

INTRODUCTION

In 2013, superintendent of Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS) Bernadeia Johnson announced that MPS would be starting a new program called “Shift.” This program would create “partnership zones” at 20 to 30 percent of Minneapolis Schools. “School teams in these zones would... be governed by performance based contracts and freed up from what she characterized as outdated rules” (Regen 2013). These would be schools modeled after charter schools, and this plan would require substantial contract changes. As a researcher that is interested in education policy, this development caught my attention. Charter schools have increasingly carried weight in the media space over the past decade, especially with popular documentaries such as The Lottery (2010), and Waiting for Superman (2010), which have characterized public schools as failing at their job or even being “obsolete”, as Bill Gates said in a 2005 op-ed in the Los Angeles Times. Moreover, the relationship between charter schools and public schools is characterized as competitive and contentious. In fact, with the rise of schools being run as businesses and other free-market approaches to education policy, most schools and districts find themselves competing with one another for state and federal dollars. In such a competitive environment, I wanted to know how a program that seemed to value collaboration over competition between charter schools and public schools could come exist. Further, as a proponent of collaboration, I wanted to know how this competitive environment could hinder or affect future collaboration-based education reform policy. The main question for this study became: What impact is the free-market ideal having on the relationship public school districts have with charter schools and how do those in charge of making policy decisions frame opportunities for collaboration?

To answer this question, I decided to use a qualitative open-ended interview method with current school board members in the Twin Cities. As elected officials, their thoughts, beliefs, and preferences are important for understanding why certain kinds of policy are favored while other kinds of policy are not sought or investigated. Further, as insiders in the realm of education policy, their unique perspective would

provide me with access to the discourse of education policy. I was able to use this to shed light on the way the subjects of collaboration and competition are framed within policy-making circles.

After some challenges during the data collection process, I decided to focus my research on Minneapolis and St. Paul in a comparative case study. Because Minneapolis *has* chosen to begin the Shift program discussed earlier, while St. Paul has not, I expected to find some differences between the school boards. In addition to the Shift program, Minneapolis has also pursued collaboration in other ways that will be discussed in the following section. However, I was pleased to find specific references to different frames that school board members from these two districts used to talk about the charter school issue and collaboration-based approaches to education policy. Within the individual contexts of competition-based policy approaches versus collaboration-based, I found other important frames that seem to help facilitate a favoring for one approach to the other. Within the pro-collaboration environment, I found a focus on how to best teach to the individual student, a focus on class as a factor that disadvantages students, and an emphasis on equal opportunity for every student. Within the pro-competition I found a focus on how to provide the best learning environment and a focus on race as a factor that disadvantages students, then emphasizing the importance of diversity. Alternately, while Minneapolis school board members were more wary of charter schools, they were also more open to working with them, while St. Paul school board members were generally approving of charter schools existing as competitors to public schools but were hesitant about working collaboratively with them.

Because of the small sample size used and the qualitative work being done, it is difficult to make any strong claims based on my findings. However, the data collected from each interview was substantial, and the trends discussed in my findings are rich sources for continued research and new questions about discourses in education policy.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 2002, President Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), a federal education reform policy that was focused on “higher performance standards and, among other measures, calling for closing down failing schools, opening up public school monopolies to competition, and authorizing federal dollars for school districts pursuing initiatives consistent with new federal law” (Sperry et al. 2012). Minnesota, however, had already championed major education policy reform in the early 1990s through legislative action that saw the start of an open-enrollment program, which allowed parents to send their child to another school if they felt as though their child’s current school was not meeting the child’s needs (Corson 2000). In addition, the nation’s first Charter School Law was passed by the Minnesota legislature in 1992, paving the way for the nation’s first charter school. These two education reform policies would become inextricably tied to a national discourse that saw competition as the best method for improving the nation’s schools because it allowed for parents to make choices about their child’s education, which would in turn encourage education institutions to innovate to become a school parents would want to send their child. As part of giving parents more choice, Charter schools were created. Charter schools, independent but still public schools, were free to institute innovations, but would be subject to the same regulations as district schools and closed if they did not meet the standards (Sperry et al. 2012).

Although it had begun earlier in many states, in many ways the signing of the NCLB Act heralded the beginning of an age of education reform in the United States. Combined, the charter school movement and the increase in the importance of choice and competitive options are two important pieces of what is called Portfolio School District Reform, which has become the primary reform focus for many states and local districts through-out the country. This type of reform was characterized in a Pennsylvania study as addressing the structure of school governance by: Central offices moving from directly managing schools to a focus on the closure and creation of schools based on performance; management of schools becoming

based more on contract arrangements; and school building principals provided with increased authority over budget and program decisions (RFA 2012).

The case of Chicago Public Schools is one of the more striking examples of School District Portfolio Management. After over two decades of rigorous education reform had not shown significant improvements for test scores and achievement, Chicago Mayor Daley and his education staff decided in 2004 to begin shutting down the city's worst schools and replace them with mostly charter schools and independently operated contract schools (Dell'Angela 2004). This trend in education policy reform posed a major threat to the teachers union, which in the Chicago case was "not guaranteed a role in staffing the charter and contract schools" (Dell'Angela 2004). Charter schools are important to this project because of the way they have been historically situated in relation to public schools as competitors for students and state and federal money. This model of competition in education was driven home by a concept that said schools in general should be run like businesses. In 2004, Larry Cuban of Stanford University wrote, "business-inspired reform coalitions, driven by a deep belief that strong public schools produce a strong economy, have changed school goals, governance, management, organization, and curriculum. In doing so, the traditional and primary collective goal of public schools building literate citizens able to engage in democratic practices has been replaced by the goal of social efficiency, that is, preparing students for a competitive labor market anchored in a swiftly changing economy" (Cuban 2004). The discourse of "a competitive labor market" has continued to play a powerful role in our society, which was verified repeatedly by the school board members I interviewed.

The past 30 years have not only seen a meteoric rise in education policy reform, but they have also seen massive societal changes from the "War on Terror," to the rise of the internet, and the great recession ushering in a rising skepticism of business-leaders and the competitive business model. In addition, the relative lack of success among many charter schools has contributed to this disappointment in the reform movements of the late 1990s. In 2005, Bill Gates posted an op-ed in the Los Angeles Times claiming that

“Our high schools are obsolete... they were designed 50 years ago to meet the needs of another age... Until we design high schools to meet the needs of the 21st century, we will keep limiting -- even ruining -- the lives of millions of Americans every year” (Gates 2005). The Bill and Melinda Gates foundation would then go on to become one of the most important organizations in education policy reform, giving hundreds of thousands of dollars to specific reform movements throughout the United States. One of the largest investments in reform started in 2010 with the creation of what have been called “District/Charter Collaboration Compacts,” a new initiative by the Gates foundation to build “stronger cooperation between charter schools and traditional schools, as well as providing equitable district funding for charters” (Karp 2011). As a 2013 study of cities that signed the compact agreement, of which Minneapolis was one, explains, “The Gates Foundation required that Compacts be signed by key district and charter leaders and include agreements about specific collaborations. While all the Compacts contained ambitious goals, some kept a tight and measurable focus, and others spelled out a broader vision for collaboration” (Yatsko et al. 2013). Goals that were particularly important included helping the most effective schools expand while committing to locating new schools in the highest-need areas, ensuring equitable distribution of public school resources and access to facilities for public charter schools, and enhancing efficiencies through shared service contracts (Yatsko et al. 2013). In the context of an education system that pushes schools to compete with one another, this push for collaboration is unusual. Historically locating how this shift was possible would be a great site for continued research. Moving forward from the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation’s push to forge partnerships between the public schools and charter schools within the district, while Minneapolis received funding in 2010 they have not received funding since, despite applying again in 2012. The prior work with the Gates foundation, combined with the appointment of a new superintendent, helped lead to the implementation of autonomous zones modeled after charter schools that was the impetus for this project.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As a project focused on the study of discourses and the impact they have on a society, a theory of discourses and how they operate is crucial for moving forward. In particular, Gee's theory of discourse focuses on how language, in combination with other social practices contribute to forming communities similar to subcultures. In his book on Discourse he distinguishes between 'discourse' and 'Discourse' (denoted by the use of lower-case d and upper-case D), which signifies the interrelationships between social identities, social relations, contexts, and specific situations of language use (Gee 2001). His work is very similar to Bourdieu and his concept of a "Field" as a place where people, in addition to their social positions, are located. Gee even says that "there are innumerable Discourses in any modern, technological, urban-based society: for example... Being a type of middle-class American, factory worker, or executive, doctor or hospital patient, teacher, administrator..." (Gee 2001). These are all Discourses. Thus Discourse with a capital D refers to "...a socially accepted association among ways of using language, other symbolic expressions, and artifacts, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing and acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or "social network" (Gee 2001). The value of those other social relations in addition to the language is significant because it is what makes the distinction; 'discourse' with a lower-case d, then refers to the language on its own as "language-in-use or stretches of language (like conversations or stories)" (Gee 2001). This theory of discourse is important to this project because the data collected consists primarily of transcriptions taken from interviews with school board members.

By applying Gee's theory to this project, Education Policy can be seen as a field with its own discourse with which School Board members engage, utilize, and recreate as a part of their work. The conversation during the interview on its own would not rise to the level of discourse, but because the questions in themselves were about their position in a field and established their identity as a member of a "socially meaningful group" (elected officials, policy-makers, etc.), the language presented in the data I

recorded does meet the level of Discourse. This project continues from that theory by making the claim that there are two distinct Discourses within the Discourse of Education Policy, which are recognizable by a partiality for either cooperation or competition between and among schools.

With the rise of a discourse of competition in education policy reform over the last several decades, much research has been done to evaluate the effectiveness of this type of policy reform. In addition, some research has looked into how cooperation-based reform initiatives are impacted by the existing competition-driven model. However, often these studies point to political conservatism and liberalism as the basis for much of the debate between charter schools and public schools. In their book entitled Policy Studies for Educational Leaders, Frances Fowler (2000) discusses values and ideology in education policy, “Ideas, beliefs, and values... shape the way people define problems” and they “constrain people’s ability to perceive possible solutions to policy problems.” Fowler goes on to discuss different values that play a role in education policy, however they place a particular focus on democratic and conservative social and economic values. One of my goals for this project was to question what kinds of values people give as the rationale for their positions on decisions in education policy. However, the concept that “no policy or policy proposal can be fully understood without considering the values and ideological system that undergird it” (Fowler 2000) did play an important role in approaching my findings as being relevant to understanding the policy choices made by the people I interviewed.

Other than economic values being either democratic or conservative, neoliberal economics has come to the forefront of research in a variety of sociological fields. When discussing the importance of competition between “diversified and specialized forms of provision... ‘markets’ in educational services” (Gordon et al. 1997), this is identified as a neoliberal policy. Because political leaders of different political parties have adopted neoliberalism, it is unclear how an individual’s political party contributes to their favoring of one economic mode or another. As a concept neoliberalism stands as a counterbalance to cooperation-driven models for reform. However, neoliberal policies often struggle to provide the open

choice that is so crucial to a free educational marketplace. A 1997 study of New Zealand and English schools showed that despite the effort to create a free market, what actually existed was a “quasi’-market in both countries” (Gordon et al. 1997). In this study, the researchers looked at an incongruity between what policy-makers advocate for and purport to exist contrasted by the way the education system is actually operating. This incongruity could be better understood by applying the study of discourse to see why education leaders may be skeptical or hesitant to adopt non-free-market ideals when approaching reform. As Marshall et al. (1989) found, policy makers do not consider ideas that “diverge from the prevailing dominant values.” This can be problematic for reformers proposing cooperation-based solutions and can make collaboration difficult. This project did not have a broad enough scope to approach these questions, so they remain as possibilities for further research.

RATIONALE FOR MY STUDY

My study takes an important step in understanding the relationship between discourses of competition and cooperation in education reform by asking what beliefs and values contribute to the reasoning behind the education policy decisions that each individual advocates. A School Board is a board of directors who are primarily responsible for electing the superintendent, but they may also construct a plan for the district, provide feedback for the superintendent, are in charge of all hiring and firing that happens in the district, and oversee the fiscal year budget. There have been some studies on school boards, for instance a 2014 study “aimed at understanding how well suited the typical school board member is for office” (Chorneau 2014) found that most school board members had a reasonable understanding of important school issues like the fiscal budget and collective bargaining. Potentially important to my project, the study also found that “political moderates tend to be more informed than liberals and conservatives when it comes to money matters...” (Schober & Hartney 2014). What this study was not able to investigate, however, was the actual words and phrases used by school board members to align themselves with a particular position in education policy or the way they frame particular situations and problems. In addition, because of the

survey design of their study, it was limited to quantitative data. This project accesses qualitative data that could shed light on how school board members frame the important issues.

METHODOLOGY

I chose a comparative case study as the method for this project for several reasons. With only a limited amount of time to complete this project, I knew that I would not be able to conduct interviews on a broad scale as would be needed for a qualitative survey or ethnographic model. While a survey method would provide for a richer body of data to analyze, a comparative case study still allows me to hear some of the discourses being used by the school board members. Going into the project, I knew that St. Paul and Minneapolis were exploring different policy strategies as discussed earlier. Because both cities are comparable to one another in size and population, I believed finding differences in how policy-makers framed their approach to policy-making would illuminate further differences between these two districts. While this study cannot answer the question of why the two cities are so different policy-wise, this project can help to further understand how they are different.

In addition to studying Minneapolis and St. Paul, the two urban centers of Minnesota, I also speculated that smaller districts might deal with different issues as well as abilities in terms of financing reform practices. My initial goal for this project was to compare Minneapolis, St. Paul, Richfield, and Brooklyn Center to one another. Richfield and Brooklyn Center are each inner-ring suburbs that reside to the south and northwest of the Twin Cities, respectively. By comparing small counties to one another at the same time I was comparing large cities, I hoped to find differences and similarities between the smaller and larger cities that could provide further clues to understanding certain policy preferences.

DATA

I began the data collection process by reaching out to school board members from all four districts by email and phone. The majority of those that I was able to contact were open to being interviewed; however because of unforeseen circumstances, I was only able to interview six school board members, two

from Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Richfield. At this point I decided to focus on differences between Minneapolis and St. Paul, however because I was able to conduct two interviews with school board members from Richfield, I used that data to further understand the frames, concepts and values expressed by Minneapolis and/or St. Paul school board members.

Demographically speaking, Minneapolis and St. Paul are similar in size and diversity of students and as urban hubs they each deal with similar problems and issues. Minneapolis serves about seventy-one public schools. While they do authorize four charter schools (MPS 2013), Minneapolis has over thirty charter schools of various sizes. St. Paul Public Schools (SPPS), serves about sixty public schools and do not authorize any charter schools, while the city of St. Paul also has over thirty charter schools. Richfield serves six public schools. Like St. Paul they do not authorize any charter schools despite having two charters. Of the two large cities, Minneapolis is a wealthier city overall, but racially it is comparable to St. Paul. Of the three cities, Minneapolis is also the most populous.¹

The six school board members I interviewed ranged in gender, ethnicity and also ranged in ages between their mid-thirties and early fifties. All of the board members I interviewed currently have or previously had children in public school systems in districts in the Twin Cities. In addition, the majority of interviewees had completed a Bachelor's Degree or higher education. Each interview lasted about an hour with the exception of one interview that was cut twenty minutes short. Finally, all but one of the respondents self-identified as a Democrat, the remaining school board member declining to self-identify.

I split the interviews into three sections. The first section asked them about their work as a school board member to put them at ease. The last question in this section focused on the values they as an individual bring to the school board, which helped transition into the second section that asked about their perspectives on the policy issues discussed at the beginning of this paper. This section took up the majority

¹ A table showing basic demographic information about each of the cities can be found in the

of the time and involved many open-ended questions. I found that each interview took on a different shape, where the interviewee would identify a belief or frame and this would carry us in one direction or another. While I tried to stay focused on the questions, I asked other questions that arose out of the conversation. The final section was designed to gauge the school board member's perspective on general social issues. There were three questions that asked the interviewee to provide a solution for a particular social problem. The social issues I selected were the high cost of infant childcare, health insurance and their views on the Affordable Care Act, and finally the relationship between wage stagnation in the US and government food assistance programs like Food Stamps.

After interviewing six school board members and transcribing the recordings, I found that I had collected over 92 pages of valuable data. Considering the complexity of some of the issues, and the difficulty in setting up interviews, this amount of data allowed me to make relatively strong conclusions based on the findings. However, because I was only able to speak to less than half of the members on the school boards I was studying, I cannot conclude that the perspectives and frames described by the board members with whom I spoke can be ascribed to the district's school boards as a whole. Other limitations of this study are related to the interview process. Because I asked questions based on the flow of the conversation, there were some questions that I did not ask all school board members. One example is a question about charter schools, for one school board member I was able to ask them directly if they supported open enrollment, while other school board members either answered this question indirectly and in some cases it was not answered. This problem also limits the generalizability of the codes discussed in the section below.

FINDINGS

I coded the transcriptions for frames relating to collaboration or competition as well as other beliefs that were repeated in other interviews. Together with the jottings I took during the interviews I was able to find the important frames discussed here. Although school board members disagreed on their value

judgment of the competitive relationship public schools have with charter schools, all of the people I interviewed acknowledged that the relationship between charter schools and public schools is competitive. For school board members in Minneapolis, this relationship was seen as a something that hindered the best education from reaching the individual student, whereas in St. Paul this relationship was valued and Charter schools were seen as important competitors that challenged public schools to innovate and create the best learning environment for students. My findings are thus split into three sections; the first explores the discourse of competition represented primarily by St. Paul, the second section explores the discourse of collaboration represented primarily by Minneapolis. Each of these two sections will focus on two frames that were important to understanding the particular favoring for one side or the other. The third section takes into account the data collected from Richfield, which was more in line with St. Paul in terms of framing and policy-preferences. However, the data from Richfield also nuanced the perspective held by St. Paul school-board members favoring competition.

St. Paul Public Schools: Competition Means a “Better Product”

Overall, statements like the following were characteristic of school board members that favored a competitive relationship with charter schools:

“I believe in the value competition to help everybody have a better product, that’s a traditional business model and I come from a corporate background, if someone has the monopoly then it’s easy to let customer service slip”

This better product became apparent in many subtle ways, including discussions about how schools market by door knocking to boost enrollment. In a competitive marketplace, enrollment matters, because funding goes where the students go. While this relationship is mostly directed by the state, school board members that favored competition did not emphasize the directedness of this relationship the way other school board members did. In addition, school board members that favored competition were either less informed about the successes and failures of charter schools, or they were supportive of Charter schools as worthy adversaries. Believing that “charter schools provide things we can’t provide” was very important in

terms of thinking about charter schools competitively because it meant that they do not necessarily pose a direct threat to the work done by public schools, so long as public schools are still able to innovate and provide a product people like.

By focusing on creating a better product, the focus is taken away from individual achievement. This distinction was only really apparent when I began to compare the data from St. Paul to Minneapolis. On average, St. Paul school board members talked more about school or district-wide programs designed to help students have a safe and supportive learning *environment*. Board members talked about a new racial equity policy as well as the recently passed statewide anti-bullying policy. When talking about the high-cost infant-childcare as part of the situation questions, one school board member moved the topic to early childhood education, emphasizing that he would invest money in that area.

“...to get that additional learning and exposure to other students in a learning environment, it just helps them so much really it's a kind of preparation for success [that we need].”

This effect was amplified when I asked one school board member from St. Paul to imagine their district collaborating with charter schools, if they thought it was something they felt was possible. The St. Paul school board member first identified the competitive relationship as a major hindrance to collaboration. However, when I urged them to speculate, they continued to use a vocabulary of a learning environment, if “[the students] don't feel like they fit, and academically they just fit better in this environment then... [Superintendent Silva is] fine with that, she'd rather make sure that every child [get the best education].” This last statement suggests that equal opportunity for the best education is the most important. However, after further questioning I found that St. Paul school board members continued to be uneasy about charter schools because of their focus on the learning environment frame.

With an emphasis on learning environments, pro-competition board members placed a particular importance on racial diversity in schools, an effect that was amplified by pro-competition board members from Richfield. In addition, when talking about the achievement gap, this was mostly attributed to racial

inequity in society. One board member highlighted this when discussing Minneapolis' implementation of the Shift program:

“...The way we're looking at our achievement gap is we don't necessarily think it's a poverty, it's a poverty AND race [issue] because of the institutional racism. Because, most institutions anywhere were designed for the people in power which was a race, white privilege, white whites, so we find more of our students of color feeling disrespected by our teachers, or they don't care, because how can you as a white person relate to ME, who has to get up in the morning when my parents are gone. I get my siblings ready for school, get them on the bus, you know, and help them with their homework and yeah I come in and I'm a little pissed off that morning, and what do you do, you send me to the principals office because I lipped off, you didn't care to ask me what happened this morning, you didn't take that time...”

Statements like this were not characteristic of school board members in Minneapolis, even when they identified themselves as ethnic minorities. In fact, I did not find any relationship between a focus on race over class and the self-identified racial category of the interviewee. Therefore, I attributed a stressing of race as a primary disadvantage to the learning environment emphasis. This opens the door for potential future research into how race and class are framed differently by elites in society. This can also be attributed to recent articles that point to charter schools as increasing racial inequity as white students leave urban public schools to attend better funded charter schools in some states. The above quote is also revealing in the way it intermingles race and class without care for the distinction. The situation of a student with parents that are gone and having to care for siblings does not necessarily need to apply to a racial minority, yet this is given as an example of the experience of a student of color. Because race is *socially* constructed, solutions for racial inequity involve changing the social environment such that racial discrimination becomes a more unlikely avenue for teachers and staff to fall into. Class-based issues, on the other hand are more concrete, and while they are influenced and affected by race, they are not specific to race. Thus, they may involve more complex and creative solutions than a single school district is able to manage without the help of charter schools.

Minneapolis Public Schools: Collaboration to Make Sure Individual “Kids Get What They Need”

Overall, statements like the following were characteristic of school board members that were in favor of collaboration between public schools and charter schools:

“...If we can have a combination of district schools and high performing charter schools that address the needs of the students, and we can do it in a collaborative way, I do believe that can work. I've already seen mastery schools collaborating with district schools. I've already seen Hiawatha Leadership Academy principals and teachers collaborating with Minneapolis public schools teachers...”

Unlike pro-competition school board members, pro-collaboration board members seemed much more informed, also more skeptical, of the successes of charter schools, however they also believed that if a charter school *was* working, that it would be worth it to collaborate. This willingness to do collaborate work fits well within the emphasis on the individual student. As one school board member explained, “...ultimately it's about the kids, no matter which school they go to. We should compete in terms of how we are doing the work of educating, educating our kids, but not competing against the kids...” Through the Shift program, Minneapolis school board members are still attempting to figure out a way for Minneapolis to do what “high-performing charter schools” are doing on their own. Thus, the other significant frame necessary for determining if a board member was pro-collaborative was a general disappointment for the way competition is imposed on the districts by the state and federal government. For example:

“...I believe in collaboration. I think unfortunately one of the things that was set up wrong from the beginning was this whole competitive, you know, one of the two gets funding and you're competing for kids and so it becomes, you know, one organization's self interest is threatened by the other's self interest.”

However this problem did not have a satisfying solution. Instead, school board members focused on individual achievement as a way to escape the isolating effect of competition on public and charter schools. One school board member described the competitive relationship as being in denial about charter schools, which suggests that collaboration is important for learning and being flexible to the needs of the situation. In addition, MPS school board members said a phrase I was surprised to only hear from Minneapolis Public Schools: “We want them to succeed.” While I do not believe St. Paul Public Schools wants their charter

schools to fail, this problem is at the heart of the dichotomy between competition and collaboration.

Ideally, either system would work. SPPS improves by innovating in competition with Charters, so Charters innovate by competing with SPPS until both are successful at providing good education. On the other hand, Minneapolis collaborating with charter schools could also lead to both public schools and charter schools providing good education.

Minneapolis school board members also focused on class instead of race when describing problems students in the district face such as the achievement gap. This fit into the frame of providing equal opportunity to all students, as one school board member said:

“[I have] a big belief in society providing equal opportunity for everyone regardless of where you were born and how wealthy you are. We obviously have big advantages if you were born wealthy to people who were born not wealthy and so trying to change that is a big value that drives that.”

By focusing on class instead of racial inequity, school board members broadened the range of students that could be coming to school at a disadvantage. In addition, providing solutions for students at a disadvantage because of class is more complex because class conflicts affect students in a variety of ways. Class may be the difference between having an after school tutor, or a student that has to work part-time while attending high school. In this sense, providing a good education to that student is not necessarily a matter of providing a *service*, but rather of opening up flexibility to meet the individual student and family’s needs when it comes to the student’s education. If a charter school is able to provide so that the student can work and go to school, that child stands a better chance at success. For pro-collaboration school board members, that child’s, and their peer’s, success is more important than the “success” of the district at providing a good learning environment. Of course, by supporting and collaborating with charter schools, school board members believe they in fact *are* providing students with the learning environment they need. As one school board member said:

“I think we... spend way too much time arguing about charter schools... it's like eighty... ninety percent of the debate, and maybe less than five percent of the solution. You know, the solution really has more to do with how

to address the needs of kids, and you need to do it holistically, see what the larger society can do and then what can we do in the schools to get there...

The word “holistically” is important. Here the school board member is describing something beyond charter schools, a school system that can determine the needs of individual students and provide them each with the best education. In a sense, this shows how competition underlies the pro-collaborative frame. Collaboration in the context of schools, involves crossing a sort of line in the sand that keeps schools in competition with one another. Schools may agree to work with one another, but the lines that divide them are still there. However, imagining the context in which schools could work with one another without having to also compete is difficult and for now what remains are the two polarized sides.

Richfield Public Schools: Nuancing the Debate

As a smaller district with only a handful of elementary schools, only one high school, and two charter schools, Richfield Public Schools struggles with many problems that the larger districts do not. Because of open enrollment, competition with other districts can be a problem if enough students leave Richfield to attend schools elsewhere because Richfield’s fiscal budget is partially dependent on their ability to draw students. In part, this is why school board members from Richfield struggled with the concept of competition. While they were similar to St. Paul in that they did not work with their charter schools, they also were somewhat disappointed by the way competition was having an impact in their district. As one school board member said, “Public schools, in my opinion, are not necessarily set up for competition.” They explained that most people who go into education are the kinds of people that focus on “the success of kids, they're not business people, they're not driven by production.” When I asked them if they thought this was good or bad, they said it was both. They explained that they did feel as though competition helped encourage teachers to be better teachers, a frame also used by St. Paul school board members. However, they said that it felt strange that the district had to market itself to parents, because so much rests on their ability to gain students.

This helps to nuance the pro-competition narrative, perhaps revealing that a drive for competition had more to do with the perspective of charter schools and their role in society. School board members in Richfield and St. Paul tended to talk about charter schools as either being indebted to the public schools, which are mandated to provide charter schools with a variety of external resources, or as innovative laboratories created for the purpose of experimenting new policy that can then be brought back and implemented in the district.

“I would hope that charter schools would be treated like little laboratories, would allow for innovative educators to come up with better ways to do things and then to share that kind of information... there becomes a little bit of a sense of competitiveness between the public schools and the charter schools because... you know, it gets back to they're fighting for those same kids, and so what good is the charter school to society, if they come up with better ways to do things but aren't interested in sharing that with other educational institutions because they're attempting to pull more kids into their system.”

By contrast, pro-collaboration school board members tended to see charter schools as alternative sites for different kinds of education to take place.

Finally, Richfield school board members discussed the importance of the role of the teachers union in affecting change when it came to charter schools. For the most part teacher's unions have been wary about the charter school model because charter schools generally do not permit teachers unions. Public school districts are beholden to a variety of groups of people, and the teachers union is one of the more powerful. In St. Paul and Richfield, school board members described their unions as most likely being uneasy about the kind of change happening in Minneapolis. As one school board member said in response to the likelihood of Richfield applying a policy similar to Minneapolis' Shift program:

“...The unions have a lot of control over what happens there, and that is who you have to get on board to do something like that... so, I'm not sure how that would be accomplished. I don't think people would be against it, I mean I don't, maybe certain teachers might be and the union in general would be against it...”

However, in spite of the teacher's union, Minneapolis was able to negotiate teacher contracts without a problem and begin implementing shift just this year. And so, other school board members

pointed to the flexibility of the Minneapolis teachers union as crucial to allowing Minneapolis to pursue those kinds of pro-collaborative policies.

CONCLUSIONS

There is no doubt the push for reform based on market values of competition have helped increase the focus and awareness for education policy and improving the education system. However, as new policy reforms that value collaboration come to the fore, the market-driven system is being put to the test in unexpected ways; unexpected because the pro-competition value of providing consumers with a variety of options has been co-opted by pro-collaboration policy reformers. When I began investigating school district portfolio reform, I understood it as policy that asked districts to open up to charter schools as a way to create new options for students. In researching the school districts involved in this study, I found that St. Paul and Richfield had managed to create some new options for their students on their own. To understand what makes a school board member or their district pro-competition or pro-collaboration, the use of discourse and language was crucial to understanding how these concepts interrelate with one another.

The impact the free-market ideal is having on the relationship public schools districts have with charter schools is that policy-makers that want to collaborate with charter schools to provide new opportunities for students are hindered by this ideal. By applying the charter school model directly to the public school system, Minneapolis may be able to provide the next best alternative to a charter school, but this is uncertain. Meanwhile, school districts that support competition continue to work to improve what they offer but by focusing on creating a good educational product, there may still be students in need that are not helped by that specific product.

When policy makers frame collaboration, according to the data I collected, they tend to see it as being about focusing on the individual “whole child.” Whereas policy makers frame competition as being about creating a good learning environment that allows a child to succeed. I have pointed out several opportunities for further study throughout the paper, but what this paper lacks most is a complete data set.

It would be interesting to see if these findings in terms of framing could be found in other cities with greater competition or in a place like Chicago that is focusing almost exclusively on collaboration. In addition, the discussion on race and class and how their interpretations affect education policy reform would make for another excellent study to see how, for example, racial equity policies intersperse class and race. Hopefully the limited data and coding for this project can help us better understand the way education policy decisions are made, so that we may better advocate for the policy we support, and understand why certain policy options are never pursued.

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APPENDIX 1

People QuickFacts	St. Paul	Minneapolis	Richfield
Population, 2012 estimate	290,770	392,880	36,087
Persons under 5 years, percent, 2010	7.8%	6.9%	7.5%
Persons under 18 years, percent, 2010	25.1%	20.2%	21.3%
Persons 65 years and over, percent, 2010	9.0%	8.0%	14.2%
Female persons, percent, 2010	51.1%	49.7%	50.8%
White alone, percent, 2010 (a)	60.1%	63.8%	69.8%
Black or African American alone, percent, 2010 (a)	15.7%	18.6%	9.2%
American Indian and Alaska Native alone, percent, 2010 (a)	1.1%	2.0%	0.8%
Asian alone, percent, 2010 (a)	15.0%	5.6%	6.1%
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone, percent, 2010 (a)	0.1%	Z	0.1%
Two or More Races, percent, 2010	4.2%	4.4%	3.5%
Hispanic or Latino, percent, 2010 (b)	9.6%	10.5%	18.3%
White alone, not Hispanic or Latino, percent, 2010 (b)	55.9%	60.3%	63.2%
Language other than English spoken at home, percent, 2010	26.2%	19.9%	25.5%
High school graduate or higher, percent of persons 25 years and over, 2010	86.2%	88.0%	87.0%
Bachelor's degree or higher, percent of persons 25 years and over, 2010	37.8%	45.5%	33.6%
Median value of owner-occupied housing units, 2010	\$188,100	\$216,800	\$201,000
Per capita money income in past 12 months (2008-2012)	\$25,686	\$30,734	\$28,148
Median household income, 2008-2012	\$46,305	\$48,881	\$52,447
Persons below poverty level, percent, 2008-2012	22.8%	22.5%	13.9%
(a) Includes persons reporting only one race.			
(b) Hispanics may be of any race, so also are included in applicable race categories.			
FN: Footnote on this item for this area in place of data			
NA: Not available			
D: Suppressed to avoid disclosure of confidential information			
X: Not applicable			
S: Suppressed; does not meet publication standards			
Z: Value greater than zero but less than half unit of measure shown			
F: Fewer than 100 firms			
Source: US Census Bureau State & County QuickFacts			