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# SECTOR DIFFERENCES IN OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN THE SCHOOL CONTEXT

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*Research has consistently related school effectiveness to parental involvement. Catholic schools in particular have tended to have high levels of parental involvement, more so than public schools. This study measured the opportunities for parental involvement present in private and public schools. While Catholic school parents tend to demonstrate higher levels of parental involvement than public school parents, public schools offer significantly more opportunities for parental involvement than Catholic schools.*

## INTRODUCTION

Studies of academic achievement generally show that private school students outperform their public school peers on common measures such as standardized test scores and graduation rates (Coleman, Hoffer, & Kilgore, 1982; Hallinan, 2002). Some educational researchers argue these differences in achievement levels are at least partially a result of sector effects; that is, differences in the way public and private schools educate their students result in differences in academic outcomes. Public and private schools do differ on a number of characteristics that can affect achievement, including the types of courses schools require all students to take (Lee & Bryk, 1988) and the manner in which schools in different sectors discipline their students (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987).

One characteristic related to school achievement that has been studied in relation to public-private school differences is parental involvement. Research suggests that parents of children in private schools are more involved in their children's educational lives than parents of public school children (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Muller, 1993). These higher levels of involvement may be partially accounted for by private school parents' higher average incomes and educational levels (U. S. Department of Education, 1995), characteristics that are related to greater involvement among all parents (Lareau, 1987; Nord, Brimhall, & West, 1997; Stevenson & Baker, 1987). They also may result from a greater interest in or concern for education on the part of the private

school parents: the very act of choosing a school and paying for education may be a reflection of greater interest and is a form of parental involvement in and of itself (Coleman, Schiller, & Schneider, 1993).

Greater parental involvement may also be a result of the practices of private schools themselves. To a great extent, parental involvement in the school environment, for example volunteering in a classroom or attending an open house, is controlled by school personnel. Teachers and administrators are responsible for determining if, when, and how often activities that allow for such involvement are offered. Parents can only be involved when school personnel afford them the opportunity. Research shows that the policies and practices of schools do affect levels of parental involvement (Epstein, 1990). There is evidence that private schools more effectively facilitate the involvement of parents than do public schools (Vaden-Kiernan, 1996). However, this evidence is limited. The majority of studies on parental involvement focus on differences in individual-level characteristics related to involvement, rather than on school policies and practices that can influence parents' participation at the school. This study adds to the understanding of ways in which schools can affect parental involvement in the school context by using nationally representative data to examine differences between public and private schools in the opportunities for involvement they provide to parents.

## **EXCHANGE THEORY AND SECTOR DIFFERENCES IN OPPORTUNITIES FOR INVOLVEMENT**

This study situates the general discussion of parental involvement within a social exchange framework, which can also be used to hypothesize about possible differences in opportunities for involvement between public and private schools. Within this framework, the parent-school relationship is conceived of as an interpersonal relationship involving the exchange of valued goods, or rewards. A basic proposition of exchange theory is that people become involved in relationships with one another when they feel there is something to be gained from the relationship; that is, that they can benefit from it. There are benefits school personnel and parents can obtain from relationships with one another. They exchange many types of goods, including information, support, and respect for the role each individual plays in the lives of the students. Parents also gain satisfaction from seeing children's accomplishments firsthand. The need or desire for these rewards motivates parents and school staff to seek and maintain relationships with one another.

While providing rewards for individuals, the reciprocal nature of the exchange relationship also results in costs for the individual as well. In order to have others provide rewards, the individual must provide something in return (Blau, 1964). Costs are incurred by both schools and parents in the

process of overcoming constraints to their relationship. Parents and school personnel spend time and energy on their relationship that they could devote to other pursuits. For example, school personnel often have to devote time outside of the regular workday to fulfill the commitments of their jobs, as is the case when schools hold back-to-school nights. They lose time with their families or to prepare the next day's lesson as a result of having to spend evening hours at the school. Parents, on the other hand, may have to take time off from their jobs in order to meet with teachers. Their cost is a financial reward (income) forgone by choosing involvement at school over attendance at work.

According to exchange theory, if individuals perceive that the costs of a relationship far outweigh its benefits, they may avoid a relationship, or leave it altogether (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Extending this proposition to the general parent-school relationship, it is hypothesized that as the costs of providing opportunities for involvement to parents increase, the actual number of opportunities offered by school personnel decreases. Alternatively, as the costs of not offering opportunities for involvement increase, the number of opportunities schools provide increases.

In this study, particular characteristics of schools are conceptualized as constituting the context in which school personnel and parents make decisions about their relationships with one another. These characteristics can affect opportunities by constraining or facilitating the ability of school personnel to offer these opportunities to parents. Conceivably, organizational features of the school or the school climate surrounding parental involvement can make it difficult or undesirable for school personnel to seek relationships with parents. Any attempt to overcome these difficulties, or constraints, results in costs for the teachers and administrators trying to offer opportunities for involvement. As these costs increase, school personnel become less willing or able to form and maintain relationships with parents.

In thinking about the relationship between the organizational characteristic of interest in this study, school sector, and opportunities for involvement, consideration must be given to the nature of the parent-school relationship in private schools, which has been described as quite different from that in public schools. There are two prevalent perspectives taken in the study of the relationship between parents and private schools; researchers identify the relationship as adhering to market principles or existing within an environment focused on the development of communities. Using either perspective, it can be expected that private schools will offer more opportunities for parents to be involved than public schools.

In the market model of the parent-private school relationship, parents are considered to be consumers of the school's goods because they are paying for their children's education. Private schools are dependent upon their students' families for the income necessary to run the school. As a result, school personnel are pressured to meet the needs and desires of the parents on whom they are dependent for resources and, ultimately, employment. This is not true of

public schools, which receive their financial resources from public funds. As such, private schools have a much greater need to satisfy any desires their parents have for involvement. They must also assure the parents that they are providing children with high quality educational experiences. Ways to do this include inviting parents to the school to see these experiences firsthand and making parents aware of happenings within the school through newsletters and personal communication.

While there is somewhat of a consumer relationship that exists between parents and personnel in Catholic schools, research suggests that their relationship is not strictly so. Catholic schools place special emphasis on the development of a sense of community among school personnel, students, and parents (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993). An integral part of this communal orientation is the shared commitment of parents and school personnel to creating community and an academically-enriching environment for all students. Researchers assert that this vision of the school as community enables Catholic schools to produce higher levels of achievement and lower dropout rates than those found in public schools (Coleman, 1988; Coleman et al., 1982). Thus, a method by which Catholic school personnel succeed as educators is by creating and maintaining relationships with parents. For this reason, they may be highly motivated to offer parents opportunities to be involved at the school. However, parents of Catholic school students may not want to involve themselves in the daily functioning of their children's schools, instead opting to attend only those functions in which parents have traditionally been welcomed. Parents of Catholic high school students are more active in school activities such as parent nights and attendance at children's events than they are in the governance activities of the school (Bryk et al., 1993). Without parents' desire for involvement in certain activities, Catholic school staff may see no need to offer them such opportunities.

For all private schools, whether operating strictly according to market principles or with a communal orientation toward education, there are costs to not providing opportunities for involvement. These can include the loss of funding and students that may occur if parents become dissatisfied with their experiences with the school and decide to educate their children elsewhere. Without parental involvement, school personnel may also fail to develop a community atmosphere, which represents a failure to adhere to the basic mission of some schools. In all cases, school staff must weigh the monetary, time, and energy costs associated with providing opportunities for involvement against the costs associated with not providing these opportunities.

In recent decades, there has been a movement within the public school system to create schools with private-like characteristics as a means of improving public education. These include magnet and charter schools. Often these schools purport a school-as-community orientation common in Catholic schools. Many also require increased parental involvement for their students to attend (Cookson, 1994). As a result of this orientation toward students and

their families, these types of public schools also are expected to provide greater opportunities for parental involvement than are regular public schools.

The nature of the relationship between parents and school personnel is not the only source of possible differences between public and private schools in the opportunities they offer parents to be involved. National data show that public and private schools differ on other characteristics that also may affect the opportunities schools provide (Alt & Peter, 2002). In examining differences among school types, it is important to take into account these other factors that may explain any observed differences in opportunities.

In general, public schools are larger than private schools. In the private sector, Catholic schools tend to educate more students than other types of private schools. School size itself may be related to the number of opportunities for involvement, because the number of students and parents whose interests and desires must be accommodated affect school offerings. On the one hand, size may exhibit a negative relationship with opportunities for involvement as a result of the expenditures involved in providing these opportunities. As the numbers of students and parents increase, the time, energy and monetary costs associated with providing opportunities for all of them increase.

On the other hand, smaller schools may not be able to offer as wide an array of services as larger schools (Alt & Peter, 2002). They also may not have the need to. With a larger student body, schools have to provide more extracurricular opportunities to students that encompass a wider range of interests. The costs of not doing so may be discontent among students who do not have the opportunities they want, as well as detachment from students who are not involved with the school. These extracurricular activities also provide opportunities for their parents, who can attend school functions in order to watch their children. Similarly, with a larger parent population, schools may find it easier to attract enough parents to support a parent-teacher organization or school fair. Regardless of the direction of the relationship between opportunities and school size, it is important to account for this factor when making observations about differences in opportunities by school sector.

School resources constitute another factor simultaneously related to school sector and opportunities. As stated above, the provision of opportunities brings many kinds of costs. Schools with greater financial and human resources can better bear the brunt of these costs. As a result, they find themselves less constrained by cost factors. Therefore, as schools' resources increase, they should be able to provide a greater number of opportunities. When the socioeconomic characteristics of schools' student populations are used as indicators of school resources, private schools seem to be at advantage in terms of both monetary and human resources. They are less likely than public schools to enroll students who qualify for free or reduced lunch programs and less likely to have student populations that are 30% or more minority (Alt & Peter, 2002). In fact, they are less likely than public schools to educate minority students at all. However, private schools tend to be smaller than pub-

lic schools, and small schools tend to have limited fiscal and human resources (Bryk, 1995). Evidence shows that, while more extracurricular opportunities are offered in Catholic schools with greater fiscal resources, overall these activities tend to be limited in Catholic schools because they have limited budgets (Bryk et al., 1993). Recent data suggest that private schools have at least one advantage with respect to human resources; although their absolute numbers of school personnel may be smaller than those in public schools, their student-teacher ratios tend to be lower than they are in public schools (Alt & Peter, 2002).

Another aspect in which public and private schools differ is the working climate for school personnel. Teachers in private schools are more likely than their counterparts in public schools to report that they have control over school practices and policies, that there is cooperation among teachers and a sharing of beliefs regarding their school's central missions, and that they receive support for their work from both administrators and parents (Alt & Peter, 2002). It is possible that aspects of school climate related to parental involvement, such as institutional support for involvement and the power parents are afforded to influence daily activities within the school, also differ among schools in different sectors.

These aspects of the school climate may be important determinants of whether or not schools offer parents opportunities to be involved. According to exchange theory, an actor's willingness to accept the costs of a relationship depends on the value he or she places on the outcome, or reward. The value placed on parental involvement essentially mediates the effect of structural constraints on the provision and facilitation of opportunities for involvement. When the school climate values and encourages parental involvement, personnel will see benefits to their efforts to create relationships with parents, including positive evaluations of their work. As a result, they will be more likely to offer parents opportunities to be involved, and incur the costs associated with doing so. They also may experience costs from not creating these relationships, because they will be defying institutional norms or pressure, resulting in negative evaluations of their job performance. In contrast, when little institutional support is given to the home-school relationship, school personnel may see no benefit in making the effort to generate relationships with parents. If they consider parental involvement to be unimportant or even detrimental to their ability to educate, they will be less eager to encourage it.

Personnel in private schools may place greater importance on parental involvement than do public school personnel, as a result of their dependence upon parents for monetary support and their emphasis on the development of community. Research shows that the parent-school relationship is important to parents, personnel, and students in Catholic high schools (Bryk et al., 1993), which may result in their greater willingness to accept the costs involved in the provision of opportunities. Also, norms encouraging parental involvement may be better communicated from administrators to teachers in private

schools, as private school teachers are more likely than public school teachers to report that school goals are communicated clearly and staff members are recognized for doing a good job (Alt & Peter, 2002).

Last, the balance of power and dependence between school personnel and parents also is important to consider when hypothesizing about the differences between sectors in opportunities for involvement. As the relationship is conceived of here, school personnel have more power than parents within the school context, because they determine opportunities for involvement. For this reason, the desires of the parents are less likely to supercede those of the personnel in decisions regarding such opportunities. However, school personnel who feel parental involvement is important have an interest in making parents their partners in the educational process. When parents are afforded more influence in the school environment, they become more powerful actors. If parents have power to influence their children's school experiences, they can pressure schools to provide them with more opportunities when they are desired. Therefore, it is expected that as parental power increases, the opportunities for involvement provided by the school will increase. Private school parents are expected to exert more power within their schools than public school parents, because they have the ability to remove their children and money from the school, and because some private schools view their students' parents as composing an integral part of the school community.

## **DATA AND METHODS**

Data for this study come from the fall and spring kindergarten waves of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998-1999 (ECLS-K). The ECLS-K employed multistage probability sampling, which produced a nationally representative sample of schools that educate kindergarteners in the United States (U. S. Department of Education, 2001). The unweighted sample includes 866 schools from all sectors for which information was available from school administrators. When weighted appropriately to account for the complex sampling design, oversampling, and nonresponse, the sample size is 72,260 schools. Information used in this study comes from self-administered questionnaires completed by school administrators.

Several statistical methods are used to examine sector differences in the opportunities schools provide for parents to be involved in the school context. Descriptive analyses are used to present an overall picture of the frequency and types of activities provided by schools in different sectors. Comparisons are made among different types of schools, and any observed differences are tested for statistical significance.

Linear regression techniques are used to estimate the relationship between school sector and opportunities for involvement provided by the school while controlling for other organizational characteristics. The complex nature of the

ECLS-K sampling design required an adjustment of the standard errors of the estimates in order to obtain more accurate evaluations of the precision of these estimates and more reliable tests of significance (U. S. Department of Education, 2001). In this study, standard errors are computed using Taylor series approximation.

## MEASURES

### DEPENDENT VARIABLE: OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT AT THE SCHOOL LEVEL

In the spring wave of the kindergarten year, school administrators were asked whether several activities that involve parents were provided by the school. These activities include PTA, PTO, or Parent-Student-Teacher Organization meetings; teacher-parent conferences; school performances to which parents were invited; classroom programs such as class plays, book nights or family math nights; and fairs or social events planned to raise funds for the school. Original responses from administrators were recorded in the following manner in order to obtain a measure approximating the actual number of opportunities for involvement offered by the school: *Never* = 0; *Once a year* = 1; *2 to 3 times a year* = 2.5; *4 to 6 times a year* = 5; and *7 or more times a year* = 7. The answers were then summed across all five groups of activities to produce an overall indicator of the number of opportunities for involvement provided to parents. Possible scores range from 0 to 35. Schools with higher scores on this measure provided more opportunities for involvement than schools with lower scores on this measure.

### SCHOOL SECTOR

The main independent variable of interest in this study is the sector to which schools belong. For some analyses, a dichotomous distinction is made between public and private schools. In other analyses, schools are identified as belonging to one of four categories: a regular public school, a magnet school or public school of choice, a religious private school, or a secular private school. A dummy variable was created for each of these four school types, where a *1* indicates that the school is of that particular type and *0* indicates that the school is not of that particular type.

### ADDITIONAL MEASURES OF SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS

As indicated above, measures of school characteristics are included in these analyses to control for other differences among schools in different sectors. These include: school size, type, resources and location, characteristics of the student and teacher populations, general parental power, and institutional support for the parent-school relationship.

## SCHOOL SIZE

The size of the school is indicated by the number of students enrolled in the school at the time administrators filled out their questionnaires. The dataset contains a categorical measure of size, where 1= 0-149 students, 2= 150-299 students, 3= 300-499 students, 4=500-749 students, and 5= 750 students or more.

## SCHOOL TYPE

Schools were identified as being public or private early childhood centers by a dummy variable coded 1 if the school was an early childhood center and 0 if it was not. These schools educate children in only a limited number of grades, which probably results in their offering fewer opportunities for involvement.

## SCHOOL RESOURCES

Controlling for school resources within this study proved problematic. Educational researchers commonly employ a measure of the percentage of students within each school eligible for free and reduced lunch as an indicator of the average socioeconomic status of the student body, which in turn reflects school resources. Although the ECLS-K includes a composite measure of eligible students, as indicated by school administrators, this information is missing for 26% of the sample schools. Using this measure in analyses would have resulted in a substantial loss of cases.

Therefore, this research utilizes two best-alternative measures related to school resources. The first is a dummy measure indicating whether the *school operated a school-wide Title 1 program* (coded 1=yes, 0=no). Schools in which more than 50% of the student population is low-income qualify for school-wide Title 1 programs. This measure essentially indicates that at least half of a school's student population came from a low-income background.

A second measure of school resources indicates the schools' additional sources of funding. Schools that receive funding in addition to basic funding from the state or tuition conceivably have extra money available to spend on the provision of opportunities for involvement. Specifically, administrators indicated whether their schools received funding from state compensatory funds, community fund raising, PTO fundraising, local or national businesses, special education programs or agencies, auxiliary services or affiliated enterprises, Medicaid, impact aid, bilingual aid, migrant aid, or grants other than those listed above. A score of 1 was assigned for each type of assistance the school received. These scores were then summed across all 11 types of additional funding, resulting in a score that ranges from 0 to 11.

A measure of the total number of full-time equivalent school personnel was used as a measure of human resources available to provide opportunities for involvement.

## SCHOOL LOCATION

The ECLS-K provided a composite measure of *urbanicity*, which indicates whether a school is located in one of three areas: a central city; urban fringe or large town; or small town or rural area. Dummy variables were created for each of these locations and labeled city, suburb, and rural respectively (*1* indicates the school is located in such an area and *0* indicates the school is not located in that area).

## SIZE OF SCHOOLS' MINORITY STUDENT POPULATIONS

The dataset provides a categorical measure of the *percent of minority students* within each school. It is coded in the following manner: 1 = *less than 10% minority*; 2 = *10% to less than 25% minority*; 3 = *25% to less than 50% minority*; 4 = *50% to less than 75% minority*; 5 = *75% or more minority*.

## GENERAL PARENTAL POWER

General parental power within the school is indicated by a series of measures representing the influence parents had in different areas. The first measure indicates whether parents were represented on a school-based management committee. It is coded 1 if *yes*, and 0 if *no*.

The second measure of parental power indicates *parental influence in administrators' job evaluations*. Specifically, administrators were asked how much parent and community support, as well as parent involvement in school activities, influence their job evaluations. The more these factors influence these evaluations, the more costly it becomes to not offer opportunities for parental involvement or make efforts to create positive relationships with parents. Failure to do so can result in the loss of a job. Therefore, the greater the influence, or power, parents have in this area, the greater the number of opportunities for involvement that are provided. Administrators indicated whether parents had 0 (*no influence*), 1 (*some influence*), or 2 (*major influence*). A scale measure was created by summing the responses to these two areas affecting job evaluation, resulting in a measure of influence ranging from 0 to 4. Higher scores reflect greater parental influence on the administrator's job evaluation.

## INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT FOR TEACHER-PARENT CONTACT

The value the institution places on the parent-school relationship is indicated by administrators' responses to the question of how much emphasis they placed on kindergarten teachers communicating well with parents. Available responses included 1 (*No or minor emphasis*), 2 (*Moderate emphasis*), and 3 (*Major emphasis*). Categories 1 and 2 were collapsed into one, because only one administrator reported that the school placed *no or minor emphasis* on communicating well with parents. The resulting measure is a dummy variable

where 1 indicates that the school placed *major emphasis* on such communication, and 0 indicates the school placed less emphasis on communication with parents. Greater emphasis on good communication with parents reflects greater institutional support for the home-school relationship.

Another manner in which administrators can provide institutional support for the home-school relationship is by providing training for teachers that enables them to develop effective relationships with parents. Researchers suggest that such training is essential but lacking in teacher education programs (Bermúdez, 1993; Davies, 1993). Teachers do not have the necessary skills to reach out to and encourage the involvement of parents, especially those who are considered hard-to-reach. Therefore, creating these relationships represents real costs to teachers, because they have to undertake the process with little formal knowledge of how to do so, and they may become frustrated at their inability to facilitate contact with some parents. Costs to creating positive home-school relationships are reduced for teachers when they are taught the skills for doing so, and when they feel there is support from the administration and other teachers.

Administrators were asked how often their school provided workshops for teachers that focused on parental involvement. This measure is coded such that 1 = *Never*, 2 = *Once a year*, 3 = *2 to 3 times a year*, 4 = *4 to 6 times a year* and 5 = *7 or more times a year*. Higher scores reflect greater training for generating parental involvement.

## FINDINGS

Table 1 provides basic descriptive statistics for the full, weighted sample of schools included in this study. Public schools compose 65% of the weighted sample ( $n = 47,003$ ). Roughly 16% of these public schools are schools of choice or magnet schools. Of the 25,257 private schools, 41% are non-Catholic religious schools, 27% are Catholic, and 32% are secular. About 13% of the sample is composed of early childhood centers.

Statistical comparisons show that public and private schools are quite different with respect to the organization characteristics included in these analyses. As a group, private schools have significantly smaller enrollments ( $t = -13.00, p < .001$ ), fewer minorities ( $t = -2.84, p < .01$ ), and fewer sources of additional funding than public schools ( $t = -15.13, p < .001$ ). Also, compared to public schools, a significantly lower percentage of private schools operate school-wide Title 1 programs ( $t = -11.36, p < .001$ ) or are located in rural areas ( $t = -5.44, p < .001$ ), while a greater percentage of them are located in urban areas ( $t = 2.96, p < .01$ ) and are classified as early childhood centers ( $t = 4.49, p < .001$ ). There were also significant differences on those measures related to parental power. Contrary to expectations, parents in private schools had less of an influence on the school administrator's job evaluation ( $t = -2.25, p < .05$ ),

and fewer private schools had parents represented on a school-based management committee ( $t = -12.68, p < .001$ ).

Private schools, on average, had fewer full-time equivalent staff than did public schools ( $t = -12.78, p < .001$ ). However, this measure was excluded from regression analyses, because it was highly correlated with school size ( $r = .79$ ). An additional measure indicating the teacher-student ratio was also created, but found to be unrelated to opportunities. As a result, this measure was dropped from analyses. Due to insignificant differences in the frequency with which schools in different sectors offered workshops on parental involvement and the emphasis administrators placed on good communication, these measures also were omitted from further analyses.

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Weighted Sample of Schools Educating Kindergarteners, by School Sector**

|  | Total Sample |      | Public Schools |      | Private Schools |      |
|--|--------------|------|----------------|------|-----------------|------|
|  | Mean         | s.e. | Mean           | s.e. | Mean            | s.e. |
| Opportunities for Involvement                        | 18.33        | .32  | 20.17          | .32  | 14.78           | .52  |
| School Size  | 2.60         | .05  | 3.07           | .07  | 1.73            | .06  |
| Full-time-equivalent School Personnel                | 35.53        | 1.02 | 44.54          | 1.51 | 18.43           | 1.26 |
| Percent Minority                                     | 2.41         | .07  | 2.53           | .09  | 2.17            | .10  |
| School is Early Childhood Center                     | .13          | .02  | .08            | .01  | .23             | .03  |
| School is Located in Urban Area                      | .37          | .02  | .32            | .03  | .46             | .04  |
| School is Located in Suburban Area                   | .37          | .03  | .36            | .03  | .39             | .04  |
| School is Located in Rural Area                      | .26          | .02  | .32            | .03  | .15             | .03  |
| School Runs School-Wide Title 1 Program              | .42          | .02  | .56            | .02  | .16             | .02  |
| Sources of Additional Funding                        | 3.37         | .09  | 4.19           | .11  | 1.87            | .11  |
| Parent Impact on Job Evaluation                      | 2.48         | .05  | 2.57           | .05  | 2.33            | .09  |
| Parent Presence on School-Based Management Committee | .48          | .02  | .64            | .02  | .17             | .03  |

## DIFFERENCES IN OPPORTUNITIES FOR INVOLVEMENT

For the full sample, the average number of opportunities for involvement is 18.32 in the previous year. Some substantial differences are found among schools in different sectors. Public schools offer an average of 20.17 opportunities per year while private schools offer an average of 14.78 opportunities per year, a difference which is highly significant ( $t = 9.29, p < .001$ ). Among public schools, the difference between regular public schools and public schools of choice is small and insignificant. As a result, no distinctions are made between regular and special public schools of choice in further analyses. There are significant differences between some types of private schools. Catholic schools offer significantly more opportunities for involvement

(17.28/year) than do either other religious private schools (14.52/year) ( $t = 2.78, p < .01$ ) or secular private schools (12.75/year) ( $t = 4.19, p < .001$ ). The difference in the number of offered opportunities between non-Catholic religious and secular private schools is not significant.

## **FACTORS PREDICTING OPPORTUNITIES FOR INVOLVEMENT**

Results from the regressions of opportunities for involvement on schools' characteristics are presented in Table 2. The first model includes only a dummy variable indicating that a school is private, where public schools constitute the reference category. The effect of the private measure on opportunities is highly significant, with the beta coefficient indicating the difference between the public and private school means. In Model 2, the global measure of private schools is replaced by the three dummy variables indicating different types of schools within the private sector, again using public schools as the reference category. The relationship between each type of school and opportunities is highly significant. Contrary to the hypotheses, the relationship of private school to opportunities is negative, whether you use a global measure for private school or distinguish among types of school within the private sector. Catholic schools, private schools pertaining to a non-Catholic religious denomination, and secular private schools all offer fewer opportunities for involvement than public schools. Secular private schools offer the fewest opportunities, seven less per year than public schools. Catholic schools, on average, offer approximately three fewer opportunities per year than public schools. School sector alone accounts for 18% of the variance in opportunities for involvement.

**Table 2: Opportunities for Involvement Regressed on School Characteristics**

|  | <u>Model 1</u>    | <u>Model 2</u>    | <u>Model 3</u>     |
|--|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| Constant   | 20.17***<br>(.32) | 20.17***<br>(.32) | 14.35***<br>(1.12) |
| Private School                                   | -5.39***<br>(.58) | -----             | -----              |
| Secular Private                                  |                   | -7.41***<br>(.95) | -3.34**<br>(1.18)  |
| Catholic   |                   | -2.88***<br>(.62) | -3.01**<br>(1.13)  |
| Other Religious Private                          |                   | -5.65***<br>(.96) | -1.42*<br>(.72)    |
| Urban  |                   |                   | .26<br>(.65)       |
| Rural  |                   |                   | -.86<br>(.66)      |
| School Size                                      |                   |                   | .62**<br>(.23)     |
| Percent Minority                                 |                   |                   | -.01<br>(.20)      |
| Early Childhood Center                           |                   |                   | -2.62**<br>(.87)   |
| School-wide Title 1                              |                   |                   | -.62<br>(.47)      |
| Additional Funding                               |                   |                   | .58***<br>(.15)    |
| Parental Presence on School Management Committee |                   |                   | 1.02<br>(.61)      |
| Job Evaluation                                   |                   |                   | .59**<br>(.21)     |
| <b>R-square</b>                                  | <b>.16</b>        | <b>.18</b>        | <b>.27</b>         |
| N  |                   |                   |                    |
| Unweighted                                       | 820               | 820               | 756                |
| Weighted   | 68,216            | 68,216            | 62,733             |

+ p < .10, \* p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .00

(standard errors in parentheses)

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Early Childhood Longitudinal Study 1998-1999, Kindergarten Cohort

As discussed above, public and private schools differ on important characteristics that may also be related to the opportunities schools provide for parental involvement. Model 3 includes these factors along with the measures of the three categories of private schools. When these other factors are included, the

effects of the school sector measures are reduced, but not eliminated. Even when controlling for other factors, Catholic, non-Catholic religious, and secular private schools all offer fewer opportunities for involvement than do public schools.

## DIFFERENCES IN THE TYPES OF OPPORTUNITIES OFFERED

Focusing on a global measure of opportunities may lead to the incorrect assumption that public schools always offer parents more opportunities to be involved in all types of activities. It may be the case that private schools offer more opportunities for meaningful contact with school personnel that can enhance learning, for example through parent-teacher conferences, but fewer opportunities for parents to attend other school functions like sporting events. Comparisons among different school types were made to determine whether differences in offerings of individual activities existed.

The means for each activity that together compose the overall opportunity measure (Parent-Teacher Organization meetings; teacher-parent conferences; school performances to which parents are invited; classroom programs; and fundraising events), broken down by school type, are presented in Table 3. In general, *t* tests show that public schools offer each of these activities significantly more often than each type of non-public school, with one exception: fundraising events. Catholic schools have fairs or social events planned to raise funds for the school significantly more often than public schools ( $t = 2.72, p < .01$ ), other religious schools ( $t = 3.25, p < .001$ ), and secular private schools ( $t = 5.42, p < .001$ ). Among non-public schools, Catholic institutions generally offer each type of activity more frequently than the other two types of schools. Contrary to predictions, secular private schools offer parents the fewest opportunities to be involved in school decision making, as indicated by the low average number of times PTO meetings they hold during the year ( $x = 2.91$ ).

**Table 3: Mean Frequency of Individual Opportunities for Involvement, by School Sector**

|  | All Schools   | Public        | Catholic      | Other Religious | Secular Private |
|--|---------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| PTA, PTO, or Parent-Student-Teacher Organization meetings              | 5.14<br>(.13) | 5.78<br>(.12) | 4.71<br>(.20) | 4.13<br>(.33)   | 2.91<br>(.41)   |
| Teacher-parent conferences   | 2.61<br>(.06) | 2.75<br>(.07) | 2.38<br>(.14) | 2.34<br>(.15)   | 2.34<br>(.19)   |
| School performances to which parents are invited                       | 4.36<br>(.10) | 4.80<br>(.11) | 3.95<br>(.17) | 3.71<br>(.27)   | 3.01<br>(.24)   |
| Classroom programs like class plays, book nights or family math nights | 3.40<br>(.11) | 3.99<br>(.12) | 2.72<br>(.18) | 2.04<br>(.25)   | 2.27<br>(.29)   |
| Fairs or social events planned to raise funds for the school           | 2.71<br>(.11) | 2.84<br>(.13) | 3.46<br>(.22) | 2.42<br>(.23)   | 1.68<br>(.24)   |

(standard errors in parentheses)

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Early Childhood Longitudinal Study 1998-1999, Kindergarten Cohort.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Results from this study show that there are sector differences in the opportunities schools provide for parents to be involved in the school context. Even when accounting for other factors, private schools offer fewer opportunities overall than public schools. Catholic schools offer more to parents than other types of public schools, but offer fewer activities than the average public school. These findings contradict what is expected, given the nature of the relationship between school personnel and parents in private schools. Extant research offers plausible explanations for these findings.

Parents of private school students may not feel that they need to be involved, because they may have a greater level of trust that school personnel are providing their children with a quality education than do parents of public school students. A study on Catholic high schools suggests this is true of Catholic school parents. Parents' trust in school personnel, who feel they are morally obligated to act in the students' best interest, leads parents to be less involved in the day-to-day aspects of the school environment (Bryk et al., 1993). This same study suggests that some of this trust stems from the fact that Catholic schools educate a large number of disadvantaged children. These children's parents, lacking education and knowledge of what their children need to succeed, leave education in the hands of the people they feel are better able to provide it. Also, current rhetoric surrounding the debate over school choice reveals a common belief that private school education is superior to public school education. This belief may lead parents of children in non-Catholic private schools to place similar levels of trust in their schools' staff.

Private school parents are also shown to be more satisfied with various aspects of their children's schools than parents of public school children (Hausman & Goldring, 2000; U.S. Department of Education, 1992), which may result in their feeling less of a need to concern themselves with the daily functioning of the school. Parents whose children are having problems or who are dissatisfied with the schools themselves might be more likely to have contact with school personnel on a more regular basis (Muller & Kerbow, 1993; Vaden-Kiernan, 1996). In general, decreased parental presence in the daily activities and governance of private schools, accompanied by lesser pressure from parents for contact with school personnel, results in fewer opportunities for involvement overall, because private school personnel do not see the utility in offering or feel pressured to offer them.

While the full regression model presented above accounted for a substantial amount of the variation in opportunities for involvement (27%), there probably exist other organizational characteristics and characteristics of school personnel that are simultaneously related to school sector and opportunities whose inclusion may further reduce the relationship between private school and opportunities. In particular, differences in resources may not be adequately controlled for in this study. Catholic schools in particular operate

on very limited budgets, a fact which may explain why they are unable to offer a greater number of formal opportunities for involvement. Financially, they are simply unable to do so. Had resources been better controlled for through inclusion of different measures, the effect of private school may have been reduced further or eliminated altogether.

Lastly, this study only examines relatively formal opportunities for involvement in the school context. These are activities that may require substantial planning and are offered school-wide. Involvement in the school context also includes less formal communication between parents and school personnel; for example, when parents and classroom teachers set up times for individual conferences apart from regularly-scheduled, school-wide conference days.

Similarly, involvement at the classroom level is not captured within the measure of opportunities used for these analyses. It is at this level that parents probably have the most direct and closest contact with the school as they interact with the people most responsible for their children's educational experiences, the teachers. Relationships between teachers and parents may differ considerably between private schools that foster a communal environment and public schools. Future analyses should examine whether the nature of the parent-school relationship in private schools does lead to greater opportunities for involvement at the classroom level and in less formal activities than those examined here.

Despite these limitations, results from this study clearly indicate that public schools offer more formal opportunities for parents to be involved than do private schools. These differences are partially explained by differences in the organizational characteristics of the school, most notably size and sources of additional funding. On average, public schools have larger student populations than private schools. They offer more extracurricular activities such as school plays and other performances to their students, which results in parents having more opportunities for involvement. With a larger parent population, public schools also seem better able to support organizations like Parent-Teacher Associations.

It was expected that private schools would be at an advantage with respect to resources, yet these data show they have fewer sources of additional funding than public schools. Many of the sources included in this study, for example migrant aid, are specifically directed at addressing the needs of at-risk populations, which private schools are less likely to educate. For this reason, they are less likely to qualify to receive such financial assistance. This lack of additional funding explains some of the difference between public and private schools in opportunities for involvement, as the number of additional sources of funding is highly and positively related to opportunities. The differences between public and private schools also are partially accounted for by the fact that, in this sample, a greater number of private schools are early childhood centers, which offer fewer opportunities for involvement than traditional schools. Contrary to expectations, differences in opportunities were not explained by differences in institu-

tional support for parental involvement, as measured in this study. Public and private schools placed similar levels of emphasis on good communication with parents. They also offered their teachers roughly equal opportunities for training regarding parental involvement, although the average in both types of schools was low, approximately once a year.

Findings from this study seem curious given that other research suggests private school parents are more involved in the school context than public school parents. It appears that private school parents are more involved despite the fact that they have fewer formal opportunities for involvement. While results from this study cannot provide insight into why this might be so, other literature supports several explanations. As discussed above, private school parents' socioeconomic backgrounds may lead them to be more involved, no matter the school their children attend. At the same time, it might be the case that when parents choose their children's schools, they become more interested, and therefore involved in, their children's education. Lastly, private schools may be doing a better job than public schools of encouraging and facilitating involvement in those activities they do offer. Such an explanation supports the contention that private schools are more concerned about creating a communal atmosphere in which all members of the school community are welcomed and valued. No matter the explanation, differences in opportunities for parental involvement represent another area in which the school experiences for both students and their parents differ between public and private schools.

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