

Decentralization of school management to boards of governors in secondary schools in Kenya: a case of Trans-Nzoia County

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The concept of decentralization of school management to Boards of Governors was adopted by the Teachers Service Commission in an attempt to infuse community participation in the administration of schools. It has also been proposed as the solution to challenges facing the education sector including eliminating government bureaucracy, increasing efficiency and accountability, and improving the quality and relevance of education. In this study we attempt to explore the impact of decentralization of educational services to Boards of Governors on the management of secondary schools in Kenya. The study utilized qualitative data collected from twenty public secondary schools in Trans-Nzoia County, where the views and experiences of school principals on school management by boards were sought. This article reports that while decentralization has many positive aspects, it also has numerous demerits that need to be remedied. It particularly recommends the genuine professionalization of the composition of the boards. The implications of the findings are considered within the wider context of management of education in Kenya.

Keywords: Educational management; decentralized management; school management; boards of governors, Trans-nzoia County - Kenya, secondary schools–Kenya, Kenya

Introduction

Education is important for the socio-political, economic and cultural development of any nation. In this regard, management of educational institutions must be based on professional management practices. Okumbe (1999) observes that several countries have developed systems and policies to meet their educational needs. In the case of developing countries, such policies are mainly geared towards attaining parity in standards with their developed counterparts. Community participation in decentralized educational systems has become increasingly important in these reform efforts. In Kenya, one such approach is the integration of the community in school management through boards of governors.

Management of education in Kenya

The Education Act (1964) defines a manager as any person or body of persons responsible for the management and conduct of a school, and includes a Board. In addition to the Act, the Teachers Service Commission (TSC) Act, Cap. 212, confers extensive powers on the Minister of Education (MOE) over the management and regulation of education in Kenya. The two acts mandate the minister to delegate his powers to local authorities, district education boards or Boards of Governors.

Board of Governors (BOG) Management

The Education Act Cap. 211 (1968) mandated the establishment of boards of governors (BOGs), comprising parents and other members of the community. BOGs play a central role in the administration of schools and have been given authority to influence and control important issues, such as school budget, discipline, and appointment and promotion of teaching and administrative staff. In a nutshell the mandate of school BOGs is to delegate management of schools more so decision-making authority from ministry and district offices to individual schools. It fosters principals, teachers, students, and parents to have greater control over the education process by giving them responsibility for decisions about the budget, personnel, and ensuring the curriculum is implemented. Through the involvement of parents, and other community members in these key decisions, BOG can lead to more effective learning environment for students. The core components of BOG are decentralization of administration, participation by staff, parents and the community in the school set-up. Hence, delegation of power and authority is considered to be a significant factor in BOG that leads to commitment, trust, and a sense of ownership.

It is clear that the role of BOGs is central in the attainment of school goals. The importance of an effective, efficient and co-operative school management structure cannot be underestimated. The figure below shows the position of BOG in the hierarchy of school management in Kenya.

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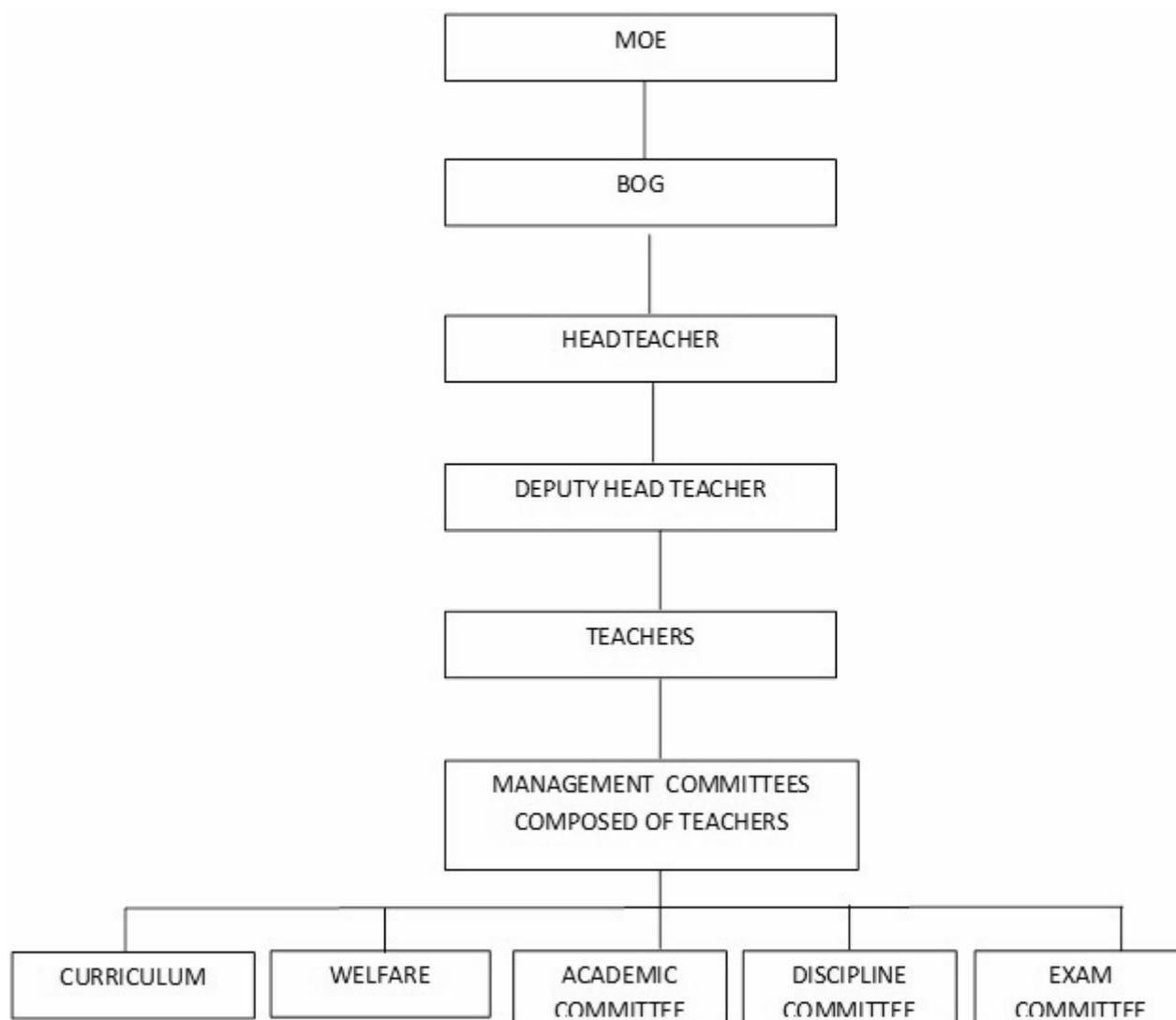


Figure 1 Secondary School organizational structure showing the position of BOG

Source: Osure (1996)

Purpose

In this study we attempt to explore the impact of decentralization of educational services to Boards of Governors on the management of secondary schools in Kenya. We report on the findings of a case study conducted in Trans-Nzoia County that set out to address the following objectives:

1. To find out school principals' experiences and perceptions on decentralization of school management to BOGs.
2. To establish the merits and demerits of management by boards of governors in secondary schools in Kenya.

Literature Review

In this section we present the theoretical framework that informs this study and briefly review the four primary structures of decentralization gleaned from the literature, and then discuss some of the elements of decentralization.

Theoretical model

The decentralization of decision making advocated by the ministry of education in Kenya rests on the BOGs appointed to run individual schools. BOG system is based on collaboration between the community, principals and teachers in dealing with management related issues in schools.

Pushpanadham (2006) proposes a model, School Based Management (SBM), which seeks to improve the quality of education by relocating significant decision making authority from the central government and district education offices to

Inkanyiso, Jnl Hum & Soc Sci 2011, 3(2)

individual schools. This model augurs well for the present study since its main components are decentralization of administration, participation by staff, parents and the community in the school.

The following figure explains the concept of school based management.

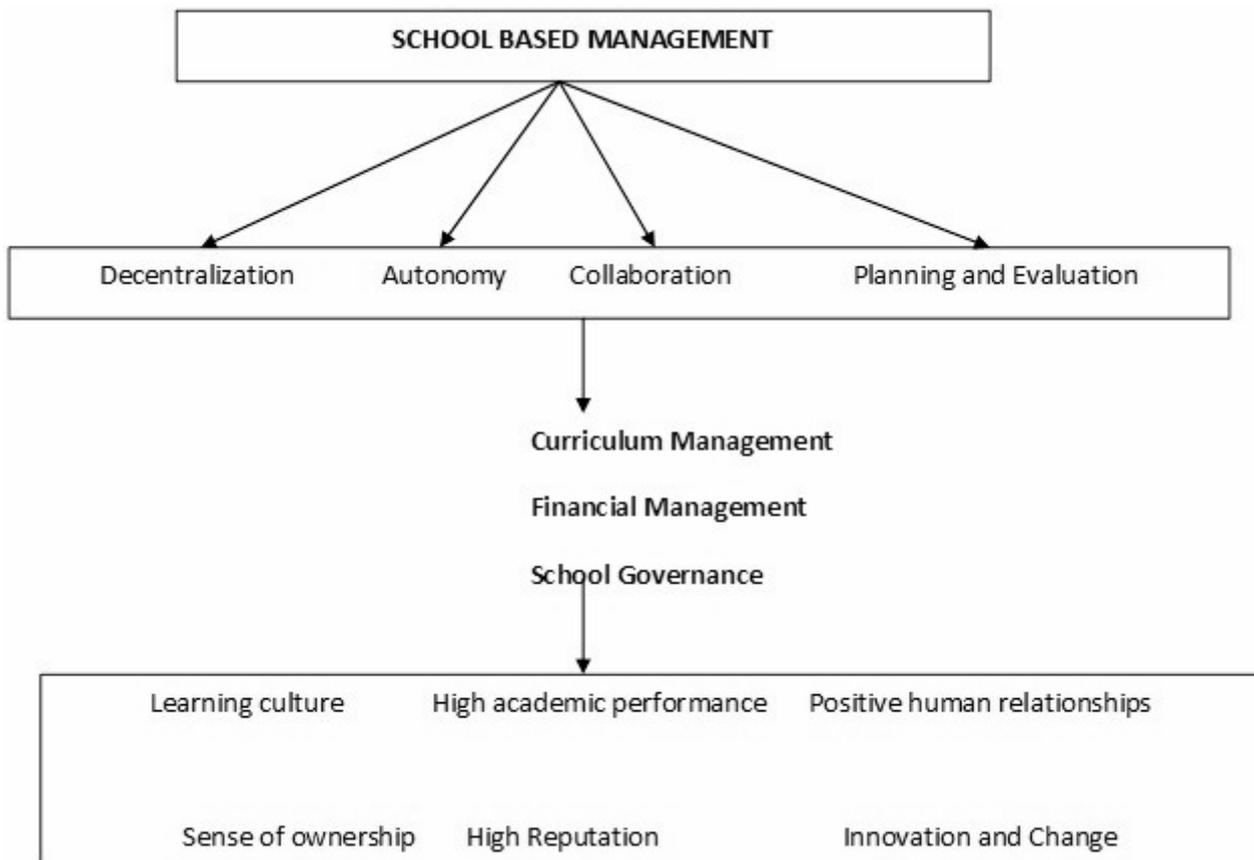


Figure 2 School Based Model (SBM)

Source: Pushpanadham (2006)

In the model shown above, decentralization of authority is considered to be a significant approach that leads to commitment, trust, and a sense of ownership. This reflects the purpose of BOG management which is to create an efficient school system by building structures that improve the standards of education by taking on board all stakeholders. The ultimate objective according to Pushpanadham (2006) of the SBM model is to establishing high academic standards, maintaining positive human relations, developing a sense of ownership, fostering high reputation in the society and accepting innovation and change. These are the features that are at the core of the BOG management framework in Kenya.

Sharma (1982) emphasizes that the “effective decentralization of management largely depends on efficient leadership”. Leadership can only be effective in the Kenyan context if principals work seamlessly with BOGs in school management. Pushpanadham (2006) proposes the following expectations of management at the school level:

- Involvement of staff in decisions about programs and organization;
- Involvement of parents and others in the community in the school;
- Efficient and effective allocation of resources, based on a school budget;
- Strong instructional leadership and a focus on educational concerns;
- An environment supportive of professional growth and collaboration;
- Long term academic improvement;
- Positive attitudes toward, and support for the school demonstrated by staff, students, parents, and the community; positive behavior, modeled by the staff;
- The school should be successful and effective in meeting its goals.

Schools in Kenya are run through a collaboration of various interests and stakeholders performing varied functions that are aimed at achieving set goals. The minister appoints the BOG from persons nominated by a panel consisting of the principal, provincial education officers and district education officers.

Literature on school management revealed four primary structures in the management of schools. These structures are discussed briefly below:

1. Centralized management

Complete centralization of the school system provides the government with total control over almost all administrative and curriculum decisions. There are several strengths of this approach. Vuchic (2008) observes that the government has the ability to ensure equity in both the financing and the quality of education. It is also able to provide consistent curriculum and assessment throughout the country, and it can enforce that a bare minimum level of educational support is provided to all of its citizens.

This approach is often criticized because government bureaucracy is perceived as wasteful and inefficient. It is difficult for schools and communities to give feedback about their needs to the government. Further, centralization of management suggests that policies meant to help urban schools are also effective for rural schools.

2. Centralized financing and decentralized management

In this model, centralizing financing while decentralizing management allows government to control equitable financial distribution based on revenues while giving municipalities more control over how that money is spent and how the schools and curricula are run.

This type of system as observed by Vuchic (2008) works well for some areas, especially affluent ones, because it gives them more freedom to govern their schools around local needs and issues. However, it is sometimes very difficult for poorer areas to take advantage of decentralized management because they neither have the qualified personnel nor the resources to handle the responsibility of school management, and they often need to rely on the government for the planning and management of any school system.

3. Decentralized financing and centralized management

Decentralized financing obligates communities to raise funding for schools on a neighborhood level. Whereas this could definitely be advantageous for affluent neighborhoods, poor neighborhoods will tend to lag behind due to financial inadequacies. This means that the government has to avail support so as to ensure equity in funding. Unfortunately, the problem of economic inequality between different regions which is particularly prevalent in African countries makes this type of decentralization ineffectual. It has been observed that decentralized financing creates the biggest increase on inequalities in education.

4. Decentralizing financing and decentralizing management

Finally, decentralization of financing and management, described as full decentralization is achieved by delegating exclusive authority to local communities managing educational matters in the community. The major problem encountered by this system is that confers the burden of raising funds on the local communities meaning that low income areas suffer due to inadequacies in funding while affluent areas thrive. This results in inequities in education both in terms of quality and access of education by disadvantaged children.

Countries which have gone the decentralization way adopt one or the other of these approaches. However it is possible to administer them in an amalgamated manner, for example, rather than completely decentralizing the financing or administration to communities, some countries like the U.S. and Australia tend to delegate only certain aspects of management from federal to the state level so that states manage financing and budgets along with the communities or districts themselves.

The Kenyan situation can best be described in this way since considerable managerial authority has been delegated to Boards of Governors (BOGs) but the ministry of education retains an oversight role to ensure some level of redistribution and economies of scale for management. The ministry of education provides financial support from to both lower and high income communities but lack of expertise in school management by BOGs is a problem to these schools.

In summary, there are many different ways to centralize or decentralize various aspects of the provision of education. In some cases decentralization of certain areas may make sense and work for some communities. However, in other cases it can greatly increase inequality, while only improving education for a few select groups or communities.

Research design

The study employed a descriptive survey design. The intention was to collect data on the principals' experiences and relationships with their boards of governors. Kothari (2005) observes that a descriptive design provides an accurate

description of prevailing conditions, practices and attitudes. The design was effective for our study since it describes the experiences and perceptions of school principals on decentralization of school management to BOGs.

The study covered 20 public secondary schools in Trans-Nzoia County. The choice of schools was done purposively based on “availability, accessibility and theoretical interest” (Schwandt, 1997). The principals of each of these schools were interviewed so as to get facts on the subject under study. The intention of the study was to present an in depth perspective of principals’ views on the subject of BOGs.

The first step of data collection was the administration of questionnaires to the school principals. Data from questionnaires was corroborated with interviews with the principals. The questionnaires involved open-ended questions to elicit honest, personal comments from respondents (Cohen *et al.*, 2000:255). These questions probed principal’s experiences and perceptions of the management capabilities of BOG members in managing the school.

Semi-structured interviews were used to draw in-depth probing and extended responses. These questions focused on how respondents experienced and perceived BOG management, probing strengths and weaknesses in particular. The respondents were encouraged to narrate their experiences freely and at length.

Findings and discussion

Despite the apparent embrace of decentralization of school management to BOGs in Kenya, there are still serious challenges faced by school managers. We present the merits and demerits of BOG management as revealed by school principals and how it affects the day to day running of schools. In presenting findings, we wish to reiterate that only principals’ responses are discussed. Quantitative and qualitative data drawn from questionnaires and interviews are presented under the following subheadings:

- The merits of school board management
- The demerits of BOGs

Merits of BOGs

In the questionnaire, respondents were asked to indicate, in order of importance, the merits of decentralization of educational services to BOGs. The suggested merits were:

1. Developing a sense of ownership of the school – 30% of the principals supported the notion that BOGs enhance “infuse community participation in the administration of schools”. The fact that BOGs are composed of members from the community such as parents and religious leaders brought about a sense of ownership. This was enhanced by the involvement of staff, parents and others in the community in decisions about programs and organization of school affairs.
2. Maintaining positive relations with the community – 28% of responses from school principals felt BOGs fostered high reputation of their schools in the society and were key in enhancing positive participation by parents, and other community members in school affairs.
3. Improving academic standards – 17% of principals said that the long term academic improvement, and support for the school demonstrated by staff, students, parents, and the community were responsible for their school being successful and effective in meeting their academic goals.

During follow-up interviews, we enquired from the respondents whether BOG management led to:

1. 1. Efficient and effective allocation of resources based on the school budget – 10% of the interviewed principals felt that board members stuck to their budgets and ensured quick allocation of resources. This was attributable to their commitment to the overall success of the school.
2. Creation of an environment supportive of professional growth and collaboration – A paltry 8% of respondents supported the idea that the presence of BOGs was professionally enriching since some of them comprised experienced personnel and professionals in areas such as educational leadership and financial management. This question prompted most principals to voice the need for professionals appointed to school boards.
3. Relieve pressures on the principal – some (7%) principals acknowledged that efficient board members assisted them tremendously especially in cases of handling students (in)discipline, prudent financial and other resource utilization and organization chairing of Annual General Meetings.

Table 1 Principals' perceptions on the merits of BOGs

Merits	Frequency (N=20)	Percentage of positive responses
Developing a sense of ownership of the school	7	35
Maintaining positive relations with the community	6	30
Improving academic standards	3	15
Efficient and effective allocation of resources	2	10
Creation of an environment supportive of professional growth and collaboration	1	5
Relieve pressures on the principal.	1	5
Total	20	100

Demerits of BOGs

1. Lack of managerial competency - school boards composed of members who, according to 41% of respondents (Table 2), do not possess managerial skills. This impacted negatively not only in the management of school affairs but also meant that the BOGs provided less professional support for principals and teachers.
2. Abuse of power by BOGs - cases of nepotism, favouritism and bribery ranked highly (24%) among respondents who cited teacher recruitment exercises and tendering of school provisions as the most abused processes.
3. Conflict between BOGs and principals - we deduced that there was a concern in terms of complimentary working relationships between principals and BOGs. Numerous cases of conflict between principals and BOG in management of school affairs were raised. For example, one principle accused "an illiterate board member" of "bulldozing decisions that were absolutely absurd and backward". Most of these cases were largely attributable to lack of clarity in the definition of respective roles and duties. Principals complained that some board members encroached on their 'professional roles' and felt that BOGs should be completely delinked from running academic affairs which according to them was their preserve since they were professionally trained teachers.
4. Difference in priorities between principals and board members - another factor of conflict is difference in priorities between principals and board members. An example cited by most principals is the emphasis of BOGs on physical development of school facilities at the expense of improving performance. One principal recalled how in the face of declining performances by his school he requested the board to set aside funds for purchase of more books but instead the members prioritized building of a block of classes to facilitate enrolment of more students.

Table 2 Principals' perception of the demerits of BOGs

Demerits	Frequency (N=20)	Percentage of responses
Lack of managerial skills by board members	8	41
Abuse of power e.g. corruption, favouritism	5	24
Conflict between principals and BOG	4	22
Difference in priorities between principals and board members	3	13
Total	20	100

The overriding aim of TSC was to foster community participation in the administration of schools. This was easily achieved by simply incorporating community leaders and parents in the boards. However, this only served to present a façade of community participation since their effectiveness and basic conversance with administrative functions were overlooked. Sang (2005: 55) in a study on the role of BOGs in teacher requirement found that the level of education of board members was poor. He reveals that only 42.9% of members had attained secondary school and above level of education with the rest having primary school education or being illiterate.

We observed that principals looked down upon BOG members based on their educational qualifications. They were clearly at a loss on whether illiterate members were expected to grasp the basic school management principles "when they had never been to such schools themselves." This created friction as BOG members felt sidelined in management decisions, in fact a few of them we spoke to informally claimed that principals arrogated themselves "executive authority" over management of schools by making unilateral decisions.

The theoretical framework that guided this study (Pushpanadham, 2006) proposes the SBM model which seems to lend support to the principals' argument that boards should comprise members conversant with management practices. The model provides managerial roles of boards as being: curriculum management, financial management, school governance and human resources management. These are salient skills that require formal training which clearly lack among the ranks of board members. This is the only way BOG system can lead to the achievement of a positive learning culture, high academic performance, good human relationships, and sense of ownership, reputation, innovation and change.

The responses from school principals show that merits of boards outweigh their demerits. What is clear is that there is need to address a number of shortcomings identified by the principals. It is instructive to note that school principals did not advocate for the disbandment of boards but felt that the appointing authority could address issues that encumber the efficiency of BOGs. In view of the responses presented in this section, the researchers propose a number of recommendations outlined the following section to improve effectiveness of BOGs.

Conclusion

We conclude that whereas there are merits in school management by boards of governors, most notably the involvement of local communities hence instilling a strong sense of ownership, there is a need for genuine professionalization of the composition of the boards. The significance of professional leadership in ensuring the success of the decentralized management of education at all levels cannot be over emphasized. It calls for the sourcing of professional personnel be it within the local community or alternatively the training of board members and principals on modern management practices. This would ensure that capacity is built at every level of the decentralized structure, encompassing all stake holders to make the management of schools efficient and successful. The role of the ministry of education should be at the level of monitoring so as to ensure the desired management practices are achieved.

Recommendations

Improving the effectiveness of BOGs

Ideally, management by boards should be strengthened by defining its structures, process and personnel for creating an efficient school system where learning is considered as a priority. There is a dire need, therefore, to develop a training curriculum for board members that include new subjects which will equip them with basic working knowledge in accounting, planning, financial management and project management.

The Ministry of Education should also develop a criterion for the appointment of members of boards of governors and create a common pool of managers of all public schools. It is important for the government, parents, school managers and educationists to review the current system of managing public institutions to attract more professionals and allow full and equitable participation by all the stakeholders.

Results further suggested that co-operative administrative practices between principals and the BOGs are key in dividing the responsibilities of school governance. This would to a large extent resolve the stand-off between certain principals and their boards to ensure effective management of schools.

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