Abstract: No evidence exists for a direct link between public sector decentralisation initiatives and improved organisation effectiveness despite the rhetoric surrounding its implementation. This paper examines the role of accountability as a key factor in the 'mix' of variables that operate to focus attention on improving learning outcomes in state-owned schools. Using a case study, the research seeks to investigate the way in which performance data are used to facilitate accountability and to inform principals of the appropriate focus for planning and strategy development. The study reveals that principals, while initially wary of performance data and unsure how to interpret them, experience greater feelings of empowerment when these data are read in the light of the school's 'narrative'. With this heightened sense of understanding, principals appear to gain a greater appreciation of the role of performance data and how to make use of them in developing annual performance plans and strategies, with a direct focus on improving student learning outcomes. Directly addressing areas in need of improvement, principals are able to satisfy their accountability obligations. The linking of performance data, accountability obligations and the setting of priorities for future action illustrates the operation of indirect links between SBM and improved school effectiveness. These links need to be investigated further with a view to identifying how they can be targeted and developed.
Linking Accountability to Public Sector Performance: A Case Study

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Abstract

No evidence exists for a direct link between public sector decentralisation initiatives and improved organisation effectiveness despite the rhetoric surrounding its implementation. This paper examines the role of accountability as a key factor in the ‘mix’ of variables that operate to focus attention on improving learning outcomes in state-owned schools. Using a case study, the research seeks to investigate the way in which performance data are used to facilitate accountability and to inform principals of the appropriate focus for planning and strategy development.

The study reveals that principals, while initially wary of performance data and unsure how to interpret them, experience greater feelings of empowerment when these data are read in the light of the school’s ‘narrative’. With this heightened sense of understanding, principals appear to gain a greater appreciation of the role of performance data and how to make use of them in developing annual performance plans and strategies, with a direct focus on improving student learning outcomes. Directly addressing areas in need of improvement, principals are able to satisfy their accountability obligations.

The linking of performance data, accountability obligations and the setting of priorities for future action illustrates the operation of indirect links between SBM and improved school effectiveness. These links need to be investigated further with a view to identifying how they can be targeted and developed.

1. Introduction

Improving the effectiveness of public sector organisations remains a high priority for governments internationally. It is the motivation for the implementation of variations of New Public Management that have swept the globe over the past two decades (Ferlie, Ashburner et al. 1996). This is no less the case in public systems of education where, not only is it critical that the state provides an effective system of education for its student population, it is also crucial that they operate with maximum efficiency given the high proportion of funds allocated to education sectors. The aim of improving student learning outcomes is a challenge that is being addressed at many levels, including curriculum development, education design and change in management and governance structures.

Site-Based Management (SBM) is one manifestation of New Public Management (NPM), a wave of public sector reforms that, among other things, introduces private sector principles into public sector organisations (Ferlie, et al., 2003; McLaughlin, et al. 2002). The rhetoric relating to SBM reforms is that they will lead to improved student learning outcomes, as expressed by Caldwell (1998):

[While factors underpinning the movement to self-managing schools are many and varied, there has always been an expectation that they will make a contribution to improved outcomes for students.]

However, there is little in the way of research evidence to support this link (Leithwood & Menzies 1999). Evidence of improvements to student performance is sparse (Fullan & Watson, 2000; Caldwell & Spinks, 1998; Gannicott, 1998). The conclusion reached by Leithwood and Menzies (1998) is that:

There is an awesome gap between the rhetoric and the reality of SBM’s contribution to student growth in the light of widespread advocacy of SBM (p. 34).

To date, therefore, no direct link has been identified between the reforms implemented under SBM and improved learning outcomes. This is despite the beliefs of policy makers that such outcomes are to be expected. The purpose of this paper is to shed light on the role of accountability as a key factor in the improvement of student learning outcomes. It identifies the operations of SBM as it is practised in an environment strongly committed to its principles and it is hoped that this analysis will provide a rich understanding of the workings of the system ‘on the ground’.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section contains a review of the literature that includes a discussion of SBM processes, identifying differences with the traditional form of public education governance. This is followed by an outline of the research method and then a description of the research environment within which the case study is undertaken. This section outlines governance processes contained in policy documents and a description of the structure of the school-level performance report. Then follows a description of the process of analysis and findings of a Senior Education Officer relating to an actual (though de-identified) School Level Report. The paper ends with a discussion and conclusion section.
II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

An examination of the literature provides some indication of the differences between traditional forms of public education governance and the more recent move to a decentralised system that characterises SBM. The main purpose of this discussion is to identify clearly the role of accountability within the new system.

Traditional education systems

Traditional state school management is characterised by tight external control of schools from the corporate centre, where school management tasks take place under instruction from a central office of the education bureaucracy. They are standard structures, described as ‘implementing systems’, exhibiting tight structural control on constituent schools (Cheng 1996). Often this system of governance is not in accordance with individual school characteristics and school members do not have decision-making autonomy. Consequently, school management tasks are performed under instruction of the external central authority, often not in accordance with school characteristics and need, and school members do not have much autonomy. Earl and Fullan (2003) identified that the role of the principal under traditional systems was one where decisions were made using a combination of:

… intimate and privileged knowledge of the context, political savvy, experience and logical analysis. Data played almost no part in decisions (p. 383).

Site-based management

Site-Based Management (SBM) refers to the decentralization of decision-making authority to schools within a centrally determined framework (Cheng 1996); (Cheung and Cheng 1996); 2004; 2003), consisting of goals, policies, curriculum, standards, and accountabilities (Caldwell, 2005). It identifies the individual school as the primary unit of improvement, recognising that those who are closest to the business of schools will make the best-informed decisions. The essential purpose is to increase the autonomy of the critical stakeholders to improve the instructional process (Summers & Johnson 1996).

The introduction of SBM has facilitated the development of a wide range of systems within schools relating to pedagogy, curriculum and educational design internationally. More importantly for research, however, principals of state-owned schools now have a much broader scope in the design of school management systems, including structure, budget allocation and performance management. Understanding the role played by accountability is essential in identifying any link between decentralised systems and improved school effectiveness (improved student learning).

In general, it is thought that SBM frees schools from externally imposed sets of rules, allowing them to become more dynamic and responsive to their constituents’ (local community) needs. SBM has been identified as the means through which school improvements might be stimulated and sustained (Malen, et al. 1990). The following summarises the extent to which schools operating under SBM are influenced by NPM principles:

The empowered school is neither the unwilling victim of externally driven changes nor the innovator who reacts unthinkingly to every fad or whim. It is the school which responds to the challenge of change by recreating its own vision, by redefining management to support change and by releasing the energy and confidence to put its ideas into practice (Hargreaves & Hopkins, 1991, p. viii).

A focus on outputs

Departments of education hold accountability obligations to society at large, via parliament, for their use of public funds in the provision of education programs for their student populations. Whereas the focus of traditional, centralised government systems was on controlling inputs (costs), decentralised organisations focus their accountability systems on outputs. Under systems of NPM involving decentralisation and associated devolution of responsibility to operational units, accountability takes on added significance. Considering that direct line management links between government departments and their units of operation (eg schools, hospitals, local governments) have been severed, an increased focus on organisational outcomes is inevitable as part of this increased accountability.

A search for improvement

Within a rapidly changing world, schools are faced with the task of anticipating the educational needs of students and making themselves (via the systems they employ) responsive to those demands. In order to succeed within this environment, schools need to grow, develop, adapt and take charge of change, so that they can control their own futures (Stoll et al. 2003). There is evidence in the literature that if a school is able to take charge of change, it will be more effective and will improve more rapidly and, to some extent, control its own
future. Given this high level of task uncertainty with education, it is further anticipated that measures of accountability will be in a constant state of development, refinement and improvement.

**An emphasis on data and accountability**

There is evidence within the SBM literature that accountability systems will be data-focused. Fullan (2000) identifies that government mandated reform focuses on results, with accompanying demands for evidence. Earl and Fullan (2003) point out that under SBM principals are required to have knowledge and understanding in relationship to context and evidence (p. 384). They summarise the conundrum with respect to the role of data as follows:

> Although the social process of sharing information and using it to produce knowledge is still not well understood, educators are recognising that they need to use data (p. 384).

For principals, this increased focus on performance data emphasises the stronger emphasis on accountability. Annual school performance reports present data relating to the school, the state and to ‘like-school groups’.

**III. RESEARCH METHOD**

A case study design was employed in this project since the objective of the research is to gain an understanding of a set of phenomena with a view to developing theory to explain it. It is understood that the case study design is ‘… particularly well-suited to new research areas or research areas for which existing theory seems inadequate’ (Eisenhardt 1989). The case study proceeds in three parts.

The first part of the case study focuses on department-level documentation that identifies the role of accountability within the system – The Blueprint for Government Schools (Blueprint). Analysis of the Blueprint reveals that accountability is integral to the governance processes and is interwoven throughout.

The second part presents, in generic terms, an outline of the School Level Report, a key document to this study since it contains a summary of annual school performance data. Here data are presented within a number of categories established under the Blueprint.

The third part of the case study investigates the approach taken by a public service officer employed within VDE at a regional level whose role is to assist school principals in the interpretation of their annual school performance data and the implementation of appropriate plans and strategies in response to those data. As a research case focusing on the approaches to accountability taken by this officer, the seeks to investigate the complex processes not easily separated from the social context in which they occur (Cutler 2004).

**IV. RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT**

The focus of this paper is on the Victorian State Department of Education (VDE), one of the largest states in the Commonwealth of Australia and a leader in SBM governance processes internationally. States within the Commonwealth of Australia have embraced SBM to varying degrees, with the Australian state of Victoria demonstrating possibly the strongest commitment to its SBM system since the early 1990s”. It was for this reason that the VDE was selected for analysis. Support for this system has survived changes in government over that period and it seems to be well entrenched. SBM has been introduced incrementally by VDE, under the rubric Schools of the Future, since 1992 when it began to introduce reforms that were both systemic and structural. It replaced a large and powerful centralised bureaucracy that handled matters such as schools’ financial administration and staffing resource allocations. Schools were designated as ‘self-managing’. At the same time, schools (and their principals) were made directly accountable to both government and the local school community via a system of (triennial) strategic plans and annual reports. Of the typologies identified by Leithwood and Menzies (1999), Victoria is characterised by the ‘administrative control’ form of SBM, giving increased decision-making power to principals and school councils’.

**Accountability framework within VDE**

This section contains an outline of the framework of accountability that operates within the VDE. The Blueprint for Government Schools (Blueprint) is the overarching document identifying the policy direction and reform agenda for DOE. The focus of this document is exemplified by the following statement:

> Excellence in the Victorian public education system should be driven by a relentless focus on improving … student learning (p. 23).

The Blueprint identifies eight “Factors” that relate to building an effective school system, as well as seven integrated “Flagship Strategies” that provide direction to schools for the achievement of their goals. Of particular interest for this paper is the Accountability factor. It contains many references to the characteristics of
an accountability system anticipated by the research questions. The introductory paragraph is a strong and purposeful statement. It clearly identifies the role of accountability within the system:

Effective schools establish rigorous systems of accountability by which school and student performance can be evaluated. Strong accountability systems use performance data to identify, support and monitor under-achieving students and plan professional learning activities for staff. Strong accountability measures also allow school leadership teams to provide parents with meaningful information about their children’s progress.

The Accountability document also clearly specifies characteristics anticipated by the research questions, linked with relevant Flagship Strategies. These strategy statements identify accountability areas as follows:

Flagship Strategy 1 Student Learning

Through involvement in the [Principles of Learning and Teaching] program, schools will generate data on which to base initiatives and then implement and monitor these.

Flagship Strategy 4 Creating and Supporting a Performance and Development Culture

A performance and development culture in schools sustains an accountable culture by ensuring: the use of feedback data for continuous improvement in teacher and school effectiveness and that there is individual and collective responsibility for the focus and quality of professional learning programs.

Flagship Strategy 6 School Improvement

The [Targeted School Improvement initiative] examines school performance data over the previous four-year period, and identifies schools where there are student performance outcomes below the expected levels.

The School Accountability and Improvement Framework

The Blueprint contains a section that addresses accountability directly. Known as the Overview of the Accountability and Improvement Framework for Victorian Government Schools (March 2005), it focuses on the accountability dimensions and comprises four main elements:

1. planning for improvement via a School Strategic Plan and Annual Implementation Plan
2. evaluation of progress via an internal School Self-Evaluation and an External School Review
3. reporting on progress via an Annual Report to the school community
4. managing risk and compliance with legislation and regulation via a School Compliance Checklist.

This overview provides evidence of a strategic, future-oriented approach to planning and the evaluation of school performance. It also highlights the emphasis placed upon performance evaluation and accountability, undertaken by independent reviewers.

The School Level Report

The School Level Report (SLR) contains data that relate to the performance of each school. It uses a process of benchmarking that enables schools to compare their performance with that of ‘Like’ Schools; that is, schools with a similar cohort of students in terms of, for example, socio-economic and language background. The emphasis on SBM principles is highlighted in the following statement relating to benchmarking (contained in the Blueprint):

Benchmarks provide common points of comparison, enabling schools to determine their own relative standards and to answer the question: "Is what we have achieved good enough?"

Many indicators of school performance are contained in the School Level Report. Each is characterised by an intensely data-focused approach to reporting, including raw scores, averages comparisons and benchmarks (like-school and state means). These data are supported with graphical representation in the form of box-and-whisker graphs, scatter diagrams, bar charts and line graphs. Areas of accountability covered are:
‘Like’ School Groups

This section identifies nine ‘Like’ School Groups for both primary and secondary schools within DOE. Represented in a scatter diagram, each ‘Like’ Group is numbered and the school’s designation is identified as a dot on the graph. The LSGs are constructed from two parameters:

- Proportion of Languages Other Than English (LOTE) speakers at home and
- Proportion of Education Maintenance Allowance or AUSTUDY recipients (ie students who receive financial assistance with their schooling).

These indicators attempt to group schools by cohorts of students with similar educational advantage. It is an attempt to control for benchmarking data sets relating to student learning outcomes.

Student Performance

Data for Years 8 & 10 students are provided from internal assessments determined by the school’s teaching staff in each of the Curriculum Standards Framework (CSF)\textsuperscript{viii} categories (eg. reading, speaking and listening and algebra). Percentages of student achievement are reported in four categories, labelled in reference to ‘expected’ level of performance (eg. ‘% better than established at expected level’ is the highest category).

Year 12 student (those in their final year at secondary school) results data cover each subject offered in the school at university entrance level for the past five years. It lists the number of students in each subject, the school mean, the like-school mean, the difference between the school mean and the like school mean and the difference between the mean of the current year and the previous year’s mean. These data are supported by a graphical representation for each subject in the form of box-and-whisker graphs. The report also includes data for the past nine years of the percentage of the school’s students who achieved total study scores above 40 (out of 50) state-wide, along with averages for like-school groups and state government schools in total.

Other measures of school performance

Apparent retention rates

This section provides information on current enrolments at each year level in relation to data for that cohort in their first year at the school. It describes total enrolment movements, rather than the number of students who are still enrolled at the school from Year 7 (the first year at the school). For example, Year 12 apparent retention rates link current enrolment numbers at Year 12 with Year 7 enrolments five years earlier. Data are provided for each year level over the past nine years, along with like-school group and state mean data. Again, these are supported by box-and-whisker graphs.

Real retention rates

This section describes the actual number of students who are still at the school. It does not account for more recent enrolments. For example, of the 100 students who may have enrolled in Year 7, only 30 may be enrolled at Year 12, giving a real retention rate of 30%, despite there being a total enrolment at Year 12 of 80 students (an 80% ‘apparent’ retention rate).

Exit destination

These data identify the destination of students who left the school over the past four years, along with state mean data for each destination. Again, these data are supported by bar graphs of state averages, with an indication of the school’s place on each bar. Destination categories include ‘non-government schools’, ‘university’, ‘employed part/full time’, ‘unemployed’ and ‘unknown’.

Student absence

In this section, student absence information for each of the year levels is provided for the past five years, along with previous years’ 25\textsuperscript{th} percentile, mean and 75\textsuperscript{th} percentile groups.

Staff, Student and Parent Opinion Surveys

Data for this category are collected via survey forms sent to a stratified random sample within each group. The Blueprint identifies a number of ways that schools can use these data. These ways include monitoring levels of student engagement, to stimulate discussion on how to improve engagement and to assist in the identification of professional development needs areas and areas for improvement and in the school.
The Parent Opinion Survey collects data on parent perceptions of quality of teaching, curriculum and standards, reporting and feedback, student behaviour, school climate, school/parent relations, extra-curricular activities, school resources/facilities and general satisfaction.

The Staff Opinion Survey was administered online to all staff in 2005. It contained measurement items relating to, for example, individual morale, school morale, supportive leadership, role clarity, goal congruence, professional growth, student motivation, individual and school distress. In the School Level Report, data were available for the past five years and included state secondary school benchmarks for each item.

Two additional sets of data appear in the School level Report. One relates to staff sick leave (including certificated and non-certificated leave days per staff member, along with state benchmarks). The other relates to bank balances. It includes graphical representation of account balances over the past eight years, accompanied by a box-and-whisker representation of school account balances per student enrolled.

V. SCHOOL-LEVEL REPORT ANALYSIS

The purpose of this section is to describe the approach taken by an SEO in the analysis of a set of actual school performance data. The School-Level Report (SLR) for analysis was supplied by the VDE, the identity of the school withheld in order to protect the school’s confidentiality. The school is not one that fell within the responsibility of the SEO since it is located in a different region. It is identified in this paper as BBBB Secondary College.

The task of SEOs is, among other things, to assist principals at the operational level in the interpretation of their annual School Level Report. Under the Blueprint, SEOs are:

... jointly accountable ... for implementing successful differential school reviews that focus on and deliver improvement (Department of Education 2004, p. 23).

The SEO assists principals in the reading and interpretation of data contained in their School Level Report (SLR) and ways in which the data can assist in the development of management plans and strategic direction. In the section below, one SEO outlines an approach to interpreting the data contained in the School Level Report of a de-identified secondary school provided by VDE. The approach to analysing data explained below does not represent an accepted systemic approach. It is one that has been built on practice by the SEO and is in a constant state of development and refinement. It may differ from the approach of other SEOs in its detail, though it would share similar aims and outcomes to those of other SEOs.

The analysis in this study is confined to the school’s SLR, a document that is produced annually for every government school. This report comprises 39 pages of data in tabular, graphical and descriptive form. Other reports are used in a full analysis, though they lie beyond the scope of this paper. For the purposes of this paper, analysis is confined to the data contained in the SLR.

General principles of analysis

To begin, the SEO outlined a number of guiding principles by which the analysis of SLRs begins. The guiding principles were developed as an attempt to maintain a consistent approach between schools, with the aim of reaching reliable conclusions. The list is not exhaustive, but it demonstrates the consideration given to developing a valid and equitable approach to accountability processes. These principles are as follows:

1. Data are not the only consideration in analysing a school’s performance. Perceptions of the school and its culture are some of the factors that contribute to a ‘narrative’ of the nature of the school. Analyses are undertaken jointly with both data and narrative, both of which should be put into the one general context for consideration and analysis. In doing so, the narrative about the school’s circumstances and arrangements becomes more honest and the data become more meaningful.

2. In constructing this general context the school principal, through discussion, has significant input to the school’s narrative and hence into building the general context. In doing this, the principal typically will use a narrative to explain the data better and to draw initial conclusions about areas for organisational improvement.

3. Care must be taken over the narrative by both the SEO and the principal. Even in cases where there is a mutual agreement over the school’s narrative, it must be remembered that there may be varying perceptions of important stakeholders such as students and parents. Anecdotally, the principal’s narrative is more optimistic and perceptions of change processes more advanced than the staff of a school would have it. The SLR and other data assist with this by mapping the perceptions of staff, students and parents over a number of years.
4. The Like School Group (as identified in the SLR) should only be used as a general guide to the school’s client group. English as a first language and eligibility for an education maintenance allowance (the current criteria) are important considerations, although there is an awareness that other criteria may better identify common school characteristics. Research currently commissioned by VDE is assisting in identifying other significant factors.

5. Data should not be over analysed. The SLR can present a morass of detail that could lead to micro-management of an unsustainable number of initiatives for improvement. General trends provide a much more useful picture in satisfying the needs of both accountability systems and planning for improvements. A variation on this may occur when analysing a school with a very small student population. In this case the small cohort in a data set can produce volatile trends that are not helpful for either accountability or for improvement initiatives. Strategies for overcoming this include considering the progress of individual students, aggregating data over a number of years and relating it to benchmarks and ignoring data expressed as percentages.

6. Different data sets within the SLR should be used to build a picture of the school; that is, relationship between data sets should be explicitly looked for to create a more sophisticated analysis. An example of this is explained below in data sets relating to post compulsory schooling.

7. The report is usually analysed in the order that it is presented; that is, starting with the ‘Like’ School Group chart and ending with school finances.

**Report analysis – BBBB Secondary College**

Here follows an analysis undertaken by the SEO with respect to the SLR of BBBB Secondary College (BSC). The analysis follows the guidelines described in the previous section.

Teacher assessments (pp. 5 to 13) reveal the results of testing of students as conducted by teachers within the school using in-house assessment processes (ie assessment instruments are not developed independently). Results for BSC show four year trends relating to the level of student achievements in a number of different ways. The percentage of students ‘beginning or lower than the expected level’ is an important indicator in focussing organisational improvements on the most vulnerable students and the area for most urgent improvement. Pages 9 to 13 show the number (not percentages) of students who are at, above, and below the ‘expected’ level. These data are particularly useful in small schools where percentages can be misleading, but is an ideal visual representation of the spread of student assessment in any size school. For example, observation of the assessments of students’ ability in mathematics does not reveal the same degree of variance in students’ results. There is a clear visual difference in the spread of assessed ability of students in English compared to the same students in mathematics. While this may partly be explained by the more sequential nature of learning in mathematics, it is also an indication of the possibility that the curriculum and the pedagogy in mathematics are not adequately challenging students. Further, the fact that there are fewer students in mathematics than English who are significantly lower than the expected level is an indicator that the assessment instruments also need to be examined. These considerations would form a part of a discussion between the SEO and the school principal about both improvement strategies and the accountability for challenging but achievable improvements.

The Achievement Improvement Monitor (AIM) data (pp. 14 and 15) are important in that they are a result of common state-wide testing of students (ie assessment instruments are developed independently of the school). Students complete AIM testing in both English and mathematics. This provides for an analysis of students against a much bigger cohort than is possible within the school; that is, the place of the school average (mean) in the bigger ‘Like’ School Group distribution. As a non school based assessment, the AIM allows for comparisons between teacher assessment and the more objective state-wide assessment. For this school, a three year trend of declining achievement in year seven algebra (teacher assessed) and AIM mathematics is indicated. This pattern is verified from two sources.

The teacher assessment in algebra is, however, in stark contrast to the AIM in terms of the standard of achievement of students. This indicates that the staff in this school may benefit from a greater familiarisation with the required standards of work and assuring this through moderation of assessment with other teachers (possibly from another school). Such would be the advice that would be proffered to the school principal.

Data relating to post compulsory schooling is a case in point where a picture has to be built by linking different data sets (this is an indication of some of the complexity involved in analysing school performance data). For example, in the qualifying year for tertiary entrance (the Victorian Certificate of Education – VCE), the study scores (pp. 16 to 21) may be affected by:

- the retention rates of students from years 7 to 12 (pp. 29 and 30),
- the alternative programs offered for students at this level (pp. 22 and 23) and
- (to a lesser extent) the absence rates of students (p. 35).
A school that has well established pathways for applied (non academic) learning at year 12 and low retention rates leading up to year 12 will have a different cohort of students studying the final year of VCE than a school with no alternative or applied pathways and a high retention rate. In the de-identified school’s SLR, the overall indicators of VCE performance (the aggregated results and the results for English) show a clear decline after four consecutive years of improvement. Closer examination reveals that this coincided with a dramatic and once-off increase in real retention from years 11 to 12. The affect of this broader cohort undertaking VCE on the school’s VCE results data may be (at least partly) be offset by a large increase in students opting for an alternative to the VCE, the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL). This picture becomes more complex when it is considered that the alternative program (in this case VCAL) that may have attracted the less academic oriented students away from a mainstream VCE program, are in fact doing many VCE studies as a part of their VCAL program and still contributing to the school’s VCE results data.

Other important analyses include the trends of study scores in individual VCE studies over time, with an eye on the size of the cohort (as few as four students in some studies), and the completion rates compared with the participation rates of students undertaking VCAL. The latter analysis may alert the school to the possibility that alternative programs are, in part, delaying or softening a decision by some to leave school rather than offering an alternative credential. The study scores of 40 or more (p. 21) adds to the picture by highlighting how the school is faring compared with ‘like schools’ in extending the more academically able students. In the de-identified school there is work to be done here.

The data on enrolments (p. 28) is looked at in the context of other information such as the proximity of neighbouring schools and their enrolment trends, the demographics of the local population, the school’s retention rates, and the parent opinion survey. Again, the analysis is building a picture of the school’s performance.

The parent opinion survey (p. 36) indicates a general improved perception of the school which is sometimes a surrogate indicator for improved perceptions and engagement of students; the primary source of the parents information about the school. The staff opinion survey shows quite a different picture. There is a prescribed and sophisticated methodology for analysing the staff opinion survey, based on the relationships between the different category of questions in the survey and results in an indication of what aspects of improved staff management will most likely lead to improved student outcomes. The methodology is too detailed to cover here, although it is important to note that while most SEOs have been given several days of training in the methodology, only a small proportion of principals have had the same training. The results of an analysis may be compared with the average number of days taken by staff as sick days (p. 38). While the total number of sick leave days can change dramatically with a serious illness on the staff, the non-certificated (discretionary) sick leave days may be considered with the staff opinion survey. There is a three year downward trend in many of the categories of the staff opinion survey attached and a corresponding general increase in the number of non-certificated sick leave days. As with the analysis of all data sets, this would lead to a discussion on strategies for improvement and attendant accountabilities.

The financial affairs of the school (p. 39) are considered only broadly in the SLR. Limited conclusions can be drawn about the trends in school account balances and the data relating to student learning outcomes. There are many reasons for the account balance to change outside the short term business planning in the school. An injection of funds to cover impending capital works or a short term financial gain due to a reduced cost of staffing are factors that may have a significant effect on the school’s bank balance but have little relation to the effectiveness of the planned use of financial resources to improve identified issues in the school. Work is currently being undertaken on more detailed financial data that will assist in judgements over the effectiveness of financial decisions in schools.

VI. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper is to identify the role played by accountability in the improvement of public sector organisation governance and to identify this factor as integral to the improvement of effectiveness within its operational units. A case study examined the system of governance and accountability processes of a decentralised state department and the ways in which these principles are applied at the operational level.

Focusing on a decentralised state-owned education system (the Victorian State Department of Education – VDE), the study examined the system of governance at three levels. First, it presented the principles of governance as outlined in the over-arching policy document, the VDE’s Blueprint for Government Schools, with a particular focus on its systems of accountability. Second, it presented an outline of the structure and contents of the School Level Report (SLR), which contains performance data for each school within the system. Third, it
presented an outline of principles of analysis applied by a Senior Education Officer (SEO) in the analysis of individual schools. This outline was exemplified with reference to the SLR of an individual (de-identified) school (BBBBB Secondary College) supplied by the VDE.

The study reveals that accountability is an integral part of the system of governance operating within the VDE at all levels. From the principles espoused in the policy documents at the department level, through to the systems of data collection and analysis at the school level, the emphasis is on performance evaluation and accountability. School-level performance data are used, in conjunction with reference to the qualitative assessment of the school’s narrative, to the development of plans and strategies designed to improve student learning. This system has been in operation for approaching five years and, though in a constant state of refinement, has had ample time to establish itself in the basic processes of governance.

The mere orientation of the accountability system towards outputs, adaptability and data is not sufficient of itself to ensure better outcomes. A broad interpretation of the ‘accountability’ conception requires much more than the mere provision of performance data. There must also be a strong orientation of data use towards informing relevant actors (most notably school principals) to the school narrative and an emphasis on performance. There is strong evidence of this orientation in the analysis presented by the SEO.

The study provides support for the development of hypotheses that predict that decentralised forms of governance of large public sector departments can influence organisation effectiveness through a focus on accountability as informed by performance data. These data must be presented in a manner that is easily analysed and understood by the actors to whom the information relates; that is, principals. These principals need to be empowered to a sufficient extent to be able to act on the information and to identify and implement ways of bringing about improvement and to make changes within their schools that lead to improvements.

Some data inform the principal as an educational leader on important areas for improvement within the school (eg literacy and retention rates). Other data sets alert the principal as a cultural leader to important organisational changes that have to be made in order to achieve the desired educational improvement (eg staff and parent opinion surveys).

This paper stands as an important step in the understanding of the direction that SBM systems of state-owned education are taking. In providing an understanding of the landscape of accountability of organisations seen as an international leader in SBM processes, it identifies the need for further research into the context within which these accountability systems operate. The ultimate goal remains to identify the link between SBM forms of governance and improved student learning.

ENDNOTES

\(^{i}\) The author wishes to thank the B&ESI conference discussant, Dr Sanjay Paul of Elizabethtown College, USA, and to one anonymous B&ESI reviewer for valuable comments made in respect of this paper.

\(^{ii}\) SBM is in evidence in Britain (from 1988), New Zealand (1989), Hong Kong (early 1990s), Canada (late 1980s) and some states of the USA (1960s).

\(^{iii}\) For a detailed consideration of the full range of accountability available to schools, see Leithwood, Edge, et al. (1999)

\(^{iv}\) New South Wales reverted to a centralised system of governance for its education department, having adopted SBM for a brief period of time.

\(^{v}\) The four forms of SBM identified by Leithwood & Menzies (1999) are administrative control (where the principal is dominant), professional control (teachers dominant), community control (parents and community dominant) and balanced control (parents and professionals are equal).

\(^{vi}\) The Blueprint can be viewed online at: http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/blueprint/.

\(^{vii}\) Examples of performance indicators are contained in the Appendix to this paper.

\(^{viii}\) To be known from August 2006 as the Victorian Essential Learning Standards

\(^{ix}\) These include the Attitudes to School survey of students’ perception of their school and their peers, and the On Track survey of the work or study destinations of year 12 students after leaving school. Recent developments in VDET will result in some data relating to students outcomes changing format, however many of the approaches to analysis will still be relevant.
Where the principal uses the narrative to excuse rather than to explain the data, no improvement strategy is seen as necessary. For example, a principal may (in an extreme case, in response to a set of negative data), see the client as the cause (and not the victim) and therefore conclude that improvement is not within the control of the school. When this occurs the analysis is stalled and typically a discussion about the imperative for improvement occurs.

In contrast to current practice, the SLR data will soon include a year nine AIM which will show the growth of the students in English and mathematics over the two years. This will include the growth of the matched cohort; that is, eliminating the students who have arrived at the school after the year seven AIM test was conducted. A matched cohort analysis in primary schools (years three and five AIM data) has in some cases provided an important challenge to assumptions about transient families lowering the school’s achievement data. At the moment this comparison is not available at the secondary level.

REFERENCES

Malen, B., Ogawa, R.T. and Kranz, J., “What do we know about school-based management? A case study of

