

Site-Based Decision-Making: Views from Secondary School Personnel

Cindi Noel, Ph.D.
Texas A&M University-Kingsville

John R. Slate, Ph.D.
Sam Houston State University

Michelle Stallone Brown, Ph.D.
Texas A&M University-Kingsville

Carmen Tejeda-Delgado, Ph.D.
Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi

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With the implementation of site-based decision-making occurring in schools, an understanding of the views of secondary school principals and of secondary school teachers would provide valuable information. In the study, six principals and six teachers, from either high performing or low performing schools, were purposefully selected for their views of site-based decision-making at their respective campuses. For the first research question in which campus characteristics associated with site-based decision-making committees were sought, respondents provided three themes: collaboration; voice/communication; and application/procedures. Regarding ways in which decision-making committees were influencing the decision-making process on the campus level, the themes of site-based decision-making team member composition, empowerment, and negative power were present. Concerning how campus culture was influenced by site-based decision-making, participants responded in terms of the themes of acceptance and of dissatisfaction. Findings and implications are discussed.

Keywords: Site-based decision making; Principals; Teachers

As part of educational reform efforts, decentralizing school management to individual campuses making site-based decisions has been advocated for some time (Rodriguez & Slate, 2005a, 2005b). Site-based decision-making (SBDM), a process of decentralization in which the school becomes the primary unit of management of educational improvement, creates an avenue for the input of teachers, support staff, parents and the community—individuals who have first hand knowledge of relevant issues related to schools and schooling (Everett, 1998). In this process, school boards and superintendents are being asked to turn over control of decisions concerning curriculum, finance, and school operations to the local school community (Riley, 1999).

Beck and Murphy (1998), in describing proponents of SBDM, asserted that conditions for excellence are dependent upon decision-making systems that can establish organizational performance goals and develop policies, procedures, and systems to ensure their attainment. In her extensive research on *The Who, What, Why of Site-Based Management*,

David (1995/96), maintained that “site-based management may be the most significant reform of the decade—a potential force for empowering educators and communities, yet no two people agree on what it is, how to do it, or even why to do it” (p. 4). In her research, David attempted to differentiate between what site-based management is and is not by indicating that SBDM comes in so many forms that no single definition can capture them all. This leads to the question, “why do it?” Reasons for initiating site-based management cover many areas, yet David stressed that virtually all reasons are cloaked in the language of increasing student achievement. Regardless of educators’ perception, the shift in authority is moving towards shared power (Rodriguez & Slate, 2005a, 2005b). This shared power encourages stakeholders at all levels to be involved in making decisions without feeling manipulated (Kowalski, 1993). As stakeholders take part in the site-based decision-making process, it helps educators manage the school, and holds them responsible for results (Texas Education Agency, 2002). As a result, principals, teachers, and other school personnel at the local site are substantially changing the way they have traditionally conducted routine business.

The emphasis on shared decision-making practices at the campus level has led to numerous mandates from states for the implementation of some form of site-based management (Howell, 1999). Texas responded to this emphasis by passing Senate Bill 1 in 1990, which mandated the implementation of site-based decision-making (SBDM). Senate Bill 1 established new funding patterns, student and school accountability procedures, and a site-based management program for Texas public schools (Kemper & Teddlie, 2000). Compliance for the Texas site-based mandate has been left up to each local independent school district; however, Kemper and Teddlie (2000) stated that there is “no mechanism to ensure that the spirit and letter of the law were carried out” (p. 196).

A site-based management program, as interpreted by Texas public schools administrators, allows schools to improve education by increasing the autonomy of the school staff to make site-decisions through collaborative decision-making (Brown & Boyle, 1999; Chrispeels, Castillo, & Brown, 2000; Lashway, 1996; Kemper & Teddlie, 2000; Smaby, Harrison, & Nelson, 1989). Site-based decision-making is based on a philosophical belief that some decisions, which are traditionally made by district-level administration, are moved to the school, and some decisions which are made by the school principal are shared with faculty, students, and members of the community (Madison Public Schools, 1996).

Concerning the implementation of shared decision-making, questions arise concerning the extent to which decisions at the individual campus level are truly shared. Historically, evidence exists that principals have implemented authoritarian techniques in the decision-making process. Some principals have been unwilling to share or to surrender their control, rather than involving school staff in the collaborative decision-making process. However, decision-making plays a crucial role in teacher empowerment and strengthening as well as increasing teacher effectiveness (Short, 1996, 1998). Thus, the problem investigated in the study was to determine the views of principals and of teachers at either high performing or at low performing secondary school campuses regarding site-based decision-making. In particular, we were interested in the perceptions of principals and of teachers concerning how site-based decision-making had influenced their school’s characteristics, climate, culture, and teacher empowerment.

Research Questions

1. What campus characteristics are associated with site-based decision-making committees in high performing and low performing high schools?
2. In what ways are decision-making committees influencing the decision-making process on the high school campus level?
3. How is campus culture influenced by site-based decision-making in high and low performing high schools?

Method

Participants

From a larger quantitative study, the senior researcher selected six principals and six teachers to participate in this qualitative study. These school personnel were purposively selected from various regions located throughout the State of Texas. Three principals were from large schools, two from mid-size schools and one from a small school. One principal was female with the remaining five being male. All six teacher respondents were from mid-size high schools with equal representation from urban, suburban, and rural schools. Given the diversity and number of teachers and principals across the State of Texas, this sample of 12 high school personnel should not be viewed as a representative sample of all high school personnel.

Participants in the study, high school principals and teachers, were selected from either high or from low performing high schools in the State of Texas. For the goal of the study, high performing campuses are those campuses that received an Exemplary or Academically Recognized rating established by the Texas Education Agency. For a campus or district to receive this rating, at least 80% of all students and students in each group (e.g., ethnic membership) meeting minimum size requirements must pass each section of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (Reading, Writing, Mathematics, and Social Studies, Texas Education Agency, 2002). For the goal of this study, low performing campuses were those campuses that received an Academically Acceptable or Academically Unacceptable rating, as established by the Texas Education Agency. For a campus or district to receive this rating, less than 80% of all students and students in each group meeting minimum size requirements did not pass each section of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (Texas Education Agency, 2002). It was deemed important to select principals and teachers at high and at low performing high schools to include all perspectives and to "...obtain the fullest picture that can be communicated of the interviewee's relevant construction of reality" (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993, p. 93). The State of Texas has four accountability ratings: Exemplary, Academically Recognized, Academically Acceptable, and Academically Unacceptable. In this study, we collapsed the top two accountability ratings into a high performing cluster and the bottom two accountability ratings into a low performing cluster. As such, no middle performing group was present.

Instrumentation

Qualitative interviews conducted by the senior researcher were used in the data gathering phase of the study to identify the role of relationship between principals and teachers through site-based decision-making. Qualitative research, as defined by Creswell (1994), is “as an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting” (p. 2). For the naturalistic researcher, Erlandson et al. (1993) stated that to get inside the social context and to “...enhance both the knowledge of the researcher and knowledge and efficacy of the stakeholder” (p.68), the researcher must create a climate in which the best holistic picture can be gleaned from the interviewee.

Data in the study were generated through interviews and informal conversations with principals and teachers and the interviewer’s reflective notes. Summaries of what was learned during the interviews and a running file of ideas were recorded in a reflective journal.

Data Analysis

The open ended questions generated a wealth of information through in-depth interviews conducted by the senior researcher. The interviews allowed the senior researcher to obtain participant trust and rapport in addition to verbatim observation. As respondents dialogued on the decision-making process, they were allowed opportunities to elaborate on their responses. Data were reviewed immediately by transcribing the interview verbatim, analyzing the in-depth field notes then filing for possible categories and themes. Open lines of communication with the respondents permitted opportunities to follow-up on clarifications through phone calls, electronic mail, and face to face interviews. This process allows evolving themes in the naturalistic study to take place, allowing the construction of meaningful, emergent categories. The method of constant comparison, utilized to analyze data, allows researchers to transfer data from notes to index cards from which categories can be created on the basis of similar characteristics, “...searching for consistencies, discrepancies, anomalies, and negative cases” (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 112).

Results and Discussion

It is important to note that neither the Texas Education Agency nor the State Board of Education (SBOE) has any rule-making authority in the area pertaining to site-based decision-making. Therefore, it is the responsibility of each school district to interpret and implement the provisions of the Texas Education Code in a manner consistent with the statute that will best serve the school district’s unique characteristics (Texas Education Agency, 2002). Because of school district interpretation and implementation, principals and teachers from high and low performing schools, respectively, discussed their role in the decision-making process. Respondents contributed their own unique perspective and experiences to the discussion on the decision-making process. In providing their voices, several themes emerged from the discussions. Emergent themes included collaborative input, voice, empowerment, negative power, acceptance and dissatisfaction. Regardless of the site-

based decision-making committee's decision, members of school councils in Texas serve only as advisors and the principal may exercise the right to make unilateral decisions as appropriate. The Resource Guide for Integrated District and Campus Planning and Decision Making (Texas Education Agency, 2002) recommended that the principal regularly consult with the campus-level committee in the planning, operation, supervision and evaluation of the campus educational program.

Research Question One

What campus characteristics are associated with site-based decision-making committees in high performing and low performing schools?

Collaboration. In comparing responses to the open-ended questions, all respondents agreed that the site-based decision-making process allows for collaborative input toward the day-to-day operations of the school. A high performing principal (Principal C) from a suburban school district described the process as, "A selective group of nominated and elected participants whose role and participation is extremely important since the decisions they make impact the whole campus." The SBDM committee, a low performing principal (Principal D) explained, "serves as the focal point whose main goal is to gather and analyze data to propose, implement, and evaluate solutions to problems while keeping student achievement as the number one priority." A second low performing principal (Principal E) from a rural campus maintained, "it is better to have 'more minds' making decisions to reach consensus rather than one." She continued, "By acknowledging that some folks on the committee may actually have better ideas than administration or they may have worked at other campuses where successful ideas have been implemented." The majority of principals agreed on the need to facilitate a process for shared decision-making.

The following are a compilation of campus characteristics that both principals at high and at low performing schools in the State of Texas stated should be associated with the principal's role in the SBDM process:

- Principals should set clear parameters for shared decision-making and be supportive of the process.
- Principals should value their stakeholders' opinions highly by being open to suggestions as a leader.
- Principals must monitor everything. Ultimately, they are accountable for their campus.
- Principals should not be demanding of the SBDM team or railroad the committee to accept their ideas.
- Principals must continually study society and the economy to revamp the needs of the students.
- Principals must stand stay issue oriented not person oriented.

To the contrary, one high performing teacher (Teacher G) from a suburban school complained that his principal was the "epitome of the collaborative process." In his opinion, his principal:

wastes so much time getting so much input and trying to make everyone happy that she constantly misses deadlines. In her desire for the process to work, she neglects to

keep track of decisions, which frustrates faculty and staff alike. In addition, she conducts SBDM meetings without an agenda and request that the teachers decide what should be done.

He believed that she could not adequately address issues on his campus due to her lack of leadership.

Voice/Communication. As a group, one high performing principal (Principal C) described the committee as “the voice of the school where decisions can be made in an atmosphere of trust with all members equally heard.” Two low performing teachers (Teachers K and L) and one high performing teacher (Teacher I), clearly felt their role in the SBDM process as an ideal way to voice concerns that they perceive need to be addressed on their campus, and at the same time, each one felt a personal stake in the collaborative decision-making process by shaping the direction that the school chooses to take. One high performing teacher (Teacher I) reported that “having equal voice and equal participation in the voting process is an important component.” He also observed on his campus that “teacher complaints are often lessened and sometimes eliminated by those who feel they are being heard.”

The SBDM communication process was best described by a low performing teacher (Teacher J) as a “method of communication between administration and staff.” She explained, “If communication problems exist, it is a direct result of the lack of communication between the middle people.” She defined the middle people as those individuals who were currently serving on the SBDM committee. The majority of the respondents communicated the best method for placing items on the agenda was through electronic email. Teachers can voice, submit in written form, or send concerns via email to their department representative for items to be placed on the agenda.

Application/Procedures. A high performing teacher (Teacher G) stressed, “For SBDM to work, campuses must take under consideration what input they choose to collect.” Two high performing principals (Principals E and F) explained that they would place items on the agenda that highly impact the school and its operations. In their case, this does not imply that other contributed items would go unnoticed. A high performing principal (Principal C) reported that he prefers to “allow other items to move to a committee level and allows the committee to decide if the concern needs to be acted upon.” In his opinion, “This eliminated topics that did not legitimately engage stakeholders appropriately.”

Some principals go through the motions of being open and participatory to the SBDM process, but this does not necessarily mean that campus needs will or will not be met. One high performing principal (Principal A) maintained, “You may have to fake it to show that you went through the process,” even though he fully understood that the team decision was advisory only. On the other hand, when everyone agreed with the decision of an important issue, he was pleased that this decision was not made in isolation, but a decision made by the group. He attributed this to his “teachers being more committed and satisfied with the decision that they helped make.” Another high performing principal (Principal B) admitted that he “does not use the SBDM process more than the required two meetings a year” in his small, rural campus. He preferred his “core departments, consisting of three teachers each, to decide amongst themselves and only when necessary.” He was candid in explaining that he makes all decisions unilaterally because his staff prefers it that way. He gave an example

where teachers were allowed input to the school calendar drawn up for the following year and not one person responded to his request.

Unless we have teacher buy-in, warns a low performing principal (Principal D) from a large suburban school, "There will be limited success for any new program being implemented." A high performing principal (Principal A) believed in "having more than 60% of buy-in from the staff for an innovation to work well on his campus." Finally, high performing principals (Principals A and F) believed that principals must study consensus versus majority working collaboratively to support a certain position even though it may not be the committee's first choice.

Research Question Two

In what ways do decision-making committees influence the decision-making process on the campus level?

SBDM Team Composition. Both high and low performing principals and teachers each cited the importance and effectiveness of the shared decision-making process when discussing the composition of their teams. Four teachers (Teachers H, I, K, and L) and three principals (Principals A, D, and E) elaborated, "That their current committees are composed of 'respected' members within the staff." These respected members are perceived to be a valid representation of ideals and goals shared among stakeholders. Because of this site council influence, decisions are interpreted to be made in a timely manner, are generally accepted, and implemented. These members have also demonstrated great skill in presenting delicate or oppositional concerns as described by a high performing principal (Principal A). In his opinion, "Their intentions are good and at the same time these committee members have an opportunity for communication to flow upward in an anonymous fashion."

However, some teams clearly did not come together utilizing the nomination and election procedure as reported by two low performing and high performing teachers (Teachers I, K, and L). Department members at one low performing high school actually take turns volunteering and have no problems twisting a few arms to get people to serve. In fact, two low performing teachers (Teachers K and L) were amazed this year when a new teacher to the campus volunteered to serve without being prodded. To this department it was a relief.

Empowerment. For teachers to be empowered in the decision-making process, a low performing teacher (Teacher K) believed, "That teachers must be informed to make the best decisions." For this reason, two high performing principals (Principals A and C) and three low performing principals (Principals D, E, and F) explained, "that they have encouraged their staff to learn the necessary skills for effective implementation by focusing on facilitating and team building skills." They reported this process had not been easy because their districts did not train teachers how to be effective. That is, no professional development or other support was provided to teachers in such areas as team building, developing consensus, and problem solving. All six high and low performing teachers agreed, "that teachers must be willing to take initiative if they want something done on their campus. Don't just sit back and think positive things will happen."

Negative Power. Some committee members, as reported by a low performing teacher (Teacher K), “Have very unrealistic expectations, others only want to spend money, and finally some SBDM members may just take issues to take issues.” These committee members are not anxious to hear the point of view of others on the committee. These informal groups, explained a low performing principal (Principal E), “Play out hidden agendas and thwart programs or changes.” A high performing teacher (Teacher H) reported, “That many teachers on his campus believe that it is mainly the rubber stamping of the principal.” This is why a high performing principal (Principal A), “Warns that if decisions are not realistic or coordinated to meet campus or state mandates, it may cost the campus problems sooner or later.” He continued by explaining, “That sometimes a principal may have to take a dissenting position and part company with the site council. Parting company may have huge consequences on the campus climate; however, he insists that principals need to make a call and stand firm.”

Research Question Three

How is campus culture influenced by site-based decision-making in high and low performing schools?

Acceptance. Both teachers and principals commented that the best way to influence campus culture is by building trust among stakeholders. “Building trust doesn’t occur overnight”, warned a low performing principal (Principal F). “It takes time to train the committee on how to develop team consensus. However, if teachers know that issues can be taken to the principal by the site council and that it will be resolved in a collaborative way allows for trust to develop.” (Principal F). “The decisions that the SBDM team makes clearly sets the tone for influencing the campus culture,” reports a high performing principal (Principal C). A high performing teacher (Teacher G) observed, “That when teachers become aware that decisions have been made at the SBDM level, they are more accepting of the decision and are willing to comply.” “Once the committee has made a decision, offering opportunity for input, then it has a stamped seal of approval,” reiterated a high performing principal (Principal A).

Dissatisfaction. Five of the teachers (Teachers H, I, J, K, and L) interviewed were eager to describe dissatisfaction of the SBDM process. They felt that “The committee and administration have not addressed some issues properly.” All of the high and low performing teachers were in agreement that some decisions, both personal and departmental, were not truly beneficial to their campus. However, the teachers’ final consensus was that because most teachers are overworked on other issues and paperwork, it was easier to go along with the decisions of the site council and take a path of less resistance than to spearhead a cause or idea. Individual principals also have found ways to champion a cause. One low performing teacher (Teacher K) explained, “That if his principal wanted a certain issue passed, he visited directly with some of the committee members to help them see the significance of the issue. He preferred to use this method instead of exercising his right to make executive decisions as appropriate.”

One high performing principal (Principal A) who agreed to participate in the study discussed, “That site-based decision-making is a topic that is very interesting and yet,

sometimes very frustrating.” This same principal (Principal A) indicated, “That regardless of the steps he takes to make SBDM successful on his campus, it is still an oxymoron because he considers the process to be a top-down initiative”. He continued, “By stating that central office is still in control of many of the decisions made on his school campus. A low performing teacher (Teacher K) summed up the process by recounting his experiences with the past three principals on his campus. “The bottom line is if the principal wants the SBDM process to work, it will, otherwise it won’t.”

Summary

Past academic disappointments and a school system which has been inundated with a multitude of failed educational reforms have resulted in a shift from a top-down point of reference to one which includes all participants. Many of these school reform failures, Sarason (1990) maintained, were the direct result of removing persons responsible for implementing the reforms from the initial decision-making process. The rationale behind this shift from top-down management to the local school community has been the result of the society’s continued pressure for the restructuring of our nation’s schools (Howell, 1999). Site-based decision-making has become common and continues to resurface throughout many areas of the United States (Rodriguez & Slate, 2005a, 2005b). This resurfacing, Malen, Ogawa, and Kranza (1990) explained, is not a new idea but is a “recurrent reform...surfacing periodically when public education is under fire” (p. 289). As Malen et al. (1990) commented, “Such efforts seem to reappear in times of intense stress-when broad publics are criticizing the performance of schools” (p. 279). In this process, school boards and superintendents are required to turn over control to the local school community (Riley, 1999). Levey and Acker-Hocevar (1998) reported that upper management does not have the appropriate information needed to make decisions because they are too far removed from the problems. This change to local school community control has become an integral part of site-based management plans as districts attempt to decentralize governance. Although the structure of school governance evolved, centralized decision-making authority was accepted as norm of the operation for schools (Levey & Acker-Hocevar, 1998).

The study has contributed to the body of existing literature by providing the views of principals and teachers at high and at low performing high schools in the State of Texas regarding site-based decision-making at their respective campuses. Both principal and teacher groups perceived differing levels of involvement of the SBDM process. Principals perceived significantly greater input by the SBDM committee than was perceived by teachers. High performing and low performing principals need to involve teachers in the SBDM process at their perceived level of input as the findings revealed. Texas adopted their version of site-based management through the enactment of Senate Bill I of 1990 and even after all these years, a disconnect still exists in the process between principals and teachers. It appears to the researchers that principals and teachers may not be sufficiently prepared to participate in the SBDM process due to inadequate training on the guidelines presented by the state, and their individual perceptions of involvement. Only when both groups are prepared to participate in a knowledgeable way in the SBDM process, do we believe that the SBDM

process will be successfully implemented. Even then, we do not view the SBDM process as the panacea for all of education's problems.

Continuing this investigation, we believe, could yield interesting findings by capturing the perspectives of other stakeholders such as students, parents, district-level administrators, and members of the community. This recommended research could contribute to the increased success in the implementation of site-based decision-making as well as assisting in the determination of the extent to which site-based decision-making is being implemented as mandated by state law. Suggested studies would include: (1) Investigate the views of central office personnel and their perceptions of the decision-making process; (2) Conduct a study on campus improvement plans and their relationship with the site-based decision-making process; (3) Investigate parents' and students' perceptions of the site-based decision-making process; and, (4) Examine the extent to which school districts are moving away from decentralization by comparing Pre-No Child Left Behind to Post-No Child Left Behind.

Implications of our study involve the following: (1) Teachers, both preservice and inservice, may need to receive professional development in areas essential for SBDM to occur. It appears at present, should these findings be replicated, that school personnel may not be well prepared for the SBDM process. (2) Principals need to be sensitive to the interpersonal dynamics involved in the SBDM process. Sharing decision-making involves sharing power and, as such, should involve disagreements. Dealing with conflict in a professional way that builds the school community may require specialized training on the part of principals. (3) As SBDM has been in schools for over a decade, it still does not appear to be the operational norm for schools. Or, if so, SBDM does not appear to have the same form across schools. Thus, practitioners need to be aware that one school's SBDM may be quite different from another school's SBDM. Both principals and teachers should be alert to this possibility, particularly for principals and teachers who assume positions at a different school campus.

Readers should be cautious in the extent to which they generalize these findings. Our sample was small, although more than comparable in size with other qualitative studies. In addition, our participants were solely from high schools in the State of Texas. As such, the views of school personnel regarding middle school and elementary school SBDM committees may be quite different. Until these findings are replicated, readers should view these findings as tentative in nature.

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