

Report of a National
Invitational Symposium
hosted by the Queensland
Education Leadership
Institute (QELi) and the
Centre for Strategic
Education (CSE)

School Autonomy and System Leadership

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Introduction

In the highest performing school systems, system leadership at multiple levels is clearly exhibited and has routinely been seen as the key ingredient in high performance. But more recently autonomy alongside system leadership is seen to be the formula for the next wave of improvement. The concept of providing schools with greater autonomy is not new. According to the OECD 'placing more decision-making authority at lower levels of the educational system has been a key aim in educational restructuring and systemic reform in many countries since the early 1980s'¹.

Across Australia there is a diversity of school governance arrangements and levels of autonomy and policy makers within the various jurisdictions are focussing on the potential benefits of autonomy, complemented by partnerships, networks and clusters. In jurisdictions beyond Australia the reform landscape includes specialist schools, free schools and charter schools.

In pursuing a reform agenda focused on various iterations of school autonomy policy makers face the fundamental challenge of how best to reconfigure and reconceptualise the roles and relationships of the 'centre' and the 'local' and of the 'middle tier' that includes regions, districts, clusters, networks, statutory agencies and professional bodies.

This paper provides a summary of participant contributions to a national invitational symposium on school autonomy and leadership hosted by the Queensland Education Leadership Institute (QELI) and the Centre for Strategic Education (CSE). It also synthesises a range of challenges and issues that surfaced in symposium presentations and discussion sessions. The symposium was held in Brisbane on 28 November 2011 and was entitled School Autonomy and System Leadership: A 'Formula' for School Improvement?

The one day seminar explored the emerging evidence base on school autonomy in high performing/fast improving systems designed to enable school and system leaders exercise the greatest influence and leverage over quality teaching and learning.

Participants at the seminar included system and sector leaders from government and non-government settings and leaders of national professional associations and key national agencies. (Appendix 1 lists the symposium attendees.)

¹ OECD (2004). Education at a Glance. Paris: OECD.

Seminar inputs

Seminar participants were provided with background papers authored by David Hargreaves², Michael Fullan³ and the Australian Government⁴ as pre-reading for the seminar. A keynote address was also delivered by Professor Brian Caldwell.

David Hargreaves: Creating a self-improving school system

The Hargreaves paper argues that increased decentralisation 'provides an opportunity for a new vision of school improvement that capitalises on the gains made in school leadership and in partnerships between schools'; and 'would usher in a new era in which the school system becomes the major agent of its own improvement and does so at a rate and to a depth that has hitherto been no more than an aspiration'. It suggests that it is time to go beyond the self-managing school to arrangements whereby schools form collaborative 'family clusters' to pave the way for a self-managing and self-improving school system (SISS).

Hargreaves concludes that: 'In a self-improving school system, more control and responsibility passes to the local level in a spirit of mutual aid between school leaders and their colleagues, who are morally committed to imaginative and sustainable ways of achieving more ambitious and better outcomes.'

Box 1: Hargreaves' key messages

- Increased decentralisation offers an opportunity for the school system to become self-improving.
- A self-improving system would capitalise on the benefits of school clusters; adopt a local solutions approach; stimulating co-construction between schools; and expand the concept of system leadership
- Autonomy provides school leaders with more power and control to drive improvement in their own schools and across the education system

Michael Fullan: Choosing the wrong drivers for whole system reform

The Fullan paper discusses the dominant drivers that cause whole system improvements and cautions systems against adopting the wrong drivers for change. Fullan argues that the anchors of whole system reform or 'right drivers' are a combination of capacity building, group work, pedagogy and systemic strategies as these drivers 'work directly on changing the culture of school systems (values, norms, skills, practices, relationships)'. His wrong drivers for change are accountability; individual teacher and leadership quality; technology; and fragmented strategies.

The main purpose of the Fullan paper is to shift policy makers' thinking away from big drivers that are counterproductive in producing school system reform.

² Hargreaves, D. (2010) *Creating a self-improving school system*, National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services

³ Fullan, M. (2011) *Choosing the wrong drivers for whole system reform*, Seminar Series 204, Centre for Strategic Education

⁴ Australian Government (2011) *Empowering Local Schools – Fact Sheet*, DEEWR

Box 2: Fullan's key messages

- Capacity building is a better driver for change than using test results and teacher appraisal to reward or punish teachers and schools
- Reforms are carried by groups not individuals so focus on groups rather than individuals
- Investing in improving teacher instruction is a better driver for change than investing in technology
- Reform strategies need to be integrated or systemic not fragmented

The Australian Government: Empowering Local Schools

The Australian Government fact sheet 'Empowering Local Schools' describes the Government's initiative that provides funds to schools to 'complement existing measures to increase school autonomy'.

Professor Brian Caldwell: *Autonomy and System Leadership: Aligning the Effort in the Journey from Improvement to Transformation*

In addition to the insights provided by the pre-reading materials, a keynote address entitled *School Autonomy and System Leadership: Aligning the Effort in the Journey from Improvement to Transformation* was presented by Professor Brian Caldwell. This address provided a solid platform for later participant discussions and has been liberally drawn upon in the preparation of this report.

Professor Caldwell outlined the emergence of school autonomy as a reform agenda, highlighted the importance of developing a narrative that transcends political boundaries and takes a long-term view; and listed some of the myths about autonomy that are getting in the way of moving from improvement to transformation. He also described the forces that are driving similar developments around the world; addressed issues related to impact on learning and the need for aligning the efforts of leaders across all levels of the system; and offered a prognosis for the decade ahead⁵.

Whilst Caldwell used the terms 'self-management' and 'autonomy' interchangeably in his presentation he noted that he and his colleague Jim Spinks prefer the term self-managing schools to self-governing schools and prefer the idea of the self-managing school to that of the autonomous school as autonomy implies a degree of independence that has not been intended in the government policy frameworks for empowering local schools.

Box 3 below outlines the definition originally coined by Caldwell and Spinks⁶ over twenty years ago to describe a self-managing school. It is a definition that still resonates in the current reform context.

⁵ Professor Caldwell's presentation

⁶ Caldwell, B. and Spinks, J. (1988). *The Self-Managing School*. London: Falmer.

Box 3: A definition of a self-managing school

A self-managing school is one for which there has been a significant and consistent decentralisation to the school level of authority to make decisions related to the allocation of resources. This decentralisation is administrative rather than political, with decisions at the school level being made within a framework of local, state or national policies and guidelines. The school remains accountable to a central authority for the manner in which resources are allocated.

System perspectives on autonomy

Autonomy can be viewed as a continuum ranging from systems with highly centralised arrangements through to systems that allow schools very high levels of autonomy.

Participants from the government, Catholic and independent sectors from each of the states and territories provided their perspectives on the concept of school autonomy as it relates to their schools. This section provides a brief synopsis of the perspectives of three symposium 'expert witnesses'- Julie Grantham, Director General of the Queensland Department of Education, Training and the Arts; Jim Watterston Chief Executive Australian Capital Territory Department of Education and Training; and Stephen Elder, Executive Director of the Catholic Education Office, Melbourne – and of system spokespersons Gary Barnes, Chief Executive of the Northern Territory Department of Education and Training and by participants from the Northern Territory and Western Australia.

Queensland government schools

Julie Grantham advised that Queensland has great diversity within its school system and to cater for this diversity it has adopted flexible arrangements in terms of local decision-making. Large, well-resourced schools in urban areas are better able to self-manage than are small, isolated schools and so they have high degrees of local decision-making. Isolated schools do not have the time or capacity to become self-managing to the same degree and so are supported by the system (e.g. the system maintains transfer arrangements to cater for hard to staff schools).

Queensland is currently canvassing views about various proposals for further extending local decision-making in schools. A discussion paper issued in 2011 explores various ways in which schools and their communities might use the flexibility available to them to take on new opportunities for local decision-making. The preface to this paper states that 'school communities will have a choice about the level of decision-making that is appropriate to their own situation' and that that before deciding to increase local decision-making a test will be applied to see 'whether it improves what happens in classrooms'. A range of ideas for discussion are canvassed under the headings of 'supporting learning', 'managing our people', 'managing our resources', and 'working with our communities'.

The objective of the discussion paper is to test whether the mix of decision-making flexibility for schools is right; whether other matters should be open to local decision-making process; and what support would assist schools and their communities take advantage of existing and possible new decision-making arrangements.

ACT government schools

Whilst the ACT has high levels of local school autonomy and is a very successful system, Dr. Watterston observed that in order to leverage the potential of greater autonomy to promote school improvement and transformation, systems would need to:

- strengthen school clusters and networks (as these provide a means for promoting cooperation between schools and for delivering services);
- ensure that school accountability arrangements are intelligent and promote increased school effectiveness;
- ensure that the primary focus of schools is on improving their performance; and
- build the capacity of school leaders and improve succession planning (as principals do not always take the opportunity to use their autonomy or may not feel equipped to operate in a highly devolved environment)

Autonomy is not an input, it is just a lever to improve student performance and if schools do not take the opportunity to allocate resources in ways that best meet their teachers' and students' needs its potential for enabling schools to customise their educational services will be compromised. Greater autonomy needs to be matched with improved decision-making at the school and network level.

Watterson also suggested that as the term autonomy tends to polarise people, perhaps empowerment is a better term to use when talking about strengthening local decision-making.

Catholic Education Office Melbourne

Stephen Elder explained that he can only exercise 'soft power' as he 'does not employ any principals or teachers, does not own a school, and does not control funding allocations to schools'. As a key defining characteristic of CEOM schools is their autonomy his role is to 'serve and lead'.

Drawing on his experience as Parliamentary Secretary for Education when the Schools of the Future reform was introduced in Victoria in 1993, Stephen observed that resistance to greater autonomy in school can come from a variety of fronts: from government because it does not want to stir up trouble; from unions because the need for centralised bargaining is reduced and they become disempowered; the central office because it also loses power and is down-sized; and from schools as they are suspicious of the motives of the bureaucrats.

Consequently, the next wave of reform will need to be carefully managed to ensure that the structural and cultural changes that need to be made are clearly identified and strategies to achieve change are carefully aligned.

Northern Territory government schools

The description of developments in the Northern Territory revealed that school autonomy in the Territory is structured around five key ideas:

- Focus on instruction.
- Build good leadership.
- Establish good community relationships.
- Empower schools to innovate.
- Allow and support schools to take on more responsibility when they are ready to.

Some specific examples of schools exercising authority at the local level in response to their particular circumstances were provided. These included examples such as some schools deciding to open on Saturday, some deciding to open over the long vacation and some deciding to add an extra half-hour to the school day on certain days of the week.

Western Australian government schools

Western Australia has conducted its third intake of schools wishing to become 'Independent Public Schools' (IPS). These schools remain part of the public education system and continue to be fully government-funded; however they are able to adopt a range of additional responsibilities and decision-making authority. Key areas of autonomy available to IPS⁷ include:

- Curriculum, including the capacity to adopt a range of curricular, as long as the requirements of the curriculum framework are met.
- Student support, through the management of student support staff, allocation of funding for students with special needs and authority to expel students.
- Human resources management, including determining the staffing profile, selecting and appointing all staff and exemption from central placement processes.
- Financial management through a single global budget, greater power to award contracts and dispose of assets and the potential to opt-out from whole of Department bulk purchasing contracts.
- Flexibility to manage utilities and in the employment and management of facilities management staff and routine maintenance.

Whilst schools apply to become an IPS they need to meet certain criteria to be selected by an independent panel. These criteria include demonstrated leadership

⁷ Department of Education WA (2011), *Unlock your school's future: Becoming an Independent Public School in 2012 - Information for schools and communities*

capacity, evidence of adequate community consultations and a well-articulated explanation of what schools would do with greater autonomy.

Issues and challenges

The discussion that follows canvasses a range of issues and challenges associated with significantly lifting the level of school autonomy that were identified by symposium participants.

The discussion has been framed by the following set of questions:

- What is meant by autonomy?
- Would all schools have the same autonomy?
- How might central offices operate to support increased school autonomy?
- What needs to be in the autonomy package?
- How is autonomy balanced with system needs and priorities?
- Would greater autonomy affect school governance?

Box 4: Key points arising from responses to these questions

- Power should be located at the school level except when the school is unable to exercise authority in a manner that leads to better outcomes for the school.
- The primary role of central and regionalised agencies would be to actively encourage, support and resource schools to exercise autonomy.
- The degrees of autonomy exercised by schools may vary depending on their circumstances.
- Governing bodies in schools will need the capacity to handle the responsibilities that accompany a default autonomy model.
- For greater autonomy to make a difference it should be part of an integrated set of strategies that are focused on achieving improvement.
- For systems to be effective, self-managing schools cannot operate in isolation and ignore system goals and priorities.

What is meant by autonomy?

There are many definitions and interpretations of autonomy amongst educational researchers or international jurisdictions. Many researchers use related terms such as school-based management or subsidiarity and qualified terms such as 'earned autonomy' and negotiated autonomy. Structural autonomy also might be universal (i.e. all schools have local responsibility) or differentiated (i.e. local responsibility granted to a select group of schools).

An emerging new concept is 'default autonomy' which is premised on the view that it is time to move beyond the position where autonomy is an exceptional case or something to the point where decentralisation and self-management become the default position.

'We need to fundamentally change the relationship between schools and central bureaucracies so that we are starting from a position of school autonomy and leading and serving schools cooperatively and collaboratively. It is difficult to see how genuine school autonomy will be realised if each school's autonomy is bounded by the extent to which we are willing to empower the Principal and school leadership.'

Stephen Elder, Executive Director of the Catholic Education Office Melbourne

When operating within a default autonomy model, the overarching principle driving the introduction of greater autonomy would be that a function or power should be located at the school level and only be removed to a higher level when the school is unable to exercise authority in a manner that leads to greater efficiency and effectiveness and better outcomes for the school. This is not a 'trickle down' model where the centre considers what it might divest to the region or school.

School autonomy would be actioned in a context in which school leaders guided by school councils exercise 'negotiated' autonomy and are supported to do so by central and regionalised agencies that have customised their services so that the various needs of schools are responded to. The primary role of central and regionalised agencies would be to actively encourage, support and resource schools to exercise autonomy in areas that contribute to producing improved outcomes for all students.

This could require a significant shift in culture of schools and regional and central agencies.

Reflecting on the relationships that would need to be forged between schools and system authorities, a participant from the independent school sector commented that independent schools pay a fee to join their local association of independent schools and the role of the association is to respond to the needs of its member schools. Conceptually, the role performed by an independent school association could provide some guidance as to the relationship that regions and the central office needs to develop with schools.

Would all schools have the same autonomy?

It was observed that schools systems are at different stages in terms of the degree to which authority over aspects of schooling have been devolved to the local level and schools are at different stages in terms of their capacity to exercise autonomy. So, even if all schools operated within a default autonomy context, the degrees of autonomy exercised by schools may vary depending on their circumstances.

A McKinsey & Company report⁸ noted that 'there is a strong, correlation between a school system's improvement journey stage and the tightness of central control over the individual schools' activities and performance; and that all improving systems adopted six common interventions but did so in different ways. The common

⁸ Mourshed, M., Chijioko, C. and Barber, M. (2010). How the World's Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better. London: McKinsey & Company.

interventions were: revising curriculum and standards, ensuring an appropriate reward and remuneration structure for teachers and principals, building the technical skills of teachers and principals, assessing students, establishing data systems, and facilitating the improvement journey through the publication of policy documents and implementation of education laws.

These findings demonstrate that a one-size-fits-all approach should not be adopted and why there should be robust mechanisms for the support of schools.

Would greater autonomy affect school governance?

Systems that have established a high degree of school autonomy need to establish strong governance systems so that there are clear accountabilities to the school community and the system for the performance of the school and the allocation of resources.

Historically, schools established advisory bodies as a means for gaining community input to the school and such bodies were established in response to a desire to improve parental participation and promote participative democracy. As greater autonomy is granted to schools, the need for improved accountability intensifies and advisory bodies are usually replaced by statutory bodies with designated governance responsibilities. However, as with other factors, the capacity of a school's governing body varies significantly from school to school.

In a devolved system, school councils need to:

- contribute to the establishment of the school's strategic directions;
- monitor school performance and partnership arrangements;
- undertake scrutiny of school expenditure and its effectiveness;
- encourage and promote school improvement; and
- exercise a general oversight of the school buildings and grounds and ensure that they are kept in good order and condition.

Schools in Western Australia entering into an agreement to become an Independent Public School are required to have a School Board that participates fully in:

- endorsing the delivery and performance agreement;
- endorsing and reviewing annually the school budget and business plan;
- processes to review the school's performance;
- processes to determine satisfaction levels of parents, staff and students, with results reported in the annual school report;
- endorsing the annual school report; and
- selecting the principal when a vacancy arises.

A 2002 study of English school governance⁹ revealed that whilst only 8% of primary and 10% of secondary schools had unsatisfactory governance, this proportion

⁹ Ofsted. (2002). *The work of school governors*, HMI 707. Available at www.ofsted.gov.uk

increases in relation to school socioeconomic disadvantage. In lower socioeconomic schools 17% of primary school councils and 24% of secondary school councils were evaluated as being unsatisfactory. A similar pattern is likely to be evident in schools in lower-socio economic locations in Australia. So part of the autonomy reform agenda needs to be concerned with ensuring that current governing bodies in schools are able to handle the roles and responsibilities that are likely to accompany a default autonomy model.

How might central offices operate to support increased school autonomy?

School autonomy has both a structural and a cultural dimension. For example, structural changes may need to be made to enable the relocation of decision-making responsibilities (e.g. legislation or regulations may need to be amended) and cultural changes (e.g. a willingness by schools to take on new responsibilities and of central agencies to transfer responsibilities).

Discussions about the possible responsibilities of central offices of education systems identified that a major function would be to establish policies and procedures that support schools to exercise their autonomy and build community confidence in government schooling and ensure that the cultural and structural dimensions of autonomy are aligned.

Possible responsibilities of central office could be:

- establishing regulatory and policy frameworks that support schools to exercise their decision-making autonomy;
- providing data management systems that support schools to effectively administer their resources and make strategic resourcing decisions;
- administering school accountability processes that support schools to monitor their performance and identify areas for improvement;
- encouraging and supporting schools to exercise local decision-making powers;
- monitoring the transition to greater local school autonomy and disseminating examples of innovative practices emerging from a culture of local school autonomy;
- providing balanced performance information on the outcomes of schools
- supporting the capacity building of school leaders, teachers and school councillors; and
- encouraging, supporting and promoting school and system innovation.

What needs to be in the autonomy package?

OECD sources¹⁰ demonstrate the impact on learning that autonomy, accountability and choice have on student success. For example, findings on school and system characteristics in high-performing systems confirm that the most successful systems of

¹⁰ Schleicher, A. (2011). Is the sky the limit? *Phi Delta Kappan*. October, pp. 58-63.

schools secure an optimal balance of autonomy, accountability and choice. This reinforces that 'the primary purpose of self-management is to make a contribution to learning, so that schools that aspire to success in this domain will make an unrelenting effort to utilise all of the capacities that accrue with self-management to achieve that end'.

As Caldwell advises, 'self-management is but one element in a constellation of approaches that must be aligned if the desired outcomes are to be achieved'. Self-management is not an end in itself but a means for improving school effectiveness and student outcomes. For greater autonomy to make a difference it should be 'part of an integrated set of strategies that are focused on achieving improvement'.

Other elements¹¹ to be included in an autonomy 'package' include:

- effective external and lateral accountability systems;
- schools operating in clusters and networks that stimulate and spread innovation and collaborate to provide curriculum diversity, extend services, and professional support;
- the strengthening of leadership capacity to help reduce between-school variation;
- the encouragement of diversity and choice;
- the development of the capacity to optimally manage resources and select staff;
- the development of the capacity to design, select, implement or utilise professional development programs;
- the building of high-performing teams whose work is needs-based and data-driven, underpinned by a culture that values quality, effectiveness, equity and efficiency; and
- developing the capacity to draw on the intellectual, social, spiritual and financial resources of the community.

How is autonomy balanced with system needs and priorities?

It was observed that in the next phase of school autonomy, central, regional and district offices in systems of public education will need to take on stronger support roles than in the past. However, as well as the different levels within the system needing to be clear about their particular responsibilities, it was also observed that for systems to be effective, self-managing schools cannot operate in isolation and ignore system goals and priorities.

It was suggested that the needs of self-managing schools and the system could be met if, for example, central offices, regions and schools assumed joint responsibility for such matters as:

- working within the legislative and regulatory framework for government schools;

¹¹ Derived from Caldwell, B. and Spinks, J. (1988). *The Self-Managing School*. London: Falmer.

- ensuring that the students attending government schools are provided with every opportunity to experience success and pursue their chosen post-school pathway;
- ensuring that schools and the system as a whole meet state and national performance benchmarks and continue to improve performance outcomes
- upholding the democratic values of fairness and participation;
- adopting procedures and processes that significantly increase decision-making autonomy at the school level;
- ensuring that the transition to a highly devolved system is effectively managed and results in all schools being more responsive to the needs of their students and the expectations of their local communities; and
- promoting and building public confidence in government schools.

System needs could also be addressed by self-governing schools exercising their autonomy in ways that:

- ensure students have the choice to attend their local school;
- strengthen not only their own performance, but also the performance of schools with whom they are in formal partnerships, clusters or network arrangements; and
- advance the learning outcomes and life chances of all students attending programs conducted by these schools either as single self-managing entities or in formal partnerships with school clusters and networks.

Concluding comments

A common thread running throughout the symposium was the need for policy makers and change agents to 'get the story right' about why greater self-management is being pursued as a reform goal. Professor Caldwell advised that it will be necessary for all those with a stake in creating a highly autonomous schooling sector – ministers, department heads, regional staff, principals, teachers and communities – to have the same narrative so there is no confusion about what is intended and why it is necessary.

Additional observations from symposium participants were that:

- establishing and gaining agreement about the values underpinning the reform is vital as values provide the glue that binds people together when taking on change, even when they have different roles and responsibilities;
- key 'ethical' principles such as subsidiarity, transparency, equity and accountability need to operate in concert to underpin a default autonomy model;
- a 'people-driven' reform is more likely to succeed than a program driven reform – so establish networks; provide capacity building; and encourage dialogue and sharing;

- central office culture needs to change so strategies for achieving central office change need to be part of any implementation strategy
- when schools are part of a system, school leadership needs to work not just locally, but also for the system;
- strategies need to be developed to support those schools not equipped to take on high levels of autonomy – increased autonomy must not contribute to the residualisation of some schools; and
- trust is essential – in schools, between schools and between schools and the head office.

In summing up the perspectives shared at the symposium, Professor Caldwell concluded that:

- there is a consensus that autonomy for schools is desirable and necessary to help improve and transform schools;
- the future of school depends on school principals having more responsibility and for greater innovation to be occurring at the school level; and
- while system leaders have a regulatory role, their main work from now on should be to support school empowerment.