The political, economic and societal challenges encountered by public school systems in developing countries

Priyadarshani Joshi, University of Pennsylvania

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The political, bureaucratic and societal challenges faced by public schools in low-income countries: the case of Nepal

Abstract

Education systems in low income countries are routinely portrayed as experiencing a learning crisis and as facing strong political economy challenges that impede efforts aimed at improving quality. This paper aims to improve the understanding of the confluence of political, bureaucratic and societal challenges faced by public school actors in their quest to reform and compete in the context of Nepal. It draws on extensive in-depth qualitative and quantitative data on the perceptions of public sector actors, including national and district officials and school principals. I show that stakeholders from the national to school level confirm that the combination of political economy challenges and the unintended consequences of stigmatization of the public sector due to private growth have negatively affected motivations to reform. The regression analyses indicate that the barriers to reform are especially heightened in public schools that face higher levels of private competition, and schools that are less selective. The in-depth analysis reveals how some principals and some districts have been able to thrive despite these conditions, providing some optimistic narratives, if not solutions on the way forward.

Key words: political economy, community support, public school stigmatization, private schooling, constraints to public sector reform
Introduction

Education systems in low income countries seem to be in pretty bad shape. Existing statistics from learning assessments suggest a global learning crisis – only about half of primary school aged children are learning basic primary level skills (The Education Commission, 2016). Economists have long argued that education spending and inputs is not tied to learning outcomes, and that there needs to be a stronger focus on efficiency and reducing wastage (Pritchett, 2013). In this milieu, private schools have grown in popularity in emerging Asia and Africa (Dahal and Nguyen, 2014; Dixon et al., 2013; Härmä, 2015; Thapa, 2015). Over the past decades, international organizations that advise lower income countries have sought to fix the identified systemic problems of bureaucratic and political inefficiencies in public schooling with solutions of decentralization reform and other ways to encourage local accountability (Barrera-Osorio et al., 2009; Faguet, 2014).

However, a growing number of political economy analyses in low income countries paint a fairly grim picture on why such governance reforms may also not work. The predominant view is that education systems in low income countries are plagued by the forces of political patronage, clientelism, and corruption, which strongly undermine the success of education reforms. In this recounting, politically influential teacher unions and personalistic politics are some of the key factors that lead to poor acceptance of reforms aimed at education quality (Kingdon et al., 2014). For instance, previous political economy analysis from Nepal, the context of study in this paper, has argued that it suffers from political patronage challenges that seep from the national to the local level as political parties focus on dividing the spoils, including at all levels of the education system. As a result, reform efforts such as decentralization and the
establishment of school-level management committees are argued to be ineffectual since these are politicized and fill the “political vacuum at the local level” (Pherali et al., 2011).

In the midst of this strong emphasis on the learning challenge and the political economy challenges of low-income contexts, there has been limited investigation of how public school decision-makers view their experiences with reform and private schooling growth. There is a significant lack of analysis on the issue of motivations and expectations, even though previous research into the processes such as school choice, mainly based on the United States, suggest that how a school responds to competition or reforms is affected by factors such as resource constraints and personal motivation and expectations (Hess et al., 2001; Mohrman and Lawler, 1996; Zief et al., 2005).

This paper aims to improve the understanding of the confluence of challenges faced by public school actors in their quest to reform and compete. It draws on extensive in-depth qualitative and quantitative data on the perceptions of public sector actors, including national and district officials and school principals. It focuses on the consequences of political interference, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and private schooling growth on public school actors’ ability and motivation to both carry out their functions and try to improve. The quantitative analysis focuses on whether perceptions on supports and barriers, as well as the motivations to reform vary by some key school characteristics and the extent of private competition faced by the public schools.

I show that public schools face intense political interference, a lack of parental engagement and community support, and lack well-defined accountability incentives. The combination of political economy challenges that affect public sector functioning and the unintended consequences of stigmatization of the public sector due to private schooling have
negatively affected the motivations to reform of school principals. The logistic regression analyses show that principals of public schools that face more competition from private schools are more likely to highlight poor government monitoring and the lack of parental educational awareness than principals of public schools that face less competition. Still, the in-depth local analysis helps reveal substantial variation within the public sector in their experience of these constraints, as some school principals and some districts have been able to thrive despite difficult bureaucratic and political conditions, providing some optimistic narratives, if not solutions on the way forward.

Thus, in the paper, I address the research question: What are the challenges and supports faced by public schools in their quest to reform and compete? Specifically, I ask:

1. What are the barriers and supports faced by public schools in instituting reforms?
2. Do principal perceptions on the key barriers and supports to reform differ by the extent of private competition faced by the school?

Data and Methods

Data sources

This analysis utilized extensive primary and secondary data collection (Figure 1). The in-depth data gathering happened in two districts of Nepal, Kathmandu and Chitwan, chosen as key population areas that have a large private school presence. I also interviewed national level officials and district officials from 5 other districts (Mustang, Jhapa, Kavrepalanchowk, Sarlahi, Dadeldhura) to understand the variation in sentiments around challenges faced by the education systems. I utilized primary and secondary data sources compiled into a “Combined Quantitative Dataset” to quantitatively analyze the relationship between principal perceptions on the barriers and supports to reform, competition measures, and school and community variables. The utilized
secondary sources included the national population census and the EMIS administrative records, and the primary data collection of a principal survey.

The qualitative data included over 80 interviews that I conducted with public and private school principals, education officials, and a smaller sample of teachers and school management committee members. The education officials I interviewed included resource persons and school supervisors (responsible for local level school supervision), district education officers and section officers (responsible for the entire district’s supervision), and deputy directors at the Department of Education, Ministry of Education, National Planning Commission and National Curriculum Development (responsible for national level planning and implementation). The stakeholders provided their perspectives on the factors that constrain public school reform efforts. National level policymakers provided perspectives on the national state of affairs, discussed the efficacy of current and past policy trends and private schooling growth. District level officials’ opinions provided their understanding of the variations in school quality that exist within the district, and of the impact of the rise of private schooling in their district. Local level officials provided clarity on their roles in the bureaucracy and heterogeneity in public schooling in smaller local settings that were under their jurisdiction. Finally, public and private school principals provided a sense of the political, bureaucratic and community-level constraints and supports faced by public schools.

In the principal survey, the principals were asked questions pertaining to the extent of decision-making control of different stakeholders, the stigmatization of public schooling, school climate and political interference, public-private differences, and the expectations and motivations to compete. School principals were asked these questions on a 4-point ordered scale. By responding to these questions, the school principals revealed their opinions on the factors that
constrain or support their ability to reform or respond to competition. The majority of the statements were phrased in a manner that if they agreed to the statement then that would imply that the public school faced barriers to reform. Specifically, if public schools agree that they face more political interference or more disadvantaged student backgrounds than private schools, then it would be a significant barrier for the public school as they attempt to implement any kind of systemic reform. In terms of decision-making, if the principals perceive that the district education officers have a large role in school related decisions or that the principals themselves have limited influence, then it would suggest that principals have less flexibility to suggest reforms. If the principals agree that their schools (or public schools in general) lack the motivation to compete because of a lack of government monitoring, financial resources, teacher quality, or greater political interference, then it may suggest that the school officials have been frustrated by having to deal with these specific barriers to reform. In contrast, some of the statements were phrased in a manner that if they agreed to the statement then that would imply that the public schools had supportive conditions. For instance, if the principals agreed that the parents were actively involved in the school or that the teachers were of high quality, then that would suggest that the school has important supports that would facilitate their quality improvement efforts.

**Empirical Strategy**

I conducted a two-step mixed methods analysis. I first analyzed the qualitative interviews and the descriptive data on the barriers to reform. Then, I conducted logistic regression analysis on the perception indicators on the key barriers to reform. To address Research Question 1, the identification of the key constraints faced by public schools, I coded all interviews for stakeholder’s views on motivations and expectations, and the main supports and constraints available to function effectively, or encountered while responding to competition. I highlighted
the key supports and constraints, and also discuss how perspectives on these key factors vary by
district, urbanicity, and by types of stakeholders. To complement the qualitative analysis, I
descriptively analyzed the differences between public and private school principals’ perceptions
on the political, social and policy environment barriers to reform. In the analysis, I transformed
the Likert 4-scale perception questions to binary data.

To address Research Question 2, whether perceptions vary by the extent of competition, I
quantitatively analyzed some key principal perceptions on barriers to reform. I only analyzed the
perceptions on the barriers to reform that had substantial variation (that is, where public schools
did not universally agree or disagree to the perception statements). I ran the logistic regressions
of perception questions on competition measures, and some community and school level
characteristics. My hypothesis was that the constraints faced by public schools will be
heightened in high privatization (primarily urban) regions as they may experience a more intense
lack of community support and political pressure, as documented from parent perspectives in
Nepal (Joshi, 2014a, 2014b). Therefore, I test the hypothesis that principals of public schools in
high competition regions are more likely to perceive severe constraints and limitations than
public schools in low competition regions.

Thus, the cross-sectional model for the logistic regression analysis is of the following form:

\[ P_i = \alpha + \beta_1 C_{thirds2} + \beta_2 C_{thirds3} + \delta Z + \varepsilon \]  \hspace{1cm} (Model 1)

Where \( P_i \) is the perception of a public school principal of perception question i, discussed
in Research Question 1; \( C_{thirds2} \) and \( C_{thirds3} \) represent categorical indicators of competition\(^1\) - the

\(^1\) The continuous variable that measured the geographic proximity measure of competition was converted to a
categorical variable that took three values (low, medium and high competition for the analysis). I decided to use a
categorical transformation into high, medium and low competition because I felt that it would be better for
interpretation, because competition may not have a linear relationship with perceptions of challenges to reform. On
the other hand, I felt that a binary transformation (1 = at least one private school) would not capture the variations in
the competitive environment.
medium and high number of private secondary schools in geographic proximity (the omitted category is low competition, i.e. low number of private secondary schools in geographic proximity); and Z includes explanatory and control variables such as the selectivity, school fees, and enrollment levels of the school, and community characteristics such as literacy rates and urban context. The key parameters of interest are $\beta_1$ and $\beta_2$, which measure the effect of competition on the principal perceptions on key constraints. The variable definitions and descriptive statistics on the explanatory and control variables are listed in Table 1.

*Limitations.* All public schools require supportive conditions to be able to function well and to be able to respond to competition. A potential limitation of the study is that it is a correlational study and not a causal analysis. That is, the principal perceptions of various challenges cannot be conclusively argued as having been caused by the extent of competition or any other specific reform such as decentralization without better data documenting the perceptions of principals before or after a reform, or before or after rapid private expansion. Furthermore, the conditions that aid or impede their ability to function are also linked to those that aid/impede their ability to respond to competition. There are some instances when they discuss specific changes they made in a desire to compete, for instance, by transitioning to English medium of instruction. While these comments were limited, they were useful to paint a picture of how schools view their challenges as they make improvements. However, I would argue that since this paper focuses on the systemic challenges faced by public schools, it was adequate to show an association between the experience of competition and the perceptions without trying to argue about causality.
The key barriers and supports faced by public schools in instituting reforms

Public schools are under the jurisdiction of the public education sector bureaucracy which is comprised of the Ministry of Education which works out the details of education policy, and the Department of Education, which is responsible for the implementation of policies and supervision of schooling. The authority of the Department of Education is devolved to 75 district-level District Education Offices (DEOs), who in turn have resource persons and school supervisors who are expected to provide local level support and monitoring to schools in their catchment areas.

Political interference

All of the stakeholders at the national, district, local and school levels unanimously agreed that the politicization of education was the central problem hindering public school improvements, and consequently, their ability to compete with private schools. They argue that political interference pervades every aspect of society, and consequently, the school system functioning in Nepal. In fact, politics is so pervasive that one school principal even closed down their budding alumni association because these alumni started “playing politics” and fighting for their party’s rights. To quote a Department of Education Deputy Director:

“The political situation and thinking is what has hampered the determination and ability of the team to work hard. Politically, all the teachers are divided. And so are the school management committees (management boards). And so is society. When you talk about children, they ask “whose child” they are and “which party” they belong to.” (personal communication, July 28 2010)

While the Nepal education system consists of a large private sector in urban markets, officials argue that the private system is relatively insulated from ongoing political interference, despite being regularly targeted for political purposes since the Maoist era (Caddell, 2006; Caddell, 2007). As shown in Table 2, there is near universal agreement among public and private
school principals in both districts that public schools experience more political pressures than private schools.

The omnipresence of political influence has interlinked manifestations for decision-making and policy implementation at different levels of the education system. Firstly, the lack of political stability and almost annual changes in government over Nepal’s two decade-long democratic rule has implied that there are significant challenges in planning for education. Public school officials and national officials acknowledge that there is a dearth of people who are actually interested in developing an educational vision as everyone is focused on preserving their jobs. For instance, most planners are risk averse since jobs are linked to people rather than institutions, and each transitional government leads to a change in positions in important institutions like the National Planning Commission and the Ministry of Education. To quote a ministry official:

“The national plans are made by the National Planning Commission. The problem there is that people are changed frequently due to political change…Everybody gets their share in leadership… in Nepal, we only design the plan of the one who becomes the minister. Then, when the next minister comes, he will say that the previous plan was the worst, and he will design another one. So that is the dilemma in Nepal.” (personal communication, June 7 2011)

National policymakers also pointed out the difficulty caused because of incomplete cycles of reforms in the country, stressing how a country like Nepal differs from developed countries in how they implemented and evaluated policies. To quote a national expert who has been active in education planning for the past four decades:

“They (the U.S.) are doing reforms with a rationale in their mind, and do an evaluation to verify the output at the end. They also do cycles of reform over there, but at least they complete the cycle. I think that changes happen because of a change in political leadership. But the problem over here is that at times we won’t even have started the cycle or may have just started the cycle and then we have to stop it. We never complete it. Even if we complete it, it is not evaluated at all and then changed without any evaluation.” (personal communication, July 5 2010)
Within the education system, a hallmark of the Nepalese system is the excessive political influence which has led to a situation where teachers are more focused on political interests than on professional development. There are as many teacher unions as political associations, which are divided on ideological lines and support left-wing and right-wing policies. Due to the multitude of teacher unions jostling for political power, they are unlikely to make unified decisions and thus hamper school functioning even further. Leftist ideology based politics pervades various aspects of schooling and have led to regular protests or strikes on politicized issues as varied as banning private schooling, forcing teachers to teach their children in public schools, and ensuring that public schools take no user fees.

Interestingly, the policy planners and implementers stressed how these differences in ideology were superficial at best, particularly in the current private schooling landscape. Many principals, district and national officials talked about the hypocritical system where national political leaders who supported or initiated the public campaign of banning private education were actually owners of private schools. As expounded by a Department of Education Deputy Director:

“Of the 4000 private schools, over 1200 are owned by the Maoist leaders! Never mind them sending their children to private schools – they are in charge of 25% of the sector! And the party policy is to “take out all of your children from private schools and send them to public schools”. So they have to say one thing in their agenda and do something else while in power. They can't close all private schools either… But they still have to say that we have to shut down the schools. They are not in a position to be able to say we will allow them to exist because it seems like the private schools are necessary.” (personal communication, June 29 2011)

Consistent with the literature on the political economy challenges (Kingdon et al., 2014), national policymakers in Nepal particularly lament the powerful role of politically affiliated teacher unions which affect teacher transfers and incentives to perform. They claim that they are especially unable to redistribute teachers between and within districts that have an excess
number of teachers and an inadequate number of teachers to equalize student-teacher ratios. A national expert involved in school policymaking stated the following:

“I talked with one undersecretary about the government allotted teachers and he replied in the same way. If there is a high ratio of teachers in certain schools they cannot adjust transfers and they wait for directives from above because even if they try and change it they will face revolt from the teachers – this is all due to politics.” (personal communication, July 5 2010)

Nepal has been on a path towards decentralization of authority to the district and local levels for well over three decades. However, the implementation of more aggressive national policies to decentralize authority to the school level, the Community School Support Project (CSSP) launched in 2003, seem to have been particularly affected by political resistance. The CSSP project was met with substantial resistance by teacher unions, as many teachers were concerned about the changes implied in their job security. Teachers and party leaders typically portrayed the policy as the government trying to shirk its responsibility from the education sector, handing over authority for teacher transfers and teacher hires to less educated local community members. Many national, district and school level officials pointed out how these debates continue to rage years after the policies were first adopted.

At the district level, problems with political interference were typically reflections of the national political climate, barring a few exceptional districts. For instance, all district officials mentioned that they needed to engage with the political parties’ district level officials to ensure that they could implement policies. Due to the decentralized and politicized nature of education, district education officials talked about how they lacked authority to truly sanction schools or teachers. At a more extreme level, district officials supposedly face threats from political parties as politicians tried to intervene in district decision-making and planning. As recounted by a teacher:

“There is an association in my district - there were no teachers in that association. All of them were political party members. They went to the district office and told the district education officer –
“we will kill you right now. If you don't do what we tell you to do, then we will just kill you before you reach the door.” They were trying to get people from their association into the district education committee (planning board in the office). That organization has no teachers, and that is not allowed because of the regulations. And without the district education committee, when will they convene and when will they recommend that certain schools go through certain procedures?” (personal communication, July 28 2010)

A local level official gave a specific example of how their efforts to redistribute teachers in a Kathmandu location were ceased due to political authority a few years ago.

“We have also tried to do this earlier - about two years ago, we were really dedicated to complete the teacher equalization process... Then, the process was stopped because we got one phone call from the topmost level of political power. He just said – “don't do this” and that was that.” (personal communication, September 13 2011)

At the school level, the stakeholders particularly highlighted the role played by political pressures in teacher appointments and accountability, budget distribution, and school improvements. Many of the principals suggested that public school teachers, including teachers at their school, frequently work as local level political officials for their parties. Allegedly, the political party affiliation is instrumental in teacher hiring and transferring decisions, and provides teachers with protection against sanctions. For instance, in a well-functioning public school in one of the study sites, the English teacher was absent for six months, and could not be replaced with a substitute in time. The irresponsible behavior of the teacher resulted in an unprecedented high number of failures in the high-stakes examination at the public school.

Most officials regarded public school teachers as highly qualified and trained professionals, compared to relatively inexperienced private school teachers. However, there was near unanimous agreement that many teachers felt immune from accountability, and principals were typically unable to hold teachers accountable for their schooling performance. As described by a Department of Education Deputy Director:

“It is not that there is no system for reward and punishment.... For example, the principal has been given the authority to cut seven days of pay for the school teacher. But the head teacher cannot cut the pay. The reason for this is that if they cut the salary for seven days – then the teacher will be affiliated with some political party and that party might threaten to attack him. Because of
these reasons, he will not be able to implement this available policy. So, it’s not like there are no rules. But since this is a transitional period in terms of politics, we have not been able to implement these policies.” (personal communication, July 28 2010)

A principal from the capital noted that politically appointed teachers were a historically accepted phenomenon in Nepal, but that there was a substantial rise in these appointments after the Maoist civil war.

“The simple reason is that these party people fought in the battle, did so much, and then begged to have a job. Then where can you get work? The easiest place to get a job is in teaching. So, they were asked whether they would like to be a teacher. Now who will they place in teaching positions? Put yourself in that person’s shoes…Obviously you will choose your political person who had helped you in the past.” (personal communication, July 5 2011)

Besides teacher absenteeism and limited teacher effort, other substantial examples of teacher political interference focused on the difficulties encountered in trying to transfer teachers. For instance, a teacher mentioned how after trying to transfer one teacher, the district education officer was transferred instead. Some parents and teachers also talked about additional instances of within-school political activities that affected students more directly, such as how teachers held political meetings within school grounds, or took their students to political rallies.

Politics apparently also played a significant role in budget distributions and school financing. A few principals alleged that the lack of party affiliation and networks often hurt schools when it came to procuring additional budgeting support. The majority of public school principals argued that the national-level decentralization policy to empower communities seems to have had the significant unintended consequence of increasing political interference.

Allegedly, community members who are divided along party lines have joined individual school management committees to use it as another opportunity for political influence – for instance, with the goal of providing teaching jobs to members of their political party. The increased community role is also accompanied by an increase in nepotism in the school management committee – for instance, the desire and the power to hire your own children as teachers. Some
school management committee related tensions included the absence of an SMC for years on end, because of party politics. As a result, some schools were unable to complete outstanding building renovation projects. In other schools, ongoing disputes with the community meant that schools could not utilize the available land as an asset to generate additional revenues for school improvements. A local education official (resource person) who was regularly part of school-management committee formation discussions in Chitwan said the following:

“"I haven't seen anyone talk about quality at all in even one place (while attending school management formation discussions). It's all about politics. This is the major frustration and constraint here.

_How do you handle this (politics) then? What is your role?_

We have such a major difficulty here. It's as if we are administrators who are involved in an election campaign. We should not have to do this. There is so much time that we lose doing all this. When we go to the schools we have to spell out the rules in the education act regarding the school management committee – that only the “real” relatives (whose child studies at that school) can come in. And even within the real relatives, the discussion is based on politics. Among these relatives, there is a discussion about how the head of the committee has to be from my party, that in the 10-member SMC, there have to be at least four from my party, and so on.” (personal communication, August 7 2011)

While most of the district (Dadeldhura, Chitwan, Jhapa, Kathmandu, Sarlahi) officials highlighted the intensity of political involvement, the district education official from Kavrepalanchowk focused on their ability to function efficiently. The official highlighted that their district functioned as a model district, with fewer school closures, many exemplary schools, a system of consistent evaluations, and regular meetings with local level supervisory officials. They especially highlighted the fact they were able to operate fairly systematically in the political environment because of their transparency and their willingness to listen to and adopt suggestions made by political parties:

“"There have been many (political) fights that have stalled the distribution of funds in many parts of the country. In our district, we brought the teacher associations’ representatives together and had discussions with them based on a framework and then submitted our plans to the district development committee. Because we operate in that manner, we also get support from all the
political groups. Furthermore, when they give us suggestions, we have taken them very easily and tried to implement them and have sensitively incorporated their suggestions.”

(Lack of) bureaucratic and financial support

The top-level official at the Department of Education argued that there was very limited politics within bureaucracy, as compared to the rest of the country.

“When we talk about this politicization of education, how can we take it out of the bureaucracy?

There isn't that much in the bureaucracy. There is a small thorn in the bureaucracy and if you go digging for it, you can take out the weed. However, in other sectors, there is so much of that that it's pierced through and has entered the bloodstream. So that's very difficult to get rid of.”

(personal communication, June 29 2011)

However, public school principals mentioned a long list of other complaints that were attributed to bureaucratic inefficiencies and inadequacies, including dissatisfaction with monitoring and supervision, resource provision, wrong-minded policies and poor implementation, which were implicitly and explicitly linked to the political economy of the national context and its education system.

Decentralization policy. The efforts of the past decade to decentralize authority have increased the decision-making role of the local level players in school management committees. A consequence of the decentralization initiative is that public schools are now beholden to numerous stakeholders at the national, district and local level, much like in developed countries. It is interesting to note the difference in decision-making control between public and private schools, as clearly demonstrated in Table 3. Private school principals suggest that they have almost all control while public school principals have to share authority with other stakeholders in the bureaucracy (district education office) and the local community (school management committee members). While district education officers play a substantial role in public schools in appointing teachers and deciding how the budget will be spent, their role is nonexistent in private schools.
Arguably, hierarchical school setups, such as those that exist in private schools, may work better in hierarchical societies such as Nepal. For instance, one of the department of education officials also argued that perhaps there should have been a policy to strengthen power in the hands of the principal instead of the school management committee:

“We also brought a system of community transfer called school-based management, but I sometimes feel as though we have dual management. That is, we are giving SMC power, and there is the headteacher on the side that also has power. And there are extra pressures from above as well. And maybe it’s better if there is just one position that should have power.

The reason I say this is – all of the good schools are due to the headteacher. And wherever there is a supportive and dynamic management committee that will assist the headteacher that school will become even better. There may be some schools were even with poor school staff the SMC may have dragged them up to get better quality – but it would require a lot more effort if the effort comes from the SMC than if the effort comes from the headteacher. That’s why – the major thing is the internal functioning of the school.”

Virtually all public school officials and bureaucrats alluded to how the policy of governance decentralization had not borne fruit, primarily because of a lack of real devolution of responsibility, and because the program was developed without adequate participation from teacher groups. Many national officials conceded that the decentralization approach was “imposed” rather than demanded. Furthermore, such a management system would invariably depend on the capacity and willingness of communities to participate in the system.

Besides the aforementioned politicization of school management communities, according to teachers, one of the key problems caused by the increasing focus on decentralization has been a consistent confusion over the boundaries of authority between the district education office, the national Department of Education, and the school management committee. Most stakeholders also argued that the community management concept was brought in without focusing on adequate consensus and capacity building. One of the complaints was that despite the almost two-decade long effort to decentralize authority, the functioning of the bureaucracy remains obstinately “top to bottom” while it was supposed to transition to “bottom to top” management.
That is, while the majority of the stakeholders agreed that decentralization was best for democracy, they questioned the applicability of the community management strategy given the current national political context.

**Monitoring and supervision.** At the district level, district education officers, school supervisors and resource persons highlight the various tasks they perform to support education quality directives from the central agency, the Department of Education. These tasks include conducting regular monthly meetings to discuss school performance, addressing technical support needs in schools through teacher trainings, school visits and classroom observations, and collecting statistics.

However, almost all of the interviewed public school principals thought that local level resource persons and supervisors, who were expected to be in more direct contact with schools, were a waste of resources. One principal derogatorily labeled resource persons as “postmen” travelling from the school to the district education offices delivering statistics and district-level requests. Yet another principal disparagingly called them “son-in-laws” of the district education office, implying that they were shielded from accountability. While the resource person job is supposed to be balanced between school-level support activities and district-level activities, school principals contend that the job has primarily been implemented as the local arm of the district education office. To quote an experienced principal:

> “The government’s monitoring is completely absent. The supervisors, they don't even have to note their attendance. They have field work jobs - and they are just simply earning salaries. The resource center doesn't do school visits, teacher training, feedback and observation, or teacher counseling. They basically collect paperwork from our schools and make sure that they get to the DEO. They officially support DEO and therefore do not really support the teacher. The education agencies should be supportive for the headmaster and the teachers, but I haven't found any of that.” (personal communication, July 30 2010)

The resource persons themselves agree that such a negative perception exists. They attribute part of the problem to the variation that exists in effort expended by each resource
person and school supervisor as there is no performance-based criteria to judge local officials’ performance. However, all of the interviewed resource persons argued that the main problem was that there was too much work assigned to the resource person, including administrative duties, and that the main issue was a lack of more streamlined terms of reference.

“We have not been able to do the work that we were supposed to be hired for. We should actually be kept completely separate from the administrative work really! We would be incredibly happy if they would say – you don't have to deal with any of these forms, your job is to observe classrooms, monitor them, and give feedback and interact with the teachers. Then we would also be able to really interact and get to know the teachers.” (personal communication, August 7 2011)

The district officers and the resource persons admit that they have not been able to provide the adequate monitoring support in the classroom since the district’s bureaucratic responsibilities take up much of their time. They also suggest that they lack adequate manpower to effectively handle all the required tasks, since they have not had an increase in manpower in over two decades.

“The District Education Office and staff numbers were envisioned 20-30 years ago for the number of schools that existed back then. It still is in the same structure now – and given that, how much can we really manage and observe? There is a need for a re-envisioning and transformation of the system.” (personal communication, August 9 2010)

Some officials noted that newer projects that focused on teacher professional development, and included requirements for teacher project work and goal setting was increasing the frequency of face-to-face interaction with teachers. In addition, district and national officials countered public school accusations by suggesting that school officials were too focused on blaming bureaucratic officials, who were far away from schools and lacked manpower, while community members and principals were not adequately monitoring locally even though it was expected of them in a more decentralized conception of school management.

**Finance.** When discussing financial and personnel resource constraints, school principals focused on the foundational needs for daily operations, and additional supports needed for
making productive changes. Many of them complained about the lack of adequate foundational resources, such as an adequate number of subject-wise teachers, lack of funds for support staff, and poor physical facilities, which meant that they had to find additional funds or go under-resourced. Public school principals additionally argued that they would require funds for innovation, such as additional English teachers, more extra-curricular activities, or better laboratory facilities. In contrast, most public school district and national officials argued that finance was not a major problem in public secondary schools. Instead, they critiqued the lack of good management and the lack of effort to creatively utilize existing resources in public schools. A few officials provided a more nuanced finance related discussion. While they agreed that the government provided the majority of funds for school functioning, they agreed that it was unable to provide all of the funds necessary for a good school environment.

Thus, there was a general understanding that government provided funds are often inadequate for foundational expenses, let alone additional costs. As a result, the schools would require funds from the community and parents, even though public schooling is widely advertised as “free” schooling. For instance, even though schools were allowed to take fees after basic education (8th grade), many schools do not have the ability to raise such fees due to fear of political intervention. For instance, some schools exclusively educate disadvantaged communities that balk at even minor fees raised for additional activities, such as extra classes in English and Mathematics. Additionally, given that public schools are heavily politicized any attempts to raise fees, even with parental agreements, were met with protests and threats from political parties. Thus, the funding shortage problem is magnified in communities that have higher concentrations of disadvantaged populations.
A major reason for low financial efficiency was the lack of utilization of needs-based criteria in government budgeting processes. While financing formulae tried to implement the same policy throughout Nepal, these blanket approaches ended up being unequal due to the disparities in district living standards and public school resources. All national policy implementers, districts and principals sought policies that differentiated schools and districts by needs. However, district officials also argued that differentiated policies were unlikely since resolving this difficult problem would require a real investigation into the details of the districts, which would be too inconvenient to be pursued by an indifferent national planning system based in the capital, Kathmandu.

Another type of finance related complaint brought up by public schools was the fact that the bureaucrats did not seem to listen to public school officials’ recommendations that were developed after much thought about local needs. For instance, in the sparsely populated district of Mustang, the schools received plenty of government and international donor supports. One year, the principals got together and submitted a proposal on which school should get additional improvement funds in the next cycle. However, they found that the district did not listen to their recommendations and provided the extra funding to a school that had no need for it. Similarly, as reform-minded, famous principal of a highly successful school recounted that he could took a proposal to the national department of education and promised that he would turn around the 10 public schools in his locality if he was given a little autonomy over funding and staff. However, the department of education paid little heed to his suggestion.

The discussion of funds is generally accompanied by an analysis of misuse and corruption in lower income countries, and Nepal is no exception. Recently established projects such as the per-child funding accountability mechanism, which provided schools funds based on
the number of children in the school, had invariably led to corruption. National officials mentioned small-scale “misuse” incidents such as schools trying to inflate their student enrolment data in order to gain extra resources for their schools, and more egregious corruption, such as the invention of fake schools and students to “pocket” funds. On the other hand, principals and local officials cited macro incidents such as ministers who were fired for siphoning off funds from the budgets.

_Inability to regulate private school practices._ Furthermore, public school officials also discussed the lack of systematic regulations governing private school growth and functioning as having caused public school decline. The inability of the government to regulate the private system is also chalked up to bureaucratic inefficiencies and the loose functioning of the private sector is often blamed by public school officials for their inability to compete. Most public and private school officials believed that approval for schools was given too liberally. Some public school officials even argued that perhaps privatization was the end goal of the government and these lax regulations signaled that the government was trying to escape from its responsibilities to provide education. The school officials argued that many national officials were indifferent in supporting public school improvements, despite having a deep understanding of the problems in public schooling.

**Private schooling growth**

There is clear evidence that private schools have expanded in Nepal, especially in more populous areas. Public school teachers were highly dissatisfied with private school practices, and they focused their discontent on what they deemed as unfair practices that prevented public schools from competing with private schools. Given the high unemployment of educated youth, private schools can pay low salaries to short-term teachers. Many private schools continue to
have differentiated salary structures and have the ability to hire and fire teachers, which exerts additional pressures on private school teachers to improve their performance. While these accountability systems could also be construed as a positive aspect of private schooling, many public school principals discussed the low teacher wages in the private sector as “exploitation”, despite new regulations governing wages for privately hired teachers. For instance, a public school official in an urbanizing district even argued that if all the private schools were to pay teachers required wages then only a quarter of all private schools would remain in business.

“The boarding schools, if they were to follow all government regulations, then only 25% would really last. Because, now in primary schools the salary is Rs. 11,100 – no matter what their (private or public) status. But, in private schools, they have two teachers under the same salary. If the government were to follow up on this (private school salaries), then most would not be able to function as well.” (personal communication, August 10 2010)

Additionally, public school principals also argued that private schools practiced unhealthy competition by targeting the best students from public schools – that is, private schools lie in wait to see if the children showed any promise after the public schools put their blood and sweat into them, and then they are attracted to the private schools with the promise of scholarships and special incentives. As a result, public school teachers were demoralized while private school teachers gained another easy way to improve their test scores.

Public schools that exist in smaller population centers were more likely to discuss the impact that they felt due to the market entry of specific private schools. For instance, a principal from one school in a rural region in Kathmandu argued that their school was adequately serving the local rural population through the mid-1990s. Then, a non-Nepalese missionary organization came to the community and agreed to pay for the education of the poorest students in that neighborhood. The public school happily agreed to this arrangement as it eased their administrative burden of having to collect school fees from late fee payers. Through this relationship, the agency collected information on all the poor households in the community.
Then, the missionary organization decided to open a new school and informed the parents that they would only continue to receive these funds if their children transferred to their new school. As a result of that move, the public school lost half of its student body. As Kathmandu land prices skyrocketed in the next two decades, the local rural farmers became wealthy landowners and did not need to seek out the cheaper public school. Thus, this public school was never able to recover its stronghold in the community.

**The dimensions and consequences of private schooling growth**

In this environment of growing national political instability and bureaucratic inefficiencies, many national, district and school officials, and parents agreed that public schools were perceived to be inferior to private schools. Over time, the flight of students from higher income families towards the increasingly abundant private schools gave way to the stigmatization of public schooling and erosion of community support.

*Public schools concentrated with disadvantaged students.* Firstly, as a result of the dual education system (public and private), public schools experienced the negative consequences of sorting by income, capacity, and behavioral traits. Private schools were attractive to parents since they taught in English medium, and provided a relatively politics-free, disciplined environment. Public school officials argued that there had been a gradual, historical flight of middle and high SES students away from public schools to private schools. With the transformation of the education system and migration, a growing group of lower-income families also began to select the increasingly abundant private schools. Some public school officials also mentioned that due to stigmatization of public schooling, students who were behaviorally difficult to manage where transitioned from private to public schools, while good students were encouraged to attend private schools. The stratification had escalated to such an extent that urban area public schools
were now concentrated with difficult-to-educate low SES students, and many public schools had to be merged or collapsed because of a lack of enrollment. Public school officials mentioned that there was social pressure to send your child to private school and that it was embarrassing to send your child to public school. A teacher described his personal experiences to demonstrate the widespread stigmatization of public schooling:

“The thing is here – the culture in Nepal is – whether you can or you cannot; whether they teach or they don't – you still have to send your children to boarding school. If you don't send them to boarding school, your neighbor, your relatives, your well-wishers - all of them will criticize you.

I have experienced it myself. I brought my child here for two years. He was studying in a private boarding school. But, he couldn't read Nepali. He had passed 6th grade, but when I asked him to read in Nepali, he couldn't read the text from any pamphlets or newspapers. And I was alarmed by that and decided that was not good, and brought him here (to the public school I was teaching in). So, I kept him here for two years. In those years, there were just so many people who yelled at me – you couldn't even keep that one son in boarding school. Why did you take him to a government school?

Because of this trend, people send children to boarding school because they feel compelled as well, even when they cannot afford it. Since it's a question of a need for a cultural change, it's not something that we can do all by ourselves.” (personal communication, August 10 2010)

A key aspect of the stigmatization was the thinking that public schools were “schooling for the poor”. Many principals illustrated the stigmatization by citing that their schools were full of children of footpath dwellers, migrant laborers, and anyone who did not have a stable income and was living “hand to mouth”. One of the reasons for this perception was the fact that public schools have been mandatorily free by law. While some principals were in favor of free education, most talked about how they were handicapped by the policy since parents now perceived of public schools as education for those who could not afford user fees. For instance, a local official described how parents would discriminate between children sent to public and private schools, and how this discrimination had clear gender-based dimensions.

“Because the parents have paid fees …they continually ask the (private) school how their child is doing, and whether their quality is improving. They go to the school, have discussions with the teacher and the principal, take tiffin (lunch) for their child. And then at four pm, they arrive on time to get them from the school. They make sure that they have done their homework as well.
In the same household, the older sister goes to the public school – no one is sure what she has eaten, what she wears and how much she has studied as she makes her way to the school. They send the son to the boarding school, but the older sister has to come back from the school and wash the brother's uniform, she has to polish his shoes, and get her tiffin ready.” (personal communication, August 7 2011)

Interestingly, there were noticeable differences in opinions between public and private school principals on the parental background and social status of public schools, as shown in Table 4. Almost all public school officials agree that public schools face more challenging home environments, less education conscious parents, and low social prestige. About half of the private school principals disagreed that public schools face substantial demographic disadvantages, primarily because they also educate poorer students nowadays. However, these differences in opinion are arguably due to the fact that private school officials may not have accounted for the fact that they are educating a smaller group among the poor while the rest of the more disadvantaged students go to public schools.

_Lack of community support._ Over time, the flight of middle class parents and the institutionalization of the free education policy have resulted in a loss of community support since none of the community members with historical ties to the community send their children to public schools. A typical type of lack of support experienced by the public school was indifference or lack of interest in the public school’s functioning since their children did not study there. Urban area school principals painted a narrative about the importance of public schooling as a symbol of pride and progress in villages, which has all but disappeared in urban regions. Additionally, an unforeseen consequence of globalization is the fact that many children in wealthy urban communities have migrated to foreign countries after going there to study abroad. There has also been significant migration from villages to the cities and to neighboring countries due to the conflict and continued lack of employment. As a result, public school
principals argue that there is a dearth of local people to lead the community and participate in public schooling or other community activities.

A higher level of friction between the community and school existed where the community actively resists improvements in the school because it does not serve their self-interest. For instance, the school officials from a historically important all girls’ school claimed that many of their local neighbors threw their garbage into the school compound, and had tried to steal some of the expensive urban land from the school.

“We also get to hear that the schools in village regions that have gone through the community handover have gotten better. And the reason this happens is because the community themselves show a lot of interest. On the other hand, in our school our neighbors all they are thinking about is how to take over our land holdings here. When you have a situation like that, it becomes self-explanatory how involved they will be in helping the school. For us, it has been difficult just maintaining the school.” (personal communication, July 29 2010)

Furthermore, the decentralization policy which handed significant authority to the school management committee exacerbated the situation and created an increasingly hostile environment between teachers and communities. Many principals also highlighted the precarious situation they found themselves in after the community gained so much authority over teachers.

To quote a principal’s interpretation of how community started viewing teachers:

“The community handover idea must be to give incentives and then mobilize the community?

What the community and parents understood from this (handover program) was that the teachers have to listen to what we say. They thought that all of the teachers are their shepherds and workers. And when that sentiment exists, that creates a problem between parents and teachers.” (personal communication, July 19 2010)

The lack of ownership of public schools by local communities in urban areas also has unintended consequences on well intentioned policies such as that of promoting mother tongue instruction. The government has introduced mother tongue education to help ease the transition to schooling of children whose mother tongue was not Nepali. However, most principals and officials argued that the current parental demand was for English. More importantly, the policy
was only instituted in public schools while the bulk of students in urban centers studied in private 
schools, which are referred to as “boarding” schools in Nepal. A local official described a 
peculiar situation in a historical urban neighborhood:

“So even in this school (the school with the Resource center) – the children nearby don’t go to 
school here?

Not at all – not even one of the “local” children go to school here. The funny thing here is that –  
there are Nepal bhasa (Newari languages) teachers at that school. This locality, of course, is the  
center of Kathmandu proper, the heart of the Newari community. Because of that, they have  
added Newari as one of the languages for children so that they are able to learn in that “local”  
language (mother tongue). But when you go to that class, there isn't even one Newar child there.  
That's because all of the “local” children go to boarding schools. The ones who are in government  
schools now are migrant children and others who are not Newar.” (personal communication,  
August 22 2011)

The lack of community support for public schooling can lead to complicated, unexpected  
obstacles to reform. In one of the remote districts of this study, Dadeldhura, a public school was  
located very close to two private schools. A young teacher had been requested to rescue the  
public school from near collapse. He took charge of the school as a principal and tried to institute  
some key reforms, such as English medium of instruction. However, his efforts were met with  
strong resistance. In this public school, the principal who was trying to institute some key  
reforms, such as implementing English, began receiving threats and faced significant opposition  
from the district education office and even members of the public school’s management  
committee. The main reason for this extreme reaction was that the community members had  
invested in the local private schools, and were worried that the improvements in the public  
school would lead to private school failure, given the small market. This public school is an  
extreme example of hostile relationships between public and private school stakeholders, and the  
complexity of increasing “community” ownership of public schools.

Motivations and expectations of school personnel
A public school official who is expected to carry out reforms will base his decision to conduct these reforms on the likelihood of success of these strategies given the enabling environment, and the accountability mechanisms that incentivize these efforts. Given the lack of community support and stigmatization of public schooling, the extensive political influence in decision-making which affects all education system functioning, it would not be surprising for public schools to have limited motivation to carry out reforms.

As displayed in Table 5, while almost all private school principals agree that parents are highly involved in schooling activities and communicate their academic concerns to the school, less than half of public school principals confirm the same. On teacher quality, public school principals are more likely than private school principals to believe that the more experienced teachers are of high quality.

As discussed earlier, a major problem with the national accountability system was the inability to utilize existing bureaucratic norms to sanction schools and teachers, given the political influence. In addition, the principals and public school officials decried the fact that the accountability systems made no attempts to differentiate between well-functioning and poorly functioning school teams, and incentivize better performing schools. One principal stated, “why would it matter if I work harder? There is no incentive system that promotes good teaching.” Thus, there is very little reward for individual good behavior and even less punishment for poor behavior. Government support for public schooling is limited to praising and rewarding schools that produce good results in the school-leaving examinations and asking why other schools are unable to produce similar results. However, even the best schools are unhappy with the existent accountability mechanisms that do not utilize performance-based criteria to assess and reward schools and teachers.
“The policy of the government is that “shit and gold are equal”. Government won't conduct inspections to distinguish between the schools and teachers that are good and bad… Whether it is an organization or a person it is necessary to add more value. If I have done a good job, the government won't add any more budgets for my school neither it will raise my salary. Then how will the people be encouraged to do well? To do well, the government must encourage the schools by saying, “you have practiced well, and we will support your school and increase your facilities.” Those kinds of policies are needed, but our government doesn't have those policies.” (personal communication, August 22 2011)

Public schools argued that the no fee system was a politically sensitive government regulation which has decreased parental involvement and has also handicapped their efforts to innovate. While some schools are able to come to an agreement with political party members and parents to raise additional funds through fees and community fundraising to pay for additional costs and innovative efforts, other schools argue that they lack real community interest or supports.

“The other problem we have is the no-fee situation. This is because government schools have been told that we cannot raise fees. We had a discussion with the policy level people then. We talked about how the situation is akin to them telling us to swim after tying our hands and feet together. In that situation, can we swim? There is no means of raising resources. And without financial support, we cannot really innovate. All we can do is maintain whatever we are currently doing.” (personal communication, August 10 2010)

One of the other reasons cited for the lack of motivation for teachers to perform was that these teachers’ children also often do not study in these public schools which lowered the stakes for poor quality of education for these officials. A district official highlighted how a school in his district was successfully able to increase ownership by requiring that teachers send their children to the same school.

“One of our model schools – what it has done is that it has instituted a system whereby all of the teachers and school management committee members have to send their children to the same school. One example was that the teacher put their child in a private school and that teacher was then fired from the job.

What I have been saying is that even a cook will not work hard or may even spit in your food if he has predetermined that he will not eat that cooking. If you have to eat it yourself, then you will focus on cleaning up the food and making sure that it is well prepared overall. Similarly, one should be able to think that public schools provide an appropriate or adequate education for my children if they were to study here. That's how we need to approach it.” (personal communication, August 9 2010)
A national official pointed to the inability to utilize school personnel’s expertise as limiting personnel’s motivation and effort. That is, given their long-term experiences of frustrations in the system, many teacher resign themselves to just keeping their jobs and working, rather than focusing on innovations.

“The other thing we find is that there are not that many people who have had good experiences. Many of them are quite frustrated – they say, well they’ve never listened to what we have to say, let it just continue on as it is….So, there are those people who think that it won't matter what I say, I should just finish the job and retire. There are only a few who think that they need to struggle for the country. The person will have spent a lot of time gathering expertise and then he will retire and that expertise will leave with him.” (personal communication, July 28 2010)

These qualitative findings are corroborated by the descriptive statistics of principal perceptions on expectations and motivations to compete. As shown in Table 6, the majority of public school principals agree that there is lower motivation for public schools to improve because of lack of monitoring, a higher number of politically appointed teachers, and because teachers don’t send their children to their public school. Additionally, over four-fifths of the public school principals agree that public schools face systemic problems that cannot be fixed with school-level efforts alone.

However, public schools express optimism and satisfaction when the questioning is directed towards their specific experiences. For instance, most public schools do not agree that they lack personnel or financial resources to conduct reforms, and agree that the government does an adequate job monitoring their school. In addition, they almost unanimously express urgency for school-level improvement efforts and optimism of making improvements with school-level efforts. The fact that public school officials are mostly optimistic about their ability to improve from their current conditions and compete with private schools through their individual efforts may be attributable to an attenuation bias. That is, public school principals may have felt that they needed to acquiesce with these seemingly positive statements when these
questions were specifically about their schools. The fact that they readily admitted the difficulties faced by most public schools because of politically appointed teachers, poor government monitoring, and disadvantaged student backgrounds suggests that public school principals do feel that public school reform requires systematic interventions along with school-level efforts.

In investigating the link between the extent of competition faced by public schools and their views regarding parents, teachers and motivations of public schools, the logistic regression results reveal that public school principals located in regions with higher number of private schools are much more likely to express negative attitudes (Table 7). For instance, principals of public schools that are located in high competition regions were statistically significantly more likely to suggest that the District Education Office (DEO) had a significant role in appointing teachers than principals of schools from lower competition regions. Principals of public schools located in medium or high competition regions were over twice as likely to suggest that public school parents were not very aware of the importance of education, which may suggest that these public school principals had to face a concentration of educationally deprived parent populations. Importantly, principals from public schools in high and medium competition regions were over four times as likely to agree that public schools lacked incentives to reform because of a lack of government monitoring. Significantly, I find that the principals of public schools in higher competition regions were over three times as likely to say that they lacked the incentives to perform because of politically appointed teachers compared to principals of public schools in low competition regions.

Principals from more selective public schools, defined as schools that had a 6th grade entrance examination, were more likely to have more positive attitudes. These principals were more likely to agree that less experienced teachers were likely to be excellent. Tellingly,
principals of more selective public schools were more likely to agree that parents were active in the school and that they monitored their children’s academic progress, and less likely to agree that public school parents were not education conscious. These findings logically suggest that principals of selective schools, which are likely to have better resources and a higher caliber of students, encounter a different group of parents than principals of nonselective schools.

**An Example: Factors that Mediate the Implementation of English Medium of Instruction**

There was unanimous agreement among public school principals and district officials that public schools needed to adopt English medium, since it was a consumer demand that public schools had to provide if they were to survive in the modern age.

The public schools varied in terms of internal management and resource support, and hence had very different experiences with transitioning to English medium. In the best case scenario, school principals who had efficient teams and strong reputations expressed their confidence that they could implement English medium as the teachers were enthusiastic and highly qualified. Some schools mentioned that they had regained enrollment as the community acknowledged their efforts to improve by implementing English. Many public school officials also provided additional support for extra English classes and received district supports for English teacher training. These principals discussed the medium of instruction challenge as just one of the policies they needed to institute:

“It’s ok, maybe there is an issue of medium of instruction and that not matching up. If you have the will and capacity, then why not make them English medium then. That’s the only shortcoming we have in comparison to them (private schools) – we teach in Nepali and they teach in English.”

(personal communication, July 30 2010)

However, the majority of the public schools faced a myriad challenges in their implementation of English. The foremost amongst these problems were related to teachers. Firstly, most public school principals argued that the current teacher pool would have difficulty
teaching in a new medium of instruction, given their lack of English fluency. The problem was exacerbated by older teachers’ resistance to change, since unlike private schools they could not be compelled to exerting effort to improve their English medium teaching.

“Here, actually most of the teachers of Kathmandu don't have condition to teach in English medium. For me, for example, at this place if I tried to convert into English medium then it will be the greatest problem for me. I can't remove the existing teachers. I can't take it into totally English medium along with the existing teachers. So, my concept will remain in thought only.” (personal communication, July 9 2011)

Other school officials highlighted a host of problems that plague public schools in Nepal. Firstly, some principals highlighted that the extremely disadvantaged home background of public school students would prevent them from realistically teaching in English.

“We have also said we have started it (English) from (Grades) 1 to 5 – but it remains as is, inconsequential. There is English medium I guess, but English won't just happen out of thin air – it needs an environment. We don’t have the manpower that can teach English. There are children who come in here without shoes on their feet, and who are hungry in the afternoon because they can't afford lunch. You can’t just force English to happen – it will be unnatural and artificial.” (personal communication, August 10 2010)

Another school principal focused on the difficulty in implementing English medium due to student population volatility. Given the fact that the school was a public school, they lost students to better schools in the transition to secondary school, and did not have the authority to deny admission to other students. As a result, public schools faced a lack of continuity in student populations to adequately continue providing English medium.

“In the lower grades, we teach Math and Science in English. We have a goal of teaching in English in Math and Science through 10th grade. But in order to be able to do that, we need continuity. In our school, the ones who we have taught with English medium in primary schooling leave for other schools. And the ones who come in towards the end of primary are those who have only learned in Nepali medium. So how do we get them to study in English medium then? That's been a big problem for us.” (personal communication, August 10 2010)

Many teachers expressed concerns over their inability to teach well in English because of the poor learning levels. Many of the schools had to teach English mixed in with Nepali given the student’s initial English backgrounds. In fact, one district local official suggested that even
the best public schools were actually dealing with the transition by teaching one section in English and the other section in Nepali, thus sorting the student population by ability and capacity. To quote a teacher in a struggling school:

“I teach English, and there is variety within the classroom. For instance, some students understand and enjoy English speaking in the classroom. For another student, if you ask them to speak in English, they don't understand any of it. Even with just eight students there is that kind of gap. And the reasons for that is the family background and not being able to give that kind of time afterwards. They are with us for six hours of the day after all.” (personal communication, August 2 2010)

With regards to external supports, a principal in a remote district recounted that he had a particularly harsh experience implementing English since he received significant resistance from the local community, the management committee, and even the district education office. He recalled how he had very little bureaucratic help in implementing English medium, and could not even get them to provide teacher training, and thus had to continue with the effort in a fairly isolated manner.

Given the fact that transitioning to English medium would require systematic efforts from the schools, some schools had also experienced a lack of funds, and the government’s rigid rules regarding fees made the costs prohibitive for them as they tried to institute English medium.

“We should teach in parallel, in both the English and Nepali medium but could not do so. Firstly we do not have necessary number of teachers and secondly we are not allowed to receive the school fees. Sometime back we started to receive a nominal amount of donation Rs.100-150 from each student but then we received the letter from the DEO office to return it. We tried to do something but we were not allowed to do so.” (personal communication, September 4 2011)

Another teacher pessimistically highlighted that even if they taught in English medium, the parents would not trust their ability to deliver quality English since they were perceived to be inferior.

“In order to stop the flow out from here to boarding school as much as possible, we have said that we will teach in English medium in 1-2 grades. With that English medium, some of the classes have been operated in that way. But, even then, it's not like the parents are convinced that we will definitely do it in a competent manner. In boarding schools, they think that they will definitely do it – there is more trust in their competence.” (personal communication, August 10 2010)
Thus, the problems encountered while implementing English consistently reflect the supports and constraints that plague schools, and demonstrate the variations in public school capabilities. Schools that have a strong reputation, good resources, and are able to ensure a stable student population appear to be at ease with initiating and consistently maintaining English language education to meet consumer demand. Other schools face difficulty in maintaining English medium education because of student backgrounds and learning levels, teacher quality and effort, and lack of funds. The least advantaged schools feel that they are in such an unfavorable position in terms of these inputs that they think it best not to try to institute the policy, despite the fact that it is highly valued. There is also great variability across districts. While English medium education is a known intervention and supported strongly in the capital, public schools that are in remote regions have to do a lot more of the work and struggle by themselves. In summation, these findings call for more recognition of the variation in teaching resources and income sources in the public schools.

**Discussion**

Public schools appear to face myriad political, bureaucratic, and motivational barriers to reform. In the context of Nepal, politics is an issue that is debilitating school functioning internally. Consistent with previous political economy analysis on Nepal, I find that the systematic involvement of teachers and school management committee members in politics, and the linkages between the bureaucracy and political parties, has allowed for public schools to be used as hotbeds for political machinations. The fact that politics has seeped into every aspect of Nepalese society implies that governance reforms to decentralize the responsibility for education will likely shift authority from a small group of political interests to a larger group of political
players. As a result, unless politics can be taken out of the entire bureaucracy, it is unlikely that decentralization reforms will help public schools be as autonomous as private schools.

I also argue here that public schools are in a precarious position because of the dysfunction in the bureaucracy as each stakeholder looks to blame another for its systemic ills. For instance, public school officials at the national and district level officials highlight the lack of teacher effort and the inability of local actors to truly take responsibility for education governance. On the other hand, public school officials highlight the lack of thoughtful policy formation and systematic financing strategies, and the red-tape laden yet poorly functioning monitoring system as having allowed private schools to leapfrog over public schools. Interestingly, both local level officials and school principals lament the lack of classroom monitoring. While public school officials believe that the lack of classroom monitoring is a product of loose accountability, local level officials responsible for that monitoring highlight the misalignment of tasks. Consequently, better targeting of financing and policies, and better delineation of responsibilities could greatly improve the functioning of the existing bureaucratic support structure.

The public school system is perceived as being bureaucratically inefficient and politically entangled, and inferior to the private school system. Over time, the lack of trust in public schooling has led to significant middle class flight, an erosion of community support for public schooling, and led many public schools to become concentrations of disadvantaged populations. Public schools have lost significant community support, particularly in urban areas, since the mid-1990s. When everyone who could afford to pay some school fees began to send their children to private schools, public schools became far less relevant for urban populations with stable incomes. Resurgence in public schooling in urban neighborhoods would require systemic
interventions tied to school-level efforts, and a re-examination of the no user fee policy of public education systems in developing countries.

The combined effect of bureaucratic, political, and community issues, and a lack of individualized accountability systems has led to a situation where school officials have little motivation or capacity to initiate competitive reforms. In fact, the main reason public schools are initiating some new reforms is arguably because public schools have reached an all-time low in credibility, and are fearful of school closures and loss of employment. The regression results suggest that public schools that are located in high competition regions face heightened barriers to reform. These results suggest that the public schools that are located in high privatization regions face a higher order of constraints, and may be unable to respond to competition without significant targeted government intervention.

In order to deal with these challenges, national and government officials, and principals, agree that the headmaster plays the most important role in ensuring effective functioning, as he needs to expertly sidestep the political infringement to focus on education, motivate less educated parents to focus on their children’s education, motivate students, run a well-functioning teacher team without the help of a monetary rewards system, and work with the school management committee on administrative tasks.

While the problems of public school quality tend to be generalized in national and global discussions, this analysis suggests that researchers need to analyze the variations in community supports, personnel motivations and policy implementations while responding to private competition. Policymakers need to prioritize the recruitment of principals who are adept at functioning in political conditions, and the development of more equitable, better targeted financing criteria. Policy also needs to focus on the public schools that exist in high competition
regions since these schools appear to suffer the most from a lack of community and bureaucratic support, and experience the most substantial political interference.
References


Figures and Tables

Figure 1 Data sources used in the study

**Primary sources**
- **In-depth analysis** (Kathmandu, Chitwan)

**Secondary sources**
- National administrative records (EMIS): school level data on student, teacher and infrastructure indicators
- National Population Census: community level data on population characteristics

**Supplemental analysis**

**Principal Survey**
Survey of principal perceptions, school policies, competition measures and education indicators
[212 public schools, 81 private schools, Summer 2011]

**Qualitative (in-depth) dataset**
- Exploratory analysis (interviews with district officials and national officials – Summer 2010)
- Detailed study
  - Interviews with district officials and resource persons
  - Principal interviews, parent focus groups and parent surveys in 30 public and private schools [Summer 2011]

**Qualitative (supplemental) dataset**
- Interviews with national policymakers and implementers
- Interviews with district officials and public and private officials in 5 other districts (Dadeldhura, Jhapa, Kavrepalanchowk, Mustang and Sarlahi) [Summers 2010, 2011]
Table 1 Descriptive statistics on explanatory and control variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>variable description, year</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
<th>Median</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of public schools [N = 212]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographic proximity measure of competition (continuous)</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community characteristics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Female literacy rate, 6 years and older, 2001</td>
<td>60.9</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>60.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• District dummy (percentage Kathmandu schools)</td>
<td>68.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Urban dummy (percentage urban schools)</td>
<td>42.9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School-level indicators</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Whether the school requires an entrance examination for grade 6 admission, 2011-12</td>
<td>49.06</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Total fees, grade 9, 2010-11 (in U.S. dollars)</td>
<td>18.87</td>
<td>19.25</td>
<td>15.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Total grade 1 to 10 enrollment, 2011-12</td>
<td>544.53</td>
<td>313.99</td>
<td>456.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ calculations based on Combined Quantitative Dataset.
Note: Exchange rate used to compute total fees in U.S. dollars: 1 U.S. $ = 80 Nepali Rupees.
Table 2 Extent of political interference in public schools compared to private schools
(% principals who agree to the statement)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Public school principals</th>
<th>Private school principals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kathmandu</td>
<td>Chitwan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents are attracted to private</td>
<td>84.1</td>
<td>77.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>schools because there is less external</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pressure on school management in</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>private schools</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is more political influence</td>
<td>94.5</td>
<td>95.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in the school management committee</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in public schools compared to private</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>schools</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is more political influence</td>
<td>89.7</td>
<td>95.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>among teachers in public schools</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>compared to private schools</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ calculations based on the Principal Survey.
Table 3 Extent of decision-making control of different stakeholders  
(% principals who agree)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception Questions</th>
<th>Public school principals</th>
<th>Private school principals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kathmandu</td>
<td>Chitwan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The stakeholder has a lot of influence/complete controls in ...</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appointing teachers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Education Office</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>31.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Management Committee/PTA</td>
<td>73.1</td>
<td>55.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In deciding how the budget will be spent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Education Office</td>
<td>46.9</td>
<td>38.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Management Committee/PTA</td>
<td>82.8</td>
<td>82.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ calculations based on the Principal Survey.
Table 4 Demographic and social status differences between public and private schools  
(\% principals who agree to the statement)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception Questions</th>
<th>Public school principals</th>
<th>Private school principals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>KTM</td>
<td>CHW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic differences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Compared to public schools, private schools can select the schools the students they take in</td>
<td>85.5</td>
<td>95.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Comparatively speaking, the home environment of public schools is more challenging</td>
<td>95.9</td>
<td>95.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Most of the parents do not understand the importance of education</td>
<td>49.7</td>
<td>80.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social prestige</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Public schools are equated with poor or low status schooling</td>
<td>90.3</td>
<td>92.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• There is social pressure to send your child to private school</td>
<td>73.8</td>
<td>70.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ calculations based on the Principal Survey.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception Questions</th>
<th>Public school principals</th>
<th>Private school principals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>KTM</td>
<td>CHW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent involvement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Parents are highly involved in school activities</td>
<td>51.7</td>
<td>35.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Parents monitor the academic progress of their children closely</td>
<td>69.7</td>
<td>56.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Parents communicate their academic concern to the school</td>
<td>57.9</td>
<td>40.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher quality</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teacher absenteeism is a big problem</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teachers who have less than 3 years of experience are excellent</td>
<td>47.6</td>
<td>26.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teachers who have more than 15 years of experience are excellent</td>
<td>70.3</td>
<td>68.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ calculations based on the Principal Survey.
### Table 6 Expectations and motivations to compete
(% principals who agree to the statement)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Kathmandu</th>
<th>Chitwan</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lack of motivation to change for public schools</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• There is less incentive to improve quality in public schools because no one is monitoring or holding the schools accountable</td>
<td>57.9</td>
<td>44.8</td>
<td>53.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• There are more politically appointed teachers who are not concerned with teaching in public schools</td>
<td>75.2</td>
<td>44.8</td>
<td>65.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The school officials do not study in public schools, so there is no incentive to try and improve the school</td>
<td>80.7</td>
<td>70.1</td>
<td>77.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Resources and monitoring supports at the school</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The school cannot bring about required improvements because it does not have the physical or financial resources</td>
<td>42.1</td>
<td>29.9</td>
<td>38.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• This school does not have adequate or the right kind of teachers to make the required improvements</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>23.9</td>
<td>26.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The government does an adequate job monitoring at your school</td>
<td>57.2</td>
<td>68.7</td>
<td>60.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The government has a good policy vision to improve public schools, and there has been good implementation as well.</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>35.8</td>
<td>28.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Changes that can and should be made at the school</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• This school does not need to make any private-like changes because we are getting enough students</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>14.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• This school does not need to make private-like changes because we are competing with other public schools and not with private schools</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>17.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Your school faces external pressures, which is why you cannot make necessary improvements</td>
<td>35.9</td>
<td>46.3</td>
<td>39.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• In order to survive and to compete with private schools, the school has to make changes.</td>
<td>94.5</td>
<td>97.0</td>
<td>95.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Expectations from making changes at the school</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• With the changes you make to compete, the school should be able to improve schooling quality</td>
<td>98.6</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>99.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• With the changes you make to compete, the school should be able to improve parent perceptions</td>
<td>98.6</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>99.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The quality problems are systemic and cannot be fixed by public schools alone</td>
<td>85.5</td>
<td>85.1</td>
<td>85.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• There is no use for public schools to make changes because parents have a preference for private schools that is not linked to education quality</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ calculations based on the Principal Survey.
Table 7. Logistic estimation results of the main reasons public schools lack motivation to reform

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>DEO has a large role in appointing teachers</th>
<th>Parents are highly involved in school activities at the school</th>
<th>Parents communicate their academic concerns at the school</th>
<th>Most of the parents of public school students do not understand the importance of education</th>
<th>Teachers with less than 3 years of experience are excellent</th>
<th>Public schools lack incentives to perform due to politically appointed teachers</th>
<th>Lack of government monitoring and accountability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total (n = 212)</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>.562*</td>
<td>2.66***</td>
<td>0.971</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>3.86***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographic proximity measure of competition</td>
<td>high competition 2.04**</td>
<td>0.776</td>
<td>0.497</td>
<td>3.57**</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>3.48***</td>
<td>3.6**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selective school 1.3</td>
<td>2.09***</td>
<td>1.98**</td>
<td>.512**</td>
<td>2.15**</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>.467**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District dummy (1 = Kathmandu) 2.02*</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>.187***</td>
<td>3.55***</td>
<td>2.6*</td>
<td>1.62</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pseudo R-squared 0.04</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chi-sq. 22.4</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>49.7</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>50.9</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathmandu (n = 145)</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>.381**</td>
<td>2.47**</td>
<td>0.999</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>3.06**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographic proximity measure of competition</td>
<td>high competition 2.43**</td>
<td>0.733</td>
<td>0.368</td>
<td>3.38*</td>
<td>1.62</td>
<td>6.22***</td>
<td>2.37**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selective school 1.22</td>
<td>1.76*</td>
<td>0.368</td>
<td>.621*</td>
<td>2.29*</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>0.464*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pseudo R-squared 0.05</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chi-sq. 25.8</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>18.70</td>
<td>58.5</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chitwan (n = 67)</td>
<td>2.5*</td>
<td>0.947</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>5.54**</td>
<td>0.471</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>8.59**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographic proximity measure of competition</td>
<td>high competition 1.37</td>
<td>0.664</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>8.11***</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>0.971</td>
<td>17.6**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selective school 3.8</td>
<td>3.7*</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>.11**</td>
<td>3.51*</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>0.351</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pseudo R-squared 0.14</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chi-sq. 17.9</td>
<td>5.97</td>
<td>7.49</td>
<td>41.1</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>9.78</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ estimations based on the Combined Quantitative Dataset.
Note: *, **, and *** indicate significance at 10%, 5% and 1% level respectively. The regressions include other explanatory and control variables as noted in Table 1.