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### TEACHER LICENSURE AND EXPERIENCE

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#### *Differences between Vermont's Public and Independent Schools*

Prepared for the Vermont House Committee on Education

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Over ten percent of Vermont's school-aged children attend one of over 100 independent (private) schools in the state. Some of these students receive monetary vouchers to attend independent schools of their choice because their hometowns lack public schools. Unlike the state's public schools, Vermont's independent schools do not require educators to possess state licensure. Given the different requirements posed upon public and independent school educators, the Vermont House Committee on Education asked whether there are significant differences between the teachers employed by public schools and independent schools. To answer this question, we compared the experience and qualifications of Vermont's independent school and public school educators by performing a quantitative content analysis of current educators' professional résumés. We found that public school teachers were more likely to pursue undergraduate degrees in Education and to pursue post-graduate education. We also found that independent schools hire a greater proportion of inexperienced teachers, although on average independent school teachers had more teaching experience than public school teachers.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

#### *1.1 Privatization: The Case of North Bennington*

In 2013, residents of North Bennington, Vermont, voted to close the town's 140-year-old public elementary school. That fall, a new school opened in the place of the former: the private North Bennington Village School. The school became one of over 100 independent schools in Vermont, which generally operate beyond the jurisdiction of the state Department of Education and local supervisory unions.<sup>1</sup>

Why did the town vote to close its sole public elementary school? Residents feared that the state might close or consolidate the school, which served a dwindling student population of only 130 students.<sup>2</sup> "We wanted to maintain local control," said a member of the Prudential Committee, which governs the public school district. North Bennington is not the first Vermont town to "privatize" its existing public school: Bondville first did so in 1998, and other districts are currently considering it.<sup>3</sup> As Vermont's public school enrollment continues to decline, more public schools will face the choice of privatizing, consolidating, or closing altogether. These issues will become more significant as school districts respond to the recently passed Act 46 (detailed in Section 3.3 of this report), which encourages Vermont's school districts to merge.

In Vermont, towns without public schools of their own, such as North Bennington, participate in a publicly funded school choice system known as "town tuitioning." In this system, which has been in effect since 1869, families receive funding to send their children to any public or independent school inside or outside Vermont. A dollar amount equal to or competitive with the public school cost per pupil follows the child to the school of the parents' choice.<sup>4</sup> This means that while families in North Bennington may



send their children to the new Village School, now they may also opt to “tuition out” their students to another private school.

There are currently 93 “tuitioning” towns in Vermont, out of 258, which allow for families to choose where to send their students. Six percent of the state’s K-12 population receives tuition vouchers, and four percent use these vouchers to attend independent schools.<sup>5</sup> Altogether, independent schools educate over 10 percent of Vermont’s school-aged children.

### *1.2 Statement of Purpose*

Vermont’s independent schools, such as the new North Bennington Village School, are not obligated to meet many of the requirements imposed on public schools. They are not required to hire licensed teachers; instead, they are only required to hire individuals who possess at least a bachelor’s degree in their subject area. Additionally, independent schools do not need to follow Vermont’s Framework of Standards and Learning Opportunities. This raises the question: if Vermont’s independent schools are not required to hire licensed teachers, are they hiring teachers with less experience than those in public schools? Or, are Vermont’s independent schools in fact hiring more effective educators than the state’s public schools? Given that towns such as North Bennington have voted to ‘privatize’ their existing public schools, and many Vermont families fiercely support “school choice,” independent school teachers may indeed be more qualified than their public school counterparts.

## **3. LEGISLATIVE CONTEXT**

### *3.1 Vermont’s School System*

#### *3.1.1 Public Schools*

There are 250 public schools in Vermont. This includes 28 union high schools, which are schools supported by towns with separate school districts for elementary grades.

The Vermont Agency of Education has released annual “report cards” assessing how many of its public school teachers met the “Highly Qualified Teacher” criteria of the No Child Left Behind Act. These criteria required that educators of “core” subjects be properly licensed and endorsed for the subjects and instructional levels they teach and have the required content knowledge for the endorsement they are using in the assignment. The 2014-2015 State Report card showed that 70 percent of Vermont’s public school teachers held Level II Professional Educator Licenses (i.e., have 3 or more years of experience) or equivalent. Across public schools, 3.4 percent of core academic classes were not taught by Highly Qualified Teachers. This percentage was highest in the state’s high-poverty elementary schools, where overall 5.6 percent of core academic classes were not taught by Highly Qualified Teachers. This is in keeping with existing



evidence that predominantly poor school districts are considerably more likely to employ uncertified or inexperienced teachers.<sup>6</sup> The State Report Card also showed great disparity in teacher qualification between individual Local Education Agencies (LEAs): for instance, in the Halifax LEA, 58.93 percent of core academic classes were not taught by Highly Qualified Teachers. In 29 of the state’s 237 LEAs, over 10 percent of core academic classes were not taught by Highly Qualified Teachers in 2014-2015.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, while this report compares Vermont’s independent schools to the state’s public schools, not every public school necessarily meets federal standards for teacher quality (standards which, to be sure, are no longer in effect after the No Child Left Behind Act was replaced by the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act).<sup>8</sup>

### *3.1.2 Independent Schools*

Vermont has over 100 independent schools, which the state Agency of Education designates “recognized” or “approved.” As of January 2016, 31 independent schools are “recognized” and 100 independent schools are “approved” by the state.<sup>9</sup> Only approved independent schools are eligible to participate in “town tuitioning,” and therefore only approved independent schools were included in this study. Approved independent schools must apply for approval to the Agency of Education every five years and meet more requirements than recognized schools.<sup>10</sup>

Alternatively, independent schools may receive “approved” status by receiving accreditation from an outside agency, most frequently the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) or the Northern New England Conference of Seventh Day Adventist Schools. Currently, 41 of the state’s “approved” independent schools hold outside accreditation from one of these two agencies.

As of May 2016, the makeup of Vermont’s approved independent schools is as follows:

Table 1. Vermont’s Approved Independent Schools

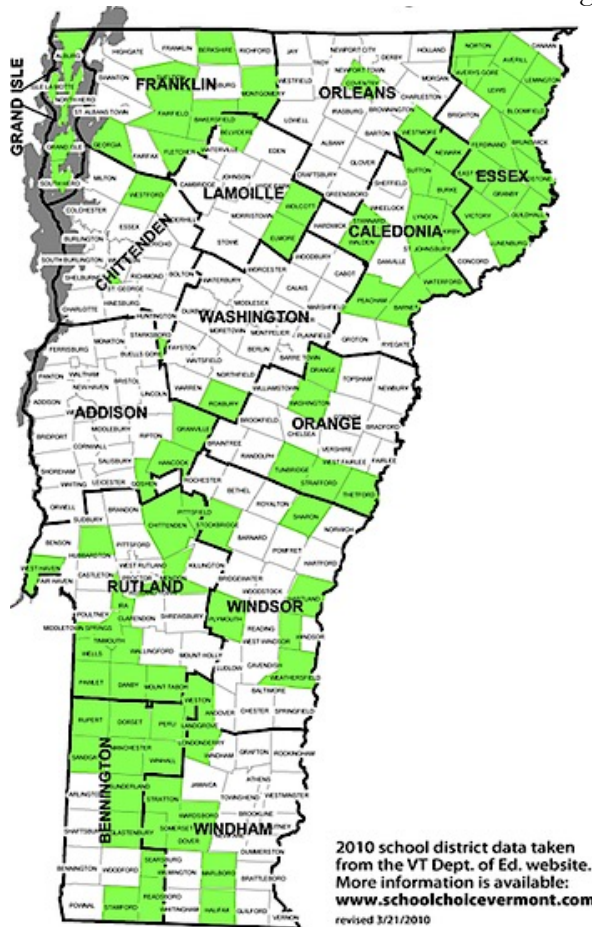
<b>Type of School</b>	<b>Number of Schools</b>
Approved independent schools (excluding distance learning)	100
Accredited from outside agency	41
7 <sup>th</sup> Day Adventist Schools	3
Serve kindergarten only (NAEYC accredited)	3
Approved for special education (excluding Kindergarten)	40
Serve special education students exclusively	28
Ski academies/schools	7
Have only a 5-month academic program	3
Montessori schools	2
Parochial schools	13
Christian schools	4
Waldorf schools	2

**Source: Vermont Agency of Education**

### 3.2 School Choice

Vermont is one of 29 states to offer some type of school choice program for its public school students to attend private schools.<sup>11</sup> Vermont's "town tuitioning" program is the oldest private school choice program in the country. In the 2013-2014 school year, 151 schools and 3,585 students participated in the program. Students received an average voucher value of \$14,681 to attend a school of their choice. Figure 1 shows the geographic distribution of "tuitioning towns" in Vermont as of 2010, while a comprehensive list of tuitioning towns (as of 2013) can be found at the Vermont Department of Education website.<sup>12</sup>

Figure 1: Vermont Towns that Tuition Students or Designate Schools



Source: <http://www.vtindependentschools.org/map-of-tuition-towns.html>

School choice is a hotly contested issue among educational reformers. For instance, while the Milton Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice advocates for educational choice, the National Education Association denounces school choice as elitist on a page titled, "The Case Against Vouchers."<sup>13</sup>



### 3.3 Act 46

In response to Vermont's dwindling student population, in early 2016 the Vermont legislature passed Act 46, which State Board of Education Chairman Stephan Morse referred to as a "revolutionary piece of legislation" intended to encourage small school districts to merge with one another to form larger districts.<sup>14</sup> This major reorganization of the state's schools may pose a challenge to Vermont's independent schools, as one provision of Act 46 prohibits merged school districts from participating in "town tuitioning."<sup>15</sup>

## 4. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 4.1 Parental Preferences for School Choice

A national survey found that 41 percent of Americans would choose a private school as a first option for their child, as opposed to only 36 percent that would choose a regular public school. However, among rural respondents, which may better reflect Vermont's population, only 38 percent would choose a private school while 40 percent would choose a public school. Sixty-six percent of rural residents favored school vouchers--more than the national average of 61 percent. The number one choice families reported favoring school vouchers was "access to schools having better academics."

The report also found that when asked what state governments should do intervene, if at all, in low-performing schools, the highest proportion of respondents (41 percent) said supplying vouchers/scholarship to affected families would be a useful state intervention. Significantly smaller proportions believed converting district schools to charter schools (26 percent) or closing the school (18 percent) would be useful to affected students or families.<sup>16</sup>

A 2012 report by the Vermont Agency of Education summarized students' reasons for exercising school choice.<sup>17</sup> Their reasons included academic opportunities, parental employment, and athletics. Some families that had previously paid for their children to attend school in a different district opted for public choice in order to save tuition costs. As Robert Roper, president of the Vermont-based school choice advocacy group, The Ethan Allen Institute, surmised: "Having so many choices empowers parents and kids. Students with choice tend to be more invested in their education because they have made an active choice about where they want to be. Parents also play a more active role in their child's education."<sup>18</sup>

### 4.2 Teacher Certification and Student Outcomes

Teachers in Vermont's public schools must possess licensure. The traditional route to licensure involves completion of a state approved educator preparation program at a



college or university through a bachelor, post-baccalaureate or master's degree program, and recommendation for licensing from the institution. Educators may also have achieved certification in other states and apply for Vermont licensure. All licensed educators must pass the Praxis I and Praxis CORE Series.<sup>19</sup>

Independent school teachers are not required to possess licensure.<sup>20</sup> Teachers at approved independent schools need to hold a minimum of a bachelor's degree in their field of instruction or substantially equivalent time in training and experience.<sup>21</sup> The exception to this rule is Vermont's special education teachers, who are required to possess traditional licensure. For this reason, special education teachers were not included in the present study.

The Vermont Independent School Association states that it "opposes any state action to impose public school educational quality standards upon independent schools," and the fact "that independent schools may do things differently should not obscure understanding that they meet or exceed the results sought by the public school standards." However, the website does not provide access to data to demonstrate that independent schools "meet or exceed" any results.

Over the past 15 years, researchers have attempted to determine whether licensure/certification affects the quality of an educator and the achievement of his students. Though the results of this research are not conclusive, they suggest that certification does improve teacher quality. Researchers have found that it is not only a teacher's prior coursework in their subject, but also their prior coursework in *teaching* their subject that is significantly related to student achievement.<sup>22</sup>

There are various ways to measure student achievement. One of the most reliable measures for assessing student academic achievement is the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a standardized test administered to students in all 50 states. However, the NAEP has historically not been administered to students in private schools. Due to the limited availability of student achievement data in Vermont's independent schools, this study did not attempt to compare student achievement across the state's public and independent schools.<sup>23</sup>

Note that some groups—in particular, teachers' unions—disagree with the belief that a teacher's effectiveness or quality of teaching can be evaluated based on student achievement. Some educational researchers also resist linking teacher evaluations to achievement, questioning the reliability of value-added calculations or the wisdom of focusing primarily on student test scores.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, achievement between private and public schools can be confounded by demographic differences between student populations. Therefore, this report does not suggest that any differences between Vermont's independent and public school teachers reflect differences between the students in these two groups of schools.





### *4.3 Best Practices for Independent School Educators*

In lieu of formal licensure or certification, some independent school organizations have put forth their own recommended standards for educators. These may guide independent school administrators in their hiring and evaluation processes. Such standards also informed this study by indicating how independent schools—which, as described in Section 4.2, may reject legislative standards imposed by state or federal governments—ensure that qualified teachers are being hired.

#### *4.3.1. National Association of Independent Schools*

The National Association of Independent Schools lists ten “Principles of Good Practice” for independent school educators, first published in 1990.<sup>25</sup> These are:

1. The teacher has a thorough knowledge appropriate for his or her teaching assignment and stays abreast of recent developments in the field.
2. The teacher uses a variety of teaching techniques suitable to the age and needs of the students and subject matter being taught.
3. The teacher establishes positive relationships with students, which, while recognizing the differing roles of adult and child, are characterized by mutual respect and good will.
4. The teacher collaborates with colleagues and the school’s leadership in the design and implementation of curriculum within the context of the school’s overall program and mission.
5. The teacher initiates growth and change in his or her own intellectual and professional development, seeking out conferences, courses, and other opportunities to learn.
6. The teacher is self-aware and self-monitoring in identifying and solving student, curricular, and school problems. At the same time, the teacher knows the mission and policies of the school and, when questions or concerns arise, raises them with appropriate colleagues and supervisors.
7. The teacher serves his or her school outside the classroom in a manner established by the individual school and consistent with the responsibilities of a professional educator. For example, teachers often serve as advisers, coaches, or activity sponsors.
8. The teacher participates in the establishment and maintenance of an atmosphere of collegial support and adherence to professional standards.
9. The teacher welcomes supervision in the context of clearly defined and well communicated criteria of evaluation.
10. The teacher models integrity, curiosity, responsibility, creativity, and respect for all persons as well as an appreciation for racial, cultural, and gender diversity.



#### *4.3.2. New England Association of Schools and Colleges: Commission on Independent Schools*

The NEASC, from which 41 of Vermont’s independent schools have sought accreditation in lieu of state approval, requires its member schools to meet 15 standards. The Ninth Standard, which concerns faculty, has few “suggested indicators” for the hiring of “appropriately qualified faculty,” which include:<sup>26</sup>

9.a. The school has a procedure for recruiting professional staff who are the best available for the tasks to be performed and for the mission of the school, and also has a procedure for screening and interviewing candidates and providing them with necessary background information about the school.

9.b. Academic personnel are qualified by education, training, or experience in the areas to which they are assigned.

9.c. Academic personnel are regularly trained in the areas of skills, content, and the context of a multicultural society.

9.d. The school has a shared understanding of teaching excellence.

## **4. METHODOLOGY**

### *4.1 Résumé Collection*

In order to assess the experience and qualifications of Vermont’s educators across public and independent schools, a content analysis of current educators’ professional résumés was performed.

#### *4.1.1 Public School Teachers*

One hundred professional résumés were randomly selected by the Vermont Agency of Education Licensing Division, representing public school educators who applied for licensure within the past five years. These résumés did not indicate the schools at which educators sought employment.

#### *4.1.2 Independent School Teachers*

Professional résumés were collected from 212 educators across 20 of Vermont’s independent schools. These résumés were retrieved from independent schools’ most recent applications for approval at the Agency of Education. The 41 approved independent schools that sought outside accreditation in lieu of Agency approval did not have any information on file, and therefore were not included in the present sample. The 28 approved independent schools that exclusively serve special education students were



also excluded from this sample, as educators in these independent schools must possess traditional licensure like any public school teacher. The 20 schools sampled were:

Table 2. Approved Independent Schools Sampled

<b>School Name</b>	<b>Location</b>
Aurora School	Middlebury, VT
Avalon Triumvirate Academy	Fairfax, VT
Bridge School	Middlebury, VT
Champlain Valley Christian School	Vergennes, VT
Compass School	Westminster Station, VT
Green Mountain Montessori School	Essex Junction, VT
Hilltop Montessori School	Brattleboro, VT
Kurn Hattin	Westminster, VT
Lake Champlain Waldorf Schools	Shelburne, VT
Laraway School	Johnson, VT
Mid Vermont Christian School	White River Junction, VT
Mt. Mansfield Winter Academy	Stowe, VT
Okemo Mountain School	Ludlow, VT
Orchard Valley Waldorf School	East Montpelier, VT
Pacem School	Montpelier, VT
Downtown School	Manchester, VT
Hiland Hall School	Bennington, VT
Neighborhood Schoolhouse	Brattleboro, VT
Schoolhouse	South Burlington, VT
Upper Valley Waldorf School	Quechee, VT

#### 4.2 Content Analysis

Each educator's professional résumé was coded to identify the following variables:

- **Undergraduate education:** Identified whether the educator's undergraduate major was in 1) Education, 2) Humanities/Social Sciences, or 3) a STEM field.
- **Undergraduate Grade Point Average:** Indicated the educator's academic achievement during undergraduate study.
- **Higher education:** Indicated whether the educator held an advanced degree of any type (M.A., J.D., PhD, etc.) Did not include certifications, professional development, or continuing education.
- **Years of Teaching Experience:** Measured the educator's years of teaching experience as indicated by the earliest teaching position on their résumé, excluding any years during which the educator was not employed in a teaching position. Student teaching and teaching internships were not included.
- **Certification:** Indicated whether an independent school educator held state-recognized teaching certification at any point in their teaching career or otherwise



- met the requirements for teaching licensure (completion of a state-approved educator preparation program at a college or university through a bachelor, post-baccalaureate, or master's degree program.). Did not include alternative certification, such as Waldorf or Montessori certification.
- **Past Professional Experience:** Indicated whether an educator had professional experience outside of the teaching field at any point in their career. Did not include jobs/internships held during college.
  - **Volunteer/Philanthropic Experience:** Indicated whether an educator noted volunteer or philanthropic experience (such as serving on a board or volunteering for a non-profit organization).

Some variables have been linked to student achievement, especially an educator's years of teaching experience. Three years of teaching experience is a commonly cited threshold, after which point any additional experience has a less significant influence on student achievement.<sup>27</sup> An educator's undergraduate GPA has also been indicated to predict student achievement and self-efficacy, and can also be used as an indicator of an educator's subject knowledge. However, as with many of the variables involved in teacher quality research, there is much conflicting research. Additionally, the majority of résumés sampled in this study did not contain GPA at all.

Undergraduate major may also be a significant indicator of teacher quality, as there is consistent evidence that the amount of education coursework completed by teachers is strongly correlated to performance in the classroom. The amount of education coursework completed may in fact be a more important predictor of teacher quality than an educator's content knowledge.<sup>28</sup>

Some of these variables, though potentially of interest to policymakers and administrators, may not be empirically demonstrated as bearing weight on student achievement. For instance, a master's degree "has no systematic relationship to teacher quality as measured by student outcomes," according to a literature review in the 2006 *Handbook of the Economics of Education*.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, there is no evidence that an educator's previous professional or volunteer experience influences student outcomes. Nevertheless, these variables may suggest personal differences between the types of individuals that public and independent schools attract and employ.

It is important to note the limitations of this type of study. Résumés may not be a comprehensive representation of any given educator's qualifications and experiences. For instance, all previous professional or volunteer experience may not be included on a résumé, particularly an individual's experience in professions unrelated to teaching.

#### 4.3 Quantitative Analysis

After coding each résumé for the variables described above, the mean and standard deviation of all variables were found for both independent and public school teachers.



The difference of means for all variables was found. A t-test was performed to determine significance at the .1 and .05 levels.

## **5. RESULTS**

### *6.1 Public School Teachers*

On average, public school educators possessed about 10 years of teaching experience (mean=9.79). However, there existed considerable individual variation (s.d.=9.60 years): 16 percent of teachers had fewer than 3 years of teaching experience, while 18 percent had over 15 years of teaching experience.

Half of educators (50 percent) possessed prior work experience in different professions. Slightly less than half (43 percent) indicated volunteer/philanthropic experience.

The most common undergraduate major was in the Humanities or Social Sciences, with 44 percent of educators majoring in these disciplines. One third (33 percent) majored in Education, while 23 percent majored in the STEM fields. The average undergraduate GPA, of the 25 résumés that included this information, was 3.51/4.00 (s.d.=0.32).

### *6.2 Independent School Teachers*

On average, independent school teachers possessed 12.56 years of teaching experience. However, there was even greater individual variation than among public school teachers (s.d.=11.39): 26 percent had less than 3 years of experience, while 38 percent had over 15 years of experience.

About half (48 percent) of teachers possessed prior work experience in unrelated professions. Thirty-six percent of teachers indicated volunteer/philanthropic experience. Many teachers possessed experience in diverse education-related pursuits, including nonprofit work, community organizing, mentoring, and tutoring. Several résumés indicated college-level teaching experience (typically as adjunct faculty or teaching assistants.)

Forty-two percent of independent school teachers possessed teacher certification or otherwise met state criteria for licensure (i.e., completed a Master's degree program in Teaching.) Many other educators possessed program-specific, though not state-approved, certifications, such as Waldorf or Montessori certifications.

The most common undergraduate majors were in the Humanities or Social Sciences, which composed 55 percent of the sample. Twenty-three percent of teachers pursued a degree in the STEM fields, while 18 percent pursued Education degrees. The average undergraduate GPA among independent school teachers who reported it was 3.50. Many resumes indicated Latin honors (i.e., *cum laude*), but these honors were not included in



our quantitative analysis. We observed that several independent school educators attended elite universities (Harvard, Yale, Brown, Stanford), and one educator was a Rhodes Scholar. Conversely, several résumés did not list any education at all. Two résumés listed only an Associate's degree, and one résumé listed the Bachelor's degree as in progress.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

The most significant difference ( $p < 0.05$ ) between the two groups of educators was in higher education. Sixty-seven percent of public school educators possessed an advanced degree, as compared to only 49 percent of independent school educators. In both groups, advanced degrees were nearly always Education-related (e.g., Master's in Education, Doctorate of Education). This difference may be because public schools offer pay-raises for teachers with higher levels of education, while this incentive may not exist in independent schools.<sup>30</sup>

Additionally, the proportion of public school teachers who pursued undergraduate degrees in Education was nearly double that of independent school teachers (33 percent to 18 percent, respectively). One possible reason for this is because individuals who pursue Education-related degrees are more likely to enter the teaching profession through conventional means, i.e. through attaining licensure and working in public schools.

The other statistically significant difference between the two groups was in teaching experience. On average, independent school educators possessed 12.34 years of experience (s.d.=11.24), while public school teachers possessed slightly less—on average, 9.79 years (s.d.=9.60). However, only looking at mean teaching experience obscures the fact that independent schools actually had a higher proportion of educators with little experience: 26 percent of independent school teachers have less than 3 years of experience, as compared to 16 percent of public school teachers. Because having fewer than three years of teaching experience has been shown to negatively affect student outcomes, independent schools may wish to pay attention to the proportion of inexperienced teachers they are hiring. The greater proportion of inexperienced teachers may be explained by independent schools hiring more individuals with related experience (such as in social work, tutoring, outdoor programs) but not teaching experience per se.

No statistically significant differences between the two groups existed in any of the other variables tested. The two groups were nearly identical in average GPA, volunteer/philanthropic experience, and prior work experience. Therefore, the assumption that Vermont's independent school teachers are more likely to come from diverse professional backgrounds may not be substantiated. Future research could investigate qualitative differences between public and independent school teachers by observing the types of professional and volunteer experiences educators pursued. Such qualitative research might also systematically observe the types of universities attended.



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