

NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS

WHO INFLUENCES DECISIONMAKING ABOUT SCHOOL CURRICULUM:

WHAT DO PRINCIPALS SAY?

ISSUE BRIEF

JULY 1995

NCES 95-780

Which groups make key educational decisions in schools? Are teachers, parents, and principals highly influential over important activities such as determining the school curriculum? Or do school boards and state and local government agencies primarily shape instructional and educational agencies primarily shape instructional and educational policies for schools? Moreover, in what ways do public and private schools differ in the extent to which these groups influence educational decision making? The answers to these questions provide the starting point for much of the current debate over school management reforms. In this debate, some policymakers and practitioners have argued for greater accountability and centralized control, whereas others have supported greater decentralization through school-based management approaches of various types.

The 1990-91 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), provides data from the principal's perspective. For example, this survey asked school principals to report on how much actual influence state departments of education, school boards, teachers, parents, and principals themselves had on establishing the school curriculum. Principals were defined as having thought that groups had "a great deal" of influence on decisions if they responded with a 5 or 6 on a scale from 1 to 6 representing increasing influence over school-related decisions.

IN 1990-91, PUBLIC SCHOOL PRINCIPALS REPORTED THAT TEACHERS, PRINCIPALS, SCHOOL BOARDS, AND STATE DEPARTMENTS EACH HAD "A GREAT DEAL" OF INFLUENCE ON CURRICULUM DECISIONMAKING.

According to principals, public and private schools distinctly differed in who influenced decisions concerned with establishing school curriculum. Influence over curriculum appears to be more evenly distributed in public schools than in private schools. While public school principals most often reported that the state department of education had "a great deal" of influence over school curriculum (61 percent), about half of these principals also

reported themselves, teachers, and school boards to have "a great deal" of influence.

In contrast, private school principals more frequently perceived themselves as strongly influential than they did the other groups; 85 percent reported having "a great deal" of influence over their schools' curriculum (figure 1). Private school principals also saw teachers as key decision makers, with 70 percent of these principals crediting teachers with "a great deal" of influence over curriculum. In addition, private school principals were less likely to perceive their governing boards as highly influential than were public school principals. 1/ Finally, a few public or private school principals perceived parent associations to be strongly influential.

Figure 1. Percentage of principals in public and private schools who rated various groups as having "a great deal" of influence over establishing curriculum, 1990-91

Percent	Public	Private
on scale		
of 0-100	Prin-	Prin-
	State Board cipal Faculty Parent	Board cipal Faculty Parent

61 46 49 51 7 26 85 70 10

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education
Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey, 1990-91 (Administrator Questionnaire)

DIFFERENCES IN SCHOOL SIZE APPEARED TO AFFECT PRINCIPALS'
PERCEPTIONS OF

INFLUENCE ON CURRICULUM DECISIONMAKING IN 1990-91.

In public schools, principals in schools with the lowest enrollments (i.e., less than 150 students) had distinctively different perceptions of the various sources of influence on curriculum than did principals in schools with higher enrollments (i.e., 150 students or more). Principals in the smallest schools were more likely to report principals and teachers as strong influences and less likely to report state departments of education and school boards as strong influences than were their counterparts in larger schools (table 1). It may be that the smallest public schools, curriculum decisions can be made directly and informally at the school site rather than relying on external sources, such as school boards and parent associations.

Table 1. Percentage of principals in public and private schools who rated various groups as having "a great deal" of influence over establishing curriculum, by school enrollment size, 1990-91

	State	School		Parent	
	Dept.	Board	Principal	Teachers	Assoc.
Public					
150	55.1	38.0	56.9	57.3	5.9
150-499	61.4	46.5	49.3	51.0	6.6
500-749	62.6	45.3	48.2	51.9	7.3
750	63.5	49.6	45.1	47.6	8.2
Private					
150	N/A	32.4	80.4	62.8	11.2
150-499	N/A	18.5	90.7	78.5	9.0
500-749	N/A	17.2	85.0	74.3	4.1
750	N/A	18.7	86.2	73.9	2.5

N/A indicates that the item was not included on the Private School Administrator Questionnaire.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education
Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey, 1990-91 (Administrator Questionnaire)

In general, the results related to school size for private schools are less conclusive than for public schools. However, these data clearly show that principals consistently see themselves and teachers as the groups exerting the greatest influence over curriculum decisions, regardless of school size.

DISCUSSION

One of the most important and controversial subjects for contemporary education research and policy is the nature of decision making in schools. SASS data can help clarify the debate and the issues by providing a national portrait of principals' views of which groups in which settings have influence over school-related decision making. The data presented here, for example, suggest different patterns of influence in the public and private sectors and, within public schools, highlight the possibility of shared decision making. Further analyses are needed of the extent of shared decision making at individual schools and the effects of this collaboration on teacher morale, teacher

turnover, and teacher-principal agreement on important educational goals.

For private schools, additional analyses of SASS data can examine whether principal and teacher influence is as pronounced in school decision making related to discipline policy and teacher hiring as in establishing curricula.

References:

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, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (NCES Report No. 93-146).

1/ The Private School Administrator Questionnaire did not include 'State Department of Education' as a response.

ISSUE BRIEFS present information on education topics of current interest.

All estimates shown are based on samples and are subject to sampling variability. All differences reported are statistically significant at the .05 level. In the design, conduct, and data processing of NCES surveys, efforts are made to minimize the effects of nonsampling errors, such as item nonresponse, measurement error, data processing error, or other systematic error.

This ISSUE BRIEF was prepared by Richard Ingersoll and Robert Rossi,
American Institute for Research. To obtain standard errors or definitions of
terms for this ISSUE BRIEF, or to obtain additional information about the
1990-91 Schools and Staffing Survey, contact Kerry Gruber at 202-502-7349.

U.S. Department of Education

Office of Educational Research and Improvement

NCES-95-780