



CONTENTS

1. ABSTRACT

BACKGROUND

2. WHY STUDY THIS ISSUE?

WHAT ARE WE STUDYING?

WHAT DID WE FIND?

3. WHAT WILL THE FUTURE HOLD?

AUTHORS

Anysia Mayer, Ph.D.
Morgaen Donaldson, Ph.D.
Larisa Warhol, Ph.D.
Casey Cobb, Ph.D.

Implementing Autonomy in CommPACT Schools

Data suggest that it is important for district and school staff to develop shared understandings of the concept of school-based management as they attempt to implement the concept as a reform strategy. Our findings also suggest district and school staff should strive to create new working relationships with individual principals and teachers if the concept of school-based management is not being implemented district wide. The concept of school-based management is one that must be built on trusting relationships between central office personnel and principals as well as between principals and teachers.

Background

The CommPACT Schools Initiative (CSI) represents a new approach to improving high-need urban schools in Connecticut. A CommPACT school is an existing public school reorganized by teachers and administrators to increase organizational responsiveness and to maximize shared decision-making and collaboration. The name "CommPACT" symbolizes a shared commitment by key school partners including community members, parents, administrators, children, and teachers to improve student learning and close persistent achievement gaps. Designation as a CommPACT school means that district leadership and union membership can provide school faculties increased flexibility on issues

of governance, budgeting and curriculum so that school communities can implement evidenced-based and context-specific decisions to increase student achievement. CommPACT schools also receive technical support from faculty at the Neag School of Education at the University of Connecticut. Eight schools adopted the model in the inaugural 2008-2009 academic year. The Center for Education Policy Analysis (CEPA) is funded by a National Education Association (NEA) Foundation gift to research the CSI. As part of their research agenda, CEPA researchers have examined school autonomy and distributed leadership in CommPACT schools for the first two years of the initiative. Our research relies on several sources of data,

including interviews, surveys, documents, and onsite observation.

Why Study This Issue?

The National Education Association (NEA) Foundation is committed to partnering with local agencies to help close the persistent achievement gap in schools nationwide. Central to the NEA's theory of change are the concepts of meaningful partnerships across all educational stakeholders, systemic community involvement, and alignment of educational systems at the state, school, and district level. The CommPACT Schools Initiative (CSI) represents a unique opportunity to learn how local schools are getting this important work done. The research conducted at these sites will inform the philanthropic work of the NEA Foundation, Connecticut educators, and the larger education policy community.

What Are We Studying?

The effective schools literature published in the 1980s and 90s suggests that site-based management, if done well, can lead to dramatic improvements in schooling. Local principals and teachers are best positioned to make decisions on how to help their students reach high levels of academic achievement because they are most familiar with their talents and their challenges. Moreover, placing the decision-making in the hands of those doing the work helps ensure healthy commitment and fidelity to the reforms. Grounded in this research, the CSI incorporated the concept of site-based management into its theory of action.

Referred to as "autonomy" in CommPACT materials, as in the following example from the CommPACT web page, "What is a CommPACT school? A CommPACT school is an existing public school reorganized by teachers and administrators to maximize shared decision-making and collaboration. CommPACT schools exchange *autonomy* in

governance, budgeting, and curriculum for accountability to the district." Our review of the applications submitted by the current CommPACT schools suggests the idea of autonomy was also important to principals and teachers who joined the initiative. The term *autonomy* was also frequently mentioned by teachers in interviews we conducted during Year 1. Patterned after the Accelerated Schools Plus program, CommPACT site facilitators identified eight process and performance benchmarks, including (a) Buy-In, (b) Visioning, (c) Setting Priorities, (d) Setting up Shared Governance Structures, (e) Inquiry Teams, and (f) Instructional Improvements, to help internal stakeholders and external funders track the progress of each school. According to the CommPACT model, site-based management involves districts deferring management decisions to principals and principals, in turn, distributing those management decisions to a school wide steering committee made up of teachers, specialists, parents, and community members.

What Did We Find?

In the early stages especially, we found that autonomy has been an illusive but evolving goal. CommPACT did not immediately result in increased principal influence over the budget, curricula, or professional development in most schools. There was considerable ambiguity regarding the definition and dimensions of autonomy among principals, central office staff, and teachers. This is not altogether surprising given the newness of this approach to reforming schools that are situated in larger district systems--systems with actors that are accustomed to more hierarchical relationships. Our analysis of how key actors framed the issue of autonomy suggests that competing definitions of autonomy, rather than a lack of willingness to implement the concept, was the reason

status quo was maintained. Data also suggest that in some districts, central office staff who provide direct services to schools initially have not effectively re-defined their relationship with their CommPACT schools. Some of the reasons for this appear to be role ambiguity under the CommPACT arrangement, difficulty in treating one school differently from other schools under their supervision, a desire to continue to shape school curricula, and the continued responsibility (and accountability) for increasing student achievement in schools, especially those on the federal watch list. Schools also play a role in establishing a new district-school relationship. While some principals were eager to gain increased authority from the district, they were not as eager or equipped to share their authority with teachers. Principals are also held accountable to school performance standards and some have not necessarily come to trust the model enough that they turn over significant decision making to staff. Other principals, however, have gone through significant changes in their leadership styles and abilities to distribute leadership. They have taken risks and in many cases have been rewarded for this leadership approach.

In Year 2 of implementation, we found increased school autonomy in particular CommPACT schools. These schools operated in relatively decentralized districts and, as a result, the CSI fit in with larger district reform efforts. Because CommPACT aligned with district administrators' theories of action in these settings, the principals and central office

administrators were able to negotiate many of the authority and decision making contingencies in Year 1 and took advantage of decentralized district budgeting and hiring processes. Moreover, the schools that gained autonomy tended to be performing just well enough to avoid sanctions from the state or federal level that would override all claims to increased decision making at the school site.

What Will the Future Hold?

Data suggest that it is important for school and district staff to develop shared understandings of the concept of school-based management as they attempt to implement the concept as a reform strategy. Our findings also suggest district and school staff should be willing to create new working relationships with individual principals and teachers if the concept of school-based management is not being implemented district wide. The concept of school-based management is one that must be built on trusting relationships between district administrators and principals as well as between principals and teachers. Moreover, there must be clear and common understanding of actors' roles under this new arrangement. Finally, district and building level administrators may need some "cover" from short term accountability pressures that can act against school autonomy and distributed leadership. With shared efforts from key state and district level organizations, in theory CommPACT is well positioned to address some of these externalities that bear upon its success.