



# Leadership and the decentralized control of schools

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# Leadership and the Decentralized Control of Schools

This review examines the literature related to leadership and the decentralized control of schools. It first considers the distinctive goals of public and private agencies, the specific constraints that shape the autonomy of leaders in different sectors, and the ways in which new models of public management are infusing public agencies with market-based principles. Next, the role of principals as public-sector leaders and the evidence on factors related to principal effectiveness are considered. Finally, the review assesses the extent of decentralized control granted to local schools and the evidence on the impact of decentralization.

## How has public sector leadership evolved over time?

The traditional view among those who study and theorize about organizations and management is that key differences in public- and private-sector organizations lead to differences in the role and authority of leaders in each sector (e.g., Meyer, 1982; Perry & Rainey, 1988). However, more recently, scholars have argued that the lines delineating public and private organizations are often unclear, that organizational “publicness” should more accurately be seen as a continuum, and that effective leadership practices are not necessarily sector specific (e.g., Bozeman, 1984, 1987; Bozeman & Bretschneider, 1994; Murray, 1975; Perry & Rainey, 1988; Robertson & Seneviratne, 1995). These scholars contend that, because of structural changes (such as decentralization and team-based arrangements) in many public organizations, such as public schools, and regulations affecting private firms (for example, those that take on government contract work), clear-cut and consistent differences between public and private organizations are vanishing. Despite this increasingly blurry distinction between the public and private sectors, researchers continue to cite sector-specific characteristics related to organizational goals and constraints that affect leadership in each of the sectors (Boyne, 2002; Hooijberg & Choi, 2001; Robertson & Seneviratne, 1995).

Public-sector organizations are commonly understood to have more ambiguous goals than private-sector organizations. While organizations in the private sector are more clearly driven by the goal of maximizing profits and enhancing shareholder value, organizations in the public sector tend to have multiple and potentially conflicting goals. Furthermore, at least some of the goals of public-sector organizations may be vague or intangible, such as maximizing the public good, fostering a democratic society, or maintaining equity. Because these goals are multiple, potentially conflicting, and often vague and intangible, measuring the performance or evaluating the progress of public-sector organizations is often difficult (Rainey, Backoff, & Levine, 1976). Because their goals are more ambiguous, public-sector organizations also face a broader range of constituent groups—

ranging from politicians and special-interest groups to diverse groups of citizens and taxpayers—as they seek to achieve their multiple objectives (Baldwin, 1987; Boyne, 2002; Rainey et al., 1976).

In addition to pursuing more ambiguous and less quantifiable goals than those of most private-sector organizations, public-sector organizations are more constrained by external factors out of their control and by internal structures and processes that reduce flexibility and innovation (Boyne, 2002; Hooijberg & Choi, 2001; Rainey et al., 1976; Robertson & Seneviratne, 1995). Public-sector organizations are subject to more rules, regulations, and procedures that are set by an external agency or authority. Among these constraints are higher levels of accountability, stricter reporting requirements, and the absence of market incentives (Boyne, 2002; Meyer, 1982; Perry & Rainey, 1988; Rainey et al., 1976; Solomon, 1986). Within public-sector organizations, incentive systems based on seniority rather than performance and the ambiguous and often intangible nature of their goals often constrain flexibility and innovation.

**Because of these differences, public-sector leaders – including school principals – tend to have less decision-making authority and less flexibility in their personnel management.** Additionally, they are often subject to stricter accountability requirements and to greater public scrutiny of their actions. Their plans are more likely to be disrupted because of the more frequent leadership turnover that results from elections and political appointments (Boyne, 2002; Rainey et al., 1976). Thus, compared to their private-sector counterparts, leaders of public organizations tend to have less autonomy and more accountability. This tension between autonomy and accountability is especially true for school principals.

Despite these sector-specific differences and their implications for leadership, the role and expectations for leaders in both sectors have become more similar. One analysis put it this way: it was in the 1980s that “market-like concepts broke through the weak wall of separation between the values of the market and the values of public management” (Box, 1999, p. 29). In the sphere of education reform, concepts such as site-based management in the 1980s and vouchers and charter schools in the 1990s reflect the infusion of market-based principles into the public sector.

As a result of the growth in market-oriented approaches, the dominant model of leadership in the public sector has shifted from one that views leaders of public organizations as administrators of the public interest to one that sees them as entrepreneurial managers of efficiency (Box, 1999; Terry, 1998; Kaboolian, 1998). Referred to as “the new public management,” this shift reflects the expansion of a market orientation into the public sector. According to the new public management model, market-like concepts such as performance-based contracting, customer service, competition, market incentives, entrepreneurialism, and individual choice will mitigate bureaucratic waste and lead to a trimmer and more efficient public sector (Box, 1999; Kaboolian, 1998).

**Seeing public managers as “good people trapped in bad systems” (Gore, 1993, p. 2), the new public management model embraces the private-sector logic.** In particular, managers need to be

liberated from routines and regulations that limit their ability to innovate and make changes to improve performance and efficiency. Proponents of market-based principles contend that deregulation, decentralization of authority, and the granting of increased discretion will free public managers to meet the expectations that they will be entrepreneurs and view citizens as customers (Terry, 1998).

While the distinctions between public and private organizations are neither clear-cut nor consistent, the role of public-sector leaders has become more similar to that of managers in the private sector. Although hampered by sector-specific rules, regulations, and procedures and lacking the discretion afforded to managers of private firms, leaders of public organizations are increasingly expected to use market-like techniques focused on cutting costs and increasing efficiency. In short, they are expected to run their organizations like a business.

These shifts in the role and expectations of public-sector leaders have implications for principals of public schools. **In the post-*No Child Left Behind* era of greater school accountability, public schools have become increasingly subject to private-sector features such as complex techniques of performance-measurement (tied to student performance on annual tests), alternative schooling models designed to increase competition among public schools, and performance-based pay schemes.**

## How has principal's role as school leader changed over time?

Just as the role of public-sector managers has changed over the past several decades, so too has the role of school principals, a particular subset of public-sector leaders. Dating back to the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk*, education reforms in the United States over the last three decades have influenced the school principalship (Murphy & Hallinger, 1992). These reforms were needed to respond to the increasing importance of education in post-industrial societies, heightened international economic competition, and demographic changes in school-aged populations.

Changes in the international political landscape have led to a global emphasis on grassroots democracy and public participation and voice in public organizations. At the same time, there has been a push for the de-bureaucratization of society and the decentralization of problems (Murphy & Hallinger, 1992). As a result of these global pressures, education policymakers are faced with a world in which 21<sup>st</sup> century jobs require higher levels of education for a more diverse population of students. Furthermore, this education is expected to be delivered in ways that are more responsive to students and families and are increasingly locally controlled. Policy reforms have, therefore, included elements such as deregulation, student/family choice, school-based management, and increased accountability measures.

**As school policies and practices change, the role of school principals has also changed (Hallinger, 1992; Murphy & Hallinger, 1992). This role has shifted from one focused on program management, to one emphasizing instructional leadership, to one focused on transformational leadership, and finally to one involving leadership practices that contain elements of each of these earlier models (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Hallinger, 1992; Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Marks & Printy, 2003; Stronge, 1993).**

During the 1960s and 1970s, an influx of federally funded programs—such as bilingual, compensatory, and special education—and curricular innovations centering on math and science education focused the work of school principals on program and curriculum management with the goal of improving schools. Principals functioned largely as program managers implementing policies designed by others to solve pressing social and educational problems. This role that often resulted in an emphasis on compliance with program criteria rather than on positive student outcomes (Hallinger, 1992). During the 1980s, in part because of the publication of research by Edmonds (1979) that highlighted the importance of school leadership in effective schools, the principal’s role shifted to one of instructional leader, the coordinator and overseer of curriculum and instruction (Hallinger, 1992). However, like the former role of program manager, being an instructional leader involved managing the implementation of prepackaged solutions for predefined problems (Hallinger, 1992). Stakeholders outside of local schools—policymakers and developers of in-service programs designed to train principals in instructional leadership—were still defining the problems and designing the solutions.

In contrast to the implementation-focused expectations placed on principals during the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, policy changes beginning in the 1980s emphasized decentralization and school-based management. These changes put curricular and instructional decisions formerly made at the state or district level into the hands of those at the school level. Instead of being instructional leaders “leading from the front or middle of the band,” principals were now seen as “leading from the back of the band” (Leithwood, Begley, & Cousins, 1992, p. 6). In other words, as leaders, they were responsible for transforming schools by inspiring those working within them to higher levels of commitment, energy, and moral purpose (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008).

The principal’s new role as transformational leader involved greater ambiguity and uncertainty as new emphasis was placed on distributing decision-making among members of the school community, looking to teachers as important sources of expertise, and finding problems and setting goals as determined by those inside the school rather than by those in the central office (Hallinger, 1992). Thus, mirroring shifts in the role of public-sector leadership at large, the role of the school principal has become less focused on bureaucratic accountability in the form of compliance with externally determined rules and regulations and more focused on organizational improvement from within and accountability related to student outcomes (Murphy & Hallinger, 1992; Hallinger, 1992).

Despite changes in the role of the principal, research clearly indicates that school leadership matters for school and student outcomes (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2012; Bryk et al., 2010; Hallinger, 2005; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008; Rice, 2010; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). A review of findings from studies of school leadership in the United States and elsewhere (Leithwood et al., 2008) offers a number of claims that have been bolstered by more recent research. **First, school leadership indirectly influences student learning by acting as a “catalyst without which other good things are quite unlikely to happen”** (Leithwood et al., 2008, p. 28). These “other good things” include attracting and retaining more effective teachers, who in turn improve student outcomes (Beteille, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2009; Ladd, 2009); releasing less effective teachers (Branch et al., 2012); and improving staff motivation, commitment, and working conditions (Leithwood et al., 2008).

**Second, research suggests that successful school leaders draw on the same set of basic leadership practices, which include elements of traditional management, instructional leadership, and transformational leadership** (Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2008; Robinson et al., 2008). Although leadership practices have been grouped and categorized differently across studies of principal effectiveness (e.g., Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2008; Robinson et al., 2008), the following four categories put forth by Leithwood et al. (2008) capture many of the qualities and practices studied by other researchers.<sup>1</sup> First, effective school leaders *build vision and set directions*, which includes creating a shared vision, fostering acceptance of group goals, and demonstrating high-performance expectations (Leithwood et al., 2008, p. 30). Second, they *understand and develop people*, which involves providing individualized support and consideration, fostering intellectual stimulation, and modeling appropriate values and behaviors (Leithwood et al., 2008, p. 30). **Third, they redesign the organization, which includes building collaborative cultures, restructuring and re-culturing the organization, building productive relations with parents and the community, and connecting the school to its wider environment** (Leithwood et al., 2008, p. 30). **Finally, effective school leaders manage the teaching and learning program, which includes staffing the teaching program, providing teaching support, monitoring school activity, and buffering staff against distractions from their work** (Leithwood et al., 2008, p. 30).

Studies that link particular principal behaviors or sets of practices (often called “task dimensions”) with student outcomes suggest that some task areas may be more important than others in improving schools (e.g., Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Robinson et al., 2008). For example, the dimension referred to as *promoting and participating in teacher learning and development*—which most closely overlaps with the category *understand and develop people* in Leithwood et al. (2008)—is

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<sup>1</sup> Other researchers (e.g., Robinson et al., 2008; Grissom & Loeb, 2011) offer other categorizations of leadership practices, also referred to as “dimensions.” The categories used by different researchers do not align neatly with one another. This report chose the categories used by Leithwood et al. (2008) because they are intended to capture the various dimensions used in many studies of school leadership.

most strongly associated with positive student outcomes (Robinson et al., 2008). The study argues, “The closer educational leaders get to the core business of teaching and learning, the more likely they are to have a positive impact on students’ outcomes” (Robinson et al., 2008, p. 664). Similarly, a study of a pilot teacher evaluation system in the Chicago Public Schools finds that principals’ direct involvement in teacher evaluation via classroom observations and post-observation conferencing with teachers is associated with improved academic outcomes, significantly so in students’ reading performance (Steinberg & Sartain, forthcoming). Another study (Grissom & Loeb, 2011) finds that principals’ skills in the dimension “*organization management*”—which overlaps most closely with the category *redesign the organization* in Leithwood et al. (2008)—are most consistently associated with positive student outcomes. For Grissom and Loeb (2011), *organization management* refers to tasks related to overseeing the functioning of a school in pursuit of its medium- and long-term goals. These tasks include managing budgets and resources, developing a safe school environment, and maintaining campus facilities. Such tasks are among the areas of greater autonomy granted to principals in both the School District of Philadelphia and Chicago Public Schools (Steinberg, 2012). Some see a redefinition of principal effectiveness: “Involvement in instruction matters, but so do ‘traditional’ management functions that have not typically been included under the instructional leadership mantle” (Grissom & Loeb, 2011, p. 1119).

While researchers continue to untangle the impacts on student learning of particular task dimensions and principals’ effectiveness in each dimension, it is clear that principals are important to student-outcomes. **As school authority becomes increasingly decentralized, principals are positioned to have even more influence in shaping the school community—the climate for teaching and learning, the practice of instruction, and the quality of relationships among adults and students.**

## What role has greater principal autonomy played in recent education reforms?

Over the past decade, countries around the world have used decentralization of decision-making as an education reform strategy (Hanushek, Link, & Woessmann, 2013). Findings from international research on the effects of decentralized decision-making on student achievement have been mixed (see Arcia, Macdonald, Patrinos, & Porta, 2011, for a review; see Clark, 2009, for a comparative study). However, a more recent comparative analysis of decentralization across 42 countries reconciles these inconsistent findings (Hanushek et al., 2013). Using four waves of data (2000–2009) from the Program for International Student Assessment, the analysis estimates the effects of school autonomy as the average share of schools with different levels of autonomy within each country has changed over time (Hanushek et al., 2012). The study finds that increasing autonomy improves student achievement in developed countries but undermines it in developing countries. More specifically, the study finds that, in countries with high levels of economic development, increased autonomy in academic content, personnel, and budget decisions is associated with

higher levels of student learning. These findings lend support to education reforms in the United States that focus on decentralizing decision-making authority and increasing principal autonomy.

The decentralization of decision-making as an education reform strategy has a long history in the United States. Indeed, the nation's largest school district, New York City Public Schools, has alternated between local and district control for nearly two centuries (Ouchi, 2006). In response to the growth in state funding in the 1970s, school (site)-based management (SBM) gained favor in the 1980s among education reformers who believed greater school-based autonomy could improve school performance (Chubb & Moe, 1990). SBM is often implemented by appointing a council, made up of teachers, parents, and community members, at each school site. This council would have some responsibility for budget, personnel, and curriculum. However, in practice, local school councils tended to have advisory, rather than decision-making, authority (Mohrman & Wohlstetter, 1994; Wohlstetter & Buffett, 1992). By the early 1980s, approximately 60 percent of school districts with enrollments of at least 50,000 students had experimented with some form of SBM (Van Langen & Dekkers, 2001). While SBM became a priority in many large school districts, there is little evidence that these structural reforms had any impact on school performance (Fullan, 1993). Around the same time, researchers began to attend to the relationship between school achievement and factors related to how schools and school districts are structured and make decisions, with much evidence pointing to the central role of the principal in school governance (Purkey & Smith, 1983).

Over the last decade, school districts throughout the United States have again begun to grant greater autonomy and decision-making authority to local public (noncharter) schools.<sup>2</sup> **In this most recent form of decentralization, decision-making authority resides with principals, rather than local school councils. The extent of autonomy has expanded to include issues related to teacher professional development, school climate and safety strategies, and the school's calendar and schedule, along with curriculum and budgetary authority.**

Current models of school autonomy include one first implemented in a school district in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, in 1976 and then adopted by districts in Houston and Seattle in the 1990s. In this model the district's central office continues to perform administrative and coordinating functions such as payroll and pension, bus transportation, and food preparation, while each school within the district controls most of its instructional decisions. Additionally, in the absence of a districtwide student assignment process, each school must attract its own students (Ouchi, 2006). Similar to the model in Houston and Seattle, principals of pilot schools in the Boston Public School district also have autonomy over their budget, staffing, curricula, and schedules, and these schools must also

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<sup>2</sup> School districts in Boston, Chicago, Houston, New York City, Oakland, Seattle, St. Paul, and San Francisco have implemented school-based autonomy, with officials in the Clark County, Nevada, and Los Angeles school districts planning to provide greater autonomy to local public schools (Ouchi & Goldschmidt, 2009).

attract their own students as part of the centralized Boston Public School choice plan (Abdulkadiroglu, Angrist, Dynarski, Kane, & Pathak, 2011). Similarly, in the Chicago Public School District, the Autonomous Management and Performance Schools Program grants selected principals autonomy over their school's budget; curriculum, instruction, and assessment; calendar and schedule; and teacher professional development (Steinberg, 2012).

These more recent models of school autonomy grant far greater autonomy to schools than did SBM programs, which generally limited control to only one or two areas of authority over budget, personnel, and curriculum decisions (Wohlstetter & Mohrman, 1996). Moreover, while SBM historically provided local school councils with budgetary authority, evidence suggests that this authority was nominal at best, as more than 95 percent of the school budget was often determined before dollars were allocated to the school site (Wohlstetter & Mohrman, 1996).

More recent federal education policy reflects a shift towards the decentralization of decision-making authority to the school's principal. Under the 2010 Race to the Top competition, the U.S. Department of Education gave priority to states that not only expanded the number of authorized charter schools but also instituted a broader reform strategy enabling local school districts to operate autonomous public, noncharter schools. Under this program, autonomous public schools have greater authority to define their curriculum, hire and replace staff, organize their school day or year, and control their budget (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

While education reforms such as Race to the Top have granted increased autonomy to principals, they have also mandated accountability measures such as standardized testing to monitor how well each school is meeting the goal of increasing student achievement. Therefore, as principal autonomy has increased, so too has school-level accountability for student outcomes. This combination of reform strategies reduces some of the bureaucratic constraints principals face while still requiring them to reach specified levels of school performance—features of the trend towards employing market-like concepts in the public sector (Box, 1999; Kaboolian, 1998). Research suggests that the combination of local control and clear accountability requirements may positively impact student outcomes (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2011; Hanushek et al., 2012; Loeb & Strunk, 2006; Steinberg, 2012).

**Principals today are seen less as program managers and more as education entrepreneurs responsible for school improvement** (Box, 1999; Terry, 1998; Kaboolian, 1998). As they are being granted the decision-making authority to fill this more entrepreneurial role in school districts such as Boston, New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia, it is critical to consider the ways in which school leaders use their new autonomy. Specifically, what choices do school leaders make about changes to school management and instruction when given broader decision-making authority?

One study found that principals in Chicago Public Schools were more likely to exercise greater autonomy over their school budget and curricular and instructional strategies than over professional development and the school's calendar and schedule (Steinberg, 2012). However,

while the study shows the areas where Chicago principals preferred to use their autonomy, because of data limitations, the author was unable to disentangle the specific changes principals made to their curriculum or the ways in which principals spent school resources. **For example, with their new autonomy, did principals select curriculum and instructional strategies that differed dramatically from those used pre-autonomy? In what ways did principals allocate funds when given the independence to make budgetary decisions? Questions such as these have not been answered. Yet they are critical for understanding the implications of decentralizing decision-making and increasing school-based autonomy.**

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