
Managing from the Inside Out: Debating Site-based Management in Public Schools

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Abstract

Historically, public schools have been run by an administration that made all the decisions about how education should occur. Increasingly, however, teachers are taking more active roles in decision-making at their public schools. This is often under the aegis of 'site-based management.' One important factor in site-based management is that teachers' and administrators' thoughts and beliefs related to public school management often differ significantly. This difference can cause internal power struggles between teachers and administrators. The purpose of this study was two-fold. First, this study investigated the hypothesis that attitudes towards site-based management are consistent with teacher or administrator status in public schools. And secondly, the local data was compared to national data to determine if similar discrepancies occur throughout the country. The results confirmed the hypotheses that teachers and administrators hold different opinions towards their site-based management and that this difference in opinion is influenced by the public context in which schooling occurs.

Introduction

Site-based reform has been popularized by community members, teachers, counselors, and parents since the early 1980s (Leithwood & Minzes, 1998). Creating site-based management programs within public schools can range from a total restructuring of a public school's administration to a slight shift in shared decision-making practices. A shared decision-making program can encourage greater communication among administrators, teachers, and support staff. A site-based approach is dependent upon these groups sharing common beliefs about leadership and decision-making styles.

What is Site-Based Management?

Site-based management, which is often referred to as public school-based management, is a widespread restructuring of the organizational level of the public school that involves decentralizing decision making to individual public schools and sharing decision making with a variety of groups (teachers, administrators, counselors, parents, etc.) within each public school structure (Kemper & Teddlies, 2002). Active restructuring can include participation in reform activities, involving teachers in decision-making, obtaining

parental involvement, creating a flexible public school schedule, changing the role of principals from dictators to authority figures who act as facilitators, investing in professional development for all parties, and acknowledging the efforts of all participating parties. This restructuring, as argued by those supporting the reform, cannot effectively improve the students' academic performance unless those directly involved with the students' outcomes (the teachers) have decision making authority (Leithwood, & Menzies, 1998). For the past two decades, advocates of site-based management hold firm to the ideas that the teachers can best identify and meet the students' needs, not necessarily the administration or the public school boards, yet decision making must be granted by these other entities. In summary, there must be broad-based participation by all people involved with the operation of the public school if the public school is to operate successfully under a site-based premise.

Rationale

The purpose of this study is to determine if there is a difference in opinion among teachers, administration, and counselors and their attitudes towards site-based management. West (1994) identified six characteristics that must be present for a site-based management program to occur within a public school. These characteristics are: 1) staff development, 2) involving staff, students, and the community in public school policies and decisions, 3) transformational leadership approaches, 4) coordination of strategies, 5) inquiry and reflection, and 6) collaborative planning. And although the main emphasis of this research is to look at the collaboration between teachers and administrators, or perception of such, an understanding that public penetration directly and indirectly influences the management dynamics of a public school is of interest. Public schools have unique management characteristics, one being the role any community member can play which can greatly affect the decisions and teaching strategies of each educator.

The Problem

In our nation's public schools, there is an increase of stress due to the complex system of many needs, wants, and expectations. Both educators and administrators not only have to maintain their already demanding workload, but are also expected to take on extra tasks and issues that were not demanded of these types of professionals in years past. These added responsibilities create an increase of stress in an already chaotic and stressful environment (Peterson, 1996). Research has shown that administrators, teachers, and community members could share leadership responsibility within the public school so that these added stresses could be relieved (Wohlstetter and Odden, 1995). Most public schools have a unified vision of how to educate the students, yet all adults in the educational setting need to use one another's knowledge of education, of child psychology, of learning theory and of pedagogy to create a program to best teach each and every student. Legislation recently created to serve as a precursor to this premise is the "No Child Left Behind" Act (Hardy, 2002). Site-based management goes hand in hand with program built on this legislation due to the community involvement and the active role teachers play in developing a complete public school for the children.

Public penetration of values, expectations and agendas continues to complicate decisions made on a daily basis by educators. Parents today have a greater variety of

public schools to choose from (Well, Slayton and Scott, 2002), and the more students in public schools, the more money the public schools receive from the government. Also, public educational institutions are based on the premise that any member of the community (parents specifically) can participate in discussions about the education of the students. Parents can provide input on policy, vote for public school board members, and even sway public school-level curriculum decisions. This community input can lead teachers to feel the parents have more input in public schools than the teachers who have been hired to educate the child. Principals know the public can impact local public schools' functioning, so they tend to cater to the public, giving more to the attention to those with greater social and political resources (Lubienski, 2001). Although teachers have contact with the students every day, they may not be the ones who are asked before important decisions are made. Site based management operates on the premise that the teachers are given a say in the decision making process, yet teachers may not feel they are a part.

Hypotheses

In order to improve site-based management within public schools, this research study identifies differences in beliefs about site-based management between teachers and administration at nine public schools. Two hypotheses were considered. The first was that the individual's position (administrator or teacher) will significantly affect their attitude towards site-based management. The second was that the data to be collected on a local level would resemble that collected on a national level.

Teachers' Opinions

Research completed through the Schools and Staffing Surveys (SASS) and *Who Runs the Public Schools?: The Teacher's View* (Anderson, 1993) reveals that control over curriculum, hiring teachers, and discipline practices vary greatly among administrators and teachers. This research suggests that only thirty-five percent of teachers believe they have significant influence in determining discipline policy or establishing curriculum. It also shows thirty-one percent believe they have much influence in determining the content of in-service programs and only twenty-eight percent believe they are influential in setting the policy on grouping students in classes by ability (United States Department of Education, 1993). Teachers overwhelmingly note that the only real control they have, in the public school setting, is over classroom activities. These areas include selecting instructional materials, disciplining students within the classroom, selecting teaching techniques, and determining homework assignments.

Administrators' Opinions

Turning to administration and basing our findings on the same data retrieved from the United States Department of Education in 1993 in surveys administered to principals, we find that this group believes they still hold the majority of the power in the areas of establishing curriculum, hiring new full-time teachers, and setting discipline policy and procedures. Regarding curriculum, the Department of Education survey found thirty-three percent of administrators believe that the public school district (central office administration) is responsible for establishing the curriculum. This is in contrast to approximately nineteen percent of the administrators who believe that teachers and

principals are equally responsible for curriculum decisions and fifteen percent who state that all parties (district administration, principals, and teachers) are responsible for the curriculum.

Principals believe in some areas the teachers have very little input. Forty-nine percent of principals feel that principals are primarily responsible for hiring yet only five percent feel teachers have any input at all for hiring new teachers. Twenty-three percent of the principals feel they, themselves, are responsible for setting policies concerning discipline and only one percent feel teachers have any say at all in this area. Kemper and Teddlies (2002) report that several of the principals in their study commented that, "Site based management allows teachers to feel as if they have a stake in decision making, but the committee itself has little impact on the decision making process."

Differences of Opinions

Site-based management success is based upon total cooperation and input from every sector that makes up the public school system. If attitudes and beliefs differ from group to group as to what individuals' real part is in the make-up of site-based management, then goals may never be met. In an analysis of data collected in 1987-88, 1990-91, and 1993-94, Mohr (1998) reports views that the administration and the faculty have on their given positions. Principals feel that certain responsibilities have remained in the hands of principals, not simply because they choose to maintain control, but because state laws dictate it. They state that teachers need to accept that not all decisions can be made by consensus and by letting each teacher have a say. Teachers, however, expect the shared leadership and decision-making powers that have been granted to them to provide them with greater say in public school affairs, yet these teachers feel their influence has remained the same over the past years, and is primarily confined to the classroom. Teachers see little or no change, and administrators disagree.

Teachers feel the need to share more in the decision-making process at the local level, and administrators refuse to release decision-making power, saying that laws and mandates have their hands tied. Mohr (1998) identifies factors that can create barriers to compromise. These barriers include: 1) a gap between the senior management team and the public school; 2) a mismatch between public school goals/priorities and the role of senior management; 3) confusion about management and leadership; 4) the relationship between delegation and empowerment; 5) time-management; and 6) the gap between policy and practice. Regardless of the reasons behind the lack of cohesiveness between members of the educational community, a goal of most K-12 institutions is to provide the best education for all students. Providing this type of education means administrators and teachers working together to make decisions, solve problems, and unite the public school community, reducing the gap between what the administrator feels teachers' should be and are doing, administratively, and what administrative role the teachers feel they possess. This study looks at this administrative "gap", between teachers' role as viewed by teacher and administrator.

Methodology

Two hundred and forty administrators, teachers, and support staff from nine Midwestern suburban public schools were used in this study. Five elementary, two middle, and two high public schools comprised the total number of participating public schools. Of the participants, 41 were administrators and one 199 were teachers (Refer to Table 1).

Table 1. The number of participants in each specific category.

PUBLIC SCHOOL	ADMINISTRATION	TEACHERS	TOTAL
1	6	21	27
2	7	27	34
3	4	32	37
4	4	13	17
5	7	36	43
6	3	17	20
7	4	14	18
8	3	18	21
9	3	21	24
Public School Total	41	199	240

The design of this study was quasi-experimental with the independent variable being the position/title of each of the participants and the dependent variables being the answers on the survey. A t-test was used to show the difference of the mean scores on the survey between administrator and teacher. The survey consisted of twenty-five questions and had four major topics: knowledge of site-based management, roles, satisfaction with the program, and demographics.

The twenty-five-question survey was developed through research and review of selected abstracts from given authors on the subject of site-based management. The survey consisted of fourteen yes and no questions, seven questions that had to be answered using a Likert-type scale and four questions dealing with demographics.

After gaining approval to administer the survey by each of the principals from the nine participating public schools, it was distributed at respective public school faculty meetings by the researcher and then collected as soon as attendees completed the survey. Every participant completed the waiver form notifying subjects of his/her rights and these documents were also collected. All teachers and administrators handed their forms directly

to the researchers who placed them in designated envelopes and left the faculty meetings immediately. The entire process took less than ten minutes at each public school.

Results

Table 2 shows the mean scores between the answers of the teachers and the answers of the administrators when asked two questions. The first question asked, “In your opinion, does the site-based management team really make decisions at your public school?” Teachers responded with a mean of 4.43 (SD=2.89) and administrators with a mean response score 6.95 (SD=3.08). The scale was in a Likert format, ranging from “1” (no real decision making power or no influence) to a “10” (complete decision making power). The second question asked which group made “decisions about the curriculum”, and the mean scores between teacher and administrator on the survey results were also different (Teachers : M=2.53, SD=0.70; Administrators: M=1.81, SD=0.97). The differences in opinions between teachers and administrators, as seen in Table 2, were found to be statistically significant for both questions, “Decision making power” and “Curricular influence” as shown in Table 3 from the t-test with $p < .001$.

Table 2. Mean results of teachers and administrators when asked questions on curriculum influence and site-based council decision-making power.

Question	Position	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error
Decision-making	Teacher	198	4.43	2.89	0.21
	Administrator	42	6.95	3.08	0.48
Curricular influence	Teacher	198	2.53	0.70	0.05
	Administrator	42	1.81	0.97	0.15

Table 3. Inferential statistics of “Curriculum influence” and “Decision-making power” question responses in relationship to position at public school.

Question	t	Mean Diff
Decisions making	-5.065*	-2.5180
Curricular influence	4.546*	0.7157

* $p < .001$

Table 4 shows the differences between the teachers’ responses and the administrators’ responses to similar questions on a national level. The data used for comparison comes from the TIMSS-R databank and includes survey results from 410 teachers and 178 administrators. The teachers were asked how much influence they had on

curricular decisions, with “1” representing none and “4” representing “a lot”, and the mean response was 3.08 (SD=0.950). Administrators were also asked how much influence teachers had on curricular decisions and their mean response was 3.29 (SD=0.762). The t-test showed the difference between teacher and administrator responses to be statistically significant at the $p < .001$ level.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics on teacher and administrator responses concerning teacher influence on decision-making from TIMSS-R national questionnaire.

Question	Position	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error
Curriculum	Teacher	410	3.08	0.950	0.05
	Administrator	178	3.29	0.762	0.06

Discussion

The results of this study suggest that there is a significant difference between teachers’ and administrators’ views on who is in charge of curricular decisions. This difference was found to be significant with a sample size of 240 teachers and administrators.

Similar results were found when using 588 teachers and administrators from across the United States. These results support Hypothesis 1 which stated that there is a difference between teacher and administrator belief on the function of the site based program at the local public school.

In order for site-base management to function at the public school level, both teachers and administrators need to have adequate influence on certain decisions. Perception is very important to each individual and group. If the teacher perceives they have a say in a decision, they will take greater ownership and feel more of a part of the outcome than if they perceive they have no impact. This study shows what teachers have felt for years about site-based teams. Teachers have been told by the administration that they have influence on decisions, yet they do not necessarily believe it. Teachers who are told they have an influential vote or voice expect that once a decision has been made, they would be able to feel they had an influential part in the decision. The administrators at the surveyed public schools voiced their opinions that the teachers had this voice, yet the teachers did not agree. In these public schools, it appears site-based management is not working. This supports the work done by Kemper and Teddlies (2002) and Mohr (1998) showing differences in beliefs of what is “really” happening at the public school in regards to decision making.

The finding that the national results are very similar to the local results supports Hypothesis #2 in that data collected at the local level supports that collected at the national level. Random public schools were asked similar questions (TIMSS-R), and the results showed differences in teacher beliefs as compared to those of the administrators. It appears that in the United States, a country proud of its educational system which also boasts the freedom of public schools to operate in the format each public school sees fit, deceit is present. This deceit is evident in the TIMSS-R data where teachers feel they have little

decision-making power yet the administrators report that they do. Administrators tend to say, "The teachers have decision-making power over the curriculum," and teachers say, "We have limited decision-making power over our curriculum." It appears site-based management is alive and well in the minds of the administration, but not so much in the minds of the teachers. Adding the fact that the public can make recommendations and cause changes in the public schools, the teachers have even more reason to believe their decision-making powers have been compromised. All in all, the dynamics of the public schools' decision making is unique and complicated.

Implications

Public institutions, such as our nation's public school system, function on the premise that all students have the opportunity to receive an education provided by professional (or at least highly trained) educators. These educators not only make their living by teaching, but have been taught, trained and mentored to make daily decisions to best educate their students. Administrators, on the other hand, have been trained in a similar educational realm yet spend most of their working hours dealing with parents, the community, and disruptive students, while planning long term goals for the public school and leading their teachers towards these goals. In most cases, public administrators have served several years in the classroom and are aware of the daily decisions teachers must make for the individualized education of each student. In this scenario, it would seem likely that principals would recognize the importance of teachers making curricular decisions, for example, allowing teachers to have a larger part in the decision-making power at the public schools.

Morale and loyalty at public schools and at public institutions have been shown to be related to job satisfaction and performance. Teachers whose views are considered in decisions should be made aware that their opinions are important. Although major decisions at public schools must ultimately be made by the principal, teachers giving input as to what is best for the students could be useful. Even more advantageous for moral would be to let the teachers know their opinions played an important role in the decision making process. The results from this study showed that at the public schools surveyed, this does not occur very well. Teachers feel they have little voice yet the principals feel they do. Possibly, better communication between the two groups is all that is needed. The results of this research should be shared with public school personnel to increase the lines of communication.

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