



TASMANIAN  
PRINCIPALS  
ASSOCIATION

# Towards a TPA Position on School Empowerment

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We want to be empowered to...

June 2013

## Summary

In a Tasmanian government school context **we support** the achievement of equity through:

- A concept of graded autonomy with differentiated support.
- School interdependence built on trust and shared purpose.
- A system that is responsive to ideas and seeks feedback from a wide variety of sources.

We believe the following constructs **will not** contribute to the achievement of equity in the Tasmanian context:

- The concept of Independent Government schools
- The management model described as “One Line Budget” and its implied staffing responsibilities and implications.

We provide the following rationale.

## **Towards a TPA Position Paper on School Empowerment**

The existence of a system to educate the young can only be justified by the quality of the learning opportunities and processes delivered by teachers in the context of school communities. There is now overwhelming acceptance that decisions about the 'how' and, more contentiously, the 'what' of teaching/learning programs are best made as close as possible to the learning interface. Here-in lies the rationale for the devolution movement.

The educational rhetoric since the 1970s has extolled the virtues of devolving resources to schools ('money through the school gate') and the responsibility for using it in the best interests of the school community. The reasons for doing so have been honed and refined through time as political imperatives and social circumstances changed. Whilst it was always the intent that devolution would improve learning outcomes, it is only in the last decade or so that research and practice has described successful pathways for doing so. Early on, the evidence to support the shift was scarce and of questionable quality. However, the accumulated data in numerous studies since the turn of the century clearly supports the devolution movement, but with an essential qualification; its unequivocal purpose must be a focus on improving learning outcomes of students. (For a summary see ACER submission to DEEWR, "*Evaluation of Empowering Local Schools*"; Brian Caldwell, June 2012)

The purpose of this paper is to help facilitate a discussion among school principals and support the development of a 'position' about which principals can agree. Such a journey might address questions such as:

- Where does the TPA stand on devolution, decentralization and the empowerment of school communities? Are we in favour of the Independent Government School model?
- What are the steps towards building capacity to creatively manage the complexities involved?
- What is the appropriate balance between school autonomy and system support?
- Where do we think our system is at this moment in time?
- Where would we like our system to be heading? Is there a 'light- on-the-hill' to which we aspire?
- What are the indicators of progress?

In order to engage in a meaningful debate and ultimately reach a position acceptable to the TPA membership we believe it is necessary to develop a shared understanding of the terminology swirling through the debate about devolution of resources and responsibility to schools. Clear definitions are elusive as descriptors are employed in different ways. However the following is offered as a starting point to facilitate discussion.

### **School Autonomy**

Autonomy is often used as an idealistic state. In its purest form it denotes the possession, or right, of self- government, freedom of action (a law unto itself).

Government schools in Tasmania are, and will likely be, part of a system in which absolute autonomy is an unrealistic and perhaps undesirable goal. More useful here may be an understanding of aspects of autonomy along a continuum from less autonomy to greater autonomy depending on the circumstances of particular situations (schools). In the current discussion it will also be useful to agree about the aspects and degree of autonomy which positively influences student learning.

### **Self-managing schools**

A useful starting point is the Caldwell & Spinks, (1998, pp. 4-5) definition. A self-managing school is a school “to which there has been decentralized a significant amount of authority and responsibility to make decisions related to the allocation of resources within a centrally determined framework of goals, policies, standards and accountabilities”. Have we moved on from this definition?

### **Resources**

Here-in used to encompass personnel, curriculum, pedagogy, technology and facilities and opportunities as well as money.

### **Empowerment**

In this context, empowerment is seen as any delegated resource, responsibility, and/or opportunity which enable schools to positively affect student learning. It might include;

- policy frameworks with clear expectations based on shared values,
- meaningful participation in decision making and therefore, in policy formulation at all levels (distributed leadership),
- a system which embraces through its actions, democratic principles of involvement, the fostering of ownership, the valuing of contribution and which encourages and supports creativity and entrepreneurship.

### **Distributed leadership ...**

...describes the dispersion of leadership throughout the system. A recognition that to be an effective organization which finds its way through the complexities of providing optimal learning opportunities for every child, fostering, nurturing and enabling leadership must be a significant task at every level of the system.

### **Capacity building ...**

... refers to the acquisition of skills, knowledge and attributes necessary for the task and a commitment to shared values and beliefs underpinning desired outcomes. Capacity building also requires adequate resources to undertake the task and not least, moral support and trust within the System.

### **Devolution**

Devolution and decentralization are terms used to describe the movement of resources and responsibility from the central authority to a point as close as possible to the delivery of service. In school systems it necessitates the

development of appropriate management and accountability processes and skills at each level of the system. In the Caldwell paper (cited above) he quotes Pope Pius XI, (1931)... *Still, that most weighty principle, which cannot be set aside or changed, remains fixed and unshaken in social philosophy: Just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own industry and give it to the community, so also it is an injustice ... to assign to a greater and higher association ... what lesser and subordinate organisations can do. For every social activity ought of its nature to furnish help to the members of the body social, and never destroy and absorb them.*

These definitions are but a starting point. They should be disputed and refined in the process of reaching a collective understanding

### **What does the research literature show?**

Studies of the impact of the devolution movement dating back to the 1970's are characterized by an increasing sophistication and by an ever sharpening focus on the central task of education ... teaching and learning. The first 'generation' of research tended to look at the mechanisms for distributing resources, the second (in the 1980's) began to look at how classroom practice was being effected, but the data-base was inadequate and improvements to teaching and learning as a direct result of devolution were hard to discern. Consistent calls for evidence that devolving to local schools positively impacted student-learning outcomes honed the research of the 1990's and early 2000's to find positive links and determine the quantum. Research reports since then have shown a consistent trend; devolution has a positive impact on student learning when certain conditions are in place. On its own, devolution is unlikely to have the desired improvement effect on student learning outcomes. What, then, are the factors which, when selectively aligned and managed, drive improvement in schools?

### **Factors which positively affect student learning**

The following list identifies the factors generally accepted in the current literature.

- A clear sense of purpose founded in a moral code of shared beliefs and values. This is the glue that holds everything together.
- An optimal balance of centralization and decentralization. That balance needs to be determined by the stage of the improvement effort and will change through time and for site circumstances.
- System-wide improvement efforts that have direct links to students and teachers in classrooms.
- Freedom for schools/teachers to tailor teaching approaches and course content to the needs of children.
- Deliberate strategies to spread successful practices and to support and spread innovation throughout the system. Building networks between schools with a focus on improving teaching and learning.

- Collaboration between schools to provide curriculum diversity.
- Leadership to reduce difference in student learning outcomes between schools. *A commitment to leadership that goes beyond the local community and embraces the system as a whole.*
- System-wide networking and lateral and shared accountability.
- Establishing clear learning pathways.
- Motivating students to become independent, lifelong learners.
- Distributing leadership to optimize the system's capacity to align resources, including curriculum and pedagogy with the mix of learning requirements at the school/classroom level. This also goes to the decision making processes employed throughout the system. Processes that encourage involvement, acknowledge skill and insight, foster commitment to and embrace collective responsibility for outcomes are paramount.
- Capacity building to ensure optimal management of resources, and to enable individuals, schools and the system to move towards a "learning-system". ( See Glatter)
- Involvement with the local community. Building social capital by engaging positively with the school community. Involvement in school governance positively influences parent's feelings of being valued and having a sense of ownership of the decisions taken. Other forms of involvement such as participation in learning activities e.g. literacy programs, parenting programs and activities which demonstrate the school's sensitivity to cultural needs and values directly impact student learning outcomes. (Educational Transformations, 2007b; Epstein, 1995; Saulwick Muller Social Research, 2006)

The above list is indicative and records only those factors identified in the literature consulted. Nor is it to suggest that all these elements need to be in place. What is suggested by the literature is that to enable optimal benefit for teaching and learning from devolution efforts will require a suite of strategies that empower the school community; a suite that may be unique to the particular circumstances of a community.

In summary the movement to devolve educational provision began more than 40 years ago and was introduced by authorities for a variety of reasons. Initially it focused on finding ways to distribute resources equitably and on promoting management skills at the school level. Across the intervening years the focus has shifted to "the enhancement of learning". As described in the ACER submission to DEEWR; *"The logic of the argument... (for decentralization is)... relatively straightforward: each school contains a unique mix of student needs, interests, aptitudes and aspirations and those at the school level are best placed to determine the particular mix of all the resources available to the school to achieve optimal outcomes"*. (Caldwell 2012 pp.31)

Current and future research will continue to enlighten our understanding of the transformative power of these factors. Meanwhile, a well-supported pathway has emerged. The way forward is for empowered leadership to build the school community's capacity to align available resources in ways that provide optimal

educational outcomes for all students. Many of the ways for moving forward are now clear in the findings listed above.

### **Two further matters of central interest are addressed in the literature.**

The issue of **equity** is ever present in discussions about devolution. It is a legitimate concern and further work is necessary to satisfy the general anxiety about small, rural and isolated schools. However, a study of the PISA results undertaken for the OECD concluded that accountability, autonomy and choice ... *“are tides that lift all the boats... there is not a single case where a policy designed to introduce (these), benefits higher-SES students to the detriment of Lower-SES students”*. (Schultz, WoBmann, and West, 2007, pp. 34-35)

The second issue goes to the impact of empowerment (and devolution) on the **workload** of principals. It seems clear from the research that time taken to do the job has increased and there is evidence of a negative impact on the emotional and physical wellbeing of principals. A Swedish study (Lindberg, 2012) looked at role ambiguity, role conflict and role overload and found that principals at School Based Management (SBM) sites experienced less role conflict and role overload but much more role ambiguity. More work is necessary to clarify and quantify the impact on principals, but it is edifying to note that in the EU context principals are working an average 60 hours per week compared with other similarly remunerated professionals who average 45 hours.

Using the research foundation outlined above, where do we believe our system and our schools to be and where would we like them to be heading? Can we agree on ‘a light on the hill’ which guides us along the pathway?

In this regard we are not left with a blank page. A number of prominent and well-credentialed educators have used data from the most successful systems across the world to devise models that are helpful. The following examples will serve to progress the debate. Each of the models briefly described below suggests a staged progression from dependent and subservient to interdependent and professional.

Ron Glatter (Warwick University) proposes five system models which are enlightening in this regard.

**Competitive market**, characterized by: pupil-number-led funding; open enrolment; published data on school performance; variety of school types; run commercially as a small business.

**Quality control**, characterized by: systemic inspections; performance targets, mandatory curriculum and assessments; bureaucratic; school as local delivery point; central control.

**School empowerment**, characterized by: finance, staffing, curriculum and student admissions devolved to school; substantial power for school council; school as a participatory community

**Local empowerment**, characterized by: authority devolved to locality on finance, staffing, curriculum, student admissions; community council as

governing body; school as one of a 'family' of schools. The locality is seen as the social and educational unit.

**Learning system model**, characterized by: reform by small steps; evidence informed policy and practice; tolerance of divergent views, minimal blame/derision; test beds for innovation; genuine partnerships built on trust; school as a creative unit within the wider system; connections between stakeholder groups and between system levels.

( Described in Glatter, R. 2003 and cited in the ACER paper to DEEWR)

Glatter does not suggest a sequence, but clearly the Learning System Model is his light-on-the-hill. In reaching an agreed TPA position, characteristics of all the models provide fertile ground for developing a continuum from dependency to the maturity of inter-dependence.

In the McKinsey and Co. report 'How the World's Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better' (Mourshed, Chijioke and Barber, 2010), the focus is on system improvement. Using a 'robust' evidence base they placed systems on a 'journey' from *poor to fair*(achieving the basics of literacy and numeracy); from *fair to good*(getting the foundations in place); from *good to great* (shaping the profession) and from *great to excellent* (improving through peers and innovation) Three findings are relevant here:

1. System improvement comes about as a result of a cluster of strategies which are mutually reinforcing and act together to lift the system as a whole. Different clusters of intervention are effective for each stage of the system's journey.
2. The degree of central control is much greater where a system is moving from poor to fair and looser and less prescriptive as systems move through each of the other improvement 'journeys'. Peer led creativity and innovation is seen as the key driver in the *good to great* and *great to excellent* 'journeys'.
3. Six intervention strategies occur commonly across all the improvement "journeys", but manifest differently in each.
  - 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
  - Facilitating the improvement "journey" through the publication of policy documents and implementing education laws.

For each of the findings the Report detailed intervention strategies appropriate to particular 'journeys'. Salient to our current discussion are the strategies employed on the great to excellent 'journey', and these are listed below.

- Cultivating peer led learning for teachers and principals
- Creating additional support mechanisms for professionals
- System-sponsored experimentation and innovation across schools
- Encouraging collaborative practice among educators

- Decentralizing pedagogy to schools and teachers
- Creating secondment programs across schools and between the centre and schools
- Providing more administrative staff
- Sharing front-line innovation across the system

Evident here are the similarities between the findings of this report and the rubric of the Glatter models.

A third noteworthy contribution is from Pat Collarbone. Her work is powerful because it draws much of the research and theory together into a model which makes sense to professional teachers and principals. It describes the ‘journey’ from immaturity (read competitive, quality controlled and *poor to fair*) to maturity (read ‘Learning System’ and *good to great* and *great to excellent*) In a paper “From Dependency to Autonomy and beyond” she presents it thus.

	Co-dependence	Dependence	Independence	Interdependence
System Focus	Confused	Centralised	Localised	Personalised
Leadership based upon	Fear	Control	Rules	Trust
Accountability	Remedial action	Inspection	Self evaluation	Peer review
Ways of working	Conflict	Consultation	Negotiation	Partnership
Approach to change	Status quo	Reactive	Proactive	Creative
Workforce response	Denial	Compliance	Development	Professionalism

Maturity of the individual, team, organisation and sector

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In this case the ‘light-on-the-hill’ is characterized by a personalized system focus, trust based leadership, accountability through peer review, partnerships as the keystone of working relationships, change through creativity and a professional workforce. As a continuum is built into this model it is particularly useful in deciding where we are, where we want to be and what the path forward might look like.

A survey conducted during Term 1 (2013) and based on Pat Collarbone’s model, elicited responses from 94 principals across the State. Assuming that the responses accurately reflect the perceptions of those principals, it is a positive affirmation of the *independence* and *interdependence* end of the continuum as the place to be.

In seeking a way forward, it seems appropriate to conclude on an inspirational note delivered by one of the living treasures of educational research.

Michael Fullan, in his work for the Centre for Strategic Education (Fullan, 2011) identifies the ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ drivers of educational reform.

He suggests the ‘wrong drivers’ are “not forever wrong”, just “badly placed as **lead drivers**” in reform efforts. His rubric makes thought provoking reading and perhaps lights the way ahead.

The ‘main culprits’ i.e. less successful lead drivers of reform.

1. “Accountability: using test results and teacher appraisal to reward and punish teachers and schools, **vs** *capacity building*.”
2. Individual teacher and leadership quality: promoting individual **vs** *group solutions*.
3. Technology: investing in and assuming that the wonders of the digital world will carry the day, **vs** *instruction*.
4. Fragmented strategies **vs** *integrated or systemic strategies*.” (Fullan, 2011, p.5)  
(The italics are the writers and not from Fullan’s text)

In summary he says:

“The four ‘right’ drivers – capacity building, group work, pedagogy, and system-ness are the anchors of the reform effort” (Fullan, 2011, p. 5)

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