**School Networks and Autonomy-Accountability Tradeoffs: A Cross-National Policy Analysis**

**Abstract**

**Purpose of the study:** In recent decades, school networks have increasingly emerged as an alternative governance model to that of traditional public schools, in an aim to balance institutional flexibility with measurable accountability. This study presents a comparative analysis of student achievement and school climate in network-affiliated schools versus “standalone” schools, which operate independently.

**Methodology:** The study employed a mixed-methods design. In the first phase, verified public data on academic performance, school climate, and governance structures were analyzed. In the second phase, in-depth interviews with school principals were conducted to compare experiences of pedagogical and managerial autonomy across the two models.

**Findings:** The findings indicate a moderate advantage for network-affiliated schools in terms of academic achievement and positive school climate, as well as higher levels of institutional autonomy in management and pedagogical planning.

**Significance and innovation:** This article makes both theoretical and methodological contributions to the study of school networks as intermediary structures that influence educational efficiency and equity. It proposes a comparative analytical framework for examining school networks across diverse education systems, emphasizing the policy implications of balancing choice, equity, and accountability.

Keywords: school networks, decentralization, managerial autonomy.

**Introduction**

In recent decades, a global trend has emerged toward the establishment of school networks, aimed at decentralizing decision-making and enhancing school-level effectiveness. These networks typically combine managerial and pedagogical autonomy with newly developed accountability mechanisms. The current article examines the effectiveness of decentralized school network models through a comparative analysis of network-affiliated versus standalone schools.

**Literature Review**

Comparative studies of school networks across countries commonly focus on six core dimensions: (1) the degree of autonomy—managerial, budgetary, and pedagogical; (2) the regulatory and oversight structure; (3) academic outcomes; (4) equity of opportunity; (5) admissions mechanisms; and (6) the distribution of authority between central and local governments (Ares Abalde, 2014; Gutiérrez et al., 2022). These dimensions form a foundational framework for analyzing education policy in Western countries, reflecting the inherent tension between institutional flexibility and public accountability. As detailed below, school network models in the United States and Europe differ significantly—not only in organizational practices, but also in how they navigate the trade-offs among efficiency, equity, and oversight.

**School Networks in the United States**

The decentralization of public education in the United States during the 1990s led to the emergence of privately managed school organizations, reflecting broader shifts toward competition, privatization, and market-oriented reforms in education. These organizations were shaped by the ideas of Milton Friedman and Myron Lieberman, who championed capitalism and free-market principles, advocating for the introduction of profit-driven competition among service providers within the public education system. Their vision laid the foundation for two main organizational models. The first model, Educational Management Organizations (EMOs), consists of companies such as Edison—the largest of its kind—that operate charter schools with the explicit goals of improving service quality, reducing costs, and generating profit. The second model, Charter Management Organizations (CMOs), comprises nonprofit entities that oversee charter school networks, the largest and most prominent being the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) (Abrams, 2016; Gulosino & Miron, 2020; Mohler, 2020). Charter schools are publicly funded and operate under a performance-based charter, founded on the principle of “autonomy in exchange for accountability.” In other words, their continued operation is contingent on meeting specific performance benchmarks (Glazer et al., 2019; Gleason, 2019; Cohodes & Parham, 2021). While EMOs adopt corporate-style management and marketing strategies, utilize individualized teacher contracts, and focus on enriched curricula, test score improvement, and profitability, CMO networks such as KIPP employ similar management tools but typically maintain standardized employment terms for educators (Abrams, 2016; Gulosino & Miron, 2020; Mohler, 2020).

By 2019, the charter school sector in the United States had expanded significantly, with over 7,000 schools serving more than three million students. While two-thirds of these were standalone schools, the remaining third were managed by either EMOs or CMOs and integrated into formal school networks (David, 2018; Dills et al., 2021; Zimmer et al., 2019). The literature presents mixed findings on the effectiveness of network-affiliated versus standalones charter schools. One U.S. study found that standalone charter schools outperformed network-affiliated ones in both math and reading (Gilblom & Sang, 2021). Conversely, another study reported that network-affiliated charter schools achieved better outcomes than standalone charter schools, with larger networks showing greater success than smaller ones (Cohodes & Parham, 2021).

**School Networks in the United States and Europe**

In the United States, networks such as CMOs operate as independent, state-funded entities that retain operational and pedagogical autonomy, subject to measurable performance targets (Cohodes & Parham, 2021). In contrast, countries such as the Netherlands, England, and Sweden have implemented diverse network models marked by soft governance, indirect regulation, and collaboration among schools, local authorities, and third-sector organizations (Dovigo, 2024; Greany & Higham, 2018).

School networks in the United States operate within a strict regulatory framework that emphasizes measurement and accountability, with their operating contracts typically including both pedagogical and quantitative targets assessed through measurable student outcomes (Cohodes & Parham, 2021). By contrast, in England, Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) function under government oversight, particularly by Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education), and promote standardization in management and teaching practices, while still allowing for a degree of pedagogical flexibility (Greany & Higham, 2018; Gunter & McGinity, 2021). Similarly, in the Netherlands, the “educational freedom” model allows schools to operate independently with full public funding, as long as they comply with legal requirements (Verger et al., 2019). More broadly across Europe, most education systems emphasize inclusive and equitable education. While pedagogical approaches vary, networks tend to operate within a broad value-based framework (Waslander et al., 2021).

Building on these differences, many school networks in the U.S.—particularly CMOs—are organized by educational stage, with some focusing exclusively on either elementary or secondary education. This structure shapes their pedagogical specialization and staff training (Gulosino & Miron, 2020). At the same time, broader, vertically integrated networks also exist, such as KIPP and Uncommon Schools, which operate across all grade levels from elementary through high school (Zimmer et al., 2021). In contrast, most networks in Europe, especially in the Netherlands and England, serve a single educational level, typically primary, within pluralistic yet state-regulated systems that balance centralized oversight with institutional autonomy (Verger et al., 2019).

While these structural models offer clear advantages, research also points to several challenges within school networks. These include disparities in school-level autonomy, inconsistencies in teaching quality, and variations in student achievement (Dovigo, 2024; OECD, 2018). Additionally, some studies suggest that independent schools operating outside of formal networks may benefit from greater flexibility and, when controlling for socioeconomic factors, may even demonstrate stronger academic outcomes (OECD, 2018).

**Governance and Organizational Structure**

In the United States, CMOs typically operate under a centralized corporate structure, with a central office overseeing multiple schools through advanced management systems, standardized information platforms, and educational and financial quality control mechanisms (Gulosino & Miron, 2020). In contrast, governance models in Europe are more diverse. In England, MAT networks are structured as independent institutions with centralized leadership, yet they are subject to government oversight and accountability standards enforced by bodies such as Ofsted (Greany & Higham, 2018). In the Netherlands, school networks follow the stichtingen model—semi-public private foundations that manage multiple schools while adhering to principles of transparency, equitable access, and independent governance within the framework of national standards (Verger, Fontdevila, & Zancajo, 2019). Meanwhile, in Scandinavian countries such as Sweden and Norway, governance structures emphasize a balance between operational decentralization and public accountability, with both local and national councils participating in decision-making processes (Baeck, 2024; Sundberg, 2024).

The distribution of authority within education systems varies considerably across countries. In the United States, this variation stems from its federal structure, which gives individual states significant discretion in shaping education governance. Each state appoints an authorizer responsible for overseeing charter schools, typically granting them a high degree of operational and pedagogical autonomy (Cohodes & Parham, 2021). In contrast, European countries exhibit a wide range of governance models: while Germany and France maintain relatively centralized state control, the Netherlands and England have implemented far-reaching decentralization reforms, transferring managerial, pedagogical, and in some cases budgetary authority to schools or local authorities (Gutiérrez et al., 2022).

**Pedagogical Autonomy and Educational Choices**

In the United States, the federal system enables each state to develop its own regulatory framework, typically overseen by authorizers—semi-independent bodies responsible for approving and monitoring charter schools (Cohodes & Parham, 2021). Within this structure, school networks such as CMOs are granted significant autonomy in curriculum design, instructional methods, and staff recruitment, provided they meet performance targets specified in their contracts with authorizers (Cohodes & Parham, 2021).

In Europe, by contrast, a growing trend of “school autonomy with accountability” has taken shape. This model grants schools broad pedagogical freedom while subjecting them to rigorous national standards and external evaluation mechanisms (Parcerisa et al., 2024). Implementation varies by country: in England, Ofsted conducts regular inspections across all schools, including those affiliated with MAT networks, with a focus on teaching quality, organizational leadership, and school climate (Greany & Higham, 2018). In the Netherlands, high levels of institutional autonomy are coupled with strong external inspectorates, while in Germany and France, school oversight remains centralized under federal or national authorities (Gutiérrez et al., 2022).

**Academic Achievement and Equity of Opportunity**

Research findings from the United States indicate that there is no consistent or significant difference in academic performance between students in network-affiliated schools and those in public standalone schools. However, in schools serving disadvantaged areas, network-affiliated schools sometimes show modest advantages, such as slightly higher test scores or improved graduation rates (Cohodes & Parham, 2021).

In Europe, the picture is more complex. In countries such as the Netherlands and Switzerland, the combination of institutional autonomy and affiliation with a managerial or professional network has been linked to improved academic performance (Gutiérrez et al., 2022). However, other studies highlight the variability of network effects across national contexts. In countries like the Netherlands and Sweden, for example, substantial disparities in quality and outcomes have been observed even among schools operating within the same network— particularly in England and Sweden, where institutional variation is especially pronounced (Verger et al., 2019; OECD, 2018). These findings underscore the importance of evaluating not only academic achievement, but also the extent to which school networks contribute to equity of opportunity, particularly when compared to more traditional public school models.

**Oversight and Evaluation**

In the United States, oversight systems differ across states but typically involve a combination of state-level regulators and external organizations such as universities and nonprofit agencies that conduct performance measurement and evaluation (Loeb & Dynarski, 2020). In contrast, many European countries have moved toward establishing independent national inspectorates that implement structured evaluation systems and regularly publish public accountability reports. In England, for instance, Ofsted conducts routine inspections and issues public ratings for schools (Ehren & Baxter, 2021). Similarly, in countries such as the Netherlands and the Scandinavian states, national inspectorates evaluate not only academic performance but also school climate, equity, and accessibility (Ares Abalde, 2014; Verger et al., 2019).

While some view the expansion of school networks as a practical expression of decentralization, others contend that it signals a retreat of the state from its obligation to provide public education. Critics argue that such shifts may carry significant social costs, including the erosion of educational equity (Cordes, 2018; Gutiérrez et al., 2022; Ladd, 2019).

Existing research shows no clear or consistent evidence of differences between network-affiliated schools and standalone schools, whether in terms of academic outcomes or other dimensions of school functioning. Most comparative studies have relied on narrow indicators, such as standardized test scores in math and English or high school graduation rates, typically measured by the percentage of students passing final exams. This limited focus does not capture the full complexity of educational practice and overlooks broader indicators such as students’ sense of belonging, school climate, teacher and student satisfaction, and equity in admissions and placement processes.

Moreover, the structure of school networks varies widely across countries in terms of governance, regulation, and founding purpose. For example, while many networks in the United States were established within a market-oriented, competitive framework, in Europe, many developed as part of broader decentralization efforts and community-based initiatives. These variations in operational models, oversight mechanisms, degrees of autonomy, and relationships with government and local authorities directly influence how networks function and their educational outcomes.

Against this backdrop, there is a growing need to develop context-sensitive metrics that allow for more nuanced, accurate, and relevant assessments of school networks across diverse national education systems. Such a framework should account not only for academic outcomes, but also for qualitative dimensions such as satisfaction, sense of belonging, pedagogical and social climate, support for teaching staff, and the accessibility and fairness of admissions processes. These metrics must be tailored to each country’s political, cultural, and social context, and reflect key structural variables, including the level of decentralization, funding models, educational market configuration, oversight mechanisms, and the characteristics of the target population.

The aim of this study is to lay the groundwork for an informed examination of these indicators and to propose a comparative analytical framework for more accurately assessing the effectiveness, equity, and contribution of school networks to the improvement and fairness of public education systems.

Given that many countries operate both network-affiliated and standalone schools, and in light of the limited comparative research on their relative effectiveness, there is a clear need for systematic evaluation of network performance. The findings of this study may serve as a foundation for further research that can support policymakers in the Ministry of Education in assessing the viability of strengthening school networks and identifying the areas in which such efforts are most beneficial.

**Methodology**

This study employs a comparative approach to examining network-affiliated school versus standalone schools, using a mixed-methods design that integrates both quantitative and qualitative components. The quantitative phase focused on several categories of educational inputs and outputs, allowing for the analysis of economic, pedagogical, and social factors that contribute to variation in student achievement and school climate. The qualitative phase complemented this by exploring aspects not fully captured through quantitative measures. Drawing on the experience of principals who have led both network-affiliated and standalone schools, this phase generated insights that are underrepresented in the literature and absent from standard metrics. These insights include the dual oversight structures in network schools (from both the network and the Ministry of Education), the ways in which networks enhance the operational capacity of principals and teachers, the effectiveness of network-specific professional development, the implementation of unique educational programs, and the comparative autonomy of principals in network versus standalone schools. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with school principals. These interviews enabled a deeper examination of qualitative dimensions essential for a more comprehensive understanding of the study’s findings, capturing variables not accessible through quantitative data and supporting triangulation across both research components.

**Quantitative Research Design**

**Research Question**

Are there statistically significant differences in funding levels, core academic achievement, and indicators of socio-pedagogical climate between officially recognized schools affiliated with networks and those operating as standalone institutions?

**Research Model**

Figure 1 below presents the quantitative research model.

[FIGURE 1]

*Figure 1*: Quantitative Research Model

The variables were divided into three components. The first includes the exogenous/independent variables: N-SS (network-affiliated or standalone schools), school sector (state or state-religious), Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) municipal cluster, and the Nurturing Index, and their influence on the annual cost per student. The second component includes mediating variables, reflecting internal school interventions aimed at improvement, specifically teacher empowerment and initiatives to strengthen the social and pedagogical climate. The third component consists of the predicted/endogenous variables: academic achievement in core subjects and indicators of the social and pedagogical climate.

**Research Instruments**

Quantitative data were collected from the official websites of the Ministry of Education, including “Transparency in Education,” “Meitzav[[1]](#footnote-1) Online,” and the Ministry’s Research Room, which contains data on 12th-grade matriculation exam results and teacher and student climate survey responses, as measured by the Ministry between the 2014–15 and 2018–19 academic years.

**School Climate and Pedagogical Environment Questionnaire**

This instrument, developed by the National Authority for Measurement and Evaluation in Education (RAMA), is designed to provide school principals, Ministry of Education officials, and the broader public with a comprehensive, multidimensional portrait of schools. It aims to identify both strengths and areas for improvement within individual schools and across the education system over time, focusing on key domains. The questionnaire is validated annually by the Ministry of Education to ensure its reliability and consistency across years, and is administered in two formats:

1. **The Student Climate and Pedagogical Environment Survey (Meitzav), based on student reports**, which includes 43 items grouped into 10 categories.
2. **The Teacher Climate and Pedagogical Environment Survey (Meitzav), based on teacher reports**, which includes 73 items divided into 18 categories.

**Participants**

Israel’s education system offers a compelling case study due to the high prevalence of school networks, which encompass nearly half of all schools in the country, and the broad socio-economic diversity of its population. The study compared 999 six-year, state, officially recognized secondary schools affiliated with educational networks and a group of 848 standalone schools. The study covered 137 municipalities across Israel’s seven administrative districts between the years 2015 and 2019, focusing on schools that participated in both matriculation exams and school climate surveys.

**Qualitative Research Design**

**Research Questions**

The study employed semi-structured interviews that began with questions about the principal’s professional background and personal reflections on their role, particularly regarding managerial autonomy within a network compared to the public system. The goal was to understand key differences in leadership and school functioning between network-affiliated and standalone schools.

Subsequent questions focused on specific aspects of the school, including sources of funding, incentive structures for principals and teachers, and staff training practices. The interviews also explored the composition of per-student funding and whether networks impose additional oversight beyond that of the Ministry of Education.

**Participants**

In qualitative research, it is generally accepted that data saturation can be achieved with a sample size ranging from twelve to twenty participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Guest et al., 2020). This study included 16 school principals, 9 men and 7 women, each of whom had experience transitioning between network-affiliated and standalone schools. Some had moved from a network to a standalone setting, while others had made the reverse shift. The participants represented diverse geographic and demographic backgrounds: five were from the Central District, four from the Northern District, two from the Arab sector, two from the South District, and three from the Shomron (Samaria) District. Their years of experience as principals ranged from 7 to 34 years, with a mean of 13 years. Interviews lasted between 30 and 62 minutes.

**Interview Analysis Method**

The interviews were analyzed using thematic phenomenological analysis, applying a content analysis approach (Berner-Rodoreda et al., 2020). This phase of the study focused on interpreting the meanings embedded in the interview data. Content analysis involves identifying themes, words, expressions, and descriptions that emerge from participants’ narratives, capturing their thoughts and emotions, particularly regarding issues they themselves raised (Shkedi, 2003; Berner-Rodoreda et al., 2020).

**Findings**

**Quantitative Findings**

**Analysis of Explained Variance**

The analysis of variance revealed an advantage for network-affiliated schools in the non-religious state sector compared to standalone schools in the same sector. Statistically significant differences were observed in two key variables: the CBS municipal cluster and the Ministry of Education’s Nurturing Index. These two indices are commonly used in Israel to characterize the socioeconomic background of a school’s student population. The CBS municipal cluster ranks local authorities on a scale from 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest), based on indicators such as education, employment, income, and overall standard of living. This measure corresponds to the Socioeconomic Status Index at the Municipal Level widely used in international research.

In contrast, the Nurturing Index is a more granular measure, based on the characteristics of a school’s student population, such as parental education, recent immigration status, single-parent households, and eligibility for National Insurance benefits. The index is used to calculate differential funding for schools, similar to needs-based funding or pupil premium approaches adopted in other education systems, such as those in England, Canada, and New Zealand. A higher Nurturing Index score indicates a more socioeconomically disadvantaged student population.

Network-affiliated schools also showed an advantage in core academic achievement indicators, particularly in the proportion of students eligible for matriculation certificates that include four or five units in mathematics and five units in English. In Israel, matriculation exams are structured by levels, with each subject taught and assessed at one of three tiers: 3, 4, or 5 units. The 3-unit level is considered basic and constitutes the minimum requirement for obtaining a full matriculation certificate. The 4-unit level is intermediate, while the 5-unit level is the most advanced, recognized as both academically demanding and prestigious. It is typically pursued by high-achieving students with strong analytical skills or aspirations for competitive academic fields, especially in science, engineering, and economics. These levels function not only as indicators of academic rigor but are also widely perceived as markers of educational quality and student ability, and often serve as admission criteria for higher education institutions.

No statistically significant differences were found between network-affiliated and standalone schools in the following areas, even when sector-specific analyses were conducted:

Mediator variables: leadership in the professional development of teaching staff, promotion of civic and social engagement, and the implementation of high-quality teaching, learning, and assessment practices.

Outcome variables: general eligibility for matriculation, eligibility for matriculation with 4 units in English, students’ overall positive perception of school climate, the quality of teacher-student relationships (characterized by closeness and care), and levels of school violence.

Similarly, in the religious state sector, no statistically significant differences were found between network-affiliated and standalone schools across any of the measured variables.

**Structural Relationships Among the Research Variables (Structural Equation Modeling)**

The analysis of model fit indicated that the final model met the established criteria.

Figure 2 displays the significant findings from the structural equation modeling (SEM) of the final model used in the study.

[FIGURE 2]

Figure 2: Significant findings from the structural equation modeling (SEM) of the final model used in the study.

(71) =180.25, p<.001; CFI=.975 ; RMSEA=.058 ; RMR= 10765.85 ; NFI=.960²χ.

\*p < .05. \*\*p < .01. \*\*\*p < .001

The variable “network-affiliated vs. standalone schools” (N-SS) was found to be significantly associated with the following outcomes:

Nurturing Index: A significant positive relationship was observed, indicating that network-affiliated schools tend to have a lower Nurturing Index, suggesting that their student populations are of higher socioeconomic status compared to those in standalone schools.

CBS Municipal Cluster: A significant negative relationship was found wherein network-affiliated schools are more likely to be located in municipalities with higher CBS cluster rankings, once again reflecting a higher socioeconomic status compared to standalone schools.

Annual Cost per Student: A significant positive association was identified, showing that the annual per-student expenditure is higher in standalone schools than in network-affiliated ones.

Civic and Social Engagement: A significant positive relationship was observed, indicating that standalone schools place greater emphasis on promoting civic and social engagement compared to network-affiliated schools.

**Testing the Significance of the Mediation Effect**

To further clarify the unique contribution of the mediating variables to the outcomes and to strengthen the validity of the tested model, a mediation significance analysis was incorporated into the SEM procedure.

Table 1: *Results of the Bootstrap Test (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) for the Significance of Mediation Effects*

**Coefficients of Indirect Effects**

**Bootstraping  
Confidence Interval**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Mediation Effect** | **(95%) Indirect Effect** | **BootSE** | **Lower** | **Upper** |
| N-SS → Civic and Social Engagement → Overall Positive School Climate | .22 | .05 | .12 | .32 |
| N-SS → Civic and Social Engagement → Involvement in Violence | -.21 | .04 | -.30 | -1.3 |

Note: For the variable N-SS (0 = network-affiliated; 1 = standalone), and for the sector variable (0 = non-religious state; 1 = religious state).

**Summary of Indirect Effect Coefficients in Relation to the Research Questions**

Analysis of the indirect effect coefficients presented in Table 1 and Figure 2 reveals a significant mediating role of civic and social engagement in the relationship between N-SS and both overall positive school climate (a×b = .22) and involvement in violence (a×b = –.21). These findings suggest that students in network-affiliated schools tend to experience a more positive school climate and report lower levels of involvement in violence compared to their peers in standalone schools.

**Qualitative Findings**

**Managerial Autonomy**

**Of the sixteen participants, seven reported that network-affiliated schools offer greater managerial autonomy compared to standalone schools, three disagreed, three perceived no difference, and three did not address the question.**

When asked where they had experienced greater managerial autonomy: in a network-affiliated school or a standalone school, participants’ responses were divided.

For example, Itamar, a principal with 15 years of experience in the Northern District, noted:

In the public system, I was on my own, there was no one to consult with. It’s important to remember that a school principal is an educator who doesn’t always understand every aspect. The support I received from the network allowed me to be innovative. It provided an umbrella of resources and capabilities. In terms of pedagogy and school climate, principals feel free to share everything—the good and the bad. They trust me, and the message is: “Take risks, and if you fail, we’ve got your back.” That kind of support didn’t exist for me in the public system. (Itamar)

In contrast, Renana, a principal with 20 years of experience in the Central District, offered a different perspective:

When I was in the public system, the sky was the limit—I could do whatever I wanted. I feel that across the entire education system, principals don’t really have a ceiling they need to break. They can pursue whatever they want, whatever they dream of, as long as they prepare students for the matriculation exams. In all the public schools I led, no one ever stopped me from doing anything. (Renana)

One factor contributing to the variation in perceived autonomy between network-affiliated and standalone schools was the role of the local municipality. Some municipalities are supportive, offering financial and pedagogical assistance to principals, while others are passive or even obstructive, often due to internal power struggles.

Maya, a principal with 10 years of experience in the Central District, shared her experience:

I had much more freedom in the network. In the public system, our relationship with the municipality only caused problems. We suffered because of political tensions between the head of the education department and the mayor and many things got stuck. The leadership at the municipal level wasn’t pedagogically oriented. When I moved to a network, the budget didn’t increase, and the network even charged an overhead fee, but the leadership was different. They talked about pedagogy, and everything budget-related was much clearer. At the start of the year, I knew exactly how much money I had for everything. For me, that clarity made a big difference. (Maya)

Maya described the challenges of working within the municipal system, where internal political tensions not only failed to support her efforts but actively obstructed educational and financial initiatives. She emphasized that these conflicts were unrelated to her leadership but stemmed from rivalries among municipal officials. In contrast, she found the network environment to be more professional and coherent, particularly in terms of pedagogical focus and budgetary transparency. The stability and clarity it provided allowed her to lead more effectively and develop professionally in her role as a principal.

Despite the points noted above, some principals reported experiencing greater autonomy in standalone schools. Asher, a principal with 8 years of experience in the Shomron District, explained:

In the public system I had more autonomy. Now, in the network, I feel there are a lot more “strings,” but it doesn’t feel limiting. I just have to report more and meet higher standards. (Asher)

Asher acknowledged that the network offers substantial pedagogical and managerial support, but also emphasized that it sets high expectations and requires greater accountability from school prinicpals.

Similarly, Amram, a principal with 8 years of experience in the Central District, described the trade-offs he experienced:

The network constantly pushed me to deliver results. In the public system, your main accountability is to the Ministry of Education and the Meitzav exams. But at the same time, there was a lot of flexibility when it came to learning programs. If I came up with an innovative idea, they usually went along with it. Interestingly, in the lower secondary grades in the network I actually had more autonomy than in the public system, because there was less pressure around the Meitzav exam in the 8th Grade compared to the 5th Grade. (Amram)

Amram pointed out that constraints on school autonomy are not exclusive to either setting; rather, different forms of pressure exist in both network-affiliated and standalone schools, limiting principals’ ability to act independently.

Sahar, a principal with 13 years of experience in the Northern District, shared a similar perspective:

In the public system I had more autonomy than in the network. I wouldn’t go back to working in a network, even though I was offered the chance, because in the public system I can give more hours to students. I’ve done more ambitious things there than I ever could in the network. In the public system, I can take initiative more freely and don’t have to report on everything all the time, there’s less pressure. (Sahar)

Her concerns were echoed at the organizational level as well. In an interview with the CEO of one of the networks, a similar issue was raised: the overhead fees charged by the network reduced the number of instructional hours available for students. For Sahar, this was a source of frustration, as it directly impacted her ability to provide the level of support she felt her students needed.

Alongside these challenges, two additional themes emerged that underscore the advantages of networks as large-scale educational organizations: strengthening the operational capacity of principals and teachers, and the integration of mentoring for school leaders. These advantages allow networks to offer mentoring programs, provide professional development opportunities, supply administrative support that frees principals to focus on pedagogy, and employ school leaders under more favorable financial conditions than those typically available in standalone schools.

**Interviews with Network Heads**

In addition to the principal interviews, the study also included interviews with the heads of two major educational networks. While both highlighted the strengths of their networks, particularly in terms of pedagogical and financial management, they also raised several issues that merit attention when considering the future of the network model.

For example, in recent years, local municipalities have begun issuing tenders to determine which networks will operate schools within their jurisdiction. As outlined in the literature review, these tenders are based on various criteria. They also raise concerns that could affect the stability and long-term planning of network operations. As one network head explained:

Because of these tenders, I’ve stopped investing in buildings and infrastructure. A municipality can now run a tender, and a school I’ve poured hundreds of thousands of shekels into could suddenly be handed over to someone else.

Another issue that emerged was the level of investment local authorities make in network-affiliated schools:

Municipalities tend to invest less in schools managed by networks compared to standalone schools. We charge an overhead fee, but no one really knows how much the municipality is charging in overhead. In the end, students in network schools end up losing twice: once from the municipality’s overhead, and again from ours.

Network heads also reflected on the evolving identity of the networks themselves. As noted in the literature review, networks originally served specific populations. In recent years, however, this distinction has blurred. Networks that once operated exclusively within the state-religious sector have expanded to include general state schools, and vice versa, networks that traditionally served general state schools have begun managing state-religious institutions as well:

Networks can give schools everything they need, whether the school is religious or secular. It’s a big challenge, but there’s mutual respect and understanding. Our leadership team includes both religious and secular members.

The network heads also articulated their broader vision of the network model as a driver of educational improvement. From their perspective, networks foster both pedagogical and systemic development, benefiting principals, teachers, and students. They emphasized that networks enhance the professionalism of educational staff and equip them with tools to support their work. Moreover, the network framework allows for the formation of diverse pedagogical teams, which they believe can create a more robust social and educational climate than that typically found in standalone schools.

**Discussion**

This study contributes to the evolving academic discourse on the organizational functioning of educational networks in the global context, while also challenging common assumptions about their inherent structural superiority. Its central contribution lies not only in expanding the scope of evaluation beyond academic achievement, but more importantly, in reconceptualizing *effectiveness*: not as a fixed structural attribute, but as a context-dependent gap between the organizational promises inherent in the network model and the extent to which they are realized in practice under specific local conditions.

This perspective seeks to uncover the systematic disconnect between a network’s theoretical claims and its situational performance, which is shaped by tangible field conditions such as the demographic profile of the student population, the degree of local autonomy, and the level of regulatory oversight. In this way, the study offers a dynamic, context-sensitive framework that views educational networks not as closed systems endowed with universal structural advantages, but as contingent entities whose quality is shaped through the actual processes of managerial, cultural, and pedagogical implementation in the field.

A differential comparative analysis of academic achievement in network-affiliated versus standalone schools reveals a clear, though selective, pattern of success within networks, particularly among high-achieving students and in subjects stratified by level, such as mathematics and English. This finding is consistent with research from countries operating similar educational network models, such as CMOs, where improvements have been documented primarily within specific segments of the student population (Cohodes & Parham, 2021).

However, comparable achievements can be found in standalone schools, yet these tend to be more closely tied to the strength of local leadership than to the institutional structure itself. The uneven distribution of academic gains within networks, across both student populations and subject areas, underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding of educational impact. This calls for a shift away from absolute measures of success toward the concept of *differential effectiveness*: outcomes that are context-dependent and conditional, emerging selectively among specific student groups and under particular pedagogical or managerial conditions. This is not merely a case of local variation, but rather a systematic pattern in which advantages are constructed for specific subpopulations, often accompanied, whether deliberately or implicitly, by the marginalization of others. As such, while the successes observed in network-affiliated schools may be genuine, they do not necessarily indicate broad, system-wide improvement. This insight challenges the notion of educational networks as a universal solution and instead brings into focus the tension between standardized organizational models and context-specific outcomes, outcomes that depend on particular structural, social, and pedagogical conditions, without which the potential benefits of the network model cannot be fully realized.

In terms of funding and resource allocation, the study reveals a significant discrepancy between the prevailing public perception of educational networks’ financial strength and their actual budgetary reality. Although networks are often viewed as enjoying fiscal advantages, a closer analysis of allocations and resources suggests that network-affiliated schools do not necessarily benefit from a distinct financial edge compared to their standalone counterparts. Moreover, some of the additional resources directed toward networks are not channeled directly into teaching and learning, often being allocated instead to administrative infrastructure and central office operations. Nevertheless, there have also been noteworthy efforts to invest in instructional quality. These include initiatives such as raising salaries for high-performing teachers and improving employment conditions through flexible contracts and targeted professional development, with the aim of recognizing excellence and enhancing staff retention and stability.

A key managerial insight emerging from these findings is that organizational change, even when accompanied by increased funding, does not automatically lead to improved educational outcomes. Meaningful improvement depends on the strategic allocation of resources toward strengthening teaching and learning processes that offer students developmentally rich opportunities that are tailored to their interests, socio-cultural contexts, and individual abilities. This highlights the critical distinction between the organization as a formal institutional framework and the organization as a dynamic pedagogical arena, which fulfills its educational mission by effectively translating policy into context-sensitive, practice-based implementation.

In the realm of pedagogical climate and teacher professional development, the findings challenge the widely held assumption that investment in professional development infrastructure such as mentoring systems, regional training programs, and organizational support mechanisms, necessarily translates into improved teaching practices. While network-affiliated schools benefit from substantial investment in these structures and regularly offer formal training programs, the findings show no significant differences in measures of school climate or in teachers’ perceived professional growth compared to standalone schools. In some cases, standalone schools even reported higher levels of teacher engagement, curiosity, and interest in learning, indicating a depth of professional culture that may emerge independently of formal development systems. These results suggest that the effectiveness of professional development is not determined by the infrastructure itself, but by the degree to which its content is tailored to the specific school context, aligned with teachers’ needs, and integrated as part of the organizational culture. When professional development is experienced as disconnected from the realities of day-to-day teaching, it risks becoming a hollow, technical routine. This calls for a paradigm shift in managerial thinking, from quantifying professional development by the level of investment to prioritizing context-sensitive implementation that distinguishes between formal initiatives and pedagogical practices that are truly meaningful and effective in the classroom.

In the domain of belonging and civic and social engagement, the study found a clear advantage for standalone schools over those affiliated with networks. This finding is particularly noteworthy given global trends that increasingly prioritize core academic achievement at the expense of essential dimensions such as identity formation, community belonging, and education for active citizenship. These results echo concerns raised by the OECD (2017) and underscore the need to reassess the perceived benefits of network models, not only through the lens of measurable academic outcomes but also in terms of the social and civic quality of their educational impact. From an organizational perspective, the findings suggest that meaningful civic and values-based education is not a direct result of structural differences, but rather depends on the integration of a clear values-driven vision into everyday school practice.

At the same time, it is striking that many principals expressed a clear preference for working within network-affiliated schools. One likely explanation is the more favorable employment conditions offered by networks. A deeper factor appears to be the lack of operational and managerial support structures in standalone schools, such as access to mentoring, professional learning communities, regular oversight, and logistical or administrative systems that assist principals in their day-to-day responsibilities. In the absence of such support, principals in standalone schools may experience professional isolation, regulatory overload, and a heightened sense of institutional vulnerability. This points to an important distinction between *managerial attractiveness*, which reflects the working conditions and support available to school leaders, and *educational effectiveness*, which pertains to the quality of outcomes for students. Recognizing and maintaining this distinction is essential for shaping responsible, evidence-based education policy grounded in multidimensional data analysis.

In conclusion, the findings of this study indicate that network-affiliated schools demonstrate a moderate advantage on several indicators, including academic achievement, positive school climate, and higher levels of institutional autonomy in management and pedagogical planning. However, this advantage is neither consistent nor robust enough to support claims of the overall systemic superiority of educational networks compared to standalone schools. Rather, the advantages of networks appear to be situational, context-dependent, and subject to interpretation.

The study’s central contribution lies in two key areas: first, in broadening the definition of educational success beyond conventional achievement metrics; and second, in demonstrating that organizational structure is not, in itself, a guarantee of effectiveness, but rather a potential framework whose impact depends on a complex interplay of cultural, political, pedagogical, and managerial factors. In this sense, the study offers an analytical framework that bridges the gap between structure and practice, between organizational models and contextual realities, and between institutional aspirations and educational outcomes.

These insights underscore the importance of developing context-sensitive evaluation metrics capable of reliably assessing the quality and impact of educational networks across diverse settings. The findings point to the need for continued research into the effectiveness of network models, using the present case study as a basis for deeper, comparative analysis across varying educational contexts.

1. Meitzav (an acronym in Hebrew for *School Growth and Effectiveness Indicators*) is a national assessment system in Israel administered by the Ministry of Education, designed to evaluate the performance of schools in key areas, both academically and organizationally. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)