VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT POLICIES TOWARDS IMPROVING SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION AND STUDENT PERFORMANCE

Page by: David Gamage

Summary

Introduction

In view of the deficiency of the decisions by the top bureaucrats, large business and industrial organizations realized that they should decentralize their organizations to be more effective. When rapid changes were taking place in societies, organizations, technology and communications around the globe leading to increasing and challenging demands on all organizations, educational systems too felt the need to be flexible and creative in meeting the local and global demands. In addressing the challenges confronted by the private sector, it embraced more decentralized, high involvement management approaches. Similarly, the public school systems too started to focus on establishing more flexible, autonomous and responsive, high performing schools in responding to the global knowledge economy. According to Houghton (2002) the speed and pervasiveness of information technology (IT) revolution was such that the number of computers connected to the internet increased from around 200 in 1981 to a little over 300,000 in 1990, rising to 129 million by 2001 making a huge impact on all organizations including schools. This revolution has led to the realization by most governments that a country's future competitiveness and indeed long-term well being was inextricably linked to the provision of appropriate education services to their younger generations.

Yet, early research found only a few if any direct links between the new reform vehicle of SBM and learning outcomes (Malen, Ogawa & Kranz, 1990; Whitty, Power & Halpin, 1998) whereas recent research findings have provided this vital linkage. The OECD states that decentralization of school systems is a global phenomenon affecting both developed and developing countries (OECD, 2005). In another report, OECD (2004: 428) states that 14 out of 19 member countries had decentralized their education systems between 1998 and 2003. At the 2004 Education Ministerial Meeting of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) held in Santiago in Chile, APEC has endorsed SBM as a strategy of educational reform (Caldwell, 2005). Decades of research have consistently found that top-down reform is problematic while identifying school level factors that provide a high degree of student success (Gamage & Zajda, 2005). A PhD thesis project supervised by the author and was submitted in July 2008 on 'The Implementation of SBM in Flores Primary Schools in Indonesia' has revealed stronger links between SBM and student learning (Bandur, 2008). In this context, this paper attempts to examine the policies and approaches pursued by Victoria in Australia in implementing SBM towards the improvement of student learning.

Victorian Schools System

In an analysis of historical development of the concept of SBM in Australia in particular and around the globe in general, the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) has played a significant role. At a time when the Coleman's Report (1966) in the USA concluded that the school does not make much of a difference to a child's development, the ACT citizens strongly believed that a school could make a difference provided that the bureaucratic model of school management was replaced with an alternative model. It was their efforts that led to the release of a working party report in 1967 leading to a public debate spreading to all Australian school systems. In 1974, with the introduction of representative mandatory school boards their dream was realized and with the enactment of legislation in 1976, the school boards were made mandatory, corporate governing bodies of the ACT public schools.

In the early 1970s, the public debate initiated by the ACT reformist groups in 1967 spread to Victoria. Based on this debate, the education reforms initiated by the Director General of Education (DGE), involved all the relevant stakeholders. In November 1973, following the distribution of a discussion paper entitled 'Some Thoughts on the Community and the School' and discussions with representative organisations, the DGE announced that each school could select its own council structure, out of four different patters of membership detailed in the report. Thus the Victorian system approached the establishment of school

councils by giving each school community its own choice of a council structure rather than prescribing it by the systemic authorities (Gamage, 1992).

It is also important to note that Victoria was the first Australian school system to provide legal provision for the establishment of school committees comprising of the parents and local community to advise the school principals in 1958. As the proposed policy changes were an advancement of the 1958 provisions, in 1975, the Education Act of 1958 was amended to enable the establishment of school councils comprising of representatives of the key stakeholder groups of the school education such as staff, parents, students and community [Education (School Councils) Act, 1975]. The councils were made mandatory, corporate governing bodies with greater authority and responsibility. The Act reflected the recognition by Victoria of the importance of flexibility in addressing diverse and unique needs of individual communities. It made provision for each council to develop its own constitution and extend the authority of councils beyond what was prescribed by the Act. The Section 14 (1) of the Act empowered a school council to:

- Tender advice to the principal and staff of the school as regards the general educational policy which might be followed in the conduct of the school;
- Exercise a general oversight of the buildings and grounds and ensure that they are kept in good order and condition;
- Make any recommendations it thinks necessary for or with respect to the replacement, extension or alteration of any buildings, and generally for or with respect to the making of improvements to the buildings or grounds;
- Provide for the necessary cleaning and sanitary services;
- Ensure that all moneys coming into the hands of the council are expended for proper purposes;
- Endeavour to arrange suitable accommodation for teachers appointed to the school;
- Carry out any other prescribed duties; and
- Generally stimulate interest in the school [Education (School Councils] Act, 1975].

In 1978, a difficult situation arose when a junior teacher who was elected as the president of a school council of a high school challenged the authority of the principal. He declared that as the president of the council he can manage the school and introduced his own time-table for the teachers resulting in industrial action by the teachers. This dispute got dragged on to such an extent within a short period the health of three successive principals suffered due to stress in dealing with situations as the powerful teachers union and the Member of Parliament sided with the council president. As the subsequent enquiries found that the principals were acting within the relevant rules and regulations, the Victorian Government enacted a new regulation ensuring that no school employee should become the president of a council and making this provision effective from 1980. Thus, the principal's authority was restored and a more appropriate balance of stakeholder representation on the school councils were affected (Badcock, 1988). Following a further review instigated by the government in 1982, the Education (School Councils) Amendment Act was enacted in 1983 to strengthen the authority vested in school councils (Gamage, Sipple and Partridge, 1996).

In 1992, the election of a centre-right government took further steps towards the enhancement of SBM with a framework of 'Schools of the Future (SOF)' to be effective from 1993, which among other elements, devolved over 90% of the schools recurrent budget to the school site with flexibility for schools to allocate funds according to local needs. It gave greater voice to parents in the conduct of a school via the school council requiring it to develop a school charter which was in effect a contract between the government and the school council. It was required that the Charter should provide for learning that will take place, and the way it will be monitored and reported to government along with the devolution of staff selection to the school (Pascoe and Pascoe, 1997). Dehou (1999: 68) claims that the Victorian SBM model through the SOF program represents one of the most comprehensive strategies in school decentralization for higher levels of student performance attempted anywhere in the world. He has asserted that the SOF programs focusing on the concept of schooling quality outcomes can only be assured when decision-making takes place at the school level.

In 1999, a centre-left government was elected but an enquiry commissioned by it supported the retention of the broad reforms introduced under the Schools of the Future framework (Connors, 2000). In 2003, the Victorian Government released a report with a Blueprint for Government Schools, which outlined the goals and strategies which underpin the future developments in Victorian school education. These related to 1) Recognizing and responding to diverse student needs, 2) Building the skills of the education workforce to enhance the teaching and learning relationships, and 3) Continuously improving schools. This report reaffirmed the Victorian commitment to self-managing schools (SMS) but with a new focus for the schools to work together but not in isolation or competition. It also further enhanced the role of school councils in the school review process (Victoria, Blueprint for Government Schools, 2003).). Accordingly, the Victorian regional offices were expected to employ the following courses of action:

- The use of coaching, mentoring and cooperative exchange of experts, administrators and teacher experts;
- The strategic use of experts and consultants to work with the school leadership or the whole staff;
- The development of local area solutions to problems of education provision and uneven outcomes;
- Partnership arrangements with the tertiary providers to work on school improvement projects;
- Cooperative arrangements with schools to exchange successful practice through mentoring at the individual or whole school level and through teacher exchanges;
- The use of principals with a strong performance record to work alongside other principals or to be seconded as replacements where appropriate;
- The strengthening of school governance through the appointment of additional school councillors with specific expertise (Adapted from Victoria-DET, 2004: 3-25).

In 2004, after the successful implementation of SBM with several phases of refinement within a period of 28 years, the Victorian Ministry of Education, in its website asserted that the Victorian state school system is a world leader in SBM. Many researchers too have argued that Victoria is currently implementing one of the most devolved school systems resulting in the improvement of student outcomes. The most recent research by Gurr, Drysdale and Mulford (2006), has revealed that the leadership of the principals has created a supportive teaching and learning environments in the schools, leading to enhance the quality of education for students. The researchers have asserted that the principals were interested in improving student learning outcomes in literacy, numeracy etc. by setting specific goals and continuously raising standards and expectations.

In March 2005, the Victorian Minister for Education commissioned a review of school governance in government schools. The specific terms of reference were to:

- Provide advice on the role, membership structure, processes and support needed by schools councils;
- Provide advice on the legislative framework for governance of government schools;
- Propose a set of revised governance principles that meet contemporary standards of governance; and
- Provide advice on the role of local community in school governance and the contribution that school councils can make in building the capacity of their local community.

The Review sought and considered the submissions from the key stakeholder groups, principals, school councils and interested individuals on the basis of a discussion paper, through newspaper advertisements, information posted in the website and direct invitations to school councils and other interested parties. Overall, the review considered 132 written submissions and conducted 11 round table discussions in different parts of the State of Victoria with groups comprising of school councillors, members of local communities and other stakeholders in the process of consulting their opinions.

The findings of the Review confirmed that school councils are an integral and valued part of the government schools. However, there was an overall agreement that roles needed to be more clearly delineated. The operational matters of schools should not be the business of school councils and the role of the principal's

relationship with the school council as well as his role as its executive officer should be well defined and articulated. There was general agreement to formulate a set of principles of governance and standards based on the best practices, reflecting that school councils are comprised of volunteers and other elected and nominated members should continue to be protected from any legal liability. Again there has been a clear agreement that a school council has an important role to play in school improvement efforts but its focus should be through planning, monitoring and reviewing student outcomes. There was also an acknowledgement that the councillors need better training and support in undertaking these roles effectively. There was less unanimity regarding the composition of the membership but there was general agreement for the current mix of different categories of stakeholders. There was unanimous support on the major role that a school council has to play in community engagement and involvement (Adapted from Victoria-DET, Review, 2005).

However, a small minority of the participants have felt that the power and authority of school councils should be increased to include the employment of staff and generate income through sponsorship agreements. There was also some support for mandated parent council representative positions and removal of upper limit of membership from the current 6-15 while there was an acknowledgement that some councils find it difficult to enlist sufficient numbers to school council vacancies. Pro-active promotion of school councils through support and incentives were proposed to overcome such shortages. Concerns have been expressed on the inadequacy of systemic communication with school councils and declining formal support for school councils (Adapted from Victoria-DET, Review, 2005).

In March 2006, the Minister for Education Services issued her response to the Review Report, accepting the need to clarify the functions and powers and governance obligations of the school councils, the respective roles of the school councils and the principals and authority for the school councils to delegate its powers, duties and functions to be incorporated in the proposed Education and Training Reform Act. Similarly, she agreed to make provision to keep the membership of a council from 6-15 but with flexibility for the school communities to affect changes subject to the proviso that community membership should remain a majority of each council. The Minister also agreed to emphasize the important role that the school councils are playing in school improvement efforts with the promise to provide adequate support for the councils to carry out their role in school improvement. In keeping with the Minister's response to the Review, the Education and Training Reform Regulations 2007 were framed in terms of the Education Reform Act of 2006, to comply with the recommendations of the 2005 Review of school governance.

The Education and Training Reform Act of 2006 provided for the objectives, functions and power and authority for the school councils. Accordingly, the objectives of the school councils are to:
- Assist in the efficient governance of the school;
- Ensure that its decisions affecting students of the school are made with the primary consideration to the best interests of the students;
- Enhance the educational opportunities of students at the school;

The functions of a school council are to:
- Establish a broad direction and a vision for the school within the school's community;
- Arrange for the supply of goods, services, facilities, materials, equipment and other things or matters that are required for the conduct of the school;
- Raise funds for school related purposes;
- Ensure that all money coming into the hands of the council are expended for proper purposes relating to the school;
- Inform itself and take into account any views of the school community for the purpose of making decisions in regard to the school and the students at the school; and
- Generally stimulate interest in the school in the wider community.

How did School Councils Help Principals and Student Learning?

In a doctoral research project on 'A comparative study of the effectiveness of school councils in Victoria and New South Wales in Australia' conducted by Wayne Ible and supervised by the author in 2006; the school principals have perceived that the school councils have been helpful and useful in the following aspects:
- Ninety-four percent (94%) of the responding principals have agreed that school councils assisted their leadership by providing authenticity to major decisions.
- Ninety-four percent 94% of the responding principals agreed that councils assisted their leadership by providing other perspectives.
- Ninety-four percent (94%) of the responding principals agreed that school councils assisted their leadership by providing a process where major decisions were not seen as just that of the principal.
- Eighty-seven percent (87%) of the responding principals have agreed that councils assisted their leadership by sharing responsibility for decisions.
- Eighty-seven percent (87%) of the responding principals agreed that councils assisted their leadership by supporting the principal's role.
- Eighty-four percent (84%) of the responding principals agreed that councils assisted their leadership by setting directions for the schools.
- Eighty-four percent (84%) of the responding principals agreed that councils assist their leadership by sharing leadership.
- Eighty-one percent (81%) of the responding principals agreed that councils assisted their leadership by providing better information for school decisions.
- Sixty-five percent (65%) of the responding principals agreed with school councils that their role was more of one as a team member than a leader (Ible, 2007).

The participants comprising of all relevant stakeholder categories, in responding to questions on how the school councils were able to enhance student learning, Victorian responses have been statistically more positive as shown below.
- Sixty-percent (60%) of the respondents in Victoria agreed that they had influenced the curriculum to improve learning;
- Sixty-two percent (62%) of the Victorian respondents agreed that they had influenced teaching and learning to improve student outcomes;
- Ninety-one percent (91%) of Victorian respondents agreed that their school council had improved learning by increasing parent and community participation;
- Ninety-two percent (92%) of Victorian respondents agreed that they improved learning through enhancing support of the community.
- Eighty-seven percent (87%) of the Victorian respondents agreed that they had improved learning by enhanced planning.

In respect of the questions designed to identify major operational issues for school councils, the Victorian responses were strongly positive than the NSW ones. With regard to the composition of their school councils, 100% of the respondents in Victoria were of the opinion it was good. In respect to the decision making processes, 98% of Victorian respondents were of the opinion it was good. With regard to the adequacy of information provided to make informed decisions at school council level, 96% of Victorian respondents were of the opinion that it was good. Finally in evaluating the overall functioning/operation of their school

councils and the usefulness of the committee structure to assist the decision-making process, 98% of Victorian respondents were of the opinion that these were good. A comparison of scale means on the 'Operation of School Councils' showed a mean of 2.87 for NSW and the mean of 3.48 for Victoria showing a statistically significant difference on t-test analysis (Ible and Gamage, forthcoming).

In August 2007, on a case study visit to Victorian Government schools by a team of specialists of the OECD Directorate for Education comprising of Peter Mathews (Rapporteur), Hunter Moorman and Deborah Nusche has issued its report in December 2007. The report amongst other things refers to the three priorities for reforms set by the Victorian Government based on a broad consensus in order to lift the student outcomes. These priorities are:

- Recognizing and responding to diverse student needs
- Building the skills of the education workforce to enhance the teaching-learning relationship; and
- Continuously improving schools

The Victorian Minister has emphasized the need for exceptional leadership in such a highly devolved schools system. Accordingly, the Government has appointed an experienced principal with outstanding leadership to head the Office for Government School Education (OGSE) as the Deputy Secretary. OECD team confirms that there was evidence to support that the Government's Blueprint of 2003 has the common ownership making it easier to implement. The report also draws attention to the agenda for action based on seven flagship strategies which focused on the following aspects:

Student Learning: By identifying a framework of 'essential learning' for all students; Developing the principles of learning and teaching for prep to year 12; Improving reporting on student achievements; Developing broad assessment processes against which defined standards of learning at key points of schooling can be measured; and Developing a knowledge bank that documents exemplary practices in schools.

Developing a New Resource Allocation Model: By replacing the school global budget with a new resource allocation model.

Building Leadership Capacity: By an improved principal selection process; Mentoring program for first-time principals and coaching support program for experienced principals; A balanced scorecard approach to principals' performance management; An accelerated development program for high potential leaders; Development program for high performing principals; and Establishing local administrative bureaus for networks of small schools.

Creating and Supporting Performance and Development Culture: By developing an accreditation scheme for performance and a development culture for schools.

Teacher Professional development: A groups of 60 teachers to undertake teacher professional leave ranging from 4-10 weeks; and Induction program complemented by a mentoring program for beginning teachers.

School Improvement: By developing a differential model of school review; Schools with student performance outcomes above expected levels to indicate plans to expand horizons with purpose based alternative models of review and acting as a mentor school to share the good practices; Supporting schools where student performance is satisfactory but where indicators suggest there is scope for improvement; Developing a improvement strategies for schools where student performance outcomes are below the expected levels; Developing a range of interventions and support strategies; Getting the schools to prepare a single planning and accountability document; Providing schools with a parent, teacher and student data; and Developing a performance and development culture.

Leading Schools Fund: Establishment of leading school fund.

In its final summing up of the Victorian case study, the OECD team has agreed with the views expressed by Richard Elmore in an unpublished internal communication on 'Educational Improvement in Victoria' who has stated:

The good news is that Victoria, because of the thoughtful design of its improvement strategy, is on the leading edge of policy and practice in the world. There is few improvement strategies close to or as well developed, and probably none that are focused with such depth and complexity on the basic human capital problems associated with school improvement at scale. Unfortunately, this is also the bad news. What it means is that there are relatively few places Victoria can look to find answers to the kinds of problems that will surface through the middle and later stages of the strategy. The special affliction of the precursor is to have to make the mistakes that others will learn from (Elmore, 2007, Cited in Mathews, Moorman & Nusche, 2007).

Discussion

In a closer examination of the implementation of the concept of SBM in the Australian school systems, it is clear that each system has adopted its own policy frameworks with slight or significant variations while the Victorian state schools system is the most advanced schools system out of the eight and one of the most advanced in the world. It is interesting to note that since 1958 Victoria had a long tradition of community participation through school committees comprising of parents and local community in an advisory capacity to the school principals. Perhaps, respecting this tradition; when the public debate arising out of the Currie Report of the ACT spread to Victoria, then Director General of Education (DGE) issued a Discussion Paper to consult the relevant stakeholders. Even though some of the teachers' and principals' unions had reservation and tried to resist the change, school communities extended their enthusiastic support. When it became clear that the change was inevitable, those who were keen to resist the changes also came along and contributed to the development of the SBM policy framework. In addition, the DGE commissioned a research project to obtain the opinions of all school communities within the state. Based on the research outcomes, a flexible approach was adopted by allowing each school community to select from four different structures of school councils but making each council a mandatory corporate governing body. Thus legislation was enacted in 1975 making the provisions relating to school councils effective from 1976.

However, in 1978, a serious dispute arose between a school council and a principal of a high school. A newly elected school council president who was a junior teacher with only three years experience challenged the authority of the principal and introduced his own time-table accusing the principal for over-loading the work on the teachers. A Group of radical teachers, the local Member of the Parliament and most parents sided with him resulting in a number of strikes affecting the health of three successive principals within a short period of time. Later, a high powered inquiry revealed even though according to the systemic instructions, a teacher could be assigned 20.67 hours of teaching per week, not a single teacher had been assigned more than 18 hours of teaching disproving the allegation against the principal. The inquiry report was debated in the Victorian Parliament and it was decided to amend the legislation in addition to taking action against the wrong-doers. Thus Regulation 81A was enacted in terms of the 1975 Education (School Councils) Act disqualifying anyone in the employment of a school being elected or nominated as the president of the same school council. It also strengthened the authority of the principal relating to the total management of the school by making the principal the Executive Officer of the school.

In 1982, another consultation was undertaken by a newly elected government and six ministerial papers were issued to strengthen the SBM model with a higher degree of devolution of authority and responsibility to the school councils. In 1983, Education (School Councils) Amendment Act was enacted with the incorporation of these provisions. In 1992, another newly elected government conducted another consultative process and Schools of the Future (SOF) model was introduced in 1993 on an experimental basis along with the concept of negotiating a school charter between the school and the community. SOF was made fully- operational by 1997. One important feature of the Victorian development is that at every stage of refinement, the systemic authorities consulted all relevant

stakeholders and was successful in building consensus. The 2005, review of the whole schools system was the most comprehensive one with the consideration of 132 written submissions and consultations with 11 focus groups convened in different parts of the state. Another significant feature was that when there was a consultation or a review and a report was produced there was a positive response from the authorities resulting in fine tuning of the legislative provisions along with the creation of necessary structures.

The 2005 Review Report and resulting legislation has helped to remove the grey areas with regard to the authority, duties, functions and responsibilities between the school council and the school principal. It has clearly clarified that the authority and responsibility of a school council is the governance of the school whereas day-to-day management of the school is within the purview of the principal. If the system had this foresight to provide the clarifications in 1975, difficulties and the conflicts that arose in 1978 could have been avoided. However, as pointed out by Richard Elmore and agreed to by the OECD team in 2007, Victorian systems did not have any precursors who had advanced beyond the Victorian system on the path to the establishment of self-governing or SBM schools.

In 2004, the Federal Minister for Education, Science and Training (DEST), also announced a ten point plan for Australian schooling with the purpose of 'giving schools autonomy to meet the local needs' (Nelson, 2004:iii). In 2004, a discussion paper on this ten point plan was developed in which SBM principles of greater autonomy for principals and for school councils in school budgets and flexibility in the allocation of resources were key features (http://www.dest.gov.au/nef/schools). The Federal Government has made it clear that it intends to continue to move away from the centralised bureaucratic approaches to school management. However, it is important to note that the federal government has to depend on its power of the purse by providing specific grants for this purpose as the constitutional responsibility for education is with the states. But, at the November 2007 General Elections, the Australian Labour Party (ALP) which was in opposition for 12 years at the federal level came to power with a huge reform agenda for education and is still in the process of finalizing its agenda. However, in Victoria most reforms were introduced and supported by the ALP governments, it is most unlikely that the ALP will roll back the Victorian reform agenda and the process.

Conclusion

In 1976, Victorian public school systems commenced the implementation of SBM with the establishment of mandatory, corporate governing body type school councils. With the experienced gained, it was able to sort out whatever issues and problems that arose and strengthened its own particular model of SBM to the satisfaction of all relevant stakeholders. It is important to note that none of the stakeholders, whether they were politicians of both sides of politics, bureaucrats, principals, teachers or community did not want to roll-back the reform process. The analyses of the documents released by the Victorian Government show that during the period 2005-2006, Victoria evaluated its policy frame-woks relating to school management by undertaking extensive and wide ranging reviews. The emerging results of the reviews show that the vast majority of the principals and other stakeholders were happy with the implementation of SBM and have agreed that it helped improve student outcomes. It was only a small number of principals and other stakeholders have expressed concerns on possible interference by school councils within the principals' sphere of authority and latest refinement of the legislative provisions have removed even this possibility. Arising out of these findings, a consensus has emerged that the school councils should deal with policy issues, participating more actively in setting the schools' visions, goals, approval of strategic plans and monitoring and reviewing the progress rather than getting involved in the day-to-day management of the schools which should be left in the hands of the principals. Here the implication appears to be that school councils or boards should function as governing bodies rather than managerial bodies, implying that school-based governance (SBG) or self-governing schools (SGS) could be more preferable nomenclatures. The claim that the author made (Gamage, 1998) to the effect that Victoria led the way in democratising school governance, and the Victorian Government's claim made in 2004 that it is a world leader in SBM has now being confirmed by a team of experts from the OECD Directorate of Education. (5,175 words, excluding the abstract and references)

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