

*Part II*

*Themes in Canadian reform*



## Devolution and Control in Alberta

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### ABSTRACT

A package of reforms to education designed to restructure the education system was introduced in the first three-year business plan for education in Alberta in 1994. Similar to other sites, the intention of the reforms was to increase community involvement and to make the system more efficient and accountable. Borrowing from policy writers, this paper traces the process associated with funding changes and the introduction of school-based management as part of the simultaneous centralization of control and devolution that began in 1994. Findings confirm that the cuts in education funding was a key driver in the restructuring, that centralizing changes overshadowed devolutionary reforms, and that there was more attention given to early phases in the policy process than to implementation and evaluation of outcomes.

**Keywords:** education reform, Alberta, Canada, public schools

### RESUMEN

El primer plan comercial trienal para la educación en Alberta, de 1994, introdujo un paquete de reformas de cara a la reestructuración del sistema educativo. Como en otros lugares, la intención de estas reformas era aumentar la implicación de la comunidad y hacer el sistema más eficiente y controlable. Basándose en analistas políticos, este artículo explora los cambios en el sistema de financiación y la introducción de la autonomía de gestión escolar, como partes de un proceso simultáneo de centralización del control y de delegación que comenzó en 1994. Los datos confirman que las restricciones financieras a la educación han sido un factor clave para la reestructuración, que los cambios centralizadores han ensombrecido las reformas de delegación, y que el acento se ha puesto más en las fases iniciales del proceso político que en la implementación y en la evaluación de los resultados.

**Descriptores:** reformas educativas, Alberta, Canadá, escuelas públicas

### RÉSUMÉ

En 1994, on a présenté un ensemble de réformes éducatives dessinées à restructurer le système éducatif pendant le premier plan d'entreprise de trois ans pour l'éducation en Alberta. Pareille à d'autres sites, l'intention des réformes était d'augmenter la participation communautaire et de rendre le système plus efficace et responsable. Empruntant aux écrivains de principe, cet article suit la trace du processus associé avec des changements de financement et l'introduction de la gestion par l'école comme partie du processus simultané vers la centralisation du contrôle et la décentralisation qui a commencé en 1994. Les résultats confirment que la réduction des budgets destinés à l'éducation était un moteur clef dans la restructuration et que des changements cen-

tralisants ont éclipsé les réformes décentralisantes, et qu'on accordait plus d'attention aux débuts du processus politique qu'à la réalisation et à l'évaluation des résultats.

**Mots-clés**

réformes éducatives, Alberta, Canada, écoles publiques

## Introduction

THE NEED TO LOOK AT both commonalities and differences in educational reforms across industrialized countries has been noted by a variety of authors (Ball, 1997; Dale & Ozga, 1993; Levin, 2001; Whitty, Power & Halpin, 1998). For example, Dale and Ozga's work (1993) articulates some of the differences between school reforms in New Zealand vis-à-vis England and Wales. Levin's recent book (2001) also attends to the micro-dynamics of reforms across five different settings. Authors tend to agree that while we can observe common reform trends across and within countries, the translation of policies in these sites is very much rooted in their local situations. As Ball (1997, p. 262) writes, "policy analysis needs to be accompanied by careful regional, local and organizational research if we are to understand the degrees of 'play' and 'room for manoeuvre' involved in the translation of policies into practices."

This paper builds on the work of critical policy writers by tracing two policy initiatives in Alberta, Canada, from the entry of reform ideas onto the political agenda to the outcomes of policies (Levin, 2001). My intention is to attend to how the policy process works in order to inform future political debate. The paper focuses on two elements of the reform package introduced in 1994 that reflect a simultaneous shift toward devolution and centralized control in the Alberta system: school-based management (SBM) and changes to the collection and allocation of education funding. It also builds on previous research undertaken with co-authors that examines the impact of funding cutbacks on school boards in the province. Primary data therefore include ten interviews with representatives from two school districts (superintendents, secretary-treasurers and principals) as well as two later interviews conducted with civil servants at Alberta Learning. Documents and reports relating to these reforms were also examined.

The paper is organized as follows: the next section situates these reforms internationally and within other educational and government reforms in Alberta in the mid-1990s. The two sections that follow then document the policy process related to the two reforms. Finally, the implications of the analysis are discussed.

## The Context of Reforms

Certain theoretical ideas inform this work. First, I share the view that educational policy analysis can benefit from exploring connections between education reforms and global changes (Ball, 1997; Whitty et al., 1998; Brown and Lauder, 1992). Second, I agree local conditions, resources, histories, and micropolitics affect the articulation of policies in different sites. And third, I assume that policies and policy processes are complex, messy, and socially constructed (Levin, 2001). Discussion in this section

focuses on the importance of exploring connections between local policy and global political and economic trends. Assumptions about the importance of attending to local policy-making processes in particular sites are addressed in greater depth in subsequent sections.

It can be argued that the global economic crisis in the 1970s led to attempts to change capitalist relations of production and led to challenges to the Keynesian welfare state. The notion that there has been a shift from Fordist relations of production based on mass production techniques to post-Fordist relations based on flexible production within a knowledge economy has become part of dominant political discourse in most OECD countries. Although there are arguments over the extent to which current realities actually reflect post-Fordist or neo-Fordist developments, the question of which policies can best address economic changes is central in most countries. Also important is the influence of neoliberal ideas that promote change in the governance of public sectors in the direction of increased privatization, liberalization, and the imposition of business models. As a result, there is a change in the principles of public sector provision (Ball, 1997). Awareness of the global political and economic trends helps us to make sense of structural, political, and historical constraints that affect local policy-making.

For example, Whitty et al. (1998, p. 30) note common reform themes in England and Wales, USA, Australia, New Zealand, and Sweden that include the devolution of financial and managerial control to local levels, the promotion of parental rights to choose schools along with increased diversity of provision, and centrally defined performance goals. Ball (1998) adds that influences leading to such reforms include ideas associated with neoliberalism, new public management, and public choice theory. Both Ball and Whitty et al. agree that there has been a move in the jurisdictions they have studied toward a state that steers from a distance through increased emphasis on outcomes and accountability. Therefore, although there is evidence of devolution through initiatives like school-based management (locally-managed schools in England), Ball adds that reforms that emphasize the market tend to devolve blame and responsibility while retaining government control.

In Alberta, we see some of these influences on education policy and broader government restructuring in the 1990s. Kneebone and McKenzie (1997) discuss six factors that facilitated government restructuring in Alberta around 1994 as follows: the perception of fiscal crisis; the presence of a relatively centralized, hierarchical political system able to move quickly; strong and determined leadership; the basic elements of reform prepared in advance; an electorate that was receptive to change; and an opposition that was fragmented. While I agree that these factors were present, there were other influences related to the “climate of ideas” (Levin, 2001).

In his comparison of government restructuring in New Zealand under the Labour government in the 1980s and in Alberta under the Klein Conservatives in the 1990s, Schwartz (1997) identifies three categories of influence in Alberta: local ideas, Canadian and US ideas, and New Zealand ideas. For example, the idea of government action plans or business plans was proposed by Conservative Party member Elaine McCoy and later taken up by her leadership rival, Ralph Klein, when he became party

leader and then Premier. In the US, ideas around “reinventing government” described by writers Osborne and Gaebler (1992) were also influential. The discussion paper for the education roundtables in the fall of 1993 references this work. Schwartz notes that the Canadian federal government’s retrenchment in the early 90s also provided a model for provincial restructuring.

Finally, Schwartz discusses the “remarkable similarities” between New Zealand and Alberta reforms (1997, p. 5). In his view, Alberta bureaucrats had “absorbed the largely public choice-based New Zealand model by reading about it in the media, in Canadian digests of New Zealand policy, and most importantly, via Roger Douglas’s *Towards Prosperity*, which provides an account of the early budget, deregulation, and corporatization efforts” (p. 8). Douglas was also invited to Alberta to speak with politicians and senior officials in the early 1990s. Therefore, connections are evident. At the same time, Schwartz argues that New Zealand policy documents were more clearly ideological while reforms in Alberta were more financially driven.<sup>1</sup> Given the prominence of a discourse of debt and deficits in this period, I would agree. However, with the recent budget surpluses in the province, it is interesting that there has been little talk of reversing reforms.

So what kinds of reforms were introduced? The three-year business plan released by the education department in March 1994 included budget cuts of 12.4 percent, the centralization of funding collection (previously shared between the province and municipalities), the regionalization/amalgamation of school boards, mandatory school councils, the introduction of charter schools, open boundaries, school-based management, and an expansion of the province’s standardized testing program. Alberta reforms share the emphasis on devolution, accountability, and choice that has been described in other sites (Whitty et al., 1998). Neoliberal ideas about creating quasi-markets, a decrease in state regulation and direct involvement in provision, and increased emphasis on the government’s role in monitoring and accountability mechanisms are apparent. Given these similarities, it is important to look at the particularities of the reform process, from origins to outcomes, in greater depth.

## The Centralization and Allocation of Funding

Ball (1997, p. 266) recommends that policy writers adopt what he refers to as a “policy trajectory approach,” which traces the development, formulation, and realization of policy “from the context of influence, through policy text production, to practices and outcomes.” Levin (2001) elaborates a similar approach organized around four overlapping and iterative elements in the policy process that attend to origins, adoption, implementation, and outcomes. The following discussion of the decision to centralize education funding in Alberta refers to these elements. My analysis draws primarily on data from interviews and government reports. Since it was difficult to separate the different elements or initial phases of the policy process in the Alberta case, I discuss origins, adoption, and implementation within one section.

Whitty et al. (1998) suggest that centralized financial control along with devolution of budgets to schools were common aspects of reforms across the countries they exam-

ined. They also comment on some of the implications of such trends. For example, they note that the devolution of funding “on a per capita basis requires schools to attempt to maximize their rolls” (p. 36). It may also create financial uncertainty and “penalize schools where resources are most needed” unless the funding formula is weighted to provide an incentive to schools to take “more expensive children” (pp. 85, 117). They further argue that devolution to schools has often been a strategy for budget cutting in times of contracting state revenue. A closer look at changes to funding in Alberta and the introduction of school-based management allows us to assess these claims.

### *From Origins to Implementation*

Bruce and McKenzie (1997) and Schwartz (1997) suggest that part of the success of government restructuring in Alberta in the early 1990s can be attributed to the fact that the basic elements of reform had been prepared in advance. Indeed, the groundwork had been laid for the decision to centralize funding from various accounts. For example, a civil servant from the education department (Alberta Learning bureaucrat 1, Interview, July, 2001) suggested that inequities in funding were seen as a problem in the late 1980s and early 1990s. As a potential solution to the problem, the department of education prepared a white paper that promoted centralized collection of the corporate portion of education funds (corporate pooling) and redistributing these across districts in a more equitable way. At the time, there was apparently disagreement from politicians and school boards around this proposal. In particular, boards that stood to lose money through such pooling were opposed while boards that stood to gain were supportive. According to the interview participant, politicians were similarly divided and no action was taken at that time.

The newly elected Conservative government, led by Ralph Klein, promised to be more fiscally responsible. Therefore in late 1993 and early 1994, the government began a deficit-elimination program that forced departments to consider how they would deal with funding cuts of 20 percent or more. Perhaps it was this imperative that prompted action on the issue of school funding. The civil servant suggests that the decision to centralize funding was made hastily:

I recall getting called into [the Deputy Minister's] boardroom in early January 1994 and I got the understanding that there [had been] some kind of caucus discussion or cabinet discussion. You know, what are we going to do with this [funding] mess? Nobody was prepared to give, they were all deadlocked in two camps. And somebody got the bright idea, well maybe we should just do away with [municipal funding], just take it all. ... [I]t was strictly a political process where all of a sudden, allegedly, you could see the light come on around the table. It gave them a magic solution. And bear in mind, at that time there were already seven out of ten provinces that were doing this. ... Now they were seeing this as a way of saving face and getting a solution. Now it's a bit twisted because you couldn't agree to take some of [the municipal money] and all of a sudden you can agree to take all of it and that's better?! ... And it was all done in great

haste with political expediency. (Alberta Learning bureaucrat 1, Interview, July, 2001, p. 3)<sup>2</sup>

The problem of inequitable funding across school districts had therefore been on the table before the 1994 reforms. The fact that other provinces had moved in the direction of centralized funding probably lent credibility to policy proposals. In addition, it could be argued that looming funding cuts provided an impetus for action on the collection of funds. Civil servants and politicians wanted to achieve greater control over the system to ensure that spending reductions occurred in particular areas. As my interview participant notes (p. 4), the question was: “if you’re going to have this reduction in funding for instruction, what can you do to ensure that the monies that are available for the classroom are maximized?” One response was to control the collection of funds.

Another was to devise a funding framework that increased control over the allocation of funds. For example, in March 1994, an MLA implementation team was charged with the task of developing a new framework for funding school boards. A group of three MLAs worked with an Advisory Committee composed of representatives from provincial education groups and the department to develop a discussion paper for this framework. This paper recommended that funding be allocated through instruction, support, and capital funding blocks and that there be a number of additional controls. For example, it recommended that there be a limit on funds allocated for school system administration and for system instructional support. There were also restrictions on boards’ abilities to shift funds from the instruction to the support block. Finally, the ability of schools to levy taxes was to be limited to three percent of the budget of the board. My interview participant suggests that these limits were linked more to bureaucrats’ wishes than to concerns expressed by education groups.

A number of these allocation decisions were designed to support other reforms by creating desired behaviours. For example, the limit on administrative funding was intended to ensure that schools did not bear the brunt of funding cuts. The restriction on system instructional support (system-wide support of instructional activity) was intended to encourage implementation of school-based management across districts. Similarly, the new funding framework allowed funding to follow students, which was consistent with notions of parental choice and the creation of quasi-markets in education. This move could be characterized as creating a voucher system within the public/separate school systems.<sup>3</sup>

Funding decisions also encouraged other reforms to some extent. For example, my interview participant suggests that the regionalization of school boards was partly motivated by the fact that small school districts with a poor assessment base would no longer be viable as funds were cut. Therefore, structural changes were required to increase the economies of scale for small jurisdictions. Further, with regionalization, there was concern about trustees’ ability to maintain contact with schools in larger dispersed districts. Therefore, although the civil servant acknowledges that SBM was also the “flavour of the year” movement in the US, it began to make more sense for Alberta, as follows:

[It was] also the only comeback we had for parents and trustees in those smaller jurisdictions: “We will balance this up by actually improving local input through this system of school-based decision making and school councils.” (Alberta Learning bureaucrat 1, Interview, July, 2001, p. 5)

These comments point to something of a domino effect in the reform process.

As Levin (2001) notes in his comparative look at educational reforms in England, New Zealand, Alberta, Manitoba, and Minnesota, reform agendas were driven by a managerialist focus—the view that education problems can be remedied by changing the organization and management of the system. Alberta reforms, like those in other sites, assumed that educators were self-interested, that schools could be viewed as production enterprises, and that reforms must come from outside (p. 18). For example, a new reporting system was designed to ensure greater accountability. Like the department, school districts began to be required to prepare rolling three-year business plans and annual education reports. When asked how this came about, my interview participant replied:

I don't know if the minister of the day had a bright idea one time or one of his minions. But it was definitely an outcropping of the fact that the provincial government all of a sudden required all of its departments to do this. And, “hey if we're required to do it, and districts are like locally elected governments, why should they not do the same thing?” (Alberta Learning bureaucrat 1, Interview, July, 2001, p. 7)

A new system of financial reporting was also introduced. A task force with representation from the department, the Auditor General's office, professional auditors who serviced boards, and secretary-treasurers from districts worked to develop the new financial statements and “rules of the game” (Alberta Learning bureaucrat 1, Interview, July, 2001, p. 8). This was partly prompted by the Auditor General's request that districts adopt accrual accounting methods in their reporting in order to be more “technically accountable,” in the words of my interview participant. Of course, it also brought school districts more in line with the reporting practices of business and industry. The introduction of new financial reporting required the involvement of personnel with an accounting designation, a change from the skill requirements of secretary-treasurers under the previous cash accounting system.

Levin (2001) suggests that in the process of moving from an initial policy proposal to its final form, there are likely to be internal political debates, bureaucratic accommodation and political opposition that potentially lead to compromise and modification in the proposal. At the same time, he notes that in the sites he studied, “determined governments were able to turn their proposals into law in each case, and to gain most, if not all, of what they originally sought” (p. 135). Similarly, my interview participant suggests that the MLA implementation process may have resulted in “fine-tuning” but adds that the final product “wasn't much different” from the original discussion paper (Alberta Learning bureaucrat 1, Interview, July, 2001, p. 6). There was minor accom-

modation related to the cap on administrative spending. Apparently, when department personnel began to “crunch the numbers,” they realized that consideration must be given to the size of the board and therefore a small range was introduced.

A funding review undertaken by the province in 1999 also provided opportunities for accommodation. One major concern of some district administrators involved the lack of attention given in the funding framework to discrepancies in salary costs across the province. As my interview participant notes, “the average cost of teachers in most parts on that Highway 2 corridor is as much as \$8,000 more than elsewhere and it’s not recognized” in the allocation of funds to districts (Alberta Learning bureaucrat 1, Interview, July, 2001, p. 9). However while acknowledging that these districts had a legitimate argument, it was apparently a “politically difficult issue” because politicians were “not prepared to differentiate grants on the basis of salary costs” (p. 9).

In fact, one reason for increased earmarked funding was to “try to affect the balance of how much ends up in the classroom and how much ends up in the pockets of teachers through the collective bargaining process” (p. 10). As a result, no changes were made in this area. This response is consistent with neo-Fordist approaches that try to reduce social overheads and the power of unions (Ball, 1998). Also, while districts were concerned about reduced autonomy through funding restrictions, only in the area of system instruction support was the limitation removed. Politicians “would not do away with the limit on system administration because they were afraid that was not very politically astute” (p. 10).

In summary, although there were slight accommodations made, the funding framework generally reflected the original interests of politicians and some key civil servants. As we see in the next section, although school system administrators complied, they were not always satisfied with changes.

## **Outcomes**

In his study of educational reform across sites, Levin (2001) notes that little willingness seemed to be given by policy-makers to investing in implementation or the assessment of outcomes. The primary policy levers used to bring about change tended to focus on mandating certain actions through legislation and regulation, structural change, and attempting to mobilize opinion. Some attention was given to providing inducements through additional funding, but little was given to capacity building through training and other supports.

In the case of funding changes in Alberta, mandates were a primary policy lever. As my interview participant comments, “the funding framework was based on a premise which carries the force, in effect, of a regulation under statute so it’s the law of the land. Funding was conditional on ‘thou shalt not run deficits’” (Alberta Learning bureaucrat 1, Interview, July, 2001, p. 8). Further, although some training was provided by the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Alberta to secretary-treasurers to implement accrual accounting methods, district administrators have raised concerns about increased reporting demands and about the “re-skilling” required for district administrators and principals to adapt to changes.

In an earlier study, we interviewed superintendents and secretary-treasurers from two different school jurisdictions and all four associated changes in funding with a loss of district autonomy. Administrators in a district that received provincial funding to compensate for “sparsity and distance” were concerned about restrictions on transferring funds between blocks. Administrators in a district near the Highway 2 corridor noted that because their salary costs were much higher than the provincial average, they were having serious difficulties meeting budgets. Six principals interviewed from these districts acknowledged that central office expected them to balance budgets as a precondition for staying in the job.

One superintendent indicates the “success” of funding changes in modifying behaviour as follows:

[A]s an “educational leader” in my jurisdiction, I end up spending a huge amount of time dealing with things that are money-related. So it’s “educational” within very tight resource constraints and so that makes me increasingly attentive to the dollars and cents. So I would say that the government has been very successful in making us pay attention to the dollars. The downside is that I would say it’s potentially to the detriment of just about everything else because you spend so much time having to deal with that side of things. (Interview, October 2000, p. 5)

Similarly, a principal at one of the schools in this district suggested that principals spent a lot of time at meetings talking about “facilities, expenses, cutting teachers, dissolving programs ... and we don’t talk about kids and social development and academic development...” (Interview, October 2000, p. 11).

These comments and others suggest that a more technocratic administration of the educational system has been promoted. Burris (1993, pp. 133–4) discusses five interrelated features that characterize technocratic administration: increased systematization, stratification, and centralization of educational institutions; increased quantification of educational inputs and outputs; development of both educational and administrative technology; increased emphasis on long-term planning and “objective” decision-making based on technical imperatives; and a new form of teacher professionalism.

In the Alberta context, the introduction of a management information reporting system that tries to capture information about outcomes reflects this direction. More quantitative information is collected by the department and presumably plays a greater role in the policy process. Business plans seem to be driven by financial imperatives. My interview participant sums up some of the thinking that has influenced policy:

The Auditor General has always been pushing to link money invested to outcomes of the program they produce, like we were making widgets. And it’s really hard to do. So we have these broad general statements, we’ll look at our student assessment results, what else have we got, these surveys that people are happy, 85 percent of parents are satisfied. If we compare favourably, we must be putting in

enough money; it's no more scientific than that. (Alberta Learning bureaucrat 1, Interview, July 2001, p. 13)

The shift toward a more technocratic administration is therefore evident. However, funding changes were ostensibly introduced to distribute funding more equitably across districts. Yet the department does not appear to have commissioned research to establish results in this area. For example, when asked whether the department had evaluated the outcomes of funding changes, my interview participant replied, "I'm not sure how to answer that. I think there's a general belief that the funding is reasonably equitable. . . . I think there's a general consensus that it is equitable (outside Edmonton and Calgary) amongst the boards." (p. 12). As Levin (2001) notes, often little data are gathered on outcomes.

A study supported by the Alberta School Boards Association and Alberta Teachers Association does however attempt to analyze the impact that financial changes have had in Alberta. Using eight years of longitudinal data for 19 school districts and cross-sectional data for the 1998 population of districts, this study examines the impact that restructuring has had on horizontal equity (equality of per-student funding and expenditures across school districts) and funding neutrality (the absence of systematic differences in the way the funding mechanism compensates districts for uncontrollable costs). Findings suggest that inequities between districts in terms of per-student total revenues and per-student instructional spending have not decreased in the post-1994 period. Furthermore, results imply that the funding mechanism is not district-neutral. Certain components of it (proportions for disabled, English-as-a-second language, and salary) are negatively correlated with the financial health of jurisdictions.

These findings raise questions about the extent to which policy around funding has fulfilled its original purpose. They also raise questions about how equity is defined and measured. For example, Ball (1998) suggests that equity issues do not so much disappear in current educational reform as become reframed. In Alberta, funding equity through the recognition of key cost drivers has been translated primarily as geographic equity, which to an extent has favoured the rural areas (e.g., through sparsity and distance funding) that have traditionally been a key source of political support for the Conservative party. But even in these areas, concern is expressed about a loss of autonomy associated with the new funding framework. Further, with a funding cut of 12.4% in 1994, there continue to be concerns about adequacy of funding.

With the move toward school-based decision making, discussed further in the next section, there are also increasing concerns about inequities within as well as between school jurisdictions. For example, since the mid-1990s as a result of federal requirements, districts and schools have been required to report the amount of school-generated funds (including fundraising). In some cases, the amounts are significant. However, in an interesting excerpt, a second interview participant from Alberta Learning comments on the seeming lack of public concern for this form of inequity, as follows:

[With school-business partnerships and fundraising] I think there are inequities creeping back in and I think it speaks to the degree to which the public as a whole in Alberta felt the need for equity. You know there have been a lot of city-state arguments going on where Calgary has determined that the funding structure creates an inequity for them compared to Edmonton, and the grounds for it are the number of special ed [education] kids they've got or something. So there's a lot of that going on and I'm not sure that the general public in Alberta really feels the inequity issues at all, or feels that they need to be addressed. There's much more of a "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" feel, I think, from the public. Where "if you've got the smarts to go out there, beat the bushes and gather more money, good on you, and hold onto the money." (Alberta Learning bureaucrat 2, Interview, July 2001, p. 2)

This statement raises interesting questions about how equity is framed and the importance of players' sense of the public mood in the policy process (cf. Levin, 2001).

## School-Based Management/Decision-Making

While the centralization of funding and development of a new funding framework present examples of increased control on the part of government, a directive for districts to adopt school-based management (SBM) in Alberta Education's 1994 business plan reflects a devolutionary trend. This directive appears in the department's Policy, Regulations and Forms Manual (Policy 1.8.2) in a section called school-based decision making (SBDM),<sup>4</sup> which reads: "a school and its community shall have the authority and support to make decisions which directly impact on the education of students and shall be accountable for the results."<sup>5</sup>

Parental involvement in school governance is related to parental choice through the creation of a more marketized system that was perceived by politicians to enhance the quality of education. Part of this market strategy involved legislation permitting charter schools and greater support for home schooling and alternative schooling. The notion of per capita funding that follows students and the publication of school results were other parts of this strategy. As the interview participant notes, providing parents with information about the success of their children's schools (e.g., results on standardized tests) was part of that market-driven strategy: "The more you know, the more you will be a consumer, the more you will make judgments and choices" (Alberta Learning bureaucrat 2, Interview, July 2001, p. 11).

The combination of devolution and choice in reforms is by no means unique to Alberta. Whitty et al. (1998) note that the devolution of financial and managerial control to more local levels was apparent in each of the five countries they examined. These authors argue that "the devolution of ever-increasing decision-making capacity to site-based managers in schools is the means whereby the central state is able simultaneously to exercise a degree of control over what they do and shift responsibility when things go wrong" (p. 63). In other words, "blame for failure rather than the freedom to succeed" is seen as the key political motivation for devolutionary policies (p. 12).

Other writers are less pessimistic about the motivations and possibilities of self-managing schools. A look at the policy-making process and relationship to other reforms in Alberta is therefore desirable.

### *From Origins to Implementation*

As with the policy process around funding, the groundwork for the move to SBM had already been laid before the 1994 restructuring was announced. An interview participant from Alberta Learning (Bureaucrat 2, Interview, July 2001) suggests that the example provided by the Edmonton Public School Board, which had piloted school-based budgeting in the late 1970s and expanded the concept in the 1980s, was very influential, adding:

The people that were involved are very interesting. ... Shortly after the opening up of the boundaries, Reno Bosetti became Deputy in Alberta Education. [He and the superintendent of Edmonton public schools] were very similar in their ways of thinking about things. In Edmonton, one of the people involved in the piloting of SBM was Roger Palmer. ... [Roger Palmer had been] an associate superintendent in Edmonton public. He then came over to government, became the ADM [Assistant Deputy Minister] there, eventually the DM. And during that period of time was when government went through the changes and went through the decentralizing to the school jurisdictions. (p. 5)

The superintendent of Edmonton public schools at the time, Mike Strembitsky, had been a key player in the promotion of SBM and after retiring in 1994 became actively involved in the movement in the US. Strembitsky's successor, Emery Dossdall, took SBDM further in 1995–96 when he allocated the majority of central service fund to the schools, allowing them to purchase services and products from the district or outside vendors (McBeath, 2001). The work environment for central staff became much more entrepreneurial as these services were operated on a cost-recovery plan. These changes occurred around the time that the education department was developing the new funding framework, which included a cap on the amount that boards could allocate to instructional support services.

The credibility of Edmonton's model of SBDM was no doubt enhanced by the fact that it had gained national and international attention. Perhaps because of this local model, the interview participant from Alberta Learning suggested that it was an "Alberta-made strategy" (July 2001, p. 6). At the same time, government moves outside Alberta to "back government out, to deregulate" were reportedly part of the bigger picture that would also have influenced the department (p. 6). When asked earlier about other examples of reform aimed at decentralization and deregulation, my participant replied that the department has stopped delivering specialized programs for students, has involved industry in school-to-work transition initiatives through a career foundation, and exerts less central control over learning and teaching resources. At the same time, as noted in the previous section, there has been an "increase in the

amount of data” collected from schools and more broad-based monitoring (Alberta Learning bureaucrat 2, Interview, July 2001, p. 3).

As with the changes to the allocation of funding, an MLA team was established in early 1994 to address the implementation of SBDM and school councils. The mandating of school councils as a way to formalize and increase parental involvement was closely tied to the move to devolve decision making to lower levels of the education system. Two-day consultations were held in six locations across the province with public presentations on the first day followed by workshops and small group discussions with 550 invited participants representing students, parents, teachers, principals, trustees, and superintendents. A position paper 1994 called “Roles and Responsibilities in Education” was released by the MLA team in December. My interview participant talks about some of the accommodations that occurred throughout this process:

The idea in its early stages in the discussion within government and then in some of the focus groups that government was doing was that SBDM would be enhanced by having a school council participate in the decision-making. And I think there were some people in the politician group who thought this was a very good step toward just getting rid of school boards. And the consultation processes at the time with parents and community members tested out with them the idea of the levels of decision-making, how much authority should government vest in school councils through legislation. And to the surprise of a lot of the members of government, the parents came back saying “don’t give [school councils] too much power.” It was very interesting to then discuss that with people in the standing policy committees at the time because that was not what they expected. The voices they’d been hearing who wanted control were a relatively small number. ... So the government backed away and made the school councils a much more general kind of affair. (Alberta Learning bureaucrat 2, Interview, July 2001, p. 7)

Government also appeared to have backed away in the implementation phase. Unlike sites like Australia where SBM was promoted quite strongly in policy documents throughout the 1990s, the approach in Edmonton seems to have been somewhat laissez-faire. For example, a representative of the Alberta Teachers’ Association (ATA) who was involved in producing an SBDM manual<sup>6</sup> for the government comments that boards tended to “fall into it” and that government did not appear to be monitoring it, aside from the cap on administrative spending (personal communication, June 26, 2001). Her impression after talking to representatives from seventeen school districts was that implementation was “uneven.” She added that SBDM seems to have fallen off the government’s agenda in terms of three-year plans that are produced. The civil servant agreed that assessing the outcomes of SBDM was not necessarily on the government’s agenda, adding, “I think the concentration of government is really on the link between government and the boards” (Alberta Learning bureaucrat 2, Interview, July 2001, p. 8).

Also, aside from producing the SBDM Manual, the government has delegated implementation. For example, the interview participant comments:

One of the things that came out of the [school council review] was that as goes the principal, so goes the school council. . . . So there was a request that we look at doing training for principals to get that competency up. Well, we said, “not our job. But there are lots of ways of doing that.” So we engaged the Home and School Councils to take a look at things that they might do to collaborate with other partners in putting together some administrator training in the area. So they’ve joined with the ATA admin council, I think somebody from there, to try and put that in place. (p. 8)

As we see in the discussion of outcomes that follows, the devolution to schools within the context of other changes such as decreased funding and increased parental choice was not seen as unproblematic. Tensions that were highlighted in early consultations with “stakeholders” in 1994, such as the weak links between SBDM and outcomes for students, the increased workload for school leaders, the tension between parental involvement and school accountability, and the potential for increasing inequity recur in discussions with district and school people.<sup>7</sup>

### **Outcomes**

Levin (2001, pp. 165–167) suggests that policy outcomes in three areas should be considered: what happens to students, the impact on the education system, and social outcomes. In the area of local management of schools, his analysis of reforms across different sites suggests that it has significantly increased the workload of school administrators, principals tend to be more positive about the changes than staff, the gap between these groups has increased, there is little evidence of a link to student achievement, and it does not seem to have led to greater diversity in schools or to significant changes in teaching and learning practices in most schools (pp. 175–177).

A survey of teachers, principals, and superintendents as well as reviews of SBDM in two school districts and our interviews with six principals in two others generally substantiate these findings. For example, of 200 principals responding to a 1998 survey, 78 percent indicated that the working conditions for principals worsened between 1992 and 1998. Similarly, a review of SBDM in Pembina Hills school district found that although most principals supported the concept, they spent more time on management activities than previously and some principals noted an increased separation between themselves and some of their staff members “as the principals are increasingly viewed as being management.” Major problem areas were identified as “time demands, lack of money, insufficient training and the difficulty with declining enrollments in rural Alberta” (p. 11). A staff satisfaction survey across schools in the district indicated “significant concerns among the teaching staff as to the manner in which SBM is being accepted and implemented” (p. 9). Our interviews with six principals in two districts support the notion of an increased workload.

Interviews with school council chairs suggested that the level of involvement varied from school to school. Most participants felt that “the motivation behind the implementation of SBM was the reductions in the funding that was provided by the province” (Cymbol & Sloan, 2000, p. 10). And while they felt that SBM helped schools deal with the impact of reduced budgets, a number stated “that the system was still significantly under funded” (p. 10). The review also found that a review of student achievement (measured by results on provincial tests) do not indicate that SBM has resulted in “improved overall student achievement in the district” (p. 16). This district is not unique in this regard. A 1998 survey found that 91 percent of the 301 teacher respondents disagreed that Alberta’s educational reforms<sup>8</sup> had brought about significant improvements in student learning (Townsend 1998, p. 16). Further, reports from the US suggest that there are weak links between SBM and student achievement (Malen, Ogawa & Kranz, 1990; Lingard et al., 2001; National School Boards Association, 1999).

Another review conducted in Elk Island public schools comments: “there is still not a great deal of evidence that confirms that [SBM] improves student achievement” (Gordon Welch Consulting, 2000, p.7). In this review, although principals tended to support the district’s balance between centralized and decentralized functions, consultants were concerned to hear “a significant number of ‘we-them’ comments about the relationship between schools and central services” (p. 6). There was also concern expressed about the effects of competition across schools as follows:

Will Elk Island be a school system or a system of schools?... It’s everyone for himself [sic], every student has dollar signs attached and we have lost our system focus. These concerns surfaced during many interviews. The evolution of SBDM has raised this concern in school systems in this province. When some schools are generating significant surpluses while others cannot afford basic necessities, students are not enjoying equal opportunities to learn and receive services. (p. 8)

The survey of teachers, principals, and superintendents found other results that speak to societal outcomes of Alberta reforms more generally (Townsend, 1998). For example, 66 percent of 40 superintendent respondents, 60 percent of principals, and 67 percent of principals disagreed that reforms had increased local control over education (p. 15). Furthermore, 57 percent of superintendent respondents, 80 percent of principals, and 87.5 percent of teachers disagreed with the statement that Alberta’s educational reforms have led to an improved equality of service being provided to Alberta’s students (p. 14). Therefore, although the shift toward SBM was generally viewed as positive by respondents, clearly this was clouded by perceptions about the package of reforms. For example, Townsend (1998, p. 31) writes:

[Respondents] are not convinced that there has been any serious increase in local control, the perceived benefits of school councils and site-based management notwithstanding. On the contrary, many of them believe the measures that have promoted greater centralization of system operations are stronger and more influential than those that appear to encourage decentralization.

Survey evidence overall suggests that “producer groups” such as teachers, principals, and superintendents are less satisfied with the impact of reforms than are the “consumer groups” who tend to be the focus of departmental satisfaction surveys (cf. Ball, 1990).

## Concluding Comments

The preceding discussion raises a number of important points about the policy process in Alberta and its connections to reforms across other sites. This research supports the idea that the cut to education funding was a key driver in the restructuring of education. The process undertaken to develop a new funding framework indicates the perceived importance of increased departmental control during a period of financial constraint. Further, cutbacks lent legitimacy to other reforms aimed at making the system more efficient and accountable. We also see something of a domino effect in that one reform led to another. Influences on the local situation included key players in the education department. As Levin (2001, p. 106) notes: “The Alberta reforms need to be seen in the context of a very powerful Department of Education that had always played a lead role in education policy.” The climate of ideas from New Zealand and the United States as well as models from within the province and country also lent credibility to reform proposals.

Examination of the policy processes associated with funding changes and SBM suggests that the department focused primarily on the early phases of policy with less attention to implementation and evaluation of outcomes. Levin’s (2001) suggestion that governments often focus on creating and promoting policy within short-term political horizons makes sense here. In addition, his observation that governments may not wish to commit additional resources to implementation and assessing effectiveness is very pertinent to the Alberta case. In the case of the funding framework, little has been done to assess the policy in terms of its stated objective of increasing equity across districts. Questions around which aspects of equity have been prioritized in policy (as indicated by earmarked funding in areas of perceived inequity) have been raised. Also, the adequacy of overall funding and levels in particular areas continues to be an area of concern. While one might expect that education groups are difficult to satisfy in this regard, the fact that there has been so little departmental accommodation to concerns and so little public discussion of how outcomes should be assessed is problematic.

In the case of SBM, assessment of outcomes also appears to be lacking. After establishing a regulation that boards adopt SBM, little direct support was provided by the department. While aspects of the funding formula and reporting requirements support SBM by setting limits on administrative spending and central instruction services and requiring schools to produce education plans, there is little evidence of policy levers focused on inducing districts to adopt SBM or helping them with capacity-building in this area. Instead, after its original directive, it is convenient for the department to say, “It’s not my job.” Perhaps as a result, the implementation of SBM across the province is seen as uneven.

Although there appears to be support amongst principals for SBM, it is also difficult to assess outcomes of this reform separately from other elements of restructuring. As

mentioned, education groups and parents are generally cynical about government's motivation for introducing SBM, regarding it as a way of downloading the stress of budget cuts. Therefore, although the notion of devolution can be, and historically has been in some instances, associated with professional and community empowerment, it is difficult for participants to see it this way in the Alberta context.

In terms of assessing outcomes of reforms generally, it is important to note that the "satisfaction surveys" collected by the department tend to focus on "consumers" rather than "producers." The government's lack of trust in the latter groups may account for this focus but clearly leaves a data gap. As Levin (2001, p. 172) suggests, measurement of outcomes needs to be the "subject of frequent reassessment and heated debate." Furthermore, although there is evidence of extensive consultation in the policy processes described in this paper, it is apparent that the framing of reforms had already taken place to a large extent. This aspect of democratic process must also be considered.

By providing insights into local policy development, the preceding discussion attempts to provide a sense of both constraints and possibilities for future policy processes. Yes, the direction of changes in education across countries has been remarkably similar. In the Alberta context, as in others, there has been a shift in the provision of public services, a move toward more technocratic forms of governance, and a reformulation of equity issues. Reforms in this province are influenced, as in other sites, by discourses around neoliberalism and new public management. However, they are also shaped by local struggles among conflicting interest groups with outcomes that cannot necessarily be predicted. In this context, the policy researcher has a role in improving the nature of debate by "adding information and clarity to the issue" (Gaskell, 1988, p. 415). This requires engaging with members of the education community, civil servants, and politicians to inform policy.

## Notes

1. Levin (2001) also concludes from interviews and other data sources that educational reforms in Alberta were financially driven.
2. The page number refers to the transcript document.
3. Public and separate (usually Catholic) school districts are fully funded by the province while private schools receive 60 percent of the instructional block obtained by these schools.
4. Although the term school-based management was used in the 1994 plan, it was later changed to school-based decision making in policy regulations and in a manual that was later produced.
5. This information was found at the following website: [www.learning.gov.ab.ca/educationguide/pol-plan/polregs/182.asp](http://www.learning.gov.ab.ca/educationguide/pol-plan/polregs/182.asp).
6. The SBDM manual that was produced in 1996 was described as facilitative, not prescriptive. My interview participant suggested that it was “intended to help people manage themselves well” but was “a struggle to develop because people’s concept of what SBM ... was about varied a lot across the province” (Alberta Learning bureaucrat 2, Interview, July, 2001, p. 7).
7. These comments were noted in the synthesis of the public input sessions sponsored by the MLA team on roles and responsibilities that preceded the position paper.
8. It should be noted that questions asked respondents about the package of educational reforms. The report notes later that principals were satisfied with the move to SBM.

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