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ABSTRACT

In Australia as in many other countries, the idea of decentralization of education is an idea being widely adopted. However, it is not clear whether this has resulted in improved student achievement. A review of international research on decentralization provides clear indications that it cannot be asserted that a decentralized system, in itself, makes any difference to the quality of student teaching and learning. One reason there is little evidence in support of decentralization is that school-based management, as the logical endpoint of decentralization, is a relatively new phenomenon. There has not yet been a single group of students who have progressed all the way through a self-managing school. Nor have the school systems that have decentralized developed research agenda to study the issue. It will be difficult to study the effects of decentralization when evidence about the effects of the old centralized system is not available. Countries that institute a decentralized system need to be prepared to study it carefully, and to focus on the improvement of education rather than the repair of the old system. (Contains 32 references.) (SLD)

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**Decentralising education and improving student outcomes:  
Implications of the international research for developing  
countries\***

a paper presented at

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RE-ENGINEERING EDUCATION FOR CHANGE:  
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## Background

In all states of Australia, and a number of other countries, over the past decade, the decentralisation juggernaut seems to have picked up speed, but this paper wishes to question whether these moves have improved education. Different models of decentralisation begin to emerge. In both Canada and the USA for instance, school self-management has occurred at the school district level. In New Zealand, *Tomorrow's Schools* created a relationship between the national government and individual schools with nothing in between; and in Britain there is a mixture of the two different versions: schools are either attached to a Local Education Authority as Locally Managed Schools (LMS), similar to Canada and the USA, or are funded fully by the national government as Grant Maintained Schools (GMS), similar to New Zealand. In Australia, where the various state governments maintain and control school education, neither of these models, the smaller local district model nor the national model, apply and the states are at different stages of decentralisation. We have also seen the emergence of decentralisation of school decision-making and responsibilities in South East Asia, where Hong-Kong has developed the School Management Initiative and where countries such as Malaysia, Thailand and Korea are considering various forms of decentralisation.

Some western observers have considered that the decentralisation activity has been used as a means to improved student outcomes (an issue of quality), while others have considered that it has been used as a way of winding back the money spent on education (an issue of finance). For those in the first camp, the identified reason for much of the decentralisation of educational management to the school site is that it will improve the quality of education for children. The assumption made by proponents of the policy is that if each school is given government resources according to the needs of the students and equal powers to determine the school direction, then all schools should perform equally well when educating children. Thus, successful schools are a beacon of possibility and less successful schools are to blame for their own failure to achieve.

To critics of this argument, restructuring is a deliberate attempt by government to offload the state's responsibility for the education of the population onto individual communities and then try to blame those communities if they don't satisfy government requirements. According to this view, self-management is a myth or, at the very least, a leap of faith. For instance, Smyth (1993: 8) argues:

One of the noticeable (indeed, even remarkable, or is it?) features of the move towards the self-managing school phenomenon around the world, is its occurrence in contexts of unprecedented education budget cut-backs. Whenever there is a break out of self-managing schools, the notion is used as a weapon by which to achieve the alleged 'efficiencies' and 'downsizing' of education.

Chapman posed two questions that must be considered as critical at the systemic level. 'How is it possible to evaluate schools when they have uneven resources? What is the acceptable level of unevenness in a public system of education?' (Chapman, 1991:31). If the level of total government resources, no matter how equitably they are distributed, is lowered to the extent that only minimal outcomes are achievable, then it is the parents that must find the differential in resources if quality is to be achieved. Some schools are going to be more capable of providing higher levels of financial and human resources, and consequently more quality education experiences, than others. If this is the case, self-managing schools might be considered, at the best, as a first step towards privatisation and, at the worst, as an attack on the commitment to a public education system.

A recurrent theme for the justification of the self-managing school has been its perceived ability to deliver a range of qualitative improvements in education provision to all students. It could be argued that the implementation of the *Schools of the Future* program in Victoria, for instance, has generated a number of expectations, most importantly that the program would improve the curriculum, quality of teaching and student outcomes. If the moves have led to improvements in these expectations we might hail the implementation of self-managing school as the miracle for which we have been searching for the past 120 years. If not, then we may have to consider the claims made by the proponents of self-managing schools to be hiding a deeper rationale.

## **Improving Curriculum, Teaching and Student Outcomes**

### *The international research*

Murphy, Hallinger and Mesa argue that the central educational authority should establish what should be taught in schools through a basic core curriculum and content expectations and requirements (Murphy, Hallinger and Mesa, 1985). The school effectiveness literature has shown that education authorities can have a direct impact on the school's ability to make its students achieve and can play a number of roles in educational reform including controlling educational content (Murphy et al, 1984) and by assessing educational outcomes (Hansen, 1979; Murphy et al, 1984; Gauthier et al, 1985). Most of the school systems that have attempted school self-management in various parts of the world have kept the key features of curriculum and assessment centralised.

However, McGaw (in press) argues that there is some evidence to suggest that while there is a clear trend towards decentralisation in many systems, there is a case to be made that some are implementing a covert centralisation as more powerful control mechanisms replace others that are done away with. He uses the case of an abandonment of detailed program prescriptions concurrent with an introduction of detailed mechanisms for surveillance and evaluation as evidence of his claim. From this viewpoint, the centre controls the curriculum and assessment of students, but schools are given flexibility to determine how students will learn (by deciding things such as classroom size, whether there will be specialist teachers, how the resources will be spent, and the like). The development of a national curriculum and national testing, complete with 'league tables' of how well students achieve has not been received positively by educators in Britain. Harris (1993) argued '...governments have actually increased their claims to knowledge and authority over the education system whilst promoting a theoretical and superficial movement towards consumer authority'. Rae (in press) reports on similar developments in New Zealand, which has:

a reshaped curriculum, with new assessment procedures setting levels of student achievement to raise educational standards - particularly in the 'basic subjects' defined as English, Maths, Science, and Technology. The model was similar to, but not as prescriptive as, that introduced in England and Wales by the Education Reform Act 1988.

It is clear that one of the promises of school self-management is the opportunity for people to work co-operatively towards the achievement of jointly developed school goals. From this perspective, it seems likely that there can be an increase in the quality of the teaching force as individual school staffs develop co-operative methods to determine and implement the school's program. Eager (1988), found the role of the teacher to be more than simply being involved in the delivery of learning activities. He found that important strategies used in these schools included, among others more academically oriented:

- \* showing the students that the faculty care about them as people

- \* showing a personal caring interest in each student
- \* addressing the needs of the whole child
- \* frequently praising students for jobs well done
- \* being ready to help students outside of class
- \* providing an environment that causes students to like to come to school.

(Eager 1988:2-3)

These findings indicate that the role of the teacher extends beyond simply presenting classes and assessing student progress. They are extended by those of Renihan and Renihan (1989), who found that teachers in successful schools were not only involved in the delivery of the academic program and the welfare of the students in their care, but were also concerned with school based planning and decision-making as well. They identified a series of common characteristics for successful school improvement programs. They were (among others):

- \* They are initiated predominantly by school-level professionals.
- \* They procure a very high level of commitment from all parties involved.
- \* They give attention to both the pastoral and cosmetic aspects of schooling. By going beyond mere appearance to the physical aspects of the school, they give prominence to relationships among people within the school.
- \* They build upon a collaborative model of decision-making.

(Renihan and Renihan, 1989:4)

These findings suggest that effective schools have teachers that are not only concerned with the students but are also utilised as full partners in the education process. More than anything else, student learning at any given time will, to a large measure, depend on the teacher that the student has. It will not only depend on how much that teacher knows and how well he or she can impart what is known, but also on the level of confidence the student has in the teacher, and the care that the teacher takes to ensure that decisions made are in the best interests of the student.

There is starting to be evidence that suggests the increased responsibilities of teachers outside the classroom brought about by the move towards self-management may militate against some of the characteristics of schools that we want to improve. It has been found, in almost all studies thus far conducted in the United Kingdom (Campbell & Neill, 1994; Rafferty, 1994a), New Zealand (Wylie, 1994; Bridges, 1992; Livingstone, 1994) that the implementation of the self-managing concept has increased the workloads of teachers. Such studies have been accompanied by reports of some deleterious effects such as 'no overall improvement in standards but teachers have been driven to burnout' and the evidence of 'a steep rise in the numbers of heads and deputies retiring' (Rafferty, 1994b). Whitty reports 'it may be significant that the relatively few classroom teachers who were interviewed by the Birmingham research team were far more cautious than their headteachers about the benefits of self-management for pupil learning and overall standards' (Whitty, 1994: 7). This takes on more significance when we learn from a recent report from OFSTED (the British Office of Standards in Education) that '70% of primary headteachers are failing to monitor how well their pupils are being taught' (Whitty, 1994: 7).

It could be argued, for instance that the increased workload on classroom teachers, in the areas of school decision-making, charter development and external accountability

may take away some of the emphasis on things such as 'structured teaching' and 'effective learning time' which have been shown by Scheerens (1992) to be the school level factors most closely linked to student outcomes. Issues such as 'opportunity to learn', 'pressure to achieve', and 'high expectations', rely to a large extent on the commitment of the teacher, rather than the management system in operation. Teachers suffering from the negative impacts of increased workloads and stress are less likely to be able to deliver those facets of school operations that bring about improved student outcomes. Whitty concludes 'that in the particular circumstances of contemporary Britain some of the positive educational benefits claimed...have yet to be forthcoming and that, far from breaking the links between educational and social inequality, they seem to intensify them' (Whitty, 1994: 13).

It could be argued that it is far too early to report any lasting effects that recent efforts to restructure schools have had on student outcomes. The most radical of all systems attempted so far have been the moves in the United Kingdom and New Zealand, both of which only came into being through Acts of Parliament in 1988. But even the oldest of the attempts to encourage school self-management (Edmonton, Canada and Dade County, Florida) have only been able to report increases in the levels of satisfaction by parents, teachers, students and school personnel (Brown, 1990: 247) in the first instance and the professional status of teachers (Collins and Hanson, 1991: 4) in the second.

Bullock and Thomas (1994), in perhaps the most substantial analysis of the self-managing school concept, review *Locally Managed Schools in Britain*, and found that just over one third of headteachers agreed with the statement 'as a result of LM, more meetings are taken up with administrative issues which lessen our attention on pupil's learning'. They refer to the concern expressed by some headteachers 'about an apparent shift in emphasis away from matters explicitly "educational", towards a situation where decisions are based more on financial considerations' (p. 143). Fewer than a third of primary school and smaller secondary headteachers and fewer than a half of larger secondary school headteachers agreed with the statement 'as a direct result of LM, standards of education have improved in my school' (p. 137). They reported that the percentage of headteachers agreeing with the statement that 'Children's learning is benefiting from LM' increased from 30% in 1991 to 47% in 1993 (for primary) and 34% in 1991 to 50% in 1993 (secondary) (pp. 134-135). However, principals from larger schools and those schools with better resources were more positive than those from smaller schools and those with fewer resources. Bullock and Thomas argue (p. 137) that 'Put simply, LM may have brought benefits to learning in schools where the financial situation is healthy. A reduced budget could result in unwelcome consequences for children.' It needs to be pointed out that even the 1993 figures leave headteachers with positive views on the effect of decentralisation on student outcomes still in the minority.

Whitty (1994: 6) suggests that the local management changes in the United Kingdom have not altered children's learning in the positive way that might have been expected, with 34% of head teachers in a study conducted by Arnott *et al* (1992) thinking there had been an improvement, 31% thinking there had been a regression and 35% being unsure. In their on-going work on the impact of self-management on schools in England and Wales, Whitty (1994:5) concludes that although the study is broadly positive, 'that direct evidence of the influence of self-management on learning is elusive'.

In New Zealand less than half the principals and teachers felt that the quality of children's learning had improved since the shift to school-based management (Wylie, 1994) and in the USA, Elmore argued:

[T]here is little or no evidence that [site-based management] has any direct or predictable relationship to changes in instruction and students' learning. In fact, the

evidence suggests that the implementation of site-based management reforms has a more or less random relationship to changes in curriculum, teaching, and students' learning.

(Elmore, 1993, p. 40)

### *Victoria's Schools of the Future*

The use of the Curriculum Standards and Frameworks (CSF) in Victoria clearly establishes the core content of curriculum in Victoria and the use of the Learning Assessment Project (LAP test) provides one means of judging whether or not students are succeeding in this curriculum. A major purpose of the school charter is to provide school communities with the ability to shape the education of their children in particular ways (local requirements), while still ensuring that all children across the state receive similar knowledge and understandings (system requirements). The common set of knowledge is proscribed by the CSF for the eight key areas of learning. School communities can impart this knowledge in different ways and add priorities of their own to respond to the different needs of say, a small rural community or a multicultural inner-city community.

#### The views of principals

The process of developing school charters, which includes high levels of local input, has generally been well received by school communities. The Co-operative Research Project (DSE, 1996) indicates that 21.1% of principals identified school charters as their most positive aspect and the statement 'Schools of the Future actively foster the attributes of good schools in terms of leadership, school ethos, goals, planning and accountability process' received the highest level of confidence from principals (a mean of 3.9 out of a possible 5.0) in terms of the objectives to be attained under the program. In addition, there was support for there being a more relevant and responsive curriculum under *Schools of the Future* (3.1) and general acceptance that the Curriculum and Standards Framework improved the capacity of the school to plan appropriate curriculum activities (p 35-36). There were a number of staff related activities that principals felt were operating moderately well under the *Schools of the Future*, including shared decision-making (3.2), improved staff performance (3.1) and more cohesive staff and community (2.9). Principals were also moderately confident that schools would attain the objective that there would be improved learning outcomes for students (3.2).

Caldwell (1996: 11) reports that the Project findings indicated that '82% of principals had provided a rating of 3 or more on the 5-point scale' for the expectation of improved learning outcomes. It could be argued that this is an overly positive view being placed upon the data, first because the mean score was 3.2 out of 5, and second, because it is equally true that 64% of principals provided a rating of 3 or less on the same question (since 46% scored it 3). There has been some argument (Smith, 1996) that such reporting of the findings of the project placed an unrealistically optimistic view on the data. As there was no opportunity for principals to indicate either no support, or opposition, on the scale provided, then 3 could be seen as a neutral response rather than 'moderate support', and the level of support for such statements do not seem to be as good as suggested. At the very least it is the argument that the glass is half full rather than being half empty, a view for which the Cooperative Research Project report (DSE, 1996) as a whole can be questioned.

But the Cooperative Research Project also reports that the time available to implement change effectively was one of the major problems encountered by principals (a mean of 4.5 where 5.0 was the highest magnitude of problem), along with teaching staff work load (4.4). This, coupled with the expectation of further changes in programs and priorities (4.0), staff morale (3.9), staff numbers (4.3), the level and quality of support services (3.6) and the ability of the school to resource curriculum requirements (3.6), suggests that the lack of resources (both human and financial) have created a strain on the system. It also refers to some expected benefits that have not been realised as much

as one would hope, including increased job satisfaction (2.4 where 5.0 is the highest magnitude of realisation) and enhanced capacity to attract staff (2.4). This suggests that the increased productivity has come at a short term cost related to staff satisfaction.

Victoria is a few years behind places like New Zealand and the United Kingdom, when it comes to the implementation of the self-managing concept. A major concern for educators in Victoria is that if the short term dissatisfaction felt by school staff in Victoria translates over time to the levels of teacher burnout, illness and retirement that are indicated in international research then, in the longer term, this could spell a staffing disaster in the not too distant future. Australia is already faced with a crippling staff shortage in the next five years. If the rate of leaving the service increases from current levels this will be exacerbated.

Announcements such as those by the Minister of Education in Victoria that there will be a further round of voluntary departure packages in 1996 may lead to fewer students (particularly high quality students) choosing to enrol in teacher education in 1997. Since school leaver enrolments will not produce any teachers until four years later this, in turn, makes the future teaching force even more stretched. Since the vast majority of teachers are over the age of forty, this problem is worsened. It could be argued that although there appears to be no lessening of quality teaching in the short term, because of the concurrent lessening of the resource base, it could be argued that over time, both numbers and quality of teachers could decline unless the resources are found to address these concerns.

#### Views of parents, teachers and school councillors

Tables 1 and 2 contain the results of a study that sought a range of opinions about levels of satisfaction, levels of confidence and personal involvement resulting from the implementation of *Schools of the Future* from more than 400 Victorian parents, teachers and school councillors. Table 1 indicates that high levels of satisfaction were reported by parents, teachers and school councillors for the goals of the school (mean was 4.20, where 5.0 was the highest level of satisfaction), the school charter (4.13), and the breadth of the curriculum available (3.79). It also indicates that parents, school councillors and teachers were satisfied with the performance of teachers (4.07), with the level of communication between the classroom and home (3.98), the environment and ethos of the school (3.95) and the level of reporting of student progress (3.92). These studies suggest that teachers at the school are working hard to develop appropriate learning strategies for children and communication strategies with parents.

Table 2 indicates that the sample was confident the *Schools of the Future* program would develop better goals for the school (3.87), would provide more control over the school's curriculum (3.66), would be more responsive to the changing needs of the school's community (3.53) and would provide the opportunity to deliver a broader education (3.45). However, it also indicates that there was less confidence about the outcomes for students. The sample was less confident that the program would better service the needs of students (3.38), promote achievement for students from different backgrounds (3.21) or lead to an overall increase in the quality of education (3.13).

Caldwell (1996: 11) reports on recent efforts to undertake a comprehensive analysis of this research data by staff of the University of Melbourne (DSE, 1996) to 'determine the direct and indirect effects of selected factors on learning.' The results at this stage could be regarded as tentative rather than definitive, since they use an analysis of the opinions of principals, rather than any substantiated evidence of improvement by students (for example, standardised tests), but they 'provide a starting point for the next stage of research... to trace the cause and effect links where there is evidence of improvement in learning outcomes' (Caldwell, 1996: 18). The case study used in the paper (p 26-27) clearly indicates that substantial resources and attention were allocated to literacy development with the end result that literacy levels improved.

Rather than proving the efficacy of the self-managing school over a broad range of goals, the paper reinforces the procedure reported by Stringfield & Reynolds (1995) who identified a 'core' of basic school activities if schools were to become High Reliability Schools (schools that could guarantee the success of their students). Such schools would:

- \* define a small number of learning outcomes on which 100% success will be obtained;
- \* set up high quality evaluation systems to measure pupil achievement;
- \* investigate good practice from within the school, and spread it widely;
- \* find out about best practice outside the school, in other schools and from the research based on school and on teacher effectiveness.

(Stringfield & Reynolds, 1995:4)

This suggests, as does Weber's 1979 research, that if we narrow the focus of what is taught, put a substantial proportion of the school's resources towards that focus and then purposfully teach and monitor students, that improvement in that area will follow. It could be argued that schools have a broader brief than simply focusing upon a very narrow range of curriculum goals. Identifying what the school goals should be is part of the brief as well. It could be expected that different schools would have different goals they wished to achieve, based upon the identified needs of their students, goals that responded to local, as well as state wide requirements.

As well as there being concerns about resourcing a broad curriculum, there are some concerns with the outcomes of the school charters. The rhetoric, as indicated in a previous section, suggests that schools have the chance to respond to the unique characteristics and needs of their communities, but the reality seems to be different. Table 3 considers the results of a study of the charters of 152 Victorian schools, which shows that of the 435 total priorities identified by the schools, 109 (72%) of the first priorities and a total of 261 (60%) were confined to a very narrow curriculum base, namely, those that were tested (Literacy, Mathematics and Science), those that were made compulsory by the government (62 of the 152 schools identified LOTE as a priority and a further 36 identified Physical Education and Sport) or those that attracted additional funding from the government (Technology and Computing). In comparison, Art, Social Education and Personal Development were all identified as a priority by only one school each and Music not at all.

Only limited numbers of schools indicated process goals such as improving teaching and learning (2.8%), school administration (1.2%), staff development (2.8%), the development of student skills (1.1%) or even student welfare (4.8%). Few, if any, schools directly addressed issues that might have reflected their particular community, although 2.8% did refer to developing programs for exceptional children (both more and/or less able) and a further 2.1% referred to improving parent involvement. Yet, with up to 30% of our children in some schools currently living in single parent families, or up to 70% in others coming from multicultural or aboriginal backgrounds, and with substantial numbers receiving the Educational Maintenance Allowance, being transient or having parents with no, or poorly paid, employment (all of which were referred to by the DSE's Education Committee (DSE 1995) as indicators of children at-risk), it seems surprising that not one school of the 152 surveyed had a first priority to address the needs of students from any of these backgrounds.

This suggests that local requirements took a back seat when it came to determining the priorities that schools took up. It could be argued that instead of giving schools a greater opportunity for varying the curriculum from school to school, the government, through various strategies, has managed to narrow the curriculum to a limited range of

specific knowledge. Anecdotal information, which suggested that a number of schools had their charters returned by the DSE unsigned, because the priorities they had chosen did not fit the government requirements, suggests that the narrowing of the curriculum on the one hand, and the focus on system goals rather than local ones on the other, might be planned rather than accidental.

Despite the concerns identified here, some argue that the curriculum is too crowded, a further difficulty which some teachers characterise as 'curriculum overload'. Much has been added to the curriculum and nothing has been taken away. This has led some curriculum groups to lament the decline of what were previously considered to be core subjects. In recent times mathematics teachers have expressed their concerns that the mandatory time for Physical Education and LOTE in Victoria has decreased the actual time student spend on mathematics. Professor Peter Hill (cited in Rollins, 1996) has argued that, especially in the early years, the major focus of schools should be the development of literacy and numeracy skills.

Schools have been caught between the need to teach children basic skills well and the need to advertise themselves as offering a broad range of interesting curriculum areas. Responding to government curriculum mandates has made it even harder. These results suggest that the argument that self-management can improve either curriculum provision or student outcomes relies at best upon opinions rather than hard evidence and that even the opinions are split between the positive and the negative. One would have to conclude that the case is not yet proven.

## **Conclusion**

The current review of the research has provided clear indications that we are not yet in a position of claiming that a decentralised system will, in itself, make any difference to the quality of teaching or of student learning.

This result indicates that the move towards a decentralised system, not only in Australia, but internationally, has either been a leap of faith on the part of governments that such a move will improve the system, or has been undertaken for reasons other than improvement of the system.

There are good reasons why there is not the research evidence we searched for. In the first instance, school-based management, as the logical endpoint of decentralisation, is a relatively new phenomenon. It is less than a decade old. Consequently, it would be difficult to find any substantial longitudinal evidence one way or the other. There has not yet been a single group of students that have progressed through the self-managing school process of education from start to finish. Second, it does not seem that any of the school systems that have moved towards decentralisation have established clear research agenda to show whether or not such a move will have positive effects, in particular, on student outcomes. Third, it will be difficult to make comparisons, in Australia anyway, since the testing regime under the former centralised education system has provided no substantial national data that can be used as a basis for making judgements over a wide range of criteria. Finally, a review of the literature has again clearly established that educational improvement relies upon a complex interaction of a number of factors and there is great difficulty in establishing a clear cause and effect relationship between the act of decentralisation and improved student outcomes. Many other factors, including staff development, resourcing, the actual decisions made and leadership style, all of which can exist in both a centralised and a devolved system, and which can be implemented in many ways in either system, will impact on the final outcomes. It may well be that even if the research is undertaken, that we may not be able to prove the issue one way or another.

It can be argued that the lack evidence of improvement in student outcomes does not, in itself, demonstrate the failure of school self-management. The movement towards this

form of decentralisation may have increased the possibility of improved student outcomes over time, by increasing local involvement, teacher status and professionalism and giving the school more control over its resources.

It could be argued that the school effectiveness research has an extremely narrow focus, and that there are many other features of school operations aside from student outcomes that can be improved by the move towards a decentralised system. If these factors are improved and the effect on student outcomes is not negative, then the case can still be made. Also the case can be made that if student outcomes remain the same, but at considerably less cost to the public, then the move has been worthwhile. Productivity will have increased and this may be seen by many as a plus. However, we must clearly establish that the decentralisation process has not diminished student outcomes before we can make this claim.

It is obvious that the self-managing school, as the key characteristic of a decentralised system is here to stay, however the jury is still out on the best way to operate such a system. The research is inconclusive about whether the self-managing school will improve student outcomes and a range of other factors.

### **Challenges for nations embarking upon decentralised decision-making**

A number of issues emerge that need to be considered carefully, by education systems, by governments and by researchers. The first challenge is to promote the establishment of an international research agenda that seeks to isolate the effects of decentralisation from other factors which may impinge on student outcomes, such as class sizes, management styles, levels and types of school funding (fees, sponsorship, etc) and how that funding is allocated (teacher salaries, professional development, curriculum, accountability) and to establish the correlations of these factors with student outcomes. In particular, school effectiveness researchers should seek ways of incorporating the issue of decentralisation into their ongoing research.

The second challenge may be to list of student outcomes, both academic and non-academic, that we might reasonably expect schools to achieve within a devolved system of education. The next challenge is that governments and education systems proceed cautiously with any further steps towards full decentralisation and establish mechanisms that will monitor the value of any changes made. Improvements in education can only take place over time and it is a responsibility of education systems to put into place mechanisms that will establish the validity of these changes. If, somewhere in the future, decentralisation is shown to have a deleterious effect on student outcomes, then steps need to be taken to undo those aspects which cause the decline.

Finally, the most important challenge is to change the nature of the debate. It is important that the basis of any changes to education must always be on improving the quality of education for students rather than 'fixing' a failing system. Much of the debate on restructuring has focused on the failure of schools to fully achieve what they set out to do. We can ask the same question of any system, of any business, of any individual. Is there anyone that has ever achieved everything they set out to do? If there is, then we could argue that such people or groups have set their goals too low. This paper has not made the assumption that there is anything 'wrong' with schools now. Just as we expect an improvement over time in all other aspects of human endeavour, from developments in technology, to consistent economic growth, to world sporting records, we are right to expect that education is on a consistent upwards curve as well. When a new athletics or swimming world record is achieved, we acclaim the new holder, but it doesn't make the efforts of the previous holder any less meritorious. Why do we treat education differently? Education is the key to development. It provides improved understandings of human development that can impact on population control issues, on the environment, on health and family planning, and the role women play in

a nation's development. The real challenge is to continue the task of ensuring the provision of a universal, high quality and relevant education.

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