriculum, policies of grouping students, textbook selection, choice of teaching methods, etc.) the average scores came out virtually equal between public and private which increased suspicions that perhaps Chubb and Moe had seen in the High School and Beyond Survey no differences between public and private and were disappointed or confused by it. Perhaps it did not agree with their expectations about markets and choice in school so they chose not to report it.

Many public school teachers in this study reported that the bureaucracy was supportive and protected their autonomy. One teacher spoke for many others when she said that the principal, superintendent, and school board did not give in "to cranky parents." This trust in the professionalism of the teacher gave many the perception of autonomy. What may appear to be a contradictory notion is the idea that knowledgeable parents understand the large public school system and are able to make it work for them. If they are dissatisfied with the response of a particular teacher, they can find a voice with the principal, superintendent or school board. Opportunities to be heard are found at each layer of the hierarchy. It is possible for the bureaucracy to be responsive to parents demands, yet make teachers feel they are not subject to the whim of the occasional "cranky parent."

What of the question of shared beliefs? If principals or heads select and hire teachers who are like-minded, is autonomy really tested? In this case, teachers are more appropriately termed like-minded rather than autonomous. Teachers who share an education philosophy with the administrator can be trusted, given support and wide latitude leading to a perception of autonomy. In a similar vein, teachers reported that as long as things were going smoothly, no parental complaints, they felt greater freedom. These ideas were found to a strikingly similar degree in both the public and private high schools. In any case, regardless of the source of the perception of autonomy, in no instance were teachers perceived to be oppressed or deadened by the weight of bureaucracy. The challenge of making schools more creative, energetic, and innovative institutions may more be a matter of stimulating teachers and principals who have fallen into complacency rather than setting them free from some ill-conceived notion of a repressive and domineering bureaucracy.

On Teachers Associations

The role of the teachers union in constraining the autonomy of teacher is described throughout the text of "Politics, Markets and America's Schools." (1990). This study was completed in a right-to-work state, where public school teachers have come to look to teachers associations rather than unions to protect their working conditions. For all intents and purposes, these teachers associations and teachers unions are synonymous. Chubb and Moe claimed:

Teachers who are team players, who have lots of autonomy in their work, who routinely play integral roles in school decision-making, and who are treated as professionals are hardly good candidates for union membership (p.53).

The public school teachers in this study reported that the teachers association actually protected their autonomy. For example, parents cannot force a teacher to change a student's grade. It is also the teachers association which negotiated a contract requiring teacher participation on committees charged with making policy decisions. Even principals spoke of working with the teachers association on controversial matters. The position of the association

helped administrators by providing clear guidelines, thus avoiding ambiguity on many issues including the firing of teachers. Both administrators and teachers claimed the association's role was to guarantee fairness in workplace conditions. The public secondary school teachers in this study all reported opportunities to participate in decisions that are important to them, contrary to the blanket statements put forth by Chubb and Moe.

Administrators in the public school reported considerable autonomy in the hiring and firing of teachers. It is true they work within the confines of the teachers association to fire teachers, however, their ability to fire teachers is not thus impaired. Experienced administrators understand how the system works and do not feel constrained. Two public school principals told of having freedom in the hiring of personnel. On rare occasion a principal may be required to accept a teacher who has been transferred due to a reduction in work force at another of the district's schools. The third principal, who reported reduced autonomy in the hiring of teachers, described how the faculty and chair of each department has the primary responsibility for hiring new faculty to their department. He was unconcerned about their selection because he trusted them. Teachers who share the educational philosophy of the administrator can be expected to hire new faculty with similar beliefs. This principal has an indirect role in the hiring of teachers. In this study, none of the public school principals experienced constraints in hiring or firing faculty as was the experience of their private school counterparts. These perceptions of autonomy exist despite the presence of teachers associations

Conclusion

Chubb and Moe were perpetuating a general view regarding public and private schools. They sought to perpetuate the myth that teachers and principals in private schools enjoy autonomy and freedom from democratic bureaucracy that their public school counterparts do not. They further claimed that private schools only are subject to market forces.

This research shows how complex the reality is. Autonomy is an issue that does not clearly distinguish public from private education. The freedom teachers and administrators feel and the constraints they experience are complex. Many of the constraints experienced by public and private high school administrators and teachers are similar. Both sectors must work within the limits of a set of prescribed laws. They are equally subject to pressures resulting from limited funds. Perceptions of autonomy are individual matters, often experienced within a range of accepted constraints. Teachers and administrators describe their attempts to secure professional autonomy in an arena circumscribed by the demands of parents, college admissions requirements, and the College Board. Often these demands are conflicting and contradictory, yet teachers are able to exert autonomy by seeking protection from administrative hierarchies, participating in opportunities for decision-making, ignoring selected policies, and seeking the sanctuary of their own classroom where their authority is unchecked. The greatest freedom is derived from the perception of a successful school. In schools that produce students who gain admission to colleges of choice, as in this study, teachers, principals and heads of school enjoy considerable autonomy.

The limited scope of this study points to the need to explore perceptions of autonomy in the context of other types of private schools. How do teachers and administrators in religious private schools experience autonomy? In what ways do the social and economic circumstances of the students affect teachers' and administrators' autonomy? What are the relationships between autonomy and achievement when the variables of religious affiliation and economic level differ from those in the present study? Given the complexity of the issues and the persistence of the debate about privatization of education further research on autonomy is warranted.