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Shared Decision Making

Relevant Legislation: Title 14, Chapter 8 of the Delaware Code
Signed into law by Governor Carper on July 9, 1996

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Rationale: "Most states are moving toward focusing their accountability systems on school performance rather than on compliance with regulations. They are moving away from inputs, such as the amount of time a student must spend in class, and toward a model of using rewards, sanctions and assistance to move schools toward higher levels of performance... Advocates of performance-based accountability systems argue that decisions about budgets, employment, instruction and structure should be made at the school level by those involved... These people share responsibility for the school's performance and understand they are accountable when things do not go well." (ECS, 1997, p. 2.)

Models of Implementation: Research reveals three broad models of school based management:

1. *Community control* which involves shifting power from professional educators and boards of education to parent and community groups at the school site;
2. *Teacher control* which entails delegating decision making to the building level in the form of professional site councils. Typically, site councils are diverse, representative groups created in individual schools where staff make decisions formerly made by the central administration; and,
3. *Principal control* is one where principals are responsible for making decisions in consultation with the staff, parents, and community. Site councils may or may not be created under this type of school based management.

These models are rarely implemented in pure form. Form usually fluctuates based on local context and policy.

Key Factors that make school-based management and shared decision making work:

- **School autonomy** for making decisions on budget, personnel, and curriculum matters is essential.
- **Leadership skills** that enable shared decision making. Principals must be strong instructional

leaders, astute community organizers, sharp managers, skillful facilitators, and optimistic visionaries of school environments.

- **Time** to acquire decision-making skills and to use them is necessary for those involved for autonomy to be exercised.
- **Recognition** must be given to those accepting added responsibility and authority. Some suggest monetary compensation such as bonuses or support for programs be given to those who are greatly involved in SDM.
- **Communication** by decision-making groups within the broader school community.

Research Findings: Although the empirical research on school-based management and shared decision-making practices in schools is still limited, some surveys and case studies have been conducted in various settings. These preliminary findings should influence establishing both appropriate direction and realistic expectations.

- **Student Academic Achievement** -- Although many propose the need to focus restructuring proposals on student learning outcomes, some caution that premature expectations of increases in students' achievement may undermine the change process. A key analysis that reviewed 200 documents describing school-based management in the U.S., Canada, and Australia reported that this management style does not always achieve its objective to improve instruction or student achievement. Many found no relationship between student mathematics achievement and teacher participation in decision making about instruction and instructional resources. Site-based management can provide a powerful context for addressing learning issues. If school-based management is to realize any impact on student achievement, then matters of curriculum, teaching and learning must be made a conscious focus.
- **Student Behavior** -- Some studies revealed that there were positive effects on student attendance when teachers actively participated in decision making regarding instruction, i.e., what to teach, how to teach, and grade assignment. Others found that student involvement in decision making can effectively reduce student misbehavior.
- **Teacher Job Satisfaction** -- The effect of teacher participation in decision making on their levels of job satisfaction, according to some researchers, remains unknown. While some studies support the link, many others do not.
- **Teacher Attendance** -- The link between participation in SDM and teacher attendance is supported in both the effective schools and restructuring research. Higher teacher absenteeism occurred in schools where teachers were excluded from participation in decision making. Also a decline in absenteeism was found after teachers became actively involved in decision making.
- **Peripheral Focus of Efforts** -- Numerous studies have revealed that although school systems all over the country are involved in school-based management, the extent of decision-making responsibility devolved to schools is often severely limited. Consequently, site teachers and administrators have little to manage, particularly in respect to budget, personnel, and curriculum strategies. SDM initiatives have rarely become centrally involved in core issues of curriculum and instruction. Projects tend instead to focus on school climate, campus beautification, career education, remedial education, parent involvement, scheduling, safety.
- **Increased Burden on Participants** -- Some research reveals that participants in school based

management must contend with heavier workloads and the frustrations that accompany slower group processes. Decentralization increased the fragmentation and complexity of city schooling, which paradoxically expanded administrative burdens, bringing pressures to recentralize.

Delaware Situation:

In November 1994, the Delaware Education Research and Development Center completed an exploration of the extent and nature of site-based management practices in Delaware's public schools. In addition to examining the breadth of shared decision-making practice, the study explored the purpose, form, level and nature of participation, and perceived impact of such practices. Some findings included:

- Nearly all Delaware public school districts report using shared decision-making practices in some form. However, definitions vary by district and school regarding the intent, role, and effect of such practices. Similarly the actual practices vary as well.
- Committees that currently exist in Delaware's schools are more likely to serve in an advisory rather than a decision-making capacity.
- Curriculum and instruction, student discipline, and school climate are the most commonly addressed issues. Personnel matters, budgetary decisions, etc, are rarely deliberated in these forums.
- Most Delaware educators view shared decision making as a means to facilitate school improvement.
- Teachers differ from building and district administrators in their opinions about the effectiveness of site-based management practices related to changes in curriculum and instruction.
- There is a need for all educators to set aside old conceptions of leadership and decision making and learn new ones. Delaware educators view this as a complex process requiring time and external support. It requires attention to the skills of intervention and decision making, the roles and responsibilities of all parties to the process as well as the provision of time and professional development support to enable these processes.

Policy Questions for Consideration: The research record suggests a host of policy issues that include:

- What kinds of decisions will be made and by whom? What processes will be used?
- What are realistic expectations regarding outcomes of policies addressing SDM? How should the effectiveness of SDM efforts be evaluated?
- What skills (and how will they be acquired) are necessary to effectively realize shared decision making?
- What is the role of policymakers to ensure the necessary linkage between the school and the

community (both parents of students and other citizens)?

- If teachers are to effectively handle their expanded role in SDM, what modifications to their current responsibilities and working conditions will be necessary? Must there be trade-offs between their new responsibilities and their instructional roles? How will these decisions be made and supported?

Related Issues:

- **Accountability** for decisions and the consequences of those decisions is a paramount concern. Some research suggests that not holding schools accountable for implementing their own plans and meeting their own goals can impede the implementation of SDM. How can policymakers ensure that the state's accountability plan coherently addresses the issue of shared decision making?
- There must be a robust **professional development** program to provide the skills to those involved about how to engage in effective discussion and informed decision making. Autonomy to make decisions must be accompanied by educational leaders that possess **leadership skills** that enable shared decision making. Principals must be strong instructional leaders, astute community organizers, sharp managers, skillful facilitators, and optimistic visionaries of school environments. What efforts can be made to develop the necessary professional development infrastructure within the state so that shared decision-making initiatives can be effective?
- Research reveals that barriers often include the reception of **mixed signals** from state/district policy. This leads to contradictory support from different levels of administration, creating unclear goals and a lack of accountability. Participants in SDM often are hesitant to challenge well-established norms and roles because they question their authority to do so and lack the necessary resources to make adequate decisions and substantive change. How can policymakers avoid dilemmas involving local versus centralized control?

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