DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 436 823 EA 030 150

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TITLE School Board Chair Understandings about School Restructuring in North Carolina: Implications for Policy.
PUB DATE 1997-03-00
NOTE 39p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, March 24-28, 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Boards of Education; Educational Change; Educational Policy; Elementary Secondary Education; Participative Decision Making; *Politics of Education; School Administration; *School Based Management; School District Autonomy; *School Restructuring
IDENTIFIERS *North Carolina

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study that investigated how local school board chairs (N=16) in North Carolina framed school restructuring. It examines major problems awaiting to be addressed in public education and discusses what board members can do to create the conditions under which schools help students become productive citizens. Data collected through interviews and state documents were analyzed inductively. Findings show that decentralization and state-education agency downsizing translated into autonomy and responsibility for local decision making. These two realities were positioned within a perspective that the state bureaucracy had not improved schools to the satisfaction of their customers, mainly parents and business leaders. These chairs sensed that schooling must be done differently. However, as the external buffering of the state-education agency evaporated, local boards by default became the decision makers and policy setters in an increasingly turbulent environment. Subsequently, these chairs were ambivalent about decentralization, which was perceived as providing little cohesive direction. School restructuring emerged as a vague, broadly cast dissatisfaction with the status quo. Only 5 of the 16 chairs expressed a systemic perspective grounded in a critique of traditional U.S. schooling. As downsizing continues, local boards will find themselves playing the unaccustomed role of major policy setters. (Contains 32 references.) (RJM)

School Board Chair Understandings About School Restructuring in North Carolina: Implications for Policy

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Abstract

Investigators probed one state's board chairs (n = 16) about how they framed school restructuring. Data, collected through interview and mining of state documents, were analyzed inductively. Decentralization and state education agency downsizing translated into autonomy and responsibility for local decisionmaking. These two political realities were positioned within a perspective that the state bureaucracy had not improved schools to the satisfaction of their customers, mainly parents and business leaders. These chairs sensed that schooling must be done differently. Yet, as the external buffering hitherto provided by the SEA evaporated, local boards by default became the decisonmakers and policysetters in an increasingly turbulent environment. Not surprising, these chairs were ambivalent about decentralization, which in this state was perceived as providing little cohesive direction, and were not hesitant to point out its downside. School restructuring emerges as a vague, broadly-cast dissatisfaction with the status quo: an ideology with little cohesive focus. That only 5 of the 16 chairs could express a systemic perspective grounded in critique of traditional U.S. schooling, therefore, may be cause for alarm.

School Board Chair Understandings About School Restructuring in North Carolina: Implications for Policy

Until the governance role of local school boards is addressed, our intentions to redefine schooling will have limited impact, according to policymakers in a landmark study of local governance (Task Force on School Governance, Twentieth Century Fund (1992). School boards and their potential for cohesive, district-wide leadership are in the spotlight, because school restructuring is now viewed systemically with local boards a main cog in the organization machinery (Smith & O'Day, 1991; Goertz, Floden, & O'Day, 1996). Reorganizing schools as partnerships among principals, teachers, students and parents (Seeley, 1981) in which students are required to use their minds well (Sizer, 1992) requires that all players on the schooling stage change their roles and relationships (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988).

We cannot change one piece of the reform puzzle, however, without that piece affecting the configuration of other pieces. Teachers cannot change their relationships with students unless principals begin sharing decisionmaking with teachers. Principals cannot share decisionmaking unless they receive commensurate autonomy from central office personnel, who are administrative arms of local boards (cf. Sarason, 1990). The last piece of the district-level reform puzzle is the local board, which hires the superintendent and sets district policy. Local boards have considerable district-wide influence on reform efforts (Clark, Lotto, & Astuto, 1984).

> Kirst (1994, p. 379) summarizes the power of local boards: School boards play a legislative role when they adopt budgets, pass regulations, and set policies. Moreover, they provide the constituent-services component of a legislator's district office. Parents phone board members about fixing showers in locker rooms, relocating school-crossing guards .... School boards play an executive role when they implement policy. Many school boards approve not only the budget, but almost every expenditure and contract for services.

The pressure is on for local boards to reconceptualize their thinking along student performance and productivity lines--or get out of the way (Elmore cited by Harrington-Lueker, 1993). Concludes James Guthrie (cited by Harrington-Lueker, 1993, p. 31): "Teachers have gotten attention; national goals have gotten attention. Now it's the school board's turn." The potential for local boards to be major restructuring players becomes even greater as decisionmaking is decentralized from state education agencies to districts. A logical policy implication would be that as power is realigned, local boards will be playing a more critical role in providing cohesive school policy attuned to district-level needs (Kirst cited by Harrington-Lueker, 1993). After concluding that state policy was fragmented into conflicting self-interest groups, Timar (1989) advocated that local boards provide the leadership necessary in galvanizing support from community leaders, local professional associations, and central office administrators. Otherwise, we will continue to spin our wheels and reform will continue to lurch on without cohesive

direction.

The Purpose of This Research

Policy scholars conclude that local boards have the potential of being major players in the reform movement. Boards have considerable power and they can act as a central clearing house in mediating among various interest groups. Local boards, however, are also viewed somewhat skeptically. They tend to meddle in political issues instead of setting and implementing policy; they also are elected by less than fifteen percent of the voting public (Rallis & Criscoe, 1993)--hardly a democratic endorsement of one of our most civic-minded institutions.

A logical question becomes: In this age of accelerated school reform, how do school boards conceptualize school restructuring? For how they visualize this admittedly elusive term affects their potential contribution as reform players. In this paper, investigators report on a study in which they probed North Carolina board chairs about how they framed school restructuring. What were the major problems to be addressed in public education? What about the external pressure to change schooling? How can board members help create the conditions under which our schools help all students become thoughtful and productive citizens? Given these findings, what implications then can be made for policy formulation at the district level?

Methodology

Research Participants

Our board chairs (n = 16; 10 male; 6 females) volunteered to

participate in this study at the annual (January 1995) North Carolina School Board Association meeting. Out of a pool of 119 districts, our participants represented a cross section of district size: 2 from small districts (< 2,600 students), 10 from medium districts (≤ 12,700), and 4 from large districts (> 12,700). At that meeting the investigators collected names, addresses, and phone numbers on a prearranged form. In March they called each participant, presented a brief description of the project, promised anonymity regarding its results, and scheduled phone interviews (May-July).

Data Collection

Data were collected through (a) mining of documents, and (b) the conversation interview format (Patton, 1990). Legislative records and newspaper accounts were examined in providing the state policy context. The telephone interviews lasted from 40 minutes to an hour. Data were recorded and then transcribed for analysis. Three central interview questions were designed within the state policy context outlined above:

1. "How do you see restructuring affecting public education at the state and local levels in this state?"

2. "Why has school choice become such a big issue in this state?"

3. "What is your reaction to the recent legislation on school decentralization?"

The investigators encouraged chairs to elaborate on these broad questions and probed for deeper conceptual understandings of school restructuring with followup questions, such as: "Do you

mean this trend is here to stay?" Or, "So you think restructuring is a fad that will just go away?" "Why do you see a growing dependency on superintendents?" They also provided opportunity for chairs to describe their district context in clarifying responses.

Analysis

The investigators, a university professor and a PhD student in research and policy analysis, coded and analyzed data according to principles of inductive research in providing descriptive themes and assertions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data were continuously compared for goodness of fit as they were collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) in making tentative generalizations. The investigators each made four iterations through the data and constructed matrixes in which chair responses were critiqued and verified (Miles & Huberman, 1993). Matrices then were exchanged and the data sifted through once again to confirm and adjust matrices where there were disagreements.

Findings were considered trustworthy only when there was consistent evidence supporting each assertion and when divergent perspectives within each theme were accounted for. Validity was considered not a property of instruments but a property of arguments (Cronbach 1988).

Limitation to This Study

There were two study limitations. Since these chairs volunteered for this study, the investigators can make no claims of representative sampling. The study, instead, was purposeful: What understandings do a selected group of chairs have about school restructuring? Self-selected chairs, not this state,

comprised the unit of analysis, although broader implications presumably exist for states in which conditions may be similar. Second, given the legislative context described below, chairs had a pre-study bias regarding the issue of decentralization. This element of restructuring logically was in the policy forefront. In the next section we describe the state policy context before moving on to study findings.

The State Policy Context: Discontent, Confusion, and Now Decentralization

During its 1995 session, the North Carolina General Assembly instructed the State Board of Education to formulate a comprehensive reform plan aimed at reorganizing the statewide system of public schools (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 1995). Lawmakers were concerned that the public schools were not making satisfactory progress in raising student achievement levels. Intended to usher in a new era of school reform and boost the state's low national rankings, the School-Based Management and Accountability Program (Senate Bill 1139) was ratified the following year and dubbed the ABCs of Public Education, an acronym standing for strong accountability, emphasis on the basics and high educational standards, and maximum local control. The plan has raised expectations for significant school improvement because of its unusual promise to trade off deregulation in exchange for more stringent accountability of student outcomes.

The ABCs are designed to provide local schools the needed flexibility to do what principals, teachers, and parents believe

best for students. Instead of being mandated from the state capital, pedagogical decisions such as class size and textbook selection are to be made locally. In exchange for this additional discretionary freedom, the plan holds schools individually accountable for meeting and improving student performance outcomes. As part of its emphasis on strengthening basic academics, the focus of the ABCs testing program is on reading, writing, and mathematics for grades K-8. End-of-grade standardized tests are used to determine baseline levels of performance for comparing and measuring growth. The state's performance expectations are for a minimum of a year's academic growth per year of schooling. Each school's rate of growth is determined through a statistical analysis of its performance the previous year. Progress will be defined by a single number, either positive or negative. Exemplary growth will be considered 110% of the expected growth rate (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 1996).

The plan retains core elements of the current K-12 statewide testing program while reducing by half the previous array of nearly 40 exams. Financial incentive awards of up to $1000 per teacher will be awarded to schools achieving at high levels. Test scores of all schools will be made public in the hope that competition will spur schools to improve performance. For schools that fall short of achieving their designated growth standard, state assistance teams will intervene. Voluntary assistance also will be provided for low performing schools that request it.

In the event that assistance efforts fail to bring about

acceptable improvement, more drastic intervention might occur. An assistance team has the authority to replace a school's principal if deemed necessary, and it can recommend that tenure be temporarily revoked from teachers. Estimates are that only about 2% of this state's approximately 2000 schools are likely to ever face a takeover. About 30% are expected to earn incentive pay for progress they would have made anyway. Of the remaining schools that do not qualify as extreme cases--nearly two-thirds of the state total--they would be left alone (Simmons, 1996).

Since state policy making has not been immune to national influences, the ABCs plan must be seen in relation to a national deregulatory trend aimed at slashing both federal and state bureaucracies while ratcheting up the level of local inputs and responsibility (Fuhrman & Elmore, 1995). Furthermore, the plan must be understood within a dual context: the first historic in which a succession of education reform initiatives have failed to achieve their purported goals and a second context reflecting the evolving attitudes of school leaders, policy makers, and state officials about how best to restore flagging public confidence in a school system regarded by many as over-centralized and over-regulated (Education Week, 1997). Many school and business leaders are disturbed that North Carolina's historically rule-bound system of public education has failed to keep pace with the changing demands of the 21st century workplace (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 1995). The public, judging many of the state's schools to be of low quality, plagued by violence and lack of discipline, can be equally as harsh (Mooneyham, 1996).

Perhaps this widespread discontent is symptomatic of a deeper malaise, one that public education leaders share with the voters: confusion over which course of education reform to steer. Over the last decade and a half, North Carolina has had four major reform initiatives. The first came in the early 1980s, when former governor Jim Martin convinced the General Assembly to go along with a Career Ladder plan for the state's teachers, whose salaries hovered well below the national average. Then in 1984, the legislature made an abrupt turn and requested the State Board of Education to design and cost out a Basic Education Program (BEP). Enacted by the General Assembly in 1985, the BEP was constructed around a common core of knowledge and skills which every child was expected to master in order to graduate from high school (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 1988).

Although still on the books, the BEP was superseded in 1989 by the Performance-Based Accountability Program (PBAP), commonly known as Senate Bill 2. The program required the State Board of Education to devise a new set of school performance indicators that would be used to gauge the degree of flexibility granted to each school that met or exceeded expectations. A bureaucratic misadventure, the sharp increase in paperwork, arcane rule changes, and time-consuming procedures for applying for waivers assured that it would never win enough popularity among practitioners or administrators to save it from disaster.

Finally in 1995, a General Assembly significantly more conservative than any in recent history initiated a massive reorganization of the state education agency (SEA). Nearly four-

hundred jobs were eliminated, cutting the workforce by about half and demoralizing many of the remaining staff. As part of this housecleaning operation, the General Assembly also removed considerable power from the chief state school officer and reallocated it to the State Board, which functioned under the assembly's supervision.

The message sent to school leaders in the wake of these recent legislative actions was unequivocal, as were the implications for future education decision-making. The supreme governing body had lost faith in the SEA's capacity to manage effectively the state's education charge. Furthermore, they had doubts about allowing a popularly elected State Superintendent to act as its executive director. Increasingly, education decisions would emanate from the legislature floor, apparently the only safe repository of the public trust. As part of this relocation of power and authority, the entire framework of public education was reexamined, from state education laws to local school organization. The strategies called for on paper in the ABCs plan mark a significant departure in the way North Carolina conceives of administering and monitoring its public education services.

Although it is too soon to be certain, the hesitancy to free-up districts and empower local communities to try innovative approaches to teaching and learning may finally be waning. As dissatisfaction with the status quo has become more urgent, officials may finally be heeding the protests. It is generally acknowledged that previous efforts at reform and deregulation were timidly designed and incapable of overcoming system inertia. If

lessons have been learned from these efforts, the ABCs plan should bring a fresh approach to the issue of power differentials amongst the members of the education community. Yet even in the midst of potentially sweeping change, the blemished record of reforms tried and lost seems to be undermining confidence about the prospects of the ABCs. Will it also not succeed? In describing the trajectory of school reform in North Carolina, one principal confided: "The pendulum swings left, and we all jerk left. Then it swings over here, and we all jerk over here. You can't really afford to follow because I'm not sure the state as a whole knows where it's going" (Simmons, 1996, p. 1A).

Study Findings

Our study findings played themselves out in five major themes.

More Autonomy for Local Boards Through State Education Agency Downsizing

Board chairs generally framed school restructuring as more autonomy at local board level at the expense of the state education agency. Four categories, of which decentralization was the most prevalent, comprised this theme.

At the micro level some types of decisions now were being viewed as better made at the school-level as opposed to either the local or state board levels. One chair termed these decisions as "Those affecting the school operation. For example, if they want to have a more flexible schedule of the school day, let them have the freedom to do that ... as long as they have done their homework." Decentralization, defined by another chair, meant that

the principal should be more than a manager by functioning as a resource. A third chair referred to site-based management in which principals and teachers make decisions about what works best for them. Another chair with a slightly different perspective was adamant that decentralization could play out into greater parent influence both in supporting school activities and in transforming schools into community centers. At the macro level the entire formal political system should devolve to the district. According to one chair: "The state superintendent ought to be hired by the state board of education; the state board ought to be elected as district representatives, so I can vote on the person representing my district."

Second, there was too much government and interference at the state level. The state capital " ... has forgotten what it is like down here in Elliot County where we don't have a high dropout rate and no low income housing. We are in touch with what our local needs are and don't need a lot of money spent on Smart Start [an early-childhood intervention program that provides health and child care and developmental learning experiences to disadvantaged parents and families]." Top-heavy government, according to another chair, also implied excessive confusion:

> There is something every time we have a change in the legislature, a change in Congress, or a change in presidents and our teachers have really gotten right jaded. You know something comes along like PBAP and they kind of roll their eyes and say, "Well, you know we'll do this for two years and then they'll come up with something different." We're

spending entirely too much energy addressing things like that.

Commented another chair: "We have this great idea about block scheduling, and then the state won't let us reschedule high school exams. The left hand doesn't even know what the right hand is doing." More flexibility was targeted as the key. One chair suggested giving local boards more leeway in teacher certification: "To teach middle school math, I'm not sure you need a person with a math degree in calculus. You need someone skilled in working with that age group of children." Another chair summed up the general sentiment: "There's too much involvement in the state telling us that we have to do this, we have to do that. They should send us a certain amount of money and each local unit should use that money in any manner that they need to."

Third, there was a clear need to eliminate wasteful bureaucracy. This chair summed up this need:

> At the local level there are opportunities both to economize and streamline as every business is doing now .... My idea is to make things more efficient ... by removing a few unnecessary bureaucrats in our department that may be repeating the same services.

No chairs wanted simply to spend less money. The money saved was still to be spent on education. In downsizing at both the state and local levels ("Taking away from the state bureaucracy"; "Far less positions at the central office"), several chairs alluded to reallocating the money to reduce class size--especially at the elementary level.

Fourth, districts wanted more accountability for individual schools. One chair remarked: "Downsizing brings more responsibility to districts than to building sites." Another chair commented: "Site-based management gives the teachers the chance for more input--not have administrators coming from the top down--and make them accountable."

These four categories (decentralization, government interference, wasteful bureaucracy, and school accountability) reflect broad-based dissatisfaction with "big government," a perspective also heard in national debates about redefining government. The middle government level (local board) and lower government level (schools) both need discretion in making the best decisions for their children. State-level government was perceived as cumbersome and intrusive in local decisionmaking.

A Need To Do Business Differently: The "State" Cannot Get the Job Done

There was widespread agreement that the "state" (i.e., state education agency and state board) was unable to change and improve schools and student achievement. One chair concluded: "The 'old system from the state capital' did not work; just look at our state's national ranking." Another chair used this example:

> The state wanted us to do a school improvement plan using parents, teachers, and community people. The plan had to be approved by the [state] school board by such and such a date. We mailed it to the state, which didn't look at it until the next year. The state was very effective in [mandating] what they wanted, but somehow in the translation, we didn't get it

> .... The state provides workshops and public events, but these things do not galvanize action at the local level. All these workshops [on restructuring] were done first class; however, without local leadership it just sits dead in the water.

Legislators also had had their day with the 1989 passage of Senate Bill 2, intended according to one chair to allocate more authority at the local level. Yet the principal at the school (where this chair at the time was a teacher) was autocratic. Never attending any site-based committee meetings, he called in three teachers the day before the improvement plans were due and developed his own plan. Another chair used a classroom as an example of the current reform movement not producing the desirable outcome:

> My daughter's in fourth grade and I said, "Emily, are you doing cooperative learning?" "Oh, yeah. We got together in a group." I said, "What did you do?" "The teacher gave us ten sentences and we were supposed to put the punctuation in." Hey, the smartest person in the group knows where to put the commas in and the rest of them sit there, and then they turn the papers in. The teacher thinks that she's using cooperative learning skills. I mean isn't that pathetic?

Districts had grown impatient waiting for the state to deliver something substantial that could be used to guide reform. Both state officials and legislators had had their opportunities and been unable to make reform work. Yet there was a sense that a real crisis was at hand: "If we don't get a grip on restructuring,

then public education's going to sink deeper and deeper .... I mean parents aren't going to continue to see their children get sub-standard education." Another chair summed up this theme: "Things aren't working out now, so schools and districts need to carry the ball. Let's let the districts decide what we want to do. If it causes a problem at the state level, we'll find a way to work around it."

More Responsibility for Boards Making Decisions and Policies Translate Into More Heat From the Public

Restructuring was framed by board chairs as the need for local autonomy and downsizing, and many expressed the belief that it could be administered as an antidote to state policy that has not resulted in school change and improvement. Unfortunately, this kind of single-variable, cause-and-effect reasoning cannot begin to solve complex problems of policy direction and leadership. If anything, these negatives merely devolve major reform issues to the local level, and in doing so exacerbate the issues. What initiatives boards take becomes the problem.

If the rules of the game have indeed changed, then local board chairs now confront a new situation. In the days of perceived state (i.e. "top-down") leadership, local officials could always explain away school failure by attributing it to unresponsive state-level policy. Now boards are expected to make policies that work in the context of local conditions. Under this new arrangement, they have both autonomy and accountability. But policy made at the local level is inseparable from practice: Boards are now confronted with the day-to-day consequences of

their policy actions without the benefit of a buffer zone. Local boards inherit major controversies that previously were the liability of the state, controversies they may be unprepared to resolve or unwilling to confront. The issue of school privatization and school choice illustrates this theme.

These chairs without exception believed that school choice defined by vouchers and privatization would be detrimental to schools. One chair, for instance, saw vouchers as resegregating schools: "In the inner city schools, vouchers would take all the good children out of the public schools and leave the harder-to-educate." What was critical to good schools was a core of active, concerned parents who would fight to make things better. If these parents were given the opportunity to withdraw from public schools (as with vouchers), they might do so, and public schools would collapse.

Yet some chairs were careful to differentiate between vouchers and privatization on the one hand and intra-district choice on the other. Some saw public school choice as potentially beneficial. One chair commented: "Choice might be perceived as a threat by some but there's some intrigue for us believing in free enterprise and competition, as long as it's done correctly and thoughtfully."

Others, however, saw even intradistrict choice as an invitation to disaster. One chair firmly believed that schools were never going to be equally good. "Give parents the choice, and all the aggressive parents will send their children to the good ones and schools will resegregate." These detractors also framed

the issue of choice as resulting in more local expense (student transportation), political challenges (What if parents wanted their children to only attend certain schools?), and logistical problems (parents and students constantly switching schools). One chair used these practical terms:

> You build schools to handle so many children. We've got 28 schools and some schools have only 300 or 400 children. If you take a third grade class, a fluctuation of three to five children may cause you to go to a combination class. You plan but you never know until opening day. Nobody says where they're going until the first day of school.

If vouchers were allowed, public schools would lose average daily attendance money and be left with a disproportionate share of children with problems who did not get accepted into preferred schools.

It was evident to the investigators that these chairs were uncomfortably aware that they had been thrust into the front lines of the school battle zone. When the state education agency made policy, local boards retained some bureaucratic slippage; they could always formally or informally modify state policy and remain hidden within the system. Reflected one board chair: "Now who's responsible when things go wrong? The [local] board."

Chairs also understood how the ideal policy on paper did not always work out in practice as intended:

> I realize there's some beauty in saying we open it up and schools that don't get selected [by parents] have got to do some major work, or they close. In an ideal situation you

might be able to do that, but I think that [unregulated school choice] would just upset education locally way too much to even be considered.

Even though districts may have considerable more perceived autonomy than in the past, the reality remains that they still operate very much within the constraints of a politically-sensitive system. And when the system equilibrium is upset, school operations become unstable, and threaten districts nourished on order and predictability. As districts receive more doses of autonomy and accountability, they may eventually come to regard them as mixed blessings.

Local boards cast in this new role of major policy setters are finding themselves caught up within a turbulent system that may be beyond their ability or inclination to control. One chair recounted an incident in which his board had to stand up against a group of aggressive parents wanting to make one of the district's three high schools a year-around school: "If it had been left up to those folks we would have been a year-around school, without thinking about the other 300 students." Another chair provided an example of extreme public heat, when the board failed to stand up and support a high school whose staff wanted to implement block scheduling because such a policy was the subject of growing public criticism. A third chair cited an example of being caught between a demanding public and reformers on the one hand and a foot-dragging central office on the other: "Sometimes the central office is still passing down [to the schools] a lot of things that you expect them to do themselves."

The widespread beliefs that state-level government needed downsizing and localities more autonomy emerged as gross simplicities masking systemic jungles which local boards had to deal with single-handedly. Local boards supposedly were now in command. But is that where they really wanted to be? Speculated one chair:

> Supporters of school restructuring might see it as an answer to a lot of problems but the facts aren't there to verify whether it would be an answer to the problems or create a whole new set of problems. People are concerned that there are things they don't like, and that when you say restructuring they think this will solve their problems. That may or may not be the case.

Decentralization Not Seen in Entirely Glossy Terms

Decentralization not only had a downside politically, it also had negatives in practice. Smaller districts were afraid of losing invaluable SEA technical support: "I am a proponent of the strong SEA resource for small, rural districts like ours. We can't afford the testing and accountability experts that large, urban districts have." Another chair stated that her district's central office was overworked to the breaking point.

Some chairs also feared losing valuable programs to larger districts. One chair from a district of 1,000 students cast restructuring as free competition fueled by a voucher system that could destroy smaller districts unable to get sufficient classroom numbers in advanced placement courses: "We are losing our brighter students across the river to [a much larger district]. And we if

do not have 15 students in a class the state won't fund advanced placement courses. Then we'd lose more of our brightest students".

Devolution of decisionmaking to the local level also might result in the relaxation of state enforcement which, in turn, could translate into loss of equity in public schools. The SEA needs to maintain its current funding formulae while enforcing high academic standards for all students. One chair pointed out that tax-payers might refuse to maintain funding for essential services, such as special education. Then what? Where does that leave local boards?

Decentralization sounded good in the abstract. Several chairs, however, were concerned about how this trend might play out. One chair speculated: "We've expanded the hierarchy way too much, so I agree with the idea of downsizing. But in our zealous world of saving money we could really mess up education by cutting arbitrarily and way too fast. What is the right target?: 50% is the figure I've heard bantered around. Or is it 25% or 75%?" In the tumultuous world of local policy-setting, decentralization comes with definite liabilities. Summed up one chair: "Like everybody else I want all the autonomy I can get, but I need some ropes. I mean, I don't want so much rope that I hang myself. There needs to be centralization but I need someone smarter than I am to tell me what that is."

Wide Variance in Chair Conceptual Understanding About Schools as Organizations

Five of the sixteen chairs conceptualized restructuring systemically in framing restructuring as designing and

implementing a new system reliant on local leadership for policy direction rather than on state agencies. One chair hypothesized that restructuring meant

> Reversing the [organization] "pyramid" so that classroom activities are supported by the rest of the system. Partnerships among a major business, an area university, and the school system are needed: These three legs [of a stool] are what is needed for total quality management and it is enough to exclude the SEA.

A second chair critiqued schools and classrooms for not accomplishing genuine change:

> "We want site-based management but we still have schools where principals are autocrats. We want stimulating, challenging classrooms but we still have a joke for cooperative learning.... Society needs people who can communicate and cooperate with each other. A student sitting all day quietly is not learning these skills."

She concluded, "State mandates never translated into genuine 'buy-ins' from principals and teachers about changing schooling." In extending her analysis to include teacher education as part of the problem, she cited the inability of the various universities to coordinate meaningful teacher internships.

A third chair's assessment was even more drastic: "Let's start all over with a blank piece of paper ... and accept only those 'traditional' things that are effective .... Decentralization will never work unless principals rethink their role and use their delegated authority to empower teachers." This

chair saw a tradeoff between the state holding boards accountable and district autonomy for determining what to do with fiscal allocations. She also envisioned how community colleges complemented K-12 education: Community colleges' main responsibility was to prepare students for a high-technology work force.

A social services administrator might have envisioned the most ambitious restructuring scenario through (a) re-examining the school calendar, (b) redesigning teacher work into teams partly through networking capabilities of the computer, (c) making school work more interesting for students, (d) competing with the private sector, and (e) providing school-to-work transition:

> If we are going to survive into the 21st century I see schools having to get far more specific about saying to businesses "these are the needs we are going to meet" .... The public is demanding more choice, better course offerings, more competition. I mean groups are forming their own schools .... Teachers and students need to work in work teams.

The last chair took a socioeconomic viewpoint: competition was really not between the public and private sectors but among schools supported by public taxes. "Every school is not a Food Lion," she elaborated, "but a Food Lion, a Winn Dixie, and a Kroger. The key is to have quality people working in the schools. Yet our teachers are not respected here the way they are in Germany and Japan. What amazes me is that they go 220-240 days a year in Japan and the American public expects we ought to do just as good a job [in 180 days]."

These five chairs generally contextualized school restructuring within a systems framework interlocked with community colleges, social agencies, public attitudes. Restructuring to these five chairs was not viewed as public schools operating as an isolated subsystem. They stated or implied the need for systemic development of competent local leadership supplanting the traditional direction of state agencies.

Other chairs, however, were anything but sanguine about attempting restructuring on such a grand scale. These chairs were glimpsing school restructuring as disconnected snippets:

> We don't get the "nitty gritty" when we go to [professional] meetings. We don't have the education or training to understand restructuring so they try to water it down.... Tell me exactly what restructuring is: How many hours is a teacher going to be a classroom, how many [hours] is she going to spend someplace else? Will a substitute teacher suffice? ... Generally I need to know the whole thing.

Two respondents questioned the long-term viability of school restructuring. Said one: "At the state level I see it as purely political. It doesn't have anything to do with making schools better." Two other members were skeptical: "I've seen many ideas come out of the state capital. Let's just see how long this one lasts." Said the other: "I don't see restructuring at the local level. I mean, every school board is different."

Summary and Discussion

The investigators assumed that board chairs should demonstrate articulate, well-substantiated conceptualizations

about school restructuring. Otherwise, reformers could expect commensurably little policy support and cohesive leadership for school restructuring at the district level. The deeper their assumptions that restructuring means a new definition of schooling, the more boards could provide district-level leadership for total revampment of U.S. public education.

In North Carolina, decentralization and SEA downsizing translated into autonomy and responsibility for local decisionmaking. These two political realities were positioned within the general perspective that the SEA had not improved schools to the satisfaction of their customers, mainly parents and business leaders: These chairs all shared an intuitive sense that the business of schooling must be done differently. As the external buffering hitherto provided by the SEA evaporates, local boards by default become the decisonmakers and policysetters in an increasingly turbulent environment. Urgent problems identified by 1980s reformers (high school dropout, poorly prepared workers, boring classes, inadequate student achievement) that were once the domain of state officials and legislators now are finding their way onto the agendas of local boards

Autonomy to tailor reform to local needs in exchange for making local policy decisions and being held accountable for these decisions emerges as a double-edged sword. The learning curve associated with this new arrangement is steep. It is not surprising, therefore, that these chairs were ambivalent about decentralization and were not hesitant to point out its thornier aspects. With policy-making devolving to the district level, the

macro-system dilemma for local boards is enlarged. More than ever before boards are caught among SEA officials, principals, teachers, parents, business leaders, and university teacher-education programs all of whom have their own restructuring agendas. Local boards must tread carefully when mediating among these groups and subsystems if they are to (a) avoid accusations of practicing partisan politics and (b) retain credibility as policy and decision-makers. Statewide, the 119 districts are being pushed into centrifugal motion with local boards the sole unifying force.

That only five of the sixteen chairs systems conceptualized restructuring as grounded in critique of traditional U.S. schooling, therefore, may be cause for alarm. One chair concluded her interview: "I really don't see school boards as the driving force behind any kind of change." In dealing with an often-uninformed and/or unconcerned public regarding socio-political issues of equity and excellence, boards--particularly those with low wealth or with histories of lean academic achievement--must turn somewhere for guidance and experience.

These chairs seem to be looking to their superintendents to lead them out of this predicament. One chair asserted that if devolution of decisionmaking continues, hiring proactive superintendents becomes ever more critical. Commented another: "When I heard about the decentralizing plan of the State Board of Education my first thought was I'm glad to have a strong superintendent. This position is going to be more important in this [restructuring] process than it ever has before." A third

chair was more explicit:

> A great number of board members depend solely on what superintendents tell them. They agree with what he or she presents to them. The quest for general knowledge is just not there. We try to stay out of their way as much as possible. But we are a responsible board so we make sure that what they're doing is in our best interests and [is] not straying too far from what the local folks would like done.

The discretionary authority of local boards, however, is to set policy and for superintendents to implement policy, a distinction reiterated by chairs in this study. This dependency highlights another predicament. Local boards as bastions of participatory democracy and lay control represent the diverse interests of their publics; boards serve as conduits in merging local concerns with professional knowledge into a discourse over education purposes, policies, and reforms. Yet on the whole, these chairs seemed inclined toward depending upon their superintendents as sources of professional and technical wisdom about policy issues.

At a time when local boards are moving onto the fringes of the policy frontier, they should view themselves as the strategic fabric knitting together SEA accountability, the schools, and customers. Yet school restructuring emerges as a vague, broadly-cast dissatisfaction with the status quo: an ideology with little cohesive focus. Although discontent was rife among the chairs, the investigators heard little clamoring that the restructuring conversation needed to become more intellectually aggressive to

figure out how district autonomy could be translated into policy resulting in performance-driven schools. Chairs, for example, framed the issue of school choice as causing logistical and resegregation problems. Only one chair, however, envisioned charter schools as a middle policy ground between the private and public sectors.

Our chairs demonstrated difficulty in positioning these issues within broad policy frameworks within which restructuring goals might be realized. Board chairs emerged from this study as favoring decentralization and SEA downsizing without comprehending how they should proceed. Since most of the chairs in our study expressed only superficial understandings of the foundational concepts and rationales supporting systemic school reform, a policy gap looms between state centralized reform bills of 1985 and 1989 and local initiative and implementation required for break-the-mold schools of the late 1990s. This policy gap looms critical in this highly politicized state with a history of inconsistent, ineffective policy direction coupled with omnipresent constituent dissatisfaction with public education.

Analytic Generalizations

The decentralization and downsizing occurring in this state are closely related to the national movement to redefine government in which the federal and state levels are downsized and their influence lessened. The board chairs in this study evinced caution that SEA downsizing might result in removing all regulations and standards necessary in assuring equity and quality control. This fear relates to a similar observation made by

Osborne and Gaebler (1992) that cutting regulations might result in "throwing the baby out with the bath water."

Second, Tallerico (1989) found three patterns of school board-superintendent interaction: (a) passive acquiescence, (b) proactive supportive, and (c) restive vigilant. Passive, acquiescent board members rely on information supplied by staffs and refer constituent concerns to their superintendents. Restive vigilant members personally visit schools and teachers and central office staff, cultivate a wide range of information sources, and follow up with constituent concerns unilaterally. Proactive supporters are a mix between these two groups: actively involved in school affairs yet inclined toward advocating and supporting the superintendent's stance, rather than scrutinizing or challenging.

The chairs in this study, in contrast to this three-category typology, comprise the proactive supporter category. With less SEA direction than before and policy and administrative problems devolving to districts, our chairs looked to knowledgeable superintendents for safe passage through the deregulatory fog. The key word, of course, is "knowledgeable". Superintendents and chairs may need each other--given the local policy vacuum and the study conclusion that few chairs approached school restructuring in a cohesive, systemic way. Superintendents had better have school improvement agendas field-tested and ready-to-fire when they arrive. (Several chairs indicated that 1994 had seen a vast superintendent turnover.)

Third, our conclusion that few chairs approached school

restructuring in a cohesive, systemic way was validated by a recent study conducted by Dlugosh and Sybouts (1995). About two-thirds of their board members and superintendents responded that only selected components of the current education system needed changing or reforming. The problem of not envisioning schooling as ecological and part of a macro-system seems endemic to school leadership: Without systemic understandings of school restructuring how does one change teaching without changing teacher education programs, school governance, structures, norms, and licensure?

This observation brings us to a fourth generalization: whether boards have "technical/professional" orientations (relying on expert authority of superintendents) or "democratic/political" (responding to demands of parents and community groups as lay control). (See Greene, 1992; Lutz & Gresson, 1980; and Tucker & Zeigler, 1980 for these philosophical orientations.) Implied in this study was a local policy void. As the SEA influence diminishes because of decentralization and downsizing, boards found themselves relying on superintendents perceived as knowledgeable about restructuring. Partly because these chairs lacked systemic conceptualizations of restructuring, their governance orientations approximated the technical, professional model.

Yet one wonders how this reliance on superintendents and professional-expertise model of governance can last--given both the unsettled policy environment and the decentralization of decisionmaking from the state to the local agencies. The political

forum once situated mainly in the state capital now has duplicated itself a hundred times over, and the SEA can no longer be counted on to serve as a buffering agency. Local boards, no longer able to cling to centralized state board and regulatory policy, may be thrust into ideological combat with insistent business leaders and parents armed with vouchers, charter schools, and publicized reports on work skills needed for a globally competitive economy. (The reader may recall the group of angry parents demanding a high school change to traditional, year-around school and the board at least for now resisting this political push because it was not right for all students.)

The board-as-policy-setter, superintendent-as-policy-implementor dichotomy may turn out to be an obsolete distinction, since boards, given SEA downsizing and decentralization, seem to be evolving into a yet-to-be-defined hybrid of policy-setter and administrator negotiating constituent demands. Devolution of policy and decisionmaking to districts means that board members will have to get out into the political thickets and come face to face with aggressive constituents. In this brave new world of policy formulation and implementation, there will be no place to run and no place to hide.

Schools and school boards may discover that they have little choice but to grow more responsive to their communities through trust-building and the free-flow of information, for with a reform plans like the ABCs the threat of state takeover looms large in situations where student achievement gains remain flat. Were closer cooperation to occur, it would not be the first time that

education policy enacted at the state level precipitated an unintended outcome at the local level (Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

However, a different scenario must also be considered, one in which the state rescinds the plan after only two or three years. Perhaps a program evaluation will find the plan to be ineffective, or the political winds in the legislature will once again shift and funding and support will dry up. Neither possibility can be dismissed out-of-hand, because in an unpredictable policy climate, events could take any number of directions. What we can anticipate at this point is that if decentralization and SEA downsizing manage to penetrate even resistant districts, then local boards will find themselves cast in the unaccustomed role of major policy setters, a sharp contrast to the omnipotent state boards of the 1980s. Are they ready for the challenge?

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