

## Parent–School Partnership Formation through the School Council in Korea

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### Abstract

Official involvement of parents in school education has been very limited until recently within the highly centralized educational administration and school management system in Korea. But, the educational reform in 1995 has brought fundamental changes in educational administration and school management system of Korea. The main approach of the reform is decentralization, which tries to turn over the power of the central government in educational administration and school management to the hands of regional education offices and site schools. According to the reform, the school council was introduced to enforce autonomous and responsible school-based management through broad participation of various stakeholders of education. In this article, I examined the background, roles, and characteristics of the school council, focusing on the new pattern of parent–school participation formation. And based on the findings, I discussed the issues of parents' participation and future prospects of the school council and suggested policy implications for better implementation of parent–school partnership through the school council.

**Key Words:** educational reform, parents' participation, school-based management, school council, school partnership

### Introduction

Korea has a unique education system characterized by much larger private sector representation and investment, and a relatively small publicly financed sector compared to other industrialized nations. The rapid educational expansion in Korea was proceeded by the government-led economic developmental plans, which directly reflected on educational policy and planning since the 1960s. The government has provided and expanded education system based on the manpower needs of the industry. In general, this approach of the government has been successful in terms of financial efficiency. The focus of the government educational plan has moved from primary to secondary, and finally to tertiary level according to nation's economic advancement.

McMahon's (1995) analysis on the net effect of policies regarding the expansion of primary, secondary and higher education between 1965 and 1990 revealed that secondary school enrolment and investment in education in Korea had a positive and crucial relationship to economic growth (World Bank, 1995). Expansion of secondary enrolment and public investment in secondary education were very important in offsetting diminishing returns on investment in physical capital, and thus made significant contributions to achieve high sustained per capita income growth. The positive effect from public investment in secondary education is made possible under the circumstances that Korea had universal primary education as well as comparable rates of investment in physical capital and export-oriented growth strategy (World Bank, 1995). That is, timely supply of manpower and offsetting diminishing returns to physical capital through human capital have been successful from economic point of view.

These government policies for educational expansion was possible due to high degree of cost recovery from students and parents in secondary and especially higher education, given the government's budget constrains (Kim and Lee, 2003). Contribution from the private sector and households has led to successful implementation of the national education development policies. There is a general consensus that oppressed educational opportunities during the Japanese colonial period, and rapid socio-economic changes after the civil war in 1950 has inspired the educational aspiration of the Korean people (Gahng, 1999). Korean people have experienced upward social mobility through education, and this experience has made them demand more educational opportunities (O, 2000). In short, rapid educational development of Korea is a joint work of the Korean people's educational aspiration and investment with the Korean government's development plans.

However, parents' participation in school management has ironically been very limited in Korea while their contributions were the main factor for rapid educational development. Instead, the government has highly regulated and centralized governing system in the past three decades. Under this circumstance, the Korean government began to reform educational administration and school management system to lead more participation of diverse stakeholders of education from the mid-1990s.

The school council has been introduced in this background. In this article, I will examine how the council contributes to parent-school partnership formation. This new pattern of partnership should be understood in the socio-economic and socio-political context of the recent educational reform of Korea because it came from the whole idea of educational reform of administration and management system towards more decentralized school-based management. Based on these examinations, I will suggest policy implications for better implementation of parent-school partnership through the school council.

## Educational Administration and School Management System

Education policy in Korea, for the most part, had been based on the premise that the individual interests of parents, students, and educators should be subordinated to broader public policy objectives. Priority had long been given to the interest of the government and administrators who support and provide services, rather than to the interests of those who teach and learn in the classroom. Centralized administration, far from paying a service role, had dominated the main sectors of education, such as, teachers, students, and parents. Therefore, the school had been in a subservient position, serving the administrators (Kim, Y., 2000). As education is seen as a means to serve the general good of society, Article 7 of the Education Law stipulates that all schools are the public instruments of the state and must be established in accordance with the standards provided by the relevant statutes (Kim, J, 2000).

In such educational administration system, the Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development has been responsible for the formulation and implementation of policies related to academic activities, sciences, and public education. The Ministry has planned and coordinated educational policies, worked out ideas for elementary, secondary and higher educational policies, published and approved textbooks, provided administrative and financial support for all levels of schools, teacher training system and been responsible for lifelong education and developing human resource policy.

However, since the 1990s the socio-economic and socio-political changes, resulted from the growing impact of globalization together with the financial crisis in East Asia, has changed the policy context in Korea. In fact, there is no denying that education systems in Korea, long organized and operated according to rigid restrictions and uniform control by the central government, have not been able to respond to the changing socio-economic and socio-political contexts. With power centralized in the hands of the Ministry of Education, local initiatives and autonomy were muted, and individual institutions lacked enthusiasm for a creative and rational approach to their operation. As passive institutions, their students could not be offered diversified education programs. Under strict orders and directives, teachers indeed had little autonomy while participation of parents in school education was so limited. Similarly, students had little opportunities to develop their own interests, talents or creativity (Kim, Y., 2000).

In this background, the legislation of the Law of Local Autonomy was initiated in 1991. With the legislation, education autonomy at the local level was promoted along with the line of implementing new modes of operation. Accordingly, educational administration became decentralized

and the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development delegated much of its budget planning and major administrative decisions to local authorities. In response to the heightening concern for the diverse needs of local education and skills they require, district offices of education, distinct from the general regional administration, have been established in seven major cities and nine provinces, as well as subordinate offices of education in counties and equivalent administrative areas. These offices make decisions regarding education, art and science pertaining to the respective local area.

Each local office has a board of members elected by the local council, which makes decisions regarding educational matters pertaining to the respective local area. Decisions are made through procedures that provide for compromise between public opinion and professional views, protected from political influence. Members of the board are selected by voting committee constituted of the school council established in each elementary, secondary, and special school. To take advantage of their independence and expertise in education, over half of the members must have 10 years of education or education administrative experience. The regular number of board members shall be a minimum of seven and a maximum of fifteen depending on the size of the city or province.

#### Educational Reform and the School-based Management

With the advent of the new global economy, the Korean economy has reached to the level that the available stock of technologies drawn on through conventional technology transfer is exhausted. Korea's past economic growth strategy largely based on input-intensive production such as labor and capital, and its ongoing dependence on foreign technologies, has its limits as manifested in the recent financial crisis. This recognition makes policy efforts to transform the Korean economy into a knowledge-based one where innovation can thrive, enhancing overall productivity and thereby sustaining economic growth. In this background, the Korean government has provided the chance for the principles of market economy to take root in education, expanding the scope of choice for educational customers, and greatly extending autonomy in school management, inviting competition among schools, and systemizing school evaluation for quality control (The Ministry of Education, 2000).

The principles of the recently initiated education policies have brought changes to the education scene by shifting educational emphasis from standardization to autonomy, diversification, and specialization; from providers to customer; from subject knowledge to nurturing moral character; from closed education occurring within the boundary of classrooms to open and

lifelong education; from academic sectarianism to individual capability; quantitative growth to qualitative improvement (Yoon, 2000).

As one of the policies, school-based management was introduced to change the rigid and closed education and training system. There is no single definition about the school-based management, but theories of school-based management can be categorized according to their emphases. First, a group of theorists stress autonomous management and decision-making of site schools (Harrison et al, 1989; Kim, 1995). They define the concept that schools free themselves from the central government's control in educational decision-making. In this case, the successful decision-making depends on cooperation between members of school. They also stress the creative school management and specialization of each school, and restrict the function of the MOE and Local Offices to policy direction and support. They suggest the whole educational decision-making system be reorganized to improve effectiveness in educational administration, including personnel, financial, and academic management. In this process, they emphasize teachers' professionalism and the balanced relationship between the principal and teachers (Choi, 1995).

Second group of theorists emphasize participation of the school community. This camp stresses site-based shifts of the decision-making power in the matter of educational personnel, program, budget to the field of education, and suggests official organization through widening participation of principal, teacher, parents, students, and community. They stress continuous decentralization in every resource of schools such as knowledge, technology, power, human resources, time, and money. They also suggest innovation in school management system through the school council (Caldwell and Spinks, 1989; Malen et al., 1990; Mesenburg, 1987). They argue that site-based, self-management in education is to get rid of the hierarchical and bureaucratic control toward school, to empower teachers with autonomy and responsibility, and to sure the broad participation of parents and students (Jin, 1995).

Third approach emphasizes the responsibility and accountability of schools. This approach stresses the school outcome. That is, based on autonomous, self-management in academic, administrative, financial planning and practice, each school should take responsibility about their institutional and educational outcomes. They give more weight on the principal's autonomous school management and responsibility (Chung, 1998; Rho, 1995).

Fourth approach stresses efficiency and effectiveness in school management. They point out that school-based management aims to meet the diverse educational needs of students, and finally to improve quality of education. For this purpose diverse subjects' participation in school management is inevitable. This is based on the assumption that site-based

management make possible for each school to set up proper goals of school management and to secure diverse resources depending on their needs and capability, and to use the resources more efficiently through collective decision-making (Yoo, 1995).

Although the definitions are different, the common element of school-based management is the autonomous planning and practise through decentralization. To decentralize the administration system, wide participation and cooperation between members of school community should be presupposed. The centralized and supply-centered education system was not able to meet diverse demands from parents and students, and in fact, caused excessive expansion of the private education market in Korea. While the local self-governing system was established in 1991, central government's direction and control for schools continued and impeded site-management of schools. One reason of the difficulty is originated from the long practise of educational administration culture that concentrates all power to the central bureaucrats. Therefore, it is very important to institutionalize broad and active participation of the members of school community through opened public decision-making procedures.

#### Background of the Institutionalization of the School Council

During the process of the maturation of the industrial society both income level and educational level have risen, forming a large population base for the middle class in Korea. Therefore, the citizens' interest and participation in solving political and social issues increased. At the same time, there is a rising call for a shift to an education that is equipped with a flexible system suitable for the knowledge-based society with the mounting criticism about the nature of school management system.

In this context, under the leadership of the President Kim Young-Sam, the administration initiated comprehensive education reform in 1995. Acknowledging the need for an entirely new education system, the Presidential Commission on Education was established. The Commission subsequently announced a series of recommendations on reform measures. Following the Education Reform of May 31, 1995, the Presidential Commission for the New Education Community (PCNEC) under the President Kim Dae-Jung was established in June 1998 to carry field-based reforms. In pursuing the objectives, PCNEC has been assisting in the creation of a new education community where all citizens play an active role in education (The Ministry of Education, 2000). In accordance with the newly enacted 'Law of Local Autonomy' the educational administration is gradually being decentralized.

Whereas the central government's authority diminishes gradually as it takes on the role of an overall internal coordinator as a result of restructuring administrative functions, the autonomy and responsibility of local governing bodies is increasing dramatically. In the long run, the reform policy aims that the education system should be revised in a way that actively guarantees the choice of educational consumers by reorganizing school system to meet the diverse demands and needs of students and parents. Also, it intends that schools with increased autonomy in school management will instill diversification in school education, which is currently uniform and de-individualized. At the same time, it assumes that school choice is expanded by competition between schools, and as a result, the quality of education is increased.

In order to increase the individual school's autonomy in school management, various authorities over educational management over elementary and secondary schools, which had been transferred to the metropolitan and provincial offices of education, come to be gradually transferred to individual schools. The school unit accountability system will be put into practise and the school-based budgeting system will be adopted to enable efficient and rational budget management based upon the educational plan of an individual school.

In this process, the participation of citizens in educational administration and financial management is enhanced through the school councils. Within the framework of a comprehensive education reform, it was crucial to establish a major body responsible for evoking the participation of the major stakeholders in the process of reform, since changes at the school sites cannot be brought about and sustained without active participation of all parties involved. Therefore, the reform procedures focus on a process beginning at the grass-roots level, encompassing all concerned parties.

### The Function of the School Council

The school council comprised of teachers, parents, and community leaders was introduced in 1995 into some model schools. The school council was spread to schools in cities in 1996, and to local towns in 1998 (Korean Educational Development Institute, 1998), and has been implemented in most public schools in 2001.

The school council is a collective decision-making body through broad participation of teachers, parents, and community leaders in the important decision-making process about school management. It is composed of a chair, 2 vice chairs, and 5–15 members depending on the school size. The ratio of composition is 40–50% of parents, 30–40% of teachers, and 10–30% of community figures (The Ministry of Education, 2000).

Its main functions are clarified on Article 32 of Law of the Elementary and Secondary Education. The council is to deliberate school budget, review financial accounts, raise school funds, propose elective courses and other after-school programs, and consider the school charter, regulations, and rules (The Ministry of Education, 2000). And it has power to elect of board members of the local education office and the head of the city and province education office, and to recommend personnel when inviting principal or teacher. And also, the council reviews other important agenda about school lunch, community education, lifelong education program, etc. It can create subcommittees for deliberation on important agenda items, and also establish spontaneous subsidiary parents associations.

#### Conventional Patterns of Parent–Community–School Partnership

Despite the societal change, the role of parents in supporting children's education at home remains a prominent feature in Korea as in other Confucian influenced regions. Traditionally Korean parents especially mothers assume responsibility for their children education and show unselfish devotion to their children as a critical feature of their parenthood.

The most common type of partnership has built by communication between parents and schools. Communication is usually made about school programs and student progress or their academic and behavior problems. Also parents volunteer to manage after-school programs to develop students' talent, aptitude, hobby, and specialties. And schools offer parent education programs although reports suggested that there should be more opportunities for parents to acquire parenting knowledge (KEDI, 2000).

Parents sometimes cooperate with schools in more direct ways for providing school programs like extracurricular activities. To enrich the programs, various resources in communities have been put into use. For example, more field trip centers to increase experiential learning are being designated in the local neighborhood, and the persons with various work experiences are frequently invited to speak before classes. And also students are encouraged to attend a variety of cultural activities hosted by publicly approved youth organizations. Schools are setting aside one day per week for the purpose of learning by experience, and students are also encouraged to visit their parents' workplaces to broaden their life experiences (Korea Institute for Youth Development, 2000).

Partnership between school and business is also encouraged at the secondary level by the government policies although this partnership is still weak compared with that of higher education sector in terms of scale and spontaneity. One good example of school and business partnership at the secondary school level is shown in the 'trust education' which allows the



students who do not intent to go to college can take vocational education and training at vocational schools and companies at their third grade. These trials began at full scale in 1990 and recorded some positive results for employment of high school graduates. And also, to satisfy the needs of rapidly changing society and to produce excellent industrial manpower, the dual system so-called '2+1 system' has been in operation since 1994. The 2+1 system is consisted with two-year general school education and one year of on-site training (The Ministry of Education, 2000).

More active participation of parents in school education arose from the establishment of the parents' non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Since the late 1980s, NGOs have exercised an important influence over educational change. There are two parents' bodies, which are influential in education at the national level: the 'National Parents Association for True Education' organized in 1989, and the 'Parents Joint for Realization of Human Education' established in 1990 (Korean Educational Development Institute, 1998). These bodies, supported by the government, suggest improvement of educational environments, fostering educational autonomy and democracy, and expansion of parents' right and participation (The Ministry of Education, 2000).

They coined the 'parentocracy' and suggested improvement of educational environment, settlement of educational autonomy and democracy, and expansion of parents' right and participation. They have dealt with various educational issues, and led public opinions. They have been actively promoting political actions against pending educational issues, and also they have offered educational seminars and classes, publishing newspapers and bulletin, monitoring mass media, and counseling parents and students, etc.

With the maturation of the civil society represented by various NGO movements, parents' official involvement in school management was full-fledged by the establishment of the school council in 1995.

#### Parent-School Partnership in the School Council and Emerging Issues

Apparently schools, parents, and community increasingly share experiences with each other, and interact in various ways, and these activities are also extended to school management. The involvement of parents and community members as decision makers are apparent in the school council. In this regard, new pattern of parents-school partnership formation appears in Korea.

With institutionalization of the school council, parents' right to participate in the school decision-making process is secured by the law, and therefore, parents can substantially influence on the school management. In

fact, it has been indicated that whatever the interest of family is, the role of parents' organizations was limited to financial support for schools where their children have been attended (Korean Educational Development Institute, 1994). But, parents are now able to have official channels to communicate with schools and to expand their influence on children's education.

According to a recent survey on teachers and parents, more than 90% of respondents think that the school council is necessary. And regarding the role of the council, respondents indicated to expand school autonomy in management is the most important. They also recognized that as a result of the parents' participation through school councils, new school culture that promotes parents' participation are created, the opportunity for parents' participation in school management are expanded, the parents' influence on decision-making process are promoted, and conditions for activating parents' participation including supporting parents' organizations are built up (Kim, S, 2000).

However, there are conflicting findings about the management of the school council. The question at issue is whether parent council members can effectively represent the whole opinions of parents. This issue is related with the matter whether parent council member is elected representatively regardless of their social strata, and whether schools have the mechanism for collecting diverse opinions of parents who are not the members of the council. In this respect, many cases are reporting against the purpose of broad participation of parents (Shin, 2003).

On the other hand, it is indicated that sometimes the result of the council meeting is not shared with students' families. The council meeting is usually informed of student family by school correspondence. But some schools do not report the agenda discussed to each family from time to time (Chang, 2002). Therefore, it is necessary to notify the result in order to increase parents' interest in the activities of the school council.

Another difficulty in the management of school councils is in the lack of knowledge and experience in school management of parent council members. It is pointed out as a stumbling block in management of the council (Chang, 2002). Therefore, to improve this situation, opportunities of training on school management should be expanded for parents and community members, and school information should be opened and shared by school community.

Whether students should participate in the council or not is another issue at hand. There is no consensus yet, but community council members oppose the students' participation while teachers and parents are relatively positive to it (Shin, 2004).

The management of the school council is posing new challenges to school principals. Under the conventional bureaucratic management system, the authority of principals used to be almost absolute. But, the school

council has changed the leadership of principals. In this process, opposing opinions between principal and teachers are sometimes acute, and cause conflict and antagonism. Especially there is sharp conflict between principal and teachers who belong to the Korean Union of Teaching and Education Workers. Divided opinions between them have also vast impact on the other members of the school council, and make trust building between members difficult. Effective partnerships need to find ways of changing aspects of education system. Therefore, to formulate new joint goals based on a common understanding of what needs to be changed will be a new challenge for all partners in the council. In this process, the principal should show leadership to reconcile conflicting interests.

### Conclusion

Korea has undergone a series of educational reforms, but the most comprehensive educational reform was started in the mid-1990s. One of the most distinctive features of the reform is that the Korean government has recognized the importance of enhancing parent-school partnership and taken the lead in promoting the partnership. For this purpose, the school council was introduced as a part of the education reform. It is meant to promote changes in both the structure of school management as well as in the nature of school programs.

The reform procedures have focused on a bottom up decision-making procedure, encompassing all of the stakeholders including teachers, parents, and community figures. The reform movement gets more strength by the new government, inaugurated in 2003, that advocates the policy goal of democracy and social cohesion.

The school council pursues creative school management based on an individual school's expanded autonomy. Parents' voluntary participation in the school council can develop local self-governing educational system. The council substantiates the concept of school community. Through the partnership in the council, the school community shares educational accountability and increases effectiveness of school management. And also it is expected to promote local autonomy in each school and to enable schools to provide diverse programs that reflect the needs of individual communities. In this process, it will improve the quality of education in the long run.

Partnership between school and parents in Korea is a relatively recent event. And therefore, it is premature to evaluate how much the school council contributes to expand autonomous school-based management system. But, many researches show that there is a tendency that partnership

between family and school through the school council gets more active although there are many bumpy issues to be tackled at the same time.

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