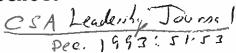# The Rise And Fall Of School Based Management: Lessons From A NYC Elementary School

By Jeffrey Glanz
Assistant Principal, Brooklyn

Public education has received voluminous criticism for being bureaucratic and unresponsive to the needs of teachers, parents and children (Johnson, 1990; Katz, 1987; Sizer, 1984). One of the prominent proposals for disenfranchising bureaucracy has been the attempt to more meaningfully involve teachers in decision-making processes (Dunlap & Goldman, 1991). This translated into giving teachers more formal responsibility for setting school policies, thus enhancing democratic governance in schools (Kirby, 1991). Susan Moore Johnson (1990) observed that "although schools have long been under the control of administrators, local districts are increasingly granting teachers more formal responsibility for setting school policies" (p. 337). The argument for greater involvement goes something like this: When teachers participate in decisions about their schools, there will be a significant improvement in their attitudes, which will strengthen their commitment toward their work. It is further hoped that teacher empowerment will translate into better student academic performance (Heck, Larsen, & Marcoulides, 1990).

Joseph Fernandez came to New York City over three years ago with this agenda in mind. Former Chancellor Fernandez' motives were not, in the author's opinion, driven by a conviction that "School-Based Management and Shared Decision-Making" (SBM/SDM) would truly serve the best interests of the children in New York, but were driven by a political agenda. Shared decision-making, which had been a "hot" issue in educational literature, would serve as the means for Fernandez to "make his mark" as the new Chancellor.

School-based management in New York, then, was promulgated essentially through the efforts of the Chancellor of the local Board of Education. Chancellor Fernandez (formerly Superintendent of Schools in Dade County, Florida) advocated SBM/SDM as an alternative to traditional school management. Under this plan, teachers, parents, and supervisors would presumably work collaboratively toward increasing productivity and enhancing the professional status of teachers (as if this were not at all happening in any New York City school). The idea of giving "ownership" over major decisions to teachers gained acceptance among educational reformers. Reformers have been convinced that "restructuring" cannot and will not succeed unless teachers are given opportunities at meaningful decision-making (Darling-Hammond, 1985).

According to Joseph Fernandez (1990) meaningful decision-making was explained as:

The shared decision-making model embraces the old saying 'two heads are better than one.' With SBM/SDM, teams of people from different positions in the school community — the classroom, the cafeteria, the guidance office, the security desk, and the principal's office — work together to devise solutions to problems that no one of those constituencies alone could possibly solve. SBM/SDM calls not for one leader, but for a group of leaders. This group must be able and willing to share among its members the authority and power that come with leadership. Fundamentally, then, SBM/SDM requires a rethinking of traditional definitions of leadership (p. 26).

P.S. X is located in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn, New York. It was built in 1905 and is a large elementary school serving approximately 1,500 pupils (Kindergarten through Grade Five). The school is administered by a principal and two assistant principals. It was identified, in 1990, by the New York State Department of Education as a school "in need of assistance" as a result of low scores in reading at the third grade level. The 1989-1990 pupil ethnic census provided the following data about the school's student population: African-American 85%; Hispanic-American 10%; Asian-American 3% and Other 2%. The socioeconomic data indicated that 95% of the students were eligible for free lunch. Also, P.S. X is a Chapter I school.

P.S. X was selected as a school to participate in site-based management because it was a school designated by the state for review. Initial apprehension by teachers and administrators alike was not uncommon. Frequent comments were: "what does all this mean?"; "who's in charge?"; "will we get support from the district office, the state?"; "who will be directly involved in decision-making — all teachers or a representative committee?"; "what role will the principal and his assistants have in making decisions?"; and "who's accountable?" Although the faculty and staff did not volunteer to participate in SBM/SDM, there was remarkable consensus among that this was a unique opportunity for helping students succeed. District and state experts explained the program to school members and a committee (comprised initially of volunteers) was formed early in the school year. With the full cooperation of the administrative team, a committee of teachers, parents, and administrators met on a regular basis. The administration at P.S. X always believed that decisions were more effective through collaboration. They believed that the Fernandez plan would expand efforts already underway at the school to involve teachers and parents more meaningfully. They believed that shared decision-making through, for example, teacher advisory councils, enhanced the feeling of ownership of the deci-

sions that affected the school. Although the administration assumed responsibility for what happened in the school, decisions made collaboratively resulted in greater teacher commitment as well as ensured that implementation of decisions occurred.

I have elsewhere described the efforts of P.S. X to implement SBM/SDM (Glanz, spring/summer 1992). Ultimately, however, the path toward shared governance was not a smooth one. Administrators and teachers alike encountered a number of critical problems. Although teachers and administrators collaborated on a number of projects, as they had done *prior* to SBM/SDM, these successful efforts were short-lived. Sustained efforts at collaboration became less frequent. School-based management ultimately *failed* at P.S. X.

Lessons

To what can we attribute the "fall of SBM/SDM"? There are a number of possible explanations. First, reform cannot take place in an haphazard, piecemeal fashion. Systemic change is necessary to mitigate bureaucratic influences that hinder participatory management and successful schooling. School-based management as a one-shot reform effort at the school level is destined to fail without broad institutional support.

Although research confirms that participation at all levels is associated with positive outcomes such as greater staff morale, organizational commitment, and a reduction of conflict (see, for example, Blase & Kirby, 1992; Kochan, Katz, & Mower, 1985; Nadler, 1986; Sashkin, 1984), teacher participation alone is not an assurance that positive changes are inevitable (Porter, Lawler, & Hackman, 1975). Teacher participation is successful only to the extent that other intervening and contextual variables are set in motion (Shedd, 1987). As Conley, Schmidle, & Shedd (1988) explained: "When employees have the formal authority to make decisions, but their actual discretion is tightly circumscribed by prescribed agenda, organization norms, resource limitations, or similar factors, the purported benefits of participation strategies are often minimal or nonexistent" (p 260). In other words, teacher participation alone does not necessarily eliminate or even mitigate bureaucratic influences. An organization effort is necessary to ensure that pedagogical, curricular, and administrative strategies work in consonance with participatory management.

The lack of this organizational effort at both the district and city levels was evident. Mr. Fernandez expected schools to share, collaborate, and participate while districts and Board of Education operated as usual: bureaucratically, management by fiat! Teachers and administrators at P.S. X were disappointed with the lack of support at the district and city levels. Disillusionment quickly led to a disintegration in morale and belief in SBM/SDM. A significant reason way SBM/SDM failed at P.S. X was due to the perceived hypocrisy displayed by outside agencies.

The message was clear: do as we say, not as we do.

A second reason for the "fall of SBM/SDM" can be attributed to the manner in which a change in educational practice was attempted. P.S. X is a good example of a local school that was influenced by the "bandwagon approach" to reform. Even a cursory examination of how educators attempted to implement reforms, say, in the sixties and seventies, will indicate that efforts were ultimately ineffective and short-lived. Larry Cuban (1984) taught us, in his book How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms, 1890-1980, that "the more thing change, the more they remain the same." Schools, said Cuban, have indeed remained formalized, uniform and essentially unchanged by educational reform that is characterized by a "quick fix" approach. This, in essence, is why reform efforts in New York City failed. Mr. Fernandez came into New York with his "bandwagon" and we hopped on.

Finally, reform efforts a la Fernandez failed because little, if any, attention was drawn to the marvelous and assiduous endeavors of administrators and teachers who had been working in schools long before Mr. Fernandez came to New York City. The council of Supervisors and Administrators (CSA), the professional union of administrators and supervisors, has been a staunch advocate of participatory management. Any competent supervisor realizes that he or she cannot be ultimately successful without the cooperation of all interested parties. Involving parents, teacher and, even students in meaningful curriculum committees has been a long standing practice in schools. I recall many times I was urged, while training for certification as a supervisor, to involve teachers fully in decisions affecting the school and the students. The demise of SBM/SDM at P.S. X was hastened, in large measure, due to the failure to take into consideration the attempts already underway to accomplish meaningful involvement at all levels. Reform by administrative fiat does not work. Change happens by degree, not decree.

The "rise and fall of school based management" at P.S. X indicates the complexity of school reform, the cyclical and ephemeral nature of reform as well as the necessity to understand the context in which reform efforts are geared. The fundamental premise behind SBM/SDM is sound and was echoed by Donald Singer (1990), the president of CSA in New York City, when he said:

Leaders must never leave the troops too far behind. Decision-sharing with staff must become a reality in fact and not just a slogan to which we give lip service. The creative leader will set up mechanisms in his/her school to involve teachers in the decisions that impact on students. Collegiality is a necessary environment for adding meat to the bone of the slogan: 'Effective Leadership = Effective Schools' (p. 5).

We must remain vigilant and seize every opportunity to ensure that our schools serve the best interests of all our children.

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