

# **SCHOOL-BASED MANAGEMENT AND ITS POTENTIAL TO ENHANCE DECENTRALIZATION IN EDUCATION**

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This is an important conference. It is likely to be the largest international conference on school-based management ever conducted, with policy makers, researchers and practitioners from 27 nations sharing experience that in some instances extends over three decades or more.

It is appropriate that it is conducted in Bangkok in Thailand, where the National Education Act of 1999 provides a framework for one of the most comprehensive reforms in the centralization and decentralization of education to be undertaken in any nation in recent times. Those from other nations who have been invited to contribute will join colleagues from Thailand in acknowledging the leadership of Dr Rung Kaewdang, Secretary-General of the National Education Council, not only for his role in shaping these reforms, but also in the organisation of events such as this forum that seek to build a research foundation for education policy in the Asia Pacific.

## **An international perspective: promise and pitfall**

We bring to this forum many different conceptions of school-based management, which has different meanings and has been implemented in different ways and for different reasons and at different rates in our respective nations. Even the more fundamental concepts of 'school' and 'management' are different, as are the different cultures and values that underpin the efforts of policy makers and practitioners. The uniqueness of each setting must be acknowledged in every case study, and that is certainly true in the case of Thailand, with its very special history in education and its current aspirations for success in an era of globalisation, with policy and practice shaped by Thai culture and Buddhist values. The film that opened this forum referred in its opening frames to three aims of education in this country, namely, the pursuit of competence, virtue and happiness. This is arguably a unique set among nations represented here.

It is one of the strengths of this forum that there are so many case studies from different nations, but we should be mindful that many of the lessons from our different national experiences cannot be applied in other settings. It is also one of the pitfalls of an inaugural keynote address that draws on experience in many nations. In my case, this experience of school-based management now exceeds 25 years, with professional assignments of one kind or another related to the theme in more than 20 countries on six continents. It may be that all I can do is to identify what is the common ground in terms of nature, objectives, processes, critical concerns and outcomes. Marking out this common ground is the primary purpose of this address.

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## **Propositions and themes**

Twenty propositions are drawn from this common ground. These are organised in nine themes: definition of school-based management, scope and scale of the practice, related theory of centralization and decentralization, driving forces for school-based management, impact on learning, impact at the centre, models for resource allocation, capacity building, re-focusing the concept to highlight leadership and learning.

### *Definition of school-based management*

1. School-based management in a system of public education is the systematic and consistent decentralization to the school level of authority and responsibility to make decisions on significant matters related to school operations within a centrally determined framework of goals, policies, curriculum, standards and accountabilities.
2. While the term ‘school-based management’ has international currency, the practice has different names in different settings, including self-management and local management.

### *Scope and scale*

3. Systems differ in the scope of the ‘significant matters related to school operations’ for which decisions have been decentralized and the scope and specificity of the ‘centrally-determined framework of goals, policies, curriculum, standards and accountabilities’.
4. School-based management has been evident in policy and practice for more than three decades to the point that there are now few nations that have not moved down this track. Indeed, by the turn of the century, there seemed to be three major tracks for change in public education: the building of systems of self-managing schools, an unrelenting focus on learning outcomes, and the creation of schools for a knowledge society and global economy.

### *Theory of centralization and decentralization*

5. In theory and in practice, centralization and decentralization are in tension, with centralization indicated when the values of control, uniformity and efficiency are in ascendance, and decentralisation indicated when freedom, differentiation, and responsiveness are preferred. Whether centralization or decentralization is better if innovation is sought is uncertain. The challenge is to achieve a balance of centralization and decentralization, depending on what values are preferred or are required and the capacities of people at different levels to carry out their respective functions.
6. Some practices are similar to but are conceptually different to decentralization. Notable among these are déconcentration and dispersion that involve moving people who previously worked at a central location, such as a capital city, to another location, such as a region or a province or a city, closer to the action. Under these arrangements, power, authority, responsibility and influence can

remain just as centralized as before. The advantages of déconcentration and dispersion may lie in control in the gathering of intelligence about conditions in the field and efficiency in direction and support to schools.

#### *Driving forces for school-based management*

7. Driving forces for school-based management are varied and include demand for less control and uniformity and associated demand for greater freedom and differentiation, interest in reducing the size and therefore cost of maintaining a large central bureaucracy, commitment to empowerment of the community, and desire to achieve higher levels of professionalism at the school level.
8. School-based management has been contentious because different driving forces have shaped policy and these have often reflected or have been alleged to reflect political preference or ideological orientation. School-based management that has been driven by concern for empowerment of the community and enhancement of the profession has often been associated with governments of the left. School-based management that has been driven by an interest in greater freedom or more differentiation has often been associated with governments of the right, with school-based management sometimes seen as a manifestation of efforts to create a market among schools in systems of public education.
9. In the final analysis, even though other driving forces may have been at work, a critical criterion for judging the effectiveness of reform that includes school-based management is the extent to which it leads to or is associated with the achievement of improved educational outcomes, including higher levels of student achievement, however measured. In recent times, there has been an alignment of views that a primary purpose for school-based management is the improvement of educational outcomes and, for this reason, most governments have included it in their policies for educational reform. It is becoming less contentious.

#### *Impact on learning*

10. For much of the three decades of experience with the approach, there has been little evidence that school-based management has had either a direct or indirect effect on educational outcomes. Critics have frequently seized on this finding. However, much of the early research was drawing on information or opinion from systems where impact on outcomes was never a primary or even a secondary purpose. This was particularly the case when school-based management was implemented as a strategy for dismantling large, costly and unresponsive central bureaucracies or as a strategy to empower the community and the professional. Even when impact on outcomes became a primary purpose it was difficult to draw conclusions on impact because of the weak database on student achievement.
11. A review of such research suggests that there have been three generations of studies and it is only in the third that evidence of impact on outcomes has emerged, and then only when certain conditions are fulfilled. The first

generation was in times when impact on outcomes was not a primary or even secondary purpose. The second generation was when such purposes may have been to the fore but the database was weak. The third, emerging in the late 1990s and gathering momentum in the early 2000s, coincides with a pre-eminent concern for learning outcomes and the development of a strong database.

12. Internationally, many of the most constrained approaches to school-based management that have also yielded little evidence of impact on learning have been long-standing practices in western nations, and many of the more broadly-based approaches that have yielded early evidence of impact are in developing nations. I was privileged to observe this at first hand in Indonesia about two years ago when I was invited to serve as international evaluator of a pilot project in three provinces funded by UNESCO, UNICEF and the Government of Indonesia. The project was known as 'Creating learning communities for children'. School-based management was just one of four strategies: (1) providing each of the 79 schools with a small budget, (2) conducting professional development programs for teachers on new approaches to curriculum and teaching, (3) engaging in community development to encourage parents to support their schools, and (4) to re-invigorate the school experience for students, or expressing it more bluntly, to make it worthwhile for them to come to school, in an initiative known as 'Active Joyful Effective Learning' (AJEL). Dramatic improvements were evident within 12 months, notably in rates of attendance and in test results.
13. Recent case study research has shown the direct and indirect links between school-based management and learning outcomes. These have highlighted the importance of local decision-making being pre-eminently concerned with learning and teaching and the support of learning and teaching, especially in building the capacity of staff to design and deliver a curriculum and pedagogy that meets the needs of students, taking account of priorities in the local setting, including a capacity to identify needs and monitor outcomes. Also evident is the building of the capacity of the community to support the efforts of schools. Expressed another way, the introduction of school-based management may have no impact on learning unless these measures, broadly described as capacity building and capacity utilisation, have been successful.
14. At a macro-level, international studies of student achievement such as TIMSS and TIMSS-R and PISA and PISA+ have confirmed the importance of a balance of centralization and decentralization, with a relatively high level of school-based management being one element of decentralization, including local decision-making on matters concerned with personnel, professionalism, monitoring of outcomes, and the building of community support. These reflect the importance of intellectual capital and social capital in building a system of self-managing schools. The building of intellectual capital is an instance of capacity building, considered in more detail in proposition 19. Social capital refers to the building of mutually supportive relationships among school, home, community, church, business and industry and other agencies in the public and private sectors. The notion of social capital was illustrated in the film that opened the forum in the reference to the partnership of home, school

and temple in education in Thailand. It was also captured in the memorable reference to the ‘local wisdom teacher’ in a rural school in Thailand, being a senior citizen who shared her knowledge and wisdom with students.

15. Experience suggests that, no matter how strong the strategic intention, it will take many years for a shift in the balance of centralization and decentralization in favour of the latter to have impact on outcomes. It is one thing to pass legislation shifting power, authority, responsibility and influence from one level to another – such a shift is a change in structure. It is another thing to build capacity to have the desired impact on learning and to change the culture at all levels.

#### *Impact at the centre*

16. The change in culture that is required at the centre is just as powerful as the change in culture that is required in schools. While an initiative in school-based management is usually an initiative of government and the most senior leaders in a school system, personnel at the centre frequently resist the change, for they perceive and indeed experience a loss of power, authority, responsibility and influence. Forces that may drive a return to centralization may soon appear. This need not occur if there is appreciation that the change may call for an increase in power, authority, responsibility and influence in matters related to the centrally-determined framework of goals, policies, curriculum, standards and accountabilities. There remains a need to provide strong support for schools, and this is often best done at the regional or district level through déconcentration and dispersion of non-school based personnel. Building capacity at the centre to do these things well is just as important as building capacity at the school level. There is an important role for what are known in some countries as ‘schools of government’, as illustrated in the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, for senior staff at the central level of a school system.

#### *Models for resource allocation*

17. An important feature of school-based management in most school systems is the decentralization of budget to the school level. The argument in favour is that responding to the unique mix of student learning needs at the school level calls for a unique mix of resources of all kinds, and that it is no longer possible for such a mix to be determined at the centre, whether it be for the standard allocation of staff or the determination of how money should be spent on supplies, equipment and services. Some school systems have decentralized to the school level decisions related to the allocation of more than 90 per cent of the state budget for public school education. The challenge under these circumstances is to design an appropriate resource allocation model that will distribute resources in a fair and transparent way, ensuring that schools have a ‘global budget’ that enables them to resource efforts to meet the unique mix of local learning needs. This task may take several years, with continual refinement on the basis of experience and changes in policy. A resource allocation model usually takes account of the number of students, level of

schooling, special education needs, and the location of the school. There is considerable experience in several nations in doing this work.

### *Capacity building*

18. Capacity building at the local level is a key theme in successful experience of school-based management. For teachers, this has taken the form of professional development that deals with such topics as needs assessment, curriculum design, research-based pedagogy, and continuous monitoring. For principals and other leaders at the school level, these topics are also relevant, but others are essential, including strategic leadership, human resource management, policy making, planning, resource allocation, community building and boundary spanning – between schools and other organisations in the private and public sectors that can support the work of schools including those in health. Building these capacities is important for creating what some have called a ‘new professionalism’ in education that is research-based, data-oriented, team-focused and outcomes-driven. In these respects, the education profession is taking on the characteristics of the medical profession, where continuous lifelong learning is an expectation and a pre-condition for accreditation and re-accreditation.
19. These needs give rise to the new field of knowledge management in schools. This refers to building the intellectual capital of the school, and involves the creation, dissemination and utilisation of professional knowledge that takes account of a rapidly expanding knowledge base, and the need for access to that base in a timely and easily understandable manner. Extensive use of information and communications technology and the design of an intranet at the school level will aid the effort. Postgraduate programs in knowledge management are now emerging to take their place with programs in human resource development, financial management, curriculum and pedagogy. Universities have an important role in building capacity and undertaking research on the processes and outcomes of school-based management. These are best conceived as partnerships with schools and school systems. Also important are national initiatives such as the National College for School Leadership in the United Kingdom.

### *Re-focusing the concept*

20. Taking all things into account, it is unfortunate that the concept of school-based management is still in vogue. First, because it is associated with a constrained set of practices that were not designed – although they may have been assumed – to have an impact on learning, when evidence suggested that their impact was minimal. Second, because once implemented across all schools and institutionalised, the term no longer has currency. This state has been reached in places like England and Victoria, Australia where the terms local management of schools and self-managing schools, respectively, are rarely used. Third, and extending the first and second reasons, the essence of the approach has more to do with leadership and learning than it has to do with management.

## **The way forward**

These themes summarise the common ground in school-based management in an increasing number of nations over the last three decades. There are differences in design and delivery in the various settings and that is the value of forums such as this that provide a rich range of case studies.

There will be a further opportunity for nations in the Asia Pacific to share their experiences in a recently approved project in 'best practice' education governance in APEC nations. It is expected that most members will contribute case studies of governance at all levels in a process that will culminate in an important APEC conference in Australia in 2004. It is fitting to draw attention to this project, given that Thailand is hosting the meeting of leaders of APEC in October. I hope that those contributing to this forum take up the opportunity to share their achievements in this broader context. The outcome may be instrumental in enhancing the educational experience for all students in each of our nations and, in the case of Thailand if not in all nations represented here, to achieve the aims highlighted earlier of 'competence, virtue and happiness'.

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