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TEXT: During the past 30 years, local school districts have gradually yielded policy-making discretion to state legislatures and bureaucracies. States' efforts to achieve equity and improve student and teacher performance have considerably diminished local controls over funding, standards, and curricular content.

The new state primacy is a drastic reversal of American political ideology, which has traditionally spurned distant government in favor of decision-making power closer to home. To restore balance, states can avoid prescribing the details of school practice, and school boards can assert their leadership role.

WHAT ARE THE REASONS FOR GROWING STATE CONTROL OVER EDUCATION?

Michael Kirst (1988) attributes growing state involvement to the public's loss of confidence in local schools' ability to provide high-quality education. In addition, in the mid-1960s, new interest groups drew the nation's attention to such issues as civil rights, women's roles, student rights, and bilingual education--issues that had been overlooked by local politics. As federal and state categorical aid programs were established to serve these needs, local entities such as the PTA gradually lost their influence. Local initiative was further eroded in the 1970s by declining student enrollments, resistance to property taxes, and court decisions concerning student rights and due process.

As states assumed a stronger role in school finance, their policy-making strength increased. Until 1979, the local contribution to public education still exceeded the state share. By 1983, "the local portion had dwindled to about 42 percent while the state share had risen to 50 percent," with federal monies making up the difference (Doyle and Finn, 1984).

By this time, accountability and minimum competency testing had failed to counter the growing discontent with academic standards, teacher competence, and curriculum quality. National commission reports such as A NATION AT RISK led to intrusive state reforms aimed at the heart of the educational process.

WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES OF INCREASED STATE CONTROL?

Specially targeted groups such as the handicapped, gifted, non-English-speaking, and disadvantaged certainly benefited from increased state (and federal) involvement with education. States also tried to achieve greater social equity through school finance reform. This movement was based on "the proposition that the amount of money spent on a child's education should not depend on accidents of geography" (Doyle and Finn, 1984).

In California, disparities of property wealth and tax capacity led to the "Serrano" decision declaring the state's system of educational finance unconstitutional. "Serrano," in conjunction with property tax limitations, created (somewhat unintentionally) a uniform statewide public school financing system that helped equalize children's access to education regardless of resident district.

Although the loss of local autonomy rankles many educators, some welcome more centralized control and direction from the state capitol. Before the Texas legislature mandated sweeping reforms, this state's 1,100 fiercely independent school districts displayed "glaring differences in both quantity and quality of" educational programs and considerable financial inequities (Killian, 1984). Thanks to very strict, detailed directives, every Texan child has a better chance for a sound education.

WHAT ARE THE DISADVANTAGES OF TIGHTER STATE CONTROLS?

Although some observers believe that centralized and standardized policies can increase school effectiveness, much evidence suggests that the most significant improvements occur when individual schools are given more responsibility, not less (Kirst, 1988). In their arguments for a statewide voucher system as an alternative to the traditional state or local controls, Doyle and Finn assert the importance of a school-level or "shared moral order" developed over the years by teams of educators, parents, and students.

According to Shannon (1985), state mandates that lack funding or tamper with everyday governance and administration are likely to "fall of their own weight." State functionaries would be hard-pressed to assume the multiple judicial, legislative, public relations, and tax-raising responsibilities of local school boards.

State education departments tend to be sluggish bureaucracies with contradictory goals and regulations not readily adaptable to diverse local contexts. For example, state policies designed to ensure curricular alignment with statewide tests can conflict with policies designed to attract and retain outstanding teachers, who need opportunities to exercise their independence and creativity. Also, states' emphasis on standardized testing tends to narrow the curriculum.

CAN STATES ALLOW GREATER LOCAL FLEXIBILITY?

Ideally, there should be a balance of state and local controls, a way to foster higher standards without discouraging local initiative or squelching teacher creativity. One way is "for the state or district to emphasize desired outcomes in broad terms and not prescribe content or procedures in detail" (Kirst, 1988). Bound only to a common core of knowledge and skills, individual schools should be encouraged to develop their own "distinctive characters" and "pursue shared educational goals."

For example, California's School Improvement Program (SIP) is a comprehensive effort to encourage local flexibility and responsibility through self-assessment and goal-setting processes. New York State's Action Plan recognizes that "effective reform requires action throughout the educational system" (Ambach, 1984). The plan provides for local implementation flexibility and easy access to state advisors for help in meeting standards.

GIVEN THE PRESENT SITUATION, WHAT CAN LOCAL POLICYMAKERS DO?

Even though they are confronted with increasing administrative complexities and burdensome state mandates, local school boards are far from helpless. While limited in their freedom to structure agendas or decision-making outcomes, school boards still enjoy strong public support as an "institutional buffer" protecting local schools from domination by both state and local bureaucrats.

Instead of focusing their energies narrowly on business affairs, local boards must

become assertive policymakers who direct administrators' supervisory and management functions, assume responsibility for implementing state and federal mandates, and set standards for academic excellence (Bell, 1988). Boards can strengthen their roles by reviewing their own policies, clarifying their goals and practices, ensuring effective policymaking and implementation procedures, undertaking more systematic training for individual board members, and reaffirming separate areas of administrative and policy-making responsibilities. Above all, local boards need to work closely with teacher organizations and other groups to help initiate state education policies, rather than react to state-generated proposals.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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