

Partnership with Key Stakeholders: Lessons Learned from the Thai Experiences

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The origins of Thai Schools began within the palace and the temples. Most of the early government schools were founded to train future government officials and courtiers. The temples, on the other hand, provided alternative education for the general public.

Over the years, the key stakeholders have expanded to include the following;

1. Religious leaders. Buddhist temples continued to play important roles in the Thai education system. Over 30 percent of the schools are situated within the temple grounds. More than 50 percent of the Thai schools receive financial supports from or through the temples. A popular practice is to make merits to the schools through the temples. Most schools benefit from religious teaching by the monks in nearby temples. One of the most effective anti-drug programmes for youth has been religious training camps organized by trained monks.

Other religious leaders have also been key supporters for education. Over 120 private religious schools in the South serving nearly 100,000 students are run by Muslim religious leaders. Around 80 private schools belong to the Catholic or Protestant Churches.

2. Community leaders. A large majority of rural schools were founded from the initiatives and the supports of local leaders. Generally, they provided the land and the first few buildings as well as lobbied the government for supports. In the past, once the schools had been formally established, the roles of community leaders gradually diminished to providing mainly financial supports and resources.

With the emerging trends towards community participation and the policy towards decentralization, however, community leaders have been more actively involved in school management. All the school boards are now required to appoint representatives from the community leaders as members.

The participation of community leaders, however, is not limited to board members or official matters. They help to enrich the learning and teaching processes with local wisdom, seek outside supports for the school, recruit students, serve as a buffer between the parents and the

schools, look after the welfare of the students and monitor the overall management of the school.

3. Alumni Associations. For long established schools, the alumni associations serve as powerful supporters. They provide funds as well as technical assistance to both the teachers and the students. In many cases, the associations influence the policies of the schools as well as the selections of the school principals, help to screen applicants to the schools, and serve as watchdogs for any changes impinging on the schools. One such powerful alumni association is the Suan Kularp Alumni Association which include 7 prime ministers. Through their nationwide network, they provide scholarships and help to subsidize a large number of extracurricular activities and academic programmes for students of the main school as well as the associated schools.

Alumni also return to help the schools individually or in small groups. Most of the schools marching bands, dance performance, cheer leading activities, and camps rely on alumni as trainers. Some university students also organize tutorial courses for secondary school graduates in their home towns.

4. The Parent and Teacher Association. Many secondary schools set up Parent and Teacher Association (PTA) to provide channels of communications between various stakeholders and the school leaderships. Over the years, the associations further serve as supporting bodies to provide more flexible mechanisms for soliciting funds and undertaking activities that may be restricted by the rigid government regulations.

5. School Committees. Since 1980, all primary schools are required to set up school committees to perform advisory functions. In 2000 all schools are required by the Education Act of 1999 to appoint school committee consisting of representatives from the parents, teachers, local government, community leaders, alumni and experts. One-third of the committee is required by regulation to be women. The committees are advisory in nature but they perform important functions such as approving the school development and financial plans as well as the curriculum. The present activities of the school committees are considered to be in the pilot phase. With the formation of the new Ministry, the present regulations which govern the selection process, the responsibilities and the operation of the committees will be revised, possibly with more authority entrusted to the committees.

6. Parent Network. An important development in secondary school within the past few years has been the establishment of parent networks to complement the more formal Parent and Teacher Associations. With the initiatives of the schools, the parents organize themselves into informal groups to meet regularly. Initially, their roles concentrate on assisting the schools to improve the learning and teaching

process by providing resources, funds, contacts or their own professional services. Presently, their activities have been expanded to student welfare and protection. There are some clear indications that soon the parent networks will seek to take even more active roles in school management or even appointment of school principals.

In 2001, in cooperation on with the Department of Mental Health, the Department of General Education set up a student counseling and assistance programmes in all schools. In such a scheme, the schools are required to assign every teacher to serve as advisor to the students in a ratio not exceeding 1:25. The advisor/teacher will meet regularly with the advisees in “homeroom” session. Moreover, the advisor will visit the students’ homes and invite the parents to come to classroom meeting every semester. The scheme has been highly successful in transforming the relationships among the teachers, the students and the parents.

In the cities, parents classroom meeting have led to the expansion of the parent networks. In the rural areas, however, home visits are more popular and have led to the formation of parent networks at the village level to help looking after the students outside the schools. Some schools even take the initiatives to organize mobile tutorial sessions into the village to teach students with learning disabilities and to help parents in assisting their children to do their homework.

7. Local government. According to the decentralization law of 1999, most of the government service functions including education will be gradually decentralized to local government within the year 2009. To be eligible for transfer of school ownership, however, the local government will have to pass assessment criteria in terms of capability and willingness to manage the schools. Due to the objections from certain teachers groups, some special schools will be exempted. The budget previously allocated through the various ministries will be channeled to local government, beginning with 20% in 2001 to 35% in 2006. Local governments also have representatives on the school committees.

Consequently, the relationships between the schools and the local government have gradually transformed. At present, local governments have helped to finance a variety of activities undertaken by the schools such as sports events, scholarships, construction of buildings and sports facilities and tutorial courses.

8. School leadership and Teachers. In the past, the authority within the primary schools rest with the community or the district and the provincial offices while the authority within the secondary school belongs mostly to the school principals. The teachers generally were not involved in management and tended to work individually, concerning mainly on the learning and teaching process.

With the new educational reform policies where participatory management and integration of disciplines are emphasized, the teachers are encouraged to work in teams. Various committees are formed to provide opportunities for teachers to share experiences and to participate in the management of the schools.

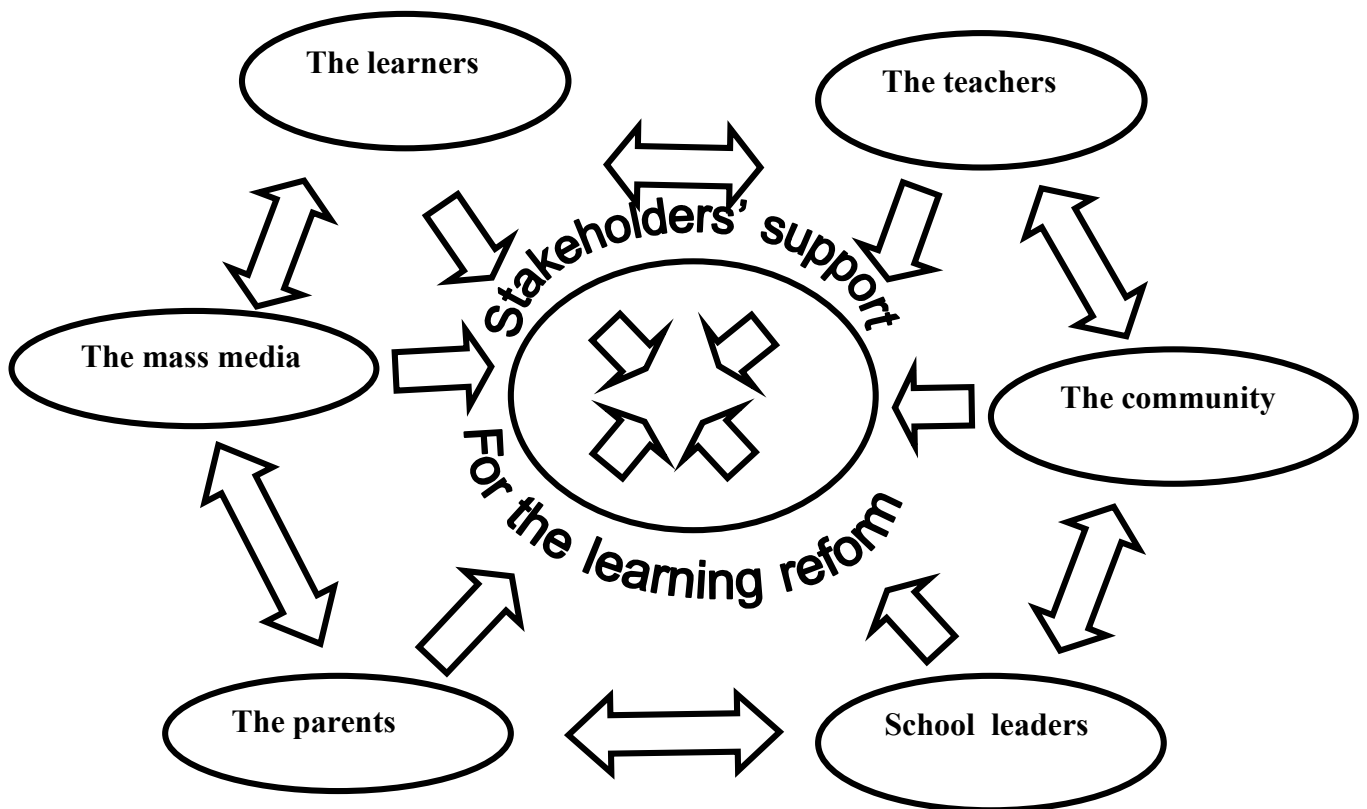
9. Students. Most secondary schools have long encouraged the formation of student councils. In the past, their roles and responsibilities have focused mainly on serving as the links between the school management and the student body and on assisting in the implementation of the school's policies and activities. With the renewed concern for student centered educational approaches, there have been increasingly recognition for the needs to listen to the voices and opinion of the students as individuals and as groups.

Various mechanisms have been set up to provide the opportunity for the students to express their opinions on various issues. They include workshops and roundtables at national, provincial, district, and school levels, youth camps, training of young reporters and setting up of youth newscenters, regular television programmes entitled "The Voice of the Future" and the use of e-mail of communication within the schools. It must be noted that the widespread use of e-mail and mobile telephone further increase the access of the students, views to policy makers beyond the schools.

In 2001, the Department of General Education organized a nationwide training workshop to train students leaders to become aware of the new roles and responsibilities in representing the interests and the concerns of fellow students, to be able to manage students' organizations effectively and to incorporate the concept of good governance in their work. The network of students leaders have been most effective in creating awareness both among the students themselves and the school management in giving more weights to the concerns of the students and in transforming students organization from management centered organization to student centered organizations.

Example from a school

At the field level, the roles and responsibilities of the key partners will differ from place to place. The example provided below illustrates how Suratani School in the South tries to promote the new partnerships on learning reform. The school identifies the key stakeholders as follows



School management is responsible for collaborating with the students and the teachers in organizing the learning process, in supporting learner centered learning activities, and in incorporating the outcomes from learning assessment in setting up development policies.

The parents are responsible for collaborating with the teachers and the schools in the education of their children, in supporting the learning process and in providing the necessary supports to their children.

The learners are responsible for identifying their own learning needs, striving to learn to the best of their abilities, applying learning acquired in schools to their own lives outside the schools.

The teachers are responsible for getting to know their students individually, organizing the learning activities that are relevant to the interests and the potentials of the learners, facilitating the learning process of the students and encouraging learner participation.

The community is responsible for providing learning resources.

The mass media is responsible for promoting better understanding about the new learning process to the learners, teachers, parents and the community.

Problems and Obstacles

While it is possible to visualize the new partnerships in principle but in practice there are many problems and obstacles to be tackled, some of which are described as follows;

1. The long tradition of government controlled and top down management of the schools impede active participation from other stakeholders. The schools are seen as the black box inaccessible to outsiders.

2. The burdens of the parents and their feelings of inferiority in dealing with academic and technical issues.

3. Government's reputations which give full authority to school directors or to the provincial office.

4. Short-term collaboration based on personal relationships rather than long term partnership, resulting in disruption of collaboration or conflicts with the changes of school leaderships.

5. Conflicts of interests (financial, political, personal) impinging on the participation.

6. Inadequate preparation of those involved for meaningful participation.

In order to deal with these problems, the following measures have been found to be effective.

1. Clear government policy towards participatory management, inclusion of participatory management indicators in quality and standards assessments and exemplary conducts of key leadership at all levels.

2. Greater decentralization of authority in management, finance, personnel and technical matters from national offices, provincial offices and school directors to school committees as the parent network and student organizations to work alongside the more formal organizations.

4. Support of teacher networks, club and working committees within the schools, the school districts and within the provinces.

5. Block allocation of budget to the schools to be used under the scrutiny of the school committees.

6. Training programs to help school leadership to make transition to more participatory school management and to equip key representatives from stakeholders to undertake new responsibilities, provision of venue for sharing of experiences and voicing opinions, are concrete opportunity for various stakeholders to work together and to build up alliances.

Experiences in the past few years have brought about more collaboration in school development and closer relationships among the stakeholders which would in turn lead to more effective partnerships.