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ABSTRACT

Teachers' views on their control of school policy and classroom practices are analyzed on the basis of data from the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) of 1990-91. The SASS, a nationally representative survey of more than 53,000 teachers, reflects teachers' opinions of school conditions. Overall, teachers (61 percent) did not believe that they had much influence over the determination of discipline policy. Only 37 percent believed they had much influence over establishing curriculum; and only 33 percent believed they had influence over determining the content of inservice programs. Only 29 percent believed they were influential in policy-setting decisions on grouping students. Private school teachers were more likely to feel that they had some control in these areas, but even they did not think they had much control. Most teachers did believe that they had considerable control over classroom matters. Teachers in big-city schools were less likely to feel that they had any control over policy, but they had similar perceptions about classroom control. (Contains 4 references.)
 (SLD)

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Who's in Charge? Teachers' Views on Control Over School Policy and Classroom Practices

Many recent school reform efforts have called for increasing the decision-making power at the local school level. How much control do teachers have over school policy and classroom decisions? Recent calls for increases in school-based management would suggest that teachers currently may not play a key role in many school decisions. School-based management varies from school to school, but generally it gives increased budgeting, curriculum, and staffing responsibilities to principals and teachers or to parents and community members in conjunction with school staff. The influence each group has varies from school to school, but the goal is the same: to improve children's schooling.

Implicit in this call for greater school-level influence is the belief that those closest to the children—principals, teachers, parents, and community members—know best what is needed to improve their schools. The purpose of this report is to examine how much control teachers believe they have over various aspects of school policy and over their classrooms.

In this report, teachers' views on control over school policy and classroom practices are analyzed based on data from the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) of 1990–91. SASS, a nationally representative survey of teachers, in addition to school districts, schools, and principals, is conducted by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics. The 1990–91 teacher survey collected information from more than 53,000 public and private school teachers. The data here reflect teachers' reports of conditions and not independent observations of actual decision making—but they are the views of those closest to the educational process and who are perhaps in the best position to know what the school conditions actually are.

School Policy vs. Classroom Practice

Teachers were much less likely to report in the survey that they can influence certain areas of school policy than they can influence their classroom practices (table 1). Overall, teachers did not believe they had much influence over determining discipline policy or the content of inservice programs, setting policy on grouping students in classes by ability, or establishing curriculum. No more than 39 percent believed they had a great deal of control over these school policy areas:

- Only 39 percent believed they had considerable influence over determining discipline policy;
- Only 37 percent believed they had much influence over establishing curriculum;
- Only 33 percent believed they had much influence over determining the content of inservice programs; and
- Only 29 percent believed they were influential in setting the policy on grouping students in classes by ability.

In all of these school policy areas, private school teachers were more likely than public school teachers to believe they had control, but even in private schools, teachers did not feel they had much control. About half of the private school teachers said they had considerable influence over discipline policy and curriculum, and a minority believed they had much control over inservice programs or ability grouping (figure 1).

Questions about control over classroom activities, however, evoked a different response. Most teachers—in both public and private schools—said they had considerable influence over classroom decisions:

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Figure 1.—Percentage of public and private school teachers believing they had considerable influence over selected school policies.

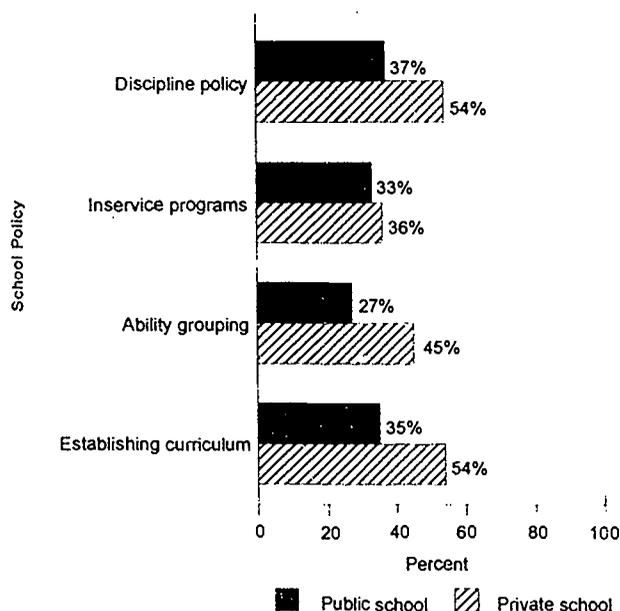


Figure 2.—Percentage of public and private school teachers believing they had considerable influence over selected classroom activities.

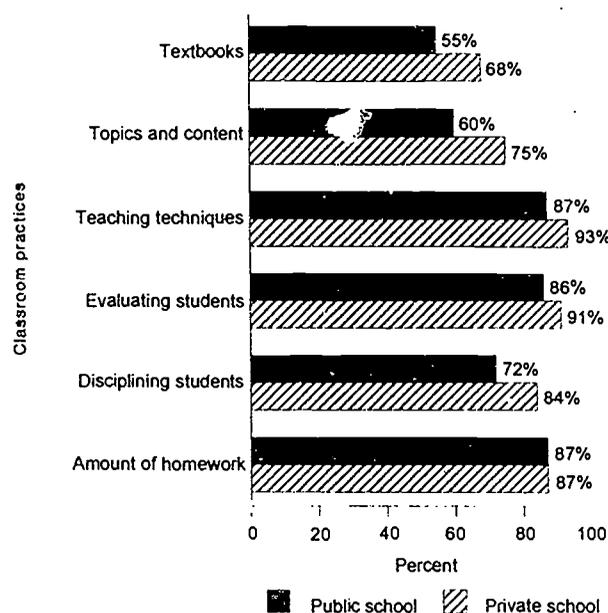


Table 1.—Teachers' perceptions of control over school policies and classroom practices, 1990-91.

| | All teachers | Public school | Private school |
|---|--------------|---------------|----------------|
| Percentage of teachers agreeing (5 or 6 on a 6 point scale) with each question | | | |
| "At this school, how much actual influence do you think teachers have over school policy in each of the following areas?" | | | |
| Determining discipline policy | 39 | 37 | 54 |
| Determining the content of inservice programs | 33 | 33 | 36 |
| Setting policy on grouping students in classes by ability | 29 | 27 | 45 |
| Establishing curriculum | 37 | 35 | 54 |
| "At this school, how much control do you feel you have in your classroom over each of the following areas of your planning and teaching?" | | | |
| Selecting textbooks and other instructional materials | 56 | 55 | 68 |
| Selecting topics, contents, and skills to be taught | 62 | 60 | 75 |
| Selecting teaching techniques | 88 | 87 | 93 |
| Evaluating and grading students | 87 | 86 | 91 |
| Disciplining students | 73 | 72 | 84 |
| Determining the amount of homework to be assigned | 87 | 87 | 87 |

- More than half believed they had considerable control over selecting textbooks and other instructional materials (56 percent) and the content, topics, and skills to be taught (62 percent);
- Nearly three-quarters (73 percent) believed they had control over disciplining students; and
- More than three-quarters believed they were firmly in control of selecting teaching techniques (88 percent), evaluating and grading students (87 percent), and determining the amount of homework to be assigned (87 percent).

Once again, however, private school teachers were more likely than public school teachers to believe they had control in their classrooms. Only in the area of determining the amount of homework to be assigned did the two groups respond the same (figure 2), with a clear majority of both groups reporting a great deal of control.

Community Type

Past studies of public school principals and teachers found that the type of community in which schools are located influenced the perception of who made school

decisions. Big city schools are more often part of large school districts that exercise central control over decisions. In small town or rural schools, principals and teachers play a larger role in decision making.

In the 1990–91 SASS, several differences across community types were evident in public school teachers' perceptions of who made school decisions (table 2).

Public school teachers in big cities were considerably less likely than their colleagues in small towns and rural areas to report control over several aspects of schooling:

- Only 24 percent of teachers in large cities believed they had much influence over establishing curriculum, compared to 40 percent of the teachers in both small towns and rural areas;
- Only 42 percent of teachers in large cities felt that they had considerable control over selecting textbooks and other instructional materials, compared with more than 60 percent of teachers in both small towns and rural areas;
- Only 50 percent of the big city teachers reported they controlled the selection of content, topics, and skills to be taught, compared with 64 percent of their

Table 2.—Public school teachers' perceptions of control over school policies and classroom practices, 1990–91.

| | Large central city | Medium central city | Suburb of large city | Suburb of medium city | Large town | Small town | Rural |
|---|--------------------|---------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|------------|------------|-------|
| Percentage of teachers agreeing (5 or 6 on a 6 point scale) with each question | | | | | | | |
| “At this school, how much actual influence do you think teachers have over school policy in each of the following areas?” | | | | | | | |
| Determining discipline policy | 33 | 38 | 40 | 36 | 37 | 36 | 39 |
| Determining the content of inservice programs | 29 | 34 | 35 | 34 | 31 | 33 | 32 |
| Setting policy on grouping students in classes by ability | 25 | 27 | 29 | 30 | 27 | 24 | 28 |
| Establishing curriculum | 24 | 30 | 36 | 35 | 34 | 40 | 40 |
| “At this school, how much control do you feel you have in your classroom over each of the following areas of your planning and teaching?” | | | | | | | |
| Selecting textbooks and other instructional materials | 42 | 46 | 53 | 51 | 55 | 62 | 64 |
| Selecting topics, contents, and skills to be taught | 50 | 55 | 59 | 57 | 59 | 64 | 67 |
| Selecting teaching techniques | 83 | 86 | 87 | 86 | 88 | 88 | 90 |
| Evaluating and grading students | 84 | 85 | 87 | 86 | 87 | 87 | 89 |
| Disciplining students | 63 | 70 | 75 | 71 | 69 | 73 | 74 |
| Determining the amount of homework to be assigned | 85 | 87 | 85 | 88 | 89 | 88 | 90 |

NOTE: For a description of community types, see page 147 of the *1990–91 Schools and Staffing Survey: Data File User's Manual, Volume 1: Survey Documentation*.

colleagues in small towns and 67 percent of their rural counterparts; and

- Only 63 percent of the teachers in the big cities, compared to 73 percent in small towns and 74 percent in rural areas, believed they had considerable control over disciplining the students in their classes.

However, in some areas relating to school-level control, public school teachers did not differ in their perceptions by community type.

- Teachers in different types of communities did not differ much in their perceptions of control over determining discipline policy and the content of inservice training, or over setting the policy on grouping students in classes. Basically, a majority of teachers—no matter where they taught—felt that these decisions were not in their hands.
- No matter where they taught, teachers overwhelmingly believed that they were free to select teaching techniques, evaluate and grade students, and determine the amount of homework to be assigned.

Private school teachers showed few differences in perception by community type, which is not unexpected if the reason for the public school differences is central district control over policies. (See Note.)

This *Research Report*, prepared by Judith Anderson, is part of a series published by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement for teachers and parents. If you would like to suggest topics for future *Research Reports*, please write to: Office of Research, U.S. Department of Education, 555 New Jersey Avenue NW, Room 610e, Washington, DC 20208-5648. To be added to the *Research Report* mailing list, send your name and address to OERI *Research Reports*, Outreach Office, 555 New Jersey Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20208-5570. This report is a public document and may be reproduced in part or in its entirety without permission. Please credit OERI.

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U.S. Department of Education. *Who Runs the Schools? The Principal's View*. Washington, DC: 1993.

Summary

Despite movements such as school-based management to give teachers more control over schools, teachers do not believe they have much control over policies on discipline, inservice programs, ability grouping, or curriculum. They are more likely to feel in control of classroom practices such as selecting teaching techniques, evaluating and grading students, and determining the amount of homework.

Private school teachers report more control than public school teachers in most areas. But even among private school teachers two-thirds feel they have little say in determining inservice training, less than half feel they have much influence over the school policy on ability grouping, and just over half feel teachers have much influence over determining discipline policy or establishing curriculum.

For public school teachers, the type of community in which the school is located affects their feeling of control. In general, teachers in rural areas and small towns believe they have more control over establishing curriculum, selecting instructional materials, selecting topics and content, and disciplining students than do their peers in big cities.

U.S. Department of Education. *Who Runs the Schools? The Teacher's View*. Washington, DC: 1993.

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NOTE: An appendix with sample sizes, standard errors, and data for private school teachers by community type is available upon request. Write to *Research Reports*, OERI/Office of Research, 555 New Jersey Avenue NW, Room 611b, Washington, DC 20208.

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