

School Administration In Russia: Centralization Versus Decentralization

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This chapter focuses on the development of school administration in Russia. The process of decentralization is experienced in terms of the difficulties and tensions involved in moving from a previously hierarchical system to one involving more school-based autonomy. Regional and local differences are identified as the process of decentralization evolves in Russia.

BACKGROUND: SOCIAL/ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION AND SCHOOL REFORM

Russia needs to re-invent many of its social and political institutions and it needs to re-engineer its economy. School reform is not a necessary condition for economic transformation as America in the 1990s and Japan in the 1960s have demonstrated. For the economy, schools may be a long-term brake; they are not a short-run accelerant. Civic and social transformation turns on the culture, the media, the structure of opportunity more than it does on whether or not middle school students make field trips to their country's capital. In Russian terms, the three TV stations broadcasting MTV from Moscow are likely to have a more profound effect on young people than a new edition of "Modern Civics for a Modern Russia."

Still, whether or not public school administrators in Russia can decentralize the operations of their schools is a significant question. Regional variations and changing labor force demands both require more flexibility than centralized governments can manage. The financial collapse of central institutions puts a premium on local initiatives. And, capturing the energy, creativity and loyalty of local populations for local institutions is a central dynamic of democracy.

Is it possible for the administrators of Russia's 65,000 local schools to operate them in ways that depart from their country's historic habits and current reality? Russia's thousand year tradition of authoritarian government was simply continued by communism's central control disguised as central planning. There were many indicators in the communist-operated school system of Russia's tendency to autarky – single textbooks for every grade and every subject, mandated and

produced by the state; school finance determined to the last ruble by Moscow; the administration of school buildings hyper-regulated and micro-managed by 2,000 memos a year from “The Ministry”; a lack of professional associations independent of the government, and a saturation of ideology.

The centrifugal disintegration of the Soviet Union had three effects on Russian school administrators. First, the central government was nearly bankrupted and is thus less able to wield power through budget control. Second, the moral bankruptcy of communism stripped the central institutions of their ideological, normative authority. Third, there was an unevenly shared conclusion that schools should participate in transforming Russia so that it could compete and participate differently in the world.

The first two changes created the possibility of more local autonomy. The third change – a need to make the economy more competitive and the society more open – created an argument in support of local autonomy.

Russia has 1,500,000 teachers and 140,000 school administrators. The teachers do not have the time or the organizational resources to transform their schools. If it is to happen, it must at least begin with administrators. This chapter presents the only empirical analysis of school administrators in the country’s history¹. It documents their readiness to create and/or to accept local responsibility for their own schools.

STUDY QUESTIONS

In the Winter of 1994, we asked 1,399 school administrators from six diverse regions of Russia 54 questions about issues of school governance and decision making. The group was representative of all Russian administrators and included principals, chairpersons of “subject methodology units” (similar to central office curriculum specialists), and local and regional superintendents. (See Endnote 1 for the research design).

In Western education, proponents of decentralization argue that autonomous school decision making can affect teaching and learning and may thus lead to improved student outcomes. Others argue that the current state of research is insufficient to establish a causal or even an empirical link between decentralization and student outcomes (Davies & Hentshke, 1994).

But, if you are a Russian school “leader” earning less than your teachers but with no job security, and if you are still responsible for meeting classes while administering a 3,000 student institution in which the teachers have not been paid for four months, then the Western curiosity about the relation between forms of governance and student outcomes will seem academic at best. The administrators we studied had practical, immediate concerns – who could force them to do what? What were the likely consequences of what actions? And especially, who would pay for what and how could they be assured of that?

WHO CAN FORCE WHOM TO DO WHAT? THE SOURCES OF INFLUENCE

The sources of influence can be divided into four groups.

1. *The Russian Federation Ministry of Education.* This is the Moscow headquarters (*Chistoprudny Boulevard*) which still issues rules and regulations for the whole country. Just as other countries find it desirable to maintain national institutions that attend to national level education, so do the Russians. The issue of course is the amount of power held at that level compared to other levels.

2. *The regional and district authorities.* In the 1992, *Act of the Russian Federation on Education*, regions and districts were allowed some fiscal control. Regions and municipalities can raise (different amounts) of money locally and they can determine how that money is disbursed. At the same time, the Federation Ministry retains an amount of fiscal control and has recently begun to experiment with lump sum budgeting for selected schools.

3. *The parents, teachers and students.* These are the clients of educators and, to the extent that educators regard themselves as servants of the public, parents especially are the constituents of educators. In most systems, the intimate and diurnal interaction among administrators, teachers and parents produces significant influence on the administrators from the other groups. Several cultural factors made that less the case for school administrators under the Soviet system. The Communist Party and the central Ministry preempted anyone else's putatively legitimate authority. The Russian respect for learning elevated and insulated school people. And central financing kept local hands off the power of the purse.

4. *The respondent herself/himself.* This is especially important in instances where a superordinate *dictat* conflicts with personal/professional judgement. In the West, race and social class combine with scarce resources to produce dilemmas of this sort. The same sorts of personal conundrum grow out of Russia's current conflicting tendencies. Whose views should be honored, the genuinely respected war veteran who literally saved the country and now passionately wants to retain a chauvinist civics curriculum? Or the newly rich entrepreneur who would have the schools teach economic and social Darwinism?

How school administrators orient themselves is at the heart of the prospects for decentralization. Two of the sources – the Russian Ministry and the regional and local authorities – are hierarchically above school administrators and, arguably, are therefore comfortable, traditional sources of guidance. The teachers and the students are down the organization chart. In many Western countries, parents are recognized as a legitimate source of direction for public schools and some school organization charts elevate them to that station. In the absence of functioning democracy at the local level, the location of parents in the current Russian configuration of authority is less clear. The role of one's own self as a source of authority is similarly unclear, at least in current theory. What do the data say? Table 1 reports the respondents' estimates of the strongest source of influence.

In light of the ferocious competition for very scarce public resources, self-reliance is a good choice. The next to last place ranking of the national Ministry

**Table 1: Sources of Influence on School Administrators
(Most to Least)**

Place	Source	Number Choosing
1.	Self	635
2.	Municipal Government	599
3.	Teachers	486
4.	Students	261
5.	Regional Government	216
6.	Ministry of Education	165
7.	Parents	131

is a measure of how quickly things have changed. And, if the goal is to locate power close to those affected (a corner stone of democratic government), the primacy of the municipal government is as heartening as the dead last place of the parents is disheartening. The 1992 legislation assigns district officials the authority to approve budgets, inspect schools and evaluate administrators and teachers. The influence of parents varies between urban and rural places: in urban places, 63 percent of administrators credit parents with some influence but only 49 percent of the directors of rural schools agree.

One of Russia's leading scholars of school administration, Konstantin Ushakov, has been attacking the still continuing isolation and dependence of some school administrators by intervening in the school's climate and culture (1994b). And, by introducing innovations such as job descriptions and role playing simulations, Ushakov is working to create new models for the "ideal administrator" and the "ideal teacher" (1993, 1994a).

Today, most schools in the U.S. operate as a dual system. The core technical activity of schools, what goes on in classrooms, is loosely supervised (Weick, 1976). Teachers have the *de facto* autonomy within broad guidelines to close the door and run their classrooms as they see fit. On the other hand, non-instructional activities such as testing and pupil placement are tightly supervised.

Russian schools also operate as a dual system, but this duality is connected first to the external environment, which is treated by the building administration and school faculty as hostile. In return for protection, the faculty "pays off" the administration with loyalty and obedience (Ushakov, 1994b).

Eighty-six percent of administrators (1,198 people) rank teachers as the most influential force despite the fact that Russian teachers do not have as much legal power as do their Western colleagues. (Soviet trade unions were in reality "state organs." Far from being sometimes antagonists with independent financing, they resembled "company unions" in the distant past of Western trade unionism.) Russian administrators often consider themselves to be teachers who temporarily became administrators and *include* themselves in their estimate of the power of teachers.

Sixty-eight percent of administrators believe they are influenced by students. We are skeptical about that claim: Soviet ideology celebrated "child-centered"

schooling. In fact, schools offered only education focused tightly on communist ideology. The State curriculum and the unitary goal of “new Communist man” made individualizing instruction a sin. Discovery learning was permitted only in math and science. Schools were presented with production quotas for graduates geared to the supposed needs of the economy including the preparation of manual laborers. Rural students were often assigned to harvest labor. Approximately 400,000 children with disabilities (the Russian phrase translates as “defectology”) were isolated, under educated and therefore consigned to lives of deprivation².

WHO HAS A BIGGER EFFECT ON ADMINISTRATORS – SUPERIORS OR SUBORDINATES?

Given Russia’s unbroken history of top down and authoritarian government, one would expect that superordinates would be a far more potent source of influence than subordinates. Reciprocal power between the governed and the governors is a fairly sophisticated, subtle concept, even in established democracies. Almost half (48 percent, 668) of the respondents mention they are more influenced by superiors than by subordinates; about the same proportion (44 percent, 614) believe they are more influenced by subordinates. Eight percent declined to answer. It has been said that ‘the Renaissance never got to Russia’, but in light of the even distribution of administrators willing to recognize that they both govern and are governed by their subordinates, this too may be changing.

INFLUENCE ON FUNCTIONAL DOMAINS BY SOURCE

Among other things, the 1992 Law on Education denounced centralized examinations and tests. While there remains a national curriculum, most testing is done at the local level. The issue of a national curriculum is sensitive and complicated. In other countries of the former Soviet Union, the first task of school reform was to strip “the Red topics” out of the textbooks (after which, often, not much remained). But Russia remains a federation which incorporates more than 100 different languages and those language groups reflect ethnic identities and nationalist loyalties even where the “nation” ceased to exist 500, 600 years ago. The Russian problem is like the American problem – “*E Pluribus Unum*” (“Out of many, one”) and thus there is a continuing debate about safeguarding “Russian educational space.” The national (minimum) curriculum is one way to attempt its preservation.

The respondents believe that the Ministry of Education is in control of the curriculum, especially regarding the issues of what gets taught and which books are used. They assign the least influence to parents and students.

Personnel issues. The administrator herself/himself and the district authorities are identified as the most important figures in deciding on personnel except for the issue of professional training (see Table 2).

Table 2: How School Administrators Feel They Are Influenced On Curriculum Issues by Source

Curriculum issue	Source of influence %/ (N)							
	Min	Tch	Reg	Dis	Self	Stu	Par	N/A
Which books are used	30 (1242)	19 (780)	22 (916)	15 (616)	8 (354)	2 (102)	3 (134)	1 (53)
What gets taught to students	27 (1132)	17 (696)	21 (874)	14 (590)	11 (480)	5 (218)	4 (187)	0 ^a (20)
How students are tested	8 (325)	24 (1017)	8 (335)	15 (611)	22 (925)	4 (153)	4 (147)	16 ^a (684)
Mean	21 (900)	20 (831)	17 (708)	14 (606)	14 (586)	4 (158)	4 (156)	6 (252)

Note. Min = Ministry of Education; Tch = teachers; Reg = regional authorities; Dis = municipal authorities; Self = the respondent her/himself; Par = parents; Stu = students; N/A = no answer.

^aErrors due to rounding.

Teacher training can be divided into two parts: undergraduate preparation, the prerogative of the pedagogical universities which continue to be governed by the Ministry of Education; and in-service training that is provided by regional and district educational authorities in cooperation with the Institute for Upgrading Teachers' Qualifications. These institutes are supervised by regional or city educational authorities. The decision of who is to be trained, and when, is usually made by the district and school administration (Saprykin, 1990).

For observers who expect that the Soviet celebration of worker participation would have created a major role for teachers in school governance, the low estimate of teachers, even in curriculum matters bears some explanation. First, whatever the rhetoric, teachers were never allowed to participate in school governance (nor were local administrators). Second, there are still no teacher organizations, independent of the government, which can mobilize teachers to influence local personnel decisions. Both facts increase the relative power of the school director.

Dismissing teachers is a special case. In the former, State-dominated system, the Russian phrase for losing your job was, "crossed out of life". Hanging on to a job, any job, is a survival issue given the lack of alternate employment in the fragile Russian economy. The combined influence of subordinates – teachers, parents, and students (28 percent) – is bigger than that of the regional and district authorities (23 percent) and 14 times bigger than that of the Ministry of Education (2 percent). This, despite the fact that the Ministry issues regulations on dismissal. Although it is commonly believed in Russia that constant disapproval from parents and students can force a dismissal, such cases are in fact extremely rare.

Budgets. The issue of budget control is reflected in the responses to the questions of who exercises the most influence over the total budget and over each department's budget. Local school administrators have been emancipated from

the central Ministry; the school district is reported to be far more powerful than any other source of influence (see Table 3). At the same time, joint teacher/parent influence is practically negligible. School administrators do not believe parents and teachers are capable of contributing to the budgetary process (they have their own, chronic family economic crises?) and even if they wanted to, administrators *do not know how* to involve parents and teachers.

IMPORTANCE OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS FOLLOWING ORDERS AND BEING LOYAL TO AUTHORITIES

Schools are bureaucracies the world over. The plus side is a certain regularity and even equity of service; the minus side is often a mindless pathology. The previous regimes recognized that independent schools would be social dynamite. They selected school administrators for dependability, predictability, malleability and loyalty and that was often measured by Party service. We measured the current reality: how important did administrators think it was to follow orders?

When all the answers to the question about loyalty and willingness to follow orders are combined, 51 percent of respondents think that it is important for a school administrator to be loyal to the three different levels of government and to follow orders. But while 62 percent believe in loyalty to municipal or local government, only 32 percent think it is necessary to be loyal to the central government (see Figure 1) and that is an intriguing measure of decentralization in process.

“DECENTRALIZATION”: ALTERNATE REALITIES IN RUSSIA

The word “decentralization” can mean many things to a Russian school administrator: first, economic independence (“My school is now paid for locally.”); second,

Table 3: Russian School Administrators’ Estimate on the Sources of Influence Over the School Budget

School budget	Source of influence						
	% / (N)						
	Dis	Self	Reg	Min	Tch	Par	Stu
Each department’s budget	38 (1090)	29 (830)	17 (500)	5 (154)	7 (196)	3 (72)	2 (44)
Total budget	35 (989)	16 (460)	27 (763)	16 (457)	2 (56)	3 (92)	1 (33)
Mean	36 (2079)	22 (1290)	22 (1263)	11 (611)	4 (252)	3 (164)	1 (77)

Note. Errors due to rounding. Dis = municipal authorities; Self = the respondent her/himself; Reg = regional authorities; Min = Ministry of Education; Tch = teachers; Par = parents; Stu = students.

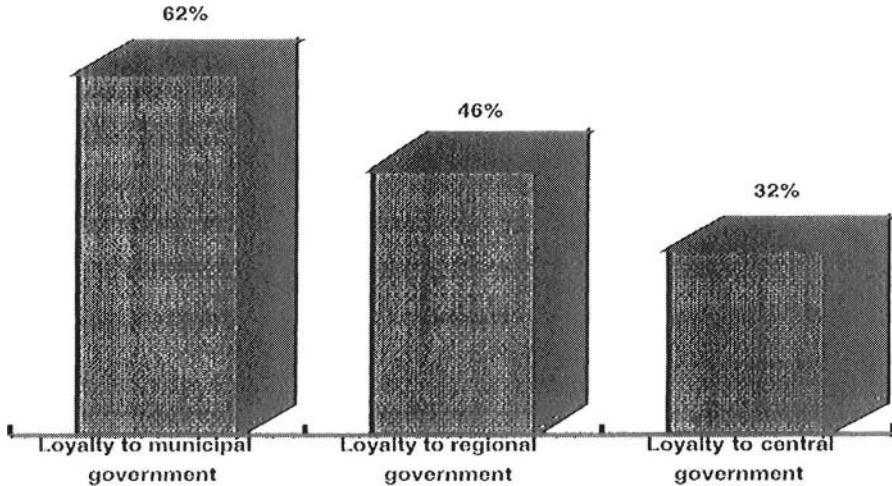


Figure 1: Administrators' Attitudes Regarding Issues of Loyalty.

functional independence (“Why be bothered by Moscow? We make our own decisions here.”); or third, geographic independence (“Do you really imagine that a Moscow bureaucrat will endure 10 hours on two different Aeroflot planes to inspect this school?”). At the same time, those who believe they are independent economically may believe themselves still to be dependent functionally and so on.

We used factor analysis of item responses among respondents to map this part of their political/administrative conscious. The responses clustered around three dimensions – political, economic and psychological decentralization.

Political decentralization (.65710) describes decision making independence. Economic decentralization (.68780) relates to the “golden rule” – whoever has the gold, rules. Psychological decentralization (.79745) measures the willingness of school administrators to separate from their past and create a new future.

The political decentralization scores support the earlier analysis of the continuing salience of hierarchy for a substantial fraction, about half, of Russia’s administrators.

Economic decentralization is impacted by the still evolving reality of finance for local schools. The central government, regional government, municipal government, a sponsoring institution (e.g., a local pharmaceutical plant or a fishing fleet), or other local sources can all participate in paying for schools. The group for whom the economic factor was most salient made all their decisions according to who was providing the most money – what got taught to students; which books were used; how students were tested; how teachers were hired, trained, evaluated, and dismissed. They also made decisions about school morale and climate, about school budget, and about their future goals – all according to the source of money. If most of the money came from the Ministry, then they took their signals from that level. Similarly, they were also sensitive to municipal sources or local sources.

Throughout, centrally-oriented administrators were more grateful for guidance than resentful. They have no training in site level decision making, their own authority is unclear, and Russian history teaches a certain prudence.

In 1997, the average school administrator's income was \$75 a month, mostly from a single source. The salary has increased since, but the cost of living has increased even more. To stay on the job with such a salary requires devotion to education. It also means frustration and anger because in spite of government promises to equalize educators' salaries with those of industrial workers, school people are paid 50 percent less. (To fill the gap, school administrators continue to meet classes and thus qualify for some amount of pay as teachers.) Wage exploitation is one explanation for the 54 percent of the respondents who think that the main obstacle to education reform is the "low prestige" of schooling. Communist ideology had always celebrated manual labor, e.g., trolley operators made more than engineers. Paradoxically, the press to be admitted to private schools and universities continues unabated as does the general cultural respect for learning.

What school people perceive as "low prestige" is more likely triage decision making on the part of governments who have to allocate chronically scarce resources among economic sectors all of which are collapsing if at different rates. This is "if it is not broken, don't fix it" logic. Russian schools continue to open every morning, the universality of literacy is a world leading accomplishment and the scientific establishment continues to function.

We recommend moving school finance as close to local schools as possible. Second, we recommend lump sum budgets to schools. The recommendations assume that administrators are ready for change. Some are, some are not. From our evidence, particularly with respect to personnel and curriculum matters, most are not yet prepared or willing to make independent decisions and that may relate to the third factor, psychological decentralization.

Seventy-five percent of the respondents believe that they can influence their own schools. Curiously, the same school administrators who feel dependent about political and economic factors claim psychological independence. In a country with as many contradictions as birch trees, explanations are chancy. The 1992 law announced a new local freedom but there is no money to support local judgments. The Ministry has theoretically and sometimes practically been supplanted by regional and local authorities, but it continues to issue regulations and orders. Most local administrators recognize that they are now expected to do what none of them has ever done before, run their own schools. Authority without resources, responsibility without independence, expectations without support. Rational models are not always the most powerful explanations (Richards & Height, 1988).

SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC AND BIO-SOCIAL VARIATIONS

Do these attitudes and practices vary across the multitude of Russian circumstances? If they do not, then the monolith prevails and Russian school administrators have not begun to differentiate themselves and their institutions.

But if there are variations, then those differences may illuminate what seems to be working in the reformation of Russian public school leadership. We examined possible differences by gender and age, by hierarchical position (superintendent, school director, etc.), and by region (wealth varies greatly across Russian regions). We assembled responses to the items that had the most discriminatory power about centralization and decentralization. We then created a four-point "centralization" scale where a respondent's belief in a Moscow-centered universe was a "1" and a school or district centered belief was a "4".

THE SUMMARY DISTRIBUTION OF ATTITUDES TOWARD CENTRALIZATION

The mid-point of our four-point centralization-to-decentralization scale is 2.5. The mean value for all 1399 respondents was 2.59, just slightly over the line toward a decentralized, district centered attitude. Although there are no prior data for comparison purposes, that slight tilt in this group is very probably progress. The fact of significant variation across the group (the first decile is 2.292 and the last decile is 2.955) is certainly progress in differentiating school practice and in moving toward the flexibility and responsiveness available through decentralization.

Men and women administrators. The sample had 864 female and 535 male respondents. The mean of the female respondents on issues of centralization was 2.49 (s.d., .38). The mean of the male respondents was 2.57 (s.d., .36). The difference is statistically and programmatically significant in that men are more locally oriented than are women. Why? One hint is in recent history, the other in tradition. By tradition, men were accorded more autonomy than women. Additionally, in the last five, post-Soviet years, 70 per cent of the newly appointed administrators have been men, a group presumably less burdened by the past. (Across the whole sample, age is not related to attitudes toward centralization. That is a bit of a surprise since older administrators will have had far more experience with the previous system. But what is the consequence of that exposure? Familiarity breeding contempt and rejection? Or familiarity conditioning incumbents to the traditions of the *ancien regime*? Because both are probably operating in our sample, the likely result is a lack of significant difference.)

Location in the hierarchy. The chain of command for Russian schools now more closely resembles a Western model with local superintendents and individual school directors. The exception remains the "chairpersons of the district methodology units." Historically, these people were the enforcers of political correctness. That happened through school inspections, pupil testing and especially teacher training. (Inspection scores still affect salary.) The position has been continued and although the singular dogma no longer applies, so many of the incumbents are holdovers from the Soviet days that they are widely regarded as obstacles to reform.

Table shows the distribution of attitudes by position with school directors being significantly more independent than the "methodology chairs".

Earlier we saw that municipal authorities are regarded as the most powerful sources

of direction for school directors. But those same municipal authorities are fiscally dependent on both regional and federal governments. For school directors, superintendents are “shock absorbers” who take part of the federal and regional pressure.

The data document that there is a statistically significant difference between superintendents and chairpersons of the district methodology units. There is also a highly significant statistical difference between school directors and superintendents, and between school directors and chairpersons of the district methodology units. To summarize, school directors feel more decentralized from the central authorities than district superintendents and much more decentralized than the often retrograde chairpersons of the district methodology units. Superintendents also feel more decentralized than chairpersons of the district methodology units.

REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

Russia is mammoth – eleven time zones; some of the coldest places on earth to regions that grow tea; a European country west of the Urals and an Asian country east of those mountains; St. Petersburg and Moscow are world class conurbations profoundly different from rural and village Russia. Because one test of government is the ability to capitalize on divergent strength, we chose six of Russia’s 88 administrative units (republics, *kraj*, and *oblasts*) to study.

Attitudes to decentralization, innovation, and Western management practices were tested across the six regions.

- Krasnoyarskiy kraj is one of the biggest – about a million square miles. Krasnoyarsk is in the north with some of the world’s lowest temperatures. It used to be host to the *gulag*. People who work in Krasnoyarskiy kraj get hardship bonuses.
- Chuvashskaya republic is one of the smallest – less than 7,000 square miles.
- Nizhegorodskaya oblast is in the center of Russia, on the Volga and at the intersection of historic West-East trading routes. It was the first to start Western oriented market reforms.
- Nizhegorodskaya oblast was a center of the defense industry, heavily populated, with lots of science institutions.
- Samarskaya oblast is located on the Volga river.
- Stavropolskiy kraj is known as the bread basket of Russia with a comparatively wealthy rural population.
- Sverdlovskaya oblast is the biggest in the Urals region, famous for its heavy and defense industry.

The data suggest that school administrators from four regions: Stavropolskiy kraj, Krasnoyarskiy kraj, Samarskaya oblast, and Sverdlovskaya oblast believe themselves to be more decentralized than school administrators from Chuvashskaya republic and Nizhegorodskaya oblast (see Table 5).

