

Six Heads Are Better Than One? School-Based Decision Making in Rural Kentucky

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As a result of the Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990, most schools in Kentucky must implement school-based decision making (SBDM) by 1996. Our study examines the work of SBDM councils in four rural Kentucky school districts over a 3-year period. We examine the extent to which decisions were shared among the role groups represented on councils, the kinds of decisions councils made, and the quality of council decisions. Findings in all areas are contrasted with research findings about SBDM in urban and suburban settings. We found that, like SBDM in urban and suburban settings, true shared decision making among administrators, teachers, and parents was difficult to achieve. While the rural councils in our study initially dealt with a different set of issues than urban and suburban councils, they resembled their metropolitan counterparts in that they did not move quickly into issues related to curriculum and instruction. Finally, the quality of decisions made by the councils in our study varied: Decisions about hiring principals and budget management generally appeared more likely to lead to school improvement than decisions about discipline and instruction.

Introduction

School-based decision making (SBDM)—alternately referred to as site-based management, school-based management, or other similar terms—is a central feature of “Wave Two” education restructuring efforts (Murphy, 1990). The idea behind SBDM is that devolving decision-making authority to those closest to students will result in a more harmonious and productive environment in schools. Some form of SBDM has been advocated in nearly every major school restructuring proposal that has emerged since the mid 1980s (e.g., Carnegie Forum, 1986; Committee for Economic Development, 1985; Goodlad, 1984; Holmes Group, 1986; National Governors’ Association, 1986; Schlechty, 1990; Sizer, 1984). As a result, school-based decision making has become a standard feature of education reform laws and initiatives around the country.

Our present study adds to the growing body of research on SBDM, but from a perspective that has been largely absent in the literature: the rural perspective. The virtual absence of research on SBDM in rural settings

likely reflects the fact that most SBDM efforts have occurred in urban and suburban settings. The implementation of SBDM in urban settings such as Miami-Dade County, Chicago, New York City, Salt Lake City, Memphis, and Los Angeles has been well documented (Easton, Flinspach, O’Connor, Paul, Qualls, & Ryan, 1993; Etheridge & Collins, 1992; Flinspach & Ryan, 1994; Hanson, Morris, & Collins, 1992; Hess, 1993; Malen & Ogawa, 1988; Moore, 1992; Rothstein, 1990; Wilkie, 1993). By contrast, a search for information on SBDM in rural schools produced only reports from our own study of SBDM in Kentucky, as well as annual reports from Jane David (1993, 1994a, 1994b), who is also studying SBDM in Kentucky. The quantity and accessibility of research in other rural settings in the U.S. is clearly lacking.

Research on SBDM in urban, suburban, and rural settings is needed in order to determine if the goals of SBDM are being realized and if differences exist in the implementation of SBDM across these environments. Studies of SBDM in urban settings reveal that true shared decision making has been difficult to achieve. In their study of local school councils in Chicago, Easton et al. (1993) found that only 3 of the 14 councils they studied engaged in “balanced governance,” in which the councils were true leaders at their schools, the principals and council chairpersons shared leadership, and parent and community representatives played an important role on councils. Malen and Ogawa (1988) discovered that even though Salt Lake City school councils were authorized to serve as policymakers, they mostly functioned as advisors and endorsers. Hanson, Morris, and Collins (1992) found that

This paper was produced in whole or in part with funds from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), U.S. Department of Education, under contract number RP91002002. Its contents do not necessarily reflect the views of OERI, the Department, or any other agency of the U.S. government.

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teacher influence on school decisions in Dade County (FL) was precarious and well below the level of influencing the direction of the school. Etheridge and Collins (1992) documented the difficulties faced by the council at a single Memphis high school in attempting to share decision making with the principal.

These findings raise the question of whether the attempt to implement SBDM plays out differently in rural settings. Malen and Ogawa (1988) found that in the urban district of Salt Lake City, council members were reluctant to press for changes in the decision-making mode for fear of damaging congenial relations. Might this problem be even more pronounced in rural schools, where participants in SBDM are likely to be at least acquainted with one another, if not neighbors or friends?

Another area that has received some attention from researchers of urban SBDM is the type of issues facing councils. Flinspach and Ryan (1994) reported that many Chicago school councils devoted much attention in the initial stages of implementation to such issues as gang activity, school safety, and overcrowding. What equivalent issues, if any, confront rural school councils? Or, in the absence of the urban problems described by Flinspach and Ryan, are rural councils able to move more quickly into the areas of curriculum and instruction?

A question that has received scant attention in the SBDM literature is whether local school councils make better decisions than would be made in the absence of SBDM. Some studies suggest that councils may not make the best decisions or that the presence of councils may not impact student achievement. For example, Wilkie (1993) reported that one New York City school council decided to implement homogeneous grouping over the objections of the principal and in spite of their own review of the research because the majority of faculty supported it. Eventually, the principal at this school overrode the council's decision. Jenkins, Ronk, Schrag, Rude, and Stowitschek (1994) found that, while participatory decision making aimed at improving services to low-performing students had a positive impact on teacher attitudes and instructional practice, it had no effect on student achievement over a 1-year period.

David's report on SBDM in Kentucky focused on the conditions under which councils attempt to influence classroom practice (David, 1994a). Her study revealed that councils in schools that are reputed to have made positive changes in classroom practice focus most of their attention on issues such as discipline, extracurricular activities, and classroom practice. She found that the mere presence of an SBDM council does not ensure instructional change.

Clearly, attention to the nature of council decisions and their effects is needed. Comparison of SBDM in urban, suburban, and rural schools offers insights into SBDM

in contrasting environments and helps identify causative elements in successful or unsuccessful implementation.

The Present Study

Our study of SBDM in rural Kentucky addressed three questions: (a) Are decisions, in fact, shared among the groups represented on rural school councils? (b) What kinds of decisions do rural school councils make? (c) What evidence exists that those decisions will have a positive impact on schools? The extant research tends to focus on the first question. This focus is appropriate, given that a key rationale for SBDM is that shared decision making will improve schools. It is also important to consider the question of whether SBDM is having a positive impact on schools. While it is too early in our study to address this question definitively, we can begin to look at the kinds of decisions councils make and consider the likelihood that those decisions will affect schools in positive ways.

SBDM in Kentucky

The Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) of 1990 required that at least one school in every district, except those containing only one school, implement SBDM by June 30, 1991. If no faculty voted for SBDM by that date (by two thirds majority), the local school board was required to appoint a school. All schools in the Commonwealth must have implemented SBDM by July 1, 1996, unless they are the only school in the district or achieve at or above the threshold level for student success as defined by the state.

KERA designates that a school council comprises the principal (chair), three teachers (elected by a majority of teachers at the school), and two parents (elected by a majority of parents of students at the school). Councils may increase council membership proportionately or apply to the State Board of Education for alternative council structures.

Teachers, parents, students, noncertified staff, and others may participate in SBDM by serving on committees established at the discretion of the council. The council determines who serves on committees, how members will be chosen, and what issues committees may consider. The role of committees is to submit recommendations to the council.

Councils are responsible for selecting a principal when a vacancy occurs; consulting with the principal in filling staff vacancies; determining (within the limits of available funds) the number of persons to be employed in each job classification; determining what textbooks and instructional materials will be provided; and setting policy in the areas of curriculum, staff assignment, student assignment,

school schedule, use of school space, instructional practices, discipline, and extracurricular programs. Councils may also participate in decisions related to school budget and administration, student assessment, school improvement plans, and professional development plans, as dictated by the local board policy (Kentucky Department of Education, 1992, 1994).

Method

The Appalachia Educational Laboratory (AEL) has undertaken a 4-year study of KERA implementation in 4 rural Kentucky school districts containing a total of 20 schools. Two districts are located in the Appalachian region of eastern Kentucky, one district is in central Kentucky, and the fourth district is in western Kentucky. Three of the districts are county districts, while the third is an independent district—a district that serves the population of a small city within the boundaries of a larger county school district. The largest district contains 8 schools serving about 4,000 students, while the small independent district contains 2 schools serving about 900 students. Each of the remaining 2 districts contains 5 schools that serve about 1,600 students.

During the first 2 years of the study, 7 of the 20 schools in the 4 districts implemented SBDM: one school in each of 3 districts and 4 of the 5 schools in the fourth district. Since the spring of 1993, 4 more schools have voted to implement SBDM. Our focus is on the seven schools that began formal implementation in 1991-1992.

The AEL study, which is ongoing through November 1995, is qualitative in nature. While the quantity and types of research activities differed among districts, the following activities occurred in each of the four districts in the first two years of SBDM implementation (1991-1992 and 1992-1993): two interviews with the district superintendent, an interview with at least one school board member, an observation of at least one school board meeting, and an analysis of the minutes of all school board meetings. In addition, at each school implementing SBDM, the principal was interviewed at least once per year; at least one teacher council member and one parent council member were interviewed; at least three council meetings per year were observed; and minutes of all council meetings were analyzed. We continued to follow those councils through 1994.

Findings

Extent of Shared Decision Making

The extent to which decision making was shared at the rural schools in our study closely mirrors findings from research in urban settings. The councils in our study, like

those in Chicago, fell along a continuum in terms of the extent to which decision making was shared. Only one of the seven councils, however, appeared to have achieved true shared decision making.

In an adaptation of the framework developed by Easton et al. (1993), we categorized councils into one of three decision-making modes: balanced, educator-dominated, or principal-dominated. Balanced councils were those in which all participants (i.e., principals, teachers, and parents) contributed relatively equally to council discussions and the decision-making process. Educator-dominated councils were those in which teachers shared in the decision-making process with the principal, but parents were left on the fringes, often without adequate information to make informed decisions. Principal-dominated councils essentially acted as advisory committees to the principal.

Balanced decision making. The school with the most balanced decision-making model was in the small, independent school district, which had a history of high student achievement and strong financial and parental support for the schools. Neither school in the district voted to implement SBDM, reportedly because teachers had historically been involved in decision making and felt no need to formalize the process. In addition, some teachers feared that active and vocal parents in the district would try to dominate the council.

As mandated by law, the local school board appointed a school to implement SBDM—the elementary school. The council got off to a rocky start at this school. Council members reported that teacher council members initially voted as a bloc, motives were suspect, and one parent and one teacher consistently disagreed. By the end of the council's first year, however, it operated as a cohesive group. Some council members attributed this to the SBDM training they received, while others attributed it to getting to know one another better. All council members served on the council for 2 years. After council meetings, teacher and parent members went to a local restaurant for informal discussions. A parent council member described how these discussions built trust between parents and teachers:

It was just kind of a little bull session, you know, where everybody would talk. And [the teachers] would say things off the record—what was going on at the school that we as parents didn't understand or know about. . . . That really helped us congeal as a group and trust one another in making decisions.

The principal at this school played a significant role in allowing the council to become balanced through his nonauthoritarian management style. He worked as a member of the team and did not appear to feel threatened by the strong role parents and teachers played. At meetings

observed the first 2 years, the principal facilitated, but did not dominate, council discussions. Parent and teacher council members were outspoken.

The council encouraged participation in SBDM by holding meetings on regularly scheduled dates at times convenient for working parents (5:30 p.m. or later) and by routinely advertising meetings through the local media. Teachers and parents not on the council participated in SBDM by running for council seats, serving on committees, and attending council meetings to submit requests or listen to discussions of issues that affected them.

Parents played a major role in SBDM at this school, where a core group of parents had always been active. Some of this core group mobilized support for the election of 1993-1994 parent members, resulting in a voter turnout of 170 parents—up from 35 the previous year. This number far surpassed the 10-25 parents voting at other SBDM schools in our sample. Parent representation on council committees ranged from one to eight members in 1992-1993, with parents outnumbering teachers on two standing committees. Some parents reported they wished to serve on committees, but the sign up sheets were full when they tried to volunteer. One or two parents were in the audience at most of the meetings observed in 1992-1993, making this one of only two schools in the study with any regular attendance by noncouncil parents prior to 1993-1994.

Interestingly, all members of this council were replaced in 1993-1994. A new principal was hired, and other council members chose not to serve another term because they each had served 2 years. Under the new principal, decision making became less balanced. The principal brought plans or ideas to the council for their endorsement, which they typically gave. Council members were vocal in their opinions, however. A parent council member reported that council members had input into decisions, but that much of this input occurred one-on-one with the principal outside of council meetings.

Educator-dominated decision making. Three councils in three districts—one high school and two elementary schools—appeared to be dominated by educators the first two years of SBDM. At two schools, strong leadership by principals who were committed to shared decision making gave teachers the opportunity to play a strong role in SBDM from the beginning. These principals saw to it that all issues that fell under the council's jurisdiction were routed through the council, carefully polled council members at meetings to make sure all opinions were heard, and helped the council work toward reaching consensus.

Teachers at the third school assumed a strong role in their struggle to share in decisions with a principal whose management practices they opposed. The principal's resistance to SBDM figured in his reassignment at the end of the 1991-1992 school year. Subsequently, the council hired a principal who was more supportive of SBDM. Since that

time, teachers continued to play a strong role in establishing a culture of shared decision making at their school.

Interviews and observations at these three schools revealed that much of these councils' work was handled by teacher-dominated committees. Many teachers at these schools served either on the council or on committees. In addition, the principals and teachers did most of the talking in council meetings, and issues were usually brought to the council by the principal, teacher members, or committees. Teachers at these three schools often influenced decision making as much as principals and sometimes changed the principals' minds on specific issues.

Parent participation in SBDM at schools with educator-dominated councils was problematic. Unlike the school with the balanced council, parents were not especially active at any of these schools prior to SBDM implementation. During the first year of SBDM, there was an initial interest in parent involvement at two schools, which formed parent-teacher organizations (PTOs) for the first time in their histories. This interest tapered off in 1992-1993, however, and those councils became less focused on parent involvement.

Parent council members at these three schools were not vocal at council meetings. Two of the three councils recruited parents to serve on committees, but the third council recruited parents only for the PTO committee. One council initially required that a parent committee member be present for committees to transact business, but the requirement was eliminated because some committees were stymied by high parent absenteeism. Attendance by noncouncil parents at council meetings was poor at all three schools. A parent council member at one of these schools described her perception of council meetings:

I feel like on site-based that the teachers already have an idea of what's going on. When we come in, they've already discussed it. I feel sort of left out sometimes. Some of the policies that they were presenting to us, they had already tried those out.

Even though decision making was generally dominated by educators at these three schools, parents occasionally influenced decisions on topics about which they felt adequately informed. At two schools, for instance, approval of discipline policies was delayed when parent council members insisted that policies be rewritten to address parent concerns. Often, however, parent concerns were addressed in a perfunctory way, or were only addressed after parents persisted in making their concerns heard over a period of time.

Since the 1992-1993 school year, parent involvement in SBDM remained largely unchanged at one school. At a second school, parent involvement decreased to the extent

that one parent council member was forced to resign for lack of attendance. When no replacement could be found, the PTA president was recruited to serve out the term. In contrast, the third council has moved toward greater inclusion of parents in SBDM. Parents were successfully recruited to serve on most SBDM committees, parent council members have become increasingly influential at council meetings, and the number of parents running for council seats increased in 1994.

Principal-dominated councils. Like the councils studied by Malen and Ogawa (1988), the remaining three councils in our study evolved as advisory groups to the principal. Interestingly, all three councils were in the same district—a district that initially appeared to embrace SBDM enthusiastically. The superintendent encouraged all schools to implement SBDM, and four of the five schools did so. The local school board hired a consultant to assist a committee in developing an SBDM implementation manual and to train council members, school board members, and central office administrators on shared decision making. In spite of this enthusiastic start, only one of the four councils was able to maintain any significant level of shared decision making over the long term.

The remaining three councils gradually slipped into a decision-making mode in which principals brought ideas or plans to the council for their endorsement. These principals often dominated council discussions and failed to bring the councils to closure on concerns raised by council members or observers. The SBDM committee structure diminished or disappeared completely at these schools. Councils occasionally canceled regular meetings for lack of business to transact.

Teachers on principal-dominated councils reported that principals routinely obtained teacher input through faculty meetings and committees. These committees typically had no parent members, were not affiliated with SBDM, and seldom reported to the council. Frequently, parent council members had no advance information on topics presented at meetings and were mostly left on the fringes of decision making. A parent member on a principal-dominated council described how the principal controlled council meetings:

I think when we come to the meeting that everything is pretty much cut and dried. I think most of the decisions are already made before we get here and it's just a formality of putting it before the board. And if anybody disagrees, it seems like you're talked to and talked to until you finally say, "Well, maybe that's right." . . . The principal is in control and he's going to talk you around to his point of view one way or the other, or else put it on the [back] burner and let you forget about it.

Perhaps because principal-dominated councils were not key decision makers, interest in SBDM seemed to be on the decline at these schools. Fewer teachers ran for council seats each year at two of the three schools, and all three schools had trouble filling parent vacancies. At one school, formal nominations and voting for parent members did not occur for three years because only two parents could be persuaded to serve each time. Noncouncil members (teachers and parents) rarely attended council meetings, and committee reports became rare as the committees became less active.

No progression toward balanced decision making was observed at schools with principal-dominated councils. In many ways, these councils appeared to be closer to balanced decision making in the early stages of SBDM implementation when council members were more sensitive to the need to change the decision-making structure.

At two of the three schools with principal-dominated decision making, principals and teachers appeared to be satisfied with the arrangement, but some parent council members privately expressed dissatisfaction or confusion about their role on the council. At the third school, a few council members who initially pushed for more balanced decision making gave up when their efforts were ineffective. A teacher member on a principal-dominated council commented:

Our site-based doesn't do much, our site-based just sort of rubber stamps. . . . We've sort of abdicated the leadership to [the principal] and [he] brings up stuff and we discuss it and if we don't like it, it usually comes around to us rubber-stamping him.

Council Decisions

There were both similarities and differences between the types of decisions our rural school councils made and those reported in research on urban councils. Unlike the Chicago school councils studied by Flinspach and Ryan (1994), the councils in our study were not consumed in the initial stages of implementation by such issues as gang activity, school safety, or overcrowding. This did not result in the councils moving more quickly into the areas of curriculum and instruction, however. Like many of the Chicago councils, and substantiating research reported in Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1991), councils initially targeted nonacademic issues that were problematic at the school, such as student discipline and facilities.

The only distinctly rural issue addressed by any of our councils was the school's prohibition of tobacco possession on school grounds. A community contingent, including several tobacco farmers, attended a council meeting to protest the ban on tobacco because of the economic

importance of tobacco to the community. In spite of the farmers' opposition, the council re-affirmed the prohibition.

All councils, regardless of their decision-making mode, participated in decisions about personnel and, to some extent, discipline. In the second and third years of SBDM, councils that practiced some degree of shared decision making, whether balanced or educator-dominated, began to delve into areas such as curriculum, instruction, scheduling, and budget. This finding is similar to David's findings on Kentucky SBDM councils (1993, 1994a, 1994b).

The quality of decisions made by councils varied with respect to whether the decisions seemed likely to improve schools. In some instances, such as the hiring of principals, it appeared that councils made better choices than might have been made by superintendents or school boards. In addition, positive reports were heard of council decisions about instructional budgets. The quality of council decisions in the areas of discipline and instruction, however, was less clear. A closer look at key decisions made by councils follows.

Personnel. The rural, small-town environment of the four school districts played a strong role in personnel decisions made by councils: Because of the small size of the school districts, council members typically were well-acquainted with (and perhaps had worked alongside) many job applicants. This factor contributed to the pressure many council members felt to hire local applicants for vacant positions.

Most teacher and parent council members at all sites said their councils hired the best-qualified applicants, even when pressured to do otherwise. Some people expressed the view that hiring was fairer than it had been when superintendents and school boards were responsible for hiring decisions. In a single district, for instance, two councils rejected local applicants over those from outside the district whom they perceived to be better qualified. A principal who was hired by one of these councils remarked:

It was wonderful. It was very fair, very open, professionally done. . . . A lot of places, it's the "good-old-boy" system, and if you don't know somebody in the community, you really don't stand a chance.

Teacher council members at two schools reported that they had taken heat from colleagues or administrators for not recommending the hiring of local applicants. In one district, a parent council member reported being ostracized by other community members after she voted to hire an applicant from outside the community rather than a less-qualified, local applicant.

There was evidence, however, that councils were not immune to pressure to hire local applicants. When these same councils later hired the same local applicants as assistant principals, some council members at both schools reported that they felt obligated to make amends to the local applicants.

Council members at another school reported that the superintendent told the council whom he wanted them to hire for their next principal a year before the position was open. When the vacancy became official, the superintendent forwarded one application to the council—the application of the person he wanted to hire. The superintendent told AEL staff that he did not widely advertise the position and only one person applied. The council interviewed and hired the one applicant. Two council members said they thought the applicant was well qualified for the job, but they believed it would have been fairer if there had been a larger number of applicants from which to choose. It should be noted that in this particular district, the superintendent's actions relative to the principal hiring were consistent with his long-standing practice of hiring local applicants.

While it might appear that council involvement in personnel decisions sometimes resulted in the hiring of less able staff, it should be noted that many Kentucky school boards and superintendents engaged in nepotism and patronage prior to KERA. The history of such hiring abuses was the legislature's primary impetus for moving hiring decisions to the school level. Our research suggests that in the hiring of the most critical staff person—the principal—most of our councils resisted pressure to hire less qualified, local applicants. Councils did, however, bend to this pressure occasionally in making hiring recommendations for lesser positions at their schools.

Discipline. In addition to personnel decisions, all councils in our study initially assumed responsibility for developing school discipline policies. Policies developed by councils during 1991-1992, when a temporary ban on corporal punishment was in effect statewide, generally included the option of assigning students to detention programs such as after-school detention or in-school suspension. After the ban expired in 1992-1993, councils at four schools (in three districts) considered the possibility of reinstating corporal punishment; two councils did so. This illustrates that, as Wilkie (1993) discovered, shared decision making may result in decisions that research suggests are *not* likely to create positive change.

Instructional budget. Another key area of decision making for our councils was budgeting of instructional funds. The council that practiced balanced decision making, as well as two of the three educator-dominated councils, assumed responsibility for managing their schools' instructional budgets. It appeared that council management of the instructional budget improved the manner in which budget decisions were made. Teachers at two of the

three schools commented that the budgeting process became more equitable when the council began handling the budget.

At a school with an educator-dominated council, the lure of managing the school budget was a partial incentive to vote for SBDM because teachers were unhappy that the principal did not share budget information or procedures with them. Budgeting was one of the first tasks assumed by this council. A finance committee was formed to develop the budget, and the committee advertised all meetings in the local newspaper. Draft copies of the budget were shared at a faculty meeting.

The authority to make budget decisions seemed to empower councils to play the central role in school change. Approval of teachers' purchase requests familiarized councils with materials and strategies teachers were using to implement KERA initiatives, such as the nongraded primary program, portfolios, and the teaching of real-life tasks and problem-solving skills.

Curriculum and instruction. While the councils in our study were slow to get into issues related to curriculum and instruction, councils that practiced balanced or educator-dominated decision making were more likely to make decisions that affected instruction and to monitor and modify their curricular decisions as an ongoing responsibility. Curricular decisions made by councils were few enough that it was difficult to determine at this early stage if council participation in these decisions would result in more positive change than would have occurred in the absence of councils. A closer look at council decisions in three areas of curriculum and instruction follows.

1. School schedules. Three councils assumed responsibility for setting the school schedule. While some of their early scheduling decisions were questioned by teachers, more recent decisions in this area seem likely to have a positive impact on instruction.

At one elementary school, the schedule approved by the council in 1991-1992 created some conflict when the council cut back on music instruction because music classes were over capacity. This cutback resulted in loss of teacher planning time, and council members reported that they took some heat from colleagues over this. Since that time, teachers reported general satisfaction with the council's efforts to provide teachers with blocks of planning time, and to accommodate teachers who wished to plan together. This council recently approved modifying the schedule to give fourth grade teachers a larger block of instructional time in the morning, in the hope that this would improve fourth graders' performance on the state assessment.

A high school council obtained faculty approval to move to a seven-period day for the 1993-1994 school year in order to offer a greater variety of courses and a larger

number of classes. In 1993-1994, after receiving numerous faculty complaints that teachers had too many preparations and that class periods were too short to engage students in in-depth study, the council adopted a four-period day for the 1994-1995 school year. The new schedule gave teachers fewer students, fewer preparations, and longer planning periods each semester. Also, the new schedule enables students to take more courses in a year because courses are offered on a semester basis.

2. Nongraded primary program. A key area of instructional decision making for some councils was developing plans for the KERA-mandated nongraded primary program. All elementary schools in the state were required to develop plans for the program, regardless of whether the schools were implementing SBDM. In our districts, three of the five elementary school councils assumed responsibility for developing the primary plan. At the remaining two elementary schools, councils merely signed off on plans developed by the primary teachers. No major differences were noted in the quality of the primary program plans developed by councils when compared to those developed by teams of teachers.

3. Math instruction. Another instance of council involvement in curriculum and instruction occurred at high schools in two different districts. At both schools, it was brought to the councils' attention that many students were failing college-prep math courses. In both cases, there were indications that the problem was the teaching methods of certain teachers. Because council members knew they had no authority to transfer teachers and were reluctant to confront individuals about their methods, they attempted indirect solutions. A council that practiced principal-dominated decision making simply referred the matter to the math department and, later, to the principal.

At a school where decision making was educator-dominated, the principal recommended "tracking" math courses to enable students having difficulty in math to meet college entrance requirements. Some council members questioned this solution because they felt it did not address the underlying instructional problems and because they feared it was not in line with KERA expectations. A parent council member observed, "We're watering it down and letting the teacher not teach to the student that way." Nevertheless, the council went along with the principal and approved three levels of math courses: a college-prep track, a "basic" college-prep track, and a noncollege track.

Like the decision on homogenous grouping cited by Wilkie (1993), this decision was clearly not in line with current research. It should be noted, however, that the tracking solution was the principal's brainchild and not fully supported by the council. Interestingly, this same council discontinued tracking in English and social studies classes, as requested by these two departments.

Discussion

We set out to discover whether SBDM resulted in true shared decision making at our study schools, what kinds of decisions councils made, and how those issues affected schools. We also explored how the answers to these three questions differed between urban and rural schools. We saw no major differences in the extent to which decision making was shared on the councils in our rural sites as compared to urban settings. Like councils in urban settings, some councils in our study took advantage of their new authority and the opportunity for input to become important decision makers at their schools. Other councils played only a minor role at their schools. As in urban schools, we found that active efforts to involve parents, as well as ongoing training, were needed for more effective functioning of SBDM councils.

Our rural school councils did differ from urban councils in the types of issues they attacked in the initial stages of implementation, but, like their urban counterparts, these rural councils did not delve deeply into the areas of curriculum and instruction until they had been up and running for a year or two. We observed that councils that practiced shared decision making were more likely to expand their operations into areas that directly affected students, such as budgeting, curriculum, and instruction. In addition, councils that managed the budget had a more global view of their role in the school and in KERA implementation. Therefore, budget management may facilitate moving councils into more extensive decision making.

The data on the quality of decisions made by our rural councils are inconclusive because of the variability of those decisions, because there had been few decisions about curriculum and instruction, and because SBDM had not been in effect long enough to know the long-term consequences. It did appear that, at least in the hiring of principals, councils were more likely to hire the most qualified applicants than school boards and superintendents were prior to KERA. Council actions in the area of discipline and instruction were variable, however. The councils in our study made some decisions that seemed likely to bring about positive change and some decisions that the research suggests may have a deleterious effect. Further longitudinal study of educational change through SBDM in a variety of settings is imperative to address the question of whether or not SBDM leads to school improvement.

SBDM as mandated by KERA provides school councils with considerable authority to make decisions at their schools. In addition, existence of SBDM councils creates a public forum that enables all persons affected by school policies to have input into those policies. Whether or not this input is incorporated into policies depends upon the

extent to which decision making is actually shared at the school.

A question that remains unanswered by our research is the long-term impact of council decisions on school performance. Our findings have made it clear that the impact of SBDM on schools cannot be properly assessed until it is first determined that school decisions are actually being made by councils. It is not sufficient to accept at face value that schools designated as SBDM are operating under a true shared decision-making model because many councils may serve as rubber stamps to principals.

In the case of Kentucky schools, many activities such as curriculum alignment and development of nongraded primary programs will be and have been performed by school faculties and/or principals regardless of whether SBDM is in place because KERA requires that these things be done. It remains to be seen whether the plans, policies, and programs now being developed by councils are more effective at improving student achievement than those developed by principals or teachers alone.

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