

Issues of Parental Involvement and Governance: What can be learned from the Nova Scotia pilot schools?

Robert B. Macmillan, Ph.D.
B.Ed. Coordinator
Department of Education
St. Francis Xavier University
Antigonish, Nova Scotia

Presented at the second annual AIMS Conference, Fredericton, N.B.
May 4-5, 1997

The author acknowledges the Nova Scotia Teachers' Union financial support of this research. The opinions expressed here are those of the author and neither of the Interuniversity Research Team nor the NSTU.

Within the past forty years, schools have been consolidated, then regionalized such that small, locally operated community schools have largely disappeared from our urban and rural landscapes except in the more inaccessible sections of the countryside. The smaller community schools have now been replaced by larger, more economically feasible structures in which students are exposed to a wide range of courses not available in smaller institutions. In many cases, however, these schools have little contact with the immediate local neighborhood and students usually have to travel by bus to attend them.

Along with the disappearance of these schools, local community control of education also shifted from local boards responsible for one school to large regional districts administering different types of institutions, often in very geographically dispersed and different contexts. As a result, educational decisions affecting many communities are left to elected representative who may or may not have any ties to the areas that they serve nor understanding the gravity of the issues affecting the communities that they represent.

Of interest for this conference is the trend by governments to reduce intervening bureaucracies and the administrative distance from communities by amalgamating school boards and by establishing school advisory councils comprised of local stakeholders. Ideally, these places the responsibility for

decisions among the people who have the most contextual knowledge required to make accurate decisions and who have a vested interest in and concern for the outcome of these decisions.

While trying to establish local control of schools, some governments have responded to parents concerning the type of schools that they wish their children to attend by allowing for choice. Different options have been developed by various jurisdictions and have included the creation of magnet schools under the control of the local school district, the granting of permission to students to attend schools within districts or beyond, the establishment of forms of the voucher system, and the legal provision for charter schools (Carlson, 1996). While the first three usually offer choice within the existing education structure, the last permits parents and educators to establish schools based on their conception of what schools ought to be, albeit within the strictures of the enabling legislation and governing contracts. In effect, parents, community members and educators have been permitted to take the devolution of decision making one step further by advocating for charter schools, one aspect of choice under discussion here at this conference.

However, effective decentralized governance, which might potentially lead to improved student achievement, cannot be implemented merely with the stroke of a legislator's pen. Although researchers have found little empirical evidence to suggest that decentralization impacts positively on student outcomes (Beck & Murphy, 1996), increased local stakeholder involvement has been used by governments and advocacy groups to reconnect schools with their communities. While arguments for changes in governance are well known and have been used when justifying restructuring initiatives, several important issues affecting a positive devolution of authority are either ignored or dismissed. These issues, however, have to be addressed by those contemplating any form of site-based decision-making, whether it is the creation of a new charter school or the development of an advisory council in an existing school. To highlight issues surrounding the implementation of local control, the following discussion uses the findings from a two-year study of eight schools piloting their conception of site-based management in Nova Scotia. These issues are grouped under three headings: Parental Involvement; In-school Role Changes; and Role and Responsibilities of the Council. To be clear at the outset, the authority that school councils had been granted was advisory in nature and could not be classified in the same category with initiatives in England and New Zealand.

Background and Method of the Nova Scotia Study

In the spring of 1994, the Nova Scotia government passed legislation (Bill 104) allowing for the creation of school councils. As an outgrowth of this legislation, the government announced a call for submissions from schools to pilot the implementation of site-based management (SBM). Each of the eight schools selected received grants of \$20,000 in the first year and \$10,000 in the second to facilitate the implementation process, a process designated to begin in earnest in the fall of 1994. A government provision in the initiative called for an evaluation of each pilot's progress.

The Nova Scotia Teachers Union (NSTU) became concerned in October 1994 when the government did not appear to be moving toward investigating and evaluating or even just documenting the process each of the eight sites used to establish their projects. NSTU's concern stemmed from the fact that the government had plans to expand SBM to include all schools, and by not examining the implementation of SBM in the pilots, the Union believed that the government could be missing an excellent opportunity to adapt the concept of SBM to the Nova Scotia context. As a result of this concern, NSTU contacted several researchers from provincial universities and asked for proposed topics for investigation along with an indication of each researcher's area of expertise. From this group, eight of us from four universities were selected in the fall of 1994 and allocated a budget of \$100,000 to be used in a two-year investigation of SBM in the eight pilot sites.

The data collected have been from archival material, from the first and second rounds of interviews, and from two sets of questionnaires sent to each school council, to their school's teachers and to a sample of parents and students. We also kept in personal contact with the schools to track any internal changes or external influences to their project. This database has provided us with quite a detailed picture of the events over the two-year period and with a sense of the scenarios which have played themselves out in each setting. We are now in the end stages of analysis and are preparing the final report to NSTU.

Issues of potential bias or influence arose early, especially considering that funding for the research came from the NSTU. Prior to beginning, the research team discussed this problem with the NSTU coordinator in charge of the project, sought and got agreement from the NSTU that the data would not be used for political reasons, and that the conclusions reached would be those of the research team and not subject to alteration. This arrangement has worked well.

To reduce the possibility of disrupting the schools, each pilot site had two researchers assigned to it, one of whom had the responsibility for coordinating data collection and for being the contact person for the school when issues

arose. Budget was allocated for eight trips per school per year for purposes of familiarization and data collection.

We had to settle various issues of access and to clarify for the schools what our position would be in the process of their implementation of SBM. In the second year of the pilots, these issues were of less importance due to other, more immediate problems created by the government's amalgamation of school boards and the institution of advisory councils in the new Education Act. These actions by the government presented some serious problems for us in that the circumstances for the continuation of the pilots had changed. As well, the government did not appear to be concerned with what the pilots had experienced nor with what has been written in our interim report; they hired outside contract people to import strategies to establish advisory councils not necessarily based on the experience of the eight pilot schools. For the pilot schools, this was disconcerting since they had understood that their efforts would help to inform the legislation. The government's apparent lessening interest in the pilots became evident at a conference in February 1996 when the Department of Education and Culture presented the schools with plaques and thanked them without indicating that these schools would be part of any further discussions about SBM in the province.¹

Issues for Consideration

The pilot projects in Nova Scotia began under somewhat difficult circumstances, and for this reason, provide interesting insight into the dynamics of school-community relationships. In most cases, the initiative for participation started largely through the schools' personnel taking the time to respond to the government's invitation to be pilot sites. Although parents were often included, this often happened almost as an after thought and participation appeared to be limited to those with whom the principal had worked closely on other occasions.

From the outset, the requisite proposals submitted as part of the application process had to be designed in a relatively short period of time after the announcement by the government of the initiative. This meant that interested parties had to work quickly to formulate and to seek approval from the various stakeholder groups in order to be eligible for participation. In some cases, this necessitated the restriction of the development of the proposal to a few key individuals in the school, most often led by the principal and a limited number of teachers and/or parents. Detailed familiarity with the proposal on the part of the

¹ For a more detailed description of the process of data collection and for a preliminary analysis of the results, readers are urged to read **The Interim Report of the Interuniversity Research Team**. The final report is due to be released in July of this year. Both are or will be available from the Nova Scotia Teachers' Union.

larger community of stakeholders often came after the government had designated the school been as a pilot.

The research team began its work during the crucial period of negotiation by stakeholders as they tried to understand the implications and meaning of their participation as a pilot. For this reason, we had access to the process of creation of councils and were privy to the debates and discussions among stakeholders concerning the councils' functioning.

1. Parental Involvement

a) Availability

The pattern of parental participation nearly duplicated the patterns of involvement in Home & School Associations, or some other types of school groups (e.g. trustees). In effect, those individuals who had participated in school activities, or were previously involved in some way with the school maintained those connections through the school advisory councils. For various reasons including work schedules and family commitments, however, their attendance at meetings was not as consistent as that of teachers. The most consistent parent council members often had additional resources which they could devote to such things as research and to the provision of their own babysitters when attending meetings. This latter became an important consideration for some single parents who may not have had available friends or relatives to look after their children nor the resources to hire babysitters to allow them to devote time to council work. It was also a consideration for parents of young families who felt that they did not have the time nor the energy to contribute in the fashion that they wished.

The most active parents have achieved some success in school or had at least some post-secondary education. Parents who may not have had successful experiences in schools were either reticent to participate, or if they did sit as a council member, they did not take a leading role in the discussions and decision-making.

b) Time

To participate fully in the operation of the council, parents had to spend a significant amount of time in preparation for each meeting. Initially they had to learn about the role of the council, about their role as a member, and then later about the general operation of schools. For each meeting, they had to read and digest any pertinent information needed to address the decisions to be made. For

some, the workload precluded intensive involvement beyond the first year of office and reduced the likelihood of their running for a second term. As with those parents on council, the time spent on the business of the council before, during and after each meeting caused some non-council parents to hesitate or to refuse to let their names stand for membership.

c) Minority Control

In the schools where close community ties and positive parental involvement already existed or when the principal worked to establish those ties and involvement, the community had been invited to participate and felt that they had a voice. To maintain this positive attitude, the school councils had to be given authority to make real decisions about their schools or to have significant and evident influence on the operation of the school. Dissatisfaction and potential conflict or withdrawal of services resulted when they felt that their contributions were not acknowledged nor appreciated.

In schools where the school-community relationships had to be built, a fair amount of suspicion existed until people had the opportunity to work together, something, which took time and effort by the principal, and the council. In these cases, single-issue or agenda-driven lobby groups were a concern for council members, especially for the teachers and principals who perceived potential interference in classroom instruction and in personnel issues.

2. In-school Role Changes

a) Administrators' Role

The principal's leadership was crucial to the creation of the initiative and to the success of the councils' operation. Often functioning as a Chief Executive Officer heading a board of directors, they provided the information about district policy, about financial arrangements, and about school structure to the council, and provided advice about decisions contemplated by the council. Once decisions had been made or if additional data was required, principals facilitated communication among the stakeholder groups and the implementation of decisions. However, in all pilots, the workload increased and changed for the principals as a direct result of this initiative. For some, one-half of their time was spent on council duties, thus decreasing the amount of time they could spend on such things as instructional leadership, discipline and teacher support. To ensure that these duties were addressed, vice-principals often assumed more responsibility, and when this became problematic, teachers developed alternate means of support among colleagues.

Of the eight principals involved in the writing of the proposals or in their execution, not one is left in that office. Some used the experience as an opportunity for career advancement while others have left administration entirely. In two schools, the principals responsible for the development of the proposals left their schools prior to the implementation of the proposals, and now, even their replacements have left. While the pilots provided 'valuable experience for some individuals, others appeared to become caught in a political crossfire and decided or were encouraged to leave the position.

b) Teachers' Role

Consistent with some of the research (e.g., Weiss, Cambone & Wyeth, 1992) many teachers not on council believed that the council did not affect how they worked, but they did feel excluded from the discussions about school issues. While longstanding staff members may not have been threatened by the changes, this differed in schools with uncertain futures. In these schools, actions taken by council could have implications for employment; hence decisions made were of keen interest for all teachers.

Teachers on council seconded what parents stated about the extensive amount of time that they spent on council business. Since they felt that they needed to be intimately involved in the project as it might affect their future, they reallocated time to the project from their leisure hours. For some teachers, this created additional strains on them professionally as they often used this time for additional planning and marking. Non-council teachers saw this practice and the stress it created in their colleagues, so they, like most parents, stated that they would continue to avoid participation until such time as their professional and personal lives could withstand the additional pressures.

3. Role & Responsibilities of Council

a) Actual Range of Control Allowed by Laws Regulations and Policy

Depending on the school and its experience with community involvement, the initial phase of the council's business often focused on what expectations for the council that each stakeholder group had. Where a strong, publicly known and approved focus already existed, these discussions moved quickly to the necessary work of implementing the pilot school's goals. In schools where the expectations of each group differed, much time had to be spent discussing, debating and clarifying the different perspectives, and finally developing a common ground on which the council could begin its work. In some cases, these expectations had been based on misunderstandings of the range of the council's

powers within the enabling legislation, therefore, disillusion and dissatisfaction had to be overcome for the council to function as a unified and effective group.

Once these issues had been resolved, or at least consensus reached, the councils moved to establish strategic plans and to implement the procedure leading to the achievement of the goals in their initial proposals. Most council members, parents and teachers alike, did not want to deal with personnel issues and did not feel that they had the qualifications to address curricular matters. They also found that many decisions that they wanted to make could not be made at the council level as the parameters and resources extended into the area of responsibility of the school districts and the government. In at least one case, the council came into conflict with the school district over an issue of ownership of resources sought out by and donated to the school.

b) Procedures

Most councils functioned by consensus. This appeared to work quite well until no consensus could be achieved on an issue, then either an alternate means of decision making had to be found or extensive discussions took place in an attempt to resolve the impasse. In all cases, clear, known and understood procedures for operating enabled the councils to proceed quickly to achieve their intended goals.

Conclusions and Implications for School Choice

Whether local control should be granted or sought through such initiatives as charter schools is not part of this discussion. What has been explored here is how people tried to implement a form of local control. When examining the data, only one school appears to have successfully implemented all of its goals as outlined in the initial proposal largely due to the highly contextual factors influencing the process (e.g., parental involvement, principal leadership, focused goals). Other schools succeeded to a greater or lesser extent, and would likely have been more successful if given more time by the government to come to understand local control in their contexts. Why the others did not appear to be as successful is not a mystery since we know that such dramatic shifts in school operation requires time to implement properly (Fullan, 1993).

Local control of education through councils can work, but it cannot do so immediately; people need time and guidance to develop an understanding of how to work together to create the circumstances for success. In a couple of our cases, the councils did work well from the outset, but leadership, ground rules for involvement, and clear, well-thought out, context specific, and achievable goals made the difference. Where these were not present, a problem of focus

occurred, initial involvement suffered and extensive periods of time had to be spent establishing a working relationship among all parties. The problem, as I see it, is that this is an innovation which is being used as an educational panacea. Unfortunately, it is being imposed without careful consideration of context, without adequate initial and ongoing preparation of all stakeholder groups, without the elaboration of a clear sense of its direction and potential outcomes, and most importantly, without determining if the innovation will actually remedy the perceived ills.

References

Beck, L. & Murphy, J. (1996). **The four imperatives of a successful school**. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Carlson, R. (1996). **Reframing & reform**. White Plains, NY: Longman.

Fullan, M. (1993). **Change Forces**. London: The Falmer Press.

Weiss, C., Cambone, J. & Wyeth, A. (1992). Trouble in paradise: Teacher conflicts in shared decision-making. **Educational Administration Quarterly**, 28 (3): 350-367.