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Western Kentucky University, emily.scheper415@topper.wku.edu

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COMPARING PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SCHOOLS

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

The Degree of Bachelor of Science with

Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By

Emily M. Scheper

Western Kentucky University
2013

CE/T Committee:

Dr. Alison Langdon, Advisor

Dr. Judy Pierce

Dr. Lynn Austin

Approved by

Advisor
Department of English

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2013

ABSTRACT

School is an experience shared by most Americans, but each individual's experience with school is very different. Many people assume that the biggest determinant of an individual's success in life stems from choosing the right school. Many parents take this choice very seriously, trying to determine the best environment for their child. In most cases, the choice is between a public/city school and a private/religious school that charges tuition. The question is, though, why do parents decide to spend extra money to send their children to a private school when the same education is offered for free at any local school? Society tends to place private schooling on a higher pedestal, saying it is the better choice for any child. Are these assumptions of society entirely true? In this paper, I attempt to determine the major factors surrounding the decision of schooling. Through scholarly sources and personal opinions, my writing should be a helpful guide to parents.

Keywords: Public School, Private School, Decision, Education, School Choice

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VITA

October 23, 1992	Born – Edgewood, Kentucky
2010	St. Henry District High School Erlanger, Kentucky
2011	Graduate of Dynamic Leadership Institute at WKU
2012 – 2013	Coordinator of Dynamic Leadership Institute at WKU
2011-present	Volunteer Tutor at Potter Children’s Home Bowling Green, Ky

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Elementary Education

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

School is an experience shared by most Americans, but each individual's experience with school is very different. Many people assume that the biggest determinant of an individual's success in life stems from choosing the right school. Sometimes a student will find the perfect friends and achieve high grades in every class. Other times a student may not be able to find the right friends or will struggle to maintain a good GPA. The school environment may have a negative or positive impact on a student's academic and social success. It is evident that grades are a big determinant when it comes to success in the future. If the school environment does not meet a student's needs, grades will suffer. When grades suffer, that student has fewer chances of attending college and obtaining a decent job. Additionally, a child forms valuable relationships at school that will impact the rest of his/her life. Different schools enroll vastly different types of children that will have vastly different influences on a student. Sometimes the children at school will have a positive influence, boosting the self-confidence of a student and encouraging good behavior. Other times the children will have a negative influence, making a student feel inferior or worthless and pressuring bad behavior.

Many parents take school choice very seriously, trying to determine the best environment for their child. Recently this issue has become highlighted. Parents are

starting to become more involved in the way their child experiences school. In fact, “in a notable number of interviews, parents expressed their awareness of educational issues on an even more refined level” (Bomotti, 1996, p. 31). Perhaps parents have become aware of how much a school influences future success. Therefore, they are taking necessary steps to educate themselves on the issues affecting education today.

In most cases, a parent’s choice is between a public/city school and a private/religious school. Public and private schools have always been in competition. Public schools are run by the government and must adhere to any standards and regulations given while remaining within the established budget. The circumstances surrounding every aspect of a public school depend on how much money the government provides. In addition, public schools are required to serve every student; for this reason, public schools are usually very diverse.

In contrast, private schools run independently of the government, although they still must meet certain curriculum standards usually set by the state. The government gives no financial help to a private school, so tuition is required for attendance. Because of this, the population at a private school is usually less diverse. The average private high school tuition in 2003-04 was \$8,412 (Snyder, Dillow, & Hoffman, 2008, p. 86). That is a lot compared to the essentially free education at public schools. The money, however, can be spent in whatever way the school desires. In this way, private schools are able to create their own budget. Regardless of the high tuition costs, private school attendance is still significant in that “about 10% of students in the U.S. attend private schools” (Powell, 2012, p. 38). Enrollment for secondary education in fall 2007 shows 15,018,000 students in public schools and 1,377,000 students in private schools (Snyder et al., 2008, p. 82).

The presence of religion is often the biggest environmental difference between public and private schools. However, public schools were not always secular. During colonial times, the earliest American public schools were actually founded on Protestant principles, since that was the main religion of England. The values associated with religion were considered necessary knowledge in the colonies (Lines, 1988, p. 68). When compulsory education laws came about in the mid 1800s, waves of Catholic immigrants wanted their schools to focus on the Catholic religion instead of Protestant, so the private school was born (Lines, 1988, p. 71). When people of other religions continued to leave the public schools due to their Protestant nature, public schools started to replace traditional Protestant values with non-denominationalism in order to keep students (Lines, 1988, p. 73). As a result, many private Protestant schools were founded as an alternative for those who were still Protestant (Lines 1988, p. 67). Since American public schools are now required by law to be secular, any religion-based school is considered private. At the same time there are still private schools that are not affiliated with a certain religion.

If given any choice without the factors of location or tuition, parental preferences for public and private schools are close to even. Results of a study conducted in Virginia, revealed that 40% of parents would prefer traditional public school, 39% would like private, 11% would prefer homeschooling, and 8% would like a charter school for their children (DiPerna, 2009, pg. 8). This indicates that parents must see benefits to both types of schools. What are the reasons that parents choose public school? What are the reasons that parents choose private school? The real question is, though, why do parents decide to spend extra money to send their children to a private school when the same

education is offered for free at any local school? Overall, “the students in both types of institutions are taught similar knowledge [and] skills in similar grades, engage in similar learning tasks, read similar literary works and textbooks, and participate in similar extracurricular activities” (Nichols, 2010, p. 42).

Regardless, it is a common notion that society tends to place private schooling on a higher pedestal, saying it is the better choice for any child. Of the parents that would choose private school, did they base their choice on these common assumptions of society or did they carefully examine the options and choose the best school for their child’s individual needs? Parents should learn to focus more on their individual viewpoints and ignore the influence of society because conclusions from this project suggest that private school superiority may not be entirely true. Many sources show that the academic gains in public school often beat the private schools. Additionally, the social factors that surround a public school may offer a better chance of social acceptance for all types of students.

After looking at many different sources, it is evident that the most important factors of school choice vary. According to Nichols (2010), tuition is not of the most importance when it came down to deciding schools (p. 82). If tuition does not play a big part in the decision, then what does? One study tried to eliminate any bias by placing the factors on a website and tracking which pages had the most hits. The following factors were listed in order of importance: student body, location, test scores, basic programs, staff, facilities, after-school, community, and special programs (Schneider & Buckley, 2002, p. 138). Therefore, parents seemed to be most interested in the student body and location of a school. However, every parent is different and will consider different

factors when choosing a school. Therefore, simply stating the popular considerations will not help one make a decision.

The goal of this paper is to identify and discuss each possible factor that may influence a decision. The factors emerging from the previous study by Schneider and Buckley will act as groundwork. All of the factors seem to be connected and related; therefore they have been organized into broad categories so that each has a context to guide understanding. Most factors can be organized into either the academic realm or the social realm. Chapter 2 of the paper will discuss academic factors such as standards, teacher quality, curriculum, class size, and educational success. Chapter 3 of the paper will address the social factors including student behavior and safety, religion, a student's identity and sense of belonging, and the size of the school. The final chapter attempts to reach conclusions based on the topics discussed in the other chapters.

One of the most reliable sources of information regarding schools comes from students, teachers, and parents. Therefore, as a part of this project, a variety of people with experience in both public and private schools have been interviewed. Whenever a person's name is used in this paper as a source of information, it is referring to one of these interviews. Some names have been changed as a respect of privacy. Comments from these interviews provide some valuable information. What they have shared about their experiences may either support what research shows or challenge it. When someone has had experience with both schools, they are likely able to compare the schools without bias. One who has only attended private school will most likely have a tendency to favor private school. The same would be true with someone who only attended public school.

It is important to note that the school of attendance may influence comments and interpretation of the interviews.

As a result of the information presented in this project, readers should be able to gain some insight into the real strengths and weaknesses of both types of schools. It is often hard to know where to look when considering a school. This paper should be a guide to show parents what needs to be considered. A lot of thought goes into the analysis of each factor. In addition to reading about each possible consideration, parents also need to examine their own desires. Discussion of the factors should not be the only source of information when making a decision. Parents should know what they want from a school before they seek to find it. The knowledge and insight here is only given as an aid to help one make a clearer decision about where to send a child.

CHAPTER 2

ACADEMIC DIFFERENCES

The widespread assumption about private schools is the promise of better academics. There are many bases on which to support this argument. Performance indicators such as graduation rates and test scores always seem to be better. Private school students also seem to write more papers and do more homework. That means they are smarter, right? Not always. Many times the successes of public schools are overlooked. A variety of scholarly sources show that public school results are equally acceptable, if not better than their private school counterparts.

When discussing academic success though, one must also consider the types of students that attend each school. Since private schools are able to select their students, it can be easy for private schools to choose only the students who will improve the academic record. Students attending private schools also have parents who are willing to pay tuition. Therefore, these parents may be more devoted to their child's education, which will improve overall academic success. This and other factors including teacher quality, class size, and curriculum will be discussed in this chapter.

Standards

Schools are created for a purpose: to teach the next generation. The nation is aware that the future depends on our youth. The work of one generation does not last forever, and jobs that keep our nation running will have to be passed to the younger

generation. Therefore, children need to be educated so they are prepared to take these jobs. In order to make the education of all students more equal, the government creates a standard. These principles illustrate where a student needs to be at a certain age so he or she will stay on track. The standards help teachers decide what needs to be taught in the classroom. There are also principles to make sure teachers are doing what needs to be done to keep students on track. This often includes government sponsored “visits” to schools to assess teacher effectiveness. Recently, the government has become reliant on standardized tests to judge student achievement and teacher effectiveness. Many parents and teachers have begun to complain about the necessity of testing. Any public school is subject to these regulations set by the government.

The question of standardized testing has become a bit of a controversy. Bernstein (2013) writes an interesting article addressing the results of the recent increase in required testing. Bernstein feels it necessary to warn college professors about incoming freshmen’s lack of writing skills. As a high school teacher, he is forced to teach English material that aligns with the required testing. Therefore, his instruction is very limited and he is unable to teach the writing tools needed to write effective college papers. As a way to monitor how our nation is improving, these new tests have become the main focus for many public schools. Teachers are forced to teach to the test because they have no time to do anything else.

As discussed earlier, private schools are set apart from public schools because they are independent of the government. The private schools are not always required to do everything that is mandated in the public schools. According to McTighe (2004), “Forced government assessments can present a serious threat to the independence and

diversity of a private education” (p. 58). For this reason, many will choose private school to escape the endless testing and standards. However, there is no guarantee that a private school will be exempt from state-regulated tests and teacher assessments. Although the staff at a private school is able to determine their own budget and set their own standards, the state may still monitor the private schools on different levels. According to a study by DeGroff (2003), there are some states that do not have state laws to regulate non-public schools. Those same states might require certain classes to graduate. On the other hand, in the states that do have laws to regulate private schools, they may not require specific classes. State mandated testing might not be required in the private schools, but that requirement depends on state law. Parents should do research in their respective state before making assumptions about the government regulations in a private school.

The influence of the state can have an effect on teachers as well. Many times, teachers will begin to worry about the security of their job based on the performance of students on state or local tests. Job security is also affected by the results of teacher assessments. In public schools, the percentage of teachers who worry about job security is 31.2% while in private schools it is only 7.8%. (Snyder et al, 2008, p. 101). From this fact, one can infer that any of the standardized tests and measurements of teacher effectiveness are considered in a much more serious manner in the public schools. The worries of public school teachers might be caused by the stress of testing and how heavily the scores predict job security. If not required by the state, private school administrators might use the extra independence to avoid these stressful testing situations and create more class time for teachers to explore other topics. Perhaps the private school teachers are not as worried about job security because they do not have as many

regular observations and assessments. When the tests are not required at the private schools, the teachers will not feel pressured to teach content on the tests.

On the other hand, some argue that the lack of state regulation in the private system can be very damaging. In a public system, one will often find higher authorities such as superintendents and members of the school board making “visits” to a school. During these visits they will observe teachers and make sure that all of the state-mandated procedures are being followed correctly. Private schools do not always get visits from higher authorities. In many cases there may not even be a higher authority than the principal, who may or may not evaluate teachers sufficiently. In one of the interviews, David, who attended private school up until college, tells of an unfortunate situation regarding his private school’s regulation. One of his classroom teachers was very ineffective and lazy, but there was not enough monitoring of teachers to notice the issue and correct it (personal communication, May 7, 2013). Perhaps if someone had observed that teacher in the classroom, the problem would have been eliminated. David also shares information that the principal of his private school was essentially careless when it came to her job. She would vacation when the school needed her most, and she even hired a close friend, making regulation even more biased and ineffective (personal communication, May 7, 2013). Although this is definitely not the case in all private schools, it shows an example of how certain schools can suffer from the lack of regulation.

Another issue surrounding standards has to do with accountability, or how much the school is liable for its actions. The government that funds public schools cannot take any chances here. In her interview, Sarah brings up the issue of accountability. Most of

the rules that govern public schools are meant to provide protection in the case of a lawsuit (personal communication, April 24, 2013). Permission to use school property for student events, following routine procedures, and signing endless forms are all ways to regulate the school. This fact may influence classroom effectiveness. Over 70% of teachers in public school said routine duties and paperwork interfere with teaching while the percentage of private school teachers making the same complaints is only 40.8% (Snyder et al, 2008, p. 101). Private schools operate with a hint of trust between their students and families. They can escape many trivial tasks because they have minimal fear of a lawsuit, hence, less paperwork. They can also have preferences about who they want to attend their school. Since the public schools are required to serve all people and do not have control over families involved with the school, regulations and procedures are necessary.

According to McTighe (2004), private schools already have a lot of accountability even if the state is not involved at all. Essentially, “if [private] schools don’t deliver what parents want, parents take their business someplace else, and the school closes” (p. 56). Private schools in a sense have paying customers. If these customers are not satisfied with the services given at the school, they will stop sending a child there, which means less money. If the private school does not have enough paying customers, it will be forced to close. According to McTighe (2004), “private schools are the most accountable schools in the country” (p. 56). The parents have other options, but they choose to pay for private schooling, so they must be getting what they want. In another interview, Michelle says something similar. Michelle went to private school up until 10th grade where she switched to a public school. She says the parents of students in a private

school are more likely to pressure the teachers, whereas the parents of students in a public school are more likely to pressure the students (personal communication, May 1, 2013). If there is a problem at the school, parents who are paying for an education are more likely to go directly to the source of the problem. In this way, the parents provide the regulation that would otherwise be done by the state.

Teacher Quality

The classroom teacher plays a big part in the academic success of a student. Parents want a school where they know the teachers will be dedicated. The average salary for public school teachers is \$47,700 while the average salary for private school teachers is \$34,700 (Snyder et al, 2008, p. 105-106). This piece of information is all that is needed to make some inferences about the teachers at both types of schools. Public school teachers make more money. There are rules to govern how the public school teacher gets paid that are directly related to years of service and educational attainment. Therefore, that additional salary may be an indicator of more training and experience. Public grade schools show 89% certified teachers while the private schools have an average of less than 45% (Lubienski, Lubienski, & Crane, 2008, p. 116). In addition, public school teachers reported participating in more forms of professional development than teachers in other schools (Lubienski et al, 2008, p. 116). It is possible, however, that public school teachers attend more training and professional development events only because it is mandatory. It is unclear whether the additional training makes a better teacher. When just considering salary, though, if a teacher had the option of teaching at a public or private school, what would be the more popular choice? If a teacher chooses to

teach at the private school (essentially doing the same job for less money), that teacher might have some kind of personal connection to the private school.

In many cases, students who attended a private school want to come back to teach there. Private schools are also probably more likely to hire people who graduated from the school. The teachers at a private school play a large part in creating the school's community. Therefore, "private schools are generally very selective about who they place in front of their students" (Nichols, 2010, p. 77). Surprisingly, in a national survey of teachers, 45.9% of public school teachers say they are satisfied with their teaching salary, but 50.6% of private school teachers say they are satisfied (Snyder et al, 2008, p. 101). Even though private school teachers are commonly paid less, a larger percentage of them are satisfied with their salary. Does that mean that private school teachers are more passionate about their work? Are public schools more likely to get teachers who are only there for the money?

Not necessarily. Matt taught several years at a private school and now teaches at a public school. He was able to provide many insights into the teacher differences. He admits that his salary at the private school was lower. Regardless of the salary, though, his excellent teaching practices remained the same at both schools (personal communication, May 1, 2013). Matt is a prime example that both private and public school teachers can be passionate about their job. At the same time, he can recall poor teachers at both his private and public schools (personal communication, May 1, 2013). As discussed before, David also described some examples of bad teachers at his private school (personal communication, May 7, 2013). It is inevitable that some teachers will dislike their job or use ineffective teaching strategies. No school is exempt from the

chance of a terrible teacher. Hopefully the hiring process at both schools will eliminate those who are not meant to be teachers. Additionally, both types of schools should implement ongoing teacher assessments. As discussed earlier, those teacher regulations may be more prevalent in public schools, giving the public schools a better chance of recognizing a problem.

Teacher quality may also be affected by the students in the classroom. Students who are disengaged and have no desire to learn are going to discourage the teacher. On the other hand, students who are engaged and desire to learn will motivate the teacher to work harder. It is hard to determine if the students in a classroom will be engaged or if their negative attitudes will affect teaching practices. Some could argue that the more advantaged students at the private school will be more eager to learn, but the kinds of students in the classroom will vary depending on class and year.

The freedom a teacher has at a certain type of school is also important. Sarah attended public schooling as a student and now teaches at a private school. She notes that the private school has more flexibility (personal communication, April 24, 2013). Matt also seemed to like the extra freedom he had at his private school. That freedom has a lot to do with the resources that are available for teachers at the school. As a science teacher, Matt's lessons and experiments are guided by the materials available. The private school was always able to provide him with anything he needed. He now finds it much harder to gather resources at his public school. The budget at his public school does not give him enough money for the supplies he wants (personal communication, May 1, 2013). Maybe the private schools set aside more money for instructional use while the public schools have too many other budgeting concerns. Without the binds of

public regulations and the availability of more resources, teachers at a private school are probably able to be more creative with their lessons.

Bailey, who has always attended public school, addressed the same issue about the assumption of more freedom at a private school. From outside sources, she agrees that private school teachers have more freedom, but she says that is not always a good thing (personal communication, May 1, 2013). Sometimes the teachers may get carried away with the freedom and absence of regulation, influencing classroom performance in a negative way. All of these characteristics are dependent on the types of teachers that are hired at the school. Some teachers will take advantage of the freedom while others will use the freedom to benefit the students in the best way possible. When looking into a certain school, parents should get to know the teachers that work there because teacher quality has a big effect on how much students learn. Salary should never be the main indicator of teacher effectiveness.

Curriculum

Another factor of a student's academic success depends on the classes offered at the school. Which type of school is able to offer the best curriculum? A school's curriculum includes the amount of classes, the quality of classes, and the work load required for those classes. Sometimes students and parents are concerned about the electives available at a school. In order to specialize in a particular field, a student might want to practice that field in job-specific high school classes before pursuing it in college. Private schools, with limited money and teachers, may not always be able to meet those specialized needs. Public schools often have the staff and funds to offer a larger variety of classes.

It is hard to give a definite answer about which school offers more classes because the circumstances are highly dependent on the specific school or school district. From experience and discussion with others though, many have formed opinions about the availability of options at both types of schools. Trenton, who attended private school until college, thinks that a public school could have offered him more electives (personal communication, May 7, 2013). This and other opinions are likely based upon the lack of options at the private school, or hearing about public school friends who have more options. Regardless, when a student is able to have more control over his/her education and class choice, that student is more likely to enjoy school and perform better.

A common assumption about private school curriculum is the greater number of advanced classes and college preparation. A great way for students to earn college credit in high school is through the Advanced Placement (AP) program. Although many private schools do offer AP courses, that does not mean they are nonexistent in public schools. According to Snyder et al (2008), 67% of public high schools offered Advanced Placement courses in 2003 (p. 220). Another option is a dual credit course where the student attends a college-level class held at the high school or at a university and earns credit for both high school and college. The difference is that AP courses require the student to pass an AP test in order to earn college credit while in dual credit courses the student earns college credit as long as they pass the class. According to Snyder et al (2008), 71% of public high schools offered dual credit courses in 2003 (p. 220). Dual credit courses are probably not as commonly found at private schools. Additionally, the courses and programs schools are able to offer is entirely dependent on the resources of each specific school and district administration.

Sources from both research and interviews have suggested that private schools may have some advantages when it comes to curriculum. Ashley sends her child to a private Montessori school, and she is very impressed with the curriculum and teaching strategies that would not be found at a public school (personal communication, April 29, 2013). Michelle has experience at both private and public schools. She describes the private school curriculum as harder and more challenging (personal communication, May 1, 2013). When asked how much homework they do per week, 75% of private school students in 2004 said they did 4 or more hours, compared to only 56% in public schools (Snyder et al, 2008, p. 221). At the same time, Cookson (1993) says that students in private schools are given stricter discipline, more homework and writing, placed in smaller classes, and take more semester hours (p. 179). Does the amount of homework provide an accurate judgment of quality education? In the case of writing, maybe the extra work does help. Trenton says that his private high school better prepared him for college level writing. He was comfortable writing long papers while a lot of his friends struggled with college assignments (personal communication, May 7, 2013).

Other sources, however, revealed similar arguments for public schooling. Like Trenton, others have formed the opinion that public schools offer more classes and electives. Eathan went to private school up until college and he thinks a public school could have offered more AP classes than his high school (personal communication, April 23, 2013). Bailey says that her public school rivaled nearby private schools. She also determined through conversation with friends that private school students had more days off school, which is less learning time (personal communication, May 1, 2013). Additionally, without a constant critical eye from the state, private schools might be more

likely to slack off and fill class time with other events such as religious ceremonies and school assemblies. Many private schools require students to take a theology class. This requirement obviously takes away from the opportunity to take other academic classes.

The amount of time spent in school will ultimately affect a child's education. Of the two teachers who were interviewed, both of them mentioned the scheduling difference between public and private. It is beneficial for teachers to be aware of the vacations and assemblies throughout the school year that will interfere with class time so they can plan curriculum units accordingly. Having experience at both public and private schools, Matt says that planning at the private school was much easier. The calendar at his public school is slightly unpredictable. In addition to that, the public school uses the intercom more often to communicate with him throughout the day, which interrupts his lessons (personal communication, May 1, 2013). From her experience teaching at a private school so far, Sarah says that the scheduling seems very flexible. There are more days off compared to when she attended public school (personal communication, April 24, 2013). These differences might be a result of state mandates on public schools and the absence of those mandates at private schools. It is important, however, to note that the amount of days off school will depend on the particular practices of each private school and the state requirements. Some private schools might have more days in session than the public schools. Either way, the scheduling habits can affect what a student learns and the effectiveness of the instruction. Although parents are not affected by the scheduling habits of the school during the day, parents may be concerned about the learning that is lost to events and interruptions.

The most important part of college preparation nowadays is how a student scores on the ACT. Caitlin, who attended a public high school, said her friend received more ACT prep at her Catholic high school (personal communication, April 29, 2013). It is important to note, however, that private schools rely on those scores in order to gain more credentials to attract students. Yes, teachers ultimately want the students to do well, but the private school also needs the students to do well in order to keep the school running. Parents are more likely to choose a private school and pay tuition if they are convinced their child will do better on the ACT. Therefore, the private schools take the steps that are needed to help students perform better. When the scores turn out favorable, the private schools advertise those scores to get more students. Public schools do not need to win approval, so they are less likely to substitute class time for ACT prep. These arguments, however, in no way mean that public school students are going to perform worse on the ACT.

The final concern surrounding curriculum has to do with the special needs services provided in both types of schools. Is a certain type of school more appropriate? Some of those interviewed said they switched from private to public schooling because either the interviewee or a sibling needed special care and resources that a private school simply could not offer. The percent of public schools with at least one IEP (Individualized Education Program) student in the 07-08 school year was 98.1%. In comparison, the percent of private schools with at least one IEP student was 59.3% (Keigher & Gruber, 2009, p. 8-9). According to Snyder et al (2008), 96% of all students with disabilities in 2005 were offered services at a regular school outside regular classes. Only 1.2% of the disabled students were serviced at a separate private school (p. 78).

Looking at these numbers, it can be assumed that private schools are almost off limits for learning disabled students. Private school administrators must budget their money very carefully, and they often do not have enough money to staff additional aides or pay for additional products to serve a small percentage of disabled individuals. Since public schools are required to educate all students, the budget includes money for the disabled and services are rendered without much trouble. Matt says it is unfortunate that learning disabled children do not always have the opportunity to be a part of a private school community (personal communication, May 1, 2013).

Size

A big part of the educational atmosphere of a school depends on the size. It is commonly assumed that private schools are always smaller. Statistics show that that assumption may be true. The average size of a private secondary school for the 09-10 school year was 282.9 students (Broughman, Swaim, & Hryczaniuk, 2011, p. 12). Based on the total school enrollment and number of schools in fall 2005, the average size of a public school was 504.3 students (Snyder et al, 2008, p. 60, 117). That's a difference of over 200 students. It is important to consider the fact that an average smaller size does not mean that private schools are always smaller. Public schools may sometimes be of a smaller size than some private schools, especially in rural areas. Additionally, private schools can get to be very large in urban areas.

There are also many assumptions concerning how size affects education. The most common assumption is that a smaller school will lead to smaller classes and more individualized instruction. When the school is smaller, the instruction is more personal and specific to the students. Other assumptions recognize the benefits of a bigger school.

Larger schools will have the extra resources to offer more opportunities for students.

When there are more students, there are more teachers to meet student needs and to offer more classes.

Size also impacts the student/teacher ratio. According to Snyder et al (2008), the number of students per teacher for all private schools in fall 2005 was 13.5, while in public schools it was 15.7 (p. 92). After reflection of all interviews, the private school benefit most often mentioned was a smaller class size. A smaller student/teacher ratio is often a sign of greater success. The assumptions about the benefits of smaller classes have some support. For example, “programs with much smaller class sizes than are commonplace today have produced much larger educational gains than are commonly experienced” (Nichols, 2010, p. 74). The student will also benefit from additional teacher attention: “students of private schools have more opportunities to form relationships with their teacher, which can lead them to greater academic success” (Nichols, 2010, p. 75). Although the average student/teacher ratio is smaller for the private schools, that does not mean that any given private school has a smaller class size than any given public school. As stated earlier, the size of the school depends on the regional influences. The student/teacher ratio ultimately depends on the characteristics of each individual school.

Another consideration when thinking about size is the notion of uncontrollable growth in public schools. In 2005, 37% of public schools had portable, temporary classroom buildings (Snyder et al, 2008, p. 162). The overcrowding of schools has the potential to unfavorably affect performance in the classroom. Students will get distracted by the amount of students in the room or the unfavorable condition of the classroom.

Private schools have the ability to deny students, preventing overcrowding. Parents need to decide if their child will still be able to learn in overcrowded classrooms. Otherwise, a private school option might be better.

Academic Success

Perhaps the biggest assumption when it comes to private schools is the promise of better academic success. For example, “it is part of the common wisdom in the United States that private school students outscore public school students on standardized tests” (Lubienski & Lubienski, 2005, p. 696). In a world that is becoming increasingly dependent on the necessity of a college degree, parents want a school that will give their child better chances of admittance to college and getting a college scholarship. For many, private schooling is the answer. Evidence found in this research, however, may challenge parents to reconsider that assumption before choosing a private school. This evidence will be revealed later in the discussion. First, though, there are many sources to support the assumptions that private schools provide better academics. Private schools often take much pride in student success. Do they have the credentials to boast about their students?

In most cases the answer is yes. In the case of test scores, private school students outperform public school students. One study looked at the scores from the 2000 Main NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) mathematics assessment and found that “the mean mathematics achievement of private schools was significantly higher than that of public school” (Lubienski & Lubienski, 2005, p. 698). Another study analyzed the NAEP scores in several subjects between 2000 and 2005. The average math score for 8th grade students in 2003 was 276 in public schools and 292 in private schools

– a difference of 16 points (Snyder et al, 2008, p. 200). Additionally, the average reading score for 8th grade students in 2003 was 261 in public schools and 282 in private schools – a difference of 21 points (Snyder et al, 2008, p. 185). As a result of these scores, people jump to obvious conclusions: private schools must be more effective at teaching material if the students score better on the content and a lower score in the public school must mean that public schools do not teach what is necessary for students to succeed on the test. These conclusions appear to be justifiable based on the statistics.

Private school students are also more likely to graduate high school. According to Broughman et al (2011), in the 08-09 school year, the graduation rate of private school students nationwide was 98.1% (p. 18). Additionally, from the National Center for Education Statistics, for the 06-07 school year, the private school graduation rate was 93.8% compared to the public school rate of 81.2 % (Keigher & Gruber, 2009, p. 12-13). It can be assumed that the extra percentage of students who did not graduate were dropouts. As a result of these statistics there are other obvious assumptions: if there are more graduates, private schools must provide an atmosphere that makes students more academically motivated; stricter curriculum and tougher assignments give students the practice and discipline needed to complete high school; since public school students are more likely to drop out of school, the atmosphere at public school must not be fostering academic motivation; and students are more likely to be affected by negative influences at a public school.

The statistics also reveal truths about students after graduation. For example, “private secondary school graduates are more likely to attend college than their public school peers, whatever their level of academic attainment or family background”

(Cookson, 1993, p. 181). According to Bobek (2005), in Pennsylvania, the percentage of private school graduates attending college after the 2003-04 school year (89.1%) is higher than that of the public school graduates (72.1%) (p. 8). Once again, from the National Center for Education Statistics, in the 06-07 school year only 39.5% of the public school graduates attended a 4-year college, compared to 66.5 % of the private school graduates (Keigher & Gruber, 2009, p. 12-13). These numbers create even more assumptions such as: the guidance counselors at private schools work harder to help their students achieve at the college level; colleges prefer to enroll students with a private education; private school students are able to receive more college scholarships; private schools help their students get higher scores on the ACT while public school students cannot perform as well; and public schools do not emphasize college as much as private schools. Making all of these broad assumptions solely from these statistics can be dangerous. Decisions should not be based only on this data because there are many reasons behind the numbers.

When analyzing these statistics one needs to keep in mind the types of students that attend private schools. It should be known that “private schools enrolled larger concentrations of high SES [socio-economic status] students” (Lubienski & Lubienski, 2005, p. 698). Additionally, “private schools, on average, serve more advantaged students – those who already exhibit characteristics associated with school success” (Crane, Lubienski, Lubienski, 2008, p. 690). Parents who are willing to pay extra money for school are parents that really care about their child’s education and will be very supportive at home. They have probably already given their child adequate preparation for learning. Nichols (2010) also states that “there is a strong relationship between

family income level and private school attendance” (p. 50). Parents who are financially able to pay for a private education are usually of higher SES and have fewer troubles at home. Therefore they are able to spend the necessary time helping their child with schoolwork. This parental involvement also serves as a motivational tool for students. When a parent shows genuine interest in the child’s life at school and is willing to help with homework, the child will most likely begin to view school with a more positive attitude.

Some comments in the interviews pointed out the fact that private schools are often aware of their students’ socio-economic status. Private schools know that the majority of their students are capable of higher level work, so that is what they assign. Buddy, who attended private school and sent his children through private school, says that teachers expect parental support in a private school (personal communication, April 24, 2013). Therefore, the homework and assignments given in class may be more challenging than normal because they know that parents will be able to help at home. Parents of private school students may also expect a better academic atmosphere for their student in school due to the economic factors of the student body. In fact, “families believe that the kinds of children who attend school affect their child’s behavior and academic performance” (Nichols, 2010, p. 30). The students at a private school are more likely to have a better academic influence on each other if everyone is already a good student.

Unlike the private schools, public schools cannot assume that parents will be involved. Matthew, who attended private schooling up until college, points out that public schools have the responsibility to educate every student, regardless of SES.

Classroom instruction often needs to be tailored to the lowest level, and in public schools the lowest level is likely to be lower than in the private schools. Therefore, Matthew feels that he would not have been challenged in a public school (personal communication, April 22, 2013). This is likely to be true in many cases. Some public schools may find it difficult to meet the needs of capable students like Matthew, but that is only because they have to focus on those students who need more attention. In a private school, those barriers are at least smaller if not nonexistent. If a larger number of students are considered gifted in a classroom, then the teacher will be able to create lessons that target the majority, making the material more challenging. All of these academic influences need to be considered when looking at the previous statistics. Are the better scores and higher graduation rates a direct result of the schooling practices, or do the demographics of the students play a role in the numbers?

As many people have noticed, the public school system has undergone a lot of changes in the past few years. All of the increased amounts of testing discussed earlier are part of an effort to improve student performance. In a lot of ways, the efforts are working. National graduation numbers are increasing and drop-out percentages are decreasing. For example, “the 2007-08 record number of high school graduates exceeds the former records of 2005-06 and 2006-07” (Snyder et al, 2008, p. 52). In the 1995-96 school year, only 71% of high school students graduated on time compared to 74.7% in the 2004-05 school year (Snyder et al, 2008, p. 165). Additionally, “between 1986 and 2006, the dropout rate declined from 12.2 percent to 9.3 percent” (Snyder et al, 2008, p. 52).

Why have the statistics improved? Practices mandated in public schools have reformed the way schools service special needs students, and Response to Intervention (RTI) methods have been implemented to help struggling readers and to place advanced readers with students at a similar level. Each reading level will get individual instruction with the classroom teacher. Students who need extra help will be taken out of the classroom to work with a specialized teacher while advanced students are able to work together to improve their talents. One of the goals of these new practices is to increase student passion for reading. Surprisingly, when asked in 2004 if they read non-school related books 3 or more hours per week, 33.8% of public school students said they do compared to only 29.8% of Catholic school students (Snyder et al, 2008, p. 221). Perhaps the research that is behind all of the new regulations is actually effective at improving student performance and motivation. Private schools do not always have the money or resources to provide programs like the ones that are emerging at public schools.

With all circumstances considered, public schools may not be as bad as they are portrayed. When studies take into account the demographics of students in the school, “public schools are at least as effective as private schools in boosting student achievement” (Crane et al, 2008, p. 694). Crane argues that public schools typically enroll a larger percentage of students who are of lower achievement levels. Regardless of the lower starting point, public schools are able to compete with private schools on an academic level. They are able to jump large achievement gaps. If given the same diverse group of students, a private school may not be able to meet the challenge. The “old assumptions about the inherent superiority of private schools – the ‘private school effect’ – may no longer hold true” (Crane et al, 2008, p. 694).

Another study by the same researchers analyzed results keeping demographics in mind. It states that, “After adjusting for demographic differences among schools, public school [mathematic score] means were significantly higher than the means for all other school types” (Lubienski et al, 2008, p. 117). In addition to that, Cookson (1993) says, “The direct academic effect of attending a private school is very small once the academic abilities and family backgrounds of students are taken into account” (p. 175). Some people, such as Chris and Jennifer, have had experience in both public and private schools. When asked about the academic differences, they both agreed that public and private schools offer the same education (personal communication, April 25, 2013). With these findings, many of the major assumptions about private schools have been challenged. It is important to bear this in mind when considering the academic opportunities at a public school.

CHAPTER 3

SOCIAL DIFFERENCES

Academic instruction is not the only thing that a child receives at school. A child also learns lessons about how to live and get along with others in life. A child interacts with peers at school. The types of people that a child is surrounded by will affect his or her development. Peer pressure is a powerful force that may cause students to do things they would not otherwise do. If a child is constantly surrounded by people who pressure their peers into bad decisions, that can have a negative influence.

Public and private schools often offer very different social environments that will impact the child's life. In addition to the educational factors discussed previously, the social factors complete the characteristics of a school's overall climate. Many people still assume that private schools are the prime choice even when it comes to the social aspect of a school. Since private schools are smaller, the students must feel much more comfortable in the tighter community. Aside from sense of belonging, students are also affected by the safety of the school and the religious presence. All of these factors will play a part in how a child grows and develops. Therefore, in order to get a full analysis of the school, one needs to examine the social factors as well.

Behavior/Safety

A large part of a school's social community has to do with the behavior of the students both inside and outside of school. Do the students engage in healthy activities

for their social development, or do they get into trouble? If a student gets in trouble at school, that student is more likely to continue to get into trouble later in life. If a school is effectively able to control the students, troubles later in life are less likely. Certain characteristics are associated with school safety. There are different variables surrounding these characteristics for both public and private schools.

Private schools always seem to have fewer behavior problems. The public population often assumes that there are fewer expulsions, fewer reported incidents, and fewer police visits at a private school. Why might that be? For one, private schools can't afford to spend any extra time dealing with student misbehavior. They have fewer resources and less money. They budget just enough to take care of all the school's needs. In order for the school to run effectively, students need to behave. Therefore, teachers and administrators take immediate action at the smallest indication of wrongdoing. They create the rules and they expect adherence. When consequences are consistently implemented, students will not take any chances and misbehavior will decrease. Studies "suggest that the private schools offer a model of effective school organization, emphasizing traditional curricula and management roles" (Talbert, 1988, p. 161). The school makes an effort to keep all of the students out of trouble. As stated earlier, when teachers expect more from students, they tighten the curriculum. The same may be true for discipline practices. The teachers and administrators expect the students to behave better. Therefore, the smallest misdemeanor does not go unnoticed.

If the school is smaller, though, dealing with misbehavior will be easier. Additionally, the students at a private school are already advantaged and are less likely to get into trouble. A study by Lubienski et al (2008) suggests that "although school climate

factors, such as parent involvement, teacher morale, and student attendance, might seem more favorable in private schools, it appears that in many cases this might simply be due to the advantaged demographics of those schools” (p. 126). All of the good behavior may once again be the result of student socio-economic status. Students of higher SES are likely to be better behaved. A good amount of misbehavior is fueled by the influence of friends. If the majority of students at a private school display model behavior, it would be better for those inclined to trouble to be surrounded by model students so there is less pressure to misbehave. Trenton says that his private school would often get new students who had been convicted as a minor and were just released from jail. The public schools thought that the private school would be a better influence on these children who are inclined to misbehave (personal communication, May 7, 2013).

Other factors concerning the behavior of students include class attendance and participation. Some statistics revealed in the Digest of Education Statistics show teachers’ perceptions about serious problems in their schools for the 2003-04 school year. When compared to private school teachers, the public school teachers reported higher percentages of problems in all cases such as student tardiness, student absenteeism, students cutting class, student pregnancy, and students dropping out. Significant differences (up to 20% margin) were found in the variables of student apathy, lack of parental involvement, poverty, and students coming unprepared to learn (Snyder et al, 2008, p. 100). Why might the problems be so much more evident in the public schools? Once again the reasons are related to region, peer pressure, and student demographics.

Behavior of the students goes hand in hand with student safety. Appropriately, “results showed that child safety is one of the two most important factors parents find

important in their decision to send their students to private Christian school” (Nichols, 2010, p. 75). As stated earlier, students are greatly influenced by the attitudes and behaviors of those around them, especially in the high school setting. Parents want their children to be surrounded by peers who will have a positive influence rather than negative. Examples of bad influences that harm the safety of students would include possession of illegal substances and the potential of firearms. These are assumed to be more prevalent in the public schools. For example, Caitlin described a police visit to her public high school as “stereotypical” (personal communication, April 29, 2013). In the 2003-04 school year, the percentage of public schools with daily presence of police or security was 24.8% compared to only 5.9% of private schools (Snyder et al, 2008, p. 225). Students will likely feel unsafe if the police are consistently visiting.

Additional statistics about public schools are hard to deny. In the 2005-06 school year, 98.5% of public high schools reported a violent incident such as rape, robbery, physical attack or threat of attack. Over 93% of public high schools reported other incidents such as possession of a weapon or explosive, distribution, possession, or use of illegal drugs and alcohol, or vandalism (Snyder et al, 2008, p. 226). Other statistics reveal that public schools find their safety to be a concern. Video surveillance was found in 32.5% of public schools compared to 19.4% of private schools (Snyder et al, 2008, p. 225). The videos cameras are installed as an effort to detect problems more quickly and easily. The fact that private schools have fewer surveillance systems shows that the private schools are not as concerned and suggests that the students there are already well-behaved and less likely to get into trouble. On the other hand, public schools that are equipped with more surveillance systems must be more concerned about student safety.

It has been a challenge to find safety and behavior statistics about private schools. As a result, one cannot conclude much from this data. Private schools may not be required to report incidents, so even when they occur it appears to the public that incidents are nonexistent. There is no evidence to argue that private schools have fewer reported incidents or a smaller presence of drugs. In fact, one study suggested that “males who attend private religious schools are almost twice as likely, and females who attend private religious schools are over three times as likely as their counterparts in public schools to have used/threatened to use a weapon in the past year” (Watt, 2003, p. 357). Additionally, one cannot argue that public schools will always have more violence and illegal activity. Even though over 90% of schools reported an incident, the data do not reveal how many incidents were reported at each school. Maybe most of the schools only reported one incident. Regional location probably plays a part in how many incidents and illegal activities are reported at a public school. For example, larger inner city public schools are probably likely to have more violence problems than a rural school. Socio-economic status (SES) of the students may also play a part in the safety and behavior of students. SES is highly affected by regional factors. In that case, one cannot use the previous statistics to make broad generalizations about all public schools because each school will be very different.

Although it is shown to be more common in the public schools, there are likely to be children in both schools who fall victim to the stress of high school and make bad decisions. In this case, maybe these students would benefit from a school program that provides counseling and assistance. These services are more prevalent at a public school because the problems are more common. Yes, it is unfortunate that the problems exist,

but the programs meant to address the problems can be very helpful for those involved. A violence prevention program operates in 66.3% of public schools compared to only 39% of private schools (Snyder et al, 2008, p. 225). Matt pointed out that his public school offered a drug/alcohol prevention program that had a positive effect on him when he was a student (personal communication, May 1, 2013). When used with the right attitude, these programs work. Similar resources are not always available in private schools. It is important to look into a school's history and resources before judging its safety.

Religion

Most likely the biggest social factor of many private schools is the presence of religion. This quality alone sets private schools apart from public schools that are forbidden to insert any type of religious practice into the day. Here we will consider how much religion plays a part in the parental decision. Many parents may choose private school simply for the religious education, especially if they are already supportive parents and know their student will succeed academically at any school.

According to Cohen-Zada and Justman (2003), "If all parents were offered a voucher equal to average public school spending per pupil, which could be redeemed at any school, over 70% would choose a religious school rather than a public or nonsectarian private school, provided tuition at religious schools could be maintained at its current level" (p. 414). Additionally, "73.8% of households would rather send their children to a religious school than send them to an unsubsidized nonsectarian private school with the same tuition" (Cohen-Zada & Justman, 2003, p. 402). Religion has a big influence on many people. Parents who want their children to practice the same religion

see private schooling as a way to reinforce the beliefs outside of the home. Additionally, “parents with strong religious beliefs often look for schools that will help instill beliefs into their children” (Nichols, 2010, p. 50). In many cases, the school can provide a better religious education than the parents. In addition to religious classes, the school will offer activities associated with religion outside of school. Religious retreats are a common field trip. The notion of being surrounded by peers that share the same faith is very appealing. The appeal is often enough to motivate parents to spend extra tuition money.

When the topic of faith was discussed in the interviews, both positive and negative outcomes were offered. One realm of the discussion relates to a personal development of faith. It is very easy to develop a faithful life when surrounded by people who share the same faith. Trenton, for example, says that there is no one to challenge your beliefs in a private school (personal communication, May 7, 2013). Essentially, no one has to be ashamed to practice that faith because everyone does it. That automatic sense of security helps a child develop a stronger faith from the very beginning. It is not as easy to develop faith at a public school. Jennifer, who has had experience with both types of schools, says that it takes more effort to learn about one’s faith in a public school (personal communication, April 25, 2013). Students will have to attend additional schooling outside of school, such as Sunday school, in order to become educated about the faith. These additional classes require more effort from both student and parent.

Bryan, however, says that it is still possible to develop a strong faith outside of a private school (personal communication, April 22, 2013). Buddy points out that faith needs to be supported at home, where it counts (personal communication, April 24, 2013). Therefore, regardless of the type of school, one’s real faith comes from the

support at home. If the family intends to instill their faith into their children, they will take the necessary steps, even if that involves attending Sunday school. There are many religious people who attended public school. The success of their faith can be attributed to family support as well as personal efforts.

The other realm of religious discussion addresses the battle with other faiths. Having no one to challenge your beliefs at a private school can be both good and bad. The good thing is that one never needs to defend the faith in a religious school because everyone they encounter agrees with the faith. Additionally, Sarah says that the constant presence of faith at a private school makes it easier to keep your faith (personal communication, April 24, 2013). But, when it is easy to keep a faith throughout childhood, one may not know how to keep the faith when the support is no longer there. When the students leave the private school as adults, they may not know what is necessary to maintain the beliefs, and they won't have the skills to defend their faith. They may even be shocked by the presence of different faiths and have interest in exploring them. If a student has successfully developed his or her faith in a public school where it is not as easy to keep the faith, that student is likely to have a stronger faith. The student will also have experience dealing with other faiths, so he or she will know how to defend the faith.

In relation to religion, parents should also determine the values they want to be supported in the school setting. One's values are not necessarily related to a specific religion. At a religious school, students are subject to the values of that religion in every class. This is a factor that Caitlin disliked about her private school (personal communication, April 29, 2013). The attitudes regarding sex education, for example, are

different at different schools. Programs at a Catholic school may only teach about abstinence instead of introducing the practices of safe-sex and prevention. In contrast, the concept of abstinence may be non-existent at a public school. Parents can always teach their own values in the home setting, but should not ignore the fact that school programs have an influence. Parents should consider all of these factors before making a school decision that is based solely on the presence of religion.

Sense of Belonging

Social interactions in and around the school help develop one's identity. The development of one's identity is much easier when a student feels accepted in the school setting. When students feel like they belong at school, they are more likely to enjoy attending school every day and are more likely to learn in both academic and social settings. Things associated with one's sense of belonging at school are school uniforms and extra-curricular activities. As will be discussed later, the size of the school also greatly affects one's sense of belonging.

One characteristic that helps form a child's sense of belonging concerns the school dress code. Something very commonly found in private schools is the establishment of a uniform policy. It is easier for a smaller school with more parental support to enforce such a large policy. Some think the requirement that students wear uniforms is a direct cause of improved academic success: since private schools perform so much better, the uniforms commonly found there must be making a difference. Perhaps the uniforms cause the students to focus more on school instead of spending extra time determining what to wear or keeping up with current styles. Public schools want to mirror the accomplishments of private schools, so some "public school

administrators are beginning to consider uniform policies to improve the overall school environment and student achievement” (Brunsma & Rockquemore, 1998, p. 53).

However, private schools implement a uniform policy for reasons other than to improve student social development and GPA. In fact, “students wearing uniforms did not appear to have any significantly different academic preparedness, prosocial attitudes, or peer group structure with prosocial attitudes than other students” (Brunsma & Rockquemore, 1998, p. 56). Private school uniforms are meant to foster a feeling of homogeneity among a range of different students. Private school administrators strive to create unity among the students. By establishing a uniform policy, “private schools tout their strict policies and standardized curriculum to promote homogeneity and order” (Watt, 2003, p. 363). When all the students wear one type of clothing, it conveys the message that they are all there for one goal, one faith, under one school. Similar mindsets might be beneficial at a public school, but increased academic success or social acceptance is not guaranteed.

In addition to homogeneity, “within the context of an educational institution, school uniforms function as a symbol of membership in the school community” (Brunsma & Rockquemore, 1998, p. 54). In a way, uniform policies are meant to give students a sense of belonging, and at the same time establish equality among different types of children and teens. If an individual feels like an outcast among the social spectrum, it can be comforting not to feel ridiculed about his/her choice of clothing because everyone is wearing the same thing. In fact, Trenton shared this fact in his interview saying that the uniforms at his school prevented teasing (personal communication, May 7, 2013). In a school where students choose their own style, there

are more likely to be divisions between people who are “in style” and “out of style.” Those who are “out of style” are often subject to embarrassment – or worse, bullying.

Another factor related to one’s sense of belonging is the after-school activities. Aside from developing a student academically, schools want to support the development of extra hobbies and passions. It is these extra activities that help a student find what he or she is passionate about, and guides a student into a career path. For example, students who enjoy math can join a math club to support their passion. Additionally, students who might be interested in an athletic career will participate in sports. After-school activities can also be a way to prevent misbehavior and bad decisions. When a student is involved in teams or clubs, that student spends free time in a positive social situation. Without the presence of these options, that free time may encourage negative behavior such as becoming involved in gangs and the development of bad habits.

When it comes to extra-curricular activities, it seems that the larger school would offer a larger variety of options. Public schools have the staff and funds to hire more coaches and club leaders if they desire. Because of this, public school students often have more options. If there are more options, it is likely that more students will get involved, therefore keeping them out of trouble. There are certain clubs and sports that are fairly standard at every school, such as band or basketball, but the variety of options available really depends on the school and the interests of the staff and students.

When comparing her experience to that of a friend in private school, Bailey, who attended a public school, said in her interview that the sports at private schools are more exclusive, and the sports at public schools are more inclusive (personal communication, May 1, 2013). In other words, public schools find a way to welcome all interested

students, placing each into a team based on athletic talent. This may be true, especially if we consider the fact that private schools might recruit for sports. Public schools are also likely to have more coaches, making the number of available spots larger. With the lack of staff at a private school, many teachers may be required to coach. According to Matt, a lot of private school teachers have interest in coaching (personal communication, May 1, 2013), and Trenton says that teachers who coach seem to be distracted while teaching and hurt classroom performance (personal communication, May 7, 2013). Overall, extra-curricular activities should always be put second to academics, but that principle may be blurred at a private school.

Statistics of extra-curricular participation in public and private schools can provide insights into some of these claims. When analyzing high school sophomores in 2002, 53.2% of public school students played a sport, compared to 73.1% of Catholic school students (Snyder et al, 2008, p. 222). This contradicts Bailey's comment about public schools being more inclusive. Maybe the students at a private school are more interested in playing sports than those at the public school. The statistic does support the notion that private schools recruit for sports. Perhaps many students only go to the private school to play on the popular sports team, increasing the percentage of students involved. In regards to participation in other after-school activities, the public schools had more students involved in cheerleading, music, and vocational clubs than the Catholic schools, but the Catholic schools had more participation in hobby clubs and academic clubs (Snyder et al, 2008, p. 222). A lot of participation has to do with popularity at the school. Oftentimes, students want to be a part of a club with their friends. Some clubs are considered "cooler" than others. The circumstances really

depend on the specific school. When choosing a school, it would be smart to consider the clubs and organizations that are available.

It is important to note that a large sense of belonging comes from the types of people who attend the school. Private schools may always have the same types of students. The people who attend a public school will vary depending on the region in which one lives. If the people who live in the area are known for their friendliness, then the local public school will probably be a very welcoming environment. Public schools have also started to adopt practices that are often found in private schools, making them more welcoming. Having a school mission is a way to focus everyone's efforts on a single goal. Public schools are beginning to create missions and form school programs that make it unique. Keeping these factors in mind, students and parents should make judgments about whether or not a certain school has traits that will make the child feel welcome.

Wealth

The types of families that are involved at a school obviously have an effect on that school's social characteristics. As stated earlier, people who send their children to private schools are usually of higher socio-economic status. They have to have the money needed to afford tuition. The possible effects of wealth on a private school will be discussed here. Jennifer, who attended both public and private schools, pointed out that sometimes a private school community may become a sort of "money show" where the families constantly spend money to benefit the school and expect others to do the same. This is part of the reason why her family decided to switch to public school (personal communication, April 25, 2013). In a community that functions solely on student tuition,

it is always helpful to have some additional cash flow. In order to keep tuition lower, the administration of a private school may have to cut some funds such as technology and books. When the school receives extra donations, they are able to budget money for things that tuition alone cannot cover. The extra donations are a way for families to show that they care about the school, but it is also a way to show off. Parents who are willing to donate extra money may pressure other parents to do the same. Sometimes this may cause tension among families. In no way does this mean that private school administration and members will expect families to be generous with their money. Some schools may not have problems with money shows at all.

Additionally, one can understand that private school administration members as well as students take a lot of pride in the school's accomplishments and endeavors. Therefore the aura of the school may appear snobby in a way. Students who attend a private school know that many of the parents are rich and often begin to feel superior to students who attend public schools. The rich kid stereotype may have originated from kids who attend private schools. Just like the money competition that may develop between parents in the private school, a similar competition may develop between private and public school students. In no way does that mean that every student at every private school will act cruelly to members of other schools. Overall, a private school's social expectations and attitudes should be assessed as a part of the decision.

Physical Health

Students spend a large amount of their childhood in a school setting. This is an important time for students to learn how to take care of themselves. The social factors that surround a school will affect a student's physical health. If peers and teachers are

not good models of a healthy life, the student will be negatively affected. On the other hand, if peers and teachers consistently model healthy habits, the student is likely to adopt the same habits. Much like the people at home affect the physical growth of a child, the people at school also play a part.

A surprising study found that “children attending public schools are more likely to be overweight than those attending private schools” (Li & Hooker, 2010, p. 101). The lunches provided at public and private schools can be drastically different. Although public schools are required to meet certain health guidelines concerning food, they are also able to provide more options (such as a daily pizza selection or burger bar), leaving the decision up to the students. In many cases students do not choose correctly, making a slice of pizza or a burger and fries their daily meal. Private schools do not have extra funds to provide a wealth of options at lunchtime. Therefore, if students do not want the meal provided they must bring a lunch from home.

Obesity can also be a sign of lower SES. The larger percentage of obesity in public schools may only be mirroring the larger percentage of students who are from families of lower socio-economic background. Participation in extra-curricular activities also plays a part in the weight of students. If more students are involved in sports then students are less likely to be overweight. It was discussed earlier that sports participation is more common at the private school. Either way, the physical health of their child is also something parents should consider when choosing a school.

Size

The size of the school can affect students both educationally and socially. The educational impacts such as class size and the range of classes a school can offer have

already been discussed. The social effects of size are related to all of the factors already addressed in this chapter. In regards to student safety, it is easier to control a smaller school. Size is also related to one's sense of belonging. For example, it may be hard to feel welcome in a school that is overwhelmingly large. It is already becoming evident that school size might be the biggest influence in a child's school experience. The remaining social concerns regarding school size will be discussed here.

Overall, the biggest criticism of the public schools revealed in the interviews was the lack of individualization and being surrounded by too many people. This is largely because "the diverse culture of the public school and the size of the large school would reduce the sense of shared purpose and community among their students" (Watt, 2003, p. 347). Additionally, "the private sectors' specialized goals and authority types promote program and social-system integration, while competing educational goals [. . .] for the public sector generate complex educational programs and administrative structures and constrain the development of school community" (Talbert, 1988, p. 184). The public schools have so many extra requirements and additional problems to handle that it is harder to create a tight school community.

As revealed earlier, private schools are more likely to be smaller than public schools. A small number of people all gathered under the same mission and faith (especially if they are all wearing the same clothing) are more likely to feel included. To support this argument, Talbert (1988) says that "private schools are constrained by tradition, size, and often by religious auspices to a limited range of educational goals, thus maintaining greater program coherence within the private sector" (p. 167-168). When a student attends a private school, he or she is automatically part of a long tradition

of people who worked under the same mission. Public school missions are harder to come by because the public school is subject to changes imposed by the government at any time. Much of the tradition at private schools comes from the presence of religion, and that aspect is absent at a public school. When discussing private schools, Watt (2003) says that “these schools are thought to produce a tight-knit community, which, in turn offers high levels of social support and social control to its members” (p. 345). It is this same sense of belonging that makes teachers willing to accept the smaller salary in order to teach at the school they attended as a student, as discussed in Chapter Two.

Many comments in the interviews agreed with these claims. David points out that the small community at his private school helped him perform better in classes. Since everyone seemed to be working hard on the schoolwork, he did not want to look bad in front of his peers (personal communication, May 7, 2013). The community of the school also has effects on the teachers. Matt says that while teaching at his private school, the community was more pleasing (personal communication, May 1, 2013). He would attribute the more pleasing environment to a staff composed of people who were wholeheartedly focused on the education of their students. When comparing the cooperative effort among staff, the public school percentage is 83.2% while the private school percentage is 91.1% (Snyder et al, 2008, p. 101). Students benefit from a staff that cooperates more often. Research has made it hard to pinpoint exactly why this may be, but there are a few possible reasons. Perhaps being founded on the principle of faith, as many private schools are, consequently makes the students and teachers act kinder towards each other. Maybe private school administrators are able to make better choices when hiring teachers. Additionally, the increased parental involvement often seen at

private schools may motivate teachers to perform better. Whatever the cause, the private school community always seems to be a more pleasing option.

On the other hand, the sense of community at a public school is not always terrible. Depending on one's location, some public schools are not overwhelmingly huge. The numbers may even compare to a private school. Sarah attended one of these smaller public schools and says that she still felt a sense of belonging at her school (personal communication, April 24, 2013). It is important to disregard assumptions about large schools. It is often considered impossible for a large school to develop community, but that is not necessarily true. Findings reveal some interesting insights that challenge previous assumptions.

A big concern related to school community has to do with the formation of tight friendships. Will a student be able to find his/her group in a large public school, or are the chances of friendship more likely at a small private school? This project has revealed some information that suggests that bigger schools have an advantage when it comes to making friends. When compared to her public school, Bailey thinks private schools are more homogeneous, where they have a lot of the same types of students (personal communication, May 1, 2013). If a child cannot find his or her group within that homogeneous group, there is nowhere else to turn. Additionally, students at a very small school might get tired of seeing the same people every day. If the relationships among that small group are not healthy, once again there is no escape. Eathan, who attended private school, thinks that he would have been able to find similar friends if he had attended a public school (personal communication, April 23, 2013). Due to the larger number of students, public schools offer more options. As research says, "perhaps

adolescents' struggle to construct an identity is more easily accomplished in large, heterogeneous environments, specifically large and/or public schools" (Watt, 2003, p. 363). In many cases, the public school's wide range of students may be a better environment in which to find friends who share the same interests. A public school's diverse group of people will offer an escape from peers that one may not particularly like.

Specific research has shown that small schools have a severe disadvantage when it comes to students' mental health. A study was done specifically to see how the difference in size affects students socially. Especially when an adolescent is trying to discover his/her identity, the people at school can have a heavy influence. Surprisingly, "nonreligious private schools are associated with reduced social acceptance for males and females" (Watt, 2003, p. 353). This relates to the earlier discussion about having a smaller body of students from which to choose friends. Additionally, "several findings suggested that attending a private and/or a small school may have negative effects on the mental health of adolescents" (Watt, 2003, p. 362). As stated earlier, private school students are also more likely to have used or threatened to use a weapon. These facts may surprise a lot of people. Apparently the community that is shown to be so tight at private schools is not the best environment for everyone. Perhaps the limited ability to branch out and meet new people causes students to become more mentally unstable or depressed. Also, "males who attend small schools are almost four times as likely to have attempted suicide in the past year" (Watt, 2003, p. 357). Public schools who know that depression is a problem often have better resources available for students who are seeking help. Private schools do not always have the ability to recognize and support students suffering from depression. Maybe the larger amounts of pressure and homework

also cause additional stress. Different students will handle the pressure differently. These considerations are another aspect of schooling that parents should keep in mind when making a decision.

A final aspect related to school size is the amount of diversity. As one knows, our world is full of many ethnicities, cultures, and handicapped people with a range of abilities. If one does not encounter these types of people in school, it can be said that he or she is not encountering the real world. Since the private schools are smaller, the amount of diversity is smaller. "Private schools are not obligated to educate all students but are able to choose and dismiss students," which makes the student body less diverse (Powell, 2012, p. 38). This fact leads many to argue that private schools shelter students and that attending a small private school does not expose one to the realities of life. Therefore, a private school student will experience culture shock in their own country when he/she attends college or starts a career.

Larger schools, like most public schools, are more likely to have a wider range of cultures and ethnicities in addition to a larger presence of handicapped and learning disabled. According to Levinson and Levinson (2003), "A diverse student body [enables] students to develop better their own autonomy by interacting with people who hold beliefs and lead lives that are different from their own" (p. 105). It is important to develop these skills in order to become an informed citizen after graduation. Having confidence in one's own lifestyle and beliefs can only be helpful in the future, and one is more likely to keep that confidence when they have had much practice interacting with others who are different. Additionally, "it is also useful if these interactions occur at an

early age, before prejudices have the chance to harden and block the development of mutual understanding” (Levinson & Levinson, 2003, p. 111).

It turns out that this topic got the most attention in the interviews. Parents should seriously consider the effects resulting from the size of a school because it seems to be the biggest issue. As a result of all interviews, the biggest criticism for private schools was the lack of diversity that leads to being sheltered. Appropriately, the most common praise for public schools was the exposure to diversity and experience with the real world. Students attending private schools may not have as much exposure to the real world as those in public schools. A few interview results mentioned culture shock as a reason to avoid private schools. Some parents may like the exposure, and others may prefer the secluded environment.

Sarah says that the presence of diversity at a school helps one stand up for his/her beliefs (personal communication, April 24, 2013). As stated earlier when discussing religion, it is easy for someone to keep his/her religion in a private school simply because there is no competition. When entering the real world, however, a student needs to have those skills to support his/her beliefs. The diversity found in a public school is more likely to give a student those skills. As stated earlier, private schools have a homogeneous quality. All those involved with the private school have very similar qualities. We live in a heterogeneous world, though, so it is easy to see why a private school might be argued as sheltering.

Both Trenton and David agree that private schools can be sheltered (personal communication, May 7, 2013). Being sheltered in school, however, does not prevent you from experiencing the real world outside of school. The notion of being sheltered is

largely supported by how the parents raise a child. A student can attend a private school and still be totally prepared for life as long as the parents provide enough practice. What the parents do with the child outside of school can also affect his/her perception of the world. Additionally, Matt explains that private schools often have a service requirement. The experience these students receive when doing service projects can be the exposure to the real world that is needed. He does not agree that private school students are sheltered because real life is everywhere (personal communication, May 1, 2013). Eathan even ventures to say that the real world is always different from school. Even public school is not the real world. Eathan still felt prepared to enter life with his private education (personal communication, April 23, 2013).

Readers should now understand that the social factors of a school are just as important as the academic factors. While the academics ultimately help students get into college and pursue a desired career, the social experiences are what shape a child into an adult. Children need to learn personal values, how to interact with others, and how to stay healthy. Although parents should teach about the desired principles at home, all of these lessons are affected by the social characteristics at schools that have been discussed here. It is important for parents to consider these characteristics when choosing a school.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

There will always be competition between public and private schools. It is a choice that most parents will encounter. There will always be a question about which choice is better for the well-being of any student. This research project has revealed that there are advantages and disadvantages for attending both types of school. Overall, both types of schools have been said to provide good college preparation and AP courses. Matt says that both public and private schools have the same potential to be amazing, but that potential is not always met (personal communication, May 1, 2013). Both types of schools have also seen some bad teachers. It has even been said that the diversity in a public school can be limited. The circumstances surrounding each type of school essentially depend on how the school runs. Some private schools will be better than others. Some public schools will be better than others. These factors really depend on the specific schools available.

There are so many factors when it comes to choosing a school that it is hard to categorize all of them. Any parent's choice will also be affected by the location in which they live. Regional influences may be the most convincing factor of all. If there is not a private school nearby, then attendance is not an option. In her interview, Sarah says that location would be the biggest determinant of her decision (personal communication, April 24, 2013). A survey in Virginia revealed that location and convenience would be

the second-most important consideration when choosing a school (DiPerna, 2009, p. 18). Private schools may not have access to local bus services. Public schools almost always have a bus that will pick up students and bring them to school. In this case, proximity to the private school will be important.

According to the national private school survey, small towns have the least amount of private school attendance, while cities have the most, followed by suburbs (Broughman et al, 2011, p. 10). Private schools thrive better when the surrounding population is larger. Parents who live in rural areas and small towns are much less likely to choose private schooling simply because there are fewer private schools. The U.S. region with the largest amount of students in private schools is the south (Broughman et al, 2011, p. 10). This probably has a lot to do with the religious practices in that region. One's church community may also have a big impact on the schooling decision. If all the young people in the community attend private school, parents will feel more comfortable sending their child to the same school as his/her peers. The same goes for a public school community.

Another important factor that impacts choice is income. A Virginia survey compared choice with the amount of income parents earn. Those with a yearly income of \$75,000 or lower are more likely to choose public schools while those with an income over \$75,000 are more likely to choose private schools (DiPerna, 2009, p. 17). This is evident for obvious reasons. Households that are able to afford extra tuition payments are more likely to pay for private school. Private schools, however, are aware of the limitations caused by tuition. Some private schools provide financial aid for parents who want their children to attend but cannot afford tuition, so parents with income in the

lower digits still have the option of private schooling. The survey in Virginia also showed that parents aged 18-25 are more likely to choose private schools, and as parents get older they are actually more likely to choose public schools (DiPerna, 2009, p. 17).

A gathering of results from the interviews has revealed that people who attended private schools for all 12 years are more likely to choose private schooling for their children or future children. This realization illustrates the strong power of tradition. It makes sense that if a parent enjoyed his or her experience at private school, they would want his/her child to have the same experiences. Additionally, it is common that graduates stay in touch, and they are able to bond over sending their children back to the same school. Public schools, however, can have the same effect. Interviews revealed that, even if someone attended both public and private school, experience at a public school made that person more likely to choose public schooling for their children. Perhaps private school students who never saw the other side of schooling have a belief that private schools are still the best option. For example, Trenton says he would not choose public partly because he does not know how the public system works. He feels more comfortable sending a child to a familiar institution (personal communication, May 7, 2013). Once someone has public school experience, though, they seem to feel more comfortable with the system because they have their own experiences.

In recent years, some additional schooling options have been created that can play a part in a parent's decision. A charter school is monitored and funded by the local government, making it a public school, but it also has the freedom to follow a different curriculum and/or teaching style, making it somewhat private. Because of this, charter schools can be described as a hybrid of public and private schools. Many parents have

chosen this route for their child. As in private schools, the administrators of a charter school have freedoms that other public schools do not have. Sometimes that freedom will be used to try out a new research-based teaching strategy within the school. For example, a specific strategy that may only be used sparingly in traditional public schools will be applied to the whole classroom in the charter school. Some of these strategies may be the best way for a specific child to learn.

Rix (2012) says that “charter schools have two advantages over most traditional schools: autonomy and a mission” (p. 34). The charter schools have freedom and function under a specific mission. One has to look into each charter school to see what the mission may be. The mission is often related to the teaching strategy that the school implements. Overall, “the guiding principle of the charter movement is to create new institutions that receive public revenues but function outside of the existing structure of school districts” (Kelly & Loveless, 2012, p. 427). It is all a part of an effort to meet the needs of every student. Sometimes traditional public school does not work for a specific student, so the government wanted to offer other options.

Charter schools may have also been created to reduce the number of students in the traditional public schools. As discussed earlier, public schools are often overcrowded. If the district was able to move some of the lower-performing students into a charter school that would help meet their needs, then students at both schools would benefit. Since charter schools are not a traditional public school, attendance numbers are likely to be smaller. Fewer students make it easier for the teachers in charter schools to focus on each individual. All of the efforts are meant to be in the best interest of the students. For example, “the best charter schools make more effective use of instructors’

time and support them in their efforts to provide focused and differentiated programs for students” (Rix, 2012, p. 34). The administration realizes the importance of teachers and provides as much support as possible.

Charter schools are growing in popularity. The thought of smaller, specialized public schooling is very appealing. The enrollment in charter schools for the 2003-04 school year totals 627,000 students (Snyder et al, 2008, p. 160). According to Lips and Feinberg (2007), in 2007 “over 1,000,000 students attended more than 3,600 charter schools” (p. 18). Growth in popularity can be attributed to the unique practices that are not found in traditional public schools. For example, a common procedure in charter schools is to make personal home visits. Rix (2012) says that “a teacher who has met a student’s parents in their home is better equipped to reach that child and keep him or her on track through the year” (p. 33). In addition to these useful practices, research has revealed many benefits of the additional schooling options. For one, “pupils participating in these initiatives [of school choice] have made academic gains when compared to their peers in public school” (Lips & Feinberg, 2007, p. 19). Non-traditional public school has the potential to benefit certain students educationally. In addition, “public schools that face competition from choice programs have also shown improvement” (Lips & Feinberg, 2007, p. 19). As charter schools continue to become more popular, traditional public schools are making efforts to improve their own curriculum. The public schools want to mirror the efforts of competing charter schools; therefore, both schools benefit. When trying to make a schooling decision, parents may wish to investigate the local charter school options.

Some parents want a religious education for their child but are unable to afford private school tuition. Because of this, “the erosion of the wall of separation in church-state relationships has resulted in a proliferation of religious schools re-cast as culturally based public charter schools” (Mulvey, Cooper, & Maloney, 2010, p. 114). As a result, there are a number of religiously-oriented charter schools that may be options for such families. These charter schools decide to create a mission related to a specific religion or culture instead of a mission regarding instructional practice. However, religious charter schools “appear to threaten the legal foundation of the First Amendment, blurring and even rubbing out the lines between religion and public funding” (Mulvey et al, 2010, p. 70). Why are charter schools allowed to include religion in the curriculum when traditional public schools are not? These charter schools are being given money from the state to fund a religious mission, which challenges the U.S. non-denominational principle. The issue is still being highly debated.

Magnet schools are another option available to parents. Like charter schools, they are funded by the government and operate freely, but instead of teaching a wide variety of subjects, they specialize under one specific content area that matches a career path. An article from the U.S. Department of Education analyzed 8 select magnet high schools from across the nation. As a result, the article is able to offer some valuable insights into the magnet school framework. Magnet high schools “serve populations from diverse socioeconomic and racial backgrounds and use themed instruction in subjects such as biotechnology, the arts, engineering, and medicine to attract students” (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2008, foreword). Many parents and students will favor this path because the magnet schools give a child extensive knowledge in a selected career path that may make

him or her more eligible for a job or college degree in the future. The article makes a point that “when students are empowered to choose a school based on their interests, they often are more engaged in learning, which can translate into improved academic achievement” (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2008, foreword). The need for motivation will be minimal because students will already be motivated to learn about topics related to the career path of their choice.

In addition to providing specialized instruction, the magnet schools have a goal to integrate education in a way that creates equality among all types of students. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2008), “Magnet schools were first created nearly 40 years ago to achieve racial integration and resolve educational inequities” (foreword). Additionally, “these schools still serve as tools to provide traditionally underserved students with better educational options, but they also are hubs for unique and innovative instructional practices and programs” (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2008, foreword). In this way, magnet schools are fairly similar to charter schools. Adding magnet schools to a populated area will help decrease the population in the local public schools and will challenge students to learn material in a new way. The magnet schools “show what is possible in public education – that when public high schools provide students from all walks of life with rigorous curricula and high academic expectations, students will rise to the challenge” (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2008, p. 26). As with charter schools, the presence of magnet schools has also grown in recent years. There are “more than 5,000 magnet schools serving approximately 2.5 million children” (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2008, p. 1). When looking into schools, parents should explore the region to determine if

any magnet schools are available. If so, it might be beneficial to look into the school's mission and teaching objectives.

A main idea that should be taken away from this project is that all parents should research their options. It is important that all parents look at every aspect of any school before coming to a final decision. David states the importance of research in his interview. He thinks that his parents did not do enough research when choosing the best school for him. In addition, he says that no one should make assumptions about schools (personal communication, May 7, 2013). In a newspaper article addressing the differences between public and private schools, the author points out that a school's reputation is mostly based on the opinions of those in the area rather than real research and facts (Clayton, 2005, para. 1). What is passed along through others is not always the best source of information. Do not assume that parents choose private schools because they think the education is better. For the most part, the decision to attend private school is "based on a proactive search for different teaching and learning environments [rather] than on negative experiences with neighborhood schools" (Nichols, 2010, p. 28).

As a part of this paper, parental involvement was determined to be a major factor in student success. Michelle says that she will choose private school if she can afford it, but she will be an involved parent so public is acceptable (personal communication, May 1, 2013). With this argument, school choice really does not matter. If a parent is willing to be involved in his/her child's education (as anyone struggling with the decision will most likely be), that child has better chances of succeeding at school no matter what. One thing to note is the ability for parents to make a large impact on how schools function. Essentially, "parents determine what types of schools they prefer, and the

competitive incentives resulting from those preferences force schools to develop more effective processes” (Lubienski et al, 2008, p. 98). If parents are dissatisfied with a school, they will ultimately stop sending their children there or will voice complaints. If a school starts to lose students or is constantly getting complaints, the school will not be able to function. Therefore, the school will make the necessary changes in order to win the favor of parents again. This is especially true for private schools that rely on loyal families for tuition. According to Nichols (2010), the goal in private schools is “to make students feel comfortable” and “to improve upon the factors their parents perceive as important” (p. 113).

In conclusion, there is no right or wrong answer regarding which school parents should choose. There is also no answer as to which school is better for a certain child. Every parent will have different opinions and beliefs about the school systems available. Every parent will have different expectations regarding their child’s education. Additionally, “findings indicate that parents who choose a private school use a range of strategies to gain relevant information, and are astute in choosing a school that is congruent with their particular values and aspirations” (Nichols, 2010, abstract). Buddy, a parent, says that sending his children to private school was “worth every dime” (personal communication, April 24, 2013). In his case, private school was the best option.

The same is also true for parents who choose a public school: they have their reasons. Bailey says that a parent’s choice should really depend on the student’s individual needs in conjunction with the local culture and parental experience (personal communication, May 1, 2013). Matthew, who claims to prefer private schooling,

recognizes that not every child will thrive in a private school (personal communication, April 22, 2013). In many cases, especially with the presence of a disability, public schools are the best option in order to meet a child's individual needs. Essentially, the best way to get information is to personally visit the school, see the resources, and meet the teachers. Some children will do well regardless of the school. Parents simply need to choose what they think is best for their child (Clayton, 2005, para. 8-9).

Whatever parents decide, hopefully they will keep a positive attitude and look to find satisfaction with their school. Nevertheless, "no matter what the auspices of the school, educators share a common interest in the cultivation of learning" (James & Levin, 1988, p. 5). In the end it is important for parents to know that every school has a simple goal: to educate its students.

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