

What is the impact of decentralization on student achievement?

The term “decentralization” in public education refers to a process that transfers administrative and financial decision-making powers from central Ministries of Education to local governments, communities, and schools. Decentralization has unfolded (and is currently unfolding) in a variety of ways in Canada’s 13 provincial education systems.

Promise of decentralization: Decentralized education promises to be more efficient, better reflect local priorities, encourage participation of all stakeholders, improve learning outcomes and quality of teaching. Governments with severe fiscal constraints are also enticed by the potential of decentralization to increase efficiency of spending. But does it improve academic achievement?

Decentralization can work: Evidence suggests decentralization from provincial and territorial governments to local school districts may not be sufficient to improve achievement and that increased autonomy for communities and teachers is necessary to improve schools and learning. Decentralization works if local players are given the resources and empowerment to attain increased student achievement. For example, in the U.S., it has been found that in secondary schools where teachers feel more influential in school decision-making, the test scores in both math and language are significantly higher. It has been suggested that the best-case scenario is for a school district to articulate a clear concise vision, but then to allow schools to determine the best ways to attain it. The biggest danger is high performing schools don’t share their successful decision-making approaches with low performing schools, which can lead to inequity in students outcomes. So finding ways to share these approaches is another requirement for success.

Self-made decisions and greater accountability: When decentralization encourages increased local participation in school management, it improves accountability and responsiveness to student needs and fosters better use of resources, thus improving conditions for students. It is argued that the gap between government officials and schools is just too great to enable speedy and informed decisions. Closer parent-school partnerships can also improve learning in both the classroom and home environments. This parent collaboration can elicit commitment to self-made decisions and greater accountability on the part of teachers and principals who are better able to make the best decisions for improving school operations and learning.

Better classroom instruction and better student performance: One outcome of decentralization, as exemplified by school-based management reforms, is better classroom instruction and improved student performance. To achieve these, two things need to be addressed: 1) the quality and quantity of educational contributions from teachers, parents and others and 2) the efficiency with which these contributions are put into action. The belief underlying this theory is that more school and family engagement in the education process produces more learning – when highly educated teachers are more involved, more resources combined with parent feedback and ideas should lead to higher student achievement. When teachers are empowered and schools can make decisions that directly affect their own students – under the umbrella of a broader vision for a school district – decentralization is at its best.

For online resources as well as the research references that inform this issue, please visit:
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