

Reinventing Local School Boards in the Philippines

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Introduction

Education governance reform, with local authorities playing a lead role, is a recent phenomenon in the Philippines. Synergeia Foundation helped bring about this interesting development, set in the backdrop of the country's 15-year experience with decentralization.

This paper will describe these governance reform efforts as a case study in effective local action to bring about large-scale systemic reforms in a centrally managed public education system.

The Setting

Public education in the Philippines is a centrally managed service delivered through the Department of Education (DepEd).

At the local level, the DepEd maintains schools divisions and districts corresponding to the three biggest local government units – the provinces, cities and municipalities. The divisions and districts in turn supervise elementary (Grades I to VI) and high schools (1st to 4th year) that comprise the basic education system in the country.

A local school board (LSB) is a special body created by virtue of Republic Act No. 7160, popularly known as the Local Government Code of 1991 (LGC 91). Its main duty is to allocate the Special Education Fund (SEF) to meet the supplementary needs of the local public school system. The SEF is an additional 1% levy that is collected together with real property taxes paid to the local government.

In the case of a city, such as Naga, the code provides for an eight-man LSB that is chaired by the city mayor, co-chaired by the schools division superintendent, and made up of the following members: the chair of the education committee of the Sangguniang Panlungsod (city council), the city treasurer, a representative of the Sangguniang Kabataan (youth council), and duly elected representatives of the city PTA league, the city teachers' organization, and the non-academic personnel of city public schools.

Problems facing Philippine public schools

On paper, the LSB seems well represented; but in reality most of them are not functioning well. Decision making has been confined to this eight-person board where most often, "educational priorities" are being defined by its two most powerful members: the local chief executive and the division superintendent. Because of its limited involvement, the LSB budget is used mostly for discrete and disparate activities, particularly infrastructure (where the possibility of corruption is strong) and regular sports events.

As a result, this has largely prevented the LSB to help address the following problems facing public schools:

- Deteriorating quality of basic education with far-reaching effects on the country's future
- General lack of awareness about the current state of public education among stakeholders
- Weak "soft infrastructure" support to facilitate the learning process
- Weak mechanisms for meaningful parent participation in the education of their children
- Weak involvement and participation of other community-based stakeholders in the delivery of public education services
- An underperforming LSB that has been reduced to a mere budgeting entity for local education funds
- Weak planning and budgeting practices and processes that contribute to inefficient and ineffective use of local education funds, and
- The lack of transparency and accountability in the administration of the public school system.

The LSB Reinvention Advocacy

Recognizing this huge gap, and the opportunity it represents, Synergeia Foundation focused its work on and defined its mission as promoting local government-led systemic education reforms at the community level.

It traces its roots to a handful of highly successful education reform projects spread strategically in the archipelago, with generous funding support through The Ford Foundation. When Ford decided to close its Manila office in 2003, these projects banded together and established Synergeia, convinced of the need to continue with their missionary work.

From the outset, the founding members recognized the centrality of the LSB reinvention in its overall work and advocacy program, given the fact that (a) it is present in every locality, thanks to the basic decentralization law; (b) it has access to a key resource base, i.e. the SEF tax money; and (c) the opportunity for governance reforms is evident, as the LSB itself mirrors the basic constituency of local public school systems in the country.

Transformative thinking

Naga, a city of 150,000 in central Philippines, is the demonstration city for LSB reinvention, but along the way, it has inspired a number of equally innovative variants of the reinvention process. For instance, the municipality of Murcia, Negros Occidental brought in 12 more institutional representatives to its school board, including corporate partners operating in the town. Enrique B. Magalona in the same province pioneered the establishment of barangay school boards, enabling local communities to play a more active role in managing local schools. In Tuao, Cagayan, public school alumni and senior citizens were given non-voting representation. But their common denominator is a local chief executive who thinks beyond the box.

Consider Naga's case of instance. Its pioneering work on the LSB was made possible by two key strategies:

1. *Home rule or "half-full glass" philosophy.* This liberating perspective anchored the whole LSB reengineering process. It enabled LSBs to become empowered entities that went beyond the traditional function – laid down in the basic decentralization law -- of providing budgetary support to local public schools. This, in itself is a controversial proposition. One school of thought held that the board can only operate within the limits prescribed by the Code. But Naga deliberately embraced the opposite – *that what the law does not expressly prohibit, it allows.*

2. *The LSB budget is key.* To provide the legal basis for its interventions, the Naga City School Board used its annual budget to allocate resources and in the process authorize the conduct of activities that go beyond current laws on the LSB. These include performance measurement through localized testing, participative planning and budgeting, fair and merit-based selection and hiring of teachers, and transparency in textbooks acquisition (procured as goods and services funded under the LSB budget).

Strategic aim

Over the years, other Synergeia project sites all over the country adopted, improved upon, and innovated on Naga's initial LSB reinvention effort to come up with a highly adaptable and flexible approach to education governance reforms in the context of existing Philippine laws governing the public school system.

On the whole, its gains in successful LSB reinvention across project sites all throughout the country demonstrate the local communities' readiness and capability to manage the local public school system with a greater degree of autonomy from the DepEd. With the country's 15-year track record in decentralization, there are other similarly situated localities with the same demonstrated capacity, particularly those at the cutting edge of governance innovations.

In this regard, a strategic policy advocacy for *calibrated decentralization of public education services* in these localities, based on local demand, institutional capacity and financial capability, is worth pursuing for the long-term. Our bottomline is for the devolution of the responsibility and the resources for delivering basic education to local governments with accredited LSBs, or those that have demonstrated leadership in education governance and whose work has led to improvement in learning outcomes.

The Organization Behind

From the foregoing, it is very clear that Synergeia Foundation plays a critical integrative role in formulating and developing a social reform product that is essential, relevant and even long-overdue – given the Philippines' 15-year old decentralization movement.

More specifically, the foundation

- successfully identified the best local communities that can pilot the education governance reforms anchored on the LSB. This was facilitated by its parallel work

with Galing Pook Foundation, the country's most prestigious awards programme for local authorities.

- supplied the technical expertise in drawing out and developing the model, templates and systems in education governance from among its project sites: a unique strength that combines development theory with real-world practice.
- set up a functional “learning circle” of, and organized regular events for local education governance advocates. This support programs facilitated the exchange of ideas and experiences that enable program managers and team leaders to resolve common problems and identify probable pitfalls in project implementation.
- documented and disseminated these models to facilitate scaling up, advocacy and evaluation work.

What key factors accounted for its success in a relatively short span of time?

Implementation strategies

In terms of project implementation, Synergeia practises what it preaches: *decentralized* service delivery through *on-site*, *hands-on* and *LCE-led* practical learning activities. This involves

- *clustering projects around an allied local authority* whose mayor or governor is a Synergeia program champion. This way, the local authority serves as an area resource center, and its chief executive the lead resource person, for neighboring localities interested in the program.
- *conducting rapid assessment with respect to key areas of the LSB reinvention*, e.g. membership, regularity and content of meetings, education planning and budgeting. Here, interfacing usually happens at the level of project managers who handle day-to-day operations; thus, project managers of the area resource center become resource persons themselves.
- *conducting highly participative events* – particularly through workshops – to surface local concerns, as well as corresponding solutions, on key aspects of the reinvention process – particularly in broadening LSB membership, expanding its functions, making the planning and budgeting process more transparent, and successfully effecting planned changes.
- *on-site mentoring and coaching by peer-mayors and governors*, especially in managing change and improving local resource generation and mobilization; and
- *evidence-based advocacy, emphasizing measurable improvements in education outcomes*. Helped by Synergeia-commissioned studies on LSB operations and SEF tax utilization in the Philippines, cross-referenced with poverty and human development indicators, program champions are able to send their message across. This is especially important in convincing mayors and governors that going into education governance is good for their politics.

Impacts and Outcomes

Consequently, Synergeia religiously benchmarks itself at two levels: (1) against comparable organizations in the Philippines and all over the world, and (2) among its project sites in regard to such indicators as regularity in convening the LSB, broadening its membership, improvements in school financing and improvements in test scores.

Because of this, it can proudly claim key headways made in improving education governance in the Philippines, as indicated by the following:

1. Naga's LSB reinvention initiative was recognized as one of the 10 outstanding programs of local governments in the Philippines for 2004.
2. The central government constantly cites the need to reform the LSB in its own effort to strengthen basic education in the country.
3. More than 250 local governments have embraced LSB reinvention, many bringing this down to the *barangay* (village) level.
4. There is heightened awareness about the crisis facing the Philippine educational system, with more sectors contributing additional resources to community-based efforts in improving public schools, and
5. Mayors and governors, who used to be ambivalent towards education governance, have become more passionate in improving the lives of children through better education.

Conclusion

Of course, there is much work that needs to be done to mainstream these education governance reform efforts in the Philippines.

For instance, we need to educate more LCEs that contrary to convention wisdom, there are enough legal provisions that actually support greater local involvement in public education. We also need to come up with a model that will be useful to mayors in Muslim communities in Southern Philippines, owing to the absence of a good role model and support system for effective governance. Moreover, at 250 localities, we have barely scratched the surface in this advocacy.

Nonetheless, the successful Philippine experience in education governance through Synergeia's trailblazing efforts affirms the following:

1. *Local education governance reforms can be done.* Without the need for rewriting the basic decentralization law, Naga and the other Synergeia project sites have demonstrated that education governance reforms are both doable and feasible. Their experience show that empowered and functional local schools boards have both the mandate and legal personality to serve as focal point for these reforms.

2. *LSBs are the most logical vehicle for reform.* Local schools boards can bring together local communities and key players in the public school system in discussing the state of local education, which can be the basis for positive and informed collective action.
3. *Broad-based stakeholder participation enhances outcomes.* Moreover, LSBs can serve as entry points for greater and more meaningful stakeholder participation in the delivery of public education services. Regular grassroots consultations not only make for good politics; they are also avenues for multi-level and multi-stakeholder assessment of where a locality is in the journey to build better schools.