

Principal and School Autonomy: AEU Advice



Background

In recent months, ACT Education Minister Andrew Barr has made a number of public statements about his plan for principals of ACT public schools to have more autonomy.

In his speech to the Australian Council of Educational Leaders (ACT) in May this year he said:

“School principals must have the power to hire, develop and manage classroom teachers....

Within the framework of the current enterprise bargaining agreement and the Fair Work Act, principals will be able to interview and hire their own staff....

I also want to make clear that greater autonomy means greater accountability as well. So where we are allowing principals to hire their own staff, manage their own budget, and cutting red tape, we expect principals to perform.”

When the ACT government announced its 2010-2011 Budget in early May, it included “\$600,000 over two years for the implementation of the School Based Management Review through trialling a tiered system of principal autonomy for managing school-based staffing.” The Minister has said that these funds will “deliver an expert support team to work with principals implementing the new approach”.

The media has conflated the Minister’s statements to mean ‘principal powers to hire and fire’ although the Minister has never actually mentioned the power to fire.

The School Based Management Review

The School Based Management (SBM) Review was conducted in August 2009 by The Allen Consulting Group.

The ACT Government provided only one week for stakeholders to respond to the SBM Review Discussion Paper and refused requests to extend the consultation period. This was clearly insufficient time for stakeholders to have genuine and wide-ranging discussions about the future of SBM in ACT public schools. The Review also limited the scope of the discussions around school based management to “*an examination of how funding is distributed between schools, but not the overall quantum of funding (which is a matter to be resolved in the ACT budget context)*”. This was both irresponsible and limiting. Despite this restriction both the AEU and the ACT Principals Association submissions discussed the lack of funding provided to schools to enable them to adequately support the needs of students and to reduce the administrative burden on Principals and teachers.

AEU submission to the School Based Management Review

In its submission to the SBM Review the AEU made the following points:

- Public schools in the ACT tend to (already) operate with relative autonomy.
- The AEU hopes that a review of SBM will bring changes that will encourage ACT public schools to work more efficiently and effectively as a system as opposed to operating as individual schools.
- Over the last decade the workload of principals and teachers, in particular, has intensified. This is partly due to the further devolution of SBM administrative responsibilities in 1997. The AEU strongly believes that centralisation of a number of responsibilities will allow principals to focus more on educational leadership and for teachers to concentrate on teaching. There is also a need for processes to be streamlined, for duplication to be removed and for economies of scale to be strengthened.

The AEU clearly stated that SBM funds should be targeted towards the needs of students in each school. This includes ensuring:

- A guaranteed minimum number of school leaders to provide educational leadership to all staff (minimum Executive structure must be protected).
- Targeted funding for English as a Second Language programs, which must continue to be protected.
- provision for minimum teaching staff to ensure class sizes are capped at a maximum of 21 students in Preschool to Year 3, and 25 students in Years 4 to 12 (as per AEU policy).
- Staffing provision is made in each school to ensure that such programs as Languages and Information Literacy (Teacher Librarian) are guaranteed.

DET has agreed to discuss with the AEU through the Joint Working Party a new staffing formula based on addressing the needs of students.

The full AEU submission to the SBM Review is available at:

www.aeuact.asn.au/info-centre/publications.html

ACT Principals Association submission to the SBM Review

The ACT Principals Association submission to the SBM Review emphasised that the outcome of the review should focus on:

- Identifying implications for the workload of the Principal and ways of ensuring the role of the Principal is predominately that of educational leader and;
- Recommending alternative administrative staffing arrangements for schools (or groups of schools) that will facilitate the enhanced educational leadership role of the Principal/s.

The ACTPA submission also notes:

- The dramatic shift of the Principal's role from educational leader to school administrator giving Principals the sense that there is no time to do the important work.
- The escalation of administration costs and the relative decrease in funding allocation.
- Principals would argue that greatly increased compliance requirements and general administrative demands from the department have significantly added to their management orientation and reduced educational leadership to a minimum.

- Fundamental to the possible erosion of positive learning outcomes for students from School Based Management is the reality that funding allocations do not meet costs.
- Principals feel that their voices are not heard on SBM matters within the Department of Education and Training even at the supposed representative and consultative School Resource Group level. SBM decisions and priorities appear to be DET led with controlled and loaded agendas simply imposed on Principals.

The submission provides, at length, evidence of the shortfall in school based funds to cover the costs of cleaning, utilities and ICT. However, the ACTPA submission is completely silent on the idea of principals being responsible for the hiring and firing of staff, a single line staffing budget or any change to the current staffing procedures.

The Government's response to the School Based Management Review

The AEU repeatedly sought access to the SBM Review report since we learned of its completion in September 2009. Despite this, the Minister refused to make the report public. Finally on 20 May, the Minister released the findings of the review and issued the government's response, stating, 'principals will get more say over who teaches in their school. Principals will take greater responsibility for the performance of their staff who will in turn take greater responsibility for the performance of their students.... The new system would begin at both the new Gungahlin College and the Kambah School in Tuggeranong from next year.... The new system will move schools to a funding based 'real world' accounting system, replacing the current points based staff budgeting system... (which) will increase accountability, making it clearer to everyone involved in managing our education system what is required.'

The government's response to the SBM Review Report is available at [www.det.act.gov.au/ data/assets/pdf file/0017/130445/Response to SBM Review .pdf](http://www.det.act.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0017/130445/Response_to_SBM_Review.pdf).

The key government responses to the SBM Review regarding Autonomy and Resource Mechanisms were as follows:

AUTONOMY

This is the most significant theme raised in the review. While recommending a move towards greater school autonomy, it emphasises that this autonomy should be accompanied by greater accountability and an obligation to build capacity across the system.

Recommendation 17

Where a school demonstrates sustained high performance, principals be given the opportunity to opt in to gain autonomy over an increasing range of areas of expenditure (capital spending and staffing) based on their judgment of what would best contribute to school outcomes. Such flexibility should be accompanied by an obligation to contribute actively to building system capacity in other schools and would be subject to continued strong performance (assessed as part of performance management of principals). Appointment of a new principal would trigger a review of the extent of devolved decision making afforded to the school in question. Conversely, where a school demonstrates sustained low performance against government and community expectations, there would be a case for greater management guidance to be provided

from the central office of DET to that school and its principal in relation to the spending of any discretionary funding under SBM.

The Government agrees to build additional autonomy in the area of school staffing, although not in the area of capital works.

In conjunction with work committed to under the Improving Teacher Quality National Partnership, a tiered system of principal autonomy for recruiting and managing school-based staff, based on demonstrated sustained high performance, will be implemented from 2011.

New staffing processes will be developed and a move to single line budgets (including staffing) implemented as part of the new approach.

Stakeholders will be consulted in the roll-out of the reforms.

Additional funding of \$0.6m over the next two years, provided in the 2010-11 Budget, will fund implementation through establishment of an expert support team and development of a simplified global funding model.

RESOURCING MECHANISMS

Recommendation 1

An appropriate index be identified and used to adjust annual funding allocations. In place of the present CPI adjustments, SBM indexation should be based on a mix of public sector capital and staff costs as measured by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). If sufficient data is available this should be related specifically to trends in ACT education costs. The index should be developed in consultation with the ACT Treasury and ABS.

The Government agrees to this recommendation in principle. ACT Government will review and report on the validity of the existing use of CPI for SBM indexation in consultation with stakeholders.

Recommendation 2

The funding formula used to determine SBM payments be revised every four years to reflect current costs in line with the following principles: reduced complexity; increased transparency; alignment with needs; recalibration of baseline cost.

The Government agrees to this recommendation in part. It is proposed that this work occur through the development of a simplified global funding model based upon the principles of reduced complexity, increased transparency and alignment with need.

The new funding model and ongoing issue of recalibration to baseline will be met by the proposed response to Recommendation 1.

Recommendation 3

The transparency of staffing allocation mechanisms be improved through simplification and clear explanation of the allocation formula and notification to schools by central office of all transfers of CRS days into and out of school accounts. This would include

improvement of the integration of key systems used to monitor and report staffing allocations at the school level.

The Government agrees to this recommendation and is reviewing the existing staffing points allocation model for managing schools staffing levels with a view to phasing this out. Key elements of the review include increasing transparency of existing arrangements, and consolidation of the number of resource allocations to reduce complexity. Supporting this review are developments in the management of casual relief through the integrated school staff management system (SiMS) information technology project.

School Autonomy Update

As a result of the decision of the ACT Education Minister to provide greater autonomy to schools a School Autonomy Reference Group (SARG) has been established to discuss the detail behind this initiative. The Terms of Reference for this group are:

“To provide advice to the SBM Review Steering Committee on implementing the Government’s decision in response to the SBM Review Recommendation 17 concerning school autonomy in staffing and finance.

Within the framework of the current enterprise agreement and taking into account future agreements, provide advice on developing new staffing processes and single line budgets in a tiered system of principal autonomy for selecting and managing school-based staff, to be phased in from 2010-2011.”

This means that any staffing processes contained within the current enterprise agreement must be adhered to, until such time as changes, if any, are negotiated within the next agreement. It is important to note that the SBM financial arrangements are not enshrined within any industrial agreement.

Gillard Government wants to give power to Parents and Principals

On 2 August, Prime Minister Gillard announced that participating schools will, under the Empowering Local Schools reform, have “greater responsibility over school budgets, selecting and employing teachers and staff and identifying funding priorities. This will drive improvements in students’ achievements and enable schools to better meet the needs of students.

“Principals will have the authority to use site managers, business managers and administration staff to handle the operation of the school, freeing up more time for teachers and principals to focus on teaching and learning. They will also be able to hire specialist teachers and support officers for areas of need identified by their school community.

“While some schools already have strong autonomy, most lack the authority to make key decisions that affect student outcomes and, across the country, attempts to increase local school decision-making in government sector schools have been infrequent and patchy. A key element of this reform is empowering local school communities to make decisions about what is best for their schools and their

students rather than a centralised system run by State bureaucracies dictating staffing mix and resource allocations.”

Federal AEU President, Angelo Gavrielatos responded by saying that, “the AEU would oppose any diminution by governments of their fundamental responsibility to ensure all our schools are adequately staffed and resourced.

“We are also concerned about policies which would cause an increase in the administrative burden placed upon principals taking them away from their critical role as education leaders.”

AEU members are encouraged to contact the AEU Office on 6272 7900 if you have any concerns or questions about issues raised in this advice.