SCHOOL-BASED MANAGEMENT

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Introduction

Shared decision making (or school-based management) has become a centerpiece of efforts across the nation to improve America's schools. This policy brief¹ considers three questions in light of current research and practice of SBM:

- 1) What are the ideals and assumptions that underlie this form of governance structure?
- 2) What are the enabling conditions and barriers involved in its implementation?
- 3) What are the research findings of its effects on schools?

WHY SBM? IDEALS AND ASSUMPTIONS UNDERLYING SCHOOL-BASED MANAGEMENT

Although there is no one definition² of school-based management, it typically includes components of shared governance (or decentralization) and collaborative decision–making. In Delaware, the members of the Delaware Education Consortium proposed that

Shared Decision Making in Delaware Education (SDM) refers to an inclusive or representative decision making process in which all members of the group participate as equals. Shared decision making can occur at the district, building and team levels. Which decisions will be shared, and at which level, should be determined at the local level and endorsed by the school board and superintendent as well as a majority of other stakeholders before implementing shared decision-making. The authority of groups who make decisions using this process must be respected and supported by other levels of the system.

Explicit and implicit outcomes for school-based management often work in concert. They generally include: 1) improved academic achievement, 2) increased accountability, 3) empowerment, and 4) political utility.

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¹ Research involved analysis of writings using the terms "site-based management," "shared decision making," "school-based management," "shared governance," "decentralization," and "re-structuring." This policy brief uses the term "school-based management (or SBM)" throughout for case of reading even though one of the terms above may have been the original source term.

² This element of reform activity actually has two aspects. The first concerns the <u>location</u> of decision-making—notably closer to the point of decisions. The second concerns the <u>processes</u> of decision making—generally conceived as shared or collaborative in some sense. Throughout this brief, we will treat the issues inherent in both these perspectives.

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IDEAL #1: IMPROVED STUDENT ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Thinking in education has focused attention on improving the performance of <u>all</u> students, with some proposing the use of curriculum and instructional practices that emphasize student problem solving and higher order thinking skills. Numerous advocates assert that the central purpose of school-based management should be to improve instructional program quality. SBM is proposed as a governance model to better effect this outcome.

An assumption underlying this ideal is that changes in decision making structures will foster (or at least create a context supportive of) changes in teaching practice leading to higher levels of student achievement.

IDEAL #2: INCREASED ACCOUNTABILITY

Hand in hand with concern for student achievement is the goal of shared accountability. Proponents declare that making local actors partners to decisions also makes them responsible for the outcomes of their decisions as is central to improving schools.

An assumption underlying shared accountability is that if those involved in decision making are held accountable for its outcomes, better decision making will result.

IDEAL #3: EMPOWERMENT

Many define local empowerment as an intended outcome of school based management. This goal supports the conviction that all those responsible for schools should have a voice in determining the conditions and practices of schooling.

An assumption that underlies this ideal is that shared governance creates a context which leads to a more coherent school culture.

IDEAL #4: POLITICAL UTILITY

Political utility refers to ways that large political institutions manage conflict, scarce resources, and public image. Even though it might seem counterintuitive for those having greater power to yield control to those lower in the hierarchy, school-based management allows conflict to be diffused by creating buffer zones which function as a cushion for central

An assumption that supports political utility as a valued outcome of school-based management is that local players know better what is needed to improve schools.

IMPLEMENTATION OF SCHOOL-BASED MANAGEMENT

Two questions will be considered in this policy brief in light of current research and practice: 1) what conditions enable, and 2) what barriers hinder successful implementation of school-based management?

Some argue that SBM is an entire governance reform that involves decentralizing both budget and personnel decisions as well as curriculum and instruction decisions. Participants must be involved in decisions regarding these matters in order to produce the desired changes in educational culture and practice. It should not be viewed as an explicitly defined quick fix. Instead, it is a developing reform defined by its context and its participants. Clearly, SBM involves the adoption of some basic tenets, but the reality of school-based management lies in each particular educational system.

MODELS OF SBM

Research reveals three broad models of school-based management. They include:

- 1) Community control which involves shifting power from professional educators and boards of education to parent and community groups at the school site;
- 2) Teacher control which entails delegating decision making to the building level in the form of professional site councils. Typically, site councils are diverse, representative groups created in individual schools where staff make decisions formerly made by the central administration; and,
- 3) Principal control is one where principals are responsible for making decisions in consultation with the staff, parents, and

community. Site councils may or may not be created under this type of school-based management.

Examination of these models reveals that they are rarely implemented in pure form and typically confront obstacles along the path of implementation. The actual form usually fluctuates due to strong influences of local context and policy.

ENABLING CONDITIONS OF SBM

Although there are several forms of SBM, many researchers have suggested key factors that make school-based management work. First, school autonomy for making decisions on budget, personnel, and curriculum matters is essential. This key component must be accompanied by a robust staff development program to provide the skills to those involved about how to engage in effective discussion and informed decision making. In addition, autonomy must be accompanied by a principal that possesses leadership skills that enable shared decision making. Principals must be strong instructional leaders, astute community organizers, sharp managers, skillful facilitators, and optimistic visionaries of school environments. Time to acquire decision-making skills and to use them is necessary for those involved for autonomy to be exercised. Lastly, recognition must be given to those accepting added responsibility and authority. Some suggest monetary compensation such as bonuses or support for programs be given to those who are greatly involved in SBM.

In addition, decision-making groups within schools must **communicate** with the broader school community. These liaisons increase people's sense of participation and make for more acceptable (and widely accepted) decisions. SBM is most effective if support is received from all involved in the educational process — principals, teacher unions, district and state administrators, school boards, parents, and students.

Some argue that, regardless of SBM's final goal, an essential condition is that its mission should be directly linked to student outcomes. This formulation should be spelled out before the process of school-based management begins. This explication provides a valuable insight into how the schooling process can be improved to better educate children.

BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTING SBM

Interestingly enough, research reveals that barriers often include the reception of mixed signals from state/district policy. This leads to contradictory support from different levels of administration, creating unclear goals and a lack of accountability. Participants in SBM often are hesitant to challenge well-established norms and roles because they question their authority to do so and lack the necessary resources to make adequate decisions and substantive change. In addition, participants realize that being involved in school-based management is time consuming, is often confusing, and often does not lead to the solution of problems. New demands placed on participants include: a heavier workload, a slower decision-making process (since groups of people are involved), and the necessity to expand oneself into new areas of expertise.

There is a great risk that the promises of SBM will be diluted by a kind of tokenism that merely adopts the rhetoric of shared decision making but does not allow participants to make substantively relevant decisions. Often decisions regarding budget, personnel, instruction, and operations are inseparable. This inseparability makes it difficult for divergent groups to work on specific issues, thus limiting the impact of school-based management. A 1994 study conducted by RAND revealed that many efforts have not produced significant changes in the constraints on schools. Moreover, they suggest that "the chief reason for the limited effects of decentralization is the inseparability of decisions." They urge that linkages among budget, personnel, instructional, and operational decisions must be honored and that "decentralization should address the need for comprehensive changes across all interrelated categories of decision making" (Rand, 1994; p. ix). In short, SBM that restricts its purview to curricular and instructional matters alone represents little change over the current state of affairs, and seems to be of only limited impact against its full potential.

Accountability for decisions and the consequences of those decisions is a paramount concern. Some research suggests that not holding schools accountable for implementing their own plans and meeting their own goals can impede the implementation of SBM. In a study of five major urban and suburban school systems, it was found that SBM is possible only if the ultimate accountability lies with schools and parents. Everyone who makes decisions must be held accountable for their results.

CHANGING ROLES IN SBM

The roles of many people are changed when SBM is adopted. Especially affected are the roles of teachers and principals. The nature and implications of these for the educational system are discussed in great length in a practitioner's guide titled "Schools for the 21st century: New Roles for Teachers and Principals."

The role of the teacher is greatly heightened in SBM. Teachers are often asked to assume leadership roles in staff development, mentoring, and curriculum development. Teacher collaboration is often necessary to assume these roles. As mentioned above, accountability systems and evaluation procedures must change in order for SBM to be implemented. This is especially pertinent as new roles are assumed.

The role of the principal is also pivotal in implementing SBM. The principal must be viewed as a part of a decision-making team, not as a sole decision maker. Principals should be viewed as organizers, advisers, and consensus builders who provide the staff with current research and relevant school information. Overall, this individual should be one who adopts a democratic style of leadership, actively seeking input from others and believing that others have valid points and can make effective decisions.

The district office and central administration must also undergo a change in their role. Superintendents and their staff should facilitate and support decisions made at the school level and provide assistance in translating decisions into policies/programs. Often times, this office is still responsible for recruiting potential employees, screening applicants, and maintaining potential employees' files. Some argue that the district office should maintain the task of setting goals and schools should be given discretion to choose the means to achieve these goals. In general, the central administration facilitates the establishment of goals and attendant assessment and accountability. Beyond this, the major role for the central administration is to provide structural supports to school staff making and implementing decisions. School boards will continue to establish a unifying vision for the district and its schools. Ideally, school boards should be more focused on providing support than demanding compliance.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Suggested guidelines for successful implementation of the above-mentioned issues include:

- Agree on specifics at the outset. Decide who will be involved, the size of the group, the representativeness of the group, and how decisions will be made (majority or consensual).
- Start small, go slowly. Analyze your school's needs, then adapt selected processes that meet your local situation. Additional components can be added when the staff matures and is ready.
- Be clear about procedures, roles, and expectations. Groups need to understand their roles in SBM as well as whether they are a decision-making body or an advisory one.
- Give everyone (within the included groups) a chance to be involved.
- Build trust and support. Do not push solutions on the group or override decisions delegated to SBM groups.
- Build the infrastructure that supports SBM decision making

 namely information structures that provide data to support decision making.
- Develop and pursue a capacity building plan to ensure that participants have the skills and dispositions necessary to successfully accomplish this form of decision making.

WHAT IMPACT? RESEARCH FINDINGS ON SCHOOL-BASED MANAGEMENT

Although the empirical research on school-based management practices in schools is still limited, some surveys and case studies have been conducted in various settings. These preliminary findings should influence establishing both appropriate direction and realistic expectations of this governance model.

STUDENT OUTCOMES

Student Academic Achievement

Although many propose the need to focus restructuring proposals on student learning outcomes, some caution that premature expectations of increases in students' achievement may undermine the change process. Some studies have reported better student achievement outcomes in schools where teachers report feeling involved in decision making. Moreover, schools that are organized communally rather than bureaucratically had more positive effects on student achievement and those gains were equitably distributed regardless of socioeconomic factors. Communal organizations were described as ones where "teachers and students pursue common activities and get to know each other... complicated rules are less necessary as settings are smaller...and there is more agreement on organizational purpose for which people share responsibility" (Lee & Smith, p. 2). One study in Australia found improved high school graduation rates in districts undergoing restructuring.

However, a key analysis that reviewed 200 documents describing school-based management in the U.S., Canada, and Australia reported that this management style does not always achieve its objective to improve instruction or student achievement. Many found no relationship between student achievement and teacher participation in decision making about instruction and instructional resources. "Teachers did not change their instructional methods as a result of their greater involvement in decision making" (Taylor & Bogotch, p.314).

It was suggested that the implementation of school-based management reforms have uncertain relationships to changes in curriculum, teaching, and students' learning. Some say that this is not surprising given that student learning outcomes are not generally the focus of restructuring programs. More recently, a study to examine the assumptions underlying structural reforms found that "changes in structure are weakly related to changes in teaching practice, and therefore, structural change does not necessarily lead to changes in teaching, learning, and student performance."

In sum, restructuring or school-based management can provide a powerful context for addressing learning issues, but the outcomes are by no means certain. If school-based management is to realize any impact on student achievement, then matters of curriculum, teaching and learning must be made a conscious focus.

Some studies revealed that there were positive effects on student attendance when teachers actively participated in decision making regarding instruction, i.e., what to teach, how to teach, and grade assignment. Others found that student involvement in decision making can effectively reduce student misbehavior. Suspension and dropout rates of students in schools studied in Dade County, Florida declined over a three-year period. However, another study found no significant effect of teacher participation in discipline related decisions or on students' rate of out-of-school suspension.

EFFECTS ON TEACHERS

Job Satisfaction

The effect of teacher participation in decision making on their levels of job satisfaction, according to some researchers, remains unknown. While some studies support the link, many others do not. More recently, one study clarified that "a positive relationship and satisfaction is more often found than not, (however) the correlation is frequently weak" (Taylor & Bogotch, p.304). Yet, teachers in Dade County reported that "collegiality" was increasingly characteristic of SBM schools. Trust increased as staff gained understanding of management complexities and principals learned to respect faculty judgment. New decision making patterns effectively empowered building-level educators and community members with substantial discretion over many resources.

Attendance

There is interest in the effect of school-based management on teacher attendance because of the costs related to teacher absenteeism. The link between participation in SBM and teacher attendance is supported in both the effective schools and restructuring research. Higher teacher absenteeism occurred in schools where teachers were excluded from participation in decision making. Also a decline in absenteeism was found after teachers became actively involved in decision making.

UNEXPECTED CONSEQUENCES

While the findings of the above research addressed some of the common concerns of those implementing this governance model, other outcomes have also surfaced that should be considered.

Peripheral Focus of Shared Decision-making Efforts

Numerous studies have revealed that although school systems all over the country are involved in school-based management, the extent of decision making responsibility devolved to schools is often severely limited. Consequently, site teachers and administrators have little to manage, particularly in respect to budget, personnel, and curriculum strategies. SBM initiatives have rarely become centrally involved in core issues of curriculum and instruction. Projects tend instead to focus on school climate, campus beautification, career education, remedial education, parent involvement, scheduling, and safety. Members of councils expressed dissatisfaction because they were not empowered in a meaningful sense nor were they involved in real issues of finance, staff, or curriculum. Most SBM programs restricted teacher decision making to operational issues that have limited effect on job satisfaction. One researcher suggests that the "relationship between decentralization and efficiency in education is tenuous at best" (Elmore, 1993). Shared decision making neither changed school policy nor broadened decision making. Others found little evidence to "support the notion that SDM fundamentally alters power relationships in the school system" (Carlos & Amsler, p. 12).

Increased Burden on Participants

Some research reveals that participants in school-based management must contend with heavier workloads and the frustrations that accompany slower group processes. Governing councils can get bogged down in trivial decisions and power conflicts. Rather than increasing morale and effort, decentralization that is badly managed can result in frustration and dissatisfaction. Decentralization increased the fragmentation and complexity of city schooling, which paradoxically expanded administrative burdens, bringing pressures to recentralize. Although input into school-site decision making initially enhanced participants' morale and motivation and stimulated school improvement efforts, there was an overall decline in satisfaction and involvement after the initial energizing effects subsided. In a 1988 study of mandated school-based management in Chicago schools, principals reported that their roles and responsibilities had been greatly expanded but their degree of instructional involvement had been reduced. Principals rated the efficiency/ effectiveness of SBM as "moderate" and felt that the practice made their jobs more difficult.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

The research record suggests a host of issues that must be confronted if the promise of school-based management is to be realized. These include:

- 1. What will the policy be regarding definition of stakeholders and kinds of decisions they will address?
- 2. What do schools hope to accomplish through the implementation of SBM?
- 3. What are realistic expectations regarding outcomes of SBM?
- 4. Will SBM be defined so as to extend over all decisions necessary to enable powerful teaching and learning?
- 5. What skills (and how will they be acquired) are necessary to effectively realize school-based management?
- 6. How can the time necessary for participatory democratic process be made available to those involved?
- 7. How can structural changes be made to support changes in teaching practice to address content standards?
- 8. Which model of SBM is most feasible to adopt?
- 9. In what ways can the link between the school and the community (both parents of students and other citizens) be made?
- 10. How can teachers handle both their expanded role in SBM and their responsibility to students? Will there be trade-offs between the two roles?

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