School Autonomy and Student Achievement

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The performance of schools, and in particular students, is being held back by bureaucratic structures. This is a commonly held belief, and one to which almost everyone has a personal experience to support. The contemporary policy solution – although one with a rich history – is ‘school autonomy’. Give schools, or more specifically principals, greater powers and they will overcome the constraints of bureaucratic systems and student outcomes will improve. The freedoms provided will enable school leaders to remove under-performing staff and develop programs for maximum performance. But are such claims warranted?

Despite recent claims in the media of the extraordinary improvements in student achievements from a landmark study, the research-based support for school autonomy is far from convincing.

What do we actually know about school autonomy and its impact on student outcomes?

A rich history (both for and against)

In many ways, Australia was a leading adopter of school autonomy – particularly in the ACT and Victoria. The world’s leading advocate of self-managing schools, Brian Caldwell, is based in Melbourne.

As a result, there is a rich history of systemic reforms, advisory roles to governments, publications, and scholarly critique. Rarely however have these diverse sources come together to deliver a comprehensive statement on the merits of school autonomy for improving student outcomes.

Apples and oranges

Obscuring the debate on the merits of school autonomy is the slippery use of language. We have decentralisation, devolution, self-managing, school autonomy, principal autonomy, independent public schools, just to name a few. Internationally we can add charter schools (US), academies (England), free schools (Sweden), and the growth of for profit providers running schools in India and Africa among others. Without due attention, all of these reforms are used interchangeably to make arguments both for and against.

Correlation and causation

Support for increased autonomy is frequently found in large-scale international tests. In particular, OECD claims that in countries where schools have greater autonomy students tends to perform better. The presence of autonomy at the school level does not mean that it is the cause of improved or higher performance.

What is often omitted from this OECD evidence is that this autonomy is specific to what is taught and how students are assessed. Such a degree of autonomy is not part of the current reform agenda. It is actually possible to claim the counter. The advent of national testing (e.g. NAPLAN), national curriculum, national professional standards, teacher education reforms, and public accountabilities such as MySchool create an environment far from autonomous.

Indirect impact

In an era where John Hattie’s work on effect sizes and impact has come to dominate education dialogue and debate, it is a little surprising that a reform with little – and mixed – empirical support has remained so popular.

It has frequently been reported that there is a lack of rigorous and robust evidence that school autonomy leads to better student outcomes. Even an evaluation study from the University of Melbourne on independent public schools found ‘little evidence of changes to
student outcomes’ and ‘no substantive increase in student achievement’.

Similar findings have been published from the United Kingdom, the United States, New Zealand and Australia. Even the OECD has presented mixed evidence. In short, the empirical evidence for school autonomy and improved student outcomes is at best, inconclusive.

Absence of debate

What is most disappointing is the absence of serious dialogue and debate on the merits of school autonomy.

In a 2012 review of related literature for the evaluation of empowering local schools for the Department of Education, Employment and Work Relations, any form of critique or contrary research was reduced to a single sentence – ‘robust criticism were mounted’. Similarly, in the recent media reports, critique was dismissed as straw man arguments.

In the interest of advancing the work of schools, there is a need for serious dialogue and debate. The logic of argument and refutation would bring about clarity on what school autonomy really means, what evidence we have to support it (or not), and what we need to know.

Conclusion

There is little doubt that the argument for greater autonomy is persuasive. The logic of the claim seems like common-sense and impossible to refute. This however is the greatest danger of the debate. The unquestioned support of a common-sense claim is not helpful for improving performance in the Australian education system. This is not to say that school autonomy is not a factor, or even the answer. Rather, I argue that we simply do not know. The evidence at this point is inconclusive. Dialogue and debate is minimal – and more likely to be people talking past one another. To that end, we cannot claim that school autonomy will improve student outcomes.

About the author

Scott Eacott is an educational administration theorist, Director of the Office of Educational Leadership in the School of Education at the University of New South Wales, and Adjunct Professor in the Department of Educational Administration at the University of Saskatchewan. He is widely published in the field of educational administration and leadership with research interests and contributions falling into three main areas: relational approaches to educational administration scholarship; theory and methodology in educational leadership; and school leadership preparation and development.

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