

# SITE MANAGEMENT: PROGRESS AND PROSPECTS

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Based on frequency of mentions, School-Based Management, or Site Management, is one of today's most popular educational improvement strategies. It is one of only two approaches for "restructuring" school governance that have been elaborated to date (the other being to make schools into schools of choice), and it is receiving a great deal of attention. Like many educational proposals that achieve much popularity, however, it is being recommended for a number of reasons and in the interests of accomplishing multiple, not always compatible, purposes. Therein lies the rub!

## Purposes and Proposals

Some seek site management (hereforth, "SM") in the interests of shifting educational control from district to school levels. Thus, they look to SM as a decentralization proposal. Another group is attracted to SM as a way to disperse authority within schools, and thereby to empower teachers. Meanwhile, a third group backs SM as a way to restore a better balance between lay and professional control, through the inclusion and empowerment of parents and other members of the community in the making of educational decisions. Not surprisingly, each group often finds much to be disappointed about in particular SM plans.

Formally, SM transfers to the school level some degree of power in controlling one or more of three basic decision areas: budget, personnel, and curriculum. Obviously, power over such matters need not be an all-or-nothing situation, and varying degrees of control are possible. But, according to formulators of the SM plan, a school which lacked any control over any of the three could not be called a site-managed school.

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One might assume that curricular decisions would be the simplest and most reasonable of the three areas with which to begin, if the purpose of SM is school improvement. But that is not how it works out.

District officials are reluctant to see power devolve and they are most reluctant, it seems, to relinquish curricular control. Thus, budgetary control is the sort most often shifted under SM and curricular control the least.

## Moving toward Site Management

There is considerable variation in the way districts move toward SM, and in the arrangements constituting it. Some famous examples have begun as school improvement projects, others have from the start represented governance change projects.

Virtually all involve the establishment of a School Advisory Council in each site-managed school. Members almost always include teachers and parents, and sometimes other community members and students as well. Major differences in the seriousness of governance change intentions surround the constitution and function of these councils. Some are appointed by the school principal, function strictly as advisory groups to that individual and sit at her or his pleasure. Others are elected for specified terms to represent particular constituencies (parents, teachers, community), and are empowered to make a range of decisions.

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According to some SM conceptions, the principal should be named by and responsible to the School Advisory Council. Perhaps most SM plans, however, leave to the principal the question of which type of school advisory council the school will have. This tends to make for the weaker council arrangement (i.e., advisory rather than decision-making groups, named by principals rather than elected).

## Impact

Critics see this as a major weakness. They point out

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that the devolution of functions really doesn't change much so long as the principal remains responsible to district administrators -- and that similarly, little is changed by having one more advisory group named by principals. Defenders respond, however, that school

policy may be greatly improved by shifting more decisions to the level at which they are implemented, and that substantial benefits can and do accrue from providing for systematic consultation of those to be affected, prior to the making of decisions.

The particular logical roots of advocates' concerns seem to generate the critic and defender positions: Those who seek SM in the interests of educational improvement are sometimes less insistent on significant changes in lines of power and authority than are those who look to the arrangement primarily as a means of altering and democratizing school governance arrangements.

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Although the shining examples like Hammond, Indiana, and the hopeful sites like Rochester and Dade County, have received a great deal of attention, there has been little systematic study and evaluation of the SM arrangement. There are perhaps only two or three empirical studies to date, and those are not enormously encouraging.

One study of eight sites reported that over the three years of the project, most schools had changed focus from SM to school improvement and the term "site management" had been abandoned. Another study reported district school officials reluctant to shift the authority recommended to constitute any substantial degree of SM. Nevertheless, it is reported that teacher morale has improved in some locales, from the increased consultation (while others report that teachers sometimes find the time demands of SM a diversion of their energies, and SM generally more bane than boon).

Thus, it appears that not enough evidence is in to ground a decision on the implementability and the effectiveness of the SM plan. Evaluations of the

Rochester and Dade County plans -- and those now under way also in the states of Washington and Minnesota -- should yield further light, but they may be a while in coming. Meanwhile, SM remains a prominent, frequently cited recommendation for "restructuring" school organization.

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