



How decentralised are education systems, and what does it mean for schools?

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How decentralised are education systems, and what does it mean for schools?

- Since the early 1980s, there has been a significant shift towards more school autonomy, but the degree of autonomy and domain of decisions to which it applies vary widely across countries.
- As schools have become more autonomous, central authorities have also been given a bigger role in determining standards, curricula and assessments.
- Within schools, the balance of responsibility among different stakeholders also varies depending on the country and domains of decisions being taken.
- Granting more decision-making power to schools can have a positive impact on learning outcomes when leveraged properly. However, it has also made the role of school leader more challenging and complex, with school leaders reporting heavier workloads.

Box 1. Data sources and definitions

This *Education Indicators in Focus* brief builds on the wealth of analyses previously carried out on the level of decentralisation of school systems and levels of school autonomy:

- **Education at a Glance 2018** (OECD, 2018^[1]): provides data on decision-making levels in public lower secondary education, distinguishing between the level of decision-making authority (i.e. central, state, local, schools or school boards / committees, and multiple levels) and the degree of autonomous or “shared” decision making (i.e. full autonomy, after consultation with bodies located at another level within the education system, independently but within a framework set by a higher authority, other). The data cover 23 decisions, organised into four domains:
 - organisation of instruction (e.g. student admissions, instruction time, grouping students)
 - personnel management (e.g. hiring and dismissal, duties and conditions of service, salary scales of teaching staff and principals)
 - planning and structures (e.g. design of programmes of study, selection of subjects taught in a particular school, definition of course content)
 - resources (e.g. allocation and use of resources for teaching staff and principals).

Each decision is weighted so that all four domains have equal weight.

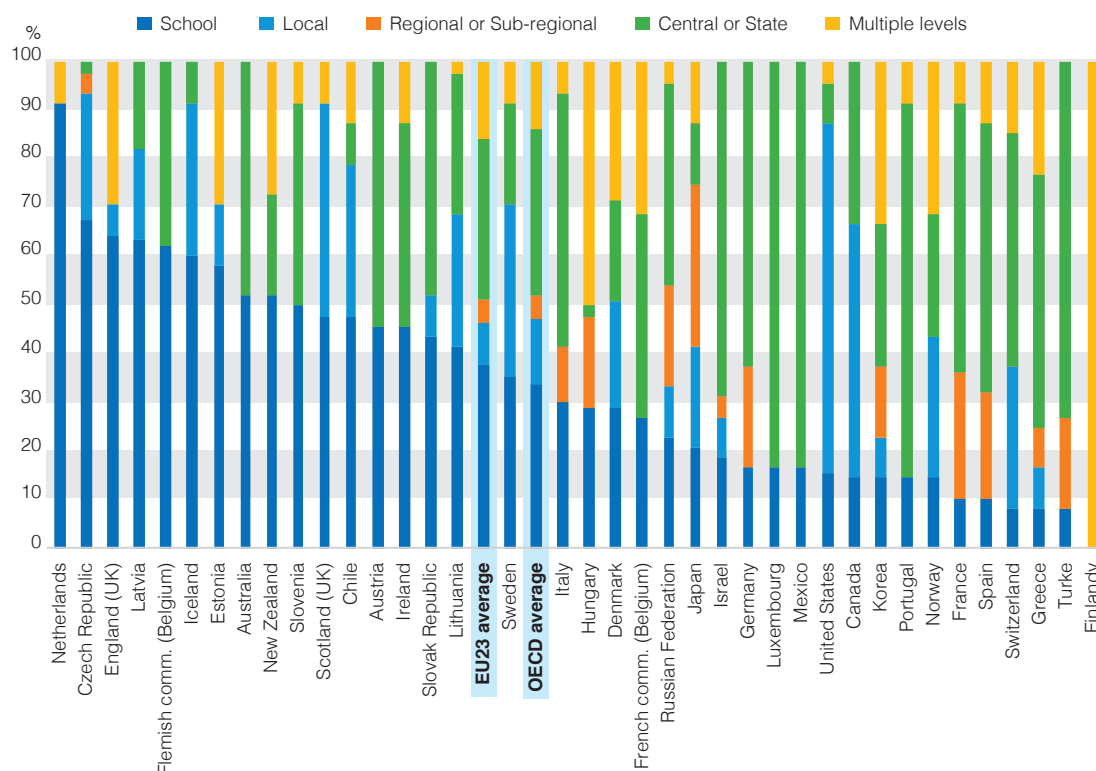
- **The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2015** (OECD, 2016^[2]) provides data on the survey responses of principals of schools in which 15-year-olds are enrolled (both public and private, and lower and upper secondary schools).
- **The OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) 2013** (OECD, 2014^[3]) provides data on the survey responses of lower secondary school principals (in both the public and private sector), about the degree to which the responsibility for decision making in certain areas is held at a school level, as opposed to at a local or national government level.

How is decision-making power distributed within education systems?

Since the early 1980s, several countries, including Australia, Canada, Finland, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom, have engaged in system reforms to devolve decision-making powers to the local and school levels. Schools were granted increased autonomy over decisions regarding curricula, and the allocation of financial and human resources. The underlying premise was that local stakeholders and schools were best placed to understand the needs of local communities and students, and make better resourcing decisions (OECD, 2016^[2]; Hanushek, Link and Woessmann, 2012^[4]).

Across OECD countries, the share of decisions taken at each level of government provides a first measure of how decentralised education systems are. Fewer than one-third of OECD and partner countries and economies have systems where the majority of decisions are taken at the central or state level whereas decisions are mostly taken at the local or school level in about half. However, the proportion of decisions taken at the local or school levels varies widely: from 8% in Turkey to over 90% in the Czech Republic, the Netherlands and Scotland. In other countries, such as Denmark and Japan, decisions are distributed over several levels of government (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1 / Percentage of decisions taken at each level of government in public lower secondary education (2017)



Countries are ranked in descending order of the percentage of decisions taken at the school level.

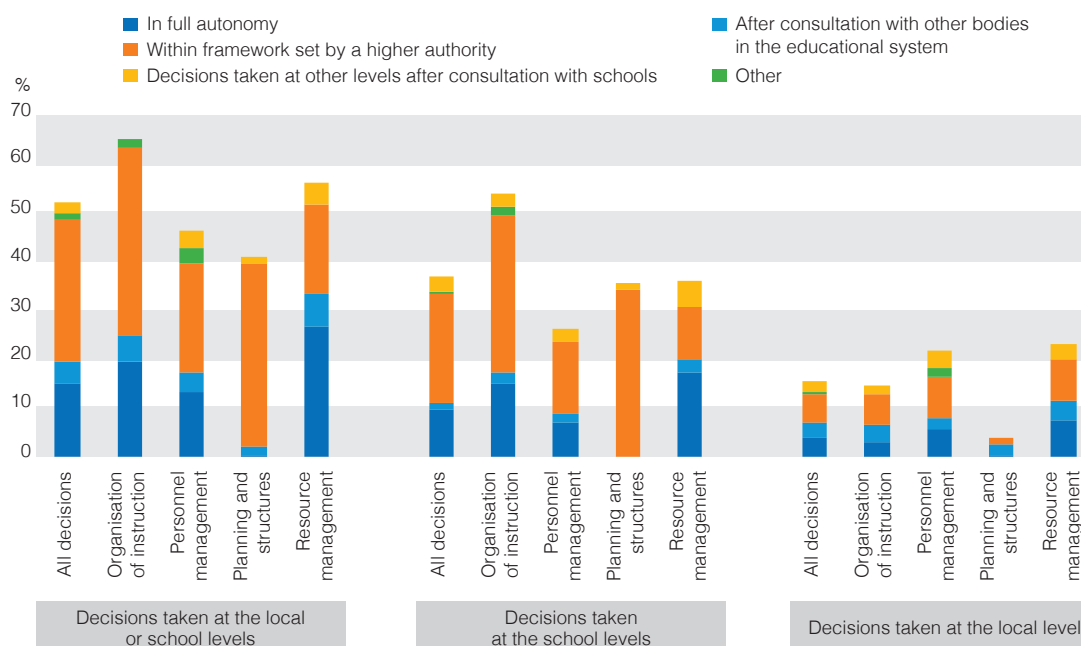
Source: OECD (2018), Table D6.1. See Annex 3 for notes (www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance-19991487.htm).

The level of decision making and degree of autonomy also depends on the type, or domain, of decisions being taken. Significant differences within and between countries emerge when comparing domains. On average across OECD countries and economies, schools or local governments make 63% of decisions related to the organisation of instruction – but only about 20% are taken in full autonomy. In the Czech Republic and the Netherlands, schools take all the decisions about the organisation of instruction, but mostly within a framework set by a higher authority. Decisions on planning and structures, and personnel management, tend to be more centralised – on average, about 50% of planning and structure decisions and 35% of personnel management decisions are taken at the central or state level. Even when these decisions are devolved to the local or school levels, they rarely have full autonomy. There is also a clear difference in where the authority lies for decisions about the allocation of resources compared with decisions about their use. Although state and central authorities decide how resources are allocated in nearly half of countries and economies, the use of resources within schools for staff and for professional development of teachers and principals is more often decided at the school or local level (OECD, 2018_[1]). Overall, about half of the decisions on resource management taken at the school level are taken in full autonomy (Figure 2).

What role do higher authorities play in decentralised systems?

As schools became more autonomous, central authorities were also given a bigger role in determining standards, curricula and assessments, thus strengthening the mechanisms to make schools accountable for their results. In the public lower secondary system, only about a third of

FIGURE 2 / Percentage of decisions taken at the local or school levels in public lower secondary education in OECD countries, by mode of decision making and domain (2017)



Source: OECD (2018), Table D6.3 and Tables D6.4a, D6.4b and D6.4c available on line. See Annex 3 for notes (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/eag-2018-36-en>).

the decisions made at the school or local level are taken in full autonomy while about two-thirds of them are taken within a framework set by higher authorities (OECD, 2018^[1]).

The role of central authorities is to ensure an accountable and equitable education system, especially when greater school autonomy is combined with free choice for parents over schools. Several systems such as the Flemish community of Belgium, Sweden and the United Kingdom have promoted free school choice combined with greater autonomy. Such policies are meant to enable parents to send their child to the school of their choice, whether in the public or private education system. School autonomy and parental choice could overcome mismatches between education supply and demand among parents, increase competition between schools and therefore stimulate innovation.

However, the line between school differentiation and school segregation is a fine one. School autonomy combined with parental choice can also result in isolated, segregated schools: while some schools may benefit from greater autonomy, others may not succeed in managing their increased responsibilities. And while parents from higher socio-economic backgrounds can afford to choose the best schools for their children, those from disadvantaged backgrounds might have to prioritise financial criteria over quality when choosing their children's school and might be less well informed than the most advantaged parents. (OECD, 2016^[2]; OECD, 2017^[5]; Rodriguez and Hovde, 2002^[6]). Nonetheless, while the risk of segregation exists, cross-country data show no relationship between the prevalence of school choice and segregation, which mainly depends on the framework conditions that underpin school choice (OECD, 2017^[5]). It is therefore important for central authorities to maintain a strategic vision and clear guidelines to ensure that the development of free school choice does not come at the expense of equitable education provision.

How is decision-making power distributed within schools?

Various stakeholders can be involved in decisions taken at the school level. School heads are often seen as the authority in charge of school development and management, ensuring the connection between teachers, parents and higher levels of the education system. However, providing high-quality education requires collaboration and for decisions to be shared between stakeholders (Burns and Köster, 2016^[7]; Cheng, Ko and Lee, 2016^[8]).

Building shared responsibilities between teachers and school heads depends largely on school heads' ability and willingness to grant decision-making power to teachers. It also depends on appropriate training being developed for school heads and teachers to provide them with the tools they need to assume their increased responsibilities. Across OECD countries, only Latvia, Portugal, Sweden and Turkey have legislation requiring



teachers to be involved in school or other management activities. In contrast, management involvement of teachers is up to individual schools in 19 out of 38 economies (OECD, 2018^[1]). On average across OECD countries, 72% of principals reported giving teachers the possibility to participate in decision making at least once a month and 73% of them engage with teachers to build a school culture of continuous improvement. On the other hand, only 34% of principals reported asking teachers to review management practices at least once a month and about 10% reported that they never do so. However, in Korea, Turkey and the United States, over 65% of students are enrolled in schools whose principal reported that teachers are asked to participate in reviewing management practices at least once a month (OECD, 2016^[2]).

Just as at the education system level, the distribution of responsibilities at the school level depends on the domain of decisions being made. School leaders take the majority of decisions about resource management – especially staff management. On average across OECD countries, 70% of 15-year-old students are enrolled in schools where principals reported having considerable authority over selecting teachers, and 57% in schools where principals reported having considerable authority over dismissing them. These shares rise to over 97% in the Czech Republic, Iceland and the Slovak Republic, but are less than 10% in Greece and Turkey. In contrast, on average across OECD countries, only 10% of students are enrolled in schools where principals reported that teachers have considerable authority over teachers' selection, and 1% in schools where principals reported teachers having considerable authority over their dismissal. Teachers usually have decision-making power over matters related to curricula and student assessments. Across OECD countries, 82% of students are enrolled in schools where teachers are predominant in choosing textbooks, and 68% in schools where teachers are predominant in determining course content. However, it varies considerably between countries – from less than 5% in Greece up to 94% in New Zealand (OECD, 2016^[9]).

Schools may also significantly involve parents in the decision-making process. On average, 96% of students are enrolled in schools where principals reported providing a welcoming and accepting atmosphere for parents to get involved and 77% in schools where parents are involved in school decisions. Across OECD countries, the parents of children enrolled in private schools participate more in school-related activities than those whose children attend public schools. Parents remain essential partners for teachers and principals as they ensure the transition between home and school and are essential for creating a positive and responsive learning environment (OECD, 2016^[2]). However, legislation on parents' involvement varies widely from country to country, and no pattern has been found between their degree of decision-making power and students' performance.

On the other hand, in schools where teachers and school heads collaborate more closely on school management and development, students tend to perform better in science (OECD, 2016^[2]). This is particularly true when school heads and teachers have more freedom over curriculum development and assessment policies.

How does autonomy affect school operation and leadership?

The link between school autonomy and student performance has been widely discussed (Hanushek, Link and Woessmann, 2012^[4]). In particular, when combined with strong accountability mechanisms, school autonomy in allocating resources is associated with better student performance (OECD, 2011^[10]; OECD, 2016^[2]). However, the way in which increased autonomy changes how schools operate – including the working conditions of school heads and teachers, the relationship between them, and the overall school climate – is still poorly understood.

Greater autonomy changes the roles of educational stakeholders. Schools have more control over their use of resources and therefore face a greater demand for results. Specifically, school leaders and teachers increasingly have had to take on a demanding set of roles, including financial and human resource management and leadership for learning (Pont, Nusche and Moorman, 2008^[11]).

Many principals complain about heavy workloads, although those with higher levels of distributed and instructional leadership¹ report greater job satisfaction (OECD, 2014^[3]). Overburdened roles, inadequate preparation and training, limited career prospects, and insufficient support can all exacerbate the challenge of attracting candidates to school leadership positions (Pont, Nusche and Moorman, 2008^[11]). If the support system for school heads and other local stakeholders is not adapted accordingly, more autonomy can clearly result in increased stress levels and significant challenges for schools, which in turn may affect students' performance. In fact, Sweden's falling results in PISA following its complete decentralisation policy in the 1990s partly stemmed from stakeholders' unpreparedness for such large changes (Blanchenay, Burns and Köster, 2014^[12]). Training, appraisal and support for school heads and teachers must be adapted to meet the increasing demands that stem from greater school autonomy (OECD, 2017^[5]).

¹ Instructional leadership includes supporting co-operation among teachers to develop new teaching practices, ensuring that teachers take responsibility for improving their teaching skills, and ensuring that teachers feel responsible for their students' learning outcomes.

The bottom line

School autonomy is popular but also complex and sometimes contentious. Many education systems have increased schools' autonomy in the hope of achieving greater efficiency and closer adaptation to local needs. In some countries, however, increased autonomy has led to greater pressure on schools and local stakeholders. To be successful, school autonomy needs to be built on a set of key ingredients: a strong national framework and a clear strategic vision, well-adapted school head and teacher training programmes, solid accountability mechanisms, and the creation of a collaborative environment – between and within schools.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- [12] **Blanchenay, P., T. Burns and F. Köster** (2014), "Shifting Responsibilities - 20 Years of Education Devolution in Sweden: A Governing Complex Education Systems Case Study", *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 104, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5jz2jg1rqrd7-en>.
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- [8] **Cheng, Y., J. Ko and T. Lee** (2016), "School autonomy, leadership and learning: A reconceptualisation", *International Journal of Educational Management*, Vol. 30/2, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-08-2015-0108>.
- [4] **Hanushek, E., S. Link and L. Woessmann** (2012), "Does school autonomy make sense everywhere? Panel estimates from PISA", *Economics Working Paper Series*, No. No. 296, Asian Development Bank.
- [1] **OECD** (2018), *Education at a Glance 2018: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/eag-2018-en>.
- [5] **OECD** (2017), *School Choice and School Vouchers: An OECD Perspective*, OECD, Paris, <http://www.oecd.org/education/School-choice-and-school-vouchers-an-OECD-perspective.pdf>.
- [9] **OECD** (2016), *Education at a Glance 2016: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/eag-2016-en>.
- [2] **OECD** (2016), *PISA 2015 Results (Volume II): Policies and Practices for Successful Schools*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264267510-en>.
- [3] **OECD** (2014), *TALIS 2013 Results: An International Perspective on Teaching and Learning*, TALIS, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264196261-en>.
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- [11] **Pont, B., D. Nusche and H. Moorman** (2008), *Improving School Leadership, Volume 1: Policy and Practice*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264044715-en>.
- [6] **Rodriguez, A. and K. Hovde** (2002), "The challenge of school autonomy: Supporting principals", *LCSDH Paper Series*, No. 77, Latin America and the Caribbean Regional Office, The World Bank.

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www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance-19991487.htm
Education Indicators in Focus (previous issues)
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