

The experience of devolutionary reform in schools: the case of New South Wales public education

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It has been 10 years since the introduction of the *Local Schools, Local Decisions* (LSLD) reforms in New South Wales (NSW) public schools. Lasting 2012-2020, LSLD centred on the devolution of additional powers and responsibilities to school principals, namely enhanced capacity to manage staffing and financial functions in response to local conditions. Representing ‘potentially the greatest change to school governance and decision-making in more than 160 years of public education in NSW’ (Dinham 2012, 13), LSLD reflects the current school governance trend of school autonomy or ‘devolution’ seen in other Australian states and also worldwide. Centralised arrangements in schooling have been increasingly eschewed for their perceived inflexibility, yet there is a lack of empirical evidence which connects devolution to improved student learning and outcomes. Devolutionary reforms may also lead to further consequences, such as managerialisation of the school principal’s role and expanded marketisation of school education (e.g. Holloway and Keddie 2019).

Using a conceptual lens of policy enactment (Ball et al. 2012), we analyse how LSLD was experienced in NSW public schools and draw implications for in-school roles and relationships. This study reports on interview data gathered from 31 teachers and school leaders on how each of the five key reform areas of LSLD – making decisions, managing resources, staffing schools, working locally, and reducing red tape – were understood and enacted at their local school level, as well as the impact on teachers’ and principals’ work and relationships from this enactment. Our findings highlight tensions in the operation of devolutionary reform in schools. While the centrality of the principal’s role was emphasised by study participants, including in relation to contested levels of principal discretion, our findings show the enactment of devolved powers and responsibilities produced fracturing of staff relationships within schools, notably between principals and classroom teachers.

References

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