

The Allen Consulting Group

Review of School Based Management in the ACT

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Background Report for the Department of Education and Training

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Chapter 1

Background and context of the review

1.1 Background to the review

In February 2009, following an open competitive tender process, the Department of Education and Training (DET) commissioned the Allen Consulting Group to undertake a review of School Based Management (SBM) in the ACT. The review will run for approximately six months, and conclude by the end of July 2009.

The review places a strong emphasis on comprehensive and meaningful school community consultation. Through a range of forums (including focus groups, face-to-face meetings, online surveys and an interactive website) this project will seek a diverse range of views about all aspects of the current model. The outcomes of this consultation are anticipated to be important in helping shape the recommendations of the review, and in informing the future decisions of Government.

1.2 School Based Management – what is it?

SBM is founded on the devolution of financial decision-making authority from governments to schools. It involves the transfer of responsibility and decision making authority over the operations and management of schools to principals, school administrators/managers, teachers, parents, sometimes students, and other school community members. SBM also requires schools to conform to, or operate within, a set of centrally determined policies.

SBM is based on the premise that principals, teachers, parents and the community are in a better position to direct financial resources to areas of priority and need within schools. By allowing schools greater autonomy over their day-to-day operations, SBM seeks to improve the way resources are allocated and managed in the school environment (Caldwell and Spinks 2008).

School based decision making capabilities have been a feature of ACT government schools since the establishment of the *ACT Schools Authority* in 1976. ACT government schools have had relatively autonomous control over the development of school curricula, assessment practices and pedagogy, which have been underpinned by regular school-based evaluations.

The introduction of enhanced SBM in the ACT in 1997 saw an increase in the level of operational responsibility given to school principals and the community. SBM gave ACT schools (colleges, high schools, and primary schools) greater discretion, than had been previously afforded, over a number of activities (such as cleaning, grounds maintenance, some IT and communications, minor and mandatory maintenance, energy and education expenses).

More recently, SBM has been complemented by measures which provide greater flexibility in the way schools manage their staffing resources and plan for future human resource needs.

The core objectives of SBM are to:

- facilitate the ‘efficient’ delivery of services to schools and school communities
- increase the level of flexibility and the range of resource management options available to school level decision makers
- improve the educational outcomes of all students attending ACT government schools (*Education Act 2004*; Hugh Watson Consulting 2004).

1.3 Why a review is needed at this time

Recent policy developments, both at the Territory and a national level, make a review of SBM timely. For example, the rationalisation and amalgamation of schools in 2008, the introduction of new schools using new models of teaching, the substantial injection of funding into buildings and equipment, as well as the introduction of new Territory-Commonwealth Government funding agreements and National Curriculum Frameworks, have placed renewed emphasis on the efficient and effective management of education resources.

In addition, it has been five years since the last evaluation of SBM (2004), and it is important to consider the progress made towards meeting the main recommendation of that review.

This review will evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of SBM against its core objectives. It will also consider the measures necessary to streamline and strengthen existing arrangements for ACT schools. An improved (i.e. a more responsive and simplified) model for managing school resources in the ACT will be important for meeting future demands and challenges faced by schools.

Chapter 2

Key issues, focus and questions of the review

2.4 Key issues in School Based Management

The ACT government school system has been the subject of considerable debate since the introduction of the enhanced SBM model in 1997. This debate has occurred at the same time as changing community needs and expectations of educational standards and outcomes, demographic change, budgetary pressure, declining numbers, and significant structural change in the ACT's education system.

In particular, the rising costs of education have placed pressure on individual schools to effectively manage resources. Some estimates suggest that the cost of educating individual students in small government schools (e.g. less than 200 students) is nearly double the cost of education at larger schools (e.g. above 400 students). There is also evidence to suggest that the operational cost in smaller schools is significantly higher than in larger schools – especially, with respect to per student costs (Costello and Smith 2005).

Increasing community demands for improved educational outcomes have enhanced the reporting and accountability requirements of schools. Under SBM, principals and school managers are afforded autonomy (in specified areas) to use resources in a way that best meets the needs of a school. Principals are increasingly required to balance community requirements, government demands with school needs.

In addition, an evaluation of SBM five years ago suggested there were low levels of understanding amongst key stakeholders about its general elements (Hugh Watson Consulting 2004). This lack of understanding had important implications (such as confusion about individual roles and decision making responsibilities) for the way SBM-related resources are allocated, managed and reported by schools and governments. This review will test whether there is a higher level of understanding of the system today.

2.5 Focus of the review

The focus of this review will be on the overall efficiency and effectiveness of SBM. Both aspects will be crucial in streamlining and strengthening SBM to meet future educational needs.

In order to provide practical recommendations to enhance the performance of the model the review will concentrate on key areas of SBM. These include:

- the governance and accountability arrangements underpinning SBM – including the roles and responsibilities of individual stakeholders
- the funding mechanisms associated with SBM – in particular, the different levels of discretion afforded to schools under various funding categories
- the management of human resources within a global budget
- the management of major assets and maintenance programs within schools – including, cleaning, and scheduled and non-scheduled maintenance

- the purchasing and contracting arrangements operated at the school level – in the current procurement arrangements and thresholds for contracts
- the information and computing technology arrangements managed by individual schools.

Key questions of the review

The key questions that participants of this project will be asked to consider are:

- How well is the current SBM system meeting its objectives?
- What are the best (most efficient and effective) features of the current SBM system?
- What are the worst features of the current SBM system? Which features require immediate attention, and what features need to be addressed over the longer-term?
- What are some practical ways in which SBM could be improved?
- Are there good practices in other jurisdictions (in Australia and overseas) that the ACT could consider adopting?
- What gaps or uncertainties exist in the accountability arrangements of SBM?
- Are the roles and responsibilities of key decision makers clear within SBM?
- Should devolution of authority to schools be increased/decreased/remain unchanged?
- Should the extent of devolution depend on the circumstances of each school?

While these questions are not a definitive checklist, they offer a useful starting point to consider how current arrangements can be improved to better meet the challenges of the future. In particular, they aim to facilitate a discussion amongst key stakeholders that will shape the recommendations of the review.

2.6 Additional project information

Additional project information can be obtained by:

- accessing www.allenconsult.com.au/sbmreview
- emailing: sbm@allenconsult.com.au
- calling: the Allen Consulting Group on (02) 6204 6500.

References

Caldwell, B. and J. Spinks 2008, *Raising the Stakes: from Improvement to Transformation in the Reform of Schools*, Routledge: London.

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