

Educational Decentralization Efforts in a Centralized Country: Saudi Tatweer Principals' Perceptions of their New Authorities

Salah S. Meemar, *Taibah University*

Sue Poppink & Louann Bierlein Palmer, *Western Michigan University*

Abstract This study captures the perspectives of school principals in Saudi Arabia regarding the new authorities granted to them as part of their country's education decentralization efforts. Specifically, it explores these principals' perceived ability to implement the new authorities, the levels of support they received, the effectiveness, and any additional authorities they desire. This study provides an opportunity to analyze the early efforts of a country with a very centralized educational system to implement decentralization efforts. A total of 173 Tatweer school principals completed an online survey, and findings suggest these Saudi principals perceived a limited ability to implement the authorities, low to moderate support, and only slight agreement that the authorities would achieve desired outcomes. Multiple regression analysis revealed that the principals' perceived ability to implement administrative authorities, perceived support in implementing technical authorities, and years of experience predicted their beliefs about the effectiveness of the authorities.

Keywords School Principals; Saudi Arabia; Tatweer schools

Salah S. Meemar, Sue Poppink, & Louann Bierlein Palmer (2018). Educational Decentralization Efforts in a Centralized Country: Saudi Tatweer Principals' Perceptions of their New Authorities. *International Journal of Education Policy & Leadership* 13(2). URL: <http://journals.sfu.ca/ijepl/index.php/ijepl/article/view/730> doi: 10.22230/ijepl.2018v13n1a730

IJEPL is a joint publication of PDK International, the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University, the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University, and the University of Delaware. By virtue of their appearance in this open access journal, articles are free to use, with proper attribution, in educational and other non-commercial settings 90 days after initial publication. Copyright for articles published in IJEPL is retained by the authors. More information is available on the IJEPL website: <http://www.ijepl.org>



Introduction and background

Saudi Arabian schools have done much to provide students with traditional forms of education; however, increased globalization and competition among nations highlight a need for greater problem-solving and technical skills among Saudi students. In 2003, Saudi Arabia's scores on the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study were among the lowest of all 45 participating countries. These results were shocking to Saudi officials, who raised calls for reforms (Castillo, 2006).

Educational systems in Saudi Arabia are highly centralized, whereby the Ministry of Education (MOE) sets overall standards for the country's educational system (Alsofyan, 2002). The MOE, located in Riyadh, the country's capital, is historically responsible for the hiring of staff, setting educational policies and curricula, allocating financial resources, selecting textbooks, and providing overall supervision and administration of the educational efforts (Badawood, 2003). Despite the large geographic area and number of students served by the Saudi Arabian school system, even the most fundamental decisions are issued from the MOE. Thus, the school principals have been working as managers of their schools rather than school leaders.

Yet, as Hamden Alghamdi and Noor Abdullgawad (2002) found, "one of the most important problems of the Saudi education system is that it is centralized" (p. 81). A related problem in Saudi schools has been the imbalance between the principals' responsibility to facilitate decentralization and their limited authority, which has created a sense of increased pressure and dissatisfaction among school principals (Alsalih, 2010).

In response to its schools' many challenges, the Saudi government embarked on a journey to improve the quality and relevance of its education services (Ramady, 2010). The \$2.4 billion King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz Public Education Development Project (or *Tatweer*, as it is known in Arabic) was launched in 2007 with the aim of transforming education for its 4.5 million school students by introducing a more modern system of instruction (Tatweer Plan, 2010). *Tatweer* seeks to develop curriculum and learning materials to meet current and future skill needs; promote learning; and provide professional development for leaders, managers, and all school staff (Tatweer Plan, 2010). Accordingly, budgets have been allocated for the construction of new schools, extracurricular activities, training, and professional development.

The decentralization of more authority to the school level is also a major goal. Such decentralization is considered a way to achieve a number of *Tatweer* reforms and keep up with the developed world. Decentralized school districts have been implemented in a number of countries (Taneiji & McLeod, 2008), and E. Mark Hanson (2000) found that "virtually every country in North, Central, and South America has some type of educational decentralization reform underway currently" (p. 1). Nearly all East Asian countries are introducing some form of educational decentralization as well (Leung, 2004). Indeed, the Saudi MOE had begun a decentralization process prior to *Tatweer* in 2001, when it transferred some authorities to schools as a first step toward decentralization.

To further the decentralization process, 900 out of 30,067 Saudi schools were granted an additional 21 areas of more significant authority in 2011, with the remaining schools to be covered in later stages (*Tatweer School*, 2012). This provided

an opportunity to analyze the early efforts of a country with a very centralized educational system to implement more significant decentralization efforts.

Related research and research questions

Globalization and the evolution of a knowledge-based economy have caused radical changes in the function of education systems in most countries around the world. Comprehensive reforms typically focus on improving countries in the global marketplace by strengthening the education training of their workforce. Realizing the importance of allowing more autonomy for schools in charting their own courses of development, many countries have introduced decentralization policies that provide schools with more of the decision-making freedom and flexibility necessary to develop (Mok, 2003). Indeed, over the past few decades, decentralization has become one of the most debated policy issues throughout both developing and developed worlds. It is seen as central to the development efforts of countries as far afield as Chile, China, Guatemala, Nepal, Singapore, Indonesia, Bolivia, and Colombia. It is also squarely in the foreground of policy discourse in the European Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Faguet & Sanchez, 2008).

Schools in developing countries such as Saudi Arabia are described as having a highly centralized system, where the decision-making is from the top to the bottom, and there is a lack of school autonomy (Alzaidi, 2008). However, in recent years, the Saudi education system has witnessed a number of reforms toward decentralization, which gives principals more authority. Consistent with global trends in decentralized educational authority, the MOE in Saudi Arabia decided to grant school principals more decision-making authority to reduce bureaucracy and facilitate school decentralization initiatives.

In general, the literature points to four factors that could lead to the success or failure of decentralization in education. These factors include the cultural context in which the devolution of education takes place, political support from national leaders and local elites, adequate planning management, and local empowerment (Khan, 2011). However, decentralization across the globe operates differently according to a country's unique circumstances; therefore, the aims and outcomes of decentralization are unpredictable. Indeed, research on the study of decentralization in Saudi Arabia is a somewhat difficult task, given that the term *decentralization* is a fairly new concept in centralized cultures (Mali, 2004). In Saudi Arabia, the business community has embraced the decentralization concept for a longer period than the country's educational system has.

Historically, Saudi school principals have received little or no leadership training before assuming their posts as educational leaders (Aldarweesh, 2003; Astiz, 2004), and strategies to support school principals while implementing change are lacking (Alghamdi, 2013). As Saudi Arabia looks to reform its educational system in a way that follows global trend practices, "educators need to examine the leadership role and the perspective of that role of those individuals who will be responsible for leading the changes — the school principals" (Mathis, 2010, p. 3). Yet, to date, few studies have explored the school principals' perceptions of the new authorities conferred to them by the Saudi MOE, despite the fact that the MOE was to evaluate these au-

thorities one year after implementation. A review of the literature revealed just three studies on the topic.

The first study, conducted by Bandar Allheaniy (2012), explored principals' attitudes toward their new administrative, technical, and financial authorities. Participants of the study included 320 school principals from the city of Makkah. The results showed that principals' attitudes were high on administrative and technical authorities, but low on financial authorities. The primary conclusion of the study was that school principals needed more financial authorities.

The second relevant study, conducted by Husam Alhumaidhi (2013), examined barriers secondary school principals have in practicing their authorities. Participants included 122 secondary school principals and 33 supervisors in the city of Riyadh. Overall, the principals reported their authorities were highly inflexible and that they faced many administrative tasks, but they had inadequate administrative staff and poorly prepared school committee members.

The third study, conducted by Saleh Alotaibi (2013), examined the degree to which principals practiced their new administrative and technical authorities, and the role of these authorities in improving school administration performance. Participants included 110 secondary school principals from the city of Taif. Results showed that the degree to which the principals reported practicing their administrative authorities ranged from low to high, depending on the specific authority. Principals reported practicing their technical authorities to a degree that ranged from high to moderate. The overall conclusion was that the new authorities did assist school principals in improving the operation and maintenance of their schools.

The studies described above provide a baseline understanding of principals' perceptions of their new authorities; yet, none specifically addresses the principals' perceptions of their ability to implement the new authorities, the level of support they receive to implement the new authorities, their effectiveness at achieving MOE outcomes, and their needs or desires for additional authorities. This study differs from previous studies by addressing these perceptions, and it also includes all the principals from Tatweer schools throughout the country, not just from certain regions.

The purpose of this quantitative study was to describe Tatweer school principals' perceptions regarding the new authorities granted to them in the initial steps of decentralization. The research questions that guided this study are:

1. To what extent do Tatweer school principals believe: (a) that they have the ability to implement the new authorities; (b) that they have support for implementing the new authorities; and (c) how effective the new authorities are at achieving MOE intended outcomes?
2. To what extent do Tatweer school principals' perceptions of their ability to implement the new authorities, and the support they receive from the MOE to implement the new authorities, predict their perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the new authorities to achieve the ministry's intended outcomes, when holding other demographic variables constant?

3. What additional authorities do these school principals suggest be added to their current authorities?

Before outlining the methods used in this study, it is important to list the 21 new authorities granted to the Tatweer principals in Saudi Arabia. This gives a sense of just how centralized the country's educational system has been, and the types of new authorities being provided to principals. These new authorities are divided into two categories: administrative and technical.

Administrative authorities

1. Choose an assistant principal from the list of names provided by the Department of Education.
2. Deduct pay from the employees' salaries when they are absent or late, and then inform the Department of Education to implement the decision.
3. Specify teachers who are to be transferred from one school to another school. These teachers should be those whose performance has decreased 85 percent in function over the last two years.
4. Transfer any employees in administrative jobs to other schools if their performance has decreased from "excellent" in the last two years.
5. Evaluate bus drivers.
6. Apply models that support the proficiency of teaching and solve school problems.
7. Arrange studies to solve school issues.
8. Nominate not more than five employees for professional development in the school year.
9. Sign contracts with specialized parties accredited by governmental sectors related to operating the school cafeteria.
10. Adopt the naming of teachers who deserve a financial reward for teaching classes in which they substitute for an absent teacher in addition to working their own 24 credits hours.
11. Sign contracts with laborers for cleaning the school in the case contracts were impossible with the cleaning officers, or in the case the labor was contracted but not performed.
12. Contract with competent institutions to perform urgent maintenance for the school according to the specialized budget.

Technical authorities

1. Make temporary modifications to the duration of classes and recess to realize educational needs.
2. Increase the duration of study for groups of students to approximately one hour at maximum per day.

3. Close the school in emergency cases for one day at maximum, and officially inform the Department of Education.
4. Communicate directly with the governmental organizations in emergency cases.
5. Accept students who are out of the school district.
6. Determine when a student's behavior represents a danger against any school employee, and transfer the student to another school.
7. Add programs that address some of the school problems.
8. Execute specified school activities outside the school, for durations of no more than three days.
9. Contact the private sector to sponsor school programs that match school goals.

Methods

Data were collected using a quantitative survey, with such research capturing a variety of information about a given population (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). The population consisted of principals at Tatweer schools in Saudi Arabia, specifically the 900 Saudi schools implementing the King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz Project for the Development of Public Education.

An original survey was developed to address the research questions following a review of the relevant literature and the official documents principals received from the Saudi MOE regarding their new authorities. Because this study was the first to measure Saudi school principals' perceptions of their new authorities in the initial steps of decentralization, no previous measures of this construct existed. Content validity of the survey was established via a pilot test involving a small group of Saudi education leaders. The survey was implemented three years after the new authorities were granted to these principals.

The first section of the survey listed the principals' 21 new authorities (e.g., 12 administrative authorities, nine technical authorities), and respondents were asked to rate their ability to implement each authority on a scale that ranged from one (not at all) to six (very great extent). The next section listed these same 21 new authorities and asked respondents to rate the level of support (e.g., resources, training, and administrative support) they received to implement each authority on a scale that ranged from one (no support at all) to six (a great deal of support). The third section asked principals to rate the degree to which they agreed that the new authorities helped achieve the intended outcomes in their school, using a scale that ranged from one (strongly disagree) to six (strongly agree). The fourth section was an open-ended question that asked respondents to indicate up to three additional authorities they would like to have, in order of importance. The last section collected demographic information about the principals surveyed, requesting their gender, level of schooling, and years of experience.

Prior to survey distribution, permission was obtained from the Tatweer department at the MOE for these principals to participate in the research; approval was also obtained from the Human Subject Institutional Review Board at the authors'

university. An email containing the survey URL link was sent to each principal's school email address, as well as two follow-up reminders. The survey and all email correspondence with the principals were written in Arabic.

Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to address the research questions. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the first question concerning the principals' perceptions of their ability to implement the authorities, the support received for implementing them, and the effectiveness of the authorities. Multiple regression was used to answer the second research question, using the principals' perceptions of the effectiveness of the authorities as the dependent variable, and the principals' perceptions of their ability to implement the authorities and the support they received from the MOE to implement the authorities, and the demographic variables as the independent variables. The third question was answered using open-ended questions concerning additional authorities.

The minimum sample size requirements were determined using the formula $N > 50 + 8m$, where M = number of independent variables (Pallant, 2007). Accordingly, the minimum sample size necessary for this study was 82; complete responses were received from 173 principals.

A key limitation of this study is that it relies on self-reported information, which may be impacted by social desirability, a phenomenon that occurs when participants respond to attitudinal questions in a way that they believe others will approve. To minimize this, participants were apprised of the anonymity of their responses throughout the consent documents and survey. A delimitation of this study is that the population consists of the principals of Tatweer schools two years after they had received the new authorities.

Results

Of the 173 respondents, the average years of service was 10.84 years ($SD = 6.13$). The minimum and maximum years of experiences were one and 33, respectively. Gender breakdowns revealed 81 (46.8%) respondents were female and 92 (53.2%) were male. Forty-six (26.6%) respondents were elementary school principals, 71 (41.0%) were intermediate school principals, and 56 (32.4%) were high school principals. Eleven (6.4%) had just a diploma, 124 (71.7%) had a bachelor's degree, 37 (21.4%) had a master's degree, and one (0.6%) had a PhD.

The results are broken down by the three major research questions.

Research question 1: Ability to implement, levels of support, and effectiveness

Table 1 presents the frequency counts, the higher and lower combined percentages for principals' perceived ability to implement the new authorities, and the levels of perceived support for each authority, as ranked from the highest to lowest ability to implement them. In reference to the ability to implement, the highest-rated administrative authority was "Deducting pay and informing the DOE" ($M = 4.76$), and the lowest rated was "Transferring administrative employees" ($M = 2.27$). The highest-rated technical authority was "Adding programs to address school problems" ($M = 4.62$), and the lowest rated was "Executing out-of-school activities" ($M = 2.47$).

Table 1. Ability to implement and levels of support: Higher and lower frequencies and means

Authorities	Frequency counts and (%) of responses						
	Admin (A) technical (T)	Not at all/ Very low	Ability		Support Level		
			Great/ Very great	Mean (SD)	No/ almost no support	Good/ Great deal of support	Mean (SD)
Deduct pay and inform the DOE	A	16.2	67.6	4.76 (1.70)	19.1	43.4	4.03 (1.57)
Add programs to address school problems	T	11.0	62.4	4.62 (1.46)	22.0	30.7	3.64 (1.47)
Accept out-of-district students	T	15.6	59.0	4.50 (1.61)	19.6	35.8	3.90 (1.48)
Sign cleaning contracts	A	25.4	57.8	4.23 (1.84)	27.1	30.1	3.56 (1.56)
Apply teaching models	A	20.8	45.1	4.02 (1.57)	24.3	31.2	3.64 (1.41)
Make temporary modifications in class duration	T	27.2	49.7	3.98 (1.81)	30.0	27.8	3.48 (1.51)
Arrange studies to solve school issues	A	23.7	37.5	3.83 (1.56)	32.4	25.4	3.40 (1.46)
Communicate with government in emergencies	T	26.0	30.1	3.62 (1.52)	26.0	30.1	3.62 (1.52)
Contract with maintenance institutions	A	39.9	41.0	3.61 (1.97)	31.8	23.1	3.28 (1.53)
Contact the private sector to meet school goals	T	30.0	35.8	3.57 (1.72)	29.5	20.8	3.24 (1.45)
Evaluate bus drivers	A	34.7	31.2	3.40 (1.8)	34.7	23.7	3.21 (1.44)
Nominate employees for professional development	A	40.4	31.2	3.32 (1.84)	35.2	19.0	3.10 (1.44)
Close school in emergency cases	T	42.8	32.3	3.22 (1.97)	43.4	16.1	2.92 (1.50)
Determine dangerous student behavior and transfer	T	45.6	29.5	3.14 (1.85)	46.8	13.8	2.77 (1.40)
Sign contracts to operate school cafeteria	A	47.4	30.7	3.08 (1.98)	45.7	20.3	2.92 (1.60)

Table 1 (continued)

Authorities	Frequency counts and (%) of responses						
	Admin (A) technical (T)	Not at all/ Very low	Ability		Support Level		
			Great/ Very great	Mean (SD)	No/ almost no support	Good/ Great deal of support	Mean (SD)
Increase duration of study groups	T	50.9	24.3	2.87 (1.87)	46.9	15.0	2.85 (1.46)
Name substitute teachers for financial reward	A	51.4	27.7	2.84 (1.92)	43.4	17.4	2.90 (1.49)
Choose an assistant principal	A	55.5	24.9	2.84 (1.80)	49.7	16.2	2.65 (1.50)
Execute out-of-school activities	T	61.3	16.2	2.47 (1.70)	45.1	11.0	2.63 (1.34)
Transfer administrative employees	A	67.1	14.4	2.27 (1.70)	57.2	12.1	2.47 (1.43)
Specify teachers for transfer	A	67.0	17.9	2.32 (1.75)	55.5	13.2	2.56 (1.50)

Notes. Ability to implement: 1 = Not at all; 2 = Very low extent; 3 = Low extent; 4 = Medium extent; 5 = Great extent; 6 = Very great extent. Level of support: 1 = No support at all; 2 = Almost no support; 3 = A little support; 4 = A moderate amount of support; 5 = A good deal of support; 6 = A great deal of support

Table 1 also presents the frequency counts and percentages for the levels of perceived support for implementing the new authorities. The highest-rated support level for administrative authorities related to “Deducting pay and informing the DOE” ($M = 4.03$), and the lowest rated related to “Transferring administrative employees” ($M = 2.47$). The highest level of support for technical authorities was for “Accepting out-of-district students” ($M = 3.90$), and the lowest rated was “Executing out-of-school activities” ($M = 2.63$).

Overall, the principals did not rate their ability to implement any of the administrative and technical authorities, or the support levels they received, highly. As it relates to perceived ability, the highest-rated administrative authority was only in the low to medium extent range. The highest-rated levels of support were only in the little to moderate range.

Table 2 offers data regarding principals’ beliefs about the effectiveness of the new authorities in accomplishing MOE outcomes. Each outcome was rated in the range of slightly disagree or below. The highest rated outcome was “Enabling the leadership role of the principal” ($M = 3.79$), and the lowest rated was “Shifting the school toward disciplined decentralization” ($M = 3.56$).

Table 2. Effectiveness of the new authorities in accomplishing MOE outcomes
(N = 173)

MOE outcome	Frequency counts and (%) of responses						Mean (SD)
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Enable the leadership role of the principal	8 (4.6)	12 (6.9)	69 (39.9)	31 (17.9)	25 (14.5)	28 (16.2)	3.79 (1.36)
Increase a focus on learning and teaching	8 (4.6)	11 (6.4)	62 (35.8)	44 (25.4)	30 (17.3)	18 (10.4)	3.76 (1.25)
Assist the school to conduct self-development	4(2.3)	19 (11.0)	60 (34.7)	43 (24.9)	26 (15.0)	21 (12.1)	3.76 (1.26)
Improve the schools' performance	3 (1.7)	16 (9.2)	71 (41.0)	39 (22.5)	19 (11.0)	25 (14.5)	3.75 (1.25)
Facilitate the schools' roles and procedures	8 (4.6)	14 (8.1)	66 (38.2)	40 (23.1)	21 (12.1)	24 (13.9)	3.72 (1.31)
Align school with the future direction of MOE	4 (2.3)	28 (16.2)	50 (28.9)	49 (28.3)	21 (12.1)	21 (12.1)	3.68 (1.29)
Provide increased flexibility to manage the school	10 (5.8)	18 (10.4)	58 (33.5)	40 (23.1)	29 (16.8)	18 (10.4)	3.66 (1.32) Shift
the school toward disciplined decentralization	7 (4.0)	22 (12.7)	62 (35.8)	42 (24.3)	29 (16.8)	11 (6.4)	3.56 (1.21)

Notes. All eight questions were rated on a 6-point Likert scale with 1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Slightly disagree; 4 = Slightly agree; 5 = Agree; and 6 = Strongly agree

Research question 2: Relationship between effectiveness, ability, and support

To determine if any relationships existed between the principals' perceived ability to implement the authorities, the effectiveness of the authorities, and the support the principals received, five composite new variables were created, and Cronbach's alphas were run to determine the internal consistency: Perceived Ability to Implement Administrative Authorities (12 survey items, alpha = 0.83, mean = 40.5); Perceived Ability to Implement Technical Authorities (9 survey items, alpha = 0.81, mean = 32.6); Perceived Support to Implement Administrative Authorities (12 survey items, alpha = 0.89, mean = 37.7); Perceived Support to Implement Technical Authorities (9 survey items, alpha = 0.86, mean = 29.0); and Beliefs on the Effectiveness of the New Authorities in Accomplishing MOE Outcomes (8 survey items, alpha = 0.95, mean = 29.7).

Data were examined and three assumptions were met prior to conducting general linear multiple regression analysis: the independence of observations (examined using Levene's test of equality), normality (examined through skewness, kurtosis, the Shapiro-Wilk test of normality, and the quantile-quantile plot), and homoscedasticity (via plotting of residuals and fitted values).

Within the analysis, the dependent variable was Beliefs on the Effectiveness of the New Authorities in Accomplishing MOE Outcomes, while the independent variables were: Perceived Ability to Implement Administrative Authorities, Perceived Ability to Implement Technical Authorities, Perceived Support to Implement

Administrative Authorities, Perceived Support to Implement Technical Authorities, gender, school building level where respondent works, level of education, and years of experience.

Based on the regression analysis, an overall model was found to be significant ($F(10, 162) = 7.876, p = 0.000$), with an $R^2 = 0.327$. This indicates that the model, which includes three statistically significant relationships, can account for 32.7 per cent of the variation in the dependent variable.

Table 3. Tatweer principals' desired additional new authorities

Category/#	Desired additional authorities
<p>Staff issues</p> <p>There were 96 suggestions for new authorities regarding staff issues.</p>	<p>(a) Involve the principal in recruiting the teachers and staff who work in the school. (b) Grant authority for the school principal to transfer weak teachers and staff to other schools. (c) Give the principal the authority to hire outstanding teachers with distinct advantages. (d) Enable the school principal to suspend inefficient teachers and staff. (e) Confer the authority of the school principal to evaluate their educational supervisors.</p>
<p>School budget</p> <p>There were 48 suggestions for new authorities regarding school budget.</p>	<p>(a) Provide even greater financial independence and empowerment to principals. (b) Give the principal the opportunity to develop the financial action plan in order to manage the school without intervention from the MOE. (c) Allow the principal to increase the sources of the school budget. (d) Grant the school principal the authority to increase teachers' salaries based on their performance. (e) Permit the school principal to increase the contracts with sponsors in order to support school programs.</p>
<p>Power in decision-making</p> <p>There were 26 suggestions for new authorities regarding power in decision-making.</p>	<p>(a) Give the principal authority in decision-making without referring to the MOE. (b) Allow principals to host experts and speakers without requiring MOE approval. (c) Give principals the right to develop their school system and curriculum. (d) Grant the school principal the authority to expel negligent teachers or staff. (e) Restrict the supervisors from interfering in the extracurricular programs.</p>
<p>Operation issues</p> <p>There were 19 suggestions for new authorities regarding the management of operation issues.</p>	<p>(a) Give the principal full authority to be independent in school activities, such as running the cafeteria. (b) Give the principal the right to develop the school strategic plan rather than operational plan. (c) Increase the number of principal assistants who work in the school. (d) Require the principal's approval before implementing any programs from the MOE. (e) Permit the school principal to determine the school's needs, such as travelling to make contracts with agencies to improve the school.</p>
<p>Other issues</p> <p>There were 13 suggestions for new authorities that were categorized.</p>	<p>(a) Give the principal the authority to increase community involvement in the school programs. (b) Grant authority for the principal to expel students who have major behavioral problems. (c) Give the principal more freedom over the maintenance of the school building. (d) Expend the school authority to work directly with government agencies. (e) Enable the principal to activate some existing authorities by reducing the permissions needed from the MOE.</p>

The first significant relationship was with Perceived Ability to Implement Administrative Authorities ($F(1, 162) = 7.120, p = 0.008$); for every unit increase of the composite score for Perceived Ability, the composite score for Beliefs on the Effectiveness of the New Authorities increases by 0.19. The second significant relationship was with Perceived Support to Implement Technical Authorities ($F(1, 162) = 7.493, p = 0.007$); for every unit increase of the composite score for Perceived

Support, the composite score for Beliefs on the Effectiveness of the New Authorities increases by 0.34. The third significant relationship was with principals' years of experience ($F(1, 162) = 9.311, p = 0.004$); for every unit increase of years of experience, the composite score for Beliefs on the Effectiveness of the New Authorities in Accomplishing MOE Outcomes increases by 0.28.

Other variables examined were not found to be significant predictors, including: Perceived Ability to Implement Technical Authorities, Perceived Support to Implement Administrative Authorities, level of school, the education level of the principal, and the gender of the principal.

Research question 3: Suggestions for new authorities

The final research question explored Tatweer school principals' suggestions for additional new authorities, and was addressed by data from an open-ended question. These principals recommended additional authorities in five broad categories, with the suggestions collapsing into five items for each (see Table 3).

Discussion and connections to previous research

This research study explored Saudi Tatweer school principals' perceptions regarding the new administrative and technical authorities they had recently been granted as part of decentralization efforts, and data were collected from 173 Saudi principals. Below are some key findings and how they connect to previous research.

First, the findings suggest that Saudi Tatweer principals perceived they have low to medium ability to implement the 21 new authorities. Average scores obtained for most individual authorities were between 3.00 and 4.00 out of a possible 6.00 (see Table 1). When looking at the perceived ability to implement the administrative authorities compared to the technical authorities, the overall grand mean for administrative authorizers was 40.5, while it was lower for technical authorities at 32.7. These findings are different than those found by Alotaibi (2013), whereby principals' actual practice of the new technical authorities ranged from moderate to high. It may be that perceived inability to implement the authorities does not necessarily translate into actual inability.

The second major finding focused on the extent to which Saudi Tatweer school principals believe they have the resources, training, and administrative support to implement the new authorities received. Our data revealed these principals perceive only low to moderate support levels for implementing these new authorities, with the lowest support levels noted for the technical authorities. This finding aligns with the work of Alhumaidhi (2013), which suggested that effective change management requires coordination and cooperation from staff members, and that lack of support was one of the obstacles in the practice of the new authorities.

The third major takeaway deals with Tatweer school principals' beliefs regarding the effectiveness of the new authorities in helping to achieve the Saudi MOE's intended outcomes. The study explored a total of eight outcomes, and the average scores rated by the principals were between 3.50 and 4.00, out of a possible 6.00 (see Table 2). It is ironic that the goal of decentralization was the lowest-rated goal ($M = 3.56$).

The fourth major finding deals with the statistically significant relationships found via a multiple regression analysis, whereby greater perceived abilities to implement administrative authorities, greater perceived levels of support to implement technical authorities, and more years of experience, are connected to more positive beliefs about the effectiveness of the new authorities in accomplishing MOE outcomes. Indeed, those three variables can explain nearly 33 percent of the variance in beliefs regarding the effectiveness of these new authorities. This means that more successful decentralization of the school systems in Saudi Arabia may be possible if more principals perceive they have the ability to implement administrative authorities, if more schools have sufficient support to implement the technical authorities, and if there are greater numbers of more experienced principals in these schools. This aligns with work by M. Fernanda Astiz (2004), who found that many school administrators are without the training and time to deal with issues associated with decentralization, which may, in part, be due to a lack of experience. Furthermore, this lack of experience may affect school principals' understanding of current reforms, the purpose of decentralization, and how to initiate change (Mustafa, 2002; Scott & Jaffe, 2004).

The fifth major outcome came from the ideas offered by principals for additional authorities that would help them meet the desired MOE outcomes. The data revealed 15 additional desired authorities focused on staffing, budgets, and other issues. Of particular interest is an urgent need for financial authorities because there is comparatively little authority in that area. This affirms previous research by Allheaniy (2012), who found school principals need more financial authority, and Alhumaidhi (2013), who confirmed that a major obstacle principals face in implementing the new authorities is the lack of control over a school budget.

Overall, the data revealed that three years after the receipt of new authorities, these Saudi school principals reported only low to moderate ability levels to implement them, low levels of support to implement the authorities, and less than positive beliefs that the new authorities help them achieve the MOE outcomes. These data indicate the need for Saudi officials to provide greater levels of support and to consider additional authorities, particularly more authorities for principals to transfer selected teachers, recruit teachers and staff, suspend weak staff, and make more financial decisions.

Previous literature indicates that principals who are equipped with better leadership skills have the ability to move their schools toward sustainable growth in the future (Osorio, Anthony, & Fasih, 2009). With this in mind, it can be argued that better leadership skills can be helpful in managing the changes occurring due to the new authorities in Saudi Arabia. Saudi school principals have historically received little or no leadership training before assuming their posts as educational leaders (Aldarweesh, 2003; Astiz, 2004). One important policy recommendation is the creation of highly structured and motivating training sessions for principals. Specifically, such training sessions could help principals better understand these new authorities and how they can be used to improve the educational environment (Osorio et al., 2009). Furthermore, less experienced principals could be supported via training programs that emphasize mentorship by more experienced principals.

The decentralization of the national education system in Saudi Arabia and the new authorities granted to school principals are important aspects of education reform, whereby greater decision-making powers can help in the overall development and sustainability of schools (Smith & Abouammoh, 2013). Indeed, a number of countries have introduced the decentralization of educational powers, and have been able to resolve different issues and improve educational environment in schools (Cordesman, 2009). Nevertheless, the Saudi Tatweer school principals in this study believed that the new authorities were only slightly effective in the initial steps of decentralization. As Shaikah Taneiji and Lorraine McLeod (2008) noted, the transition from a centralized to decentralized school system involves complex change, and such major change has its risks in the change process itself and then in the consequences of the types of changes made. Therefore, a second policy recommendation is to continue to monitor the implementation of the policies, and provide support to schools and principals as they implement and the authorities. Saudi MOE leadership, and leaders in other centralized countries, can benefit from the knowledge gained through this study, and then work with principals to overcome the challenges posed by these significant reforms efforts.

References

- Aldarweesh, N. (2003). *Leadership behavior of elementary school principals as perceived by principals and teachers in the Al Hasa region, Saudi Arabia* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh.
- Alghamdi, H., & Abdullgawad, N. (2002). *The evolution of the education system in Saudi Arabia*. Saudi Arabia, Riyadh: Education Office for the Arab Gulf.
- Algamdi, M. (2013). *The obstacles of applying decentralized management in Riyadh Educational Offices*. Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: Imam Mohammad Bin Saud Islamic University. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.
- Alhumaidhi, H. (2013). *The barriers of practicing of secondary school principals for the authorities that given to them*. Mecca, Saudi Arabia: Umm Alqura University. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.
- Allheaniy, B. (2012). *Attitudes of principals in Makkah about the new authorities to them*. Mecca, Saudi Arabia: Umm Alqura University. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.
- Alotaibi, S. (2013). *The degree of practice the new powers and its role to improve the school administration performance from school principals perception at Taif region*. Mecca, Saudi Arabia: Umm Alqura University. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.
- Alsalih, K. (2010). *High schools' principals' authorities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in regard to recent international experiences: An initial perspective*. Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: Imam Mohammad Bin Saud Islamic University. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.
- Alsufyan, I.N. (2002). *Current factors affecting principals in the secondary schools of Saudi Arabia*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, 223–223.
- Alzaidi, A. (2008). Secondary school head teachers' job satisfaction in Saudi Arabia: The results of a mixed methods approach. *Annual Review of Education, Communication & Language Sciences*, 5, 161–185.
- Astiz, M.F. (2004). Decentralization and educational reform: What accounts for a decoupling between policy purpose and practice? Evidence from Buenos Aires, Argentina. *Public Administration and Management: An Interactive Journal*, 9(2), 137–165.
- Badawood, O. (2003). *The development of leadership skills of private high school principals in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia* [unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh.

- Castillo, D. (2003, July 11). Saudi Arabia's identity crisis. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 49(44), A33. URL: <https://www.chronicle.com/article/saudi-arabias-identity-crisis/13143> [March 23, 2018].
- Cordesman, A.H. (2009). *Saudi Arabia: National security in a troubled region*. ABC-CLIO.
- Faguet, J., & Sánchez, F. (2008). Decentralization's effects on educational outcomes in Bolivia and Colombia. *World Development*, 36(7), 1294.
- Hanson, E.M. (1998). Strategies of educational decentralization: Key questions and core issues. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 36(2), 111–128.
- Khan, A. (2011). Implementation of decentralization in education in Pakistan: Framework, status and the way forward. *Journal of Research & Reflections in Education*, 5(2), 146–169.
- Leung, K.S. (2004). *Educational centralization and decentralization in East Asia*. Paper presented at the APEC Educational Reform Summit Beijing, China.
- Mali, B. (2004). Decentralization—can it improve schools? *International Institute for Educational Planning*, 112(4), 3–16.
- Mathis, B.K. (2010). *Educational leadership: A description of Saudi female principals in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia*. Stillwater, OK: Oklahoma State University. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, 168.
- McMillan, J., & Schumacher, S. (2006). *Research in education: Evidence-based inquiry*. Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Ministry of Education. (2011). *Ministerial decree: Authorities of school principals and operational procedures*. Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: Agency of the Ministry of Education.
- Mok, Ka Ho (Ed.) (2003). *Centralization and decentralization: Educational reforms and changing governance in Chinese societies*. Pok Fu Lam: Hong Kong: Comparative Education Research Centre, University of Hong Kong.
- Mustafa, M. (2009). *The requirements of decentralization in education*. Mansoura, Egypt: Alasria library.
- Osorio, F., Anthony, H., & Fasih, T. (2009). *Decentralized decision-making in schools: The theory and evidence on school-based management*. New York, NY: World Bank Publications.
- Ramady, M.A. (2010). *The Saudi Arabian economy: Policies, achievements, and challenges*. New York, NY: Springer Science & Business Media.
- Smith, L., & Abouammoh, A. (2013). *Higher education in Saudi Arabia: Achievements, challenges and opportunities*. New York, NY: Springer Science & Business Media.
- Taneiji, S., & McLeod, L. (2008). Towards decentralized management in United Arab Emirate (UAE) schools. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 19(3), 275–291.
- Tatweer Plan. (2010). *A new vision and strategy for a promising future*. URL: <http://www.tatweer.edu.sa/tatweer/sites/default/files/strategy%20english%20version.pdf> [March 23, 2018].
- Tatweer School. (2012). *Tatweer school module*. URL: <http://www.tatweer.edu.sa/sites/default/files/tatweerpublishation/forms%20for%20developing%20schools.pdf> [March 23, 2018].