



Why do some school-based management reforms survive while others are reversed? The cases of Honduras and Guatemala[☆]



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ABSTRACT

In the 1990s, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and Honduras enacted school-based management (SBM) reforms that allowed communities to make key decisions about their schools that were previously reserved for state-appointed officials. Yet, these reforms have recently begun to slide back. What explains this trend toward reform reversal? This paper argues that two factors determine the likelihood of the reversal of an SBM program: the scope of the reform and the level of national investment in it. Using the cases of Honduras and Guatemala, I contend these two factors determine the extent to which an SBM reform is vulnerable to events that can bring about its termination, such as changes in government, union strength, or parental pressure.

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Central American countries were once pioneers in letting communities run their own schools. In the 1990s, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and Honduras enacted reforms that allowed poor, remote, and/or rural communities to make key decisions about public schools in their areas, which were previously reserved for state-appointed officials. These “school-based management” (SBM) reforms were among the first in Latin America and they devolved more power and responsibility than most similar initiatives in the region (Gajardo, 1999; PREAL, 2005; World Bank, 2007b). Since education decentralization faced sharp opposition in Latin America in the '90s, it is remarkable that these countries were able to adopt these changes.

Yet, in recent years, SBM reforms in Central America have begun to slide back. Nicaragua overturned its reform in 2007, Guatemala is in the process of doing so, and El Salvador is currently considering it. To this day, only Honduras has no official plans to terminate its SBM program. What explains this apparent trend toward reform reversal? Why has it taken hold in some countries and not yet in others? Will all the SBM reforms in the isthmus eventually be dismantled? These questions are important not because SBM reforms necessarily deliver better education—in fact, the effectiveness of SBM reforms is mixed, at best (Murnane and Ganimian, 2014). Rather, they are interesting because SBM reforms are a (unique) case study of reforms that seek to make spending in education more efficient, and these reforms face some common political obstacles that make them harder to “stick.” Thus, understanding the political economy of SBM reforms can shed light on the circumstances under which these contentious reforms have staying power.²

This paper offers an explanation for why some SBM reforms in Central America have survived while others have been reversed. It argues that there are two factors that influence the likelihood of the reversal of an SBM reform: the scope of the reform and the level of national investment in it. Using the cases of Honduras and

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² The question of which SBM reforms have greater chances of survival is also of interest to international aid agencies, given the large sums of money that they invest in these programs. In 2006, the World Bank spent nearly a fifth of its education budget on SBM reforms worldwide (Barrera-Osorio et al., 2009: 3).

Guatemala, I contend that these factors determine the extent to which an SBM reform is vulnerable to events that can bring about its termination, such as changes in government, union strength, or parental pressure. The paper begins with an overview of SBM reforms in Central America, it discusses the main argument and the methods used, and then it compares the Honduran and Guatemalan reforms.

1. SBM reforms in Central America: what are they and why are they contentious?

SBM reforms radically changed the way schools were managed in Central America. Prior to the 1990s, schools were funded and managed by the same entity: either the state (in public schools) or private providers (in private schools). Thus, while each private school had autonomy to make decisions about its personnel, pedagogy, budget, and maintenance, in public schools such decisions were made by government officials—mostly, at the national level. The *Educación con Participación de la Comunidad* (EDUCO) program in El Salvador (1991), the Autonomous Schools Program (ASP) in Nicaragua (1991), the *Programa Nacional de Autogestión para el Desarrollo Educativo* (PRONADE) in Guatemala (1992), and the *Proyecto Hondureño de Participación Comunitaria* (PROHECO) in Honduras (1999) created pre-primary and primary schools—mainly in poor, remote, and/or rural areas—funded by the government but run by school councils composed of parents and community members (Table 1).³

The stated goal of the Central American SBM reforms was to empower parents. Yet, with the possible exception of Nicaragua, the responsibilities that these reforms created for low-income, rural communities outweighed the discretions they gave school councils. In El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, councils could hire and fire teachers, but they were also responsible for monitoring and evaluating them and paying their salaries. Council members also had to buy materials for their school and maintain their school's building. And while they had little say over how the school's budget was spent, they had to keep track of its transfers and expenditures.

These reforms also created extensive coordination and support structures. Except in Nicaragua, each SBM program was assigned to a coordinating unit under—but separate from—the ministry of education, in charge of setting its policies and overseeing all of its technical and financial activities. These units were also made responsible for hiring and coordinating the activities of individuals (*promotores*) or non-profit organizations (depending on the country) appointed to identify eligible communities, encourage them to participate in the program, and help them organize in councils—this includes assisting them in organizing elections for five to 15 seats, depending on the country (Table 2).⁴ All programs have also received substantial technical and financial support from multilateral banks and aid agencies (mainly, the World Bank).

SBM reforms have faced opposition in all four Central American nations, on both ideological and practical grounds. The ideological debate has mostly centered on the question of whether it is acceptable for the state to decouple its traditional roles of provider and funder of education. Opponents of SBM reforms (mainly, teachers' unions and some academics) have accused governments of giving up their responsibility to provide education for all by leaving the management of schools up to parents and communities. Proponents (mainly, governments and aid donors) have

replied that governments have continued to finance public education and that SBM reforms have allowed them to expand enrollments rapidly while making schools more efficient and accountable. The fact that SBM reforms occurred in the 1990s, when several state companies in the region were privatized, has both fueled and complicated this debate. In fact, many opponents have argued that SBM reforms constitute a form of privatization of public education.

On more practical grounds, SBM reforms created clear winners and losers. Governments in the four poor Central American nations have benefited from these programs because they offered them a way to expand access to education at lower costs. The schools SBM reforms created in the 1990s typically relied on existing infrastructure (e.g., homes, churches, etc.) and unpaid labor (i.e., school council members), they were multi-grade (i.e., one teacher teaches several grades) and they offered teachers a lower pay and fewer benefits (e.g., health insurance, pensions, etc.) than traditional public schools. Some of these initial cost-saving elements of the reforms were eventually phased out in efforts to make school systems more equitable. Yet, community-managed schools have remained more inexpensive than traditional public schools, mainly due to their lower personnel costs (Table 3). Furthermore, governments have also benefited from the jobs these initiatives created at the national and local level. Several administrations have used these to reward their loyal political activists.

Teachers' unions, on the other hand, have been harmed by SBM reforms. First, these initiatives gave school councils the authority to hire teachers, oversee their work, and fire them at will. This was a considerable loss of influence for unions, which are part of hiring committees for teachers at traditional public schools, and it circumvented tenure provisions, which unions have fought hard to achieve.⁵ Second, the teachers that school councils have typically hired are typically unable (since they are not certified) to unionize.⁶ Thus, SBM programs have expanded schooling without adding new members to union ranks, hence adversely affecting unions' bargaining power. Finally, the jobs these reforms created offered fewer benefits and lower pay than those at traditional public schools. This has damaged unions' position as purveyors of teachers' rights.

There is a third group of actors that has benefited from the reform but that would not necessarily be worse off if these reforms were reversed. Parents in poor, remote, and/or rural areas surely gained from being able to send their children to schools in their own communities. But they could still do this if schools created by SBM reforms were converted into traditional public schools.⁷ Teachers working at schools created by these initiatives got a job thanks to these reforms, but if the schools were converted to traditional public schools, their pay and conditions would improve. Those at coordinating units and *promotores* also got jobs due to these reforms, but since they are state employees, the end of the reform is more likely to lead them to another government job than to their dismissal.

It is less clear how these reforms have affected a fourth group of actors. While it seems that international aid agencies would benefit from SBM reforms because they offer them a bigger “bang

⁵ Tenure provisions, which are part of the teachers' statutes in all four Central American countries, specify the conditions under which public school teachers can obtain permanent employment status. Once teachers obtain this status, it is hard—if not virtually impossible—for schools to fire them.

⁶ Some individuals interviewed for this study claimed that teachers that entered a school system through an SBM reform were eligible to unionize. Yet, I found no hard evidence of unionized SBM teachers. In fact, the reversal of the SBM reform in Guatemala (described at the end of Section 4.2) confirms that teachers' unions initially required that their members be certified teachers.

⁷ In fact, some parents would even welcome such a change. Parents working at school councils do considerable work for no pay and those who are not members of the school council may not feel represented by their peers.

³ The Nicaraguan reform differed from the rest in several respects. Some of these differences are noted in Tables 1 and 2 below. I also discuss these differences in Section 3.

⁴ In all countries, community members have the voting majority in school councils, although in Nicaragua there are two seats in each council reserved for the teacher and principal.

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