

## School Management in a Decentralized Context - A Comparative Analysis Romania – the U.S.A

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### *Abstract*

*Basically, decentralization of educational system represents the transfer of authority, responsibility and resources needed to make decisions and to ensure general and financial management to schools and local communities. Through decentralization schools become the main decision educational maker. This paper presents comparison two educational systems from the perspective of decentralization, US system and Romanian system, emphasizing the roles of different actors involved in the educational process. In US educational system there are three types of authorities: federal or national, state, and local educational authorities. The federal government has no direct authority on pre-university system; its role is limited by the American Constitution. The decision making and control center is a local one. Romania initiated the process of moving from a centralized educational system to a decentralized one and now the decision makers are looking for equilibrium between authorities at different levels.*

**Keywords:** *Decentralization, educational system, educational authorities, school as local decision maker, local responsibility*

**JEL classification:** I21, I23

The decentralization of the educational system represents a challenge for many countries. In essence, this is an option of educational policy which is necessary to be applied in view of the process of internal democratization and increase of public services management effectiveness.

Analyzing the experiences of different countries from the perspective of educational system management, it has been proven that central decision making authority cannot take into account all the contexts and, what is more, all the needs and particular interests of the various institutions and people involved. A democratic society supposes getting the decision making process close to its implementation location, citizens being thus given the opportunity to participate in the decision making processes which directly or indirectly affect them.

Modern theories on educational management are in favour of implementing decentralization and participative strategies. A large number of states faced with a deadlock in education that have turned to these strategies. Reform projects started applying various models of decentralization in an array of nuances depending on the specific social and educational context. The solutions which have been adopted place educational systems on a continuous scale, ranging from moderate centralism to extended decentralization. The projects which have been initiated for the past twenty years by numerous countries have as their central focus placing their educational systems on the axis of effectiveness – efficiency – quality and social relevance by making a real connection between school and local community and by direct involvement of the beneficiaries of education in supporting the system.

In order to cope with the new demands and social pressures the school needs to improve its activity and performance, to adopt a lot of changes in the available options for a certain educational policy, in its structures, in the instructional process, in the school management system, and so on.

The direction chosen in the educational policy concerning the Romanian education system is that of decentralization. The analysis of the laws and actions taken for the past two decades shows that, at least at a formal level, decentralization has been the solution adopted.

In essence, decentralization of the educational system means the transfer of authority, responsibility and necessary resources in order to make decisions and ensure general and financial management towards education establishments and local community. Decentralization implies:

- *responsibilities and decision making authority reassignment as well as public accountability* for specific educational positions, from a central level to a local community level;
- *non-managerial agents, civil society representatives participation in the decision-making process* (parents, NGOs, business agents, professional associations, social partners, and so on);
- *governance competences transfer* from a central body to local and/or school-based authorities, to bring the decision near the beneficiaries of public school education services.

The decentralization of the education system is not a self-contained goal. It is an option for educational policy which is included in the national decentralization strategy. Clear well-defined and balanced distribution of decision-making authority between local community and regional representative institutions, on one hand, and national government institutions – such as Ministry of Education and other ministries with responsibilities in the field - , on the other hand, will contribute to avoidance of imbalances and distortions in the management, leadership and support given in the educational system from the national level. The success of decentralization is mainly based on the equilibrium between authority and responsibility, on one hand, as well as on human resources capacity and information streams, on the other.

As far as management is concerned, decentralization involves the *development of the system of monitoring, control and evaluation*, both by the local community and by specialized national government bodies. Thus, transition is made from the model of a school which is a consumer of resources allocated from national level to a new model of a school – we could call it a *community representative school* -, in which the community invests local resources and towards which it has control and evaluation responsibilities.

Decentralization grants school *the role of main decision-making authority*, ensuring the participation and consulting of all social actors interested in the education process, on one hand, from the perspective of durable development of the community in which it works and, on the other hand, from the perspective of education globalization.

Decentralization is an intersectorial policy which aims at the other components of the social domain (political, economic, cultural and administrative). We should mention that neither centralization or decentralization, as the major types of policy, represents a goal in itself. Centralization and decentralization are means of effective management based on a general philosophy applicable to social, political, cultural and economic domains. Decentralization is associated to democracy mainly because of the type of local government it involves and of decision making process based on consulting those who are affected by it and who have to enforce it. However, not all types of local government are effective, in the same way as not all consultations automatically lead to the best decision. Making management effective in a decentralization context also depends on local conditions such as education level, decision-making competence, degree of participation, responsibility at the local community level in order to avoid non-applicable foreign models import and to prevent decentralization from being associated to a „trend” (E. Păun). Establishing an optimum of decentralization, within a certain national context, involves adopting a balanced attitude with respect to certain coordinates such as tradition-innovation ratio, past-present, stability-change, national-global.

The option for a certain management system and educational policy is based on a socially accepted value system, as well as on cultural traditions and, at the same time, takes into account the existing managerial model. From this point of view, in the Romanian education system, the relationship between centralization and decentralization is considered. There are voices which claim that the Romanian school, which has implemented the centralized managerial model for years, cannot be changed over night. It is for this reason that the Romanian schooling system should keep a balance between the centralized managerial system and decentralization one. Gradual introduction of decentralization has, from this point of view, the role to ensure the functional equilibrium of the system. The decentralization is a long term process and aims at modifying and replacing former practices.

Decentralization is a mean through which various types of **objectives** can be met:

- 1) political objectives – education system democratization, increase in education planning decision – making participation of various social actors;
- 2) economic and financial objectives – more effective allocation of resources, increase in economic efficiency, new material resources and funding;
- 3) pedagogical objectives – increase in education quality by promoting innovation, in education, motivation through participation of all parties involved in the instructional-educational process;
- 4) administrative/organizational objectives – increase in schooling management and leadership effectiveness, and so on.

Decentralization of the education system in Romania is closely connected to the reform process. E. Păun<sup>1</sup> believes that decentralization measures aim at three levels:

- managerial activities which are, temporarily, maintained as centralized – decision-making authority of the Ministry of Education, as central government body holding responsibilities in establishing general education policy (e.g. designing and accreditation of national evaluation and curricular standards);
- semi-autonomous activities at the level of school county boards of inspectors which are mandated by the Ministry of Education essential responsibilities for the organization, running and development of pre-university schooling;
- decentralized school-based and local community managerial activities, resulting in increased responsibility (which will be expanded gradually) for school development policies in that particular area.

The more the decentralization experience will yield expected changes, at the level of mentalities, school managers' training for taking on leadership positions involving new responsibilities, the more important the level of decentralized activities will become.

As previously mentioned, there is not any perfectly decentralized education system, and other countries' experience in the domain may be relevant as a managerial model, but it cannot be „imported” and applied within our context provided that it is related to the Romanian cultural model and existing circumstances.

We will compare and contrast two educational systems, the American system and the Romanian one, from the perspective of decentralization. This analysis will be carried out with reference to the assigned responsibilities that various factors are in charge of within the schooling process.

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<sup>1</sup> Păun Emil, *Școala abordare sociopedagogică*, Editura Polirom, Iași, 1999, p. 144

**In the American primary and secondary education system** (kindergarten to 12th grade) distinct roles for three categories of authority are clearly defined: federal or national, state and local.

**At federal/national level**, authority is represented by the Federal Government, the USA Department of Education, respectively. The Federal Government does not have direct authority over the entire educational system (Lopus, 2010); in the USA there is no ministry of education. The role of Federal Government is limited by the USA Constitution which states that this institution:

- ✓ ensures leadership in reform efforts;
- ✓ provides assistance in the programmes approved by the USA Congress;
- ✓ enforces the laws that are enacted by the Congress, guaranteeing the right to education;
- ✓ gathers data and provides research findings and statistics on most aspects of education.

**The USA Federal Government does not:**

- ✓ establish, have control and monitoring authority over schools and colleges;
- ✓ exercise supervision, accredit or grant license to schools or universities;
- ✓ develop curricula or content standards;
- ✓ set requirements for enrollment and graduation for schools or universities;
- ✓ determine or allocate budgets for districts running state schools or local community schools.

**The USA Department of Education** is the governmental agency in charge of education governance. Its role is limited to:

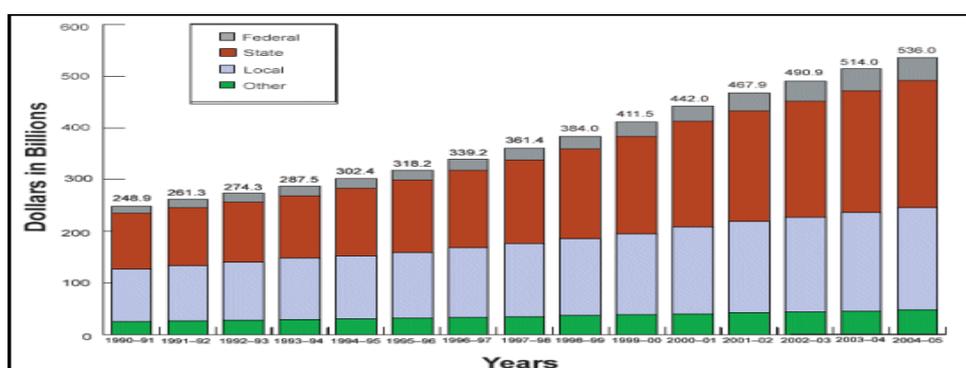
- ✓ establishing educational policies relating to federal financial aid for education, administration and distribution of those funds to schools which, through their instructional programmes, contribute to such policies implementation;
- ✓ gathering data about and carrying out research on the educational system, quality assurance and school management;
- ✓ identifying the major issues and problems in education and focussing national attention on them, rendering public opinion sensitive to addressing them;
- ✓ prohibiting discrimination and ensuring equal access/ opportunities to education for all students. This is one of the most important responsibilities held by the Department of Education which is directly derived from the Constitution provisions.

**Statal authorities** exert direct control over most of the aspects of education at all levels. These have the political, administrative and fiscal functions generally assigned to the ministries of education in countries with centralized national educational systems. Education is the public sector with the highest budget allocations in all the fifty USA states. The degree of state involvement in education depends on every single state Constitution and laws.

The responsibilities held by state authorities are, in most cases, the following:

- financing the educational public system at all levels (see Table 1);
- making decisions on school curriculum, textbooks, and content and evaluation standards;
- school accreditation and school operating authorization license granting;
- statewide information dissemination and guides elaboration for the use of local school authorities;
- adopting inclusion programmes for disabled students and other special needs groups of students;
- setting requirements and standards for teacher licensing.

**Table 1 Public educational system funding** (kindergarten through 12th grade)



Source: Lopus, S. Jane, *The USA Educational System*, Timișoara, February 2010

**The role of local authorities in the elementary/primary and secondary education system (kindergarten to 12th grade)** is decisive. The core of educational system control exercise resides at the local level. There are about 14,000 school districts which manage and run public education at the local level. They are separate special-purpose governments distinct from other local government agencies and have their own budgets.

**The functions of school districts** are, in general, the following:

- ensuring school operating on a continuous basis;
- enforcement of state enacted laws regarding education;
- development and implementation of own policies;
- hiring and supervision of teaching staff;
- fund raising and collecting for school operating needs (schools usually get money from the local community, their source being tax revenues on property).

School districts are managed by elected local educational authorities which have the mission to provide local control of citizenry over school units. At district level, there is a school board which elect a district superintendent and hire administrative staff. The district superintendent cooperates with school principal in order to implement local educational policies and achieve the educational goals set. School boards often organise meetings with school staff and local community representatives to discuss local educational policies and objectives.

Other local „actors” involved in education and school life are students’ parents. As a rule, they are organized in parent membership organizations that collaborate both at district level and at school level. Schools also have partnerships with businesses, local governments and civic organizations.

As the tabel above illustrates, budget allocations for education have increased for the past two decades, this growth being represented by local support and by state and federal support, too.

There are controversies with respect to public education system decentralization in the USA as well. These are related to:

- wide differencences among states, districts and schools in the amounts of financial support allocated;
- wide differences among states, districts and schools in the quality of public education services.

### **A characterization of the Romanian educational system with reference to decentralization**

At the beginning of the 1990s Romania had a higly centralized system in the domain of education and not only. In the course of the past 20 years, important steps have been made towards the decentralization of decision making bodies, both in the educational system and in other public sectors. The measures taken to put the principle of decentralization into practice in education domain have been analyzed in diagnosis research studies.

In 1994, the Institute for Educational Sciences carried out a research study, entitled *“The decision-making structures with a view to decentralization”* (*“Structurile de decizie în vederea descentralizării învățământului românesc”*), in which the system characteristics at that moment were identified:

- the largest part of decision-making competencies are located at central level (the Ministry of Education);
- the intermediary level, represented by county school boards of inspectors, plays the part of „transmission chain” of decisions made by the ministry and
- educational authority to enforce national standards set by the central body;
- school autonomy is very limited (school principals hold an executive position and moral authority rather than that of decision-maker),

being constrained both by the county and central educational authorities and local community autonomous authorities;

- involvement of local communities and school partners in school management at local and intermediary level is poorly represented.

In the document entitled *Steff Appraisal Report, Romania, Educational Reform Project* (March, 1994), Romanian educational system was considered “the most highly centralized in Central and Eastern Europe”.

In the diagnostic study included in “The National Strategy for Pre-university Education System Decentralization” (*Strategia Națională pentru Descentralizarea Sistemului de Învățământ Preuniversitar*), published in 2005, the following observations with reference to the stage of decentralization implementation are made:

- The actions initiated by the Government and carried out in the period 1997 -2004, in view of modernizing pre-university education and making it compatible with the European educational systems, consisted, among other things, in adopting and enforcing a set of legal instruments which provided, in part, for the transfer from central level to schools and local councils of a series of responsibilities and functions related to instructional process content and structure, school units network, school units financing and management and human resources policies.
- Decisions on decentralization were not consistent and coherent in the period considered. In 2004, by HG no. 1942/2004 (Government Resolution), eight piloting counties were designated to apply the provisions of Law no. 354/2004 referring to amending and completing the Education Law no. 84/1995 and Law no. 349/2004 referring to amending and completing the Teaching Staff Statute in view of decentralizing the system of school funding and management.
- Shifting the decision-making authority from central to local levels took place at different paces in various domains of the system – curricula, resources, school management, human resources policies, etc. – within a legal framework in which opposing provisions persist, leading to inconsistencies and disruptions in the system.

In his report on decentralization in Romanian pre-university educational system drafted in 2005, Jan Herczytski<sup>1</sup> estimated that in the past decade Romania had invested a lot of effort in decentralization of educational system. Specific measures were taken to develop local authorities responsibility concerning school material expenditures. The laws with reference to education were amended to enhance school autonomy and the role of local communities<sup>2</sup>. Herczytski, however, mentioned that “*Romania does not have a clear vision of its education system,*

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<sup>1</sup> Jan Herczytski, *Ready for the start? Current Issues of Educational System Decentralization in Romania* (*Sunteți gata de start? Probleme Curente ale Descentralizării Învățământului din România*), Bucharest, January 2005, <http://www.edu.ro/index.php/articles/12127>

<sup>2</sup> ibidem

*clearly stated in the official documents of the Ministry of Education and Research (MoER). The planned reform projects are not included in the global reform of Romania's public administration, especially in the planned fiscal decentralization."*

In 2009, the **Ministry of Education, Research and Innovation** made public a "Report on the Condition of the National Education System" in which an analysis of system components was made and it was stated that decentralization of preuniversity education and increase of school autonomy would be considered priorities for the next period (2010-2012).

In Romania, the educational system still maintains a set of highly centralized components as follows:

**a. The National Curriculum** in Romania has two components: core curriculum, corresponding to core subjects included in the curriculum plans for each stage of study programmes and school-based curriculum (also called, local development curriculum in the case of technical and vocational education). The ratio between the two components has been constantly changed to comply with the adjustments brought to curriculum plans, over the recent period, which led to a substantial reduction of the school-based curriculum.

- At present, the school-based curriculum is established, in many cases, in accordance to the „needs” of maintaining/falling vacant certain teaching positions and not according to the options of learners, parents, business agents or local/regional development policies. The proportion of this curriculum is rather limited and there seems to be no clear rationale of its distribution across the various stages of the curricular planning for preuniversity education programmes.
- **Curriculum plans and syllabuses** are designed by the National Curriculum Working Groups which are made up of specialists appointed by formal decision of the Ministry of Education. The National Council for Curriculum Development give their favourable notification on the elaborated documents and their approval is made by a minister's order issued by the Ministry of Education.
- In order to be used in schools, textbooks are approved by the Ministry of Education, in accordance to a set of criteria referring to content quality and price. The procurement of textbooks is made at the Ministry of Education level, by public auction, based on the orders placed by teachers (for titles on the list of approved textbooks), and forwarded in cumulated documents by the county school boards of inspectors.

**b. Assessment and qualifications awarding**

- The Ministry of Education is responsible for setting specific regulations on education assessment through tests and national examinations. The National Assessment and Examinations Service (NAES) develops test questions and marking schemes for these examinations and tests and they are set, administered and evaluated through the county education inspectorates, testing/examination and evaluation centres.

**c. The school network and student cohorts**

- Current procedure mandates schools to submit schooling plan proposals for approval of the county education inspectorates. Up to the 8th grade level these proposals are based on the analysis of demographic statistics. The role of the county education inspectorate is to ensure equal access to education for all school age children (checking the balance between the potential number of pupils and students and available school capacities for enrollment).
- Opening and closing of schools is made on the basis of authorization and accreditation procedures results implemented by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance on Preuniversity Education (RAQAPE/ARACIP), at the recommendation of the County Education Inspectorate, with the approval of the Ministry of Education, for post-compulsory education units, and by decision of County Education Inspectorate for all compulsory education institutions.
- Institutional evaluation of schools is carried out on the basis of an external evaluation grid, which is the same for all preuniversity education organisations (external evaluation is substantiated by RAQAPE/ARACIP). Evaluation is mainly perceived as restrictive, which seeks rather to punish for inconsistencies than encourage organisation development within the given local context. Schools are scarcely encouraged to develop and improve, to diversify their education offer in accordance to local community needs. As long as the same national standards and criteria will be used in the evaluation of school performance effectiveness in providing education services, a real decentralization cannot be promoted. Schools will tend to comply and meet the requirements of these standards in order to receive a positive appraisal and ranking as a result of their external evaluation.

**d. School leadership and management**

- The current legal framework specifies that the patrimony of schools – property in land and premises- is public domain ownership of rural areas administrative units, of towns/cities or municipia and that they are administered by local councils or county councils within the boundaries of which the schools are located and run. Through local budget specifications and prescriptions schools' financing is provided. Prin bugetele locale se asigură finanțarea școlilor. Current management of school finances and assets is done at local councils level; only in the piloting counties administration and budget execution is done at school level.
- In the composition of school administration boards both teaching staff members and local authority, business agents and parents representatives are included, the largest percentage of members being that of school staff representatives, however (2/3).

#### **e. Human resources**

- Instructional process outcomes are largely affected by the professional qualities of teaching staff, the commitment they show in fulfilling their job responsibilities with respect to pupils or students' education and training under their guidance. Therefore, although the local community and school leadership are the main actors interested in the quality and outcomes of the instructional process taking place in schools, these people have no decision-making authority to hire, norm or pay staff. School principals are the first to account for quality and outcomes of the instructional process, yet the authority of selection, employment and dismissal of teaching staff is exerted by the Ministry of Education and County Education Inspectorates while teaching staff payment and teaching load norming are strictly regulated by law. School leadership have no legal delegation of authority so that they could address personnel mobility needs through flexible payment schemes and teaching load norming, or to reward and motivate performant teachers.
- The system of didactic degree/professional title awarding is also centralized and irrelevant with respect to professional, pedagogical and managerial competences of teaching staff.

#### **f. Financing policies**

- According to Government Decision no. 1618/2009 regarding pre-university educational institutions financing, school units are financed from local budget funds, on the basis of standards of average annual cost per student /preschool pupil for the academic school year 2010;
- Financing for salaries expenditure, bonuses, incentives and other benefits as well as contributions to state budget that these incur as stated by law is provided on the basis of average annual cost per student /preschool pupil for preuniversity education units;
- Standards of average annual cost per student/ preschool pupil are set for each level of schooling and study programme, education route, profile and specialization on the basis of number of students, language of instruction provision, other education specific criteria and education unit location in either rural or urban areas;
- Financing of school units expenditure is provided from local budgets of administrative territorial units within whose area of jurisdiction and management the education units work, from the divided sums of VAT revenues;
- Pre-university education units with legal personality forward to mayors and County Education Inspectorates the number of students/pre-school pupils enrolled by level of schooling and study programme, education route, profile and specialization for the entire legal personality unit they represent. Pre-university education unit principals/headmasters account for the accuracy of the data forwarded to these local/territorial authorities;

- The mayors forward to the public finances county general directorates the data concerning the total number of students/ pre-school pupils grouped by level of schooling and study programme, education route, profile and specialization enrolled within the entire territorial administrative unit;
- The computation of the due amount of money for a territorial administrative unit is made by weighting the number of students/ pre-school pupils by standards of cost;
- Local Councils are responsible for allocation/distribution of money amounts and approval of budgets for each education unit holding a legal personality statute;
- Local Councils, County Education Inspectorates and School Boards of Administration of education units holding a legal personality statute are accountable for school units re-organization, according to legal regulations, in observance of average annual standards of cost per student/pre-school pupil per academic school year;
- The principal/headmaster of a pre-university education unit with legal personality statute, in his/her role of employer, is accountable for overseeing adjustment of education unit expenditure within the budget allocated by Local Council decision on approving local community annual budget, and transmitted by the mayor, in observance of standards of average annual costs per student/ pre-school pupil per academic school year.

### **Conclusion**

Analysing the two educational systems we can sum up the following ideas:

- the two educational systems operate in different social systems, which have their own different cultures and traditions. Romania faces the challenge of strong influence of centralized administration of institutions whereas the USA have a considerable experience in decentralization and social involvement;
- Romanian society is in demand of the building of a culture of social involvement, civic responsibility and accountability of all parties concerned in optimal operation of public education institutions to attain its set ideals of education;
- a coherent distribution of managerial responsibilities in the domain of education leads to a consistent operation of schools and, unassailably, to a better educational services offer.

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