DECENTRALIZATION & SCHOOL-BASED MANAGEMENT (SBM) RESOURCE KIT- CASE STUDIES

Nicaragua’s Autonomous Schools

Context
In 1991, the Nicaraguan government established school councils in all public schools to “ensure the participation of the educational community, particularly parents, in making school decision.”2 Subsequently, in 1993, the government initiated a education sector policy reform to promote a more democratic public administration system. The goal of this program was to decentralize management and budget decisions from the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports (MoE) to autonomous schools (AS) with local school councils (consejos directivos or CD). This initiative was grounded in the assumption that school-level stakeholders, when granted political and financial control and held accountable for their decision-making, will allocate resources appropriately to improve student achievement.

Driver
In 1995, the Direcion General de Descentralizacion established a clear framework (including six principles3) for the decentralization policy and Autonomous Schools (AS). As a result, all AS are required to establish self-governing councils called consejos directivos (CD). The CD are designed to increased parental involvement and input into school decisions. They are also intended to improve the mobilization of local community resources, via tuition fees (cuotas) and labour. The supporting rationale for this policy was the following: (1) locally made decisions would be more reflective of community need; (2) community level authority to elect decision-makers would encourage the community members to donate more of their time and resources to the school; (3) by increasing teacher participation in school decision-making, teachers would develop a greater sense of school commitment and professionalism.

Design
In 1993, the AS reform was expanded and 20 traditional secondary school councils were transformed. As part of their transition, they were required to establish authoritative school management boards (CD). As part of this AS reform, schools sign contracts with the MoE to formally establish their CD. The goal was to mobilize local resources raise local funds and to improve school efficiency. In 1994, there were 33 secondary school involved in the program. By 1995, there were over 100 secondary AS with CDs. In 1995, the reform was extended to include primary schools using a model almost identical to the one in secondary schools. By 1996, 8000 of 32000 primary and secondary public school teachers in the country taught in autonomous schools.

Rural school model
Rural schools required a different decentralization structure. The new rural school model involved the creation of Nucleos educativos rurales autonomos (NER) or a cluster of schools in which the largest school acted as the nucleus. The group acts as one autonomous school with a shared CD. The CD is based at centre (largest school) and the group shares one school director. In December 1995, 200+ autonomous primary schools had been established with 42 NER, each with 2-4 schools.

The Autonomous Schools (AS)
In contrast to reforms in New Zealand and Chicago, Nicaragua’s AS reform has been implemented gradually, starting with the schools with the strongest capacity. The AS initiative began with secondary schools for several reasons including their: size and ability to raise revenue; more experienced leaders; urban location; history of charging tuition fees; and, anticipated ability to succeed. In order to be eligible to become an AS, teachers at the school must vote in favour of AS status. After a successful vote, the principal then files an application with the municipal delegate. The delegate is then responsible for guiding program, informing the schools and community, training members of the school council, and liaising with the MoE. The final decision is

3 For an elaboration of the six principles of decentralization see Rivarola, M & B Fuller (1999). Nicaragua’s Experiment to Decentralize Schools: Contrasting Views of Parents, Teachers, and Directors. Comparative Education Review. 43(4). p493
approved by the MoE. The MoE has rejected some schools that have applied for AS status because they have felt they were not ready to accept the responsibility of an AS.

**How do traditional school councils and AS councils differ?**

Within both models of schooling, the MoE sets the regular fee schedule for schools. CD and traditional councils are responsible for setting and administering school budgets and sharing all information with community members. While it is customary for secondary school students to pay fees, CD can set the level of monthly fees according to their needs. Often the CD’s financial authority depends upon the school being able to generate local resources. Base salaries for all school professionals are paid by the MoE. The supplementary fees, set by AS, do not contribute to teacher incentive pay. At this time, the Bank does not hold any data on the amount of the fees set by CDs and schools.

**Consejos Directivos (CD)**

While all schools in Nicaragua have consultative councils, it is the CD of the Autonomous Schools that creates a distinction. In schools with more than 500 students, CDs are composed of the 7 core members: the school director; 2 teachers (best and most senior or substitute elected by teachers); and, 4 parents. In schools of less than 500 students, there are only 5 core members, with the majority still being comprised of parents. In secondary schools, students are represented on the consejo but they do not have a vote. Most members are elected for 2-year terms.

**Consejos Directivos Authority**

CDs have broad authority over a wide array of schooling issues including:

- **Staffing.** CD responsibilities include: hiring and firing school staff, including teachers and directors; adjusting teacher salary incentives; training and curricular support; evaluating teachers; and, when necessary, modifying the obligations, rights, sanctions for students/teachers by MoE.
- **Student fees.** CDs set and collect student fees.
- **Curriculum & Materials.** CD tasks may include increasing the subject hours specified in the core curriculum and adding curricular and extra-curricular activities. While both forms of councils may perform the following tasks, consultative councils need MoE approval. These functions include: formulating pedagogical plans; selecting textbooks; establishing student evaluations; and, determining necessary credentials for transfer students; and, choosing pedagogical methods.
- **Budget.** CDs are responsible for: allocating money to any mix of school inputs; elaborating and approving school operating plans, budgets, and voluntary monetary contributions.
- **Planning.** CDs are charged with: approving school rules; maintaining physical school structure; informing community of decision making process and outcomes both informally and formally; and, holding yearly town meetings to elect members.

**Ministry of Education**

The MoE maintains responsibility for: structuring the overall policy direction of the education system; setting staff promotion and certification criteria; and, establishing curriculum guidelines.

**AS Financing**

There are several unique features of the fiscal relationship between the MoE and CDs. While the central government transfers a monthly lump sum payment to each CD, AS generate 0-161% of their total resources from a combination of student fees, community contributions and school activities. The MoE encourages all secondary schools to collect fees of 10 cordobas/month/student but many schools set their own fees. While the national constitution legislates free primary schools, many schools charge a voluntary fee of 5 cordobas/month/student. The striking difference between autonomous and traditional schools is that the former are permitted to keep all fees they collect while the latter must return half to the government. According to Gerschberg, one of the key features of the reform that ensured its acceptance by teachers was the promise of more money for schools in the form of parental contributions. While school set fees do not directly contribute to teacher incentive pay, some schools do opt to provide incentive pay to teachers. Another interesting fact is that the monthly fiscal transfer to principals for teacher salaries is passed on to the teachers in cash, not cheques, to facilitate effective transmission.

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5 Currency equivalents: $9.59 Cordoba= $1.00 US (Source: Memorandum of the President of the IDA and IFC to the Executive Directors on a country assistance strategy of the WB Group for the Republic of Nicaragua. March 18, 1998)
**Lessons from the Research**

**Governance.** King et al.⁶ provide preliminary results that suggest that school governance has improved and that most stakeholders are supportive of the reform. Rivarola and Fuller ⁷ suggest that there have been significant tensions between parents of students at schools with increased fee requirements. They also noted that there have been some challenges to ensure adequate parental participation on CDs.

**Decision-Making.** Gershberg⁸ found that CDs were often involved making important decisions. Gershberg also found that the CDs are more effective and involved when they are given real decision-making authority. An additional benefits of not legally defining CD size is the opportunity to modify CD to accommodate local needs.

**Student outcomes.** King and Ozler⁹ noted that, “students in (AS) are not performing any better than students in traditional public schools.” But, it is important to note that in many cases, AS students are not performing any worse. Given that many of the AS are in urban and poor neighbourhoods, this suggests AS are producing results in students achievement. In addition, King and Ozler demonstrated increases in student achievement in math and language scores among secondary students in AS schools. They also note that “at the primary level, students in schools that enforce payment of fees throughout penalties tend to have higher probability of dropout or grade repetition; this variable appears to have the opposite effect on secondary (or AS) level participants.”¹⁰

**Participation-success.** Gershberg remarked that the apparent high level of participation, and high level of quality participation in some AS could not have been achieved if there had not been a fee structure in place.

**Technical support and training.** Several required elements of the CD success include: 1) adequate information and training on how to use the information for decision-making; 2) administrators must adopt an open leadership style and have confidence in their ability to be open without repercussion; 3) access to training for skills expansion and cooperative team work; 4) specific training and support to enhance organizational knowledge related to budget, operations, etc.

**Training for CD.** Training for council members includes introductions to budget, accounting, planning and evaluation and occurs on Saturdays. Each year, there is training for new members.

**Self-selection & Student Fees.** Wealthy areas are more likely to request autonomy and are, in turn, less concerned about the levy and more concerned with how to spend it. Cuotas have been more problematic in poorer areas.

**Fees.** The issue of parental contributions, according to Gershberg, has a significant impact on the success of the reform in achieving its goals. With the secondary school fee/child at 10 cordobas/month, Gershberg explains that a family with 6 children could easily have to pay half of their family income towards school fees. This could potentially result in parents not paying the fees or discouraging/prohibiting their children from attending. Gershberg suggests that the MoE needs to be aware of the implications of poor families and the need for equity restoration mechanisms. Rivarola and Fuller noted that there is a variation in the percentage of students who pay fees. In some of the schools they studied, only 1/3 of students pay their fees. Rivarola and Fuller also supported the need for greater equity financing mechanisms to ensure that a community’s income level does not undermine the success of the reform. They noted some instances in which primary school personnel would not perform certain tasks (ie. exams) unless the student had paid the voluntary fees.

**Central Government.** Rivarola and Fuller address the need for central governments to be aware and support the work of stakeholders throughout the decentralized system. They cite teachers support for the decentralization reform in conjunction with their enthusiasm for the support provided by the central government.

**Stakeholders.** Rivarola and Fuller address the differing perspectives of the stakeholder groups vis-à-vis the AS reform. While parents often talk of the fees and the improved connections with the school, teachers discuss the greater emphasis on student achievement and accountability.

**School leadership.** Rivarola and Fuller noted that school leaders often expressed their need to spend most of their time working on administrative matters instead of providing instructional and pedagogical skills. They also remarked that many school leaders do not provide instructional leadership to teachers or assist them in improving their pedagogical practice.

**Teacher incentives.** Rivarola and Fuller expressed their concern that the increased availability and inequity in the allocation of teacher incentives may have a negative influence on teachers and students as they attempt to increase student scores/etc.

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¹⁰ Ibid. p23