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Thank you for your request to our REL Reference Desk regarding evidence-based information about student outcomes in centralized versus local approaches to curricular decisions in large urban school districts. Ask A REL is a collaborative reference desk service provided by the ten regional educational laboratories (REL) that, by design, functions much in the same way as a technical reference library. It provides references, referrals, and brief responses in the form of citations on research based education questions.

While we were unable to find research to answer your specific question, the information below represents the most rigorous research available on the topic. Researchers consider the type of methodology and give priority to research reports that employ well described and thorough methods. The resources were also selected based on the date of the publication with a preference for research from the last ten years. Additional criteria for inclusion include the source and funder of the resource.

**Question:** *What do we know about differences in student outcomes in large urban school districts between a centralized district approach to curricular decisions and a local school-based approach to curricular decisions?*

### **Search Process**

**Key words and search strings used in the search:** centralized AND local AND curricular decisions AND student outcomes; centralized AND local AND curricular decisions; centralized AND decision making AND schools; school based AND decision making AND research

**Search databases and websites:** Google, Google Scholar (<http://scholar.google.com>), ERIC (<http://www.eric.ed.gov>)

**Sample Citations Retrieved** (NOTE: Abstracts and executive summaries are copied directly from the reports when possible to ensure accuracy):

Trujillo, T. M. (2013). The disproportionate erosion of local control: Urban school boards, high-stakes accountability, and democracy. *Educational Policy*, 27(2), 334-359. Retrieved from <http://epx.sagepub.com/content/27/2/334.short>

### **Summary/Abstract**

This case study of an urban school board's experiences under high-stakes accountability demonstrates how the district leaders eschewed democratic governance processes in favor of autocratic behaviors. They possessed narrowly defined goals for teaching and learning that emphasized competitive, individualized means of achievement. Their decision making was private; opportunities for local input were missing. They promoted centrally determined, standardized instructional and administrative practices, not locally driven ones. It concludes that accountability policies that are framed in terms of their potential to further democratic aims by



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granting greater liberty in exchange for results, and by holding all districts to the same high standards, may disproportionately reduce democratic control in urban settings.

Timar, T. B., & Roza, M. (2010). "A false dilemma": Should decisions about education resource use be made at the state or local level? *American Journal of Education*, 116(3), 397-422. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.1086/651414?uid=3739600&uid=2134&uid=2&uid=70&uid=4&uid=3739256&sid=21102477313211>

#### Summary/Abstract

Over the past 30 years, states have assumed a greater role in financing education. The presumption of local control has been superseded by systems of state control. This shift in authority raises several critical questions. Chief among them is, "What effect has centralization of education financing had on the capacity of school districts to provide educational services?" Has increased state participation led to a more equitable, effective, accountable, or efficient system of education? The authors suggest that the question poses a false dilemma. Instead of questioning who should control resource decisions, we should ask, "What obstacles prevent better connections between real dollars and valuable resources for students?"

Fitzpatrick, K. R. (2012). School-based management and arts education: Lessons from Chicago. *Arts Education Policy Review*, 113(3), 106-111. Retrieved from <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10632913.2012.687340>

#### Summary/Abstract

School-based management, or local school control, is an organizational school reform effort aimed at decentralizing school decision-making that has become prevalent in districts throughout the United States. Using the groundbreaking Chicago system of local school control as an exemplar, this article outlines the implications of such reform efforts for arts education, especially in a time of increasing centralization at the level of federal education policy. Following a brief examination of Chicago's path to school-based management and its impact on the district's arts programs, this article describes both the challenges and the opportunities that such reforms may provide for arts education.

#### **Other Resources:**

Hansen, J. S., & Roza, M. (2005). *Decentralized decisionmaking for schools: New promise for an old idea?* RAND Corporation. Retrieved from [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional\\_papers/2005/RAND\\_OP153.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional_papers/2005/RAND_OP153.pdf)



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### Summary/Abstract

Given that past decentralization efforts failed to produce real changes in governance, we are not now in a position to know whether implementation of decentralized decisionmaking for schools (DDS) can actually improve educational outcomes. The current interest in DDS, however, offers a new window of opportunity for testing the proposition that real improvement in student learning can be achieved within the public school system by radically altering the locus of decisionmaking and shifting authority over key decisions like budgeting and resource allocation to the school level. Despite the theoretical appeal of decentralization, the apparent reluctance of districts to implement it in effective ways suggests that new initiatives in this direction may be doomed to share the fate of past efforts. It is reasonable to think, however, that new efforts might be more successful.

Chambers, J., Shambaugh, L., Levin, J., Muraki, M., & Poland, L. (2008). *A tale of two districts: A comparative study of student-based funding and school-based decision making in San Francisco and Oakland Unified School Districts*. American Institutes for Research. Retrieved from [http://www.air.org/focus-area/education/index.cfm?fa=viewContent&content\\_id=522&id=5](http://www.air.org/focus-area/education/index.cfm?fa=viewContent&content_id=522&id=5)

### Summary/Abstract

As educational budgets tighten in response to the current fiscal crisis facing public services, state policymakers continue to debate ways of improving the adequacy and equity in the approaches to distributing funds to schools and increasing the efficiency of how schools use these funds. To meet these goals, increasing attention has been paid to policies that provide school administrators with greater autonomy in how they allocate their resources and that distribute additional resources to schools on the basis of the needs of the students they serve. One such policy that a number of districts have adopted in various forms over the past decade is a student-based funding (SBF) policy. Sometimes referred to as a weighted student formula policy, SBF policies typically include the following three dimensions:

- *A student need-based formula*: A district allocation formula to distribute dollars to schools based on student need.
- *Increased school autonomy*: Greater discretion in the use of those resources at the school site.
- *Student choice*: An open enrollment policy, to permit a student to choose which school to attend, with funds following the student.

This study is not an evaluation of SBF policies in California. Our goal is to describe and compare SBF systems in two case study districts, to report the perceptions of key constituencies on these policies, and to present data on the patterns of resource allocation before and after implementation.



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### **Referrals**

#### **Institute of Education Sciences (IES) Resources:**

Publication search engine available at: <http://ies.ed.gov/pubsearch/>

What Works Clearinghouse: <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc>

#### **Other Federally Funded Resources:**

U.S. Department of Education: [www.ed.gov](http://www.ed.gov)

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