

## THE IMPACT OF DEVOLUTIONARY REFORM ON TEACHERS AND PRINCIPALS

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*Scott Fitzgerald et al. reflect on the shift from centralised decision-making to increased school autonomy and the resultant impact on teachers and principals...*

Over the last decade in Australia, devolution and school autonomy have affected teachers' and principals' roles, workloads and working relations within schools. The moves towards devolutionary reform in Australian education systems has a long history. The genealogy of these changes can be traced back to the 1970s (MacDonald et al., 2021) and reflects a significant shift from centralized decision-making to increased school autonomy. However, as education scholars have long noted (Lingard & Rizvi, 2006), the concept of devolution has been a fluid and contested one.

### DEVOLUTION POLICY IN AUSTRALIA IN AN ERA OF NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

An important difference in understanding approaches to devolution is between the social democratic tradition of the 1970s (epitomised in the 1973 Karmel Report, 'Schools in Australia') and New Public Management (NPM) models. The Karmel Report argued for enhanced decision-making at a local level in a manner that more readily addressed the specific needs of students, the community and teachers. The NPM model suggested devolution could help drive greater efficiency and effectiveness in the school system by encouraging self-management of schools, controlled centrally by greater accountability requirements.

The latter view became ascendant in the 1980s and has remained dominant for the last 30 years. Greater school autonomy has been delivered to areas of budgeting and staffing (the organisation and management work) as opposed to decisions around curriculum and assessment (learning and teaching). This is despite evidence from the OECD (2013) showing that this particular form of self-management within schools is proven to have little to no effect on improved student outcomes.

The establishment of the National Education Agreement and Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) in 2008, followed by the Australian

Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) in 2009, signalled that, rather than becoming more devolved, curriculum and assessment were in fact to become more centralised via national standards and accountability measures such as the National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) test (Thompson, 2013). Here we have what Professors Bob Lingard and Fazal Rizvi have described as "the two arms of the same process of corporate managerialist reform": devolution and centralisation (Lingard & Rizvi, 2006).

### DEVOLUTION, PRINCIPALS AND TEACHERS

The effects of this policy ensemble have been investigated by a considerable body of research over an extended period of time. Looking at Australian states, we have seen the effects of increased teacher and principal workloads. In an article on this topic, we reported on teachers' views of devolution-driven work changes associated with the *Local Schools, Local Decisions* (LSLD) package of school autonomy reforms in New South Wales (Fitzgerald et al., 2019). While increased school autonomy was consistently associated with work intensification, primarily in relation to 'paperwork' requirements, respondents noted other variations in workload pressures arising from the increased school differentiation facilitated by devolutionary policies. Although the overall experiences of increased workload remained consistent, distinct patterns of work intensification were evident, reflecting the working environment of a school's level (primary or secondary), location and relative socio-educational advantage.

In another article, we reported on research that examined how 30 principals in two devolved Australian state settings, NSW and Western Australia, responded to the workload pressures associated with school autonomy (McGrath-Champ et al., 2019). Despite new leadership profiles tied to the leadership standard for principals (AITSL, 2014), the findings suggest that these

school leaders were ill-equipped to support the local, school-level working conditions of teachers. Moreover, while principals valued the greater discretionary powers that came with school autonomy, the associated workload burden further compromised their support of, and work with, teachers who also faced work intensification. Notwithstanding this overarching finding, once more there were locational differences (between metropolitan, regional and rural schools) in how principals understood and responded to teachers' changing working conditions.

A greater differentiation in the experiences of teachers and principals, both across school systems and within schools, has been a concerning outcome of devolutionary policies. This issue was explored in detail in an article that examined the ways in which the Independent Public School (IPS) initiative in WA drove new market dynamics within the state's public school sector (Fitzgerald et al., 2018). Drawing on extensive interview data from two schools – one IPS and one non-IPS – we found that competition and choice associated with the devolutionary IPS program reinforced mechanisms of residualisation, marked by increasingly complex and disadvantaged student cohorts, particularly in non-IP schools. Nonetheless, teachers in both schools reported new pressures such that all teaching staff described significant dissatisfaction in their work.

Teachers' dissatisfaction emanated not only from workload pressures but also from the fracturing of school-level working relations in devolved, 'autonomous' schools. This process was evident in WA's IPS and NSW's LSLD initiatives. In an article based on 31 school leader and teacher interviews, we encountered consistent criticism of the negative workload implications of the increased responsibility and accountability associated with LSLD (Gavin & Stacey, 2023). Despite the lack of clarity they experienced around their decision-making and accountability, principals appreciated their elevated importance and enhanced discretionary power. In contrast, teachers raised concerns that 'local decisions' about resource management in schools had become more opaque. Teachers noted, for example, that principals used their increased staffing autonomy to create extra leadership, rather than classroom teaching, positions. Moreover, while principals pointed to the managerial burden associated with their expanded hiring discretion, teachers

perceived that selection processes were now more often shaped by nepotism than merit.

### THE REAL EFFECTS OF DEVOLUTION

There is no firm evidence that the way school autonomy has been implemented in Australia has improved student outcomes. Nor has it led to more equitable outcomes for students or staff – an issue we engaged with in an article collating contributions from school autonomy researchers around the world (Keddie et al., 2022). Instead, research, including our own, has raised real concerns that devolution and school autonomy has contributed to the inequities in our education systems. School autonomy in staffing and resource allocation poses risks for trust in the crucial working relations at a local school level and, as the level of bureaucracy and paperwork in schools has grown, has contributed to the unsustainable and increasingly complex workloads that teachers face. While LSLD may no longer be in place in NSW schools, revised structures of governance will require ongoing attention if they are to avoid the range of difficulties evident under previous autonomy models.

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