

Decentralization and Educational Governance in Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

In 1999 Taiwan government officially launched Education Fundamental Act, which becomes the flagship program of empowering local governments to bear more responsibility in education. This study will argue that although this transformation is mainly affected by the thought of neo-liberalism ideology, shrinking back the central control, not many local governments take transformation as the opportunity to get themselves improved in education policy making. According to the Education Fundamental Act, each local government in Taiwan needs to set up an Educational Review Board as the primary local education policy making mechanism, consisting of mayor, head of local education authority, teachers union, parents association and scholars. The paper investigates the operation of Educational Review Board by adopting interviews and documental analysis..

Keywords: Decentralization, Education Policy, Education Reform

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980s, major countries in the world have experienced serious plights such as government failure, excessive expansion of governmental organizations and diminished ability to solve public problems. To resolve the impact of structural changes in global politics and economy, governments have to strengthen administrative efficiency through a series of administrative measure reforms and reengineering, thereby starting a global trend in reinventing governance and enhancing national competitiveness.

Education is often considered the driving force that ensures a highly productive labor force, economic growth and technological development in a society. Therefore, educational reform, excellence and improvement in performance have actively become the focus in modern educational trend around the world. Following the 1983 "A Nation at Risk" U.S. Department for Education report, the United States and other major developed countries began a series of educational reforms to improve education and enhance the quality of education. Governments of other countries such as the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong, have set up some innovative organizations to assure the success of reform, usually spearheaded by national leaders or educational administrative authorities (Levin, 2005). Moreover, broad social involvement and the transformation of the education system have become a trend in educational reform and bring more entrepreneurial and parental participation in education. In Taiwan, as a result of excessive central government control in education, educational reform and deregulation have been advocated in recent years, where local governments are demanding appropriate release or transfer of educational power to local schools. Parents are seeking more chances to join the decision making with schools and government.

2. EDUCATION REFORM IN TAIWAN

Taiwan society, under the influence of Confucianism, always takes education as the very first value. Parents will also hold the change to get into any forms of associations or committees to influence the schooling policy. On the other hand, for the past 2 decades, Taiwan government has launched several reforms or initiatives focusing on the mechanism of widening public participation in government. In other words, the spirit of reorganization is expected to facilitate the establishment of an innovative, flexible and resilient government, thereby enhancing national competitiveness and trend toward evidence-based education, democratization, decentralization, professionalism, and market orientation.

Among many educational changes, the Education Fundamental Act, passed in 1999, is the most critical one (Ministry of Education, 1999). All 17 articles in the Education Fundamental Act serve as a general guide for education and form the basis for all future education system, administrative structure, school organization, educational resources allocation, and amendments of the law. In particular, Article 10 stipulates that:

The government of a special municipality under the Executive Yuan or a County (city) shall establish an education review board to oversee the review, consultation, coordination and evaluation of educational affairs through the process of meetings on a regular basis.

Accordingly, the Education Review Board finally attained legal ground, thereby setting a trend for other cities and counties and signaling more democracy and transparency in local educational decision-making, thereby enabling more individuals with different backgrounds to participate in educational affairs.

This paper described and discussed the development of the Education Review Board in Taiwan, its organizational framework and existing operating conditions. In addition, interviews with the directors of local education departments revealed the challenges of existing operations and feasible direction for future development.

3. THE CHALLENGES OF LOCAL EDUCATIONAL GOVERNANCE

The current local educational and administrative organization in Taiwan has led to a number of administrative problems. The major inadequacies existing educational and administrative organization are:

(1) Local educational policies are vulnerable to electoral interferences

The authority of the Director of Education is subjected to the leadership and supervisory power of county magistrates and city mayors who are elected to serve four-year terms. Hence, they are subjected to local political interference and lobbyist, which result in local factions affecting educational personnel and funding, and lack of fairness in education. As such, the planning of educational policies changes significantly according to the actions of local leaders or pressure exerted by elected officials, causing programs to lack integrity and continuity.

(2) Local educational decision-making process is not democratic or professional

In Taiwan, decisions in local education are mainly based on Ministry of Education policies and the personal philosophy or preference of county magistrates or city mayors in office. The local people lack a communication channel to express their views on education, and thus have no specific influence on decision-making.

(3) Local administrative organizations have different administrative operations and programs

Within the organizational structure of the county or city government, the local education authority is parallel to the departments of civil affairs, finance, construction, accounting, personnel, and society. Like the general administrative organization, its operational system does not have an independent personnel or budget authority. Except for authority over teaching, discipline, guidance and professional tasks, the Education Department requires the support of other units in all other issues such as budget, construction, land and personnel. However, local education authority categorized as municipal and county (city) level is a bureaucratic unit within the government bureaucracy, and parallel to other units. Therefore, in educational policy planning and promotion, it is often subjected to constraints due to overlap with other units.

(4) Expenditure on local education is a heavy burden

Local government funding is always limited. Moreover, the expenditure on school personnel accounts occupies a higher proportion of annual budget, resulting in relative reduction of grants for construction, classroom equipment, and research and development for local education, thus affecting the quality of education.

To avoid or resolve the above limitations, the Education Reform Committee of the Executive Yuan (1995) recommended to re-establish a reasonable reference of educational resource distribution to ensure the equity and the quality of education. The government has set standards in the local education administrative system, one of which is the establishment of the Education Review Board, whose purposes are: (1) To make educational decisions with less political interference and to eliminate major arbitrary ills in the leadership system; (2) To improve the quality of educational administration by strengthening professional supervision; (3) To have long-term professional and systematic studies in educational matters; and (4) To have a fair and equitable program for the allocation of education funding.

U.K. and the U.S. have decentralized their educational systems, with most local educational administrative bodies adopting the form of committees. In other words, the educational committees in these two countries are elected according to public opinion, thus setting the trend for democratizing educational administration. In contrast, the planning and use of educational resources in Taiwan's educational system emphasizes centralization. As a result, local governments often cannot adjust their educational development to local needs and demands. Moreover, budget for elementary and junior high school teachers and high personnel costs in the counties not only crowd out funding for local construction, but also prevent the implementation of various educational activities.

Nearly half a century has passed since the heavy centralization of Taiwan's educational administration. Education policies are mostly legislated by the central government while local educational authority is only responsible for implementation. However, in recent years, reform from the central educational executive power has gradually moved toward deregulation and decentralization, releasing decision-making power to local governments, such as in the selection of textbooks. Other examples include Articles 9 and 10 of the Education Fundamental Act announced on June 1999. Article 9 specifically defines eight types of central government education authority, and those not listed are to be governed by local competent authority, while Article 10 requires the establishing of a local Education Review Board. These changes indicate that the Ministry of Education has empowered and delegated educational authority to local governments. Taiwan's central government no longer monopolizes educational authority, and its educational administration has gradually moved toward a bipartite system.

The political structure of the world and Taiwan are moving towards political democratization, setting off the emphasis on decentralization, responsibility under decentralization, and participation of all citizens and diversification. Accordingly, educational environments are also impacted and changed. Localism has replaced totalitarian and bureaucracy, leading to the deregulation of central educational administration authority, increase in local educational authorities, and the importance of school-based self-management models. The restructuring of the political environment has led to the deregulation of the education administrative system, and with the trend in diversification and liberalization, parental right to choose education and participate in school activities, and the rights and privileges of professional bodies of teachers and administrative staff are gaining importance in impacting educational decision-making and school management, thereby enhancing the quality of education.

The education participation inspired by the idea of innovation has diversified in recent years, and generally includes: 1. Participation in various committees and organizations: Faculty Evaluation Committee, the Principal Selection Committee, the Education Review Board, the Teachers Association and the Parents Association; 2. Participation in educational options: the government provides alternative schools to give people free choice in education, such as home schooling or non-school type experimental education; 3. Encouraging private investment of resources and participation in education reform activities: for example, allowing the establishment of private schools to promote the liberalization of education; and 4. Participation in meetings and feedbacks: for example, participation in public hearing to amend relevant legislations, and school meetings.

Although existing local Education Review Boards are not formal administrative institutions, they are administrative units responsible for task organization and preparation. According to the provisions in Article 10 of the Education Fundamental Act, municipal and county (city) governments should set up an Education Review Board with mayors or local education authority directors as conveners. The number of members of local Education Review Boards varies significantly according to cities and counties, among which Taitung County ranks top with 31 members, which is more than double compared to the 13 in Nantou County. However, for most cities and counties, the average number of members ranges from 15 to 21.

According to the regulations, the term of office for city and county Education Review Board members are one to two years. Of the 20 counties and cities, 13 of the Education Review Boards are one-year term, and 7 are two-year term. Although the terms vary, the provisions for re-appointment after expiration are consistent for both cities and counties, allowing a re-appointment of another term. Should a vacancy occur, the replacement office is held until the end of the original term.

In most counties and cities, the convener or chairman of the Education Review Board selects members from among education scholars and experts, Parents Association, Teachers Association, teachers, communities, disadvantaged groups, and education and school administrative staff. The exceptions are Taipei City, Nantou County, Tainan City, and Taitung County, where certain representatives are selected based on recommendations. For example, in Taipei City, representatives from the Parents Association are required, a member must be appointed by the Teachers Association, a representative must be respectively appointed from special education groups and indigenous groups to represent disadvantaged populations, while the rest of the members are appointed by Department of Education Commissioner. On the other hand, the Nantou County Board comprises representatives recommended by the County Teachers' Association, while others are appointed by the convener. In Tainan City, representatives from the Parents Association, Teachers Association and the Association of Principals are recommended by their respective organization, while the remaining members are selected by the convener. The representatives of the Taitung County's disadvantaged groups are respectively recommended by the special education groups and the indigenous groups while the remaining representatives are appointed by the county government. Members of the local Education Review Board are selected and hired mostly by county and city government heads and a few others by the Education Review Board. In addition to selection and hiring, certain representatives are appointed, thus indicating that some counties and cities have gradually deregulated personnel authority.

4. STUDY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The position of a local Education Review Board and its interaction with the local education authority will indirectly affect its operations and ability to function and fulfill its duties. Interview results showed that most respondents think that the Education Review Board and the local education authority should operate in parallel within the current system, and adopt a cooperative rather than jurisdictional relationship. As stated by respondents from Taipei city and Tainan city:

The local Education Review Board is not only for the consultation. I personally think that instead of being subordinated to the local education authority, it should be a cooperative relationship with local government. (administrator A, Taipei city)

Basically, the Education Review Board should be a type of policy consultant... in some way a division of labor... in fact, the Education Review Board is a consolidation of public strengths for helping the local education authority. I think cooperation is greater than a superior-subordinate relationship. (administrator D, Tainan city)

The ideal relationship between the Education Review Board and local educational authorities should be a parallel relationship for several reasons. First, Taiwan's administrative organization has elected officials and local councils whose responsibilities comprise supervising relevant county and city policies and reviewing budgets. In addition, the Education Fundamental Act provisions pertaining to the functions and authority of the Education Review Board are vague, inadvertently resulting in fear of overlap between the local education authority and the Education Review Board. Therefore, respondents believe that between the Education Review Board and the local education authority, a parallel cooperative relationship within the system is more suitable in order to avoid conflicts. As stated by respondents from Taichung city and Pingtung county:

Practically speaking, unlike overseas, the Education Review Board cannot be above the local education authority. At most, it is a parallel unit for consultation. We have an existing city council, and over-expanding the forms of the Education Review Board is not suitable within the current system and not permitted by the political environment. (administrator C, Taichung city)

This parallel relationship is probably more suitable for the current environment in Taiwan because given the existence of a city council, a superior-subordinate relationship would create greater difficulties and challenges. (administrator B, Pingtung county)

A number of respondents believe that the Education Review Board should have a parallel relationship with the local education authority, and that its position should be that of a consultant. An appropriate and comprehensive educational policy or related regulations was proposed by the local education authority following brainstorming by the Education Review Board. As respondent from Taipei city education authority commented:

My personal view is that the two should become a parallel unit, with the Education Review Board positioned as an advisory body. Any major policies or regulations can be sent to the Education Review Board for consultation or consideration. (administrator A, Taipei city)

Some respondents similarly viewed the positioning of the Education Review Board and believed that the Education Review Board can be think tanks and consultants for local education authorities:

Its relationship with the local education authority is a subjective-objective relationship. In other words, it is a think tank that provides a more well-rounded view. Before a policy is decided, it is reviewed by the Education Review Board and released when the policy is more complete. Hence it is not a superior-subordinate relationship. (administrator E, Kaohsiung city)

In a consultation position, Education Review Boards are more like consultants and think tanks that do not interfere with the local education authority. Since it is a collegial system, everyone engages in discussion about the implementation of a decision. As an ex officio member, the Commissioner is responsible for implementation, and therefore Education Review Boards mainly provide consultation. (administrator D, Tainan city)

5. CONCLUSIONS

The success of local Education Review Boards depends on whether the heads of local governments and educational administration are aware of the local need and the trend of education. Although Education Review Board resolutions do not have administrative force, mayors and the heads of local education authority should make every effort to implement its resolutions to facilitate educational affairs.

Many cities and counties educational administrators are responsible for simultaneously handling Education Review Board tasks such as notice for meetings, contacting meeting attendees, preparing and compiling data and organizing records. Due to the lack of assigned posts and shortage of funds, this organizational setup indirectly increases the burden of the educational administrators, resulting in many hurried preparations or follow-ups, thereby affecting the promotions and implementations of the Education Review Board. To facilitate the functions of the Education Review Board, educational authorities should seek financial resources to hire personnel as aides for administrators, and dedicate a space for the Education Review Board for communication, interaction, and operation. In addition, a special fund should be available to subsidize the implementation of recommendations, resolutions and operations of the Education Review Board.

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