

School-based decision-making has positive effects on education outcomes – but less so in low-income countries



School-based decision-making has small effects in reducing dropouts and repetition

What is the aim of this review?

This Campbell systematic review assesses the effectiveness of school-based decision-making. The review summarises findings from 17 impact studies and nine studies of barriers and enablers.

Decentralizing decision-making to schools has mainly small to moderate positive effects in reducing repetition, dropouts and increasing test scores. These effects are restricted to middle-income countries, with fewer and smaller positive effects found in low-income countries or in disadvantaged communities.

What did the review study?

Many governments have addressed the low quality of education by devolving decision-making authority to schools. It is assumed that locating decision-making authority within schools will increase accountability, efficiency and responsiveness to local needs.

But there is limited evidence of the effectiveness of these reforms, especially from low-income countries. Existing reviews on school-based decision-making have tended to focus on proximal outcomes and offer very little information about why school-based decision-making has positive or negative effects in different circumstances.

This review addresses two questions: (1) What is the impact of school-based decision-making on educational outcomes in low- and middle-income countries (L&MICs); and (2) What are the barriers to, and enablers of, effective models of school-based decision-making?

What studies are included?

Included studies for the analysis of impact evaluated the change in decision-making authority from a higher level of decision-making authority to the level of the school on educational outcomes. Outcomes were either proximal - e.g. attrition, equality of access, increased enrolment - or final - e.g. test scores, psychosocial and non-cognitive skills. Included studies had to have a comparison group and data which were collected since 1990.

Twenty-six studies, covering 17 interventions,



How up-to-date is this review?

The review authors searched for studies published until January 2015. This Campbell Systematic Review was published in November 2016.

What is the Campbell Collaboration?

The Campbell Collaboration is an international, voluntary, non-profit research network that publishes systematic reviews. We summarise and evaluate the quality of evidence for social and economic policy, programmes and practice. Our aim is to help people make better choices and better policy decisions.

About this summary

This summary was prepared by Howard White (Campbell Collaboration), based on the Campbell Systematic Review 2016:09 “The effects of school-based decision making on educational outcomes in low and middle income contexts: a systematic review” by Roy Carr-Hill, Caine Rolleston, and Rebecca Schendel, (DOI: 10.4073/csr.2016.9). The summary was edited and produced by Tanya Kristiansen (Campbell Collaboration). Financial support from the American Institutes for Research for the production of this summary is gratefully acknowledged.



were included in the analysis of impact. Nine studies were identified to assess barriers and enablers of school-based decision-making.

What are the main results in this review?

School-based decision-making has small effects in reducing dropouts and repetition. There is a moderate positive effect on average test scores, though the effects are smaller for language and maths. The effects are not large, but comparable to those found in many other effective educational interventions.

The positive impact is found in middle-income countries, with no significant effect in low-income countries. School-based decision-making reforms appear to have a stronger impact on wealthier students having more educated parents, and for children in younger grade levels. School-based decision-making reforms appear to be less effective in disadvantaged communities, particularly if parents and community members have low levels of education and low status relative to school personnel.

What do the findings in this review mean?

- 1.School-based decision-making reforms in highly disadvantaged communities are less likely to be successful. Parental participation seems to be the key to the success of such reforms.
- 2.The involvement of school management committees in personnel decisions appears to play a role in improving proximal outcomes, such as teacher attendance, but success is also likely to be linked to the overall teacher job market and the prospects of long-term employment.
- 3.The specifics of programme design appear to be crucial. Given the limited evidence, we cannot conclude with certainty that incorporating certain elements into school-based management reforms are generally beneficial. However, it appears that the details of such supplementary elements may be important.

There needs to be further robust analysis of the impact of large- scale school-based decision-making, as well as further analysis of the conditions that mitigate their impact. There is also a clear need to examine the potentially negative impacts of these reforms, given widespread adoption of such policies.