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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of administrators of small rural districts hold about school-based management (SBM) and to compare them with the perceptions of administrators in larger, nonrural districts. Administrators' perceptions of what should occur in SBM were compared with what they perceived does occur. Responses originally collected for the 1988 Executive Educator Survey (Heller and others, 1989) were reanalyzed for this study (N=619). Comparisons were made using the chi-square test for differences in probabilities. The McNemar test for significance of changes was used to examine within-group differences. The findings suggest that the organizational complexity and hierarchical structure of larger districts foster more marked discrepancies between the vision and reality of SBM than in small rural districts. Quantitative data are given for SBM participants, decision-making participants, the areas a school should have authority over, and the most serious obstacles to SBM. The findings suggest that: (1) the reality of SBM is more consistent than expectations of what it should be; and (2) on the distinction between what SBM should be and what SBM is, there is greater compatibility among the perceptions of administrators from small rural districts than among those of administrators from larger, nonrural districts. (RR)

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Comparing Administrators' Perceptions of SBM¹

Symposium 8.8:
"Challenging Assumptions about Economies of Scale and
'Smallness' Policy in School Organization"

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¹ Abbreviated version of a study that will appear in *Educational Considerations*, Spring 1992.

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Comparing Administrators' Perceptions of SBM

Stephen L. Jacobson & Beth Woodworth

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of administrators in small rural districts about SBM, and compare them with the perceptions of administrators in larger, non-rural districts. Administrators' perceptions of what should occur in terms of SBM were compared with what they perceived does occur. The findings suggest that the organizational complexity and hierarchical structure of larger districts foster more marked discrepancies between the vision and reality of SBM than in small rural districts.

Introduction

Over the past few years there has emerged a growing body of literature that raises serious questions about the long-held assumption that "bigger is better" when it comes to school-size units of governance (Coleman, 1986; Goodlad, 1984; Haller & Monk, 1988; Lamitie, 1989; Walberg & Fowler, 1987). Advantages previously thought attainable only through economies of scale (Conant, 1959) are now believed achievable, and even outweighed, by the academic and social benefits of smaller, more manageable educational units (Walberg, 1989).

Under the rubric of "school-based management" (SBM), an emergent "small is beautiful" orientation has helped to promote changes in the governance structures of some of the largest school districts in the U.S. The Chicago City School District, for example, has begun the process of decentralization by shifting considerable authority from its central bureaucracy to local school councils in each of its nearly 600 public schools. Cooper (1990) has suggested that this shift in the locus of decision making can be expected to bring with it troublesome periods of transition, as participants in the process realign their respective role-relationships.

In contrast to multi-site, urban districts, small rural districts are often comprised of but one or two geographically isolated schools. In these districts, SBM may simply be a reality of practice since decision making, by necessity, is reduced to the school site. If this is the case, we might expect administrators in small rural districts to have had more first hand experience with the realities of site autonomy and thus less discrepancy than their urban counterparts between what they believe SBM 'SHOULD' be, and what 'DOES' occur.

Study Design

Responses originally collected for the 1989 *Executive Educator* (Heller, et al., 1989) nationwide survey of school executives were reanalyzed for this study. Respondents were categorized on the basis of district size and demographics, producing two groups: (1) 195 administrators from small rural districts with enrollment less than 1000; and, (2) 913 administrators from non-rural districts with enrollment greater than 1000.

For this study, we focused on five key questions:

- (1) Who should participate in SBM?
- (2) Who, presently, does participate in decision-making?
- (3) What areas should a school have authority over?
- (4) What areas does your school have authority over?
- (5) What are the most serious obstacles to SBM?

Only those administrators who indicated that their districts currently have SBM in effect were asked to respond to questions #2 and #4. For these two questions the number of respondents was reduced to

85, or 43.6% of the sample from small rural districts, and 534 or 58.5% of the sample from the larger, non-rural districts.

Responses of the administrators from the small rural districts were then compared to those of their counterparts from larger, non-rural districts using the chi-square test for differences in probabilities. Next we used the McNemar test for significance of changes to examine within-group differences in the SHOULD - DOES categories.

Findings

(1) Who should participate in SBM?

Administrators in small rural districts selected principals (99.5%), teachers (93.8%), the superintendent (81.4%), the school board (69.6%), parents (68.0%), students (53.1%), and the community (52.6%).

Administrators from larger, non-rural districts also named principals (99.1%) and teachers (98.0%) most often, but after these first two, differences appear between the two groups. For example, significantly more non-rural administrators thought parents should participate, but they named the school board and superintendent significantly less often.

(2) Who does participate in decision-making?

From high to low (with rurals reported first), administrators identified principals (98.8%, 98.3%), teachers (90.6%, 83.3%), superintendent (84.7%, 71.0%), school board (68.2%, 45.3%), parents (36.5%, 40.4%), students (32.9%, 26.0%), and the community (27.1%, 23.4%). The only differences were the superintendent and school board being selected more often ($p < .01$) by the rural administrators.

When we compare the SHOULD - DOES perceptions of rural administrators, the rank-order is identical. In contrast, the SHOULD - DOES perceptions of the non-rural administrators differ in every category but the principal and school board. Furthermore, while a significantly greater percentage would like to see teachers participate ($p < .01$), non-rural administrators also perceive significantly more superintendent involvement than they believe there should be ($p < .01$).

(3) What areas should a school have authority over?

Administrators in small rural districts selected schedule (92.1%), purchases (78.0%), texts (74.9%), curriculum (73.8%), staffing (72.8%), budgeting (69.1%), maintenance (66.5%), hiring (59.2%), evaluations (47.1%), school calendar (26.7%), length of day (26.2%), pay raises (17.3%), and starting salary (14.7%).

Administrators from non-rural districts also named schedule (94.6%) and purchases (85.6%) most often, selecting purchases significantly more often than their rural counterparts ($p < .01$). Other areas named more often were budgeting (84.4%, $p < .01$) and staffing (80.6%, $p < .05$). Areas named less often ($p < .01$) were curriculum (55.6%), texts (54.0%), length of day (10.9%), calendar (9.3%), starting salary (3.9%), and teacher evaluations (33.8%).

(4) What areas does your school have authority over?

Administrators in small rural districts selected schedule (91.7%), purchases (84.5%), texts (84.5%), curriculum (78.6%), staffing (72.6%), maintenance (66.7%), budgeting (63.1%), hiring (44.0%), evaluations

(42.9%), school calendar (29.8%), length of day (26.2%), pay raises (22.6%), and starting salary (21.4%).

Administrators from larger, non-rural districts named schedule (90.4%) and purchases (84.1%) most often. Budgeting (75.8%) was named more often ($p < .05$), while curriculum (44.4%), texts (44.6%), length of day (4.0%), calendar (5.9%), starting salary (0.9%), pay raises (2.1%), maintenance (49.6%), and teacher evaluations (16.7%) less often ($p < .01$) than by non-rural administrators.

The only differences between what administrators from small rural districts perceive schools should have authority over and what they do have are hiring ($p < .01$) and length of day ($p < .05$). A greater percentage feel that their school should have authority over hiring, while a greater number feel that their school should have control over the length of the school day but do not, than believe their school should not have control over the length of the school day but do.

Though not statistically significant, rural respondents believe their schools have more authority over curriculum, texts, purchases, calendar, starting salary, and raises than they should have.

The responses of administrators from the non-rural districts revealed significant differences across all 13 areas ($p < .01$). Specifically, they believe that school-sites should have more authority over all areas than they presently do.

(5) What are the most serious obstacles to SBM?

Administrators in small rural districts identified labor contracts (30.2%), school board policies (21.9%), state law (20.1%), Other (18.9%), and accreditation standards (8.9%). The most frequently

identified 'Other' obstacle was resistance to change, followed by lack of resources and accountability.

For non-rural administrators, labor contracts (44.2%) and school board policies (20.6%) were the most frequent obstacles. The 'Other' obstacles were resistance to change and lack of resources, as well as the desire for standardization, difficulties with politics, accountability, communications, lack of trust, and apathy.

Summary and Conclusions

Marked differences exist in the perceptions of administrators from small rural districts and those of administrators from larger, non-rural districts when they are queried about SBM. Administrators differed both in who they believe should participate in SBM and what areas should be governed at the school site. Yet, in those districts where SBM has been implemented, there is less discrepancy. In other words, the findings suggest that (1) the reality of SBM is more consistent than expectations of what it should be, and (2) that there is greater compatibility in the perceptions of administrators from small rural districts than those of administrators from larger, non-rural districts between what SBM should be and what SBM is.

While rural administrators believe there should be greater participation by parents, students and community members, the relative involvement of these constituencies appears to be pretty much as they perceive it should be. In contrast, administrators from larger, non-rural districts idealize a greater level of participation for teachers, parents, students, and the community than SBM appears to allow.

Furthermore, the superintendent appears to be a participant in SBM significantly more often than they would prefer.

While administrators in the two groups desire and perceive principals and teachers as being SBM's key players, non-rural administrators are next most desirous of parental involvement, while rural administrators rank both the superintendent and school board ahead of parents. In the light of practice, both groups more often report superintendent and school board participation in SBM than parental. We speculate that parents and community members in small rural districts have greater access to the superintendent and school board, thus, they participate in decision making indirectly. Rural administrators appear to recognize this indirect participation of parents and the community as a reality of their workplace.

Parents and community members in larger, non-rural districts typically have less access to the superintendent and school board, therefore, administrators from these districts believe that the involvement of parents and community members should be formalized. But once SBM is instituted and authority decentralized, traditional decision makers such as the superintendent and school board become more accessible, and, as in the smaller districts, parents and community members can participate informally. This finding is consistent with Clune and White's (1988: 28) observation that, "decision-making authority is not necessarily redirected within the school, but instead is simply given to people who have traditionally been in charge."

Discrepancies in the SHOULD - DOES perceptions of administrators from larger, non-rural districts are consistent with Cooper's conception of instability and transition through shifts in organizational control.

While administrators in these districts would like to see greater school-site authority over all 13 areas, they feel pressure from both the teachers' union and the community to standardize policies and practices across sites. While administrators in both groups ranked labor contracts first in terms of obstacles to SBM, it was identified far more frequently in the larger, non-rural districts (44.2%) than in the small rural districts (30.2%). Furthermore, the issue of standardization was mentioned only by administrators from the larger districts.

Clune and White (1988: 16) have suggested that for many districts SBM may be more a 'frame of mind' than a 'structured, technical system.' Whether one perceives decision making in small rural districts as highly decentralized or simply centralized on a reduced scale, our findings suggest that the existing structural and organizational realities of these districts produce remarkable similarities between the vision and reality of SBM.

One might imagine that for administrators in larger, non-rural districts, the disparity between their vision of SBM and its practical reality may produce a sense of frustration if they are unable to reconcile the two. The findings suggest that while they feel there should be more teacher, parent, student, and community involvement in decision-making, there will probably be less than they desire. And, while they feel there should be less superintendent involvement in decision-making, there will probably be more. Furthermore, they need to reconcile themselves to the fact that SBM will probably yield less site autonomy across all areas of decision making than they anticipate.

The compatibility between the vision and reality of SBM in small rural districts make these ideal sites for analyses of the dynamics of increased school site autonomy. As our Nation's larger districts begin experimenting with decentralization, the experiences of these smaller districts may help to inform their decisions and expectations.

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