


# The Participation Decision Study: Private School Leaders' Perspectives on Accessing Federal Funding Considering Environmental Factors Influencing NCLB Choice and Competition Mechanisms

SAGE Open  
January-March 2014: 1–13  
© The Author(s) 2014  
DOI: 10.1177/2158244014523023  
sgo.sagepub.com  


Margaret Y. Ficaj<sup>1</sup> and Judith A. Tanner<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The 2011 participation decision study involved exploration into the impact of the external education environment on the decision for private school participation in Federal funding, one deliberately declining player in the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB) choice and competition equation. In the qualitative collective case, three religiously triangulated Michigan private school decision-makers submitted to semi-structured interviews. Analysis of the external environmental factors was through the lens of Gould and Eldredge's (1977) environmentally oriented theory, punctuated equilibria philosophy of change. Analysis involved layering, direct interpretation, categorical aggregation, and cross-comparison of two external environmental categories identified at literature review (NCLB-content and privatization-dynamic) with numerous major and sub-groupings and space for newly emergent material. The category *privatization-dynamics* emerged as significant influence, as did the major theme *trust* and the sub-themes *motivational intent*, *competency*, *consistency*, *grapevine*, *creativity or inspiration*, *restrictions on curriculum*, *lack of awareness of opportunities available*, and *fear of failure*. The study included five specific recommendations for leaders of change to explain, predict, and improve organizational performance toward greater synchronization in operation of the NCLB choice and competition mechanisms.

## Keywords

No Child Left Behind Act, NCLB, non-public schooling, private schooling, religious schooling, privatization, education funding, education choice, education competition, Common Core

Ships typically set sail on big waters with a skilled captain, a sturdy ship, and a determined route to bring the vessel to safe harbor. Nonetheless, history is full of true stories of well-prepared ships hitting rough waters that slow the ship's pace or force a reroute from the safe harbor, sometimes to an unintended demise. Wise seamen will advise that at times of big water resistance, it is not necessarily the skill of the captain that steers the vessel. Seamen will advise that sometimes the power and way of the waves, tides, and currents can take command of the helm. Sometimes external environmental factors result in resistance impacting the way and speed of the ship. An analogous thing can happen in any system when change is in process and in which resistance presents (Gould & Eldredge, 1977).

The rough waters of change commenced in American education in 2001 with the introduction of the sturdy vessel, the *No Child Left Behind Act*, commonly coined NCLB. The education reform machine with the working mechanisms of choice and competition, primarily enabled through Title V in NCLB, functioned to convert public education into a

competitive marketplace to drive up quality in education (Hursh, 2007). The private school participation decision study (Ficaj, 2011) was window into how NCLB's choice and competition mechanisms fare on the rough education reform waters from private sector education perspective, a stakeholder apparently deliberately declining to compete (U.S. Department of Education, 2007a).

## Background

The sturdy NCLB vessel was the by-product of a shift in societal perspective of the role of education from social-democracy toward neoliberalism that began somewhere around the 1960s (Hursh, 2007). The neoliberal shift toward

---

<sup>1</sup>University of Phoenix, Houghton Lake, MI, USA

### Corresponding Author:

Margaret Y. Ficaj, University of Phoenix, 140 Algon Drive, Houghton Lake, MI 48629, USA.  
DrMFicaj@gmail.com

education as a marketplace ushered in new funding opportunities to private education. The insertion of choice and competition in the NCLB legislation opened accessibility of public funds to private schools, including religious schools, through three major means: grants, supplemental services, and equitable participation (U.S. Department of Education, 2007b).

### *A Tidal Wave of Competition*

One of the sweeping changes included in education reform came in the format of competition. Market mechanisms are foundation concepts in NCLB (2001) and heavily contained in Title V, Innovation and Choice, where choice and competition are prevalent. With the introduction of NCLB, competing in an education marketplace was a new role for American public education (B. S. Cooper & Randall, 2008). Prior to NCLB, American public schools had the benefit of a public monopoly over public funds tied to education, according to Cooper and Randall.

*A social-democratic role.* Prior to the 1960s, the popular perspective of the role of education was a social-democratic perspective (Hursh, 2007). The social-democratic view holds that the function of education is to serve as a social safety net, a function of government to capture citizens to ensure the training of a democracy (B. S. Cooper & Randall, 2008). Government became caretaker for the public in terms of providing education to all, acknowledging that an educated public is necessary to responsibly carry out democracy. Prior to the 1960s, society accepted American government control in education; hence a public monopoly on education developed, according to Cooper and Randall.

*A neoliberal role.* A shift to a neoliberal view of the role of education as a business player in a competitive marketplace popularized somewhere around the 1960s coinciding with a cultural climate shift that took place in America in general (Hursh, 2007). The 1960s were turbulent times when society began to mistrust government control. Hursh described the 1960s as rising in movement toward a neoliberal perspective and the early American populist economic concept of competition and unfettered markets. Perspective on education function shifted toward emphasis on quality of education product, acknowledging need to adequately prepare an American workforce for global economic competitiveness.

### *A Tidal Wave of Choice*

To improve quality of the education product, another sweeping change included in education reform came in the format of education choice. Bringing in private schooling competitors, including religious ones, posed Constitutional challenges. The challenges were eventually mediated through another shift in societal perspective, a shift toward an

individual's right to legitimate education choice. Prior to the 1960s, while social-democracy was popular perspective, the cultural climate of the times demanded a clear separation of church and state in education (Laycock, 2008). Laycock cited the first clause of the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, commonly known as the *establishment clause*, as the function and means used to enforce separation. Laycock explained that the *no-aid principle* in the first clause functioned to block government aid into religious schools.

*The shift in constitutional emphasis.* The demand to end segregation was an important aspect of the cultural shift of the 1960s. Laycock (2008) suggested that popular elucidation of the First Amendment of the United States Constitution changed with a demand to end segregation. The emphasis shifted to the second clause of the First Amendment, commonly known as the *non-discrimination clause*, according to Laycock. Laycock explained that the new elucidation of the First Amendment gave rise to NCLB (2001) structure that allowed funding into private schools, including religious schools, in the interest of not discriminating for religious choices.

*A legitimate education choice.* Legislatively, the funneling occurred by structuring the funds as following the child as opposed to funding the religious school, where a legitimate education choice exists (Laycock, 2008). Laycock explained that appointment of a test called the *lemon test* became means to verify what the U.S. Supreme Court defined as the *legitimate choice definition*: that the choice must be genuine, independent, and private. With a justification for competition and choice in place, the huge education reform machine NCLB officially set sail on what would prove to be rough and rising education reform waters.

### *Navigating Rough Reform Waters*

Rough water seamen will advise that regardless of a captain's skill, sometimes turbulent waters determine the speed and way of the ship. In turbulent waters, rough water seamen would claim, the expertise of the individual captain can become de-emphasized and the external environmental forces can overpower the helm. Rough water seamen closely evaluate waves, tides, and undercurrents before deciding to venture out onto rough waters.

*Mode and tempo of education reform.* An analogous thing can happen in any system when change is in process and in which resistance presents (Gould & Eldredge, 1977). The overpowering happens, according to Gould and Eldredge, because the nature of systems is to remain in a steady state, so resistance to change of the steady state can result in a struggle. In Gould and Eldredge's punctuated equilibria theory of change, the Germanists described the struggle as response to an upset in homeostasis of control resulting in a struggle to regain

equilibrium (the steady state). Gould and Eldredge documented that the struggle can result in intermittent altering (punctuating) of the tempo and mode of the change. Thus in terms of education reform, resistance to reform can intermittently slow down the reform (the tempo) or alter the direction (the mode) because the reform is an upset of the status quo, so the status quo will struggle for reversion to force power back to the status quo.

*An upset of status quo control.* Design of the NCLB (2001) reform machine included deliberate attempt to upset homeostasis of a status quo control, specifically to disassemble the control of a public monopoly on American education (B. S. Cooper & Randall, 2008). Consistent with Gould and Eldredge's (1977) theory, punctuation has occurred with education reform and several education studies related to reform resistance and political sub-terrains documented the phenomena with varied successful reversion effects. Lubien-ski (2006) described education organizations as consisting of coalitions and sub-markets that fight vigorously to resist change. B. S. Cooper and Surreau (2008) conducted a study documenting homeostasis upset related to the influence of teacher unions. Lacireno-Paquet and Holyoke (2007) conducted a study concerning public school advocate's political resistance to parental empowerment through choice, documenting reversion effects in Michigan, the same geographical area as the participation decision study.

## Purpose

The participation decision study was exploration into the problem that the private education sector, one competitor in the NCLB (2001) choice and competition equation, was deliberately declining to participate in Federal funding opportunities in significant numbers. The University of Notre Dame, Alliance for Catholic Education (2007) provided proof of the problem in estimating that US\$500 million in Federal grant funds available to private schools remained unclaimed yearly. The U.S. Department of Education (2007a) also provided proof in reporting statistic that most private schools in the United States had no participants in Federal programs, and of that majority 58% reported a conscious decision to decline to participate. The idea of competition is that two countering parties exist. One of the two competing parties deliberately declining to engage is indication that NCLB's market mechanisms of choice and competition are not fully synchronized and barriers exist.

The participation decision study was significant because understanding how choice pragmatically operates (Saiger, 2006) is essential to synchronizing the NCLB (2001) machine to decrease barriers to enable increased private sector participation. The understanding cannot fully occur until all competitive stakeholder perspectives weigh in, including the under-represented perspective from the private sector. The participation decision study included five specific

recommendations for leaders of change to explain, predict, and improve organizational performances toward greater operation of the NCLB choice and competition mechanisms.

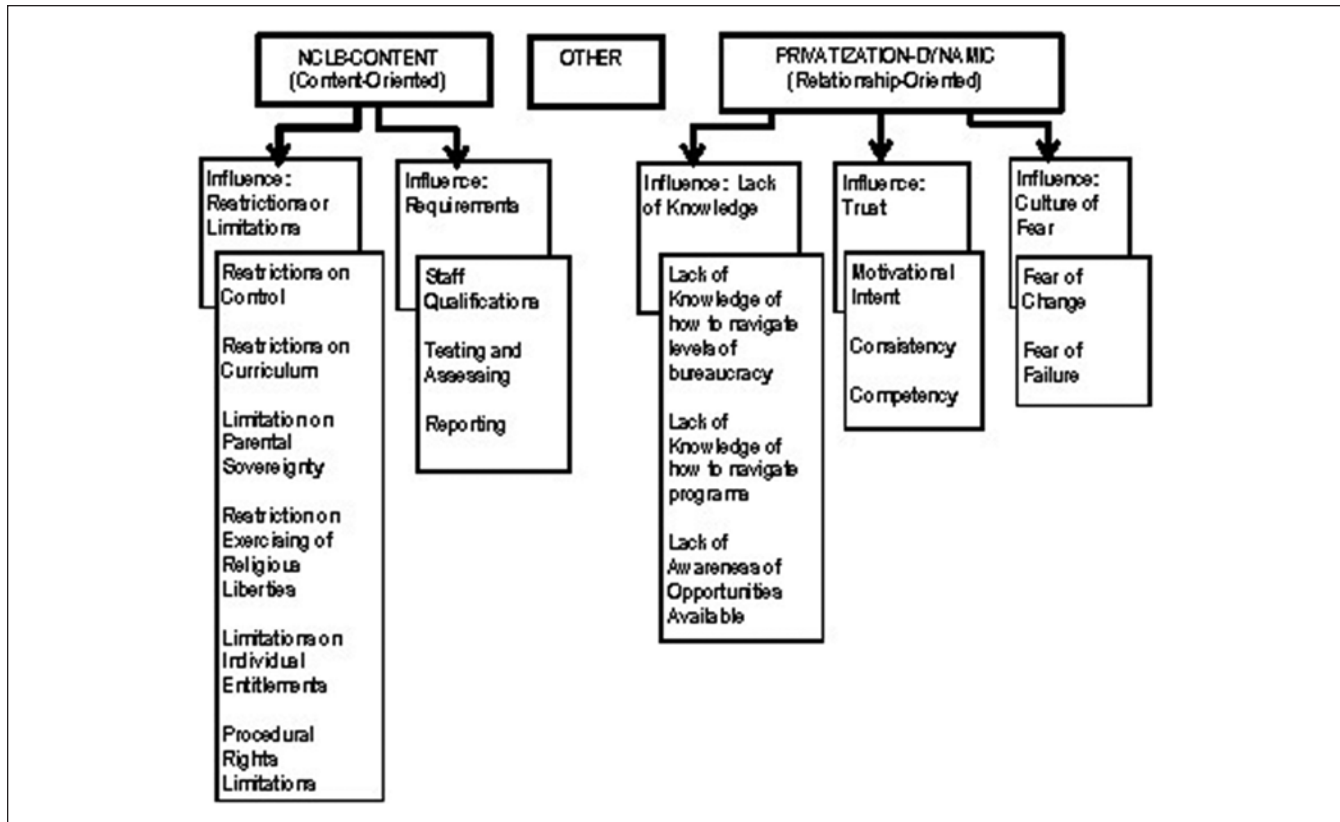
## Approach

Exploration into external environmental factors related to the private school Federal funding participation decision was through the theoretical framework of Germanalists Gould and Eldredge's (1977) environmentally oriented theory of punctuated equilibria philosophy of change. Gould and Eldredge's theory was the appropriate empirical evidence and strong research tradition to base the study on for several reasons. One reason was that the literature review for the study resulted in categories (see Figure 1) related to external environmental factors and resistance to change. Another reason was because humans define reality and construct meaning in the world based on experiences and interactions with their external environment (Stake, 2006). All behavior is an interaction relationship between, a response to or an action on, an organism and the organism's environment (J. O. Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2007). The Gould and Eldredge framework offered theory to extrapolate about how through a process of observing, analyzing, and interacting with the external environment, while de-emphasizing the individual human element, private school decision-makers come to the participation decision.

## Two Broad Categories of External Environmental Factors

The literature review for the study yielded two broad categories and five interconnected groups with numerous sub-groupings of potential external environmental factors related to the participation decision. The highest row on Figure 1 represents two broad categories labeled for the study as NCLB-content and privatization-dynamic. The third category called "other" represented any unknown categories emergent through the research.

*NCLB-content category.* In the left of Figure 1, the first broad category labeled NCLB-content was a content-oriented category concerning requirements and wordings written into NCLB (2001) imposed on private schools accessing Federal funds. Under the broad category emerged two groupings. The first grouping concerned *influence of restrictions or limitations* written into NCLB with six subgroups: *restrictions on control*, *restrictions on curriculum*, *limitations on parental sovereignty*, *restrictions on exercising of religious liberties*, *limitations on individual entitlements*, and *procedural rights limitations* (Abelman & Dalessandro, 2008; Broughman & Swaim, 2006; Coons, 2007; Furst & Denig, 2006; Home School Legal Defense Advocates, 2009; Kang, 2006; Laycock, 2008; Lorch, 2005; Michigan Department



**Figure 1.** Detailing of interconnected layers for analysis of potential influences to the private school Federal programs participation decision.

Source: Reproduced from Ficaj (2011, p. 89).

of Education, Bureau of School Finance and School Law, Nonpublic Schools Unit, 2009b; University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame Task Force on Catholic Education, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 2007a; Weber, 2007). The second grouping concerned *influence of requirements* written into NCLB with three subgroups: *staff qualifications*, *testing and assessing*, and *reporting* (Boerema, 2006; Broughman & Swaim, 2006; Bushaw & Gallup, 2008; Eigenbrood, 2004; Fusarelli, 2007; Michigan Department of Education, Bureau of School Finance and School Law, Nonpublic Schools Unit, 2009b; University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame Task Force on Catholic Education, 2008; Weber, 2007).

**Privatization-dynamic category.** In the right column of Figure 1, the second broad category labeled privatization-dynamic was a category oriented toward issues of relationships or interpersonal aspects specific to dynamics behind the privatization of education benefits. As a relationship-oriented category, the category was a specific focus on themes identified with an interpersonal nature, such as attitudes and feelings affecting the dynamics in a combined collaborative/competitive education environment. Under the broad category emerged three groupings.

The first grouping concerned where private school decision-makers may *lack knowledge or awareness* for processes or offerings with three subgroups: *navigating bureaucracy*, *navigating programs*, and *awareness of opportunities available* (Eigenbrood, 2004; University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame Task Force on Catholic Education, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2007a). The second grouping concerned the *influence of trust* and how trust may interplay in an environment involving coupled competition and collaboration with three subgroups: *motivational intent*, *consistency*, and *competency* (B. S. Cooper & Randall, 2008; Eigenbrood, 2004; Sherwood & DePaolo, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 2007b). The third grouping concerned influence of a *culture of fear* in education as a catalyst to change with two subgroups: *fear of change* and *fear of failure* (B. S. Cooper & Randall, 2008; Fusarelli, 2007; Ginsberg & Cooper, 2008; Ginsberg & Lyche, 2008; Lacireno-Paquet & Holyoke, 2007; Scott, Lubienski, & DeBray-Pelot, 2009; Weiner, 2007).

## Method

Method for the study was qualitative with a collective case design. Participant characteristics included certain



**Table 1.** Sample Population and Demographics of U.S. Private School Decision-Makers.

General population (28,384) Non-public schools in the United States 2003 (Broughman & Swaim, 2006)		Target population (820) Non-public schools in Michigan in 2009 (Michigan Department of Education, 2009a)	
		Sample	Commonalities:
"Other Religious"	48%	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Geographic location—Michigan</li> <li>• In position as decision-maker</li> </ul>
Catholic	28%	1	Uniqueness's:
Secular	24%	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Religious affiliation</li> <li>• Varied demographics outside religious affiliation</li> </ul>

Source. Reproduced from Ficaj (2011).

Note. The general population for the study consisted of the decision-makers in an estimated 28,384 non-public schools in the United States in 2003 (Broughman & Swaim, 2006). Out of the 28,384 schools, an estimated 48% were other religious schools, 28% were Catholic schools, and 24% were non-sectarian. To narrow the general population, the target population for the study consisted of decision-makers from Michigan's estimated 820 private schools (Michigan Department of Education, 2009a).

commonalities and uniqueness's based on a population drawn from Michigan. Sample size was three private school decision-makers triangulated according to religious affiliation. Measures included a semi-structured interview subject to a layering process, direct interpretation, categorical aggregation, and cross-comparison. The study included specific techniques to increase validity and reliability.

### Participant Characteristics

Table 1 shows population and sample demographics of the private school decision-makers included in the study. Participant characteristics of the sample included certain commonalities and uniqueness's. A general commonality was the geographic location for the private school, which was the State of Michigan, although not limited to any particular region in Michigan. A specific commonality was the position of the decision-maker. Definition for a decision-maker was to have occupied an acceptable position for a minimum of 2 years with a direct influence to the participation decision. Acceptable positions included a school board member, superintendent, administrator, or principal. Uniqueness's included religious affiliation and varied demographics.

### Sample Size

Because the case was qualitative and not sampling research, the goal was not generalization but what Stake (2006) described as naturalistic generalizing or transferability. Consistent with an instrumental collective case study design, coordinating commonalities and uniqueness's across a sample size of three triangulated individual cases substantiated what Stake referred to as theoretical saturation. A total of 0.00365% of the target population served as main study participants, not including the pilot participants. Triangulation according to religious affiliation allowed evaluation into whether the reports carried the same meaning at cross-site

comparison. Reason for triangulating based on religious affiliation stemmed from a U.S. Department of Education (2007a) finding that religious affiliation of a school had substantial effect on what percentage of students in the school participated in particular Federal programs.

Because the goal was naturalistic generalizing or transferability, the study included specific techniques to minimize threats to validity common to qualitative case study (Stake, 2006). The study included purposeful maximum variation sampling (Teddle & Yu, 2007), coding and layering (Creswell, 2008), triangulation (Stake, 2006), and member checks (Creswell, 2008) to address external threats of research method. The study included techniques in presentation and performance (James, 2007) to address external threat of interaction of setting. Presentation techniques (James, 2007), attention to relationships (Hendry, 2007), and attention to language and communication limitations (Polkinghorne, 2007) were in place to address internal threat to character of the data. A coding and layering technique and member checks functioned to address internal threat to reliability of the analysis (Creswell, 2008).

### Sampling Procedures

Sampling procedures involved three specific steps (Creswell, 2008). The first step was recruitment by introduction letter to the target population, selection by a maximum variation sampling technique (Teddle & Yu, 2007), and enlistment by personal contact to positive recruitment responses. The second step involved proper forms procedures to ensure consent and confidentiality, data gathering measures designed to protect identity, and proper records handling to ensure participant confidentiality. The third step involved the use of specific instrumentation and interview techniques to gather data.

Instrumentation included the interviewer, a semi-structured interview protocol, a pilot study, a non-intrusive recording device, qualitative software NVivo9™, Microsoft

**Table 2.** Research Questions Used in the Participation Decision Study.**Central research question**

(R1) Why do Michigan private school decision-makers decide to decline to participate in Federal funding in which the decision relates to influences from external environmental factors?

**Isolating issue sub-questions**

(R2) What are the external environmental factors reported by private school decision-makers related to the content of NCLB (2001)?

(R3) What are the external environmental factors reported by private school decision-makers related to the dynamics of privatization (Vergari, 2007)?

**Dissevering issue sub-questions**

(R4) What are the unique features of the private school decision-makers' descriptions of their experiences?

(R5) What are the commonalities of the private school decision-makers' descriptions of their experiences?

Source. Adapted from Ficaj (2011, p. 12).

Excel™, and member checks. Sampling procedures included technique to reduce the external validity threat of interaction of setting by arranging settings and locations to be as comfortable and convenient as possible for the participants with options of an in-person or phone interview (James, 2007). To ensure reliability of the communication, the study included technique to ensure no distractions and reduce intrusiveness of the recording device, again suggestions by James.

## Measures

Measures involved direct interpretation of the three individual cases and categorical aggregation of the collective three cases (Stake, 2006). Direct interpretation included a construct/coding/units/rules system, specific management procedures, and data layering of the individual instances. Categorical aggregation involved expanding the individual reports for frequency distribution and direction measure for cross-site analysis.

## Research Design

The participation decision study was a qualitative collective case study. A qualitative and explorative format allowed emergent material, important because the literature review did not yield assurance that the categories and subgroups identified were exhaustive of potential influences and did not reveal strength of influences. Because the goal was to understand the participation decision, something other than the individuals in the cases, the case design goal was instrumental as opposed to intrinsic (Stake, 2006). The collective case design was important to draw the unique experience of each individual case allowing direct interpretation for sophistication into categorical aggregation for cross-site analysis.

## The Research Questions

Table 2 contains the research questions that guided the study. The goal behind the central research question (R1) was to understand better what external environmental factors most

influenced Michigan private school decision-makers to decline to participate in Federal funding opportunities. To answer the central research question, the study first included isolating issue sub-questions (R2 and R3) necessary to isolate relevant experiences related to the two broad categories identified in the literature review. To further the data for cross-comparison, it was necessary to dissever unique experiences from common experiences among the individual reports through the dissevering issue sub-questions (R4 and R5).

## Results

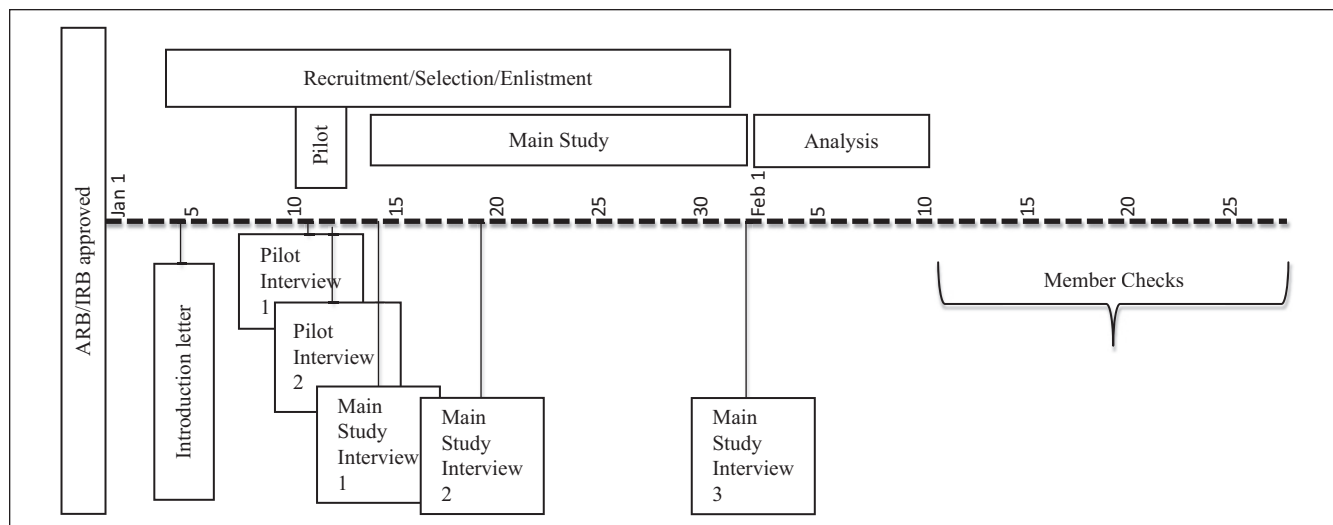
Recruitment for the study did not commence until receipt of both Academic Review Board (ARB) and Institutional Review Board (IRB) approvals. Both occurred prior to January 4, 2010. Time frame for recruitment/selection/enlistment was 27 days, between the dates of January 4, 2010, with the introductory letter mailing through January 31, 2010, with the enlistment of the final participant (Figure 2).

## Participant Flow

The pilot study commenced with the enlistment of two acceptable participants and took place over the period of the 2 days, January 11 and 12, 2010. The main study took place over a period of 11 days and commenced on January 14, 2010, with the first interview, continued to January 19, 2010, with the second interview, into February 1, 2010, with the final interview. Analysis took place over a period of 8 days, between the dates of February 2 and 10, 2010. Member checks took place over a period of 2 weeks between February 11 and 29, 2010.

## Pilot Study

The pilot study functioned to determine areas of improvement for the interview protocol and included two pilot participants. The pilot did result in revision of two questions on the interview protocol. The new improved protocol as



**Figure 2.** Recruitment and participant flow of the participation decision study running from January 1, 2010, through February 28, 2010. Source. Adapted from Ficaj (2011, pp. 74-92).

appended in the original study (Ficaj, 2011, p. 180) was applied to main study participants. Table 3 represents findings from the main study.

### Data Analysis

Analysis as represented in Table 3 involved layering, direct interpretation, categorical aggregation, and cross-comparison of two external environmental categories identified at literature review (NCLB-content and privatization-dynamic) and a third possible category called “other.” The study included triangulation according to three categories of religious affiliation for cross-comparison of commonalities and uniqueness’s based on the private education organization’s establishment type. Analysis at the sub-theme level yielded the most significant and useful information.

**Category results.** Although both broad categories, NCLB-content and privatization-dynamic weighted heavily, what emerged as the most important category to the participants was privatization-dynamic (frequency 18; direction equally positive and negative). A third broad category labeled “other” also emerged although the contents of the category likely related to the predetermined broad categories in various ways (frequency 8; direction negative). The participants reported in a combination of positive and negative ways on all major and sub-themes with the exception of two content-oriented sub-themes: limitations on parental sovereignty and procedural rights limitations.

**Major theme results.** The major theme influence of trust was the only major theme that emerged as significant in the findings. The major theme was significant because all three sub-themes unanimously rated positive (total frequency nine).

Major themes not significant in the findings rated in order from highest frequency reports to lowest included influence of restrictions or limitations, influence of requirements, influence of lack of knowledge, and influence of culture of fear.

**Sub-theme results.** The findings concerning sub-themes offered the most precise and useful information about the private school decision-makers’ perspective on the external education environment. When a sub-theme received unanimous reports, a frequency of three, the sub-theme was significant in the findings. Following are the eight sub-themes found to be significant in the findings in unanimously positive (+) or unanimously negative (–) directions, including two surprise emergent sub-themes under the “other” category:

- grapevine (–)
- creativity or inspiration (–)
- restrictions on curriculum (–)
- lack of awareness of opportunities (–)
- fear of failure (–)
- motivational intent (+)
- consistency (+)
- competency (+)

The remaining sub-themes were not significant in the findings. A majority of the participants (but not a unanimous count) indicated similar responses in a negative direction concerning the sub-themes: need to know, staff qualifications, restrictions on control, testing and assessing, and reporting. One participant reported negatively on each sub-theme: restrictions on exercising religious liberties, limitations on individual entitlements, lack of knowledge to

**Table 3.** Categorical Aggregation of Participant Reports.

	Catholic	"Other Religious"	Secular	Sub-theme totals (-)	Sub-theme totals (+)	Major themes	Major theme totals	Broad categories	Broad category totals
<b>Grapevine</b>	-1	-1	-1	<b>-3</b>					
<b>Creativity or inspiration</b>	-1	-1	-1	<b>-3</b>					
Need to know		-1	-1	-2		Influence: Other	-8	Other	-8
<b>Restrictions on curriculum</b>	-1	-1	-1	<b>-3</b>					
Restrictions on control	-1		-1	-2					
Limitations on individual entitlements	-1			-1					
Restrictions on exercising of religious liberties	-1			-1			-7		
Limitations on parental sovereignty								NCLB—Content (Content-Oriented)	-13
Procedural rights limitations									1
Testing and assessing		-1	-1	-2			1		
Reporting	-1		-1	-2			-6		
Staff qualifications	1	-1	-1	-2	1	Influence: Requirements			
<b>Motivational intent</b>	1	1	1		<b>3</b>				
<b>Consistency</b>	1	1	1		<b>3</b>		9		
<b>Competency</b>	1	1	1		<b>3</b>				
<b>Lack of awareness of opportunities available</b>	-1	-1	-1	<b>-3</b>					9
Lack of knowledge of how to navigate programs			-1	-1			-5		-9
Lack of knowledge of how to navigate bureaucracy			-1	-1					
<b>Fear of failure</b>	-1	-1	-1	<b>-3</b>					
Fear of change			-1	-1		Influence: Culture of fear	-4	Privatization-dynamic (relationship-oriented)	

Source. Reproduced from Ficaj (2011, p. 12).

Note. First three numerical columns = separate analysis of individual interviews; (+ 1) = positive report; (- 1) = negative report; no score = no report; horizontal entries = list of the sub-themes sorted by major themes and broad categories; bolding = significant sub-theme in the findings; fourth and fifth columns = Aggregated sub-theme totals (+ or -); sixth numerical column = aggregated major theme totals (+ or -); far right column = aggregated broad category totals; (+ or -).

navigate bureaucracy, lack of knowledge to navigate programs, and fear of change. No participants offered report on the sub-themes of limitations on parental sovereignty and procedural rights limitations.

**Triangulation results.** The participation decision study included triangulation according to religious affiliation as a potential pre-determinant to identify uniqueness and commonalities based on religious affiliation. Notably and contrastable to the findings of Broughman and Swaim (2006) and U.S. Department of Education (2007a), no discernment of unique features occurred and religious affiliation did not emerge as a significant pre-determining factor. Commonalities yielded an unexpected result, however, indicating that the participants were more common in general private education interests than different in perspectives or experiences based on religious affiliation.

## Discussion

The participation decision study was a general window into private sector education's perspective on how choice and competition, essential mechanisms in the NCLB (2001) machine, pragmatically operate. The study was specific exploration into the problem of why private school decision-makers choose to decline to participate in Federal funding opportunities in which the decision relates to external environmental factors. The problem was analyzed through the lens of punctuated equilibria theory of change (Gould & Eldredge, 1977). The goal of the study was not generalization, but transferability or naturalistic generalizing (Stake, 2006). Consistent with an instrumental goal, the collective case design yielded understanding about the participation decision, as opposed to the individuals (Stake, 2006).



The exploration yielded valuable information about two main categories with a layering of themes and sub-themes of potential external environmental influences on the participation decision. NCLB-content was a content-oriented category and privatization-dynamics was a relationship-oriented category. Privatization-dynamics emerged as a significant category, as did trust as a major theme making all three trust sub-themes significant: motivational intent, competency, and consistency. The sub-themes grapevine, creativity or inspiration, restrictions on curriculum, lack of awareness of opportunities available, and fear of failure were also significant.

Based on the findings, it is clear that private school decision-makers do observe and analyze the climate of the education environment before deciding to venture out and navigate the rough reform waters. As any good seaman would advise, success in navigating rough waters involves skillful operation of the ship, including synchronizing with the waves and undercurrents while avoiding wading against hazards. A more skillfully operated NCLB (2001) machine would be a better synchronized machine. A well-synchronized NCLB machine would include consideration for how choice pragmatically operates (Saiger, 2006) from private sector perspective, including the waves and undercurrents created in a coupled competitive and collaborative education environment.

### *Five Specific Recommendations*

The participation decision study resulted in a narrowing of significant influences, but the findings warrant more exploration into how, why, and to what extent the external environmental influences operate. A greater understanding is important to know how to entice all competitors to full engagement. For this reason, the study included five specific recommendations to increase knowledge about the participation decision (see Ficaj, 2011, for specific study design suggestions):

**Recommendation 1:** Increase knowledge of sub-theme grapevine

**Recommendation 2:** Increase knowledge of sub-theme creativity and inspiration

**Recommendation 3:** Increase knowledge of three apparent disconnects concerning: fear of failure, need to know, and competition

**Recommendation 4:** Increase knowledge of major theme trust

**Recommendation 5:** Increase knowledge of sub-theme lack of awareness of opportunities available

### *Privatization-Dynamic: A Rising Tide*

Privatization-dynamic was the category most significant in the findings of the participation decision study in a combination of positive and negative directions. The category was relationship-oriented toward issues of interpersonal

dynamics behind the privatization of education benefits, such as attitudes and feelings affecting the dynamics in the coupled collaborative/competitive environment. The participants reported on all of the categories, major themes, and sub-themes except limitations on parental sovereignty and procedural rights limitations. Both excluded sub-themes concerned the individual human element and de-emphasis of the human element is consistent with punctuated equilibria theory of change (Gould & Eldredge, 1977). The finding on privatization-dynamic indicated that relationships were more important to the decision-makers than content written into NCLB (2001). Relationships could be creating barriers and could also be solution for increasing participation.

### *Trust: Ripple Waves*

Under the category privatization-dynamics, the most important major theme that emerged was the influence of trust. The participants unanimously indicated a positive perception of all three of Sherwood and DePaolo's (2005) types of trust: motivational intent, consistency, and competency. The responses indicated that the private school decision-makers were willing to rely on the public school counterparts for direction, to collaborate, and to gain knowledge to access Federal funding. The responses indicated that private school decision-makers viewed the public counterparts as collaborators more so than competitors in the coupled collaborative/competitive education environment (B. S. Cooper & Randall, 2008; Eigenbrood, 2004; Sherwood & DePaolo, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 2007b). Private school decision-makers viewing the public counterparts as more a collaborator than a competitor indicates an apparent disconnect between how the two posed competitors view each other.

**Recommendation 3.** Recommendation was to increase knowledge concerning a few apparent disconnects. One disconnect related to competition in the coupled collaborative/competitive education environment (B. S. Cooper & Randall, 2008; Eigenbrood, 2004; Sherwood & DePaolo, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 2007b). The working mechanism is to compete. The participants did not indicate a concern for competitive incentives or punishments, strive to gain a competitive advantage, a fear or tension of possible elimination, or a perception of a monopolistic power or conflict toward a status quo (B. S. Cooper & Randall, 2008). The apparent disconnect could be important because for competition to work and a striving of the two markets against each other to happen, two countering participants need to engage. Education scholarship requires more information to fully understand the apparent competitor disconnect, perhaps in a theory to illuminate and explain how and why the competitor disconnect occurs.

**Recommendation 4.** Recommendation was to increase knowledge concerning the major theme trust. The findings leave unexplored potential interactions of trust with other themes

or variables. A future study could consider how to use trust to reduce other negatively rated relationship-oriented themes of significance in the findings. For example, how trust interplays with lack of knowledge is a potential expansion on the study and could include evaluation into where or how using trust factors could reduce lack of knowledge. Conversely, a future study could evaluate the potential that a strong trust factor could be interfering with the private school decision-maker's pursuit of knowledge.

Future studies in trust are important because participants indicated not only a high trust rating but also indicated a high lack of awareness of available opportunities, so a potential for interplay of the two sub-themes could exist. The two sub-themes could interplay because competition and collaboration coupled in practice can create contrasting dynamics resulting in interference with each other in terms of trust, according to Sherwood and DePaolo (2005). A future study could reveal greater truth about trust, perhaps exploring a greater population or a population across states with varied constitutions or political sub-terrains. A future study could explore if collaboration between entity-types may be more useful than competition to synchronize and move the machine forward.

### *The Grapevine: Rogue Waves*

The category "other" concerned any emergent material not previously identified in the literature review, and new information concerning an education grapevine did emerge. The grapevine is a commonly known and powerful communication force affecting perceptions and actions of individuals, and the impact is clearly and commonly known as not dependent on the accuracy of the information. In the case of the participation decision study, the sub-theme grapevine was influential and negative concerning the decision to participate in Federal funding opportunities.

**Recommendation 1.** Recommendation was to increase knowledge concerning the education grapevine. Increasing understanding about the structures, effects, and ways to manage the grapevine could be useful to transforming the communication force from a negative influence to a positive one in terms of the participation decision. The information could be useful to understand important details, such as the advantages or disadvantages of the grapevine, channels of communication, reasons for the grapevine, accuracy of the information, movements of the grapevine, or participant roles.

### *Creativity or Inspiration: A Wave Train*

The world is rapidly changing and the digital era is rapidly advancing. Contemporary education change efforts drive toward enabling and developing creativity and innovation as essential personal qualities in a workforce adequately trained for national global competitiveness. Education leaders must

consider that a creative and inspiring learning environment is conducive to producing a creative and inspired offspring, and education policy and programs must allow the same. The participants expressed a significant concern to preserve flexibility as a means to enable creativity and ability to inspire. The private school leaders may be conveying a very important message to policy makers concerning an essential to that end, the importance to preserve and enable (as opposed to stifling) the flexibility a teacher needs to be creative and inspiring.

### *Restrictions on Curriculum: A Rip Current*

Teachers can best be creative and inspiring where flexibility in curriculum exists, according to the private school leaders. If education leaders viewed curriculum and delivery as factors integral to each other for the purpose to create a fascinating and inspiring experience for the learner, the importance of ability to be flexible in curriculum would become obvious. Education legislators should consider a new vision approach offering a reward system for aligning curriculum with creative delivery, as opposed to punitive measures associated with assessing.

**Recommendation 2.** Recommendation was to increase knowledge concerning creativity and inspiration. Additional research could yield a greater understanding of the attribute alluded to and the influence of the attribute. Not only did the study participants indicate a strong concern for the sub-theme creativity and inspiration but also a strong concern for restrictions in curriculum, and a lesser concern for teacher qualifications. A relationship could exist between the attribute alluded to as creativity and inspiration and the concern for restrictions in curriculum, and perhaps even teacher quality. The findings beg a need to examine the teacher perspective, specifically why teachers certified and highly qualified under NCLB (2001) definition and able to teach at the public counterpart, choose instead to teach in a private school for often less pay and benefits.

### *Lack of Awareness: A Low Tide*

Common sense suggests that private school decision-makers will not pursue funding that the leaders do not know is available. The decision-makers in the study all expressed a lack of full awareness of what was available in terms of Federal benefit for the private schools. The reports are consistent with a U.S. Department of Education (2007a) statistic that 40% of non-participating private school representatives reported a lack of knowledge of what was available to private schools. The findings were similar to the literature review in supporting the advocates of Catholic education concern that lack of awareness could influence participation in Federal funding (University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame Task Force on Catholic Education, 2008).

**Recommendation 3.** Recommendation was for future study to gain understanding about a second apparent disconnect that concerned the private sector's need to know about public funding. Participant reports alluded to a perspective that the private sector role in American education was a distinctly separate and different type from the public sector role, prompting no need to know about public sector policy. Understanding why private leaders do not share urgency to know about public education policy is pivotal to increasing urgency to seek the information needed to engage. Future research could investigate whether the type of founding or organizing of the private school creates a distinct difference or a specific level of control that serves as a precipitator to need to know.

**Recommendation 5.** Recommendation was to increase knowledge of the sub-theme lack of awareness of opportunities available. Leaders need more information concerning the pervasiveness, distribution, and source of the problem of lack of awareness of opportunities. More insightful information may emerge in a study using a larger sample, across state samples, or samples comparing against differing demographics such as school size, urban versus rural, or factors related to the economic status or stability of schools.

Education leaders should evaluate relationships between trust, lack of awareness of opportunities, and the unclaimed funds that were the focus of the problem in the participation decision study. The findings in the participation decision study beg the question of whether vested interests in the unclaimed funds interfere with information flow, which could influence lack of awareness of opportunities and thus transference or claiming of the monies. Evaluating vested interests could be important because the study did not investigate where the unclaimed monies go, nor did the study evaluate whether where the unclaimed monies go relates to any of the relationship-oriented sub-themes.

All participants reported a general knowledge of funds available to the private school, but all also qualified the knowledge of what was available limited to communication channeled through the public school counterparts. This is important because participants also expressed lack of need to know about public funding. Structure of NCLB (2001) is to draw in all education stakeholders, public and private, in a synchronized role toward a national education interest in educating all American children equally and equitably, making need to know essential and urgent for all education stakeholders.

### ***Fear of Failure: A Turbidity Current***

The private school decision-makers reported an acute awareness of the existence of fear of failure in public sector education. The participants expressed concern for fear of failure for public sector education at all three levels: societal, institutional, and individual (B. S. Cooper & Randall, 2008). In

contrast, the participants did not report concern for fear of failure for private sector education at any of the levels.

**Recommendation 3.** Recommendation was to discover more about an apparent disconnect concerning fear of failure. The findings indicated that there could exist a surprising contrast between public and private sector education perspective concerning the influence of the sub-theme fear of failure. An apparent disconnect exists concerning how fear of failure as a tactical element in reform intended to spurn innovations (B. S. Cooper & Randall, 2008) has permeated private education versus public education. An important future study could involve a greater illumination of the contrast between private and public sector education perspectives on fear of failure. The future study could yield better understanding about how fear of failure has affected public sector versus private sector education and how fear functions in the combined competitive/collaborative education environment.

## **Conclusion**

Full functioning of NCLB's (2001) choice and competition mechanisms are not only important to the NCLB machine but also to the sustainability of private sector education (University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame Task Force on Catholic Education, 2008), which in turn is important to the machine. This is because the relationship between public and private sector education is a reciprocal relationship in American education. NCLB requires private school participation for full synchronization of the machine, and at the same time private schools need the Federal funds as they face serious sustainability threats closely related to financial issues, according to the University of Notre Dame. When a private school cannot financially sustain and disappears, a competitor disappears further stunting the machine. Maintaining a competitor is a neoliberal reason for increasing participation.

The relationship between public and private sector education is a reciprocal relationship also essential to the symmetry of American society in general. Religious education serves the purpose to integrate the sect's religious perspective into every area of the life of the individual, and religion is a constitutionally protected right necessary for pluralism (Kang, 2006). Religious education and the constitutionally protected right together support symmetry in society, in that restricting religious liberty may reduce pluralism by reducing the coexistence of differences that reinforce tolerance, according to Kang. It is imperative that private education receives Federal funding to alleviate threats to sustainability because when a religious school cannot sustain a reduction in a society built on pluralism occurs. Maintaining pluralism is a social-democratic reason for increasing participation.

Thus from both neoliberal and social-democratic perspectives, the private school participation decision warrants further exploration so leaders of change can explain, predict,

and improve organizational performance related to NCLB (2001) funding with greater accuracy. Better understanding about how choice pragmatically operates from private sector perspective is essential to understanding private education participation decision influences. To understand the private school perspective, leaders of education change need consider that private leaders are doing as the rough water seaman would advise, carefully evaluating the waves, tides, and undercurrents before deciding to venture out into rough reform waters. A beginning point is deeper evaluation into environmental interaction influences affecting the participation decision behavior, which in turn affects the mode and the tempo of the NCLB reform machine. The leaders in the participation decision study indicated relationships in the environment as most crucial. The five recommendations in the private school participation decision study are the starting point to begin the deeper evaluation.

### Authors' Note

Special agreements for authorship exist between Dr. Margaret Ficaj and Dr. Judith A. Tanner supporting equal contribution to the study and reporting of research. This manuscript is based on data used in the previously published doctoral dissertation by Ficaj (2011).

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

### References

- Abelman, R., & Dalessandro, A. (2008). An assessment of the institutional vision of Catholic colleges and universities. *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice*, 12, 221-254. Retrieved from <http://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/catholic/index>
- Boerema, A. J. (2006). An analysis of private school mission statements. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 81(1), 180-202. doi:10.1207/S15327930pje8101\_8
- Broughman, S. P., & Swaim, N. L. (2006). *Characteristics of private schools in the United States: Results from the 2003-2004 private school universe survey* (NCES 2006-319). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education.
- Bushaw, W. J., & Gallup, A. M. (2008). Americans speak out—Are educators and policy makers listening? *Phi Delta Kappan*, 90(1), 9-20. Available from <http://www.kappanmagazine.org>
- Coons, J. E. (2007, September). *Access to responsibility*. Presentation III at the Carnegie Conversation on Catholic Education, Palo Alto, CA.
- Cooper, B. S., & Randall, E. V. (2008). Fear and privatization. *Educational Policy*, 22, 204-227. doi:10.1177/0895904807311303
- Cooper, B. S., & Surreau, J. (2008). Teacher unions and the politics of fear in labor relations. *Educational Policy*, 22, 86-105. doi:10.1177/0895904807311298
- Cooper, J. O., Heron, T. E., & Heward, W. L. (2007). *Applied behavior analysis* (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Creswell, J. W. (2008). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Eigenbrood, R. (2004). IDEA requirements for children with disabilities in faith-based schools: Implications for practice. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, 15, 2-8. doi:10.1177/10442073040150010101
- Ficaj, M. Y. (2011). *Michigan private school decision-makers' federal funding participation decision and external environmental influences in education* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (1041087893)
- Furst, L. G., & Denig, S. (2006). The use of physical symbols to transmit culture in religious schools: A comparison of Adventist and Catholic schools in America. *Journal of Empirical Theology*, 18(1), 21-42. doi:10.3102/00346543057001001
- Fusarelli, L. D. (2007). Restricted choices, limited options: Implementing choice and supplemental education services in No Child Left Behind. *Educational Policy*, 21, 132-154. doi:10.1177/0895904806297579
- Ginsberg, R., & Cooper, B. S. (2008). What's fear got to do with it? *Educational Policy*, 22, 5-9. doi:10.1177/089590480731129
- Ginsberg, R., & Lyche, L. F. (2008). The culture of fear and the politics of education. *Educational Policy*, 22, 10-27. doi:10.1177/0895904807311293
- Gould, S. J., & Eldredge, N. (1977). Punctuated equilibria: The tempo and mode of evolution reconsidered. *Paleobiology*, 3, 115-151. Available from <http://paleobiol.geoscienceworld.org/>
- Hendry, P. M. (2007). The future of the narrative. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13, 487-498. doi:10.2277/1077800406297673
- Home School Legal Defense Advocates. (2009). *Home schooling in the United States: A legal analysis Michigan* (2009-2010 ed.). Purcellville, VA: Author.
- Hursh, D. (2007). Assessing No Child Left Behind and the rise of neoliberal education policies. *American Educational Research Journal*, 44, 493-518. doi:10.3102/0002831207306764
- James, N. (2007). The use of email interviewing as qualitative method of inquiry in educational research. *British Educational Research Journal*, 33, 963-976. doi:10.1080/0141192070165704
- Kang, Y. T. (2006). On public aid to Christian schools in the United States: A reformed Christian perspective. *Journal of Research on Christian Education*, 15, 169-186. Retrieved from <http://www.andrews.edu/jrce/index.html>
- Lacireno-Paquet, N., & Holyoke, T. T. (2007). Moving forward or sliding back: The evolution of charter school policies in Michigan and the District of Columbia. *Educational Policy*, 21, 185-214. doi:10.1177/0895904806296903
- Laycock, D. L. (2008, March). Why the Supreme Court changed its mind about Federal aid to religious institutions: It's a lot more than just republican appointments. *Bingham Young University Law Review*, 2008, 275-294. Retrieved from <http://lawreview.byu.edu/archive.htm>
- Lorch, S. (2005). Compelling and coherent visions: From theory to implementation. *Journal of Jewish Education*, 71, 237-239. doi:10.1080/00216240500180403



- Lubienski, C. (2006). School diversification in second-best education markets. *Educational Policy*, 20, 323-344. doi:10.1177/0895904805284049
- Michigan Department of Education. (2009a). *Number of institutional non-public schools*. Lansing, MI: Author. Retrieved from [http://www.michigan.gov/documents/NPSHS\\_numbers\\_05\\_131608\\_7.pdf](http://www.michigan.gov/documents/NPSHS_numbers_05_131608_7.pdf)
- Michigan Department of Education, Bureau of School Finance and School Law, Nonpublic Schools Unit. (2009b, August). *Information on nonpublic and home schools*. Lansing, MI: Author.
- No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Public Law 107-110 20 U.S.C.A. § 6301 et seq. (*West 1993*). Retrieved from <http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/index.html>
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (2007). Validity issues in narrative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13, 471-486. doi:10.1177/1077800406297670
- Saiger, A. (2006). The role of empirical research in informing debates about the constitutionality of school choice. *Journal of School Choice*, 1(3), 123-144. doi:10.1300/J467v01n03\_12
- Scott, J., Lubienski, C., & DeBray-Pelot, E. (2009). The politics of advocacy in education. *Educational Policy*, 23, 3-14. doi:10.1177/0895904808328530
- Sherwood, A. L., & DePaolo, C. A. (2005). Task and relationship-oriented trust in leaders. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 12(2), 65-81. doi:10.1177/107179190501200206
- Stake, R. E. (2006). *Multiple case study analysis*. New York, NY: Guilford.
- Teddlie, C., & Yu, F. (2007). Mixed methods sampling: A typology with examples. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 1, 77-100. doi:10.1177/2345678906292430
- University of Notre Dame, Alliance for Catholic Education. (2007). *Federal Grants Access Initiative*. Notre Dame, IN: Author.
- University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame Task Force on Catholic Education. (2008). Making God known, loved, and served: The future of Catholic primary and secondary schools in the United States. *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice*, 11, 276-312. Retrieved from <http://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/catholic/index>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2005, August). *Equitable services to eligible private school students, teachers, and other educational personnel: Non-regulatory guidance* (Title IX, Part E, Uniform Provisions, Subpart I—Private Schools). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Innovation and Improvement, Office of Non-Public Education. Retrieved from <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oi/nonpublic/index.html>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2007a, August). *Private school participants in Federal programs under the No Child Left Behind Act and the Individuals With Disabilities Act: Private school and public school district perspectives*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, Policy and Programs Study's Service. Retrieved from <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oi/nonpublic/index.html>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2007b). *The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001: Benefits to private school students and teachers*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Innovation and Improvement, Office of Non-Public Education. Retrieved from <http://www.ed.gov/nclb/choice/schools/privbenefits/index.html>
- Vergari, S. (2007). The politics of charter schools. *Educational Policy*, 21, 15-39. doi:10.1177/089590.4806296508
- Weber, M. C. (2007). Services for private school students under the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act: Issues of statutory entitlement, religious liberty, and procedural regularity. *Journal of Law & Education*, 36(2), 163-210. Retrieved from <http://law.sc.edu/jled/>
- Weiner, L. (2007). A lethal threat to U.S. teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 58, 274-286. doi:10.1177/0022487107305603

### Author Biographies

**Margaret Y. Ficaj**, EdD, received her doctor of educational leadership in 2011 from the School of Advanced Studies, Department of Education, University of Phoenix. Her experience relevant to the submitted article includes teaching and philanthropy in private and public education environments. Current research interests include behavioral approaches and interventions in special education and autism.

**Judith A. Tanner**, EdD, received her doctor of educational leadership and organization from the University of New Mexico in 2003. Her experience includes working in public school as a special education director, elementary principal, teaching pre-service teachers, and mentoring doctoral learners at University of Phoenix and New Mexico State University. Current research interests include the implementation of the Common Core State Standards in public schools.