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**Education Privatization:
The Attitudes and Experiences of Superintendents**

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Abstract

This paper reports the findings from an internet survey of 2,318 school superintendents across the U.S. The survey suggests four conclusions. First, private contracts for a range of educational services are widespread. Second, such contracting has a clear line of demarcation at contracting with an educational management organization for instructional services. Such contracts are infrequent; they are anticipated to provoke considerable opposition from almost all constituents; and even when undertaken are not regarded with much enthusiasm or approbation. Third, school superintendents appear divided as to the merits of contracting for private services: about half would definitely not consider it as an option, but an equivalent number are open to the possibility of privatization of instructional services. Fourth, although there is general acceptance of the importance of Federal initiatives to improve the quality of education, enhancing the competence of the teaching profession clearly supercedes policies that encourage test score accountability and parental involvement.

Education promotes dialogue about the many facets of privatization in education. The subject matter of the papers is diverse, including research reviews and original research on vouchers, charter schools, home schooling, and educational management organizations. The papers are grounded in a range of disciplinary and methodological approaches. The views presented in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the NCSPE.

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1. Introduction

Since the 1990s, America's public school system has been targeted for privatization: reforms such as expanded school choice, voucher programs, charter schooling, and private contracting have all been introduced in some states and are being promoted in others (see Levin, 2002). Many commentators praise these policies, both for offering greater freedom for parents and for improving the efficiency of the education sector. Others charge that privatization will be inequitable, and undermine the ethos of common schooling. The debate continues through this decade.

Notwithstanding the merits of privatization in the abstract, the success of such reforms will depend on their effective management and implementation from professionals within the education sector. This refers not only to teachers, but also to principals and other professionals within school districts: of specific interest here is the role of school superintendents. The roles and behaviors of school superintendents have rarely been studied by policy analysts or in the academic literature. It is thus fair to say that little is known about the views and perceptions of superintendents (Hill et al., 1997). Yet it is probably not appropriate to regard superintendents and teachers and teacher unions as having the same views: they have different jobs with different objectives which may not always be aligned (Hill, 2003). Also, privatization may change the job tasks required of superintendents, moving them from a managerial to a directorial role. To some, this change may be welcome; to others it may give more freedom to allocate resources in new ways. Nonetheless, superintendents are felt to be or portrayed as 'against choice and privatization' (Snell, 2002); others may be the subject of law suits charging that districts have failed to provide sufficient choice options (Walsh and Sack, 2003).

This paper reports the results from a large-scale survey of school superintendents across the U.S. These superintendents were asked about their experiences with, views of, and attitudes towards privatization of education services. School superintendents play an important role in U.S. schooling: they set both goals and objectives for their school district, allocate resources across instructional and non-instructional services, and have an influence in hiring and deployment of administrators, principals, and teaching staffs.

They also have a role in the politics of local communities. Yet, school superintendents' views and attitudes are only infrequently investigated by research.

This survey of 2,318 superintendents aims to redress this deficit. Section 2 reports on the sampling scheme, and the characteristics of respondents. Section 3 reports the findings from the survey as regards the superintendents' attitudes, experiences, and opinions. Section 4 concludes.

2. Survey Design

Across the U.S., there are 12,604 superintendents; although approximately one-fifth of this population represent districts enrolling fewer than 300 students (AASA, 2000). (For historical, political, and administrative reasons, the number of school districts does not precisely correspond to the number of superintendents). To obtain the views of as many superintendents as possible, this survey was distributed to all superintendents with a valid email address on the database of the AASA. The email address list comprises approximately 6,000 addresses, across all regions of the country and all sizes of district. (It was not possible to obtain a stratified random sample from this population).

The purpose of the survey is to gain knowledge concerning the experiences, attitudes and views of superintendents about privatization of educational services. The questionnaire for the survey was sent to all valid emails in November 2002, with a remailing five weeks later. The email was linked to a URL where respondents could complete the survey. From the 6,000 superintendents surveyed, 2,318 responded, representing 39% of the target sample and 18.4% of the population. Moreover, because internet surveys guide the respondent through the questionnaire, the item response rate is extremely high and consistent.

Table 1 shows the profiles of the superintendents and their districts. Most superintendents have over 5 years of experience, with over half having been a superintendent for more than one district; many are very highly qualified, with a higher degree (MA, EdD or PhD). In this sample, there is an over-representation of superintendents of large districts: 31.5% have student enrollments of more than 3,000; the corresponding figure for the population of superintendents is 23%. This over-

representation is useful, because many more students' schooling is reflected in, or influenced by, these superintendents' views. The sample also includes a sizable number of districts both with low-income students and of various racial groupings; the districts also vary in the per-pupil expenditures.

3. Results

Table 2 shows the extent of private contracting within school districts. Just under one-fifth of districts have engaged in some form of private contracting for instructional services, although much more contracting is for ancillary activities. The private contracting that does occur is commonly represented across a range of dimensions, such as capital improvements, insurance, transportation, and counseling. For some dimensions, such as summer schools, personnel, accounting, and course provision, there has been little private contracting. Overall, though, the picture is of a reasonably well-developed and extensive private contracting market within each district. This picture is consistent with the shift in other public services toward contracting (Shleifer and Vishny, 1999), although almost one-fifth of superintendents report no private contracting.

Table 3 shows more information about superintendents' views regarding contracts for instructional services. Two facts stand out. First, very few superintendents have given serious consideration to hiring an Educational Management Organization to manage an entire school site. Second, although as expected superintendents emphasize the cost-effectiveness of any contracted services, over half also anticipate community, workforce, or political opposition to contracting for instructional services. The strength and breadth of this opposition is identified in Table 4. Each constituency is anticipated – on net terms – to be opposed to contracting for instructional services. Teacher unions are considered to be very strongly opposed, as are their members, although somewhat less fervently so. School district personnel are also opposed in large majorities, as are school boards; however, for the latter, there are around 10% who are in favor. Finally, both the local community and parents are anticipated to be opposed, but a sizable minority are indifferent or in favor.

Table 5 gives details for the small fraction of school districts that have contracted with an Educational Management Organization. In general, these contracts are small-scale: most are for management of less than 2 schools; around one-third began within the last two years; and over half are single year contracts. The main concern is that the contracts will be over-budget. The contracts also appear to be open, either in terms of renewal (60%) or termination in present form (40%).

Table 6 gives details of the opinions of the full sample of superintendents. Overall, they appear either ambivalent toward or decidedly against contracting for instructional services, but with a strong minority who would definitely not consider it as an option. The survey also sought opinions about the main policy reforms on the agenda of the Federal Legislation as part of *No Child Left Behind* as ways to improve public education. Overall, there was a general presumption that these were important policy reforms. The reform that received the greatest support was hiring of highly qualified teachers (75% thought this very important). However, reduction of bureaucracy and increased flexibility was the next most important, with accountability for student performance similarly well-favored. Superintendents are less enthusiastic about empowering parents, annual testing of students in reading and math, and report cards on school performance.

Finally, it is possible to identify the factors that determine a superintendent's preferences for privatization via contracting for instructional services. In theory, several factors may be important, such as the superintendents' position and circumstances and the characteristics of the district. For exposition, all those superintendents who are either in favor or uncertain can be categorized as open to privatization; from Table 6, this is 54% of the sample. Logistic regression analysis can be used to identify who is likely to be most open to privatization. This analysis (available from the authors) reveals that some factors are influential: more experienced superintendents are less likely to favor privatization, as are those superintendents working in suburban districts over urban districts. So, a suburban superintendent with over 10 years of experience is open to privatization at a probability of 51%; an urban superintendent with less than 10 years experience is open to private contractings at a probability of 60%. However, other factors do not appear influential, such as student enrollment, per-pupil expenditures, and

student composition. Also, it is difficult to accurately predict which superintendents will – when all factors are taken into account – ultimately favor privatization.

4. Conclusions

This survey evidence reveals a number of important findings about the privatization of America's schools, as experienced by school superintendents. First, the superintendents report that private contracts for a range of educational services are widespread. This suggests that across many activities privatization is accepted and appropriate. Second, this acceptance has a clear line of demarcation as regards contracting with an educational management organization for instructional services: such contracts are infrequent; they are anticipated to provoke considerable opposition from almost all constituents; and even when undertaken are not regarded with much enthusiasm or approbation. Third, school superintendents appear divided as to the merits of contracting for private services: about half would definitely not consider it as an option, but an equivalent number are open to the possibility of privatization of instructional services. Fourth, although there is general acceptance of the importance of Federal initiatives to improve the quality of education, enhancing the competence of the teaching profession clearly supercedes policies to encourage test score accountability and parental involvement.

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Table 1
Profiles of Superintendents and Districts

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	Sample Respondents %
<u>SUPERINTENDENT:</u>	
Male	83.5
Experience:	
Less than 2 years	8.8
2-5 years	20.7
5-10 years	24.8
More than 10 years	45.6
Number of districts as superintendent:	
1	47.5
2-3	42.5
4+	9.9
Educational qualifications:	
BA only	23.0
MA	52.9
Phd/EdD	55.1
<u>DISTRICT:</u>	
Students in the district:	
Less than 300	6.7
300-2999	61.8
3000-24999	27.8
More than 25000	3.7
District location:	
Rural	63.7
Suburban	28.3
Metropolitan	7.9
Students eligible for free school lunch:	
0-5%	9.5
5-15%	18.3
More than 15%	72.2
Students who are African American:	
0-10%	82.9
10-20%	6.6
More than 20%	10.5
Students who are Hispanic:	
0-10%	81.1
10-20%	8.1
More than 20%	10.8
Average district -level per pupil expenditure:	
Less than \$5500	22.0
\$5500-\$6499	29.9
\$6500-\$7499	21.1
\$7500-\$8499	13.0
More than \$8500	14.0
<i>N</i>	2,318

**Table 2
Contracting With Private Providers Within Last 5 Years**

	Percent Contracted	
Instructional services	17.2	
Capital improvements	40.3	
Insurance	38.5	
Transportation	32.3	
Counseling or health services	27.3	
Educational technology	24.9	Formatted: Font: 10 pt
Food services	19.6	
Assessment services	14.4	
After school programs	12.2	
Fundraising	11.1	
Marketing / public relations	9.3	Formatted: Font: 10 pt
Supplementary instruction (e.g. tutoring, remedial services)	9.8	
Specific courses (e.g. music, arts, gifted)	5.3	
Accounting / payroll	5.5	
Personnel	4.0	
Summer school	3.6	
Superintendent never contracted for any of these services	18.6	Formatted: Font: 10 pt

Table 3
Contracting of Instructional Services

	Percent
Ever thought about or considered contracting with an educational management organization (EMO) to manage an entire school site:	
Yes, given serious consideration	1.8
Considered as a possibility	7.5
Never considered	90.7
Sources of information used:	
Reading materials	45.6
Presentation at a conference .	22.8
Solicitation by EMO providers	14.2
Word of mouth from other professionals..	28.4
Very Important factor:	
Effectiveness of the contracted service	89.2
Cost of the contracted service	81.9
Flexibility of the service	63.3
Community, workforce or political opposition	54.8
Views of district business official / manager	32.4

Table 4
District Views about Contracting with Private Providers for Instructional Services

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	Strongly opposed	Opposed	Indifferent	In favor
Views of teacher unions	70.1	22.7	6.4	0.8
Views of teachers	59.8	29.6	8.2	2.4
Views of school district personnel	41.8	38.8	14.6	4.8
Views of school board	34.5	36.9	19.5	9.2
Views of parents	23.3	35.3	37.7	3.8
Views of community	23.3	34.6	38.3	3.8

Table 5
Experiences with EMO Contracts

	%
Contract negotiated through a competitive bidding process	48.1
Status of EMOs:	
Only for-profit	64.0
Only not-for-profit	8.1
Both for-profit and not-for-profit	27.9
Schools managed by EMOs:	
Less than 2	71.4
2-5	14.3
5-10	8.9
More than 10	5.4
Commencement of first contract:	
Before 1996	20.8
1996-97	16.7
1998-99	27.1
Since 2000	35.4
Length of typical contract:	
1 year or less	52.8
2-3 years	26.4
4+ years	20.8
Very Important factor in evaluating the contract:	
Contract over-budget	86.3
Students' academic results	78.0
Satisfaction levels of education workers	56.9
Likelihood contract will be renewed under similar terms:	
Very unlikely / unlikely	23.6
Uncertain	17.6
Likely	29.4
Very likely	29.4
<i>N</i>	51

Table 6
Opinions of Superintendents

	%
Overall view towards contracted instructional services:	
Positive, would definitely consider as an option	8.0
Uncertain, would need more information	46.2
Negative, would definitely not consider as an option	45.8
Factor is very important as a way to improve public education:	
Highly qualified teachers in every classroom by 2005	75.0
Reducing bureaucracy and increasing flexibility	67.4
Accountability for student performance	62.4
Empowering parents	38.3
Annual testing of students in reading and math	37.2
Report cards on school performance for parents and taxpayers	25.0

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