

Independent Public Schools: A Move to Increased Autonomy and Devolution of Decision-making in Western Australian Public Schools

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The role of school leadership, while officially determined by legislation and policies, is a complex social activity (Eacott, 2009). One characteristic identified as being common to successful leaders of educational change is the willingness to take risks (Mendez-Morse, 1992). Silcox (2003) examines the contrast between management and leadership decision-making for school renewal, with management requiring low-risk decisions based on established procedures and leadership requiring higher-risk decisions to find solutions in uncertain situations. Fullan (1993) and Caldwell (2006) concur that educational leadership entails experimentation and risk-taking. Similarly, Dalton, Fawcett, and West-Burnham (2001) conclude that centralized policy cannot lead to significant school improvement, as school improvement relies on innovative decision-making within schools. However, Dalton and Read (2001) indicate that for sustainable change to occur in schools, teachers and school leaders must feel confident enough to take those risks in their decision-making.

The education literature makes a clear distinction between school reform and school renewal, as determined by the locus of control in decision-making (Glickman, 1992). Silcox (2003) makes the distinction that “school reform refers to top-down, system initiated processes,” whereas “school renewal is a bottom-up, school community driven approach to educational improvement” (p. 12). He argues that principals’ perceptions of their own capacity to bring about change and achieve desired outcomes are critical to decisions about whether to become engaged in school renewal. Similarly, Caldwell (2006) found that principals preferred decentralized decision-making and were more committed, with higher levels of job satisfaction, in self-managed schools. This encompassed circumstances where they had a significant amount of authority, even if workload, paperwork, and responsibility were increased. He concluded that principals will “actively seek and accept a higher level of authority and responsibility as the school moves closer to autonomy” (Caldwell, 2006, p. 193). Consistent with stewardship theory

(Davis, Schoorman, & Donaldson, 1997; Hoskisson, Hitt, Wan, & Yiu, 1999), wherein the goals of organizations and their managers are aligned, such findings suggest that organizational advantages are to be achieved by providing more autonomous decision-making environments in schools.

This paper considers the impact of risk-taking in decision-making by school principals on public schools in Western Australia (WA). One of six States in Australia, WA is geographically diverse with one capital city, a number of regional centers, and remote isolated communities that include large proportions of Indigenous students. Such schools can have diverse needs that are not aligned to centrally developed policy requirements.

Background

Since the 1960s, the political climate of Western nations have contributed to the rise of school-based decision-making and management as an administrative strategy in education (Seddon, Angus, & Poole, 1990). In Australia, a commitment to decentralization and devolution of authority in education was made at a national level in 1983 (Caldwell, 1990), and national and state government initiatives are still tending to move in this direction.

Devolution of school decision-making came to the political fore in WA in 2001, with the publication of two government reports that focused specifically on WA public schools. The first report indicated that “the bureaucratic nature of Central Office and the plethora of rules were identified as impeding progress with local management” (Cummings & Stephenson, 2001, p. 54). The second report found that system-wide management policies do not recognize the diversity that exists across education districts. The report stated that “locally-managed schools are seen as being more responsive to local needs” (Robson, Harken, & Hill, 2001, p. 13). The implication of these reports was that over-regulation could impede innovation and prevent the flexibility needed to implement the most appropriate response in schools given local community opportunities, considerations, and conditions.

Reasoned risk-taking long has been associated with governance mechanisms for organizations. Research in business contexts developed theories of risk-taking that incorporate governance mechanisms and stakeholder mechanisms, including the experience of management. A study conducted in WA applied these theories in the context of the public schools environment, to explore the problem of risk-taking in decision-making by school principals (Trimmer, 2011). Risk-taking was defined as decisions

that may not be compliant with the “regulatory framework” (Department of Education, 2004), the primary governance mechanism for public schools in WA including legislation and policy requirements. Such decisions involve risk as principals may be exposed to criticism for non-compliance with established policy when negative outcomes arise. Principals have the dual task of being instructional leaders to ensure that students attain achievement standards and simultaneously lead and manage the organization of the school. As each school is a component of a larger organization, there are requirements imposed from the organizational executive regarding both educational and business aspects of the leadership role of principals, and also benefits, such as access to professional learning and school support services. This creates a dilemma for principals who need to be able to respond to the locally identified needs within a school, and simultaneously comply with all State and Commonwealth departmental requirements.

Independent Public Schools initiative

In WA, the Independent Public Schools initiative was announced by the State Government in August 2009 as “heralding a new era in Western Australian education” and as being “one of the most significant changes to the state’s education system in many decades” (Barnett & Constable, 2009, n.p.). The initiative is aimed at improving student outcomes and the efficiency and effectiveness of schools’ operations through greater decentralization. This is to be achieved by reducing bureaucracy in the WA public school system through provision of greater decision-making autonomy, authority, and flexibility to public school principals.

Support for the initiative has been strong, with over 100 schools applying for the first intake. Principals of the 34 schools chosen to operate as Independent Public Schools since 2010 have expressed strong anecdotal support for the initiative in feedback provided to the Department. This first intake of Independent Public Schools comprised 20 primary schools, 10 secondary schools, two district high schools, and two education support schools (for students with disabilities), drawn from metropolitan and regional areas and from a range of socioeconomic status communities (Department of Education, 2011). In July 2010, a second intake of 64 schools was announced to commence operation at the beginning of 2011. With a third intake in May 2011, the total number of Independent Public Schools [rose](#)

to 207 (Department of Education, 2011). This represents 27% of public schools in WA. A further 141 expressions of interest have been submitted in 2012 (Department of Education, 2012).

These selected schools are being provided with autonomous control, such as currently occurs in private independent schools. With a license to operate outside of the government regulatory framework that currently controls their decision-making processes, these schools will have greater autonomy.

The Independent Public Schools initiative promotes the following core elements:

- Provision of greater decision-making autonomy, authority, and flexibility to public school principals, staff, and school boards in areas such as: selection and management of their financial, physical, and human resources; overall school direction; education programs; behavior management; and values/ethos. This autonomy is achieved through exemption from existing governance mechanisms, including compliance with the regulatory framework, that remain applicable to other WA public schools.
- Establishment of school boards to provide stronger community governance than was available through the existing school councils.
- A different school accountability process, underpinned by Delivery and Performance Agreements between the Director General of the WA Department of Education and each individual school's principal and School Board. (Department of Education, 2011)

While there is currently little public information regarding selection criteria or measures to monitor success, as these are still in development for the WA initiative, the Independent Public Schools initiative presents an exciting opportunity for future research. However, the Independent Public Schools initiative has not been without criticism, even at this early implementation stage. Fitzgerald and Rainnie (2011) were particularly critical of the initiative, expressing concern about the loss of scale efficiencies, the administrative burden for schools, and student outcome and staff equity issues. Their study indicated that managerialism and marketization were driving implementation, and that Independent Public Schools did not deliver improved student outcomes.

Alignment With International Initiatives

Based on the evidence from similar initiatives conducted internationally, the WA State government and the Department of Education expect that the initiative will lead to positive impacts in a range of areas, including improvements in student achievement over time. Such improvement might be attributed to the greater flexibility and authority afforded Independent Public Schools to be responsive to student needs. The WA Independent Public Schools initiative is consistent with a range of broader national and international reforms being implemented in the United States, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand.

Charter schools in the United States have some comparable characteristics to the Australian Independent Public Schools in that they are independent, self-governing schools. However, these U.S. schools vary considerably from state to state. A 2009 study conducted by Stanford University's Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO), identified a number of factors that can significantly hinder or aid the efficiency and effectiveness of charter schools. Charter schools that most resemble the Independent Public School operating environment in WA tended to have the best outcomes. These similarities include: not-for-profit, modification of pre-existing public schools, comparable funding levels, access to district support, professional development and support to prepare and assist leadership staff for the greater autonomy, and closely monitored accountability.

In England, the "Academy Schools," established in 2000, function as all-ability state schools. They are based on independence of state schools and alternative approaches to school management. Lord Andrew Adonis, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Schools and Learners in 2007, stated that

Academies are the future of secondary education, and it works. But it works only if Academies continue to be independent state schools with high quality, committed sponsors and principals who have the full measure of control and responsibility necessary to run a successful school. With the cornerstone of independence secure, any number of Academies could be established, transforming education nationwide.

(PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2008, p. 22)

Price Waterhouse and Coopers (2008) conducted a major evaluation of the Academy model after seven years of operation. Their report drew conclusions regarding the schools' ability to be flexible in a range

of areas, including staffing, pay and conditions, diversity of sponsorship and governance models, and the potential to provide increased diversity and choice to meet the needs of pupils within their local communities.

Recent initiatives in New Zealand provide insight into WA Independent Public Schools. The Tomorrow's Schools reforms sought to move away from previously existing centralism, and its perceived inefficiencies and inequities (Court & O'Neill, 2011). An autonomous Ministry of Education was established, Boards of Trustees were introduced to govern each school, and schools were given greater autonomy to better meet the needs of local communities. These changes brought with them a number of changed functions and responsibilities for school principals (LaRocque, 2005) and moved decision-making closer to those being impacted by such decisions. Various authors (Adams, 2009; Court & O'Neill, 2011) have outlined both the benefits and hindrances associated with these reforms at central and school levels, and the difficulties of measuring the outcomes of the reforms.

A Study of Governance in WA Public Schools

The purpose of the study of governance in WA public schools (Trimmer, 2011) was to identify and model factors affecting on principals' perceptions of the regulatory framework and their decision-making processes within the school environment. This is important for the delivery of education programs in schools, as principals experience conflict in decision-making when decision solutions that provide the best educational outcomes for students do not comply with Departmental requirements within the regulatory framework.

Qualitative interview and questionnaire data collected from 71 principals in WA public schools (Trimmer, 2003) were used to determine factors impacting risk-taking in decision-making by principals and to develop a model of reasoned risk-taking in decision-making. A further study was conducted to test hypotheses based on this model to determine whether reasoned risk-taking by school principals is a consequence of their perceptions of the regulatory framework, the experience of individual principals, or the characteristics of key stakeholders within the school community (Trimmer, 2011). This confirmatory study was conducted through a survey of a stratified random sample of principals in 253 Western Australian public schools (Trimmer, 2011). The questionnaire included measures of both attitude and behavior of principals.

Responses were received from 121 principals and 19 acting principals. Geographical location, school type and size, demographic characteristics (including gender and age of principal, highest level of education achieved, length of employment as a principal and in the teaching profession, and whether the principal was substantively appointed to their position) were determined. While no quotas were applied beyond geographical location and school type and size, the random nature of the school selection was assumed to provide a representative sample across the overall population of principals for these demographics.

Forty percent of the respondents were female and 60% were male. Fifty-two percent of respondents were 51 years or over. Ninety percent had over 10 years of experience as a teacher or school administrator, and 60% had been employed in the role of school principal for more than 5 years. Fifty percent of principals responding had achieved tertiary qualifications above the bachelor's degree level. All of the education districts across Western Australia were represented in the responses and a representative coverage of school locations and types was achieved. The descriptive statistics related to the variables of school size, proportion of Indigenous students, and proportion of English as a second language (ESL) students showed a large difference between the mean and the median, indicating that the values were not normally distributed. The majority of cases were clustered at the low end of the scale, with most falling below 500 in school size and below 5% for Indigenous and ESL students.

Results of the analysis (Trimmer, 2011) identified a range of factors impacting risk-taking in decision-making by school principals. Both the level and type of experience of principals were found to have significant influence on decision-making, with implications for governance structures and the devolution of control for decision-making and accountability for outcomes in schools. Principals' perceptions about the purpose of the governance mechanism were also significant and were mediated by their levels and type of experience. In addition, it was found that principals of schools with a high degree of uniqueness were significantly more likely to make decisions involving reasoned risk-taking. This finding has implications for decision-makers in contexts involving Indigenous populations or those with large proportions of migrants or refugees where there are differences in cultures and community needs and where English is a second language. Geographical location is also a consideration and the remote

nature of some communities where schooling and other public services are delivered is likely to impact decision-making.

The stakes of taking risks in decision-making for school principals can potentially be high. A very highly publicized example of such risk-taking by a WA Department of Education and Training principal was reported in *The West Australian* newspaper on 14 October 2006. The principal of a remote school was allegedly dismissed by the Minister of Education as a consequence of a controversial decision made concerning the serious truancy problems being experienced at the school. Evidence available on the outcomes of the decision indicate that it was successful in achieving the increase in attendance it was attempting to achieve, with school attendance being boosted from 54% to 80% in the two months the school operated the principal's initiative. However, the decision took account of the unique circumstances of the families in the community to achieve this end, and doing so was considered potentially discriminatory as the families were predominantly Indigenous ~~students~~. One respondent principal sent an accompanying letter with the completed questionnaire indicating that they felt "very strongly about the principal who was victimized for showing initiative in solving his school's attendance problems."

Conclusions

Both formal and informal governance structures provide the vehicle through which power is deployed in organizations, including schools. Bennett (2001) indicates that creating structures allowing for discretion in decision-making within schools transfers more power from the education hierarchy to schools. Critics would argue that the power inequality in education is being disguised by the rhetoric of school-based decision-making and management and that the institutionalized power of the central bureaucracy becomes visible when conflict arises (Seddon, Angus, & Poole, 1990). Within such a view, principals would not have real and legitimate control within their schools and would expose themselves to risk in their decision-making. Thorn, Meyer, and Gamoran (2007) report that in the United States, the recommendations for flexible governance in schools, power sharing, and use of collective knowledge in decision-making that are arising from research are not recognizable in the familiar operations of state and district education systems. Mok (2001) argues that the control of public sector education may be strengthened due to the coexistence of both centralizing and decentralizing trends in the governance of

education. Both of these trends are evident in the WA context, with increased accountability and the standards agenda a focus of Commonwealth Government policy (Bauer & Bogotch, 2006; Council for Australian Federation, 2007; Council of Australian Governments, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c, 2008d). However, at the same time the WA state government is moving to provide autonomous decision-making to Independent Public Schools.

The finding in this study that principals with a compliance view of governance were less likely to take reasoned risks in decision-making aligns with research conducted over many years on the effect of autonomy and control in decision-making in organizations (Child, 1997; Cooke & Slack, 1991; Libby & Fishburn, 1977; Reeve, Nix, & Hamm, 2003; Sitkin & Pablo, 1992; Vlek & Stallen, 1980). It is also consistent with research on the effect of governance structures in education (Caldwell, 2006; Hoy & Miskel, 2005; Minor, 2004; Panova, 2008), which indicate that centralized control of decision-making, level of autonomy, and principals' perceptions of preferences of the organization influence decision-making to minimize risk-taking. The concerns raised by principals (Trimmer, 2003) regarding public accountability and scrutiny of decisions as both politically and legally defensible provide further evidence of the principals' reluctance to expose themselves to risk in decision-making. These findings have significant implications for the government initiative of Independent Public Schools, which is providing greater autonomy and control to a selected number of public schools in WA.

Literature on educational leadership in schools supports the view that process-driven decision-making that is compliant with centralized policy cannot lead to significant school improvement and teachers and school leaders must feel confident in taking risks in their decision-making if sustainable change to occur in schools. Principals' confidence level in making these decisions is, in turn, dependent on the locus of control in decision-making. In public schools in WA, this control lies within the hierarchical structure of the central and district offices, but is changing with the introduction of Independent Public Schools. The initiative marks a departure from the governance framework based on a compliance approach through a centralized hierarchical structure.

The research discussed in this paper provides insight into the use of the regulatory framework by principals and its alignment with the strategic direction toward devolution of local decision-making to schools. The findings can be utilized in the development of strategic policy for governance of public

schools and to enhance professional development of principals in decision-making. While it is not yet clear how the success of the Independent Public Schools initiative will be evaluated, it appears to be an initiative that will allow the schools involved to have greater capacity and flexibility to undertake decision-making specific to their identified school needs without the risks of non-compliance with centralized policy. It will be of interest to further investigate whether these schools make decisions that are significantly different from those that remain constrained by policy.

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