School–Based Decisionmaking

Since the release in 1983 of the National Commission on Excellence in Education report *A Nation at Risk,* there has been widespread call for education reform. The reform efforts of the 1980s and 1990s focused on organizational, curricular, and instructional changes necessary to improve the quality of education. Almost without exception, national reform reports advocated decentralization and enhanced teacher involvement in decision-making as a means of fostering necessary changes within school.

School-based decision-making is a concept based on the fundamental principle that individuals who are affected by the decision, possess expertise regarding the decision, and are responsible for implementing the decision, should be involved in making the decision. This concept often is attached to the broader school-system reform efforts of decentralization and school-based management (SBM), where decision-making authority is shifted from the district to the local school level. Some educators use the terms *shared decision-making* and *school-based management* interchangeably; others see shared decision-making as a component of SBM or decentralization. In general, the goal of school-based decision-making is to "empower school staff by providing authority, flexibility, and resources to solve the educational problems particular to their schools" (David, p. 52).

Key Elements

School-based decision-making rests on two well-established propositions:

1. The school is the primary decision-making unit; and its corollary; decisions should be made at the lowest possible level.
2. Change requires ownership that comes from the opportunity to participate in defining change and the flexibility to adapt it to individual circumstances; the corollary is that change does not result from externally imposed procedures. (David, p. 46)

These propositions recognize that those closest to the technical core in education systems, because of their access to information concerning students' diverse characteristics, needs, learning styles, and performance levels, are better positioned to make decisions about educational programs than those farther removed from the teaching and learning process. Thus, decisions concerning curricula, instructional technologies, and other school initiatives will be most effective and enduring when carried out by those who feel a sense of ownership and responsibility for those decisions.

For school-based decision-making to work, four key resources need to be present to develop the capacity to create high performance organizations:

1. *Knowledge and skills* in new instructional strategies; interpersonal, problem-solving, and decision skills for working together as a team; business knowledge for managing the organization, including budgeting and fiscal planning; and assessment strategies for analyzing, interpreting, and acting on school performance data.
2. *Information* about the performance of the organization, including student performance data, budgets, and demographic-trend data.
3. *Power and authority* to make decisions, especially in the areas of curriculum and instruction, staffing and personnel, and resource allocation and budgeting.
4. *Rewards* for high performance, including intrinsic and extrinsic rewards, such as salary adjustments, professional development opportunities, performance-based pay, group or team-based rewards, and public recognition for their accomplishments.

SCOPE OF DECISION-MAKING

In general, three areas of decision-making can be school based: budget, personnel, and curriculum. Regarding school finances, under school-based decision-making models, schools receive either a lumpsum budget or some portion of the district budget from which they may make decisions regarding personnel, equipment, materials, supplies, and professional development. Although budget authority implies a new level of autonomy, because personnel expenditures account for approximately 85 percent of the district budget and other fixed costs cover an additional 5 to 10 percent, few discretionary dollars actually remain for school-level allocation. Therefore, staffing expenditures and decisions regarding staffing structures and assignments are key to schools making decisions that might substantively affect the school's operation and effectiveness.

In terms of personnel decisions, schools are afforded flexibility and the power to determine how best to staff their schools. Personnel decisions typically fall in two areas: determining staffing needs based on the school's mission and educational plan and selecting people to fill the positions. Schools are afforded the latitude to decide whether their personnel funds are best spent on teachers, instructional aides, specialists, or clerical support. Once determinations are made regarding staffing needs, schools are actively engaged in the selection of new school personnel.

In the third decision area, decisions regarding the curriculum and instructional strategies are determined at the school level within a framework of district or state goals, while attending to the school's unique mission and needs. School-level personnel draw on their professional expertise and localized knowledge in making decisions that affect the school's educational program and instructional system. School personnel monitor the effectiveness of their programs and their students' academic performance. Decisions pertaining to budgeting, staffing, and the instructional program are often restricted and controlled, however, by district policies regarding matters such as class size, tenure, hiring, firing, assignment, curriculum initiatives, textbooks, and assessment procedures.

DECISION-MAKING STRUCTURES

To operationalize school-based decision-making, structures at the school level need to be implemented to facilitate the involvement of key stakeholders in the decision-making process. Schools embracing shared decision-making typically develop councils consisting of representative stakeholders in the school, such as teachers, parents, support personnel, and administrators. The school's governance structure is supported by guidelines that specify representation, terms of membership, council size, meeting format, and delineated lines of authority. Frequently, site councils further disperse involvement through the use of subcommittees. Subcommittees allow greater numbers of teachers to participate in the formal decision-making process and reduce the overall burden of extended involvement of others.

In addition to decision-making governance councils, schools that embrace shared decisionmaking understand that reaching collective agreement and consensus around difficult decisions require extended discussions, off-site meetings, and collective planning. Thus, schools that engage in shared decision-making at an authentic level set aside time for teachers to meet and places for them to congregate and talk. In addition, school schedules are often redesigned to facilitate teacher interaction by structuring common planning periods.

EFFECTIVENESS OF SCHOOL-BASED DECISION-MAKING

Although school-based decision-making is often the centerpiece of school reform, there remains little empirical evidence that relates it to improved school performance. Most of the evidence of effectiveness of decision involvement at the school level focuses on teachers and administrators. Studies exploring organizational variables have generally found positive relationships between decision involvement and organizational outcomes, such as organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and organizational change. In addition, studies

have found that participation enhances communication among teachers and administrators, contributes to the quality of teachers' work lives, and assists in professionalizing teaching and democratizing schools. Other research on school-based decision-making has generally been descriptive, and yet a substantive body of research has not yet explored causative relationships between school empowerment and school improvement or student achievement. Nonetheless, the combined effects related to participative structures that are democratic and collaborative and focus mainly on issues of curriculum and instruction are likely to bring about change at the classroom level.

ISSUES AND CONTROVERSIES

The successful implementation of school-based decision-making is affected by a number of organizational factors and institutional constraints, including (1) clarity of purpose and access to information; (2) power and authority relationships; (3) administrative support and the changing role of central office personnel; and (4) policies at the district, state, and federal levels. These issues taken singularly or collectively affect the long-term effectiveness of decentralizing decision-making at the school level.

CLARITY OF PURPOSE AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION.

Schools that are active in decision-making have a vision statement that focuses their decision-making process on the technical core of schooling–teaching and learning. Determining the school's vision is a schoolwide effort affording the faculty the opportunity to understand the power of their commitment to decisions they make. Those involved in decision-making understand the necessity of using school-based and student-centered data to inform their decisions. In districts where data are limited or not disaggregated at the school level, the decision-making process is limited and curtailed to issues that hold less promise of impact on the school's educational program.

Power and authority relationships. Frequently, when decision-making authority is delegated, the degree of authority given to the site is often limited and ambiguous. In schools where there is confusion over decision-making authority, issues addressed at the school level tend to focus on secondary-level issues, such as school climate, scheduling, safety, and parent involvement, rather than on primary concerns, such as instructional programs and strategies, student achievement, and school performance. In order to focus on the primary issues affecting school success, decision-making authority in the areas of curriculum, staffing, and budgeting must be real and authentic.

Administrative support and the role of central office personnel. District-level support of school-based decision-making is critical to its success. Superintendents play instrumental roles in moving central offices from a directive function toward a service orientation and resource support network. This shift in roles from a bureaucratic orientation to a service organization is often difficult and misunderstood by those occupying various roles in the district office and in the schools.

Policies at the district, state, and federal levels. In a similar manner, decision-making latitude is often restricted at the school level by various state and federal policies or mandates. Under school-based decision-making, schools are encouraged to make decisions regarding the curriculum and supporting instructional strategies. These decisions should be made within a framework of district goals or the core curriculum required by the district or state. Yet schools are often limited by state mandates affecting their educational programs and are similarly restricted by compliance requirements related to federally funded programs within their school or district. Thus, these competing and often contradictory policies constrain school-based decision-making.

CONCLUSION

School-based decision-making provides a framework for drawing on the expertise of individuals who are interested in and knowledgeable about matters that affect the successful performance of students. This process depends heavily on the district's leadership to define the parameters of decision-making, to define overarching goals, and to provide the information and professional development necessary to make effective, long-lasting decisions.

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