**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 schools operating 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 and independently operated 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 schools operated independently, with no affiliation to a broader network, the remaining third were managed by either EMOs or CMOs and were integrated into formal school networks (David, 2018; Dills et al., 2021; Zimmer et al., 2019). The literature presents mixed findings on the effectiveness of charter schools affiliated with networks compared to those operating independently. One U.S. study found that non-affiliated charter schools outperformed network-affiliated schools in both math and reading (Gilblom & Sang, 2021). Conversely, another study reported that network-affiliated charter schools achieved better outcomes than independent ones, with larger networks showing greater success than smaller ones (Cohodes & Parham, 2021).

**School Networks in the U.S. 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 the Ofsted inspectorate, 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 education, 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).