ISSUE BRIEF

Teachers' Sense of Community: How Do Public and Private Schools Compare?

DECEMBER 1996
IB–10–96

A strong sense of community in schools, reflected by shared expectations and supportive relations among staff members, may facilitate teachers' instructional efforts and enhance their personal well-being. Researchers have suggested that community among teachers benefits student learning by aiding the development of clear and consistent goals for students and by encouraging teachers to work collaboratively toward, and to take responsibility for, such goals (Newmann and Wehlage 1995). In addition, community in schools has been linked to teachers' satisfaction with their work and to lower rates of teacher absenteeism (Bryk and Driscoll 1988).

Do public and private school teachers differ in the sense of community they perceive at work? Is the sense of community experienced by teachers at work more pronounced in private school settings? Prior research suggests that it may be higher in private schools, given that job satisfaction levels are higher among private school teachers than public school teachers in spite of the lower salaries they receive (McLaughlin, O'Donnell, and Ries 1995). Data from the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), can be used to explore these questions.

In 1987–88 and 1993–94, SASS asked teachers across the country for information about the nature of their relations with other staff members in their schools. Grouping these items into three categories, this brief examines teachers' perceptions of (1) the extent to which staff members share common goals, beliefs, and expectations with respect to schooling, (2) the extent to which school governance procedures involve and support teachers, and (3) the extent to which relations among staff members are collegial and cooperative. The percentages of public and private school teachers who strongly agreed with the SASS items are presented.[1]

According to teachers, the sense of community shared with colleagues was greater in private schools than in public schools in both 1987–88 and 1993–94.

In both 1987–88 and 1993–94, greater percentages of private school teachers than public school teachers strongly agreed with each of the six community-related items (table 1). For example, in 1993–94, about three-fifths of private school teachers compared to about one-third of public school teachers strongly agreed with the two items in the goals, beliefs, and expectations category. In fact, when examined over time, teachers' sense of community in public and private schools may be diverging further; for example, the difference in public and private school teachers' responses on the item relating to shared beliefs and values about the central mission of the school increased from 22.6 percent in 1987–88 to 29.6 percent in 1993–94.

---

[1] The SASS Teacher Questionnaires asked respondents to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with the statements and provided four response options: "Strongly disagree," "Somewhat disagree," "Somewhat agree," or "Strongly agree."

Table 1. Percentages of public and private school teachers who strongly agreed with items related to their sense of community at work: 1987–88 and 1993–94

	Public		Private	
	1987–88	1993–94	1987–88	1993–94
Goals, Beliefs, and Expectations				
Most of my colleagues share my beliefs and values about what the central mission of the school should be.	35.2	33.2	57.8	62.8
Goals and priorities for the school are clear.	39.9	37.9	55.1	58.0
Governance Procedures				
In this school, staff members are recognized for a job well done.	25.3	25.0	38.3	41.8
Teachers participate in making most of the important educational decisions in this school.	13.6	14.6	27.2	30.3
Collegiality and Cooperation				
There is a great deal of cooperative effort among staff members.	35.1	33.7	55.9	57.8
The school administration's behavior toward the staff is supportive and encouraging.	40.2	41.2	59.3	60.8

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1987–88 and 1993–94 Schools and Staffing Surveys (Public and Private School Teacher Questionnaires).

**U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement**

Table 2.   Percentages of public and private school teachers who strongly agreed with items related to their sense of community at work, by school size: 1993–94

	Public		Private	
	< 150 students	≥ 750 students	< 150 students	≥ 750 students
Goals, Beliefs, and Expectations				
Most of my colleagues share my beliefs and values about what the central mission of the school should be.	40.8	26.2	71.4	49.4
Goals and priorities for the school are clear.	36.0	33.1	61.7	56.3
Governance Procedures				
In this school, staff members are recognized for a job well done.	23.5	22.1	48.1	34.7
Teachers participate in making most of the important educational decisions in this school.	23.7	10.1	38.0	22.6
Collegiality and Cooperation				
There is a great deal of cooperative effort among staff members.	41.5	25.9	65.3	46.4
The school administration's behavior toward the staff is supportive and encouraging.	42.0	38.5	65.1	57.0

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1993–94 Schools and Staffing Survey (Public and Private School Teacher and School Questionnaires).

In 1993–94, private school teachers' sense of community was greater than that of public school teachers, regardless of the size of the schools in which they taught.

Evidence from prior research on community in schools suggests that larger schools in general are less likely to have a strong sense of community (Bryk and Driscoll 1988). Since public schools are larger on average than private schools (Choy et al. 1993), the differences in public and private school teachers' sense of community noted above might be due to differences in school size between the two sectors.

As expected, within each sector, teachers' sense of community with their colleagues generally was greater in small schools (i.e., schools with fewer than 150 students) than in large schools (i.e., schools with 750 or more students); the one exception was public school teachers' responses regarding staff recognition, which showed no difference by school size (table 2). In both small and large schools, however, private school teachers reported a greater sense of community with colleagues at work than did public school teachers. For example, while over 65 percent of private school teachers in small schools strongly agreed with the items regarding collegiality and cooperation, about 42 percent of public school teachers in small schools strongly agreed with those items.

Discussion

The above results indicate that private school teachers experience a stronger sense of community at work than do public school teachers, no matter the size of the school. Further analyses of SASS data can assess whether these differences in public and private school teachers' sense of community are related to differences in other aspects of their school environments (e.g., urbanicity, percent minority enrollment, racial and ethnic composition of teachers) or to differences in the nature of their professional experiences (e.g., length of school tenure, participation in collaborative teaching arrangements).

Also, in keeping with prior research, the above results indicate that school size is related to teachers' sense of community in both sectors, with teachers in small schools generally reporting a greater sense of community than teachers in large schools. This finding suggests that recent efforts to break down large public schools into smaller units (e.g., schools within schools) may be beneficial not only to students, but to teachers as well.

Further analyses that warrant attention but reach beyond the SASS data include an examination of the consequences that the sense of community experienced by teachers at work may have for schools and for students.

References and Related Publications

Bryk, A.S. and Driscoll, M.E. (1988). *The High School as Community: Contextual Influences and Consequences for Students and Teachers*. Madison, WI: National Center on Effective Secondary Schools, University of Wisconsin.

Choy, S.P., Henke, R.R., Alt, M.N., Medrich, E.A., and Bobbitt, S.A. (1993). *Schools and Staffing in the United States: A Statistical Profile, 1990–91*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES 93–146).

Choy, S.P., Medrich, E.A., Henke, R.R., and Bobbitt, S.A. (1992). *Schools and Staffing in the United States: A Statistical Profile, 1987–88*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES 92–120).

Henke, R.R., Choy, S.P., and Geis, S. (1996). *Schools and Staffing in the United States: A Statistical Profile, 1993–94*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES 96–124).

McLaughlin, D., O'Donnell, C., and Ries, L. (1995). *Private Schools in the United States: A Statistical Profile, 1990–91*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES 95–330).

Newmann, F.M. and Wehlage, G.G. (1995). *Successful School Restructuring: A Report to the Public and Educators by the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools*. Madison, WI: Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools.