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The Future of Site-Based Management: Principals are the Key

Site-Based Management (SBM), also known as decentralization, is a process that gives decision-making power over educational programs to individual schools instead of district offices with the ultimate goal of improved student learning (Hansen 2005; Tanner and Stone 1998; Walker 2007). It is a concept that was introduced to education over two decades ago (Cromwell 2005). There are a number of states and major cities in the United States that have legislated and mandated SBM programs, including Colorado, Florida, Kentucky, North Carolina, Texas, Virginia, Chicago, New York City, and Los Angeles (Chittum 2006; Walker 2007). SBM successes and failures have a number of specific characteristics and components; however, it is the belief of this author, based on the research, that the future success of SBM will be largely determined by the role and leadership of school principals.

There is a wealth of evidence supporting the importance of the role principals play in successful SBM programs. Briggs and Wohlstetter (2003) found in a study of the Chicago Public Schools SBM programs that the Chicago Consortium on School Reform (CCSR) concluded that principals are the single most important factor in promoting school reforms. Buchen (2003), in reviewing successful SBM programs, concluded that the focus of SBM reforms should be on the principal as the beacon for implementing SBM programs. In addition, research conducted by Ouchi (2006) on education decentralization in large urban areas concluded that the key to improving student achievement was turning over control of the school to the principal. According to Tanner and Stone in their 1998 SBM research study, they concluded that the role of the principal, “Is essential to any reform that is to be quick and lasting,” (Tanner and Stone 1998, 1). Finally, Cromwell (2005) concluded that a principal’s ability to lead and share power and responsibility is a key characteristic in a successful SBM program.

There are a number of characteristics principals with successful SBM programs possess. Tanner and Stone (1998) determined there are four basic processes principals with successful SBM school management programs exhibited: (a) principals must work collaboratively with staff members to analyze problems, (b) set need priorities, (c) resolve issues, and (d) use group dynamic skills. These researchers believed it is critical that principals be leaders instead of middle managers; they must disburse power, promote commitment to learning, involve teachers in the work of the school, collect student learning information, and distribute rewards. In addition, Briggs and Wohlstetter (2003), noted that principals in schools with successful SBM programs also sought out and built relationships with specific purposes in mind: newspapers for publications, universities for professional development, and businesses for technology support.

According to Cromwell (2005), successful SBM programs have principals who are able to lead and share power and responsibility. Districts where SBM programs failed did not set autonomy limits for the schools. Failure was also noted because principals told others what to do instead of working with others to develop skills and allow of some autonomy, did not distribute accountability throughout the school, and did not control power hungry decision-making groups (Cromwell 2005). Briggs and Wohlstetter (2003) identified one of the key elements of a successful SBM program is that leadership
is jointly shared between the principal, who acts as the manager and facilitator of change, and the teachers, who take on increased responsibilities for student learning.

Al Sandrini, superintendent of the Norris California School District, is not 100% sold on the autonomy provided to principals through SBM programs (Olson 2000). He is skeptical because SBM programs because he has seen how SBM programs can go awry when the vision provided by the school district is not adhered to by school principals. One specific example was when the school district wanted to increase literacy through an aggressive program and laid out the goals for the school. The school response was it would support the goal; however, the principal did not want to spend the $30,000 earmarked for library and literary materials, but instead wanted to buy physical education equipment. This was not okay with the school district and provides the always needed cautionary tale that power needs to be kept in check.

Public School versus Private School Principal Influence

Is there a difference in the level of influence enjoyed by principals in public and private schools? If a principal has more influence over the school can it result in a more effective SBM program? According to research conducted by Apodaca-Tucker and Slate (2002), the answers to both of these questions are yes.

Based on the research results, private school principals reported exerting more major influence in six areas of decision-making than their public school counterparts. The areas the principals were surveyed in were: (a) hiring, (b) selecting textbooks, (c) curricular guidelines, (d) establishing policies and practices for student grading and evaluation, (e) spending of discretionary funds, and (f) input on professional development (Apodaca-Tucker and Slate 2002). In alignment with these findings were comments by public school principals that teachers, school boards and districts, and SBM committees had a high degree of influence over decision-making in these six areas. By contrast, the private school principals believed the only other group with any major influence over these areas was the parents.

While both public and private school principals see SBM as essential to school reform public schools have a higher degree of SBM implementation than private schools (Apodaca-Tucker and Slate 2002). The reason for this may rest in the fact that public schools are subject to state and district mandates that private schools are not.

The Value of This Study

The reason determining the importance of principals to the future of SBM programs is important is because SBM has endured a rocky history; however, it is back on the rise because of the pressure placed on the education system by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (Hansen 2005). According to Hansen (2005), the reason SBM programs were mostly unsuccessful the first time around in the United States was because of improper implementation. More specifically, principals were not viewed as the leaders of schools and were not given control over budgets and resource allocation (Hansen 2005).

Edmonton Public Schools. The rising interest in the United States to revamp SBM efforts is obvious because of increased visits to Edmonton, Alberta, Canada—noted for having the most successful SBM program in the world (Hansen 2005). According to Dr. Emery Dosdall, Superintendent of Edmonton Public Schools, “School-based decision-making in our district is an approach that focuses on
decisions being made closest to where programming is provided for students, at the school level. The focus on improving student achievement places principals in a fundamentally critical role," (Cromwell 2005, 1). All 206 district principals report directly to Dosdall. A 1994 study by Wohlstettler and Briggs of school districts in the United States and Canada emphasized the importance of the role of the principal being the primary decision-maker and empowering others as key to successful SBM programs in Edmonton.

Chicago. The Chicago Public Schools began decentralizing power in the late 1980s and possessed all the necessary components for a successful SBM program. A number of the most critical factors for success included: shared decision-making, the principal sharing power while leading the school, professional development, and having control over the school budget (Briggs and Wohlstetter 2003; Cromwell 2005; Walker 2007; Woestehoff and Neill 2006). A study from Designs for Change (2005) reported 144 under-performing Chicago Public Schools made significant improvement under the SBM reform. “The most consistent feature of these improved schools is that all adults work together as a team to improve education, including teachers, parents, Local School Council members, principal and community agencies,” (Designs for Change 2005, ii). Research conducted by the Chicago Consortium on School Reform (CCSR) determined the single most important factor in SBM reform was the school principal promoting decentralization, empowering and involving stakeholders, and implementing changes (Briggs and Wohlstetter 2003).

Five years after reform, the Illinois state legislature received pressure for more academic gains and more dramatic reforms. In response, the state legislature granted the mayor of Chicago power to centrally rule over Chicago Public Schools in 1995 (Woestehoff and Neill 2006). The newly appointed head of the Chicago Public Schools System had no education background and began to undermine the gains made with SBM. Principals lost power to run their schools and the practices of teaching for tests and punitive policies for students and schools based on performance on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) and Tests of Achievement and Proficiency (TAP) replaced SBM.

After a decade of losing ground, Chicago Public Schools finally recommitted to improve SBM programs to the glory years of the early 1990s. According to Buchen (2003), McCosh Elementary School is now a model for SBM programs. The principal receives her goals and budget from the district and then she and her teacher-managers run the school. The result of this principal’s work is that McCosh has the best test scores in the district and high morale ratings from teachers, students, and parents (Buchen 2003).

Another positive sign for SBM programs in Chicago occurred in the school year 2005-2006. The district named 85 schools as Autonomous Management and Performance Schools (Hansen 2005). The hallmark of this new program is that the principal is the leader of the school receiving overall goals from the district office and then having jurisdiction over school budgets and resource allocation (Hansen 2005).

ABC Program of North Carolina. There is evidence from a research study that North Carolina’s ABC Program is a powerful tool that helps principals in changing their behaviors and improving student learning in SBM programs. According to Ladd (2001), “The ABC’s Program is designed to hold schools Accountable for the Basic skills of reading, math, and writing, while giving the schools more
local Control," (Ladd 2001, 18). Ladd surveyed principals in 1997, after the first year of the program, and then again in 1999. Over 60% of the respondents supported the program and believed ABC increased their ability to make teachers more effective because they were empowered to provide teachers with incentives if the school exceeded achievement goals by over 10% (Ladd 2001).

The respondents indicated that the biggest change in their behavior from 1997 to 1999 was that they became more involved in a wide range of policy issues at their schools (Ladd 2001). A sample of the areas of increased involvement include improved instruction, development of extra curricula math and reading programs, and increased time spent mentoring teachers. The respondents also focused more attention on low performing students that included focusing additional funds to help these students. The overall results was improved student test scores and fewer students struggling.

The Future

So, how do school districts and other key stakeholders responsible for the successful implementation of SBM programs enact these programs in a way that allow for principals to be the key facilitators of change over their schools? Tanner and Stone (1998) propose that school districts encourage professional development and expansion of their principals’ expertise in management and administration. They found that 85.7% of principals in their study believe the principal responsibilities increased to cultivate leadership from teacher ranks. Therefore, principals would dramatically benefit from leadership training. They also need to be provided with the tools and training to develop comprehensive plans for coordinating groups within their schools.

Another method for assisting principals with successfully implementing SBM programs comes from a National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) paper. The NAESP calls for principals to be instructional leaders and champions of student achievement instead of victims of bureaucracies (Buchen 2003). NAESP also suggested appointing assistant principals to create an army of future principals who are more visionary, aggressive, and knowledgeable about school reform and improvement (Buchen, 2003).

An additional way to assist principals with improving leadership is to develop them into master facilitators and communicators. An essential role of the principals in SBM programs is to coordinate development of distribution systems on promoting budgets, hiring personnel, developing schedules, and planning curriculum. Principals need these special skills to support SBM participatory management.

A final conclusion is that since strategic planning is critical to successful SBM programs principals should be provided with education and skills in this area. The observation of this author is that while many studies concluded this is a critical component in assisting principals with implementing successful SBM programs no suggestions on how to do this exist. It is the recommendation of this author that specific assessment tools be developed addressing strategic leadership and administered to principals. Based on the assessment results, each principal would be provided with a personal development and training plan to provide training in the areas he or she is deficient in strategic leadership. Follow-up assessments would determine if the principal adequately possessed the necessary strategic leadership skills or if more training is needed. Ultimately, results will be determined based improved student learning and morale ratings at SBM schools.
References


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