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Public vs Private Schools: Differences in Management Strategies and Educational Policies²

Szkoły publiczne i niepubliczne: różnice w strategiach zarządzania i polityce edukacyjnej

Introduction

After 1989, the education sector in Poland underwent a profound transformation, leading to a gradual diversification of the structure and functioning of educational institutions. In the first years after the political

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²The article is a development and reinterpretation of selected threads presented in Rafał Mydłowski's Master's degree thesis, entitled *Differences in the management of public and non-public schools on the example of secondary schools in the Mazowieckie Voivodeship*, prepared under the supervision of Adrian Chojan, PhD, at the Lazarski University at the Faculty of Economics and Management. The current publication uses the conclusions of qualitative research contained in the thesis, and in addition, the analysis has been extended to include additional interviews and observations that were not originally included in it. This allowed to deepen the interpretation and capture new phenomena and dependencies regarding the ways of managing public and non-public institutions, going beyond the scope of the Master's degree thesis (Mydłowski, 2024).

changes, the area of education was almost completely dominated by public schools, which carried out state tasks in the field of universal education. In the following decades, however, one can observe the dynamic development of schools described as private or non-public, which began to play an increasing role in the landscape of Polish education. The development of non-public education is primarily associated with the opening of Poland to the world and the growing awareness and expectations of parents looking for alternative forms of education. Access to global education models, modern pedagogical solutions and the experiences of other countries meant that the traditional way of teaching, characteristic of many public institutions, began to be perceived as insufficiently flexible and not fully adapted to the challenges of the modern world. In conditions of almost unlimited access to modern educational patterns, non-public schools gain the opportunity to implement those methods and strategies that, in their opinion, best support the student's development. At the same time, the growing popularity of the non-public sector is largely determined by the limitations faced by public schools and the units responsible for running them. The obligation to implement the core curriculum, strict legal regulations, the financing dependent on local government or central budgets, as well as the need to provide places for all students subject to compulsory schooling, significantly reduce the opportunities for strategic development of these institutions – especially in regions with weaker economic and demographic development. In such a reality, many public-school authorities focus their activities on ensuring the basic implementation of statutory requirements, while non-public schools, with greater autonomy, organizational freedom and the possibility of more flexible resource management, can construct the educational offer in a way that meets the diverse needs of students and the expectations of parents. Thus, differences in the functioning models of both sectors translate into clear differences in educational policy, work organization and management strategies (Schneider, 2005)

Legal and organizational basis for the functioning of public and non-public schools

Management of an educational institution always takes place within a specific legal and organizational framework that determines the direction and scope of activities of the director and the entire pedagogical team (Pawłowski, Wołoszyn, 2016; Goździewicz, Pawłowski, 2016; Kwiatkowski, Gawroński,

2023). Public schools (usually run by local government units) and non-public schools (run by other entities, e.g. foundations, associations, or natural persons who obtain permission from the governing body) operate on the basis of the same main legal acts, but may have separate regulations regarding their financing, supervision or establishment. The legal and organizational foundations for the functioning of public and non-public schools are based on the provisions of the Education Law (Act, 2016) and the Education System Act (Act, 1991) and the implementing acts thereto (Regulations issued by the Minister of National Education and the Minister of Science, which specify the provisions of the acts, e.g. in the field of education conditions, assessment, safety or school organization). The Statute of the School, which regulates its internal order, as well as the Teacher's Charter (Act, 1982) and the Labour Code (Act, 1974) in matters related to the employment and rights of teachers are also of key importance.

Polish educational law defines several fundamental principles determining the way schools operate, regardless of their status. The most important include: the obligation to implement the core curriculum, the universality and accessibility of education, ensuring the safety of students, being subject to pedagogical supervision and maintaining transparency in the management of public funds. At the same time, the school director although functioning within the framework specified by the legislator, has a certain scope of autonomy regarding the organization of work, cooperation with parents and shaping internal procedures. In such an environment, management takes on special importance. Its basic objective is to create conditions enabling effective and the most effective achievement of the assumed educational and upbringing results (IRE, 2024; Kozłowska, 2025).

These goals can be considered in two dimensions: economic and social. At the economic level, it is crucial to organize the work of teachers and other staff so that the activities are coherent, ordered and bring real results. In this approach, the competences of employees, their experience, level of motivation and readiness to take on new challenges are important. It depends largely on the involvement of teachers whether the school will be able to carry out its tasks in accordance with the requirements of the core curriculum and the expectations of the local environment (IRE, 2024; Kozłowska, 2025; Śliwa, 2017).

In turn, the social dimension of management is associated with building appropriate relationships, both within the pedagogical circle and in contact with

students and parents. Educational law emphasizes the necessity of cooperation between school and student's family environment, and director is obliged to create conditions conducive to such dialogue. In this context, the effectiveness of the school is also influenced by the conditions in which teachers perform their work: atmosphere in the team, access to teaching aids or substantive support from management (Jasińska, 2018, pp. 179–186; Lewandowski, 2020; LibrusPortal, 2018).

All these elements – resulting from both legal provisions and organizational practice – form a coherent system in which school management requires combining administrative obligations with activities aimed at developing staff and improving the quality of education. The effectiveness of this process depends not only on the quality of legal regulations but, above all, on the skills and competences of school leaders, their organizational skills and sensitivity to the needs of students and teachers (LibrusPortal, 2018).

The management process in public schools is largely based on the human factor that dominates over material and technological resources. Limited financial possibilities, resulting from the principles of budgeting local government units, make the organizing the school's work a demanding task, burdened with numerous organizational barriers. The dominance of the human factor also means greater unpredictability, resulting from the diversity of attitudes, emotions and reactions of employees. In conditions where material resources are rigidly limited, the effectiveness of management depends largely on the director's ability to build relationships, resolve conflicts and lead a team (Piwowar-Sulej, 2009).

Public schools are run by local government units or other public entities, which determine their character as service institutions of particular social importance. The public institution integrates the activities of teachers, students, and parents, with its functioning strongly embedded in local education policy. As a result, the school director must combine substantive knowledge with managerial competences, leadership skills and the ability to operate in an environment where the interests of many groups overlap. The scope of autonomy of the director of a public school is significantly limited by the provisions of educational law and decisions of the leading authority. The director is obliged to implement the core curriculum, care for the safety of students, conduct personnel policy in accordance with the Teacher Charter and respect the procedures of pedagogical supervision. In many areas, it plays an executive role, being a direct extension of local government authority – it is responsible for the implementation of decisions and educational policies established at the

level of the commune or district. Despite a certain amount of organizational freedom, its decision-making is limited by financial and personnel regulations, as well as requirements for a uniform level of qualifications of teachers. In practice, director of a public school is often referred to as *primus inter pares*, i.e. „the first among equals” (Encyclopedia, 2025). This is due to the fact that he leads a team that has the same professional preparation, and his authority and effectiveness are based more on interpersonal competences than on formal advantage (Act, 2016, art. 68; Act, 1982).

In this context, the differences between the management of public and non-public schools become important. In non-public institutions, the director usually has much greater autonomy – both in terms of creating an educational offer and making personnel or financial decisions. It can introduce innovations without the need to obtain the consent of the leading authority, adapt the program to the specifics of students, as well as create incentive systems based on the effectiveness and needs of the school. While public schools operate within a strict legal and budgetary framework, non-public institutions are characterized by greater flexibility and the ability to quickly respond to changing educational needs (UczymyZRadoscia, 2025; FactFinders, 2025; ZaczarowanaChata, 2024; Łuczyński, 2011).

These different conditions mean that the management of a public school focuses mainly on maintaining stability, compliance with regulations and ensuring basic operating conditions, while in non-public schools the emphasis is shifted to development, quality improvement and building a competitive offer compared to other institutions (UczymyZRadoscia, 2025; FactFinders, 2025; ZaczarowanaChata, 2024; Ciszak, 2021).

To understand the issue, it is necessary to analyse the model, tools and methods of education management³.

³ **The management model, tool and method** are related but different concepts. A model is the overall structure and mode of operation of an organization, a method is a specific course of action to achieve a goal (e.g., project management), and a tool is a specific, physical, or programmatic measure used within a method and model (e.g., ERP software, Pareto chart). The model is “why” and “how” the company operates in general. The method is “how” to achieve a specific goal (e.g. to implement a project). A tool is a specific “object” or “programme” that helps in the implementation of the method. Example: a company may use an agile management model to respond quickly to change. Within this model, it can use the *Scrum* method to manage the project (dividing it into short iterations). To carry out these activities, it will use tools such as a task management system (e.g. Jira) and boards to visualize the progress of work (e.g. physical Kanban or virtual boards) (Hopej, Kral, 2011; Semper, 2025).

Education management models

When analysing the functioning of a public school, it is difficult not to notice that many key decisions regarding its activities are made outside the institution itself, bypassing the position of the headmaster. This is due to the public nature of schools, which are subject to both state and local government authorities (Mąkowski, 2019, pp. 72-73). Such a strong dependence on external factors makes the management of a public school relational — it takes into account numerous social, political and organizational conditions occurring outside the structure of the institution (Wach, 2016; Niedźwiedzka, 2018; Muraru, Pătrașcu, 2017; Dorczak, 2012; Leżucha, 2018/2019; Pawłowski, Wołoszyn, 2016).

The management of public schools is also regulated by the provisions of other legal acts, including the Labor Code (Act, 1974), the Civil Code (Act, 1964a), the Family and Guardianship Code (Act, 1964b), the Act on Municipal Self-Government (Act, 1990), and the regulations of the Minister of Education. The Director maintains constant cooperation with the pedagogical supervisory authorities, primarily with the education superintendent, and is also subject to the assessment of the leading authority.

In practice, this means that the school director operates in a network of connections with many entities: the leading body, the board of trustees, local institutions, higher education institutions or organizations performing public tasks. These dependencies give its role a special, often sensitive character. The director is responsible not only for recognizing and interpreting the impact of the environment on the school's activities, but also for organizing work inside the institution, building relationships in the pedagogical circle and resolving conflicts. This requires personality predispositions such as openness, communicativeness, agreeableness and the ability to work under conditions of pressure and uncertainty (Statute, 2024, pp. 15–16).

The scope of activities and responsibilities of the director was determined primarily in the Education Law (Act, 2016) and the Teacher's Charter (Act, 1982). These provisions give the director a broad, multidimensional institutional mandate. Director's basic tasks comprise:

- managing the school's activities and representing it externally,
- exercising pedagogical supervision over employees,
- providing students with the right conditions for development, safety and care,

- implementation of resolutions of the pedagogical board and other school bodies,
- responsibility for the management of funds,
- cooperation with universities in the field of student internships,
- organizing conditions for volunteering (Act, 2016, art. 68; Pawłowski, Wołoszyn, 2016, pp. 404).

The Teacher's Card additionally indicates that the director is the superior of all school employees, the chairman of the pedagogical board and the person responsible for the quality of didactic, educational and care work. These obligations require high organizational, legal and interpersonal competences (Act, 1982, art. 7 [1]).

A significant element of management is the responsibility of the director as an employer. The leading authority and pedagogical supervision authorities control the fulfilment of the director's obligations under labour law (Act, 1974, art. 281-283; Norkowska, 2024). In cases of serious violations, the director may be dismissed from the position, and the sanctions provided for in the Labour Code may be imposed for violations of employee rights (Act, 2016, art. 56).

All these conditions show that the management of a public school is based on functioning in a highly regulated and multi-stakeholder system, in which the autonomy of the director remains limited by the rigid legal framework and decisions of the superior bodies. At the same time, it requires high organizational, leadership and communication skills from him, necessary to lead a team and run a school in a dynamically changing social and institutional environment (Janiak et al., 2012)

The functioning of non-public schools is sometimes perceived as a manifestation of grassroots civic activity and a symbol of a change in thinking about education management. These institutions, more than public schools, refer to concepts emphasizing the importance of responsibility, autonomy and participation of all members of the school community. In their activities, there is a tendency to replace the traditional "logic of obedience" – characteristic of a strongly formalized public system – with the principle of responsibility and co-decision.

However, this does not mean that the director of a non-public school operates outside the system of legal regulations. Also in this sector, it is necessary to know the provisions of educational law, labour law or the principles of pedagogical supervision. The legislator imposes on the leading authority the obligation to

ensure appropriate housing, sanitary and fire protection conditions, as well as a safe working and learning environment. The leading authority is responsible for infrastructure, repairs, administrative and financial issues, while the director is responsible for the organization of the daily functioning of the school and for the quality of the educational process (Koziej, Stróżyk, 2017, pp. 25).

Unlike public schools, non-public institutions have greater autonomy in determining documentation and internal procedures. The statute of a non-public school – being its key document – defines the mission of the institution, work organization, recruitment rules, the scope of rights and obligations of students and ways of obtaining funds. These schools keep documentation similar to public ones (e.g. curricula, class journals, pedagogical board resolutions), but their structure and content depend to a greater extent on the programme assumptions and profile of the institution, and not on uniform patterns imposed by the legislator. Differences are also visible in the area of financing. Non-public institutions receive a subsidy from the state budget through the local government, but in practice their activities are also based on tuition fees, donations and support from private entities. This requires the director to have greater managerial skills, including negotiating with the leading body, supervising accounting or looking for additional sources of financing. The scope of duties of the director of a non-public school is wide and includes responsibility for the safety of students and employees, supervision over the didactic and educational process, organization of the school's work, recruitment of staff and conducting control and evaluation activities. The statute of the institution also sets out detailed requirements for the director – in some school profiles it is not necessary to have pedagogical qualifications, which distinguishes this sector from public schools. The director decides on the manner of employing staff, determines the remuneration system and makes decisions on awarding prizes and imposing sanctions (Act, 2016, art. 168).

An important difference in relation to the public sector is the freedom in shaping the organizational structure of the school: the number of branches, the number of hours of classes, additional forms of support for students or the use of housing resources. To a greater extent, the director can adapt the organizational plan to the profile of the facility, as well as use modern management methods (e.g. agile, scrum or scenario management), which allow for quick response to changes and flexible planning of educational processes (SzkolaZKlasa, 2025; Alsohybe, Sabrah, 2019, pp. 54).

Therefore, the management of a non-public school is characterized by greater flexibility, individualization and the possibility of creating one's own organizational culture. However, it also involves greater responsibility both for the quality of didactic work and for the financial stability of the institution. While the director of a public school operates under rigid procedures and under the supervision of superior authorities, the director of a non-public school has a much wider room for manoeuvre, but also a wider range of tasks related to raising funds, conducting personnel policy and building the competitiveness of the school (Hargreaves, 2003, pp. 78; Lorens, 2021).

As a result, the management of a non-public school can be described as more entrepreneurial, focused on development and creating educational value, while the management of a public school – although equally responsible – is embedded in a much more formalised structure and limited by the scope of decision-making resulting from the provisions of law and local government supervision (Murzyn, Szuścik, 2017; Murzyn, 2025).

Methodological foundations of own research

Own research was carried out in three locations: Warsaw, Siedlce, and Skierniewice, which made it possible to take into account the diverse social and organizational context of the functioning of secondary schools. The aim of the research was to enhance understanding of the management practices employed in public and non-public schools and to identify differences arising from distinct legal, organizational, and cultural contexts.

Purposeful selection, typical of qualitative research, was used, allowing for the inclusion in the sample of people with direct experience and knowledge related to the issues of school management. Ultimately, the study covered **twenty-one cases**, including director from seven public high school and four public technical schools, as well as six non-public high schools and four non-public technical schools. All respondents perform managerial functions and have a real impact on decision-making regarding the organization of schoolwork, personnel policy, implementation of innovations and cooperation with leading bodies and pedagogical supervision. Their perspective is a key source of knowledge about the practical dimension of management in both types of schools. The research was based on a **case study** methodology, enabling a multi-faceted analysis of the activities and decisions made in

specific institutions. The basic research technique was **in-depth interviews**, which allowed to obtain answers to specific questions regarding among others:

- What management tools and methods are used by director of public and non-public schools in the daily practice of managing the institution?
- How are the directors' relations with the governing body and parents shaped and what significance do they have for the functioning of the school?
- What strategies do directors use in the process of introducing organizational changes and didactic innovations in their facilities?
- How do school director perceive the barriers and development opportunities of their institutions, taking into account internal and external conditions?

Interviews were conducted directly in facilities or in agreed spaces ensuring the comfort of conversation and confidentiality of data. All statements were recorded (with the consent of the respondents) and then transcribed. The research material was analysed using **thematic analysis**, which made it possible to distinguish recurring categories and patterns of behaviour. The motifs appearing in the statements of the directors were compared across cases and sectors, enabling a more in-depth interpretation of the phenomena. The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of qualitative inquiry. Reliability was enhanced through source triangulation, involving the comparison of participant statements, school documentation, and contextual observations, as well as consulting preliminary conclusions with selected respondents (cf. Pilch, Bauman, 2010; Łobocki, 2008 and 2009; Babbie, 2019).

Management tools and methods used in public and non-public schools

The analysis of the empirical material indicates that the management tools used in public and non-public schools differ significantly, which results from both legal and organizational conditions as well as different environmental expectations towards both types of institutions.

In **public schools**, director most often use administrative and control tools. This is due to the need to implement the procedures specified by the leading authority and the obligation to comply with the provisions of educational law. The management practice here is based on organizational documentation,

permanent schoolwork schedules, pedagogical supervision, analysis of exam results and current reporting. Directors drew attention to the strong dominance of administrative functions over development:

“In our school, management tools result mainly from procedures imposed by the leading body. Each action must fall within a specific legal and budgetary framework.” (Director of a public school; Warsaw)

“I create the school’s work plan in accordance with the guidelines of the local government and the board of trustees. We have schedules, organizational sheet, evaluation procedures, but there is no space for flexible response.” (Director of a public school, Siedlce)

“Most often, I use administrative tools: class register control, observation of lessons, analysis of exam results. Of course, I would like to develop teamwork, but teachers are overloaded with bureaucracy.” (Director of a public school, Skierniewice)

“As a non-public school, we are not so strongly bound by rigid procedures. Of course, we are bound by educational law, but in practice I can implement solutions faster – if something works, we immediately put it into practice.” (*Director of a non-public technical school from Warsaw*)

“I focus on making the school competitive, so management tools must support the development of mentoring teachers, monitoring student progress, and co-operation with companies. Administration is necessary, but it does not dominate. It is we who set the direction, not the official procedures.” (*Director of a non-public technical school from Siedlce*)

This shows that director of public schools are firmly embedded in the system of control and supervision, and their actions are determined by top-down local government and curatorial decisions, which significantly limit the flexibility of management (Cf. Certesto, 2025; PortalOświatowy, 2025).

Non-public schools, on the other hand, are dominated by tools of a developmental, strategic nature and aimed at building the quality of educational services. Directors have more freedom in choosing the method of work, creating innovations and organizing internal processes. They commonly use tools taken from project management or agile methodologies, as well as more extensive feedback and mentoring systems for teachers:

“I can implement management tools that really work. We regularly use reflective meetings, we work on short project sprints, and we make changes from day to day.” (Director of a non-public school, Warsaw)

“In our school, surveys among students and parents are the basic tool. If there is a signal about the need for change – we react immediately.” (Director of a non-public school, Skierniewice)

“Mentoring between teachers works great for us. In a public school, this would be difficult, because there every shift has to go through several procedures.” (Director of a non-public school, Siedlce).

Moreover, private directors drew attention to the possibility of using tools typical of the entrepreneurial sector: “We use agile elements, project work, kanban boards. This helps you react faster to changes and constantly analyse processes.” (Director of a non-public school, Warsaw).

The analysis of the statements shows that director of non-public schools operate in conditions of greater autonomy than their counterparts from the public sector. They can modify the organizational structure themselves, introduce additional programmes, create their own quality systems, adapt the educational offer and apply flexible HR solutions (Cf. Certesto, 2025; PortalOświatowy, 2025). As a result, the directors of non-public technicians use a more diverse set of tools – from the analysis of teachers’ competences to the systematic survey of stakeholders’ opinions – which strengthens the strategic and developmental nature of their role, clearly distinguishing their practices from public schools. In summary, management tools in public schools are control and procedural, while in non-public schools they are primarily developmental, flexible and supportive of rapid response to change. These differences result both from different legal conditions and from the different function that both types of schools perform in the education system.

Relations of the director with the governing body and parents – conditions and practice of cooperation

In both types of schools – public and non-public – the school head’s relationship with the governing body includes cooperation and supervision. In particular, the director’s decisions regarding the organization of the institution’s work include the planning of didactic, educational, and care goals, as well as the selection of tools and resources necessary for their implementation. Directors emphasize that in modern school, quick decision-making, systemic thinking and the ability to diagnose problems that arise in the educational process become particularly important. Decisions must be in accordance

with the law, but – as some director note – also in accordance with personal conviction and responsibility for the school. One of the directors of a public school pointed out that with all the changes, “it is important to nurture the tradition and intellectual development of a young person, also through the organization of meetings with authorities that go beyond the core curriculum.” (Director of a public school in Siedlce).

The challenges of modern school include, above all, digitization and access to technology, the development of future competences such as adaptability, critical thinking, and emotional intelligence, students’ mental health related to pressure, stress, and social media, as well as the change of the role of teacher. Schools also have to face the problems of student motivation, adapting teaching to individual needs and issues of globalization and equal opportunities (Opinions of Students, 2025; EduExplorer, 2025).

The director’s relationship with students’ parents is based on openness, regular communication and building trust in an atmosphere of mutual respect. It is crucial to create clear cooperation procedures, clearly formulate school expectations, as well as treat parents subjectively and involve them in school life, which supports students’ development. In difficult situations, the director acts as a mediator, and in extreme cases may involve other people or institutions (Zajac, 2024).

Directors of public and non-public schools indicate that one of the biggest challenges in the decision-making process are the growing expectations of parents, the overloaded core curriculum and staff shortages, especially among teachers of vocational subjects. The director of one of the public institutions emphasized: “The biggest problem is finding teachers to learn the profession. They do not want to work for the salary offered by the school; they prefer companies that pay twice as much. I’m afraid who will be teaching in techniques in a few years.” (Director of the Technical School - public school in Warsaw). Attention was also paid to financial and procedural constraints that make it difficult to respond to the needs of the school: “The basic challenges are to provide financing, access to technology, adapt the offer to the needs of the market. The lack of staff and the demanding nature of the parents further complicate the situation.” (Director of a public school in Warsaw) In the public sector, the decision-making process is strongly related to cooperation with the leading body, the board of trustees and the pedagogical board. The responsibility of the director is strictly defined by law, and many decisions

require the approval or approval of the local government unit. The director from Skierniewice emphasized that: “Decisions on care and upbringing, and didactic matters are made jointly with the pedagogical board, while the financial decisions are always made in consultation with the municipality” (cf. Łuszczarz, 2020; Opinions of Students, 2025; EduExplorer, 2025; Zająć, 2024).

The decision-making process in **non-public schools** is shaped differently. There, the leading body (the owner or the board) plays a key role. The directors emphasized that it is the owner who decides on the most important issues, including employment, salaries or directions of school development. As one of the respondents noted: “It is a private school – decisions are made by the owners after consultation with the management. I make sure that everything complies with the regulations and works as it should.” (Headmistress of a non-public school in Warsaw). Another director from Siedlce adds: “Parents and students are the most important – it is thanks to them that the school functions. Their voice is taken into account in most decisions. At first, it is difficult to get used to it, but this is the specificity of private schools.” In non-public schools, decisions are more often made in a partnership rather than a hierarchical formula. In many cases, parents and student self-government, who co-create school policy, play a significant role. One of the director of social schools described his institution as a “turquoise organization”, emphasizing: “We manage democratically. Teams dealing with a given issue can make decisions in their area. The final approval is on the executives’ side, but the experts’ voice is crucial.” (Director of a non-public school from Warsaw) Another director from a non-public technical school points out that: “In a non-public technical school, I decide not only about organizational issues, but also strategic ones. For example, if employers signal new competence needs, I can introduce appropriate practical modules in the same semester” (*Director of a non-public technical school*).

In non-public institutions, the role of the director is therefore different than in public schools – it is more managerial and entrepreneurial. It is necessary not only to cooperate with the owner, but also to “negotiate” the directions of changes with parents who play an important opinion-forming and influential role in this sector. These challenges show that effective school management – public and non-public – depends not only on the knowledge of the law and procedures, but also on the leadership competences of the director, his ability to build relationships and the ability to make decisions under pressure. In both

types of schools – public and non-public – director indicate that one of the most serious problems is the growing deficit of teaching staff. Young graduates of teaching majors are reluctant to take up a job at school, recognizing the teaching profession as not very prestigious and not adapted to modern financial expectations. Many directors emphasize that the discrepancy between responsibility, professional requirements, the scope of duties, and the amount of remuneration effectively discourages people starting a professional career.

Strategies for introducing organizational changes and didactic innovations in educational institutions

Introducing organizational changes and implementing didactic innovations is one of the key areas of the school director's activities. However, the research results show that the strategies used in this area differ significantly depending on the type of institution – public or non-public – and the degree of autonomy that directors have (Chmiel, Korneta, 2019, pp. 224–234; Kołodziej et al., 2024).

In public schools, organizational changes take place under severe formal and procedural constraints.

The directors pointed out that each initiative requires considering a number of regulations, consultation with the leading authority, and compliance with the guidelines of the board of trustees. In practice, this often makes it impossible to respond quickly to the needs of students or teachers. As one of the directors emphasized: “In a public school, change takes time. First the pedagogical board, then the leading body, sometimes even the board of trustees. It's a semester before we approve everything.”

A similar reflection was presented by another respondent: “We see the need to implement new methods, but the obstacle is the overloaded core curriculum and the lack of hours. If we want to do something extra, we have to fight for every minute.” One of the directors of the technical school pointed out that “The strategy of introducing changes in our country consists in the gradual implementation of solutions. First, we test them in one class or on a small group of teachers, and only then we extend them to the whole school. This minimizes the risk and allows us to assess the real effects before making a decision on a larger scale.” (*Director of a public technical school*).

Directors of public technical schools also pointed to personnel difficulties as one of the most serious brakes on innovation: “I cannot develop practical classes because I do not have qualified teachers. The regulations do not allow me to employ them if they do not have a suitable education.”

In contrast, in non-public schools, the process of introducing changes is much more dynamic. The directors emphasized that they have greater decision-making freedom and the ability to implement their own educational concepts without the need for long-term arrangements. One of them described it as follows: “If I see a need for change, we introduce it immediately. Sometimes during the week. I don’t have to wait for officials’ approval – I talk to the team; we analyse and act.” He emphasized in his statement that: “In order to effectively implement innovations, we work in project logic. We create task teams that have a specific time, resources and goal. When they finish their work, the results immediately go to implementation. Thanks to this, changes are not blurred in the papers.” (*Director of a non-public technical school*).

In private schools, didactic innovations often result from cooperation with parents and students, who are treated as partners of the educational process: “Parents submit many ideas to us – from additional classes to digital tools. If it makes sense and is in accordance with the statute, we implement it within a few days.” Directors of non-public institutions also pointed to the use of management methods taken from the business sector: We work in project cycles. Each educational project has a leader, a schedule and an evaluation. This allows us to quickly correct actions and do not stand still. In many non-public schools, external experts play a large role – trainers, educators, psychologists, specialists in activating methods: We often invite specialists who train our team. The school must be one step ahead of what is happening in the public system.

Flexibility in the educational offer is also an important element of innovation strategies in non-public schools. These institutions can create profiled development paths, artistic classes, extended programmes, tutoring, mentoring or bilingual education. Therefore, the collected data indicate two separate paths for implementing changes:

- in public schools – changes are cautious, procedural, dependent on regulations and organizational restrictions;
- in non-public schools – changes are quick, flexible, based on the internal needs of the school and the expectations of students and parents.

These differences result primarily from the different organizational status of the institutions, the scope of autonomy of directors and the methods of financing. In public schools, the director performs an executive function in the structure of educational administration, while the director of a non-public school has a managerial character and manages the institution more entrepreneurially.

Barriers and development opportunities of schools in the opinion of director

Bartosz Atroszko states that “on the basis of a review of the key Polish and English-language scientific literature, the most important categories of barriers to educational change that had been distinguished were divided into macro, meso, and micro levels. At the macro level, the most frequently pointed out were the educational policy of the state and the paradigm dominating in education. At the meso level, the educational policy of the local government, the cultural obviousness of the school, school culture, hyperinnovation, organizational and leadership issues, teacher education and the resources needed to carry out the change were pointed out. At the micro level, teachers’ resistance to change, the situation of teachers-innovators [who working creatively – note RM] and mental incapacitation of teachers was noted.” (Atroszko, 2019, pp. 37).

The analysis of the statements of the director of public and non-public schools indicates that despite different organizational conditions, both types of institutions face many common barriers that hinder their development and efficient management. The differences relate primarily to the scale of these problems, their sources and the ability to respond to them. The most frequently indicated barrier, regardless of the type of school, is the lack of qualified teaching staff. The director unanimously emphasize that difficulties in hiring teachers reduce the quality of schoolwork and prevent innovation. The aging of staff is also noticeable, which particularly affects vocational schools (cf. Zlobkowicz, 2025).

The most difficult situation concerns secondary schools providing vocational education. There is a lack of teachers of practical vocational training and in many institutions the only solution turns out to be the employment of retired professionals who have experience but are often not willing to further their education (cf. Zlobkowicz, 2025).

As one of the directors of the technical school notes: “I do not have the opportunity to find a teacher of certain qualifications. Those who are competent choose to work in companies. Retirees help us survive, but they do not develop the programme as the modern market demands. Such a practice – although necessary – reduces the opportunities for the development of vocational education and limits the space for directors to manage the education process in a modern way. Regardless of the type of institution, the directors emphasize that the key challenge is to find teachers involved in the development of the student, with appropriate pedagogical preparation and the ability to work in a dynamically changing educational reality. We can offer better conditions than a public school, but this is still not enough. The teaching profession does not attract, because the responsibility is huge and the expectations of parents are growing. In both sectors, the recruitment process is based on similar elements: an interview, an analysis of professional experience and a demonstration lesson that allows to verify the candidates’ skills (cf. Mazurkiewicz, 2012; Ciborowski et al., 2024; Atroszko, 2019; Dylak, 1994, pp. 93; Śliwerski, 2008).

Directors of public schools most often pointed to financial and infrastructure constraints resulting from the dependence on the local government budget. This makes it difficult to modernize facilities, invest in modern technologies and implement innovations. As one of the directors noted: “Every expense requires a lot of reconciliation – it takes a few months before anything is approved. In private schools, barriers are of a different nature – there is pressure to maintain financial stability and the need to reconcile parents’ expectations with school opportunities. The director of one of the institutions emphasized: “Parents are our partners, but at the same time they have high requirements. You have to constantly justify every decision.”

In both sectors, programme overload and increasing bureaucracy were also emphasized, which make it difficult for teachers to carry out tasks and limit time for development activities (cf. ZlobkowyZespol, 2025). The director from Warsaw noted: “Bureaucracy overwhelms us. Before we do anything creative, we need to fill in a stack of documents.” Another barrier, identified both in public and non-public schools, is the growing expectations of parents. In non-public institutions, they are of particular importance because parents act as co-deciders, and in public institutions they often expect immediate solutions, without taking into account systemic restrictions.

Directors of public schools also drew attention to the limited decision-making autonomy – many changes require approval by the governing body or

the board of trustees, which affects the pace and scope of actions taken. One of the directors summed it up as follows: We have a lot of ideas, but most of them stop at the local government level. Budget and procedures are blocking us. In non-public schools, the scope of autonomy is wider, however, directors must take into account the decisions of the owner and the opinions of parents, which also affects the dynamics of work. In both sectors, directors unanimously emphasize that the decision-making process requires the skills of diagnosis, cost and consequence analysis, consultation and resistance to stress. As one of the respondents put it: "I worked in a public school for many years, I was also a director there and one thing I can say is that in each of these schools it is the same. Before I make a decision, I have to assess the needs, costs, possible benefits, but also the consequences. The vice director is there to support, but I take the final decision on my own." (Director of a non-public school in Warsaw).

In both types of schools, a cultural barrier is also noticeable – the resistance of some teachers to changes and the reluctance to improve their qualifications. As one of the directors stated: The hardest thing to convince the team that change can bring benefits. For many, it is a source of anxiety.

Summary

In recent years, the development of non-public schools has become a visible element of the educational landscape in Poland. These institutions attract parents with a programme offer that goes beyond the standard teaching model, the possibility of individualizing work with the student and greater organizational flexibility. Some of them specialize in artistic, linguistic or technological areas, which further strengthens their position on the educational market. However, it should be remembered that their dynamic development also raises questions about equal access to education and the provision of comparable standards of education. Public and non-public schools operate in different legal, organizational, and financial realities. Public institutions are largely dependent on local governments and central regulations, which significantly limit the autonomy of directors and the pace of change. On the other hand, private schools have greater freedom of action, but their activity is based on the need to attract students, maintain financial stability and clearly respond to parents' expectations.

The conducted qualitative research confirmed that the differences between public and non-public schools concern many areas: the method of financing,

personnel management, relations with the environment, programme flexibility, infrastructure standards or the degree of decision-making of the director. Director of public schools must act within the procedures and restrictions resulting from educational law, while in non-public schools they play a more managerial role, being responsible for the development of the institution, promotion, and quality of education.

One of the most serious challenges common to both sectors is the lack of qualified teaching staff, especially visible in vocational education. The teacher deficit means that directors often use retired staff, which in the long run affects the quality of education and hinders the modernization of the teaching process. These problems highlight the need for systemic solutions and a stable educational policy, which is currently lacking. Differences are also visible in terms of infrastructure – public schools must adapt their activities to municipal budgets and investment plans of local governments, while private schools, with greater financial independence, often invest faster in modern equipment and technologies, treating it as an element of competitiveness. The issue of accessibility complements the image of both types of schools. Public institutions are open to everyone, and non-public – although they offer a richer offer – are associated with costs that limit the access of students from less prosperous backgrounds.

In the perspective of the systemic theory adopted in the article, the differences between public and non-public schools should be seen as an element of the functioning of two different but interrelated systems. The school – regardless of its organizational form – operates as an open system that cooperates with the environment: parents, local governments, educational institutions, and the local community. Its development depends on skilful change management, effective communication and the ability to maintain a balance between the requirements of the law, the students' needs, and the environment expectations.

In conclusion, the results of the research confirm that the differences between public and non-public schools are not only formal – they concern the organization of work, the scope of autonomy, resources, relations with the environment, and development opportunities. The juxtaposition of these differences allows for a better understanding of their different dynamics and challenges, and at the same time points to areas from which both sectors can draw inspiration in order to improve the quality of education.

Abstract: The aim of this article is to present the key differences in management strategies and educational policies between public and non-public, using findings from qualitative research. The analysis combines a review of the relevant literature, current educational legislation, and empirical data collected through in-depth interviews conducted with director and teachers from both types of schools. The theoretical section discusses the organisational foundations of public and non-public institutions, with particular attention to the scope of principal autonomy, funding models, and pedagogical supervision. The qualitative findings show that public schools operate under conditions of high regulatory control and limited managerial flexibility, whereas non-public schools are characterised by greater decision-making freedom, faster implementation of innovations, and more individualised educational policies. The data also reveal differing strategies for cooperation with parents and variations in organizational culture between the two sectors. The conclusions highlight the need to strengthen the autonomy of public-school principles and the potential for adapting the selected practices used in non-public institutions to enhance the quality of education.

Keywords: public school, non-public school, educational management, educational policy, principal autonomy, qualitative educational research, educational innovation, school organisational culture.

Streszczenie: Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przedstawienie kluczowych różnic w strategiach zarządzania oraz polityce edukacyjnej szkół publicznych i niepublicznych na podstawie wyników badań jakościowych. Analiza łączy przegląd literatury przedmiotu, obowiązujących przepisów prawa oświatowego oraz dane empiryczne zgromadzone podczas pogłębionych wywiadów przeprowadzonych z dyrektorami i nauczycielami reprezentującymi oba typy szkół.

W części teoretycznej omówiono organizacyjne podstawy funkcjonowania szkół publicznych i niepublicznych, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem zakresu autonomii dyrektora, modeli finansowania oraz nadzoru pedagogicznego. Wyniki badań jakościowych wskazują, że szkoły publiczne funkcjonują w warunkach wysokiego poziomu regulacji i ograniczonej elastyczności zarządczej, natomiast szkoły niepubliczne charakteryzują się większą swobodą decyzyjną, szybszym wdrażaniem innowacji oraz bardziej zindywidualizowaną polityką edukacyjną. Zgromadzone dane ujawniają również odmienne strategie współpracy z rodzicami oraz różnice w kulturze organizacyjnej obu sektorów. Wnioski podkreślają potrzebę wzmocnienia autonomii dyrektorów szkół publicznych oraz wskazują na możliwość adaptacji wybranych praktyk stosowanych w szkołach niepublicznych w celu podniesienia jakości kształcenia.

Słowa kluczowe: szkoła publiczna, szkoła niepubliczna, zarządzanie oświatą, polityka edukacyjna, autonomia dyrektora szkoły, jakościowe badania edukacyjne, innowacje edukacyjne, kultura organizacyjna szkoły.

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