For all its guises, site-based management is basically an attempt to transform schools into communities where the appropriate people participate constructively in major decisions that affect them.

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.

Kentucky requires virtually every school to have a site-based council with three teachers, two parents, and the principal, and endows councils with considerable fiscal and policy authority. Maryland and Texas require schools to have school-based decision-making teams, but in contrast to Kentucky, do not specify their composition or legally transfer authority from the district to the school.

In Chicago, state law places significant authority in the hands of local school councils and defines their makeup: six parents, two community representatives, two teachers, and the principal. In Cincinnati, reorganization and downsizing of the central office has shifted considerable responsibility, but no additional legal authority, to school principals.

Colorado governor Roy Romer initiated site-based management in Denver as part of stalled contract negotiations between the school district and the teachers' association and required a business representative on each council. In Memphis, site-based management never got beyond a small pilot phase. In Dade County, Florida, the pilot was expanded but in a much weaker form.

These are only a few examples. According to Ogawa and White (1994), one-third of all school districts had some version of site-based management between 1986 and 1990. Since 1990 at
least five states have jumped on the bandwagon. And during the same time, more than 20 states have passed legislation to create charter schools—schools that are de facto site-based managed, even though they do not carry that title. All this activity excludes individual schools that have instituted reforms but have not been delegated authority by their district or state, although some of these may be excellent models of democratic decision making (see, for example, Apple and Beane 1995, Wohlstetter and Smyer 1994).

**What Is It?**

So what is site-based management? It has almost as many variants as there are places claiming to be “site-based.” And they differ on every important dimension—who initiates it, who is involved, what they control, and whether they are accountable to an outside authority. Site-based management may be instituted by state law or by administrative action, by a district, or by a school. It may be linked to an accountability system with consequences tied to student performance, or it may not be.

Most variants of site-based management involve some sort of representative decision-making council at the school, which may share authority with the principal or be merely advisory. Some councils have the power to hire principals, some hire and fire, some do neither. Some can hire other personnel when there are vacancies. Some councils specify that the principal be the chair, others specify that the principal not be the chair.

The composition of site councils also varies tremendously. In addition to teachers, parents, and the principal, they may include classified staff, community members, students, and business representatives. Educators may outnumber non-educators, or vice versa. States or districts may list constituencies who must be represented, or simply leave it to individual schools. Chicago and Kentucky are exceptions in specifying exact membership of the site council—who and how many of each type of constituent.

**Why Do It?**

Reasons for initiating site-based management run the gamut, yet virtually all are cloaked in the language of increasing student achievement. To some, site-based management is a governance reform designed to shift the balance of authority among schools, districts, and the state. This tends to be the rationale behind state efforts rather than district reforms, and it is often part of a larger reform agenda that claims to trade school autonomy for accountability to the state.

To others, site-based management is a political reform initiated to broaden the decision-making base, either within the school, the larger community, or both. But democratization of decision making as an end in itself leaves open the question of who should be involved in which decisions.

Site-based management may also be an administrative reform to make management more efficient by decentralizing and deregulating it. Here, too, management efficiency presumably
serves the ultimate goal of the organization—student learning. Yet another premise of site-based management as educational reform is that the way to enhance student learning is to let education professionals make the important professional decisions.

Further complicating the landscape, there are often underlying motives. Stated purposes may obscure far less lofty aims, such as weakening entrenched and distrusted local school boards, creating the illusion of reform without investing more resources, putting a positive spin on central office downsizing by calling it decentralization, or simply trying to shift the blame for failure to the school itself.

**Linking Decentralization and Achievement**

Although site-based management appears in many guises, at its core is the idea of participatory decision making at the school site. And despite all the variations in rationale, its main stated objective is to enhance student achievement. Participatory decision making and school improvement are presumed to be related, but that's not always the case.

Consider what happens when any group is formed by bringing together people who have never worked as a group, who may have no experience in collaborative decision making, and who may in fact have a history of being adversaries (parents and teachers, for example). To make matters worse, some members may be subject to evaluation by other members (teachers by the principal, most obviously). Why would such a group be expected to improve student learning?

Indeed, groups like these that do function well tend to spend most of their time on issues of discipline, facilities, and extracurricular activities. They limit themselves to these issues for good reason—these are the issues that people are passionate about and have some idea how to tackle. Moreover, these are concerns that parents and teachers share (David 1994).

Curriculum and instruction are much more difficult to deal with, for educators and non-educators alike. And these issues are even more difficult to tackle when states or districts mandate new assessments that require teaching methods that are unfamiliar to many parents and teachers. When there are serious consequences for unsatisfactory student performance—especially teacher or principal dismissal—but a lack of knowledge about how to improve student performance, trust and constructive dialogue are further undermined.

**Who Decides What?**

For site-based decisions to be sound, attention must be paid to who decides what. Sound decisions are made by those who are informed about and care about the issues and who know the context in which the decision will be carried out. Otherwise, there is no guarantee that these decisions will be any better than those made by policymakers many steps removed. In fact, school-based decisions could be made by only one person, and that person could be uninformed and insensitive to the context.
Participatory management does not mean that everyone decides everything. Some decisions are best left to the professionals in the school, some to parents, and others to students. Some decisions are appropriately made by representatives of several constituencies, others by a formal schoolwide body. Nor does site-based management mean that all decisions are appropriately made at the school level. Schools belong to larger systems—districts and states—that must provide a strong center if decentralization is to create something other than anarchy (Murphy 1989).

Schools are unlikely to improve unless community members—and particularly parents—participate meaningfully. And in secondary schools, students should be involved as well. Schools are also unlikely to improve unless teachers—the main implementers—shape the direction of change. In general, those who have the strongest personal stake in and the most immediate connection to the school are the ones who should tackle the issues. The challenge is to maximize the likelihood that decisions will be appropriately participatory, informed, and sensitive to the context.

Internal Elements
Site councils that truly flourish in the school community tend to have a number of characteristics in common, most notably the following.

- **A well-thought-out committee structure.** In a well-structured system of council committees, there is a good matchup between the types of decisions to be made and the most appropriate people to debate and resolve those issues. Some committees may be standing, others ad hoc. Some may be composed of teachers, and so defined by naturally existing groups like teams, departments, and grade levels. Some may consist only of parents; others may be representative of all constituencies. Whether the relationship between the committees and the site council is formal (approval) or informal (advisory), the committee structure with overlapping memberships provides a communication network that is critical to an effective council.

- **Enabling leadership.** Strong councils are usually led, though not always chaired, by strong principals (and sometimes teachers) who exercise leadership by mobilizing others. They encourage all parties to participate. And they model inquiry and reflection. Such leaders create schoolwide ownership of the improvement agenda so that principal turnover or a change in council membership does not bring efforts to a halt.

- **Focus on student learning.** Not all issues have a direct influence on student learning, but strong councils consciously connect non-instructional decisions with conditions that maximize learning opportunities. For example, a decision to invest in classroom telephones to facilitate communication between teachers and parents will also affect students. By linking all issues to teaching and learning, council members don't lose sight
of the ultimate goal.

- **Focus on adult learning.** There are two points here. First, council members need new skills, assistance, and practice in asking hard questions and gathering evidence about what is and is not working. Second, councils need to appreciate that their constituencies—parents and educators—require access to new knowledge and skills, both to be active decision makers and to change their teaching and learning practices and beliefs.

- **Schoolwide perspective.** Functioning councils focus on the collective interests of the parties, devoting their energy to school goals and direction, coordination and communication, and allocation of resources and equity. They do not get caught up in details of management or curriculum, and they do not get waylaid by individual agendas. Naturally most parents will be thinking about their own children's needs, and most teachers will be thinking about their own classrooms, and so they might be defensive. Moreover, everyone may lack confidence in a new process that carries considerable responsibility.

**External Elements**

Not many schools are able to create on their own the conditions I have described, particularly when strong enabling leadership is absent. To learn how to do it, most schools require support from their district or state agencies, including the following:

- **Long-term commitment.** Councils cannot evolve into effective decision-making bodies at the school site if the pendulum swings from one extreme to the other every two or three years. Site-based management cannot be the reform du jour that changes authority and flexibility when the superintendent changes. Sustained commitment is essential. The process is hard work and takes time.

- **Curricular guidance.** Schools need a substantive framework within which to make appropriate choices. Whether that guidance is best communicated in the form of learning goals and standards, curriculum or content guides, or assessments is an open question—as is the way in which choices about such guidance are made. The goal of site-based management is not to let a thousand flowers bloom nor to force every school to reinvent itself from scratch.

In addition, everyone from classroom teachers to other members of committees who diagnose problems must have opportunities to learn new ways of operating, including mediating techniques. School councils must reflect the existing culture. For most schools, if real improvement is to occur, individual beliefs and, ultimately, the school culture will need to change.

- **Opportunities for learning and assistance.** Districts can provide resources for the kinds of learning opportunities that adults in schools need to change classroom practices and to
function effectively as council and committee members. School councils will necessarily reflect the existing culture. Most councils, but especially those with local conflicts and limited experience in collaborative problem solving, will need assistance and access to facilitation and mediation. For most schools, if site-based management is to lead to improvement, individual beliefs and, ultimately, the culture of the school site will need to change.

- **Access to information.** Schools must have easy access to the information needed to make decisions, including everything from budget to performance data. A decentralized system can function well only when each unit knows how it is doing. Although schools can gather certain data from students, teachers, and the community, they cannot be expected to have the data collection and analysis capability that a larger organization can support. Moreover, because the system has its own needs for information, the flow must go in both directions.

### Open Questions

Making fundamental changes in systems as complex as state and local school systems raises a number of questions for which there are no pat answers. The solutions simply have to be worked out by those involved. Among these difficult issues are questions of equity, adult learning, decision making, and changing conceptions of teaching and of community.

- What policies and supports will ensure that site-based management does not exacerbate resource differences among schools? Schools in poorer neighborhoods tend to have fewer resources and less educated populations. They are at risk of being further disadvantaged under a decentralized system.

- How can site-based management create a sense of community in schools that draw from a large geographic area, as do most secondary schools; and in schools in districts with desegregation plans, choice, open enrollment, or magnet schools? Parents and staff at such schools may not have access to transportation or time to participate in school decision making.

- New ideas for teacher professional development are emerging, but where are the opportunities for principals, central office staff, and parents to learn new roles and ways to assist site councils?

- How should teachers' jobs be redefined to allow time for collaborative decision making and ongoing professional development? Both teachers and the public believe that teachers should devote their time to students, and teachers are finding classroom demands take increasing time and energy.

- How can site-based management be structured to balance school autonomy and flexibility with certain centralized operations that require consistency, coordination, and legal
constraints? For example, collective bargaining, transportation, and government regulations may all affect class size, schedules, services, and how facilities are used.

- What is the best public education analogue to private sector work teams, and where do parents and community members fit in? That is, decentralized private organizations delegate authority to work teams that don't involve the public. But in schools, neither site councils nor groups of teachers are really teams that carry out the work of the organization (teachers typically work in isolation).

- Should schools have mandates that require them to involve parents and the community in decisions? What is the likelihood that without such mandates, parents and community members would continue to have little voice in some local schools?

**Risks and Benefits**

In theory, the benefits of site-based management overwhelm the costs: the goals of education reform are unlikely to be met in any other way. As public support for public education in general, and reform in particular, dwindles, community members' engagement in their local schools offers the most promise for rebuilding support.

Without a school and community culture that supports ongoing learning, student achievement is unlikely to improve. The challenge is to open avenues for informed conversation and for becoming informed. Ultimate accountability rests on the ability of individuals to influence what is not working (Wiggins 1993). That is certainly far preferable to a state takeover or school closure.

Although the ultimate goal of participatory site-based management is to improve schools in order to improve student performance, the intermediate goals are desired ends in themselves. Involving teachers in decisions about their work must be valued in its own right, as must giving parents and other community members more involvement in their schools.

One risk is that the public will judge site-based management prematurely on the ultimate goals, derailing sound practices whose success is not yet reflected in test scores. When there is more than one desired end and the means to those ends are not clear, it is difficult to assess progress along the way. Therefore, it is critically important to devise new ways of measuring progress for such an undertaking (Bryk et al. 1994).

Another risk, however, is that participants will not judge site-based management in terms of any of its goals—intermediate or ultimate—but simply allow the process to absorb time and energy to no good purpose. Unfortunately, in practice, the potential of site-based management is rarely realized. It can even have deleterious effects, exhausting limited energy and good will in futile exercises. Only with visible progress and results will folks willingly put in the hard work.

The key is to identify and exploit ways to ensure that decisions will be appropriately participatory, informed, and context-sensitive, thereby increasing the likelihood that they will
lead to better school practices and stronger instruction. Ultimately, it will be the people who carry out site-based management who determine what it is—and can become. Their success or failure will also help others decide whether it is worthwhile in terms of the human costs it exacts.

Finally, the goal of transforming schools into communities where everyone has a voice goes beyond issues of school reform to the heart of our democratic society. The creation of models of collaboration and participatory decision making for students to witness and become involved in—not only in classrooms but also in their community—ultimately benefits not just the school community but our entire society.

References


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