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The Politics of School-Based Management: Understanding the Process of Devolving Authority in Urban School Districts

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Abstract

Since the late 1970s the problem of urban education has been cast as partially a problem of governance and authority structures. This focus mirrors a larger preoccupation by educational reformers with democratizing the decision-making process in public schools, a preoccupation that is evident not only in this country but also many nations throughout the world. Borrowing from the private sector, the underlying assumption behind decentralization is that educational improvement is only possible if those closest to the point at which decision are enacted become the architects of these decisions. Thus,

school-based management or participatory decision-making is viewed as a means to formally incorporate the voices of parents, teachers and the community in the management of their schools. This paper discusses the findings of a recently conducted study on school-based management in thirty of New Jersey's poorest districts (referred to as the Abbott Districts). These districts have begun a process of complex reform after the State's Supreme Court ruled that the state had failed to constitutionally provide a thorough and efficient education for its poorest students by the absence of parity funding. Populated by primarily black and Hispanic students, and representing most of the larger urban communities in the state, students in these districts exhibit performance levels significantly below that of the state average. The results of the study indicate that (1) genuine autonomy has been usurped by an intensification in state power and authority, (ii) state elites have provided little opportunity for districts and SBM teams to build capacity; (iii) the level of democratization or opening-up of decision making to local community members has been minimal as the teams become teacher dominated; and (iv) in the absence of clear guidelines from the State, conflict over the appropriate role of SBM members, principals, central office staff and local school boards has emerged. The paper on the basis of these findings explores some policy options that need to be considered both at the state and local levels as school communities move toward more decentralized governance structures.

Introduction

Education remains one of the primary means through which social mobility is attained. Yet, the many discourses on the state of educational institutions suggest institutions that are imperiled for a variety of reasons. This crisis in public education is viewed as more pronounced in communities peopled by the poor of Latino and African- American descents than in white affluent communities. While the problems of these educational systems have been framed in many different ways, one argument that has been consistently forwarded centers on the endemic paralysis of their central bureaucratic structures in responding to efforts of change. Consequently, a popular policy solution has focused on the devolution of power and authority from these central bureaucracies to less formal and rigid structures i.e. schools. However, the history of the decentralization movement reveals noticeable ideological shifts behind the purpose of school-based management (SBM).

During the sixties, attempts were made to increase the level of participation in decision-making through the formal incorporation of various subgroups. Concerned with such issues as granting greater power and authority to local communities, diffusing state authority and increasing organizational efficiency, the decentralization movements of this era saw the devolution of authority as a means of meeting political and administrative ends (David, 1989; Wohlstetter & Mohrman, 1996). The eighties however, witnessed a change in the purposive intent behind decentralization. This change resulted from the pervasive influence of the reform movements that dominated the educational landscape of this period. During the eighties, there was a broad call for the implementation of

comprehensive educational changes - changes that addressed professional development and instruction, the replacement of bureaucratic regulations with professional responsibility and accountability, and the development of high standards for teachers as well as students (David, 1989). The focus of school-based management thus became inextricably interwoven with concerns about student achievement.

The growing popularity of school-based management as a reform strategy is evidenced by the fact that in 1993 over 44 states practiced some form of decentralized governance (Herman & Herman, 1993). Within the broader global context, decentralization became an integral component of the reform movements in countries such as New Zealand, Canada, Britain, Spain, and Wales (Hanson & Ulrich, 1994; Leithwood & Menzies, 1998). Ironically, at the same time that increasing numbers of school districts, states, and nations were adopting decentralization policies in the hope of bringing about improvement in student achievement, the evidence suggested that school-based management was less powerful a source of school improvement than its advocates believed. Indeed, the evidence continues to show that the impact of school-based management is more apparent in the areas of governance and organizational structures than in changed classroom practices and improved student achievement (Summers & Johnson, 1991; Wohlstetter & Mohrman 1996).

Notwithstanding this trend, several arguments have been advanced by proponents of decentralization in support of the superiority of this form of governance arrangement over centralized structures (Murphy, 1991). First, it is argued that decentralization gives communities, parents and teachers a stake in local educational decision-making. Second, decentralization is seen to contribute to the evolution of greater levels of professional commitment by allowing teachers to exercise a voice in decision-making. Third, the suggestion is proffered that the creation of decisions at levels that are closest to students, results in better outcomes, as those making the decisions are more acutely aware of the needs of these students. Fourth, decentralization is viewed as a mechanism that has the potential to promote greater efficiency in the utilization and expenditure of resources. This is achieved, since the decisions are being made by those closest to the point where services are being delivered, thereby resulting in a greater match of services to needs. Fifth, since bureaucracies are perceived to be ineffective in meeting the needs of students, decentralized structures are considered to have the potential to be more responsive to student needs than are bureaucratic organizational forms.

The Theoretical Underpinnings of School-Based Management

The above arguments on the advantages of this form of school governance reveal some important theoretical assumptions. Undoubtedly, the notion of decentralization in educational decision-making and governance issues appeals to the social democratic principles of egalitarianism whereby local communities acquire a voice in institutional building and operation (Seddon, Angus & Poole, 1990). If this principle is actualized through the creation of democratic decision-making structures, a significant shift in the realignment of power relationships can be expected to occur. Specifically, grass root groups functioning in some combination with school-based leadership ideally would replace the dominance enjoyed by educational bureaucratic elites in local school governance matters. Devolution of authority thus enables the education constituency to become more inclusive and less narrowly restricted to technocrats. By accomplishing this, the balance of power between educational elites on the one hand, and local

community and school-based actors on the other, is redistributed to the advantage of the latter group (Seddon, Angus & Poole, 1990).

Theoretically, this redistribution of power corresponds to a re-conceptualization of the organizational unit deemed to be most important administratively for the improvement of learning. Under the old governance model, central office units were considered to have the administrative responsibility for ensuring that the conditions needed to promote learning were in place. With decentralization, the school as a subunit now assumes this role.

Organizational and economic arguments have also played a role in framing some of the assumptions on which the concept of decentralization of authority structures in educational settings is grounded. Some organizational theorists argue that a decentralized environment is optimal for efficiency in operations, since employees who are empowered to make decisions have more control over their work and hence become more accountable for decisions (Murphy, 1991). The premise of these arguments is that by flattening the decision-making process, and bringing it closer to the site where client needs are met, the effectiveness of the organization is improved, as employees based on their knowledge and interactions with clients can reshape their products and services based on an understanding of client needs.

Miron (1996) posits to the contrary however, that the incorporation of corporate principles of decentralization as reflected in the ideology of shared decision-making ought to be approached with caution by educators. According to Miron, corporate downsizing and decentralization of decision-making represented a strategic response by capital to the global fiscal crisis. However, the relative complexity of schools' institutional processes when compared to those in the corporate world implies that the importation of the 'logic of capital' into educational institutions can create a set of discursive practices, as well as mask some of the macrostructural and micropolitical processes that are in play.

In a similar vein, Ball and Smyth have advanced a critical political-economic perspective on school-based management (Ball, 1993; Smyth, 1993). Both have advanced the notion that decentralization ought to be understood within the context of resource availability, social responsibility, and accountability. From these writers' perspectives, the social democratic principles on which decentralization is premised, and which appear appealing to constituencies whose voices have been rendered mute by educational elites, belie some of the hidden motivation behind those at state and governmental levels who push this form of governance. Specifically, the argument is posited that the devolution of authority from central sources, especially at the state level, serves to legitimize state agencies in many ways. First, it gives the appearance that these agencies are sensitive to local needs. Second, by shifting decision-making responsibilities to the schools, these agencies can distance themselves from failed policies by blaming schools for poor management and flawed decision-making. This works in the favor of state elites by insulating them from the consequences and contradictions that are generated by the formulation of poor policies.

Moreover, both Ball and Smyth view the devolution of authority to local schools as placing unfair burdens on schools in instances of resource scarcity. Under these conditions, schools are placed in the unenviable position of having to make decisions on how to distribute scarce resources. However, in doing so, decentralization serves an

important conflict management function. Welier's refinement of the latent functions inhering in decentralization amplifies this underlying thesis of the political-economy perspective (Weiler, 1990). Weiler argues that decentralization has two latent functions: one that serves to legitimize certain socio-political arrangements, the other that allows for the management of conflict. Welier suggests that in policy contexts that are potentially highly conflictual, such as education policy arenas, decentralization is politically instrumental in helping to diffuse and manage conflict (See also Anderson & Dixon, 1993; Seddon, Angus & Poole, 1990).

The opposing theoretical arguments that have been presented in this paper imply that decentralization is far more complex in its implications for schools than is popularly understood. Not-with-standing the problems that are associated with highly centralized structures, the lack of any substantive data on the significant impact of decentralized forms of educational governance on student achievement coupled with the problems that have been encountered with the decentralization movement, suggest that closer intellectual scrutiny of this concept is warranted (Anderson & Dixon, 1993; Gordon, 1992; Wohlstetter & Odden, 1992).

Purpose of Study

In 1998, in its culminating decision on the legal challenges to the State of New Jersey's funding and educational policies with respect to the state's poorest districts, the New Jersey Supreme Court ordered the implementation of a series of remedial measures aimed at redressing the long standing disparities between poor and affluent school districts. The decision referred to as *Abbott V*, sets out an ambitious agenda for reform that includes changes in instructional programming through the adoption of whole school reform models, expansion of early childhood programming and school- community social agency linkages, as well as improvement in facilities (*Abbott v. Burke*, 1998).

According to regulations published by the New Jersey Department of Education, the process of implementing the reforms ordered by the State's Supreme Court is to be guided and led by teachers, parents, community and other school level staff through the formal establishment of school management teams. The regulation states that the purpose of these teams is to “ensure participation of staff, parents and the community in school level decision making and to develop a culture of cooperation, accountability and commitment” (New Jersey Department of Education, 2000). To that end, the school management teams are expected to guide and lead decisions on curricular, instructional, personnel and budgetary matters.

This study in light of the preceding discussion on the unresolved theoretical and empirical issues plaguing the notion of participatory decision-making, as well as New Jersey's current policy guidelines governing the implementation of decentralization, raises and seeks to answer the following questions with respect to school-based management in the state's thirty poorest districts. First, what is the level of democratization that has occurred in these systems? This question is answered through the posing of two related concerns; the extent to which participation in decision-making reflects the major constituencies that are intended to be on the school-management teams; and the degree to which the process allows for the legitimate exercise of decision-making and authority. Second, how has school-based management resulted in the successful devolution of authority from centralized to decentralized localities? The questions as they are posed,

speak more to the issues of whether school-based management in its empirical form is consonant with the assumptions of democratizing decision-making and hence the social-democratic principle of egalitarianism and less with the effects of this form of governance on student achievement.

Method

Sample, Instrumentation and Data Collection

This study employs a mixed method research design. In April 2000, a questionnaire was mailed to a randomly drawn sample of 140 elementary and middle schools' school management teams. Included in the survey were questions on team membership and composition, the extent to which factors identified as germane to a team's ability to function, such as training, and group coalescence influenced the legitimate exercise of decision-making and the quality of support provided to the teams by the State Department of Education. The survey elicited a response rate of 51%. The school management teams in the study represented four different cohorts of schools. These cohorts correspond to the timeframe in which the schools begun to implement whole school reform.

According to state regulations, schools had three years within which to begin their whole school reform process. Schools that started the process within the first year of the Court's decision were referred to as Cohort 1 schools. Similarly, schools that begun in the second year were designated as Cohort 2 schools, schools during the middle of the second year mid-year cohort schools, and during the third year, Cohort 3 schools. In our sample there were 15 Cohort 1 school teams, 14 teams representing Cohort 2 schools, 6 teams from mid-year Cohort schools, and 32 teams belonging to the third Cohort of schools. Five teams failed to identify their cohort status. Knowing the cohort status of the team is important to the study at hand, since Cohort 1 school management teams- that is teams belonging to schools who started the reform process a year after the Court rendered its decision in 1998- had very little time to engage in quality planning.

In addition to surveying the school management teams, two focus groups were held. The purpose of both focus groups was to gain an understanding of the processes that were involved as authority got devolved from the central offices to the schools. The first focus group was held with one central office representative from six school districts. These districts were chosen to reflect the racial composition of their student bodies, their geographical locations in the State, their governance structures and when they were classified as being an "Abbott District". A second, less formally structured focus group discussion was held with three superintendents in October of the same year. These superintendents were executive members of the statewide association of urban superintendents.

Data Analysis

The data analysis involves the use of descriptive statistics and the statistical testing of associational relationships, through the use of Chi Square and Analysis of Variance. Standardized residuals are reported when significant chi-square values were found. These residuals allow us to identify the categories that are making a significant contribution to the significant chi square value. Following Haberman's guideline, it was inferred that where the standardized residual for a category is greater than 2, that category is strongly

contributing to the significant chi square value (Haberman, 1984). Tukey post hoc testing was done for those Anovas that were found to be significant. Data gathered from the focus groups data was subjected to a qualitative analysis.

Findings

Degree of democratization of school-based management in the Abbott Districts

The New Jersey Department of Education guidelines state that the constituent groups that must be represented on the school management teams are the building principals, teachers, school-level support staff, parents, and community. The inclusion of students is an optional requirement that is left to the discretion of the individual school. Groups or individuals excluded from membership on a team are Board of Education members and district employees who wish to serve in the capacity of a parent or community representative. According to the regulations, no one group can constitute 50 percent or more of a team's total membership. Membership on a team is secured either through an electoral process or by selection. The minimum number of years that a given member can serve on a team is two, however, to ensure continuity in the event of an election or selection, teams are allowed to stagger membership.

Murphy and Beck (1995) suggest that school based management typically assumes one of three ideal forms; administrative control SBM (in this model the principal is the primary decision maker), professional control (teachers are the primary decision makers) and community/parent control (community members and parents comprise the major decision making groups). A fourth though less popular form is defined by Malen and Ogawa as balanced control (Hanson & Ulrich, 1994; Malen & Ogawa, 1988). In this model an attempt is made to establish a balance in decision-making among all stakeholders. Within the context of New Jersey, it is clear from the regulations that the Department of Education promulgated that the attempt was to create a model that approximated a balanced control form of SBM. The guidelines stated that the model to be adopted by schools was one, which restricted the membership of any given stakeholder group to less than 50 percent of the total membership.

In actuality however, the findings from the present study indicate that SBM in New Jersey is regressing towards a teacher-dominated form of SBM. Of the sixty-nine teams with valid responses on membership composition there were 17 teams in which the teaching staff members represented more than 50% of the total membership and 13 teams on which teachers made up half or 50% of the total membership. Thus, 43% of the teams had at least half of their membership drawn from the teaching staff. The dominance of teachers on the school management teams cut across all cohorts. However, proportionately more of the teams that were dominated by teachers were apt to be in schools belonging to the first cohort.

With respect to representation from other stakeholders, while more than 90 percent of the teams reported having at least one parent member, about 26 or approximately 38% of the teams were at the time of the study without community representation. The twenty-six teams reporting no community presence were proportionately distributed among the various cohorts, although slightly more 43% or 6 out of the 14 second year cohort teams in the study indicated that they had no community representation. On the other hand, only 7 teams had no in school-support staff representation. The data provided by the teams in

the study reveals that most teams lacked student representation. Indeed 58 teams or roughly 83% of the teams reported that there was no student membership.

In examining the degree of representation of the major constituencies on the teams, the proportions for each group were calculated on the basis of the size of the team. On the whole the median proportion for teachers was .47, for parents .22 and for community members .07. This implies that on half of the teams, teachers made up 47% or more of the teams' membership, parents 22% and community stakeholders 7%. In-school support staff, and school administrators constitute the remaining percentages. Parent and community groups thus accounted for about 29% of the total memberships, while seventy-one percent of the teams' membership are drawn from school-based personnel. These findings suggest that the evolution of school-based management in the Abbott districts has resulted in some instances, in structures, which deviate from what was originally intended. The balanced model, which was initially proposed, has not been the dominant form.

Whether or not, school-based management has successfully resulted in democratizing the process of decision-making by incorporating the voices of key constituent groups remains therefore questionable in light of these findings. Even in those instances in which parental participation is secured, the dominance of school-based personnel has overshadowed the voices of parents. Kildow's case study of one team's functioning described how the parent member frequently deferred to school-based members on all issues, and viewed herself as less empowered to make decisions when compared to her school-based counterparts (Kildow, 2000). What these findings seem to suggest is that the 'social empowerment' of parents and communities that proponents of this form of governance arrangement imply is attendant with participatory decision making has not occurred in the New Jersey reforms.

Barriers to the legitimate exercise of decision-making

The primary responsibility of the teams is to develop a plan that will guide the school's implementation of its whole school reform model. The teams are also responsible for ensuring that their schools' curriculum and instruction are aligned to the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards. They are expected to engage in a needs assessment process based on a review of student performance data on the statewide assessments and on the basis of this review make recommendations for curricular and instructional improvement. Teams are also required to ensure that there is a program of professional development for teachers in their individual schools linked to the school's whole school reform model. Each school is further responsible for the development of a technology plan that is submitted to the Department of Education for approval. In addition to these responsibilities, the teams are also expected to ensure that there are programs and activities that are linked to the cross content readiness standards in the core curriculum standards, as well as develop a school based reward system for teachers, administrators and parents who contribute to students successfully meeting these standards. Finally, the teams based on a majority vote and with state department approval (through the School Review and Improvement Team) are responsible for approving a school budget and may recommend the appointment of a building principal, teaching staff member and instructional aides.

The teams were asked to rate their abilities to function effectively along several

operational dimensions that previous literature has identified to be important influences on a team's capacity to successfully govern. These dimensions include: clarity about roles and responsibilities, membership commitment, understanding of a shared mission, meeting schedules, attendance at meetings, effectiveness in communicating with the larger school community and active as opposed to token participation in decision - making. Overall, the teams in the present study exhibited ambivalence in their evaluation of their abilities to effectively govern. Teams were unanimous that their membership was committed (86%) and that individual interests did not supersede the goals and mission of their work (88%). Neither did teams report that conflict among members posed a barrier to their ability to operate effectively (91%). Indeed, ninety percent of the teams reported that they were able to deal constructively with differences in opinions among themselves when these differences arose. However, when an examination of the association between team composition and the identification of barriers that impede the teams' abilities to function effectively was done, some interesting findings emerged.

Teams that lacked community representation were more likely to indicate that individual members' self interests took precedence over team matters. A chi-square value of 8.75 was found to be significant, and the standardized residuals showed values of 2 or greater for teams with poor community representation and the identification of problems with individual self-interests. Also, teams with no community representation indicated that they were less likely to explore alternatives when making decisions than teams with community representation (Chi-Square value of 8.118 was found to be significant at the .044 level). Again, standardized residuals were larger for these teams. On the other hand, teams without community representation were less likely to report problems with attendance at meetings than those with community representations (Chi Square value of 6.109 was found to be significant at the .05 level). The data also showed, that teams who were cajoled to start their whole school reform process early, that is cohort 1 teams, were significantly more likely to report problems with commitment, than those teams that started the process much later (Chi Square value of 9.456 was found to be significant at .045 level).

Table 1
Association between Community Representation,
Cohort Status and Factors Impacting a
Team's Ability to Successfully Govern

Relationships	χ^2 Values	Significance Level
Community representation <i>and</i> Problems with individual interests taking precedence over team matters	9.640	.01
Community representation <i>and</i> teams exploration of alternatives when making decisions	8.118	.04
Community representation <i>and</i> attendance at meetings	6.109	.05
Cohort status <i>and</i> members commitment	9.456	.05

Note: Total number of teams in analyses of community representation: 69; number of teams in cohort analyses: 47.

With respect to role clarity, about one-third of the teams (31%) indicated that they were unclear as to their roles and responsibilities. About the same percentage (33%) also reported difficulties in communicating with their larger school communities. Securing adequate involvement from all potential constituent groups was raised as another problem area affecting the ability to govern. The experiences of teams in the larger school districts are instructive on this issue. According to these teams, the restrictive clause in the regulations which preclude in-district employees from serving in the capacity of a parent or community representative has hampered their abilities to recruit membership, as a significant number of local residents have an employment status with the school system

Lawler (1986) argued that legitimate participation has four requirements: knowledge and skills, power, information, and rewards. This framework has been used by Wohlester et.al (1994) to explain variations in implementation and effects among SMTs operating in different contexts. In surveying the teams in the Abbott districts attention was paid to three of these requirements, knowledge, skills and information. Teams were asked to rate on several scales their level of knowledge, previous experience and comfort in the ten areas of their responsibilities. It is reasonable to assume that the experiences, which members on the school management teams bring to their new roles are likely to impact qualitatively on the kinds of decisions that are made, and the teams comfort in doing so. Data on the number of team members who have had prior experiences in the 10 areas for which they are responsible indicate that overall very few teams are composed of members who have had prior involvement in any of these areas. As can be seen in Table 2, experience is weakest in the areas of school-based budgeting, technology planning, school-based hiring decisions and developing reward systems. Teams had proportionately more members, who prior to joining the teams had some experience with curriculum alignment and needs assessment.

Table 2
Percent of SMT Members with Prior Experience in
Each Area of Teams' Responsibilities

Areas of Responsibility	Percent of Members with Prior Experience
Aligning Curriculum	41.7%
Conducting Needs Assessment	37.1%
Working on, or reviewing professional development programs	32.2%
Involved in developing school-based reward systems	30.0%
Involved in school-based hiring decisions	19.9%
Worked on developing a technology plan	16.8%

Involved in school-based budgeting (zero-based) budgeting decisions	9.8%
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Number of teams responding: 66

It is quite conceivable, that although Team members may lack the experience base for making decisions, that nevertheless, they may have an informed knowledge base that can be drawn upon in decision-making situations. Each Team was asked to indicate the degree of knowledge it possessed as an entity in each of the 10 areas of responsibility. These responses are summarized in Table 3. About one third of the Teams felt that their knowledge base on how to align curriculum, review test score data and determine program and curricular needs on the basis of this review, as well as determine what actions need to be taken to improve academic achievement in their schools was substantive. On the other hand, a significant proportion (over 75%) felt that they had only some or no knowledge on how to 1) develop a professional development program that is related to the implementation of the reform, (2) develop a technology plan, 3) make decisions with regard to hiring school personnel, 4) develop a school-based budget and 5) develop school based reward systems. Significant differences were found among the cohorts. Teams belonging to the first cohort were more likely to report lack of knowledge with respect to developing school-based budgets than teams belonging to the second, mid-year and third year cohorts. Third-year cohort teams were also more likely to report having less knowledge on creating professional development programs than the second year cohorts.

Table 3
Areas of Responsibilities: Percent of Teams Reporting Minimal Knowledge

Areas of SMT Responsibility	Percent of Teams Reporting Minimal Knowledge
Aligning Instruction to the Core Content Standard	55.4%
Deciding what actions needed to be taken on the basis of test score data	59.1%
Reviewing test score data as part of a needs assessment process	62.1%
Determining program needs on the basis of test score reviews	66.7%
Making curricular decisions on the basis of test score data	66.7%
Developing school-based reward systems	75.8%
Developing a professional development program that is linked to the implementation of the reforms	79.4%

Making school-based personnel decisions with respect to hiring	80.3%
Developing a technology plan	80.6%
Developing a school-based budget based on zero-based budgeting procedures	82.1%

Training is a critical component in the development of the knowledge and capacity of teams to function effectively in making quality decisions. To that end, teams were asked to rate the adequacy of training they received around the major substantive areas for which they have responsibilities. Twenty-three teams reported that they received no training around any of the areas for which were given responsibility. Overall, the teams who provided feedback, were more favorable in their ratings of the training received in areas related to curriculum, test score analysis and school-based professional development, than they were in their evaluation of the training provided around school-based hiring decisions and developing school-based reward systems (see Table 4).

Table 4
Percent of Teams Rating Training Received to be at Least Adequate

Area of Training Support	Percent of Teams Rating Training to be at Least Adequate
Roles and responsibilities of the teams	59.0%
Developing acceptable standards for professional development	56.8%
Curriculum Alignment	53.2%
Use of test scores for decision-making	51.1%
Analysis of test scores	50.0%
Technology planning	38.9%
Developing school-based reward systems	28.6%
Hiring procedures for school-based personnel	24.5%
Developing school-based budgets	21.1%

Number of teams responding: 47

Given the fact that teams lack the knowledge and experience to adequately fulfill their responsibilities, and given the unevenness in their satisfaction with the training that they have received, how comfortable are the teams in making the decisions that are expected of them? Data provided by the teams in the survey indicate that teams feel more comfortable in making decisions related to curricular and instructional issues than they do in making decisions that involve technology, school-based budgets, school hiring decisions and reward structures. For example, more than sixty percent of the teams

reported that they are uncomfortable in creating rewards for teachers, and more than 80% indicate that they would be similarly uncomfortable in determining rewards for their building administrators. Forty-percent of the teams indicated that they would not be comfortable in making decisions involving the hiring of a principal and a similar percent 44% expressed discomfort in making teaching appointments.

In some of these decisions making areas teams are required to vote on whether or not they wish to have input. At the time of the survey, only 21% of the teams had voted to provide input into the hiring of their building principal and 26 % for input into the appointment of instructional aides. Data culled from the focus group discussion reinforced the notions that some teams are reluctant to get involved in hiring and budgeting decisions. According to the central office administrators in the focus group, while some teams initially wanted to select personnel for their buildings, they experienced discomfort when the process of selection begun, especially in those instances when they had to make decisions about staff on their own level. These results parallel similar findings reported by Jones' study of teacher decision-making preferences in Texas (Jones, 1997). Jones found that teachers expressed a desire and were more involved in areas concerning curriculum/instruction and student services than staff, personnel and budget management.

Decentralization provides the impetus for the creation of a new institutional culture within schools. It also presupposes that some socialization occurs whereby all actors are socialized to their new roles and responsibilities. However, our discussion so far suggests that the exercise of legitimate decision-making has been constrained by the teams' inexperience, uneven knowledge base, and the absence of adequate training to build capacity.

Devolving power from central to decentralized structures: Decreasing autonomy or increasing centralization?

The New Jersey Department of Education has created a structure, the School Review and Improvement Team (SRI) that ostensibly functions in the capacity of an overseer of the reform process, ensuring that the implementation of SBM is progressing according to the guidelines set forth in the regulations. The School Review and Improvement Team is comprised of Department of Education personnel from the Divisions of Student Services and Finance. Each school in an Abbott district is assigned to a team that is based at one of the State's Program Improvement and Regional Centers. The SRI Teams have a wide range of responsibilities to include working with the districts and building principal to ensure the effective implementation of whole school reform and school-based management; consulting with the school management teams to ensure that all of the SMT responsibilities are effectively fulfilled; serving as liaisons between the schools and the Whole School Reform model developers, and consulting with the Superintendents on the transfer or removal of teachers and principals.

There are two related issues that one may surface regarding the balance in power between the State and the local sites in the reform process. First, according to David (1989), a policy cornerstone of successful decentralization involves the accompanying of local autonomy with simultaneous relief from onerous rules and regulations (See also Herman & Herman, 1992, Hill & Bonan, 1991). The extensive regulatory role played by the School Review and Improvement Team in the decentralization process in New Jersey

seems to stand in contradistinction to David's observation. In fact, the question can be posed as to whether or not the regulations governing the role of the SRI teams have the potential to undermine local autonomy and thereby result in an intensification of power at the State level, rather than a real gain of power at the school level? The strong regulatory presence of the Department of Education through the School Review and Improvement Teams far exceeds and is different from the decentralization and centralization tendencies that many state reform strategies have exhibited (Boyd, 1992; Levacic, 1995; Levin, 1997).

These strategies evident in other reform efforts have combined shifts in authority to local schools with state control over setting and monitoring standards. However, the School Review and Improvement Teams' roles extend beyond one that is primarily of a monitoring nature. The SRI among other responsibilities approves decisions made by the local schools, decides when a team can assume new responsibilities in the areas of budgeting and personnel (if teams decide by a majority vote to assume these responsibilities) and approves transfers or firing of principals and teachers. In effect they have assumed an external governance role thereby adding another bureaucratic layer to the reform. One may argue that the SRI structure, which the Department of Education has put in place to provide field-based assistance to the schools and their respective management teams, virtually places the Department of Education in the position of assuming responsibility for the success of the reforms. Thus, the NJDOE may not be able to distance itself from any failed policies associated with the reforms.

This broad notion of shared responsibility that is being advocated here implies that state, local districts, and schools are equally contributing to the successful implementation of the reforms. Since the SRI is the primary state resource that is being directed to support the schools, the question as to how effective this field assistance has been is relevant to raise. The School Management Teams in the study were asked to indicate their degree of satisfaction with the support provided by the SRI teams in the areas stipulated by the regulations. The following discussion presents the Teams responses. At the time of the survey more than one third of the teams had not yet had a meeting with their SRI facilitator. Furthermore, several of the teams were unfamiliar with the roles and responsibilities of the SRI and sought clarification from the researchers. Thus only 41 of the 72 teams were able to provide feedback on the SRI teams. Among the districts providing feedback, there was a high level of dissatisfaction with the support that the SRI teams have provided. Seventy-one percent of the school management teams reported that their SRI facilitator attended meetings irregularly, and 56% noted that the technical assistance provided was unsatisfactory.

While, about 56% of the school management teams stated that their SRI provided assistance with general implementation issues, 54% noted that the SRI teams provided no assistance with the actual development of their implementation plans. Furthermore, more than 58% of the teams were dissatisfied with the help received from their SRI Teams with problems encountered during implementation; and an even larger percent 68% indicated that their SRI team provided minimal assistance in working with the model developers. An equally substantial number of the teams (25 or 68%) noted that their SRI did not help in identifying areas for training, neither were the SRI facilitators helpful in assisting them in the identification of experts that can help with the problem of student achievement. With respect to the budgeting process, more than 61% of the school management teams reported that they were dissatisfied (or unsure of how satisfied they were) with the

assistance, which their SRI facilitator provided in the development of the school budgets. Overall, only about 38% of the teams reported general satisfaction with the support, which they have received from the SRI Team that has been assigned to them.

When cohort status is entered as the main effect in several one-way ANOVAS in which evaluations of the SRI various responsibilities are treated as the dependent measures, several significant findings were found. According to the data furnished in Table 5, the impact of cohort status on the teams' evaluation of the SRIs was significant in six areas. (See Table 6) These were: help in implementation, providing satisfactory technical assistance, providing assistance with the school's implementation plan, helping with the model developers of the various whole school reform models, providing assistance in school-based budgeting and overall support. Results of the Tukey post hoc testing reveals that schools belonging to the first cohort were significantly more dissatisfied with the support, which they received from their SRI facilitators than Cohort 2 Teams. As was noted earlier, Cohort 1 school management teams began their school reform process within a year of the Court's decision. Moreover, these teams had minimal time to engage in quality planning.

Table 5
Percent of Teams Reporting Satisfaction with their School Review and Improvement Teams in Key Areas of Support

Area of Support	Percent Reporting Satisfaction
Assistance with implementation	56%
Review of the school's budget	50%
Support with resolving problems	42%
Assistance with implementation plan	41%
Assistance with the development of the school's budget	39%
Technical Assistance	36%
Attendance at meetings	29%
Support with the Model Developers	26%
Identifying for the schools, experts who can help with student achievement	18%
Identifying areas for training	15%
Overall Satisfaction with the SRI Teams	38%

Number of teams responding: 37

Table 6
ANOVA Results for the Main Effect of Cohort Status

Dependent Variables	Df(B)/ Df(W)	MS(B)/ MS(W)	F
SRI Team attends meetings.	2 35	6.982 2.329	2.996
SRI has helped in implementation.	2 33	6.775 1.915	3.538*
Technical assistance is satisfactory.	2 33	8.997 1.956	4.599**
SRI has provided assistance with implementation plan.	2 33	7.589 2.115	3.521*
SRI has helped in problem solving.	2 30	5.699 1.917	2.973
SRI has helped with the Model Developers.	2 32	6.444 1.806	3.568*
SRI has helped to identify areas for training.	2 32	3.721 1.353	2.750
SRI has identified experts that can help with student achievement.	2 32	3.643 1.581	2.304
Team is satisfied with assistance from SRI in school-based budgeting	2 32	10.836 1.966	5.513**
Satisfied with Overall support from the SRI	2 33	7.687 2.046	3.757*

Post Hoc testing based on TUKEY; *p< .05; **p<. 001

Information provided during the focus group session suggests that two factors were contributing to the ineffectiveness of the SRI teams. The first, relates to the instability of

team members. All of the districts in the focus group concurred that during the early phases of the reform there was a high turnover of individuals on the SRI teams. A second contributing factor identified by the districts is the knowledge base and experiences brought by the SRI facilitators. There was general agreement that the SRI facilitators lacked the experiences and knowledge base around the change process in general and reform within the urban context in particular. SRI team facilitators were described as being inexperienced and who for the most part seemed to be learning from the districts and schools rather than the other way around. These findings on the relative ineffectiveness of the SRI teams are not new. An earlier study on factors impacting on the implementation of the reforms pointed to problems with the SRI teams and had suggested that the State Department of Education needed to closely evaluate the way in which these teams were functioning (Walker & Gutmore, 2000). The overall impact of the SRI teams' ineffectiveness is evident in the fact that slightly more than 48% of the school based management teams noted that the absence of technical support has posed a challenge to their ability to function.

Understanding the Process of Devolving Authority

The focus group discussions with central office personnel knowledgeable about the devolving of authority to the school management teams as well as discussions with school superintendents provide additional insights into the myriad of issues the districts are facing as the shifts in the distribution of power and authority occur. All the districts in the focus group prior to the Abbott rulings had begun to create opportunities for participatory decision-making in their systems. In some instances, these opportunities were more formally structured with the establishment of what is defined as school core teams. Thus, districts did not express aversion to devolving authority to the local sites and indeed endorsed the process as a means of creating structures that were more inclusive of the voices of their various constituents. However, the districts did provide comments on what were perceived to be salient issues that adversely affecting the effective implementation of SBM.

First, there was unanimity among the districts that the vagueness and lack of specificity in the state's regulations led to confusion and misinterpretations on the part of the school management teams as to their roles and responsibilities. This they pointed out was further exacerbated by the ongoing changes to the guidelines that occurred annually. A second related concern dealt with the issues of competing power and authority in the areas of school operations and curriculum. Prior to the most current form of the regulations there were no statements by the DOE clarifying the overall roles and responsibilities of the building principal. This resulted in the school management teams erroneously assuming that they were responsible for operational issues within their local schools. A compounding factor contributing to the position of the principal vis-a-vis the teams was the leadership skills of some principals. District representatives noted that in schools led by weak principals, the school management teams emerged as centers of power. Respondents cited examples of situations in which these principals had abdicated their responsibilities to the Teams, and in so doing were sometimes unaware of critical decisions made by the teams.

The importance of properly clarifying the role of the principal in decentralized structures has been underscored in some of the literature. According to Meadows (1990) one of the essential problems with some forms of school-based management is that the group makes

the decision but the leader or principal alone is accountable. Research has demonstrated that principal leadership plays an important role in the successful devolution of authority. For example, Leithwood et.al (1999) found that principal leadership is quite central to teams that have the greatest influence on school practices. According to the Leithwood study, the principal's role is both symbolic and instrumental. Leithwood noted that school-based management tended to have a greater impact in schools in which principals facilitated the development of the teams, helped to focus the teams' activities on educationally substantive issues and engaged in a shared or distributive leadership role with the teams, than in schools in which the reverse was true.

The second area of contestation occurred over matters of curriculum. In this arena, central office curriculum staff was pitted against the school management teams. According to the regulations, the school management teams have considerable responsibilities for ensuring that the curriculum in their buildings as well as instruction is aligned to the core content standards. However as the districts noted, these curricular issues were previously resolved at the central office level in response to the state's adoption of the Core Curriculum Content Standards (which predated the most recent Abbott rulings). However, there was uncertainty among the teams about the relationship between the enacted curriculum based upon the district's aligned curricular frameworks on the one hand, and their responsibility for curriculum in their schools on the other. The confusion experienced by the teams with regards to their roles and responsibilities for curricular and instructional matters was perceived to be further compounded by the inability of the SRI teams to provide clear directions and meaningful guidance to the resolution of these issues.

As discussed earlier concerns about the effectiveness of the School Review and Improvement Teams have been expressed by not only the teams, but central office personnel and superintendents as well. Apart from the many issues that were previously mentioned, one extremely problematic area for the districts, which surfaced in the interviews with the superintendents, is the SRIs review of transfers. The guidelines state that any request for transfers must have the approval of the SRI teams. Superintendents complained that this process has not worked efficiently, and that the slow response of the SRI teams has created bottlenecks within their organizations.

Yet in spite of these difficulties, all the districts concurred that their school management teams have demonstrated commitment and diligence in their efforts to develop quality implementation plans. Most of the districts indicated that their local teachers unions have been instrumental in helping the reform process. However, as the districts observed, the rushed timetables for decision-making, the inconsistencies and poor guidelines emanating from the DOE and the ineffectual role of the School Review and Improvement Teams have all served to undermine the successful devolution of authority to the local school sites.

Discussion and Conclusions

The findings in this study raise a number of policy concerns regarding how authority gets devolved from central to local structures. The first is the apparent tension between policy statements developed by state elites and the environments, which they seek to influence. The regulations regarding membership composition created two sets of problems for the schools. First, the regulations made it clear, that no community member employed by a

school district could serve on a school management team in the capacity of either a parent or community representative. However, in districts, in which the public education sector tends to play a significant role in the employment of local residents, this regulation meant that a substantial section of the community would be excluded from serving on these teams. Second, the regulations stipulated that no one group of stakeholder could constitute a majority on the teams. However, if schools are precluded from recruiting memberships from significant pockets within their communities, then the goal of attaining balanced representation is difficult to attain. Indeed, the study found, that in effect, among the teams studied, there was regression towards a teacher-dominated form of school-based management. The preclusion of important “community voices” on these teams resulted in less than favorable outcomes. As noted, teams without adequate community representation were less likely to explore alternatives before arriving at decisions, and more prone to the intrusion of narrow individual interests over group goal. In democratic situations, broad based participation allows for the expression of different viewpoints thus increasing the likelihood of informed decisions being made.

Policies that do not have as an important corollary, the building of capacity among local actors are likely to encounter difficulties during implementation. Moving from centralized to decentralized structures imply that at some point during the process, those to whom power is being devolved, will develop the necessary prerequisite skills that will allow them to effectively develop and execute decisions. The present study found, that teams lacked the experience, knowledge, and skills, and were not provided with adequate training that would have allowed them to make effective decisions. Furthermore, in the case of the first cohort of schools, the strict timelines imposed by the state on these schools to arrive at important decisions regarding their schools instructional programming resulted in decisions that were authoritatively rather than democratically made. In some cases, these schools' implementation plans were summarily rejected by State elites (Walker, 2001; Walker & Gutmore, 2000).

More importantly, when authority is being shifted or redistributed among various power sites, it is important that the spheres of responsibility be thoroughly clarified. In the New Jersey case, no clear delineation of the roles and responsibilities of the teams, building principals, central offices, and local school boards were made. This led to contestation over areas of responsibilities. In addition to clarifying roles, questions as to how the time of teams can be constructively and efficiently used to bring about educational improvement in their communities ought to be fully explored. When teams lack the capacity to effectively govern, and when there is contestation over spheres of influence circumscribing the boundaries of each group's responsibilities is necessary. In the case of the current study, it is felt that the roles and responsibilities of the school management teams ought to be more circumscribed by state policy. The regulations give the teams a broad set of responsibilities that cover most of the processes inhering in teaching and learning as well as the management of their schools. However, as was seen, not only do the teams lack the knowledge and experience to fulfill some of these tasks, but neither are they comfortable in carrying out some of these functions. Further, the rushed timetables for making decisions have made it impossible for the teams to engage in quality planning.

When policies that seek to promote increased school responsibility for decision-making include as a precondition the ability of state elites to approve or disapprove decisions that are made by democratically constituted teams, these policies in effect undermine the very

principles on which the concept of decentralization is premised. As was seen in the case of New Jersey, in reality what has occurred is an intensification and consolidation of power at the state level. In this case, the school systems do not enjoy genuine autonomy, and in reality have only limited discretion over the reforms. Thus, decentralization in the Abbott districts has come to function as Ball describes it as a ' mechanism for delivering reform rather than a vehicle for institutional initiative and innovation' (Ball, 1993:76). Clearly, a deconstruction of decentralization within the New Jersey context, unmasks the apparent contradictions in the policy governing whole school reform through participatory decision- making. This is borne out not only by the data provided in this study, but the continuous challenges that have been made to the manner in which the Department of Education has reacted to decisions made at the local site (See Walker & Gutmore, 2000).

Ball (1993) and Smyth (1993) have both suggested that state elites and other interest groups may push for decentralization motivated more by protecting their self-interests than any deep-seated belief in social democratic principles. In such instances, communities unwittingly grant these groups legitimacy. By assuming responsibility for implementing poor policies, parents, teachers and the community buffer state elites from any adverse consequences caused by such policies. State elites are thus able to avoid their social responsibilities under the guise of decentralization. Moreover, as Miron (1996) suggests, one of the unanticipated outcomes of decentralization, is the reinforcement of calls by economic elites for market-based solutions to the problem of urban education. Thus, with the failure of decentralization the case for privatizing public education can be more forcibly made. The issues, which have surfaced in this paper if not addressed substantively at the policy-making level, do not augur favorably for empowering local communities to assist in rebuilding their educational institutions.

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