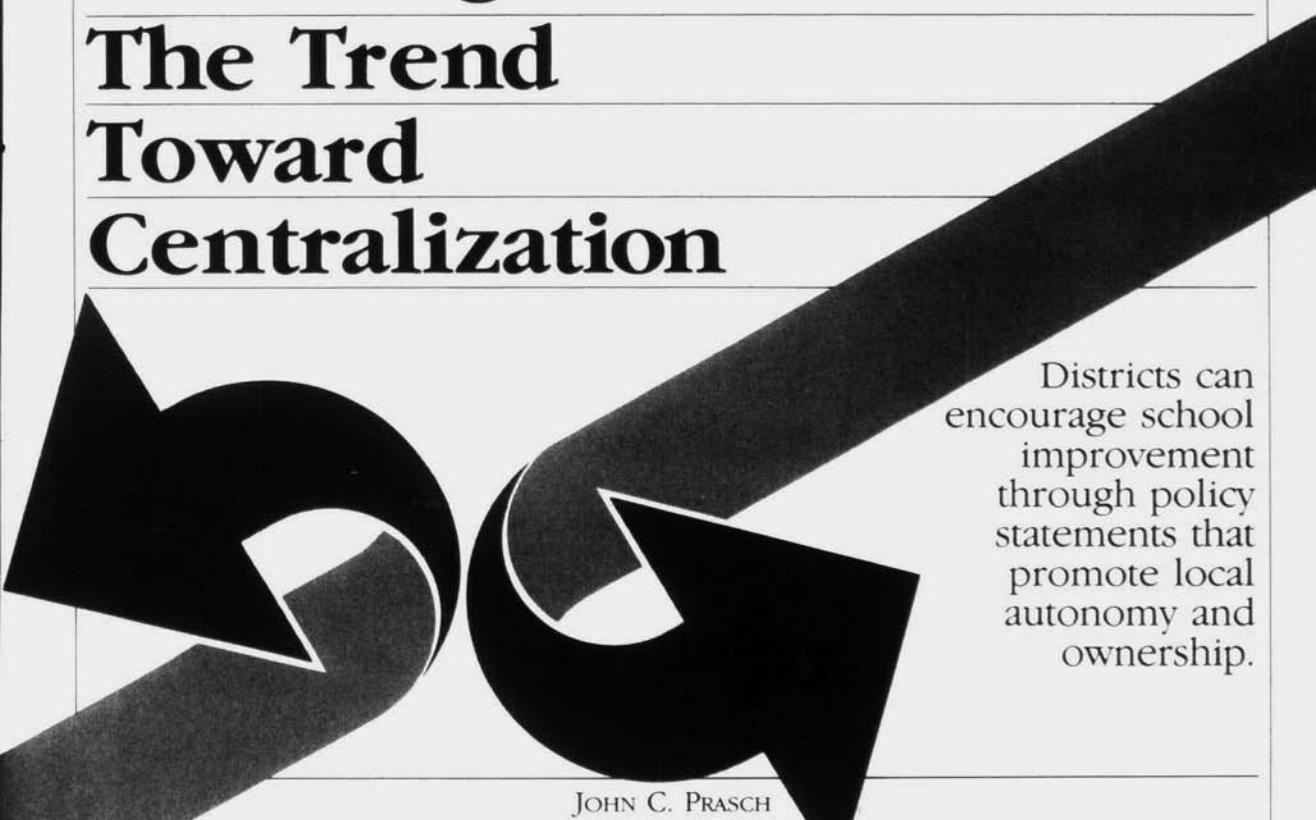


Reversing The Trend Toward Centralization



Districts can encourage school improvement through policy statements that promote local autonomy and ownership.

JOHN C. PRASCH

The insistent demand for greater accountability in all its forms is relentlessly expanding the bureaucracy in school management. Governors and state legislators are installing top-down, mandated, state-wide reform in the way teachers are paid; and state education departments, prodded by task force reports, are demanding a larger core of required curriculum. At the same time that industry is dismantling its top-down structure to achieve truly participatory management (Peters and Waterman, 1982; Hurst, 1984), schools are being pushed into greater degrees of centralization.

Ownership at the Building Level

Since the case for decentralization has already been skillfully made by Finn (1984), Goodlad (1983), and others, it is more productive to look at specific

ways school districts can reverse this trend.

Policymakers determined to protect the freedom and autonomy of building administrators must start with a mindset that states policy in brief, general terms. Leadership is stunted and bureaucrats are made by policy and procedures manuals that grow too big.

A good starting point is the building principal. To make clear that the principal is in charge, a policy can state:

School buildings are operationally under the control of building principals. Principals have control and responsibility for the buildings and grounds, for all supplies and equipment housed at the building, for all school-related activities carried on there, and for all pupils, teachers, and other employees assigned to the building.

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To give this statement meaning, additional policies and procedures must ensure that decision making at the building level is not eroded by the persistent tendency of the central office to expand its influence. Consider, for example, the following statements to guide the handling of supplies.

Each building will be provided an annual supply budget based on a formula that takes into account the number of students to be served and the supply costs of the programs in which the students will engage. Principals, in consultation with their staffs, are responsible for the requisitioning, management, distribution, and utilization of supplies within the building. The Office of Business Services is responsible for the actual purchasing, warehousing, and distribution of supplies to buildings and for providing the necessary forms and establishing efficient procedures to facilitate the process.

Note that the decision of what supplies to order and how to use them clearly



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belongs to the building and that the business office is cast in a service role.

A comparable procedure in which buildings receive an equipment budget allocation is also easily described. Once the practice of giving dollar allocations to buildings is established, greater flexibility can be provided by allowing interchangeable use of the funds and by permitting carry-over of fund balances from year to year. A sample policy statement might be:

Principals, in consultation with their staffs, are authorized, when necessary, to spend equipment allocation funds for supplies or supply allocation funds for equipment. Funds unexpended in either account at the end of the budget year are carried over and added to the allocation for the ensuing budget year.

Such flexibility does not remove the distinction between the accounts, since the sums to be allocated are computed separately and the proper accounting designation can always be applied to the actual purchase. Managers with a “hard box” mentality (Hurst,

1984) may conjure up many reasons that funds cannot be carried over. The fact remains that these are essentially internal paper transactions, and a way can be found to do so if flexibility of funds is considered a priority item.

Control over even a portion of available funds and the capability to plan over a longer frame than one year are of tremendous importance psychologically. Nothing is more debilitating to a staff's sense of ownership and responsibility than to be required to spend all of one's funds in a given category only because it's the end of the budget year. It is doubly frustrating when unmet needs in other categories exist and when total resources seldom cover all needs.

Selection of Staff Is Critical

Without a doubt, decisions about staffing have the most impact on quality of school programs. Staffing plans can be

devised so that these decisions, too, are moved to the building level.

One plan that has been used is based on the assignment of staffing points in ways that reflect the needs of the students and the range of programs within a building. A table of points might include one point for each regular student, three points for each mentally handicapped student, an additional half point for each disadvantaged student (measured by free lunch applications), one tenth of a point for each student needing special reading help, one additional point for each academically gifted student, and so on. Having been assigned a number of staffing points, a building principal and staff spend those points by selecting the kinds of positions they want.

Staff selection is made from another table of points that puts a value on each category of staff member roughly related to the average salary for workers in that category. Such a staffing plan accomplishes two purposes: it

distributes staff equitably throughout the system, and it allows and encourages schools to staff in different configurations. A building may choose to have more aides but fewer classroom teachers. Another is free to place a higher value on counseling services, for instance, by having more counselors than other schools.

The actual selection of staff is more critical than the categories of personnel appointed. Tight union contracts that give employees transfer rights to vacant positions, reduction-in-force arrangements based on seniority, affirmative action plans, and other constraints often combine to make the selection and assignment of staff a highly centralized process. Nevertheless, selection of people to best fit an individual school will pay such high dividends that ways must be found to provide building participation.

A sample compromise procedure for new appointments is described as follows:

The personnel office is responsible for conducting an initial screening of all applicants and keeping a current list of all candidates meeting district standards for employability. Principals will recommend from the approved list appointments to fill their vacancies.

It may be difficult, if not impossible, to give school staffs more control in the matter of transfers, depending upon the labor contract. It is interesting, however, to see the degree of cooperation that can be engendered among principals and others in working through these problems when everyone understands that the degree of building autonomy is at stake.

If the principles of decentralization are to be served, schools must be provided orderly ways in which to deviate from the norm. Most districts have an adopted course of study and adopted textbooks. In an attempt to aid teachers, the course of study is usually replete with suggested activities, appropriate tests, and other useful materials. This is fine provided that such helpful materials do not restrict teachers.

Goals, Objectives, and Expected Outcomes

A district interested in decentralizing its operation will have a recommended rather than a required course of study and will establish procedures by which a school can legitimately use other materials. A sample policy statement might be:

To assist the school staff and to provide some degree of coordination among schools, the district provides a written curriculum in each subject area. This curriculum specifies goals, includes teaching plans, and identifies recommended materials. In most cases, schools may use methods or materials other than the recommended ones, provided they have the written permission of the associate superintendent for instruction.

A useful approach is to express the curriculum in terms of goals, objectives, and expected outcomes. The method of producing the desired result is best left in the hands of building staffs. Not only will such an approach provide building autonomy, but a results-oriented procedure is the most likely avenue to improve instruction.

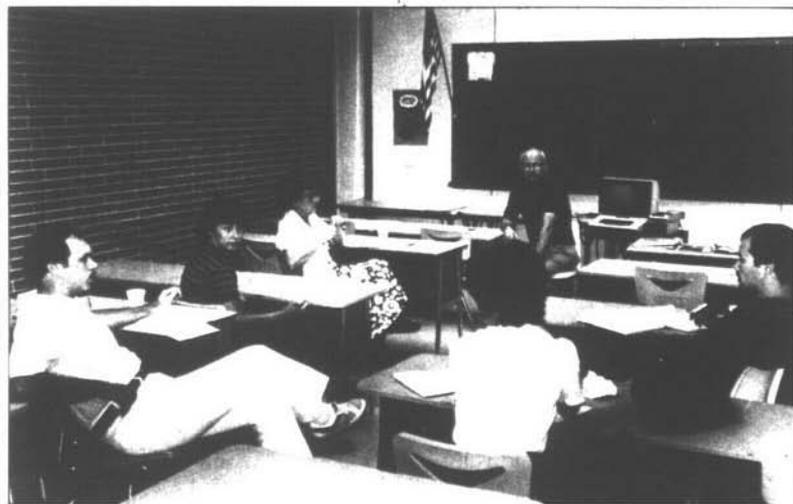
There are many other ways faculties can be given latitude in decision making. The following policy statement on school hours is another example.

The amount of instructional time will be essentially the same for all buildings at each instructional level, but starting and dismissal times may vary to meet individual building conditions.

Schools become better by playing out their own distinctive scenarios, by expanding on their unique strengths, by fitting the original talents of their staffs to the special needs of their clients, and by gaining enthusiasm and fulfillment through the collegial processes that give them control over the development of the learning environment. For educators already convinced of the value of decentralization, this article provides practical examples for implementation. Skeptics are encouraged to try these devices to discover that they do make a powerful difference. □

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