

DOES SITE-BASED MANAGEMENT INCREASE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT?

By Bridgette D. Muhammad

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Abstract

The purpose of this review of literature is to determine if the literature suggests that site-based management increase student achievement. Original research findings done on 19 Michigan Title I schools using the Bureaucracy Theory, Systems Theory, and Human Resource Development Theory was reviewed. Also, qualitative studies on superintendents and principal's perceptions using organizational learning theory was reviewed, and non-experimental, descriptive research designs that compiled survey results from teachers and administrators were reviewed. The review also looked at data collected from leaders of school reform in the 21st century. The review of literature suggests that site-based management can increase student achievement if it is implemented properly. However, the literature points out that most schools districts are not fully implementing all of the core parts of site-based management as it should be, and thus are not seeing the amount of gains in student achievement that is possible. Core parts found in the literature that must be implemented are leadership, vision, support, information, communication, and power. These core parts should be done in a climate of ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and inquiry in order for site-based management to work at improving student achievement.

As school districts try to meet the demands of No Child Left Behind there has been renewed interest in the idea of putting more control of the school in the hands of the principal. This shift, from central office control to local school control is nothing new. In fact, this is the way things were handled most of the time in the 1980s through the 1990s. "...Many public schools claimed to have tried decentralized decisionmaking--so-called school-based management--in the 1980s and 1990s, yet the performance of U.S. education during that period improved only modestly, at best." (Hansen, 2005, p. 1)

Urban schools have found this shift to be especially challenging. Even the term "urban" has undergone significant changes in its meaning in the past decades. In the 1970s urban was defined as "characteristics of a city as distinguished from a country with at least 2,500 inhabitants." But

today most people recognize 2,500 people as a small town. Even if the concept looked at urban as the opposite of “suburban” (high levels of poverty among students and their families, buildings in poor repair, a shrinking resource base, the continual struggle to attract and hold qualified teachers, etc), this would make rural areas fit into that category of urban as well. That brings in a third concept, that of “mega-metropolitan” areas which encompass urban, suburban, and even rural sectors within a sprawling zone of population density. Check (2002) says that this concept of urban is what the perception of the urban areas today really is. Check says that urban areas are perceived as dark and dangerous places, morally and physically threatening locales of chaos, crime, and congestion. When it comes to urban education, Check says, these perceptions and images “...are particularly important because many groups involved in school reform—policy makers, university “experts,” ...have little first-hand experience with urban schools.” (p.11) Yet, these folk with little or no experience with “urban schools” are making policy changes that affect these schools.

The media has done its part in helping to distort the image and perceptions of urban education as well. Media portraits, according to Check “evoke mixed feelings in many urban teachers and principals.”(p.11) There is a sense of gratefulness that someone has highlighted some of the things that goes on in the urban schools, but at the same time, they also are troubled that it implies that urban students are mostly dangerous and delinquents or gang members and that urban educators much be militaristic, super humans, or saintly to succeed. (Check, 2002) These type of portraits and images present a distorted picture of both the challenges and the successes of urban education. If principals approach school reform with this perception in mind, then it’s no wonder school reform has moved at a snail’s pace over the past decades.

Bruce Bimber (cited by Hansen, 2005) “pointed out a decade ago, the fact that centralization has not been more successful in the past could be because ...decentralization efforts do not produce

significant changes in institutional structure in the first place.”(p.1) Hansen, et.al, goes on to say that under SBM (Site-Based Management) “principals gained very little control over school budgets and resource allocation decisions.” (Hansen, 2005, p. 1)

Why are schools returning to what didn't work before? Is there some new insight that promises that decentralization can accomplish more now than it did in the earlier efforts? In the early 21st century once again the trend to model schools after business management came into the picture. Centralization once again became the norm. School district's central offices became the powerhouse where everything was planned, bought, managed, disseminated, and evaluated. Then once again, the business world influenced the educational system. “Much of the interest in decentralization among educators was inspired by the experience of businesses that when faced with unprecedented levels of global competition in the late 20th century, dramatically reformed their traditionally top-down structures in imitation of so-called ‘quality’ approaches to management.” (Hansen, 2005, p. 2) Those in organizational and management cite much support and claims that decentralized organizations perform at higher levels than centralized ones. (Organizational configuration and Performance 2003, cited by Hansen, 2005) Because of this turn in the business world, educators began to take another look at decentralization...especially urban schools. Urban schools had been steadily declining in effectiveness so much that educators were groping to find anything that had promise that it would help increase student achievement.

The objective of site-based management is to locate primary decision-making for curriculum, personnel, and student support efforts as close to the point of impact as possible. It is hoped that by allowing principals more control and say so over their buildings operations and services, principals will better be able to meet the accountability standards required, resulting in higher student achievement. Principals are now being held responsible for much of the roles that

used to be part of the Human Resource Department, or Personnel Department. Principals are in charge of recruitment, interviewing, hiring, training, and sustaining their staff. But has this all been a good thing? Has this shift improved student achievement?

Childres (2007) conducted a qualitative study of principals and superintendents and found there to be some positive benefits and some negative aspects to this shift to site-based management. Some of the positive benefits found were stronger local control and site-based management. But these small positives were overshadowed by many negatives. Negative aspects found from questioning on-the-job principals were added responsibility to the role of the principal, enhancement of the power of the principal, teacher union constraints, the creation of additional bureaucracy, the application of business principles to education, meeting the needs of all community stakeholders, revisiting values of public school system, and lack of principal training. With so many negatives sited by on the job principals, did this affect student achievement in any way?

In a 2006 study conducted on Title I schools, Harrigan found that site-based management had favorable influences in some school, but failed to achieve desired results in others. This Harrigan attributes to the fact that site-based management is an administrative style. Some principals were able to use this style of management better than others. This is similar to what Jackson (2007) said, “A major problem in site-based schools is that principals are expected to use skills they may not possess (Cornell & Fitzhugh-Walker, 1998; David, 1996; Doyle & Rice, 2002; Neil, Carlisle, Knipe, & McEwen, 2001), p. 2.

Harrigan also said that most teachers and administrators believed that site-based management improved student achievement, even when the test scores did not show positive results. Because of this faith in the teachers and administrators this concept of site-based

management has promise for the future. If the teachers and principals believe that improvement will occur it is akin to the Pygmalion effect...when teachers' expectations are high for the students, the students rise to the expectations. Reeves (2009) said that this same effect that we know to be true about teachers and students can also work with administrators and teachers. If the principals have high expectations that their teachers can and will increase student achievement because of site-based management, then those schools will have more positive gains in student achievement than schools where this expectation was low.

One critical part of site-based management is the strategic planning stage. All schools have a plan. Reeves (2009) and Stephen White (2005, cited by Reeves) found in their study of hundreds of school plans, that only particular plans were associated with student achievement. "Specifically, schools with plans that had the highest scores in *monitoring, evaluation, and inquiry* experienced two to five times the gains as schools that had similar plans but low scores on those three dimensions" (Reeves, 2009, p. 81).

Monitoring has to do with not merely monitoring on an annual basis (looking at last years scores long after it is too late to do anything about them). But high scores for monitoring was awarded to schools where there were consistent and frequent (at least monthly) analysis of *student performance, teaching strategies, and leadership practices*. (Reeves, 2009)

Evaluation high scores were awarded to schools in which every program, initiative, and strategy is subject to the relentless question "Is it working?" This type of evaluation occurs not through just having trained teachers, for instance, but when there was some type of system in place where faculty members could find the relationship between their professional practices and changes in student achievement. Also, the faculty members can site practices that they have stopped when they found insufficient evidence of effectiveness. (Reeves, 2009)

“Schools that excel in the ‘inquiry’ variable are those that attribute the cause of student achievement to teachers and leaders rather than to student demographic characteristics” Reeves, 2009, p. 82). Reeves said that schools whose plans reflect a confidence in teaching and leadership as the cause of student achievement have had three times greater gains in achievement than schools whose plans reflect a focus on student demographic characteristics as the primary cause of student achievement. (Reeves, 2008, cited in Reeves 2009)

This brings the topic around to the most important thing that administrators should be trying to accomplish through site-based management. That is to get teachers and themselves to see the connection between what they are or are not doing and student achievement. As Schon (1983, cited by Gage, 2009, p. 148), put it, [teachers should] use “reflection-in-action (the ‘thinking about what they are doing while they are doing it’) that practitioners sometimes bring to situations of uncertainty, uniqueness, and conflict”. The literature suggests that this can be accomplished by making sure that site-based management addresses six important core parts: *Leadership, vision, support, information, communication, and power.*

“While there is no research clearly linking site-based management to student achievement, it may be that this is due more to a failure to adopt genuine site based management than to flaws in the concept (Ceresin, 1990; Fiske, 1991; Putting Learning First, 1994; Bimber, 1993; Berman, spring 1978; Wohlstetter, September 1995; Wong, 1996; Bauer, 1996; Darling-Hammond, 1997, cited by Hopkins, 1999, p. 45) Bauer and Bogotch (1997, cited by Holloway, 2000) also found that districts and schools seldom fully implemented site-based systems. Districts rush to implement site-based management without considering what it takes to make the transition (Holloway, J.H. 2000). For instance, Hopkins found in her study of Title I schools in Michigan that none of the schools in

the study actually had fully implemented site-based management. Schools were missing evidence that all six core parts of site-based management were indeed being addressed.

In order for genuine SBM to be effective in positively impacting student achievement, six core parts need to be in place. Most administrators and teachers alike are highly familiar with the six core parts. But what does it look like, and how does one know if all six core parts are actually alive and functioning well in the school?

Leadership

Everyone knows that leadership on the part of the administrator is the key to any successful interventions in a school. Just because you have a “leader” designated in the building as the principal, does not necessarily mean that this person is exercising “leadership”. What does it mean to be a leader? In the context of education, the leadership role must be one of an instructional leader, one who can lead with regards to classroom instruction. In order to lead you must have followers. Therefore, the staff must view this person as an instructional leader. The leadership style should also be one which encourages participation from the followers. If you are leading and the only one doing any work is you, then you are still not a leader. The leader must be able to get others to see the destination and also be able to get them to see clearly the role they play in getting the group to that destination. Then the leader must make it so that the followers are willing and capable to get the job done. The followers must have faith that they can do this and that what they are doing will make a difference. Leadership encourages the staff to have this kind of faith.

Vision

Once leadership is defined and embraced, the leader then has to have a vision. This vision must not be only his vision, but he must also be able to share this vision with all stakeholders so that

they can embrace the vision as well. Everyone must be able to articulate the vision and must believe in their attainment of the vision. The vision must be the driving force behind everything that is done. The vision should be clear to everyone involved. It should not be silently hidden in the deep thoughts of the leader. Everyone must be aware that the school does have a vision and that everyone is working toward ensuring that the vision becomes a reality.

Support

There must also be a high degree of support for the initiative and the leadership in the schools in order for SBM to work. Not that everyone support everything, for there should be a climate of risk-taking also, but there should be support among the staff that shows a high degree of trust that the leadership is knowledgeable and capable to lead them through any uncharted territory. In order for the principal to gain this type of support from the stakeholders and staff, there must be a climate of mutual respect and teachers and staff must feel that their voices are being heard and that their concerns are being addressed. Not that what they want to happen will happen all the time, but they need to feel that the leadership takes their concerns seriously and is willing to work out differences in the best manner.

Information

Being able to provide clear information about the school improvement process is essential. The leadership must be able to articulate the goals that the school plans to achieve due to the process and have a clear road map that is easy for all to understand of how we plan to get to the goal. Everyone must feel like they understand the process and know what is involved in the school improvement process. There should be no one who is not clear on why the school improvement is needed, nor should there be uncertainty on what measures will take place in order to make the necessary improvement.

Communication

Schools with principals whom the stakeholders feel communicate effectively is also an indication of increase student achievement. Sometimes principals feel that they are communicating effectively with stakeholders, but the stakeholders feel differently about this. (Hopkins, 1999). It makes no difference if you feel like you are communicating effectively, if the listeners do not feel they understand you. You have not communicated well. The principal must communicate every step of the school improvement process to the stakeholders and receive feedback to ensure that the correct understanding was gained. This is done through careful monitoring and evaluating of your efforts.

Power

The sixth core part of SBM that must be in place is power. There must be shared decision-making in the school. The stakeholders must know that decisions are not based solely on one person's perspective. There should be an active advisory council made up of stakeholders from various entities, and these stakeholders must be held accountable for their part of the school improvement process just as everyone else. Their role must be articulated to them clearly and their input should be valued and highly considered. Teacher leaders should have clearly articulated responsibilities and they should be held accountable for their roles as well. These entities should not be brought together in secret, but everyone should know who these members are and how to make their voices heard to them. The staff should feel a sense of empowerment from this shared leadership.

Odden and Wohlstetter (1995, cited by Holloway) found two other conditions that were necessary for site-based management to improve school performance: "People at the school site must have genuine authority over the budget, personnel, and curriculum; and leaders must introduce changes that directly affect teaching and learning." (Holloway, p. 82) Holloway went on to say that

the strategies that were common among successful schools were a dispersal of power throughout the school, professional development as an ongoing school-wide activity, a broad dissemination of information, and a principal who could lead and delegate responsibility. If all of these factors are present, SBM should work and schools should see improvement in student achievement as a result. SBM can improve student achievement, but it takes the commitment of everyone involved to constant monitoring and evaluation of efforts.

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