



Changing Rules and Roles: A Primer on School-Based Decision Making



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This monograph is based on a
keynote presentation to the
Cross City Campaign for
Urban School Reform School-
Based and Student Achievement
Meeting in Baltimore, Maryland.

Building Success is an
occasional publication of
the Cross City Campaign
for Urban School Reform.



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INTRODUCTION

Edmonton Public Schools, in Alberta, Canada, began school-based budgeting in 1976 with seven schools. The transition came about as the result of a management decision to allow schools to get what they needed without having to jump through “bureaucratic hoops.” Today, the Edmonton public school system—which serves approximately 80,000 students from kindergarten to twelfth grade in more than 200 schools—is internationally recognized as an innovative leader in education. Its public schools offer students and families unprecedented program choice, resulting in more than 29 distinct educational alternatives to fit their needs. These alternative programs include language programming, a cadet program, sports alternatives, arts core, as well as programs that employ a particular instructional approach.

Angus McBeath has been a teacher and administrator for the Edmonton Public Schools for more than 25 years.



INCREASING THE CHANCE TO BE SUCCESSFUL

Let me say at the outset that when we suggest more school districts look at school-based management—or school-site decision making—as an alternative model for operation, we are not suggesting that centralized systems haven’t worked and won’t work. We are all, in some ways, products of a centralized system, and so I have to believe—we have to believe—that centralized systems can and do work. However, I strongly believe that school-site decision making gives us more value from our school systems.

HELPING SCHOOLS WORK BETTER

School-site decision making, by itself, doesn’t improve student achievement; but it allows the school to control enough of the variables that the principal and staff have a chance to be successful. Right now, under most central office configurations, school personnel don’t feel they control the variables that determine their success. Most principals don’t control the staffing, the technology, the standards, the curriculum, the textbooks, the physical plant or the ancillary activities that determine how well schools perform.

If you start with the fundamental belief that all staff want to be successful—and add the fact that most of us are more ordinary than extraordinary—then I think that all people who work in schools are humbly asking for is: *Can you give me half a chance*

to be successful? And, putting it in the most personal terms, if I believe that I have half a chance to be successful, I probably can be; but if I believe that I don't have even half a chance, I won't be. Trust me. I will give up, surrender, do something else.

Site-based decision making provides enough control of the crucial ingredients at the school level that it gives everyone on the staff the sense that it's possible to be successful.

REVERSING ROLES: PRINCIPALS AND CENTRAL OFFICE STAFF

Before we had school-site decision making in Edmonton, people in central office were the "elite" class in our district. After we moved the money out to schools in 1979, people in central lost some of their power. Now the people in central office will tell you, "The superintendent spends all his time in the schools. The principals are in charge of almost everything in the district. They're in charge of the schools; we central people aren't in charge of anything anymore." Now, that's a little bit of exaggerating. But on a good day, or even a bad day, that's generally how many central people feel. And I'm not as sympathetic as I should be because I say, "trust me, this transformation will be good for schools and central in the longer term."

That's because in Edmonton, the principalship really is the most crucial leadership position in the district, and the most important work of the district takes place in the classroom. In 1995 and '96, we moved all the service dollars for consulting, in-services, maintenance, marketing, technology services, administrative support and several other service areas out to the schools. We also gave principals the flexibility to purchase services and products from outside the system. That move—along with having principals report directly to the superintendent—changed the attitudes and perceptions of central office staff. Now they had to serve the schools, and they had to make sure their skills were finely honed so that principals would buy their services.

Prior to school-site decision making, principals often felt that they were not in control of the critical elements that affected their schools. I assure you, when principals felt oppressed, that did not generate good results. But now our principals know that they have much more control over how well their schools perform. It's quite a role reversal from the old days, with principals rather than central services having the resources and authority to manage their schools.

Has this reversal of roles generated some challenging consequences for central office staff? Of course, it has. It's been interesting watching the transition, when principals are allowed to make their own decisions. And that causes tension for people in central who can get a little bit wary of the tactics that some principals can display. When this happens, I calm my staff down and say, "Look. Will you give 'em a break? Many of them are new to this kind of work. It's a big deal reporting directly to the superintendent. And remember that they're responsible for all the results."

EMPOWERING PRINCIPALS

Principals' jobs are not easy, even in this empowering district called Edmonton, where empowerment is something we do, not just talk about. Principals' jobs are very tough, and they have an enormous sense of accountability, because the buck stops with them. To begin with, schools get 92 cents out of every dollar allocated by the district. And parents hardly ever call central anymore when they're unhappy about the way a school is programming for their child. Why would they call central? We haven't any money. There isn't anyone down there who can make any decisions anyway—other than the superintendent. If all the money is in the schools, and all the people who are responsible for virtually everything are in the schools, then you would call the school principals.

The principals are now in charge of their buildings. They are in charge of everything that happens in their buildings and they all report to the superintendent. But we say the caveat is we're going to hold each principal



accountable for their school—how well the students perform, how well the school functions. So, if you're a principal and your school isn't achieving good results, you can't blame central office! On the other hand, principals in Edmonton will tell you, "It's fine that central sent us 92 percent of the money, but they also sent us 100 percent of the problems." Everything cuts both ways, I guess.

By changing to school-site decision making, a district is essentially cutting down on the external factors that influence the way a school functions.

CREATING A NEW ROLE FOR CENTRAL OFFICE

Yet the change to a site-based system doesn't mean the end of central office, it means a new role for central office. And there is an important role for central office in a decentralized system.

Two things typically happen when you start talking about school-site decision making. One, central office staff become naturally defensive when you suggest that the number of jobs in central will depend on the wishes of the schools. The second is that central office staff also become threatened by the prospect of a change in the hierarchy.

Now there's nothing like central office people. I'm a central office person. I've been at central office for 15 years, and I've been a principal of two schools, and so I'm not telling stories here to diminish anyone. But central office has traditionally been the



“ruling class” in most school districts. And one of the fears that I’ve heard from central staff in some districts is: “We can’t trust principals. You just can’t trust ‘em.” I mean maybe that’s only a phenomenon in the districts I visit. But central office people sometimes believe that if principals have authority, and money, and who knows what else, they will just misbehave ‘cause it’s in ‘em! By contrast, what they’re thinking about themselves is, “But we’re different. We’re different from them because we’re trustworthy.” One constant about the ruling class is that it’s never likely to commit reform on itself. So, central office rarely reforms itself, particularly where it involves having to distribute real power to the schools.

MAKING CENTRAL SERVICES COMPETITIVE: SELLING SERVICES TO SCHOOLS

In Edmonton, most of the central staff work to generate revenue because all of the money for their services is in the schools. We have two kinds of central office units: We have “central-central,” which gets an allocation from the district budget; then we have “cost-recovery central,” and these offices don’t get any money from the district budget. Their money comes from the schools if their services are bought. Schools can also shop around and buy these services from outside the district.

And we don’t have many rules, by the way, to determine how these services are bought. That has changed the outlook of the people in central.

After cost recovery was introduced, our instructional consulting group shrank by almost half during the first several years. The group has since increased again due to the innovative way they restructured their services.

In fact, the consulting group is now offering extensive consultation to high schools, something that had not occurred for many years, even when consulting received a central allocation. Other services have shrunk or expanded too.

All of our technology people, all of our maintenance staff, all of our consultants, and all of our marketing people are under cost recovery—about 75 percent of central staff. We have only two people in Edmonton who work in curriculum who are paid for centrally. We have curriculum-support staff who are paid for by the schools, and are they ever good! On a day when the schools don’t want them for curriculum support, they do other things. If you want to keep your job in central, and nobody’s buying what you’re selling, there’s two things you can do: You can stop doing it altogether, or you can find services that schools value. So we retrain our staff.

We also let our staff sell services everywhere else in the world. We believe that it keeps them employed, and it helps underwrite the costs of producing services and materials for our own teachers. We sold over \$1 million of curricular resource materials last year alone! And our staff are hired as consultants by other districts in Ontario, Saskatchewan and different parts of Alberta. When our own superintendent wants to use the services of cost-recovery central, he has to buy their services too. It’s incredibly validating. A staff person said to me the other day, “You know I wish I were in cost recovery instead of central-

central. Do you know why? When you’re cost recovery and people are buying your services, it is so validating to know that what you do is valuable to the schools.”

Some people at central will say, “Principals won’t know if they need certain central office services.” So I then have to ask, “Are the schools achieving the results? Are the IPP (individualized program plan) results being met? Is each child’s writing and reading moving up a grade a year? Are the schools meeting their targets on the provincial achievement test? Are the parents satisfied? Are the staff satisfied? Are the school buildings in good shape? If they’re doing all of that and they’re not using curriculum specialists or social workers, then we’ve got to back off.”

In the end, cost recovery actually adds value to the system. Principals can make choices. They can manage their schools according to identified needs and priorities. They determine what they see as valuable and what they consider not worthwhile. As a result, school staff respond to the services provided differently. Schools don’t behave the same when the costs for services come out of their own budgets. They tend to be a bit more cautious about consumption than when the district paid the bills.

LEARNING THE HARD WAY

When we handed out the money to the schools in 1979, we had virtually no measures and no articulated standards to determine whether the schools were doing their work well enough. The first criticism was that the superintendent at the time had created 200 school districts in Edmonton, each seemingly accountable to itself, and there was going to be complete chaos.

I can tell you there was nothing close to chaos. But the district did have to do a better job of defining what authority and responsibilities schools had, and what authority and responsibilities central office had. So, we learned the hard way.

Let me give you one example. In ‘79, some of our teachers didn’t believe they had to teach the mandated curriculum. Granted

the curriculum wasn't always written precisely, but we didn't know if they were teaching it. So, we thought, "Well we'll try persuading them to teach the curriculum." That didn't work. Then we thought, "We'll lecture them to do the right thing." That didn't work. Then we said to the principals, "It is *your* job to know that every teacher in every classroom in every school is teaching the mandated curriculum." We have since developed a number of district-level measures to determine whether there is curriculum alignment happening in our schools. And I raise this point because one of the tensions that occurs when you move money out is that you change the whole accountability structure.

In the old days, before we had ways to measure the results schools are expected to achieve, we just had people monitoring the processes schools used. There were principals who believed they were successful because the people in charge liked the processes they used. And sometimes you got in trouble because you used a process that somebody in central didn't favor. Now, under site-based decision making in our district, we say, "Here are the results you are responsible for achieving; and if the processes are not immoral, illegal, unethical; if they won't "dis-elect" the board of trustees or disenchant the staff, students and parents, then go ahead."

Today if you're achieving the results and you're using a pedagogy that isn't the "flavor of the month," or if the superintendent doesn't like it, the principal can say, "Excuse me. Are these results good enough? Did they meet or exceed the provincial standards? Have they met the targets we set when we did our planning and budgeting?" "Yes?" "Then it's really none of your business." And I think that is very freeing to principals—not to have to guess at the system's true agenda—"What is the methodology that I have to use, or pretend I use in this school, in order to please my master?" The results can speak for the school and the principal. When you focus on and measure results objectively, it's cleaner: Everything's on the table, it's up front, it's known in advance.

But that's not to say that process doesn't matter. *Process does matter.* The truth is, you

obtain good results from high-quality processes. Site-based decision making helps take some of the subjectivity—the personality issues and biases, if you will—out of the process. It allows each school to select the processes that get results in their own context.

HOLDING PRINCIPALS ACCOUNTABLE

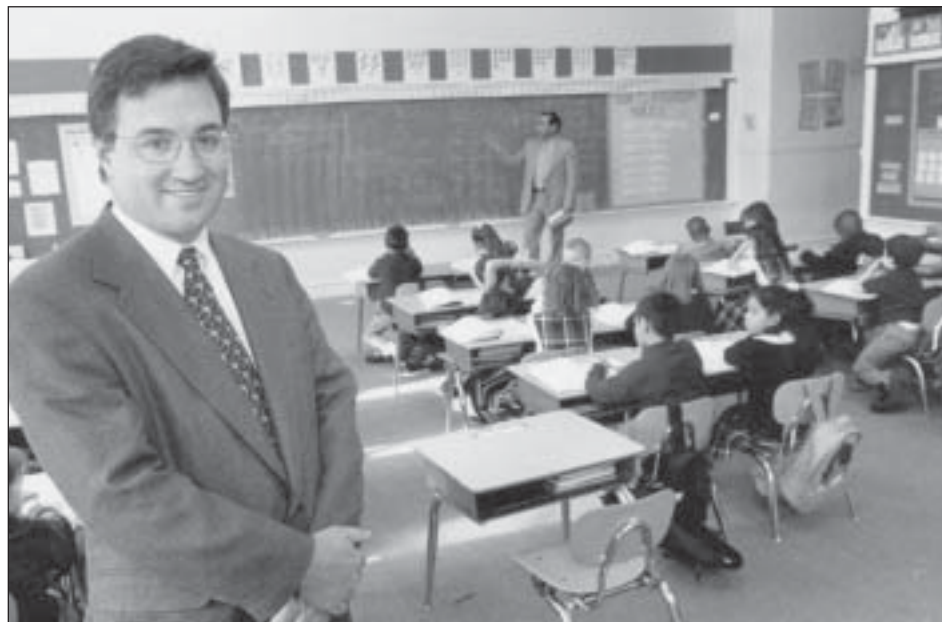
So, how do we hold our principals in Edmonton accountable? If you're going to send the schools 92 cents on the dollar, tell the principals they're really accountable and have the authority, then you must have a very sophisticated and highly regarded monitoring system in order to know what's happening at each school.

Our superintendent has all 203 principals report directly to him. And there is a small infrastructure behind the superintendent to give him data on the performance of each school. The dossier of information that the superintendent has on each school is information the principal knows is being collected. Principals are active participants in deciding what information will be provided, and in compiling it. So principals know what results the superintendent monitors. They know what measures will be used to assess school performance. When the criteria are publicly identified, that eliminates 99 percent of the politics.

For example, the superintendent has information on how satisfied the parents, staff and students of each school are longitudinally on a whole range of issues. The superintendent knows about the technology in that school. The superintendent knows how well the children write. We have graded writing tests that tell you exactly what grade level each child is writing at in the school. We know how many children are writing at grade three who are in grade three; how many children are writing at grade four who are in grade three; how many children are writing at grade two level in grade three; and so on. And we have reading and math levels on every student.

School profiles are prepared for the superintendent centrally. I have been told, and the superintendent's been told, that he knows more about our schools than is generally known by any one person in any highly centralized school district.

In addition to the information the superintendent has in a dossier, the superintendent goes out to each school for a school visit. And by visit, I don't mean a tour, I don't mean a political photo opportunity. Before he goes out to the school, the superintendent e-mails the principal, "Here are all the questions I'm



going to ask you about student achievement, about your special needs population, about satisfaction of the students. I'm going to ask you about your facility and what needs to be done and what has been done. I'm going to ask you about staff performance and satisfaction."

In short, that portfolio of information is very important because some people fear that if you do not have an army of central office people watching over the schools, then you will not have good results in the schools. I think that's absolutely not true, provided that the principal knows there is a fair and equitable monitoring system, and you put the real results on the table.

As I say this, don't think that we let principals struggle alone with this. Absolutely not! We provide a whole principal certification program of our own that's accepted as university credit-level courses for those who want to be principals. We have training programs for first-year principals, and principal institutes for established principals. We have a cost-recovery department that provides advice and assistance to principals facing difficulties because of emergencies, for working with difficult people or in resolving conflict, for handling

mediation, and for handling expulsions and suspensions. We're not going to make our principals do it all alone.

MONITORING AND ASSESSMENT ARE TWO-WAY STREETS

Under a traditional central office system, monitoring and assessment of how things are working are one-way streets—top down. In our school-site system, not only do principals have tremendous autonomy in decision making, we have a built-in system where each year they can rate their satisfaction with central service units. The rating system has been in effect in one form or another for several years, and last year principal satisfaction with the services provided by central service to 99 percent for the lowest-rated area of service. Not bad, eh! And, each principal gets to rate his/her satisfaction with the performance of the superintendent of schools.

We also conduct an annual survey of teachers, parents and students that indicates there's a high level of satisfaction with central office among all these groups. In order to function under site-based decision making, you have to have an unrelenting commit-



ment to "right-size" an organization, and then review your effort each year. You also have to be sure to get feedback from all parts of the system.

ELIMINATING DUMB RULES

One of the inevitable things that happens when you give principals the money and the authority is that you have to deregulate an awful lot of regulations that people loved.

One of the saddest things that happened, and it happens from time to time, is that when you give principals all this authority, trust, and money—somebody is going to do something that will end up in the headlines of the paper. I know in the past every time a principal did something like this, we added more supervision for all principals, and then wrote a regulation to ensure that no one would ever make that mistake again. In other words, we wrote a stupid rule. And instead of one principal being dealt with, we prevented all principals from doing something. And before long, you have a whole bunch of rules.

Under our current superintendent of schools, I headed up a "Dumb Rules Committee" for the district. We asked all staff in the district, "Please submit your idea of a dumb rule." The rules we hoped they'd submit were ones that prevented our schools from being effective. Over 300 "dumb rules" were submitted, and most of them weren't even rules! They were practices built into the behavior of the organization. They had the

Edmonton Principals Rate the Services Provided by Central Office Departments

"To what extent are you satisfied with the services provided to you by..."		
	Great Extent "+" responses	Not at All "- " responses
Budget Services	97%	4%
Communications-Community Relations	95%	6%
Financial Services (including Purchasing)	93%	7%
Personnel Services	94%	6%
Student Information	98%	2%
Transportation Services	96%	4%
Consulting Services	94%	6%
Leadership Services	98%	3%
Continuing Education Services	93%	7%
Facilities Services	84%	16%
Information Technology Services	88%	13%
Marketing Services	88%	12%
Resource Development Services	94%	7%

(Percentage total more than 100 due to rounding)
Source "Student, Parent, Staff Satisfaction Survey Results 2000." Edmonton Public Schools

force of rules, but, in fact, were not policies at all. It is the way “things have always been done.” This happened just over five years ago and I can barely recall the rules and the practices we eliminated.

Now, what happens when a principal does something that ends up in the headlines or that just shouldn't have been done? I'll give you a real example. Schools are allowed to have two school-wide professional days per year. They can also have other professional development days beyond that. The school has the authority to decide what kinds of activities the whole staff should engage in, and they don't have to report it to anybody. They notify their parents that the school is closed on a certain day for professional development. But, one year, a principal decided to take his school staff off to spend the whole day learning about high-quality investments and mutual funds. Now, this became highly publicized—and you know what that does to a board of trustees!

The first habitual response was, “Let's remove the principals' authority to set professional development days. Let's regulate what principals do. Let's make them write 500-word submissions, have 20 people review them, 'cause that way we'll never get embarrassed again.” That's how we used to respond. Now, we say, “When one person does something dumb, we're going to deal with that one person. And we're going to work to keep ourselves from creating a regulation . . . because you will surely kill them if you tell them they have authority when they don't have genuine authority.” But it takes great political fortitude on the part of superintendents and boards to stay the course and not respond by creating more rules. What we tend to forget is that whatever is today's awful headline, next week something even worse will have happened in some other sector of society. And believe it or not, it may be painful today, but in a few days it'll pass.

So when things go wrong in our district, we take action at that location with the

person who made the decision. New district rules are then avoided.

When principals see that there are endless rules governing their every move, can you blame them for behaving as if they're not responsible for deciding much of anything. I defy you to show me an effective system where a bunch of supervisors downtown can know each school so well that they can, by remote control, decide what is best for each school in the district.

DEALING WITH NON-PERFORMING SCHOOLS

Even in a decentralized system, central is not without authority. The superintendent knows exactly which schools are performing, and he has the option of centralizing a school or a portion of a school's operation that is performing weakly. This can be done cooperatively, or not; it can be done temporarily, or permanently. The superintendent can also deploy people from central office to help shore up a school's operation.

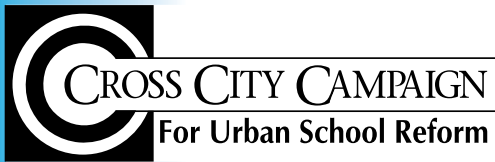
IN THE END

Let's face it. Most school systems will not have school-site decision making. School-site decision making is a long-term reform, and

most superintendents' tenures aren't long enough to see it through. In my view, it takes a strong central office and strong schools, partnered with their communities, to ensure that our schools meet standards. From the high ratings our central people receive from the principals to the crucial role principals play as senior staff, I think we've come a long way from the days when central and schools were pitted against each other, with no one the winner. When you combine school-site decision making with the superintendent's and board's unrelenting focus on student achievement, I think you have the basis of an excellent school system. Edmonton parents seem to agree, as we have virtually eliminated the market share that private and charter schools had in our city.

All of us from different districts are in various stages of moving money and authority out to schools. As you do that, you change the whole paradigm about how a district operates. I'm not here to tell you that Edmonton has invented the Holy Grail. We do not have the magic elixir of life. We have not fixed all the problems of the public schools, but we keep working on it, convinced that we're on the right track.





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ABOUT THE CROSS CITY CAMPAIGN

The Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform is a national network of parents, advocates, community organizers, teachers, principals, central office administrators, policy analysts, union officials, researchers and funders dedicated to improving public schools and education for urban young people. We currently operate in nine cities—Baltimore, Chicago, Denver, Houston, Los Angeles, New York, Oakland, Philadelphia and Seattle. Our mission is to fundamentally transform urban public education, resulting in improved quality and equity, so that all youth are well prepared for post-secondary education, work and citizenship.



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