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None of Us Are as Smart as All of Us: Site Based Decision Making

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The old Japanese Proverb states, "None of us are as smart as all of us." In recent years, the educational system in the United States has been evolving from a largely centralized decision-making structure to a more decentralized one. This shift to school-based management requires fundamental changes to the organizational structure of the district as well as the roles within the organization. From administrators to parents, school based management demands a change in the "status quo" (Cotton, 1991). It involves shifting decision making from the central office administrators to that of local schools (Henkin, Cistone and Dee, 1999).

School based management is referred to in the literature by a variety of terms such as decentralization, restructuring, site-based management, school-based management, participatory decision-making, and school-based autonomy. Irrespective of the term used the school takes center stage (Cotton, 1991). Numerous benefits have been identified with school based management including: improving student achievement (Mojkowski and Fleming, 1998), creating new leadership (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1992), improving, changing or modifying the curriculum (David, 1989), and redirecting resources to support goals developed by the local school community (Myers and Stonehill, 1993).

The problem attributed to centralized educational systems is that they do not produce the desired outcomes because they tend to be impersonal and slow moving. Centralized systems often result in inertia, pessimism, inefficiency, cynicism, and long delays in decisions making. In addition, centralized structures often fail to inspire in school personnel the prerequisite attitudes and behaviors for bringing about educational improvements (Cotton, 1992).

Cotton (1992) identified the following reasons for implementing school-based management:

1. The school is the primary unit of change.
2. Those who work directly with students have the most informed and credible opinions as to what educational arrangements will be most beneficial to those students.
3. The local schools are in the best position to sustain improvement efforts over time.
4. The school principal is a key figure in school improvement.
5. The participation by staff and community in project planning and implementation facilitates significant change.
6. A system of school-based management supports the professionalization of the teaching field and vice versa, which can lead to more desirable schooling outcomes.
7. The structures of school based management keep the focus of schooling where it belongs-on achievement and other student outcomes.
8. The alignment between budgets and instructional priorities improves under school-based management. (p.4)

School based management has almost as many variants as there are places claiming to be "site-based." Schools' plans often differ on every important aspect: who initiates it, who is involved, what they control, and whether they are accountable to an outside authority. In addition to the overwhelming number of variants, the composition of site based decision-making committees also varies tremendously. Teachers, parents, and the principal are often joined by classified staff, community members, students, and business representatives.

The implementation of school-based management has resulted in significant changes in the roles and responsibilities of the principal. No longer is the principal the sole authority on the campus and the arbiter of every decision. Principals who utilize school-based management have found that to be successful in this environment they need to work with others and be able to

delegate decisions. Furthermore, principals need to possess strong interpersonal and human relation skills and continuously reflect on their own performance as it relates to the new roles and responsibilities in school-based management (Cranston, 2002). Principals with the aforementioned characteristics lead by sharing information, providing expertise, promoting a sense of security, and by facilitating the transition toward collective action of accomplishing common goals for the students of the school. These changes bring about a more effective leader, which translates into a more successful learning environment and improved student achievement.

Methodology

This descriptive research study surveyed teachers and administrators in 40 public schools serving students in grades PK-12. Survey research is an appropriate method to collect information that cannot be directly observed (Babbie, 1990). The survey was designed to examine the perception of site-based decision making as experienced by classroom teacher (both members and nonmembers of committees), community members who serve on site based committees, and campus administrators in 35 public schools in northeast Texas.

Instrumentation. Three surveys were designed to elicit feedback on the perceptions of various stakeholders on site-based decision-making. The first survey addressed the issue of site-based decision making from the perspective of the administrator. The second survey addressed the issue of site-based decision making from the perception of site-based committee members. The final survey addressed the issue of site-based decision making from the point of view of teachers on the campuses who were not members of the site-based committee. Each survey was aligned with state requirements for implementation of site-based committees, however each survey also included questions that were specific to the perception of the identified respondents.

Questions on all surveys used five categories for answer responses: Strongly Agree, Agree, No Opinion, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree.

Surveys were validated using a peer review process that addressed both face validity and content validity. Three former school administrators independently reviewed each survey. Suggested revisions were incorporated in the final survey. Convenience sampling was used, however the 35 participating schools included elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools from each of the state rating categories of exemplary, recognized, academically acceptable, and academically unacceptable.

Procedures and response rate: All surveys were distributed during the first month of the spring semester. Eight hundred surveys were distributed to all administrators, faculty, and site-based committee members on the 35 campuses surveyed. Six hundred fifty-five surveys were returned. This return rate of 81% is considered adequate for this type of research (Portney & Watkins, 2000). Surveys were reviewed by the research team and analyzed using SPSS software.

Findings

The following findings were determined through data analysis and are presented by research question explored.

Research Question 1. Is there alignment between statutory requirements for site-based committees and the implementation of these requirements at the campus level as perceived by campus administrators, faculty, and site-based committee members?

This question was addressed through the surveys distributed to campus administrators and current site-based committee members. Fifty-three campus administrators and 163 current members of a site-based committee responded. The survey addressed four areas related to statutory requirements: Policies and Procedures, Committee Representation, Campus

Improvement Plan (CIP) and Role in Decision-Making. The policies and procedures and the CIP are specific documents required by state statute. The committee representation and the role in decision making are also addressed in state statute but do not have documentation required. Thus, the policies and procedures along with the Campus Improvement plan may be viewed as evidence the school is following the letter of the law while the committee representation and role in decision-making reflect the school's commitment to the spirit of the law.

Table 1 examines the existence of policy pertaining to site-based decision making in the surveyed schools.

Table 1

Policy and Procedure

Question	Percentage who Agree or Strongly Agree
Current policies and procedures are maintained for effective SBDM	94.3%
District has policies and procedures that establish campus-level SBDM committees	94.3%

Table 2 summarizes the data collected on the level of participation that the site-based decision-making team has on the Campus Improvement Plan.

Table 2

Campus Improvement Plan

Question	Percentage of Committee Members who Agree or Strongly Agree
SBDM provides advice and input in revising the campus improvement plan	84.5%
SBDM provides annual input in annually evaluating the campus performance	77.3%
SBDM is involved in decisions regarding campus performance objectives	79.4%
SBDM is involved in decisions regarding the development of performance objectives	79.4%

Table 3 provides information on the actual make-up of the site-based decision-making team in each of the participant schools.

Table 3

Committee Representation

Question	Percentage of Committee Members who Agree or Strongly Agree
SBDM includes adequate parent representation	79.1%
SBDM includes adequate community representation	77.3%
SBDM includes adequate business representation	67.5%
SBDM includes adequate student representation	17.5%
SBDM includes adequate classroom teacher representation	94.4%
SBDM members are reflective of the community's diversity	58.9%

Table 4 provides data into the decision-making role that each site-based decision-making team played in the school.

Table 4

Role in Decision Making

Question	Percentage of Committee Members who Agree or Strongly Agree
SBDM is involved in decisions regarding the development of the campus budget	47.1%
SBDM is involved in decisions regarding the development of the campus curriculum	62.3%
SBDM is involved in decisions regarding the development of the campus staffing patterns	47.7%
SBDM is involved in decisions regarding the development of the campus staff development	60.6%
SBDM is involved in decisions regarding the review and revision of the campus organizational structure	52.3%

Administrators and campus leaders who participated in this study indicate the site-based committee has clear policies and procedures in place, works to develop a campus improvement plan and has representation from teachers, parents and the community. However, when asked about the committee's involvement in decisions that directly relate to the campus, only about half

the administrators and school leaders felt the committee was involved. Thus, in areas that are mandated by the state, developing the campus improvement plan, the committee is involved, but in decisions that impact the teaching/learning process the committee is much less likely to provide input. These essential decisions of how we distribute resources (campus budget), what we teach (curriculum), the culture within which we teach, (staff development) and how we organize are directly related to student outcomes.

Research Question 2. Do teachers assigned to exemplary or recognized campus have a more positive perception of SBDM than teachers on campuses rated academically acceptable or academically unacceptable? (See Appendix A for explanation of campus ratings).

The second research question was addressed through the surveys distributed to teachers who were not currently members of a site-based committee. The survey questions addressed the teachers' knowledge about the committee and their perception of the effectiveness of the committee. If as Hess (1995) suggests, shared decision-making is fundamental to school reform; it would seem to follow that teachers on the campus must be knowledgeable about the committee and its function and must also view the committee as both valuable and effective.

In the first table for this question (Table 5), the perception of teachers concerning site-based decision-making team decisions being used in the formulation of the campus improvement plan are presented by campus rating.

Table 5

The SBDM Decisions Are Used To Formulate the Goals Of The Campus Improvement Plan

Campus Rating	Percentage of Teachers Who Agree or Strongly Agree
Exemplary	87%
Recognized	75%
Academically Acceptable	68%
Academically Unacceptable	20%

Table 6 characterized the perception of teachers, not currently serving on a site-based decision-making team, concerning the effectiveness of site-based decision-making by campus rating.

Table 6

The SBDM Committee Is Effective and Working On My Campus

Campus Rating	Percentage of Teachers Who Agree or Strongly Agree
Exemplary	71%
Recognized	45%
Academically Acceptable	37%
Academically Unacceptable	40%

The final table (Table 7) presents the perception of teachers, not serving on a site-based decision-making team, thoughts on the existence of the site-based decision-making team by campus rating.

Table 7

The SBDM Committee Exists Because The Law Requires It, But Does Not Serve A Useful Campus Function.

Campus Rating	Percentage of Teachers Who Agree or Strongly Agree
Exemplary	13%
Recognized	25%
Academically Acceptable	37%
Academically Unacceptable	40%

This data suggests that learner outcomes and effective site-based decision-making may be related. Teachers in schools with an exemplary rating under the state rating system were more likely to feel the committee was working to formulate campus goals, work effectively and serve a useful function. More importantly, there was a pattern in that the higher the campus rating, the more likely teachers were to see value in the committee.

Implementation of Site-based Decision Making

The data presents a compelling argument that schools that are committed to utilizing site-based decision making tend to produce higher student achievement. However, just meeting the legal requirement of the law does not ensure increased academic success. According to David (1996) site based decision making committees that truly flourish in the school community tend to have a number of characteristics in common, most notably the following:

1. A well designed committee structure. In a well-structured system of site-based decision-making, there is a match between the types of decisions to be made and the most appropriate people to debate and resolve those issues.

2. An enabling leadership. Strong site based decision making committees are usually led, though not always chaired, by strong principals (and sometimes teachers) who exercise leadership by mobilizing others.
3. A focus on student learning. Strong site based decision making committees consciously connect non-instructional decisions with conditions that maximize learning opportunities.
4. A focus on adult learning. Site based decision-making committee members need new skills, assistance, and practice in asking hard questions and gathering evidence about what is and is not working. In addition, site based decision making committees need to appreciate that their constituencies—parents and educators—require access to new knowledge and skills, both to be active decision makers and to change their teaching and learning practices and beliefs.
6. A school-wide perspective. Site based decision-making committees focus on the collective interests of the parties, devoting their energy to school goals and direction, coordination and communication, and allocation of resources and equity. (p. 6-8)

Conclusion

Site-based committees are present in most schools surveyed in this study. In almost all of the schools, the "letter of the law" is being followed. Schools have policies and procedures in place, include teachers, parents and community members on the committee and have some level of involvement in the development of a campus improvement plan. However, almost half the schools in the study are not meeting the "spirit of the law" to create site-based teams that make essential decisions on the campus. However, when an effective committee is in place, schools were more likely to be rated exemplary or recognized. This trend may indicate a relationship

between effective campus decision-making and student achievement.

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