Decentralized Decision
It's Working in

Examined here are some of the dynamics operating to make one urban decentralization model notably successful.

DECENTRALIZED decision making in the public schools is on the upswing. In two recent independent studies, over 50 percent of the school districts surveyed either currently had policies which encourage decentralized decision making or were currently developing such policies.[1,2] Thus, this concept, emphasizing the placement of decision-making authority as close to the point of implementation as possible, enjoys a growing reputation. Along with this popularity, however, exists a paucity of research that documents its successful implementation. In order to partially fill this void, data collected in a nationwide study are reported and contrasted to a case study of the Madison, Wisconsin, Decentralization Model.

Virtually the only study on a national level examining the effectiveness of decentralized decision making was conducted in 1974 by Gordon Cawelti, Executive Director of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. One part of the study focused on the relative decision-making influence held by positions at the central administration, area (region), and building levels. As Table 1 shows, Cawelti found that, contrary to expectations, there had been only limited shifting of decision-making authority to the area administrative echelon. At least this was the perception of central office personnel, the group responding to the survey instrument. He tempered his findings, though, by suggesting further study was needed to: (a) determine the extent to which the pattern of authority he found is intended and (b) validate the central office leaders' perceptions of how much real authority has been given to the building level.[3]

Concerned over the results of the Cawelti data, the Madison Public Schools, operating under a decentralized decision-making model since 1973, accepted his suggestion and replicated the study at the local level. Building principals, area administrators, and central office officials responded to the ten issues used in Cawelti's investigation. For every issue listed, the administrator ranked the relative influence exerted by each decision-making level. Based on the data collected, several observations are noteworthy.

[1] Gordon Cawelti. "Urban School Decentralization and Curriculum Development Strategies." In: I. Ezra Staples, editor. *Impact of Decentralization on Curriculum*. Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1974. pp. 18-27.

[2] Educational Research Service, Inc. *Decentralized Decision Making*. Arlington, Virginia: ERS, March 1975. 24 pp.

[3] Gordon Cawelti, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

Making: Madison

"In two recent independent studies, over 50 percent of the school districts surveyed either currently had policies which encourage decentralized decision making or were currently developing such policies."

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In direct contrast to the Cawelti data that showed central administrators retaining the most influence on five of ten issues, Madison administrators did not perceive central office officials as being *most influential* on any of the issues cited. In fact, as Table 2 indicates, the central office echelon had the *least influence* in a majority of cases.

Consistent with the belief that the decision making should reside at the point nearest to actual implementation of a decision, the Madison data showed that building level personnel had the *most influence* on virtually every issue. The one clear exception was selection of a building principal. At least for the school district surveyed, this decision rests at the area administrative level. As evidenced by responses to the remaining issues, though, the Madison Decentralization Model does place considerable decision-making authority in the hands of the building principal and staff.

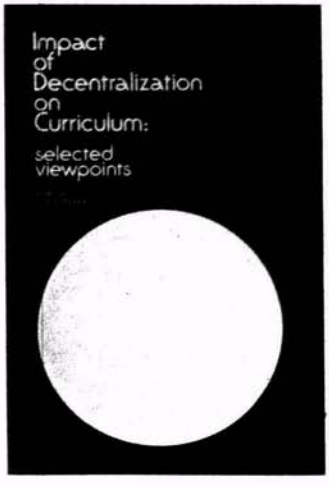
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Issue	Major responsibility of respondents	Responses		
		Most influence	Some influence	Least influence
1. Ordinarily makes decisions on assigning new teachers to a particular building	Central Adm.	Central Adm.	Area	Building
2. Makes the decision in selecting which basic materials to purchase for an elementary school reading program	Central Adm.	Building	Area	Central Adm.
3. Makes the basic determination as to how given amounts of Title I funds are to be spent	Central Adm.	Central Adm.	Area	Building
4. Has the responsibility and resources for carrying out a program of in-service education for teachers	Central Adm.	Central Adm.	Area	Building
5. Selects building principal	Central Adm.	Central Adm.	Area	Building
6. Determines final plans for the modification of a school's physical plant such as removing halls for an Instructional Materials Center	Central Adm.	Central Adm.	Area	Building
7. Makes the decision to install a plan such as differentiated staffing within a building	Central Adm.	Area	Building	Central Adm.
8. Decides to alter an existing program such as social studies to include a sizeable unit on environmental education	Central Adm.	Building	Area	Central Adm.
9. Determines particular goals and objectives for a certain school	Central Adm.	Building	Area	Central Adm.
10. Develops a plan for reporting to patrons in the community on the extent to which an individual school is meeting its goals	Central Adm.	Building	Area	Central Adm.

Table 1: Decentralized Decision Making: Cawelti Study

Issue	Major responsibility of respondents	Responses: Most influence	Responses: Some influence	Responses: Least influence
1. Ordinarily makes decisions on assigning new teachers to a particular building	Building Area Central Adm.	Building Building Building	Central Adm. Central Adm. Central Adm.	Area Area Area
2. Makes the decision in selecting which basic materials to purchase for an elementary school reading program	Building Area Central Adm.	Building Building Building	Area Area Area	Central Adm. Central Adm. Central Adm.
3. Makes the basic determination as to how given amounts of Title I funds are to be spent	Building Area Central Adm.	Building Central Adm. Area	Area Area Building	Central Adm. Building Central Adm.
4. Has the responsibility and resources for carrying out a program of in-service education for teachers	Building Area Central Adm.	Building Building Building	Area Area Area	Central Adm. Central Adm. Central Adm.
5. Selects building principal	Building Area Central Adm.	Area Area Area	Central Adm. Central Adm. Central Adm.	Building Building Building
6. Determines final plans for the modification of a school's physical plant such as removing halls for an Instructional Materials Center	Building Area Central Adm.	Building Building Building	Central Adm. Area Central Adm.	Area Central Adm. Area
7. Makes the decision to install a plan such as differentiated staffing within a building	Building Area Central Adm.	Building Building Building	Area Area Area	Central Adm. Central Adm. Central Adm.
8. Decides to alter an existing program such as social studies to include a sizeable unit on environmental education	Building Area Central Adm.	Building Building Building	Area Area Area	Central Adm. Central Adm. Central Adm.
9. Determines particular goals and objectives for a certain school	Building Area Central Adm.	Building Building Building	Area Area Area	Central Adm. Central Adm. Central Adm.
10. Develops a plan for reporting to patrons in the community on the extent to which an individual school is meeting its goal	Building Area Central Adm.	Building Building Building	Area Area Area	Central Adm. Central Adm. Central Adm.

Table 2. Decentralized Decision Making: Madison Public Schools Study



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Another interesting observation is the consensus of perceptions among respondents at the various administrative levels. Since Cawelti only surveyed central office personnel, the validity of the conclusions remained in doubt. There was an overwhelming consensus by Madison administrators at each of the three decision-making levels. The only lack of agreement occurred on item three. Further examination revealed, however, that a large source of confusion lay in the interpretation of the question. Thus, not only did principals perceive that the schools exerted the most influence in the Decentralization Model, but area and central administrators perceived this as well.

The major conclusion drawn from these data is encouraging: The Madison Decentralization Model is working. At least on the issues listed, decision-making authority has shifted away from the central office to the point of implementation, the local building level. The area administrator exerts some influence and central administration has the least influence on the ten issues used in this study. □

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