

What can be centralized and what must remain decentralized in an effective educational organization?

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The chart below lists the major organizational functions of schools and school districts. It then evaluates, based on both my understanding of the research literature and my experience, to what extent each function can be centralized without compromising the quality of education delivered to children. This document is intended to assist discussions regarding centralization of school administration and consolidation of schools and districts.

The research literature is mixed on whether larger administrative districts are more efficient – produce higher quality learning at a lower price than smaller districts. Most research on school and district effectiveness finds that student learning and school improvement are most successful when teachers, principals, parents, and students have substantial responsibility and discretion in them. School reform in the past thirty years has focused on breaking down educational bureaucracies (most notably in Chicago and the entire English national system) and stimulating school-based initiative, choice, and leadership (see Fullan; Elmore; Darling-Hammond; Tyack and Cuban; Sizer; Spillane; Lieberman; Oakes; Bryk and Schneider; Evans; Barth; DuFour, Eaker, and DuFour).

The literature – and our own common sense – indicates that certain functions can be centralized without impairing student performance and parent involvement but that certain functions cannot. The leadership and management of high-performing schools and school districts need to blend two vital things: 1) vesting in teachers, principals, parents and students substantial responsibility and judgment over classroom and school decisions; 2) devising lean management systems to provide resources and support, within the means available, to these “front-line” educators and learners.

What functions, then, can and cannot be centralized if high quality is to be maintained and enhanced while costs remain manageable for the citizens of Maine?

<u>Function</u>	<u>Centralized? *</u>	<u>Why?/Why Not?</u>
Financials: accounting/purchasing	Largely	Requires efficient ordering, accounting and communication systems, bulk purchasing, staff specialization and technological efficiencies

		Must interface extremely well with classroom and school educators' decisions regarding what children need
Plant Management & Transportation	Substantially	With efficient staff management, planning, and communication systems, requiring intermediate level supervisors familiar with geography and roads (transportation), buildings (maintenance), and community needs
Specialized educational staff & services	Somewhat	Must establish the "case load" for high-quality delivery of specialized services: special educational services, diagnostic services, guidance services, co-curricular services, technology services, professional development services, curriculum/assessment services; adult education services "High-quality" is a function of responsiveness to needs and the application of accurate information and judgment relevant to those needs.
Fiscal and Educational Policy and Planning	Somewhat	Financial and programmatic needs vary from community to community and even school to school, based on the educational needs/readiness of student populations and their families. One-size-fits-all policies can work at a very general level (such as setting standards) but have been shown not to work for implementation procedures or when they curtail educator judgment and discretion.
Contract Negotiations	Somewhat	Depersonalized, professional negotiation prevents negative emotions from infecting working relationships among educators and between educators and community members. On the other hand, political clout grows as the numbers grow and as the stage becomes more public and heavily publicized.

Public Information and Political Responsiveness	Very little	Communities want information about their own schools and transparency builds local support and engagement. Most politics are local. Resistance to centralized authority is endemic. Centralized politics means more publicity, more and stronger interest groups, and policy by compromise rather than by informed and judicious decision.
Student Instruction and Management	No	Professional educator discretion is essential, as is responsiveness to issues as they arise and the necessity of involving parents and specialists, as needed. Planning functions and school-based leadership and problem-solving require faculty-wide involvement. Supervision of personnel is optimal with a “case load” per supervisor of 12-16.
School Climate and Culture; Leadership	No	School, faculty, and student body climate have great bearing on teacher and student performance (safety; expectations; support) and are unique to each school/community and require constant adjustment and sensitive leadership.
Community Participation and Support	No	Citizen engagement in community schools is essential to both public faith in schools and financial support for schools. It establishes the foundation for parent involvement in their child’s education and to open communication between school staff and community.

- “Centralized” in the sense promoted by the Local Schools, Regional Services Initiative (26 districts ranging in geographic size considerably and in enrollment from 2000 to 20,000)