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**Education Decentralization  
in Latin America:  
The Effects on the Quality  
of Schooling**

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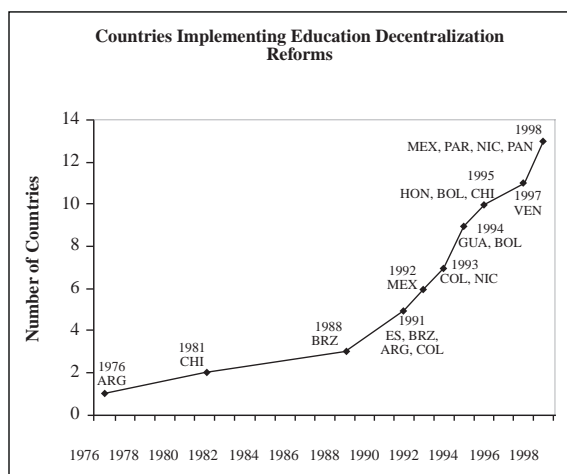
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As we have seen, over the past decade decentralization of government has become common throughout Latin America. The education sector is no exception, and there has been a rapid increase in the number of countries implementing significant decentralization reforms (see Figure 1). At the same time, there has been a worldwide trend to give schools greater decision-making autonomy, in the interest of improving school performance and accountability. School systems as diverse as those in Victoria, Australia; Memphis, Tennessee; and Minas Gerais, Brazil, have given authority to school heads, and then through a variety of mechanisms held them responsible for school performance.

**Figure 1**



The two types of education decentralization—to lower levels of government and to individual schools—have very different origins and aims. The decentralization of education to lower levels of government has almost without exception been undertaken in the context of a more general decentralization of government, the causes of which vary widely. The decentralization of education to individual schools, on the other hand, has typically been motivated by concerns about poor school performance. Both types of education decentralization are well represented in Latin America, and this chapter reviews the evidence to date on their various impacts on schooling.

The literature on education decentralization is growing rapidly, but it is still primarily descriptive in nature. Attempts to assess the impacts of decentralization have suffered from weak baseline

data and poor research designs, mainly resulting from inadequate data. Weak evaluations are not limited to Latin America or developing countries. For example, Summers and Johnson (1991) reviewed more than 600 evaluations of school-based management in the United States and found only two with an adequate research design.

Several recent studies and evaluations of primary and secondary education, both in Latin America and in other regions, provide the basis for this chapter, of which three merit mention. The World Bank recently completed several studies on education decentralization worldwide (Fiske 1996; Gaynor 1998); the Inter-American Development Bank sponsored research on the effects of different organizational arrangements in education in Brazil, Chile, and Venezuela (Savedoff 1998); and the Centro Estudios para America Latina (CEPAL) worked with researchers in five countries (Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, and Nicaragua) to assess education decentralization strategies (di Gropello 1998). In addition, this chapter draws on several country-specific evaluations from Latin America and selected evaluations from outside the Region.

## RATIONALE FOR EDUCATION DECENTRALIZATION

The economic rationale for decentralizing education is to improve technical and social efficiency (Winkler 1994). Decentralized decision-making, it is argued, will give local voter-consumers greater voice in the service mix that they receive and, hence, raise their welfare. Presumably, the more local the decision the greater the voter-consumer voice will be—that is, greater at the school level than the municipal level, and greater in single-purpose (for example, school district) than general-purpose governments. If the finance and supply of education is determined locally, the improvement in social welfare will be still greater, for the median voter-consumer will tax himself or herself only up to that point where the marginal tax costs and marginal educational benefits are equal.

However, these arguments presume a world in which democracy works well, and in which all externalities are captured locally. If there is the risk that local elites capture local decision-making, so-

cial welfare may not improve; this risk may be higher in societies with little experience in participative democracy at the local level. If the externalities alleged to result from education, especially basic education, are distributed beyond the confines of the locality, there is a strong argument for a high percentage of financing coming from centralized sources. Ensuring equality of educational opportunity, as measured at a minimum by equality in educational spending, is a further argument for a high degree of centralized financing in countries where income inequality is high.

Improved technical efficiency is the other rationale for education decentralization. Here the argument has several elements. First, to the extent that prices and production processes vary across localities, there are obvious efficiencies resulting from letting local decision-makers allocate budgets across inputs. Second, in situations where the capacity of central-government ministries to monitor and supervise local schools has been weak, devolving these responsibilities to local voter-consumers may increase the accountability of the school for its performance. The interest of local voter-consumers may be higher, if they are also contributing resources—financial or non-financial—to the school.

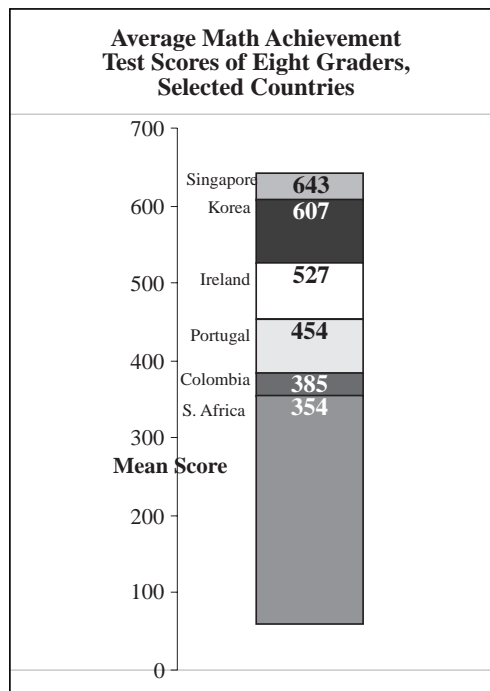
A final argument for decentralization is that having many suppliers rather than just one supplier is likely to lead to a wider variety of experiences and innovations. If there are adequate means for communicating and exchanging information on these experiences, a decentralized system may lead to more rapid innovation and change than a centralized one. There is some evidence for this argument in the case of Brazil (Xavier, Sobrinho, and Marra).

### THE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT OF DECENTRALIZATION

The problem of access to basic schooling has been solved for most children in Latin America. Now, there is a growing consensus that it is the *quality* of education that must be improved, especially in the public schools and especially for poor children (Summit of the Americas II 1998). Low quality is reflected in high rates of repetition and dropout and low performance on standardized tests of scholastic achievement. The Latin American and Caribbean

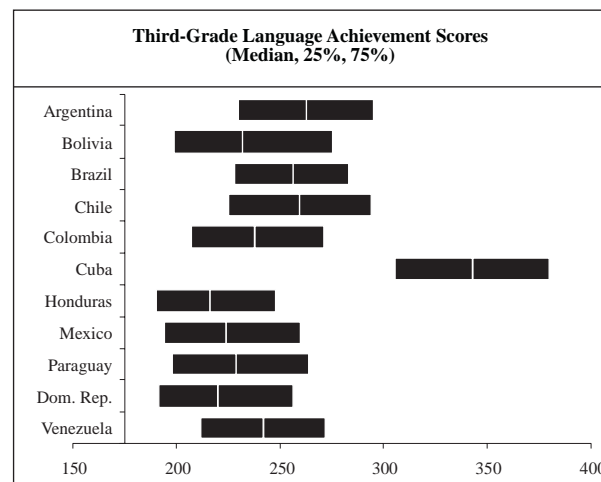
countries that have participated in international tests of science and mathematics have scored slightly above African countries and well below East Asian countries (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2**



Source: International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). (1996). *Mathematics Achievement in the Middle School Year: IEA's Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)*. Center for the Study of Testing, Evaluation, and Educational Policy, Boston College. November.

**Figure 3**



Source: UNESCO data in PREAL/CINDE 1999.

In addition, the evidence coming from a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) test of educational achievement administered in 11 LAC countries shows that, excluding Cuba, the performance of most countries in LAC does not differ greatly, suggesting that most LAC countries would fare poorly on international achievement tests (see Figure 3) (Laboratorio Latinoamericano de Evaluación de la Calidad de la Educación 1999). The low quality of basic education constrains the quality of higher levels of education and puts LAC at risk in its capacity to compete economically with the rest of the world. In addition, while children from all income groups now have access to basic schooling, there remain large inequalities in educational opportunity as measured by quality of schooling. Compared with children from economically advantaged homes, children from poor households are likely to receive lower schooling investments from both the home and the school.

While the rationale for decentralization is at least as much political as it is educational, the proponents of decentralization expect one impact to be improved quality. Other possible effects are changes in efficiency and equity. Due to the importance of raising quality and the limited information available on efficiency and equity, this paper focuses on the impact of decentralization on educational quality in LAC.

## **TYOLOGY**

Decentralization takes many forms. It varies by the level of government to which decisions are devolved, the kinds of decisions moved to other levels of government, and the orientation of the decentralization—emphasis on governance changes versus emphasis on pedagogic changes.

### **Level of Decentralization**

The level to which educational decisions are decentralized ranges from regional and local government to the community and the school. In many federal countries—Brazil, Canada, Germany, India—the states or provinces that make up the federation have had a constitutional responsibility for education. In other countries—Argentina, Mexico,

Venezuela—education responsibilities have historically been situated in the central government, but they have been largely devolved to states or provinces over the past decade.

Local governments quite often have educational responsibilities, especially for primary and secondary schooling. In the United States, most state governments have devolved educational management to single-purpose local governments, or school districts. In other countries—Brazil, Chile, Colombia—municipalities have been given increased educational responsibilities over the past decade.

Finally, some countries have given school councils and schools significant autonomy in managing (but rarely financing) education. The Netherlands is perhaps the best example of a country that has empowered parents to create their own schools with financing and other support from the central government. Recently, in cities like Chicago and Memphis in the United States, it is the school district that has given the school significant management autonomy.

### **Decision-Making Powers**

Some educational functions are decentralized even within centralized systems, and others are centralized even within decentralized systems. An OECD survey of its members, for example, shows that, even in centralized systems, schools make most of the decisions about the organization of instruction. These decisions include choice of teaching methods, textbooks, criteria for grouping students within schools, and day-to-day methods of student assessment. On the other hand, in most European countries, most personnel-management decisions are made at a central level.

The OECD methodology for measuring the degree of education decentralization divides educational functions into four groups: the organization of instruction, personnel management, planning and structures, and resources. For the purposes of this paper, we adapted these definitions to be consistent with Latin American experience and available information. The content of each group is given in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
**Types of Decisions That May Be Decentralized**

<i>Organization of Instruction</i>	Select school attended by student. Set instruction time. Choose textbooks. Define curriculum content. Determine teaching methods.
<i>Personnel Management</i>	Hire and fire school director. Recruit and hire teachers. Set or augment teacher pay scale. Assign teaching responsibilities. Determine provision of in-service training.
<i>Planning and Structures</i>	Create or close a school. Selection of programs offered in a school. Definition of course content. Set examinations to monitor school performance.
<i>Resources</i>	Develop school improvement plan. Allocate personnel budget. Allocate non-personnel budget. Allocate resources for in-service teacher training.

### Structure and Content

Just as the composition of educational functions that are decentralized varies across countries, so too does the goal and orientation of the decentralization reforms. In some reforms, local control is the goal, either for political reasons or to strengthen accountability by the schools to its clients. The focus of these reforms is on **structure**—that is, transferring decision-making powers and responsibilities to lower levels of government or to school councils. Implicit in these reforms is the expectation that local control and accountability will improve efficiency, both in the uses of resources and in the match between client demand and the supply of school services.

In other reforms, the goal is improved learning, and the transfer of decision-making powers is simply a vehicle for attaining that goal. These reforms put more emphasis on the **content** of education reform than on the structure itself. Parental participation is valued by these reforms because it is viewed as contributing to the success of education and not because it improves accountability. Matching client demand with what the schools offer is important only to the extent that client demand is consistent with raising quality.

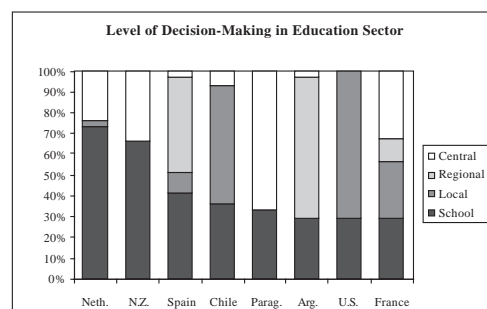
While it is tempting to contrast structural reforms with reforms that emphasize content, this typology is in fact a continuum, with most decentralization reforms encompassing elements of each.

### TYOLOGY APPLIED TO RECENT LATIN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Education decentralization has taken many forms in Latin America and the rest of the world. It always includes the transfer of authority and responsibility from higher to lower levels of government, but it varies considerably in terms of which decision-making powers are decentralized and who receives those new powers. Figure 4 illustrates the wide variety in Latin American and OECD countries in the location of important educational decisions. In addition, since education decentralization is often part of a broader education reform effort, there is considerable variation in practice in terms of accompanying school improvement measures.

In the discussion that follows, the typology will be applied to the experiences of Argentina, Brazil (with a focus on Minas Gerais State), Chile, El Salvador, Mexico, and Nicaragua.

**Figure 4**



Source: OECD 1998

## Level of Decentralization

The level of education decentralization varies widely within Latin America. In Argentina, primary and secondary education and the normal schools were transferred from the central government to the provincial governments (in 1976 and 1991, respectively), and today most decision-making authority remains concentrated in the provincial education ministries. In this respect—the concentration of decision-making authority at the regional level—Argentina presents a unique model in Latin America, although Mexico appears to be quickly evolving in a similar fashion.

Brazil has a long tradition of decentralized education, with most authority concentrated at the state government level. The state's pre-eminent role in secondary education was confirmed by the 1988 constitution, and municipalities were given the pre-eminent role in financing and delivering primary and preschool education. In addition, during the 1990s, some states (for example, Minas Gerais) have transferred significant decision-making authority to the level of the school.

Chile's education decentralization effort is long and complicated. It began in 1981 with the transfer of decision-making authority to the municipalities, on the one hand, and to nonprofit schools, on the other. It continued in the 1990s with the central government's exercising stronger pedagogic leadership and working directly with the schools to bring about school-level improvements.

El Salvador's decentralization effort was not universal but, instead, targeted rural areas where central government schools failed to function during the civil war. Hence, while for traditional public schools educational decision-making remained concentrated at the level of the central government, the new rural schools, called EDUCO (the Spanish acronym for Education with the Participation of the Community) were given significant decision-making authority and autonomy. The success in implementing the EDUCO model has led to current efforts to decentralize traditional schools as well.

Mexico's education decentralization is a combination of the Argentine and Salvadoran models. The 1993 the Ley General de la Educación transferred

most educational decision-making authority for primary and secondary schools to the state governments, but the central government's important role in financing education through negotiated transfers to the states resulted in de facto continued centralization. Real decentralization to the states occurred only in 1998 when education transfers became automatic. In addition, the central government continues to directly operate a system of rural schools, called CONAFE (the Spanish acronym for National Board for Educational Improvement), to ensure learning opportunities for remote rural, and especially indigenous, children. While not nearly as autonomous as El Salvador's EDUCO schools, the CONAFE schools give parents a considerably more important role than is found in the traditional public schools.

Finally, Nicaragua's education decentralization has evolved from an emphasis in the early 1990s on municipalization, to a clear policy in the late 1990s to transfer most important educational management and finance decisions to the level of the school.

Several other countries in the region have also adopted education decentralization policies during the 1990s. Colombia decentralized primary and secondary education to departments (regional governments) and municipalities, and Bolivia is slowly implementing a similar policy. Guatemala and Honduras have followed the model of El Salvador's EDUCO schools. In the region, only Costa Rica, Ecuador, Panama, and Uruguay have chosen to retain centralized educational systems.

## Decision-Making Powers

What does it mean that education has been decentralized to a particular level? As noted earlier for OECD countries, several educational decisions, such as choosing textbooks, selecting teaching methods, and responsibility for implementing school improvement plans, tend to be situated at the school level irrespective of the level of decentralization. Others, like setting the core curriculum or administering and reporting results on achievement examinations, tend to be located at the national level irrespective of the level of decentralization. Table 2 illustrates the focus of key educational decisions in several countries in Latin America.

**Table 2**  
**The Locus of Key Educational Decisions and Responsibilities**

<i>Group</i>	<i>Decisions</i>	<i>Arg</i>	<i>Min Ger</i>	<i>Chile</i>	<i>El Sal</i>	<i>Mex</i>	<i>Nic</i>
Organization	Level of decentralization	R	S	L	S	R	S
	Choose textbooks	S	S	S	S	N	S
	Determine teaching methods	S	S	S	S	S	S
Personnel	Hire/fire school director	R	S	L	S	R	S
	Recruit/hire teachers	R	R	L	S	R	S
	Set or augment teacher pay	R	R	L	N	N	S
Planning	Set performance exams	N	R	N	N	N	N
	Implement school improvement plan		S	S	S	S	
Resources	Determine expenditures	R	R	N,L	N	R	N,S
	Allocate personnel budget	R	R	L	N	R	S
	Allocate non-personnel budget	R	S	L	S	R	S

N = national, R = regional, L = local, S = school.

Decentralization is mainly characterized by the locus of decisions on personnel and budgets. The greatest consistency is found around teacher and school director recruitment and hiring decisions, and the budgeting of non-personnel expenditures. Thus, in Argentina and Mexico these decisions are situated at the regional (provincial) level, in Chile at the local (municipal) level, and in El Salvador and Nicaragua at the school level. Teacher pay decisions are sometimes retained at higher levels of government (as in Minas Gerais, El Salvador, and Mexico), and in most cases are heavily influenced by national policy that sets minimum pay conditions (for example, Chile) or national decisions about education finance (for example, Minas Gerais).

Of course, simple descriptions of decentralization fail to capture important nuances. A case in point is the school improvement plan. Almost every country in LAC now requires that schools or local jurisdictions develop improvement plans, but as a recent assessment of the Chilean experience illustrates, such plans are often carried out as a bureaucratic exercise and fail to meet minimum standards of quality and community participation. When schools do develop plans, they often lack the authority to implement them, as in Colombia. And even when they have the authority to implement, they may have no source of financing.

Another case in point is the allocation of the personnel budget. The multiple constraints of national or regional pay scales, collective bargaining agreements on working conditions, including class size, and national curriculum requirements may translate into little real discretion at the decentralized level.

### Structure and Content

Have decentralization reforms in LAC been mainly structural in nature—focused on increasing local control and raising accountability—or have they been more concerned with content and viewed as a vehicle to raise quality? The answer, of course, is not a simple one.

The education decentralization experiences of Argentina, Chile in the 1980s, El Salvador, and Mexico can be viewed as mainly structural in nature, but for very different reasons. In Argentina, primary and secondary education were devolved to provincial governments for mainly fiscal reasons. Hence, the goal of the reform was simply to move expenditure responsibilities to the provincial governments. There was little concern as to whether this would lower or raise quality.

In Chile, the Pinochet government simultaneously

introduced a modified voucher scheme and municipalized public education to increase competition between schools for students and thereby raise the accountability of schools to parents. In El Salvador, the EDUCO model has put the emphasis on the creation of school councils to receive and manage government funds for the purpose of providing schooling. While the main objective of EDUCO has been educational—to improve access in rural areas—its primary focus has not been interventions to alter the content and raise the quality of schooling. In Mexico, education decentralization has been an integral part of a broader decentralization of powers to state governments in keeping with the political liberalization of the country. Finally, Nicaragua's policy of school autonomy as the principal focus has been giving voice to parents and civil society on educational issues and, in this way, increasing operational efficiency (Arcia and Belli 1998).

In contrast to the cases described above, Minas Gerais and Chile (since 1990) have focused on changing the content of education and raising its quality through decentralization. Minas Gerais granted a significant degree of autonomy to the public schools financed by the state government to define their goals, develop a school pedagogical project, and manage financial resources with the overall goal of improving education. Chile since 1990 has attempted to balance the structural reforms of the 1980s with content reforms to raise educational quality, especially for the poor. While the recent reforms have been top-down in their design and the goals they pursue, they have attempted to deepen the decentralization process and move pedagogic decision-making to the level of the school. For example, beginning in 1992, teachers have been encouraged to work together to develop school improvement projects, which the education ministry funds on a competitive basis. The Teachers' Statute was revised in 1995 to allow school directors to manage funds directly and to provide school-based financial incentives for performance. Further, beginning in 1997, a competition to fund the best education improvement projects proposed by secondary schools both provides financial incentives for performance and gives school directors full management responsibility for implementing the projects.

## EVALUATION OF DECENTRALIZATION

While the reasons for the decentralization of education in Latin America are often political or fiscal in nature, from an educational perspective there is the expectation that decentralization will improve schooling outcomes. Schooling outcomes can be defined in a variety of ways, but at a minimum involve measures of the level and distribution of learning and years of schooling attained by schoolchildren.

For three reasons it is difficult to use these measures to evaluate education decentralization. First, time series of these measures are seldom available. Second, these school outcomes usually change slowly in response to any kind of educational intervention, including decentralization. Third, it is very difficult to control for external shocks—ranging from natural disasters and fiscal crises to teacher strikes and changes in national education leadership—that may also influence school outcomes.

Given the difficulty of isolating the effects of decentralization on learning and educational attainment, our approach is look at how decentralization changes factors known to be related to learning. First, we ask what is the received wisdom on what are the characteristics of effective or high-performing schools. Second, we ask how these characteristics are reflected in the school environment. And, third, we ask how does decentralization directly or indirectly affect any of these factors.

### High-Performing Schools

There is a growing qualitative and quantitative research literature on the characteristics of high-performing or effective schools (Mohrman and Wohlstetter 1994; Creemers 1994; Darling-Hammond 1997) that mirrors the much larger literature on successful organizations (Barzelay 1992; Lawler 1992). This literature concludes that high-performing schools are characterized by strong leadership, highly qualified and committed staff, a focus on learning, and responsibility for results. Another set of literature reviews the evidence on the process by which schools improve, and it yields conclusions that are consistent with the effective-



schools research. For example, in an evaluation of school improvements on three continents, Dalin (with others 1994) concludes that essential ingredients in successful reforms are a sustained commitment to quality improvement, local empowerment to adapt programs to local conditions, strong emphasis on school and classroom practice, and strong support

linkage between education authorities and the school “via information, assistance, pressure and rewards” (see Annex Box 4.A.1). In the discussion that follows, we group the variables associated with high-performing schools into four characteristics: leadership, excellent teachers, learning focus, and accountability.

**Table 3**  
**Characteristics that Can Be Stimulated through Decentralization**

<i>Characteristics of Effective Schools</i>	<i>Decentralization Variables that Can Contribute to Specific Characteristics of Effective Schools</i>
Leadership	School directors are selected by the community using transparent criteria. School improvement plans are developed locally. Resources are transferred to schools for the implementation of school plans.
Skilled and committed teachers	Schools are given the authority to make curriculum and pedagogic changes. Teachers have significant responsibility for developing school improvement plans. Directors are given the authority to provide a substantive evaluation of teachers’ performance. Schools are given the authority (and resources) to make their own decisions as to the type of training to be provided to teachers.
Focus on learning results	The school improvement plan emphasizes goals of improving learning (and associated results, such as reducing dropout and repetition). Information on learning at the level of the school is transparent.
Responsibility for results	Directors have fixed-term appointments which may not be renewed if improved learning goals are not met.

Strong **leaders** have the capacity to effectively develop and communicate a schoolwide and communitywide commitment to a common mission and vision for the school, and to manage the implementation of the school’s improvement plan. The common mission and vision fosters teamwork inside and outside the school, and, most importantly, the process of developing them makes teachers and parents the “owners” of efforts to improve learning. Leadership is especially important in a service industry like education, where the contribution of individual teachers is difficult to measure, and thus difficult to directly reward. In the absence of strong individual incentives, leaders must motivate teachers to improve. These characteristics can be stimulated

through decentralization. Table 3 summarizes our findings.

Decentralization cannot, of course, convert school directors who are used to passively following ministerial orders into dynamic leaders overnight, but it can and often does provide a transparent, competitive selection process for school directors that selects in part for leaders. A good example of this is the Minas Gerais decentralization, which (1) established a procedure for certifying qualified candidates to compete for school director positions, (2) required candidates to present their proposals for school improvements as part of the competition, and (3) empowered school councils to make the final

selection of the school director.

Excellent **teachers** commit to the high goals and standards of the school, have the strong teaching skills required to meet those goals, continually work to improve teaching and student learning, and do their work in a supportive work environment. Teacher commitment is essential to developing the teamwork required for schools to continually diagnose their own problems and devise their own solutions. Teamwork is also essential to permit the sharing of teaching experience required to continually improve teaching practices. Effective evaluations of teaching performance is critical to giving teachers information on what they need to improve and how to improve it. The time required to participate in the management of the school and the improvement of teaching is unlikely to be forthcoming in a work environment where teachers are not given time for these activities within their normal work schedule. In many LAC countries, where double and triple shifts are common, it may be logistically challenging to find the space and time for teacher participation.

Decentralization can contribute to excellent teaching in a variety of ways. When decisions on significant pedagogic matters are transferred to schools, teachers are empowered and motivated to work collectively to improve the services delivered to students. When school directors are given the authority to carry out meaningful evaluations of teaching staff, teachers can focus their training on what they need to improve. When resources for training and training decisions are given to the school, teachers and directors can purchase the training they need (demand-driven) rather than the supply-driven training provided by the education ministry.

Excellent teaching focuses on **student learning**. A school system that is focused on learning provides a pedagogy, a curriculum, and resources appropriate to student needs. In most cases, it is the local school and its teachers who are best placed to diagnose and find pedagogic solutions to individual student and collective school learning problems. Different kinds of students—rural, indigenous, poor, urban youth, and so forth—are also likely to have different learning needs with implications for the distribution of financial resources to schools by higher levels of government. Rural children may require smaller class

sizes, reasonable commuting distances, or bus transportation. Indigenous children may require more costly bilingual instruction. Poor children may require school lunches and subsidized textbooks.

Decentralization can facilitate and reinforce a focus on student learning by providing the information required to assess learning problems, devolving appropriate pedagogic decision-making to the school, and allocating additional resources to schools with special needs. The visible product of this process is a solid school improvement plan, constructed with the active participation of teachers and the community, and with real possibilities of being implemented. Good information on student learning, and on the value-added of the school, is essential to the diagnosis of learning problems that is an essential part of the school improvement plan. Good information is also essential to monitoring progress toward attaining learning goals. The devolution of appropriate pedagogic decisions is critical to the local design of solutions to local learning problems. Finally, financing is important, both because it is a means of implementing school improvement plans and because it permits the adoption of pedagogy that meets special needs. In particular, in the absence of additional resources, children from educationally disadvantaged homes are unlikely to meet the educational goals required for them to escape their parents' poverty.

Establishing **responsibility for results** provides the incentives necessary for sustained educational improvement. A school system with responsibility for results requires a set of measurable learning goals, up-to-date information on school performance toward meeting those goals, rewards for meeting goals and sanctions for not meeting them, and active monitoring of progress. The actor held accountable is typically the school director or the staff of the school. The actor holding the school accountable may be the education ministry, a school council, or both. In Latin America, the failure by ministries to hold schools accountable is often cited as the rationale for the creation of elected school councils, which have local knowledge of the school but often lack sophistication to systematically evaluate performance.

There can be no accountability at the local or

school level in the absence of devolution of authority to make pedagogic and resource-allocation decisions at the local level. Decentralization can contribute to accountability at the local level by devolving decision-making; establishing performance contracts between schools and financing bodies (including central-government ministries and parent-led elected school councils) that specify learning goals; creating information systems, including standardized tests of students' knowledge, to permit contract enforcement; and creation of performance-related rewards and sanctions, including dismissal of school directors. For example, the decentralization reform in the Chicago, Illinois school system replaced tenure for school directors with four-year contracts and required each director to sign an annual performance contract with the system specifying measurable goals for the year. Schools that consistently fail to meet goals may see their director dismissed and teaching staff reassigned (see Table 4.A.2).

## THE CONSEQUENCES OF SCHOOL DECENTRALIZATION

In this section, we attempt to evaluate each of the education decentralization cases discussed in this paper in terms of its potential to raise learning, especially among children from poor households. In some cases, such as Argentina, decentralization was just one component of a larger education reform. In other cases, such as Chile, education reform and changes in decentralized responsibilities have evolved over more than a decade. Given the complexities of evaluating reforms, we do not attempt to separate out the “decentralization” component for evaluation, nor do we try to evaluate the initial reform. Rather, we try to make an assessment of the reform as it looks today.

The criteria for this evaluation are the characteristics of decentralization that the research literature and professional opinion attribute to high-performing schools. Below we give a summary assessment for each country reviewed in this paper; more complete information on each country's education decentralization is given in the Annex.

**Table 4**  
**Assessment of Education Decentralization**

<i>Characteristics of Effective Schools</i>	<i>Decentralization Variables Related to Effective Schools</i>	<i>Arg</i>	<i>Min Ger</i>	<i>Chile</i>	<i>El Sal</i>	<i>Mex</i>	<i>Nic</i>
Leadership	Community selects director		✓		N/A		✓
	School improvement plans		✓	✓	✓		
	Transfer funds to school		✓	✓	✓		✓
Skilled and committed teachers	School curriculum authority	✓	✓	✓			
	Teachers develop improvement plans		✓	✓	✓		
	Directors evaluate teachers		✓	✓	N/A	✓	✓
	Schools decide training		✓	✓	✓		
Focus on Learning	Learning goals specified		✓				
	Transparent information	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Responsibility for Results	Fixed-term appointments for directors		✓		N/A		✓
	Competition for students			✓	N/A		✓
	Parents have effective voice		✓		✓		✓

## **Leadership**

The decentralization experiences reviewed here vary greatly in terms of the extent to which they have created the conditions that may give rise to strong local leadership. Neither Argentina nor Mexico has given school directors any significant authority and responsibility. Chile has recently granted more authority to directors of municipal schools, and of course the directors of the private subsidized schools have long had a high degree of authority. The EDUCO schools of El Salvador are mostly small and often without school directors, and school autonomy is only slowly being granted to the traditional public schools. Minas Gerais and Nicaragua are the two examples where school directors have significant authority, and in the Minas Gerais, in particular, the open selection process implicitly values the leadership qualities of candidates.

## **Teacher Excellence**

Strengthening the teaching capacity of teachers has been a high educational priority for most countries in Latin America in recent years. Argentina has embarked on a major upgrading of its normal schools. Minas Gerais has emphasized the use of distance education to upgrade teacher skills. Chile has provided competitive grants to universities to improve their teacher training programs and has sent large numbers of teachers abroad to strengthen their teaching skills. Mexico has introduced the Carrera Magisterial to strengthen teacher evaluation and performance incentives.

However, few of the region's efforts to upgrade teaching capacity have been accompanied by in-depth evaluation of teachers, additional compensated time to participate in school activities and prepare lessons, and incentives for teachers to work and learn in teams—all factors that appear to contribute to school improvement (Dalin et al. 1994). Among the countries reviewed here, Chile has the policies best aligned with changing teacher behavior and training. Teamwork among a school's teachers in Chile is encouraged through (1) competitive funding of teacher-designed and implemented school-improvement plans, (2) bonuses (equal on average to one month's salary) to the 25 percent highest-performing schools as assessed using school performance indices, and (3) provision of staff time to

participate in professional development circles, with financial support from the education ministry.

## **Focus on Learning**

The emphasis on improving quality and raising student achievement is clear in the Argentine education reform, the Minas Gerais decentralization reform, the evolving Chilean reform of the 1990s, and some of the policies and programs carried out in Mexico. It is less clear in El Salvador, where the emphasis has been more one of raising access, and Nicaragua, where the focus has been more on parental participation than on scholastic achievement. However, even in those countries where national education reforms and policies are focused on student learning, the conditions are not always present for effectively creating a school-based focus on learning.

Argentina has adopted an ambitious reform to train teachers, provide sophisticated feedback on individual student performance (at the secondary level), and provide additional financing for children with special needs. However, schools, teachers, and local communities have almost no authority to diagnose their own needs and design their own interventions. Minas Gerais, in contrast, encourages schools to diagnose, monitor, and evaluate; schools are expected to produce school improvement plans, and the state government provides funding for these plans and feedback on student achievement. However, the focus of all this effort is not necessarily specific learning goals, and teachers and community members are not always active participants in the process.

As in Argentina, the Mexican education reform has been guided and driven at the national level. While decentralization efforts have not been focused on improving learning, other components of the reform, including changes in teacher evaluation and pay, and providing additional resources for poor and indigenous rural children, are focused on learning. However, excluding the CONAFE schools, teachers and parents are not yet actively engaged in bringing about learning improvements at the level of the school (Gershberg 1998a).

Chile's reform efforts since 1990 have been focused on student learning, especially for poor children. Teachers have been actively involved in diagnosing their own needs and developing their own

school improvement projects. The Catholic University (1998) evaluated the school improvement projects carried out during 1992–95 and concluded that the largest change was increased innovation in teaching practices, especially increased use of interactive learning processes, and increased teamwork among teachers. The evaluation also found that, on average, schools that implemented improvement projects experienced increased student achievement as measured by the SIMCE. However, only 60 percent of all schools experienced achievement gains, reflecting the fact that not all improvement projects were focused on improving learning, and some projects attempted to simultaneously accomplish too many objectives.

In addition to funding school improvement projects, the Chilean education ministry has provided additional funding for special needs, such as with the P-900 program, which provided extra resources for the 900 poorest schools in the country. Average student test scores are annually published for each school in the country, and the schools making the most progress over time are eligible for financial rewards. While the education ministry could improve the monitoring and evaluation of specific learning standards, Chile has most of the conditions in place to bring about significant learning improvements.

## **Responsibility**

It is in the realm of responsibility for results that Latin American decentralization reforms are found to be most wanting. In Argentina, Chile, and Mexico there is at least one critical element missing for there to be real accountability. In Argentina, performance goals are not specified, systems to systematically evaluate performance are still under development, and no one is at risk of losing a job or suffering lower pay due to the low performance of the school in which they work. Performance goals are not specific in Chile either, and there are few risks to schools that do poorly. The same is true for Mexico. Furthermore, in all three countries school councils are largely nonexistent, so schools are accountable to neither parents nor higher levels of government.

In contrast, school councils are active in Minas Gerais, El Salvador, and Nicaragua; school staff can lose their jobs for poor performance in El Salvador

and Nicaragua; and school directors are at risk of losing their jobs in all three countries. On the other hand, learning goals are rarely specified with any precision, and the systems for monitoring and measuring school performance with respect to specific goals need considerable strengthening.

## **Empirical Findings**

While rigorous evaluations of education decentralization are difficult to find, a very few do exist. We review the findings to date of evaluations carried out in El Salvador and Nicaragua with the assistance of the World Bank, and we complement these findings with evaluations of decentralization in Brazil and Chile, and in two large U.S. cities—Chicago, Illinois, and Memphis, Tennessee.

The evaluation of **El Salvador's** EDUCO program by Jimenez and Sawada (1998) compares teacher absenteeism and student achievement in EDUCO schools with that of traditional schools, controlling for student characteristics and selection bias (since the EDUCO schools were not randomly selected). Two results merit attention. EDUCO schools, with their close community monitoring of the school and the potential sanction that teachers will not be rehired, had fewer days of teacher absenteeism than traditional schools, and student achievement in EDUCO schools was no different from that of traditional schools. Surprisingly, the study found no difference between EDUCO and traditional schools in terms of the number of decisions made at the level of the school, which suggests that the EDUCO model may not be fully implemented. On the other hand, EDUCO parents are three times more likely to engage in day-to-day classroom activities than parents in traditional schools, teachers in EDUCO schools spend considerably more time meeting with parents, and EDUCO teachers are much more likely to visit the family to inquire why a student has been absent from school.

In contrast to the El Salv

teacher training decisions. Another key finding of the evaluation is that the degree of decision-making actually exercised by autonomous schools varies greatly, and there is a positive and statistically significant relationship between the degree of decision-making exercised and student achievement. Furthermore, the strongest positive relationship to learning was found for variables measuring decision-making on teacher staffing and monitoring of teacher activities. Nicaragua also illustrates the potential role of the central government within the context of decentralization: A recent qualitative assessment of Nicaragua's school autonomy discovered that educators strongly welcome the active intervention of the central government in promoting a pedagogy of active learning (Fuller and Rivarola 1998).

The **Minas Gerais** reform has not been systematically evaluated, but the results of the Brazilian national education test put Minas Gerais at or near the top of student achievement in every grade and subject matter (INEP 1997). The reforms undertaken by the state of Minas Gerais in Brazil have been replicated in part by several other states. In particular, several states have now adopted (1) the establishment of school councils, (2) the direct transfer of resources to schools, and (3) the local election of school directors. Using state-level pooled time-series, cross-sectional data, Paes de Barros and Silva Pinto de Mendonça (1998) have analyzed the relationship between these reforms and a number of schooling outcomes—gross enrollment rates, repetition rates, age-grade lags, and student achievement as measured by the Brazilian national educational test, SAEB. They found statistically significant but mixed results. The establishment of school councils and the direct transfer of resources are associated with increased attendance and reduced age-grade lags, but have no statistically significant relationship to student achievement. The local election of the school director, on the other hand, is positively associated with student achievement gains, but not with the other measures of schooling outcomes.

As noted earlier, **Chile** has passed through two reform phases. The first, begun in 1981, emphasized changing the structure or organization of education through municipalization and the introduction of competition and choice. A simple comparison of student achievement scores across the 1980s shows

a decline in learning, but during this period real per-student education expenditures also declined, making it difficult to isolate the reform effect. However, a 1998 study by McEwan and Carnoy assembled school-level panel data to examine how the degree of competition and choice across municipalities and over time affects public school quality, as measured by changes in student achievement test scores. They conclude that this aspect of Chilean education reform has had no effect on public school quality. This finding confirms the qualitative evaluations made by other scholars that municipalization did not lead to any substantive changes in behavior and achievement in the public schools (Espinola 1997).

The second phase of the Chilean reform began in 1990 and, as noted earlier, simultaneously deepened decentralization and set clear goals of raising quality and equity. In contrast to the 1980s, student achievement on Chile's standardized exam, the SIMCE, increased significantly, both in language and mathematics (Cox and Lemaitre 1999). Nationally, the number of correct answers increased by about 18 percent. However, here, too, it is difficult to separate the effects of decentralization reforms, such as introduction of school improvement projects, from other reforms (for example, in teacher training), and from significantly increased spending over the decade.

The findings for El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Chile are complemented by two careful evaluations carried out in two large U.S. cities having large populations of poor and minority students—Chicago and Memphis. As discussed in Box 1, **Chicago** introduced largely structural reforms in 1988, and followed up with a much stronger content-based reform in 1995. A consortium of academic institutions led by the University of Chicago has carefully monitored and evaluated the Chicago reform from Day One. The most recent evaluation report concludes that year-to-year gains in student learning have risen significantly (for example, a 19 percent gain in achievement for fifth graders between 1992 and 1996) since the beginning of the reform, despite the fact that the socioeconomic level of students has been gradually decreasing (Bryk, Thum, Easton, and Luppescu 1998). Earlier evaluations demonstrated, also, that school reform efforts resulting from autonomy are as likely to be initiated in poorer as in richer neighborhoods.

**Box 1****Chicago: An Initial Emphasis on Governance**

Chicago has adopted two education reforms. The first, initiated in 1988, focused on governance, while the second, adopted beginning 1995, decentralized some powers and put the focus on improving learning. The 1988 reform created elected, parent-led school councils with the power to hire and fire the school director. The council works with the director to prepare and monitor a school development plan. Tenure for directors was replaced by four-year contracts. Directors were given increased powers to hire teachers, increased discretion in allocating the budget, and increased control over curriculum decisions.

By 1995 there was the widespread perception that educational improvements were not occurring rapidly enough in Chicago. As a result, the mayor took control and named a central district school board and a corporate-style management team. The board was given the right to impose sanctions on poorly performing schools, including disbanding the school council and evaluating and dismissing principals (in conjunction with the councils). One of its first actions was to put 109 of the 557 public schools in Chicago on probation because of poor academic performance. The 1995 reform also established a central body responsible for the review and evaluation of the performance of each school, with recommendations for actions to improve performance. Finally, it increased the budgetary autonomy of each school, including giving each director the freedom to outsource a wide variety of school services.

In contrast to Chicago, the **Memphis** reform has been heavily content-based from the beginning (see Box 2). The evaluation of the Memphis school reform confirmed the Chicago results of sustained improvements over time. Prior to implementation of the reform, the experimental schools (those subsequently undertaking school-based reforms) had smaller student gains in learning than a group of control schools. After one year of implementation, the

gains of the experimental and control schools were the same, and after two years of implementation, student achievement gains in the experimental schools were significantly higher than in the control schools (Ross, Sanders, Wright, and Stringfield 1998). Finally, an evaluation of the Memphis decentralization confirmed that leadership by school directors and teacher buy-in to reforms are critical to their implementation.

**Box 2****Memphis: Decentralization Focused on Improving Learning**

The schools of Memphis, Tennessee, serve a largely poor and educationally disadvantaged population. Frustrated with the persistently poor academic performance by students, the city decided in 1995 to grant limited autonomy to individual schools with the objective of stimulating school-level educational reforms. Each school formed an advisory school council comprising the director, teachers, parents, and community members. The principal function of each council is a technical one—diagnosing needs, agreeing on reforms, and monitoring progress in student learning—and while it is legally advisory in nature, its opinions are taken seriously.

Each school in the Memphis district was required to adopt a school-based reform from a menu of eight different school restructuring models. While the pedagogic orientation of the models differ, they share several characteristics: increased school autonomy (especially, on pedagogic matters); a common vision of school goals reflected in the school development plan; performance contracts with specific, quantifiable targets between the school director and the central administration; extensive teacher development activities at the school level; teamwork within the school; and constant monitoring of progress, including the use of standardized examinations.

The central Memphis education office continued to play a strong role in setting high standards (for example, all students in grades 3 through 8 must pass set exams in mathematics and science in order to be promoted); mandating minimum standards and core curriculums; facilitating teacher development by offering a broad menu of training options and opportunities; providing additional financing to cover the costs of implementing school development plans (with larger amounts for schools serving the poor); and establishing monitoring and evaluation systems to provide constant feedback to individual schools on their performance.

Taken together, the El Salvador, Nicaragua, Chile, Chicago, and Memphis evaluations provide strong evidence that educational decentralization can improve learning. What is notable is that those cases demonstrating the largest positive gains have emphasized school autonomy with pedagogic reform, especially true in Chicago since 1995, in Memphis, and since 1990 in Chile.

## Summary

Education decentralization is a worldwide phenomenon, and Latin America is no exception. While there are economic and education arguments for decentralization, the particular forms of decentralization in most Latin American countries have been driven more by politics. Given the magnitude of education decentralization efforts in the Region over the past decade and the forms they have taken, it is timely to assess their effects.

The evaluation of decentralization reforms is difficult due to (1) lack of baseline data, (2) incomplete implementation of many reform elements, and (3) lags between implementation and the changes in such factors as behavior and resource allocation, which affect learning. The difficulty in evaluating reforms argues for caution in interpreting results. The lack of much rigorous evaluation of Latin American experiences has led us to rely to some extent on good evaluations of decentralization efforts outside the region for our overall conclusions.

The fact that few evaluations exist of the impact of decentralization on learning outcomes has also led us to an alternative approach to infer impacts by looking at the extent to which characteristics of decentralization reforms are consistent with the characteristics associated with high-performing schools. The fact that two well-evaluated and successful U.S. school reforms—in Chicago and Memphis—have shared the decentralization characteristics professional educators associate with public schools lends credence to this approach. Interestingly, many of the recommendations made by educators for creating effective schools are consistent with the prescriptions economists might make.

Designing decentralization reforms to improve

learning is complicated by the nature of education. For example, it is difficult for any actor external to the school to monitor and hold the school's performance accountable. After all, the outputs of the school are several, and almost all are difficult to measure. Experience has shown it is especially difficult to measure the value-added of the school in producing scholastic achievement (Ladd 1996). In addition, when teachers work in isolation they have the capacity to shirk their duties, with little risk of negative consequences. Finally, strong labor unions and regulatory protection (often embodied in teacher statutes in Latin America) make it difficult to penalize poor-performing teachers even when they can be identified.

To economists, these **agency problems** argue for a number of solutions. First, intense efforts should be made to provide good information on the performance of schools and teachers, taking into account the complexity of the educational production process. This may require establishing an independent agency to carry out external audits of schools that go beyond merely identifying outputs, and provide diagnoses of problems and propose solutions as well. Second, school directors should be given a large degree of authority; they have considerably better capacity to monitor school and teacher behavior than do local political agencies, including school councils. Third, teaching should be organized in a way that minimizes shirking and provides peer rewards and sanctions for performance. This requires that teachers share experiences and work together as much as possible. Fourth, given the high risk of shirking, teachers must themselves become the proponents and owners of efforts to improve teaching, including deciding on their own training. Externally imposed (that is, top-down) solutions to educational problems are likely to fail in the absence of an effective communications campaign to enlist the support of teachers.

Of the Latin American reforms reviewed here, two—those in Chile and Minas Gerais, Brazil—entail a large number of the elements that arguably give rise to the characteristics of effective schools. Neither reform has yet been subjected to rigorous evaluation, although the available evidence for Chile is positive. Two other Latin American reforms—more limited in scope than Chile and Minas Gerais—have been evaluated in terms of impact, with somewhat



contradictory results. El Salvador's EDUCO program has not yet demonstrated positive effects on learning, while Nicaragua's charter school program has. Nicaragua's reform granted substantial authority to school directors, which Brazilian research has found to be associated with learning gains.

In sum, there is growing evidence that at least some of the characteristics of education decentralization reforms that focus on school autonomy, as opposed to municipal or regional autonomy, contribute to higher-performing schools. Decentralization to subregional governments may also yield some educational benefits by allowing greater innovation and greater flexibility to adapt resource allocation to local prices, but they have not yet been proven.

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