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ABSTRACT

In the Australian state of Victoria, virtually all decisions about spending, curriculum, and personnel are made at the school level. Victoria's experience in developing a system of school-based management (SBM) and shared decision making offers a perspective on school reform efforts in the United States. Underlying the school restructuring trends in both countries are some common assumptions: that schools must dramatically raise the performance of all students; that they should be delivering a curriculum centered on problem-solving and other higher-order thinking skills; and that to accomplish this, schools need to be restructured. This brief outlines some features of Victoria's experience that may be relevant for reformers elsewhere. It is compared to the "high involvement" model of decentralization, which calls for the development of four critical resources within each unit--information, knowledge and skills, power, and rewards. Data were obtained through interviews conducted with state and local school officials, union leaders, and university professors. Interviews were also conducted and other data collected at eight Melbourne schools--four primary and four secondary schools. The findings support the tenets of the high-involvement framework; specifically, if decentralization is accompanied by information, knowledge, power, and rewards and includes all teachers in decision making, then school productivity is likely to increase. Each of the schools experienced change in management, organization, and curriculum. However, Victoria has not developed a powerful reward system that encourages teachers to work toward schoolwide goals for student achievement. Teacher testimony and an increase in the high school graduation rate indicate improved student achievement.

(LMI)

Brief to policymakers

ED 373 417

School-based Management— The View from “Down Under”

By Allan and Eleanor Odden

Thirty-five years ago, virtually all decisions affecting schools in the Australian state of Victoria were made at the state level.

The state's Department of School Education created the single curriculum every school had to follow, told each student which school to attend, and approved every budget item and personnel decision, right down to hiring individual janitors and secretaries.

That system bears little resemblance to the one in place in Victoria today. Now, most decisions about spending, curriculum and personnel are made at the school level.

There are some statewide guidelines, such as general curriculum frameworks. But the fulfillment of those guidelines is left to the teachers, administrators, parents and other community members at each school.

Victoria's experience in developing a system of school-based management and shared decision-making may provide some perspective on school reform efforts in the United States. Underlying the moves toward reform in both nations are some common assumptions: that schools must dramatically raise the performance of all students; that they should be delivering a curriculum centered on problem-solving and other higher-order thinking skills; and that to accomplish this, schools need to be restructured or reorganized.

This brief outlines some features of Victoria's experience that may be relevant for reformers elsewhere.

The “High Involvement” Model

When evaluating efforts to decentralize school management, education leaders can gain insight by looking at similar efforts by private-sector companies in the United States. In recent years, particularly during the 1980s, many U.S. companies have embraced decentralization as a way to boost quality, and even reduce costs, amid intense international competition.

Research showed that the most effective strategy for these companies was to set clear performance targets at the top of the system, flatten the organizational struc-

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The high involvement model seems especially suited to organizations doing complex, uncertain work in a group or team structure. Since teaching is an intellectually complex job, subject to uncertainty and best conducted by people who work together closely, we agree with researchers who feel this model also is appropriate for schools.

ture, move decision-making down to the work teams actually providing services, and then hold those teams accountable for results.

Researchers have noted particularly strong results for businesses that employed the "high involvement" model of decentralization (Lawler, 1986; 1992). This calls for the development of four critical resources within each unit:

1 INFORMATION—The unit's goals and objectives are clear, and unit members have access to the data they need to pursue them.

2 KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS—The unit devotes money and staff time to making sure that member practices reflect the best professional knowledge.

3 POWER—Unit members have real authority over budget and personnel decisions.

4 REWARDS—A compensation structure—usually based on knowledge and skills and often including group-based performance bonuses—aligns employee self-interest with the unit's goals.

The high involvement model seems especially suited to organizations doing complex, uncertain work in a group or team structure—the type of structure that most large, successful private-sector companies have embraced in recent years. Since teaching is an intellectually complex job, subject to uncertainty over daily tasks and best conducted by people who work together closely, we agree with researchers who feel this model also is appropriate for schools.

Many policymakers and advisors who push to decentralize school system power make a critical error: They think simply giving power to a

school-site council will produce better decisions, better use of school resources and, ultimately, better student performance.

The high involvement model addresses that error. It also stresses providing information, knowledge and skills to decision makers, and creating a system that rewards good performance.

In Victoria, it appears that at least three parts of the model have been fulfilled to a high degree.

Victoria's Evolution

Our observations are based on visits to Victoria in 1993 and 1994. We interviewed state and local school officials, union leaders and university professors, among others. We also conducted interviews and collected data at eight schools in Melbourne: four primary schools, which in Victoria typically include kindergarten through 6th grade; and four secondary schools, which typically cover grades 7 through 12.

Located in Southeast Australia, the state of Victoria is home to about 6 million people. Roughly half live in Melbourne.

In the 1960s, the state's Department of School Education, or DSE, made all key decisions on curriculum, budget and personnel. The state-mandated curriculum for all students was basically university-preparatory. A student could only attend the school in his or her neighborhood, where parents and teachers had almost no say in operations.

Back then, about 25 percent of students in Victoria graduated from secondary school. Today, more than 80 percent graduate. While there are no data to suggest specific causes for this tremendous improvement, the government's decision to decentralize control of schools certainly appears significant.

The move to decentralize began in the late 1960s. By the early 1970s,

The council receives a lump sum from the state to spend on all functions, including salaries and benefits, supplies, operations and maintenance. The amount is based on the number of students, the number of teachers and the size of the school building. With only a few minor constraints, the school can spend this money any way it wants.

the state had created "school councils," committees at each school with some power over budget and curriculum. Up to half the members of each council could be employees of the state education system, such as teachers and the principal. But these councils also gave parents, and other community members, substantial say in all facets of the school.

By 1993, the councils had power to make virtually all budget decisions, except on professional staff issues. Each council also selected the school's principal and non-certified staff.

"Schools of the Future"

The school decentralization process gathered still more steam later in 1993, when a newly elected government created "Schools of the Future," an experiment aimed at giving schools virtually total authority over budget and personnel.

When the government asked for 100 schools to volunteer for the experiment, more than 700 applied within a 6-week period. In response, the government started the program that year with 300 schools. Another 500 entered the program early this year, and another group was scheduled to join this July. All of Victoria's 1800 schools are slated to become Schools of the Future by mid-1995.

Each School of the Future is led by a council of up to 15 members. Only a third of council members can be teachers or school administrators.

The council receives a lump sum from the state to spend on all func-

tions, including salaries and benefits, supplies, operations and maintenance. The amount is based on the number of students, the number of teachers and the size of the school building. With only a few minor constraints, the school can spend this money any way it wants.

Schools also have full authority to recruit and hire teachers. This job is handled by the principal, usually with significant teacher involvement. Teachers are, however, paid on a statewide scale.

The state developed an interactive computer system that gives each school access to detailed information about its budget and expenditures. School-level officials also use the system to handle all invoicing and purchasing, and to maintain student records.

The computers also will be used to compile results from new, mandatory surveys of community satisfaction. These surveys will enhance school communication with parents on school issues and, increasingly, on student outcomes.

The Many Roles of Teachers

At each school, although policy over curriculum technically rests with the school council, the teachers lead the way. Teachers sit on a committee which reports to the council and seeks approval for major curriculum changes. Council members generally acknowledge the expertise of teachers and accept their direction.

This trust may, in part, be a prod-

uct of Victoria's relatively long experience with teacher-led curriculum development. Teachers have regularly worked at developing, assessing and modifying new curriculum, usually in close collaboration with other teachers, since the DSE gave up control over that process in the 1970s.

Beginning in the 1980s, teachers had access to a wide range of training opportunities, such as school support centers and professional content groups. Many programs included practice in the classroom interspersed with training over 10 to 12 weeks. Several teachers said they took part in cross-school teacher networks. In all, teachers reported a wide range of long-term and short-term professional development opportunities.

In the mid-1980s, the state developed curriculum frameworks in nine major learning areas. These frameworks paint an ambitious vision of what school curriculum should be. For example, they call for developing thinking skills and problem-solving ability in all students.

But these frameworks didn't impose a new vision for teachers to follow. Instead, state officials worked closely with teachers, and the frameworks they drafted reflect existing teacher practices. Since many of the concepts and approaches in the frameworks also were reinforced by existing teacher training, teachers already knew them well. We found uniformly high awareness of the frameworks among teachers.

Teachers are expected, as part of their professional ethic, to play vigorous roles in constantly developing and evaluating curriculum. They have created a remarkable array of mechanisms for encouraging and channeling their input.

For example, most schools we studied in Victoria were divided into "sub-schools," usually consisting of two or three contiguous grade levels. Teachers in these sub-schools usually met at least once a week. Within the sub-schools, grade level teams usually met about twice a week. The grade level teams focused on both curriculum and student needs, with extra emphasis at the secondary level on student behavior and other non-academic activities.

Each school also had subject-area teams that developed curriculum and received individual program budgets. Other teacher teams focused on priorities outlined in a state-required, but site-developed, school improvement plan.

The schools we studied also made use of several schoolwide teams. The entire faculty usually met at least twice a month, and committees met on overall curriculum issues and other aspects of policy and organization, such as scheduling and teacher work loads.

Most teachers took part in at least three teams. While most schools provided an hour for team meetings during the school day, teams frequently met before and after school as well. In interviews, teachers acknowledged the considerable time commitment, but said they accepted it because they wanted input.

In the schools we visited, these rich networks of teams nurtured widespread and universal teacher involvement. They also functioned as overlapping communication channels, spreading information upward, downward and horizontally in each school. We found strong professional cultures

at every school we visited, including consensus on goals, focus on improvement, willingness to experiment and cooperative relations between principals and teachers.

In some schools, up to 40 percent of teachers were formally recognized for serving in some leadership role, such as principal of a sub-school or an advanced-skill teacher with special responsibilities for developing curriculum and staff.

These teachers, chosen for their expertise, received more money and a modestly reduced teaching workload. This was a first step in a plan to add new tiers to the teacher salary schedule based on knowledge and skills. The state had created a commission to consider revamping the teacher career structure, including a revised compensation system.

Along with this shift in teacher roles came a shift in the principal's role. Principals were stepping away from direct involvement in instruction and instead were focusing on broader issues of planning, school vision and community relations. They began operating less like "head teachers" and more like corporate CEOs.

Principals in the first wave of Schools of the Future received training on their new budget and personnel responsibilities. The state also was designing training programs on how to create school vision, and how to support teacher decision-making teams. The Schools of the Future contract specifies that 15 percent of each principal's salary will be determined by school performance, but this component was only in its beginning phases during our visits.

Rising to a New Challenge

The schools we studied in 1994 had begun a new and very specific focus on student outcomes and accountability. Previously, Victorian schools have not used standardized tests of any kind. There were no

Principals were stepping away from direct involvement in instruction and instead were focusing on broader issues of planning, school vision and community relations. They began operating less like "head teachers" and more like corporate CEOs.

grade-level performance scores for students, and no published data comparing different schools. Instead, teachers kept anecdotal notes on each student, often in diary form, to record individual progress and needs.

The schools we visited were developing strategies for gathering a wide variety of data, with the goal of developing individual performance profiles, as well as outcome data for classes, grade levels and the entire school. They also were searching for good assessment techniques to help them make comparisons with other schools.

The schools seemed well-equipped to undertake this tremendous task. Teachers were deeply involved with the process and were operating on the basis of good training and experience. They clearly were aided by the well-established teams and inter-team networks. In fact, rather than having a negative impact on school culture, the shift toward outcomes and accountability added a positive dimension to the culture at each school we visited.

Conclusions

We found substantial presence of the key components of high involvement management in the schools we studied. The findings support the tenets of the high involvement framework; namely, that if decentralization is accompanied by information, knowledge, power and rewards, and includes all teachers in decision-making,

Rather than having a negative impact on school culture, the shift toward outcomes and accountability added a positive dimension to the culture at each school we visited.

then school productivity is likely to increase.

The schools we studied all experienced change in management, organization and curriculum. Schools, especially Schools of the Future, had substantial power over budget and personnel. Teachers and principals also had access to a comprehensive set of information, and had received thorough training in the best professional practices (unfortunately, DSE stopped spending money on teacher training in early 1993, which concerned many of the people we interviewed).

Victoria hasn't developed a powerful reward system to encourage teachers to work toward schoolwide goals for student achievement. So far, schools have emphasized individual student performance, and haven't developed strong consensus on school goals and common measures of progress toward them.

Because school-by-school data on student performance are not available, we can't say how much

this model of decentralization has improved student achievement. But from teacher testimony, and increases in the high school graduation rate, it appears significant, and the level of teacher ownership attained would be the envy of many schools around the globe.

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