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School-Based Management — Problems and Prospects

An Introduction

HUGH D. JASCOURT¹

Education goals and school-based management are terms which much of the education community has embraced with great warmth and enthusiasm. Assuming there first can be agreement on what these terms mean, the problem lies in making them work. The articles that follow provide some insights to those who wish to use school-based management (SBM).

The terms are interdependent because SBM, in many instances, involves parental participation. In 1990, the Council of Chief State School Officers declared that schools must do more to enlist families as partners in the education of their children if the United States is to meet its educational goals. The National School Boards Association recently identified schools to be honored as "Profiles in Excellence." Among the hallmarks of excellence were programs initiated at the "building level." Parental involvement and decisionmaking at the building level are the key elements initiated throughout the country under the name of site-based management or school-based management.

SBM varies greatly from school system to school system, or within a single school system. The one common element is that decisions are made at the local level, allowing variances from the rules of the school system and the collective bargaining agreement. In most cases, these decisions are made by a group composed of school administrators, teachers, other school personnel (such as custodial, bus or support personnel) and parents. In most instances, decisions are reached through a consensus. This means everyone votes, and if someone of some faction objects, there is no agreement. The theory is that stakeholders will work toward the successful achievement of adopted goals that everyone accepts, even if some goals are not the ones they would prefer. The authors of our first article, however, counsel against the use of a consensus approach.

The scope of decisionmaking also varies widely. One extreme is the new system in Kentucky empowering SBM councils to determine the cur-

1. President, the Agency for Dispute Resolution and Synergistic Relations.

riculum, oversee the budget, hire and fire teachers, and make other crucial decisions previously made by central administrators. In some instances those with limited decisionmaking power have succeeded in going beyond the predetermined limitations as the result of the forces generated by consensus.

The first article is co-authored by Peter A. Walker, a partner in the New York City-based law firm of Kaye, Scholer, Fierman, Hays and Handler (which represents employers), and Dr. Lawrence Roder, Chair of the Department of Educational Administration at Pace University. The accompanying short articles present union and management perspectives on what is actually occurring in attempts to implement SBM. The union perspective is authored by Lawrence A. Poltrock and Sharon M. Goss, of Witwer, Burlage, Poltrock and Giampietro (which acts as general counsel for the American Federation of Teachers). The management perspective is presented by R. Theodore Clark, Jr. of Seyfarth, Shaw, Fairweather and Geraldson (which represents school employees throughout the country).

Since the authors of the last two articles did not have the opportunity to see the Walker and Roder article, several comments are appropriate. They express concerns about delegations of authority. If a consensus is reached, and the school administration, in effect, can veto any recommended course of action, then no authority has actually been delegated. The difficulties that arise in SBM are the willingness of the central authority to delegate authority to a local school administrator, and the willingness of a union to delegate to its school site representatives the authority to deviate from the contract. In addition, the school system initially sets the parameters by what it has allowed to be subject to SBM. Complaints have arisen more frequently that a principal, allowed to share decision-making, has been unwilling to do so.

For the same reasons that management has not ceded its authority, others cannot be peculiarly liable for the decisions the school administrator has accepted. Once more, management cannot be outvoted. Specific indemnifications may be necessary only to facilitate parental participation. Parents who fear being subjected to suit, which would involve cost regardless of liability, may abstain from participation.

Although consensus is the preferred method in implementing SBM, it is not without its problems. Most Americans are taught to aspire to be heads of hierarchies in which they will be the decisionmakers. Most Americans, regardless of occupation or profession, have not received training in reaching agreement through consensus. Consequently, the union or management representatives try to sway the parental representatives, thinking they can outvote the others. But there is no majority vote in consensus. In most cases, the participants have not been trained as a group in

how to engage in shared decisionmaking, although management and union people have been trained separately. Where consensus does not come about despite diligent efforts, blame is likely to be ascribed to the other side rather than to lack of knowledge in utilizing the process. Too often participants do not realize that the difficulties in reaching a consensus are not attributable to the issues but instead are effected, in large part, by the personal characteristics and methods of the participants.

Due to the varieties of the forms of SBM, it has been very difficult to obtain information which can be used to assess the process. The Journal would be happy to print a follow-up article describing your experience in using SBM. Such an article should indicate the scope of decisionmaking, who the participants are and how they were selected, the degree or extent of participation, when training participants have received, what you have tried to achieve but failed, what you have achieved, and the reasons you believe caused such outcomes. You may submit manuscripts detailing such experiences to:

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