

Between Mandates and Molding Minds: The Challenge of Teacher Autonomy Today

Introduction

Ms. Alicia, a passionate history teacher, has been teaching in her local middle school for over a decade. Her classes are always lively, filled with stories that wove together historical facts with the community's rich cultural heritage. Alicia often incorporated local tales, invited community elders to share their memories, and organized field trips to historical sites in the vicinity. The goal was to make history tangible and relevant for her students, creating a bridge between the curriculum and the world they lived in.

However, in recent years, changes began to seep into the district's educational approach. A new curriculum, heavily influenced by third-party providers and aligned with standardized tests, was introduced. This curriculum was rigid, offering a homogenized version of history that often skipped over local stories in favor of broader national narratives.

Ms. Alicia found herself increasingly restricted. Her lessons are now driven by the need to cover specific topics by specific dates to prepare for the standardized tests. The vibrant local stories, the surprise guest visits from community elders, and those much-anticipated field trips became rarities. She felt stifled, as her role transformed from an educator weaving contextually rich narratives to a conveyor of predetermined information.

The effects echoed beyond the classroom walls. Parents, once enthusiastic about their children coming home with stories of their community's place in history, now find their kids burdened with rote memorization and test prep. The community, which once felt deeply integrated into the school's educational process, started to feel detached. Students, who could previously see their own stories reflected in the tapestry of history, now felt a disconnect with the subject. The annual history projects, which had students interviewing family members and showcasing local history, faded away, removing a key community-school collaboration point.

Ms. Alicia's declining autonomy wasn't just a personal challenge; it was reshaping the relationships between the school, families, and the broader community. The once-celebrated intersection of formal education and local heritage was slowly eroding, replaced by a uniform narrative that diminished the richness of community engagement in the learning process.

This teacher's personal story was shared during an interview with one of the authors to provide one of many examples of the increasing decline in teacher autonomy (90%) in Texas, as well as one of the reasons for the increasing percentage of teachers considering leaving the profession (77%) (Charles Butt Foundation, 2022). A definition of teacher autonomy requires a brief exploration of the definition of autonomy. Autonomy can be defined as "the quality or state of being self-governed" (Merriam-Webster, para 1). Considering this definition, teacher autonomy can be defined as the ability of educators to self-govern their roles and responsibilities within a classroom. Experienced educators refer to teacher autonomy as the ability and power to do what they need to do to accomplish learning within the classroom (J. Durham, Personal Communication, February 24, 2023). Another frequently used term surrounding this topic is the erosion of teacher autonomy. This term can be defined as the removal of an educator's ability to self-govern their roles and responsibilities within the classroom (J. Durham, Personal Communication, February 24, 2023).

Based on the research of recent literature and an interview with a College of Education professor, three main reasons became apparent as to why there continues to be a decline in teacher autonomy: a) an increased emphasis on standardized testing, b) the prevalence of top-down leadership and bureaucracy, and c) the adoption of third-party curricula and commercialized content. The following literature review will provide evidence to support these reasons.

Literature Review

Standardized Testing

The concept of teacher autonomy has become a major point of discussion and debate in American public education, largely as a result of educational policies that, some argue, limit the professionalism, authority, responsiveness, creativity, or effectiveness of teachers (The Glossary of Education Reform, 2014). One of those instrumental pieces of legislation was the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 (Walker, 2016). The primary goal of this legislation was to increase accountability in schools to ensure that all students, regardless of their background, achieved academic proficiency (U.S. Congress, 2002). While well-intentioned, the NCLB had several impacts on teacher autonomy (U.S. Congress, 2002). One of these impacts was its emphasis on standardized testing. NCLB required schools to test students annually in reading and math in grades 3 through 8 and once in high school (U.S. Congress, 2002). These tests were used to measure Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for schools (U.S. Congress, 2002). This heightened focus on standardized tests led many teachers to feel pressured to “teach to the test” rather than focus on broader educational objectives (Walker, 2016). A second impact was school districts adopting scripted curricula to boost test scores that provided teachers with specific instructions on what to teach and how to teach it, leaving little room for personalization based on the needs of individual students (Walker, 2016). Third, teachers often felt that their professional judgment was being overridden by the mandates of NCLB. Instead of being trusted as educational experts, they were often placed in the role of implementers of policies set by higher-ups (Walker, 2016). Fourth, under NCLB, schools that failed to meet AYP faced sanctions, which could include restructuring, replacing school staff, or even a state takeover. This placed immense pressure on academic teachers, as their performance was directly tied to test scores.

Lastly, some critics argue that NCLB's universal standards did not adequately account for the diverse challenges faced by students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, English learners, or students with disabilities (Walker, 2016). This placed teachers in difficult positions, especially with parents, where they felt they were not given the tools or flexibility to meet their students' varied needs.

While NCLB was designed to address legitimate concerns about educational achievement gaps in the U.S., its unintended consequences on teacher autonomy became a significant point of contention. Many of these issues continued with the Every Student Success Act (ESSA) of 2015 as a direct successor of the NCLB Act because ESSA shifted much of the decision-making power related to accountability and student assessment back to the states (U.S. Congress, 2015). Therefore, the impact on teacher autonomy largely depended on how individual states and districts implemented the law's provisions. In Texas, centralized control remained the norm instead of enhancing teacher agency and professional discretion provided in the ESSA framework. In other words, the less autonomy teachers had, the less satisfied they were in the teaching profession (Charles Butt Foundation, 2022).

In essence, while standardized tests aim to ensure accountability and maintain educational standards (Kloepfel, Hodges-Kulinna, & Colhran, 2012), their influence on teacher autonomy has been notable. The challenge lies in using standardized testing data in a way that informs instruction without stifling the professional judgment, creativity, and adaptability of educators.

Top-Down Leadership and Bureaucracy

Additionally, due to the shift towards centralized decision-making as a result of standardized testing, administrators or policymakers began dictating curriculum choices,

teaching methodologies, and even classroom management techniques (Howard, 2020). This top-down leadership approach, often driven by a desire for uniformity or based on political motivations, can stifle teachers' ability to exercise professional judgment in their classrooms (Howard, 2020). Although the NCLB and ESSA legislation had a role in increasing top-down leadership and bureaucracy due to the pressure on state education agencies and public school administrators for meeting required federal and state accountability standards on end-of-year assessments, this pressure got worse for teachers after the COVID-19 pandemic. The Texas Education Agency reported at the 2021 Texas Assessment Conference that the pandemic had a major impact on students' performance on the end-of-year assessments in math (47% to 43%) and reading (50% to 35%) from 2019 to 2021 (Texas Education Agency, 2021). Because of these results, school administrators became more stringent in their directives to ensure their schools met or exceeded required benchmarks (Lopez, 2023). This affected teacher autonomy in the following ways (L. Durham, Personal Communication, February 24, 2023):

- **Curricular and Instructional Directives:** To improve test scores, administrators enforced strict curriculum pacing guides, limited teachers' flexibility to diversify instruction, and insisted on specific teaching methods perceived to be more effective for test preparation.
- **Resource Allocation:** Limited resources were diverted predominantly towards test prep materials, training, and interventions, potentially at the expense of other valuable programs or initiatives.
- **Increased Monitoring and Oversight:** High-stakes testing led to increased monitoring of classrooms. Teachers experienced more frequent observations, evaluations, and feedback sessions focused predominantly on test-related instruction.

- **Professional Development Focus:** There was a significant push for professional development centered around test-related strategies, sometimes at the expense of other valuable training areas.
- **Emphasis on Quick Fixes:** Given the yearly nature of many standardized tests, administrators might feel pressured to implement short-term interventions to boost scores rather than investing in long-term, sustainable education improvements.

In Texas, 55% of teachers felt valued by school administrators, down 13 points (68%) since March 2020 (Charles Butt Foundation, 2022). When teachers left their school districts, they looked for other school districts where administrators were more supportive of their teachers or left the profession all together (Charles Butt Foundation, 2022).

Additional ways top-down leadership and bureaucracy influenced teacher autonomy include the following (Charles Butt Foundation, 2022; Howard, 2020; & Walker, 2016):

- **Decision-making Limitations:** Top-down structures can minimize teacher input into decisions that directly impact the classroom. Examples include selecting textbooks, using particular classroom technologies, or adopting specific teaching methodologies.
- **Increased Paperwork:** Bureaucratic systems usually result in additional administrative tasks and paperwork for teachers. This diverts energy and time away from instructional planning and student interaction.
- **Impact on Morale:** Feeling like a small cog in a vast machine rather than a valued professional can negatively affect teacher morale. This can lead to reduced job satisfaction, feelings of burnout, and higher attrition rates.

- **Dilution of Teacher Expertise:** When decisions are made predominantly by higher-ups, the first-hand expertise and insights of teachers—who interact with students daily—might be underutilized or overlooked.
- **Innovation Constraints:** Bureaucratic structures can sometimes inhibit innovation. Teachers may be discouraged from experimenting with new pedagogical approaches, technologies, or interdisciplinary methods due to strict adherence to established protocols.

Dr. Durham commented on how teachers need the ability to use their expertise to build their instructional practice based on the students' needs, but deprofessionalization was restricting that ability (Personal Communication, February 24, 2023). Furthermore, he mentioned the importance of providing teachers with the professional courtesy to do their job with integrity (L. Durham, Personal Communication, February 24, 2023).

While there are some potential negative aspects of top-down leadership and bureaucracy, it's important to note that structure and standardization are not inherently detrimental. In many cases, they can bring about necessary uniformity, ensure equitable access to resources, or introduce evidence-based best practices (L. Durham, Personal Communication, February 24, 2023). The challenge lies in striking a balance that respects and leverages teacher expertise while also maintaining consistent standards and expectations.

Third-Party Curricula and Commercialized Content

Third-party curricula and commercialized content, while sometimes beneficial in providing structured and well-researched educational materials, can have substantial implications for teacher autonomy. First, third-party curricula often come with prescribed lesson plans, activities, and assessment tools. While these can be useful, especially for novice teachers, they

limit more experienced teachers from adapting or enhancing lessons based on their classroom's unique dynamics. Second, commercial curricula are often designed to cater to a broad audience, meaning they are often more generalized and many not address specific local or cultural contexts effectively. Third, schools and districts that invest in third-party curricula mandate teachers to follow the curriculum with high fidelity, leaving little room for deviation or supplementation (Gawne, 2023). Fourth, many commercial curricula come bundled with specific textbooks, digital tools, or other resources. This could restrict teachers from utilizing other materials they deem valuable or relevant. Fifth, if a third-part curriculum is closely aligned with high-stakes standardized tests, teachers feel pressured (or even be directed) to teach to the test, potentially sidelining other important educational experiences. Sixth, with a set curriculum, there's often less need (or perceived less need) for teachers to develop innovative lessons or incorporate creative teaching strategies (Gawne, 2023). Seventh, training might be primarily centered around the implementation of the third-part curriculum, which can limit teachers' opportunities to pursue other areas of professional growth (Gawne, 2023). Eighth, third-party curricula often come with their own set of assessments. Teachers might be restricted in their ability to create or use alternative assessment methods that they believe might better gauge student understanding. Lastly, over-reliance on commercialized content can undermine the perceived expertise of teachers (Gawne, 2023). Instead of being viewed as instructional experts who can craft and modify lessons based on their students' needs, teachers might be seen as mere facilitators of a pre-packaged curriculum (Gawne, 2023).

In summary, while third-party curricula can offer consistency, save planning time, and provide researched-based instructional methods, they can also significantly impact teacher autonomy. A balanced approach that respects teacher expertise, while also leveraging the

strengths of commercial curricula, is ideal. This balance ensures that students benefit from both structured, evidence-based instruction and the unique, responsive teaching that educators bring to their classrooms.

Methodology

This literature review aimed to understand the increased decline of teacher autonomy in Texas. The Texas Education Agency (2023) reported more than 13% of the state's teachers—nearly 50,000 of them—left the profession last year, making it the highest number on record. Given this alarming loss of teachers in one year, understanding one of the main causes being the reduction of teacher autonomy in the classroom is crucial for school districts in planning future teacher retention strategies.

Searches were conducted using multiple databases and platforms such as Academic Search Complete, Education Source, Google Scholar, National Center for Education Statistics, Teacher Reference Center, and U.S. Congress legislation. Additionally, we conducted searches using the following teacher education journals: *District Administration*, *Education Week*, *Journal of Teacher Education*, *Journal of Education for Teaching*, *Professional Development in Education*, *Teaching and Teacher Education Journal*, as well as a couple of international education journals. Lastly, we considered articles and reports published by teacher-related organizations/foundations such as the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Charles Butt Foundation, National Education Association, and National Foundation for Education Research. We considered studies and articles published between January 2015 to August 2023. Only articles written in English were considered.

We focused on peer-reviewed articles and evidence-based articles written by education-related organizations and the Texas Education Agency. Also, we looked at national teacher

education reports developed by research-based education foundations. Both qualitative and quantitative designs were included, with a preference for longitudinal studies and large-scale surveys.

For the screening process, our initial search yielded over 70 articles and two main research-based education reports. We then screened titles and abstracts, resulting in 55 articles. After a full-text review based on our inclusion/exclusion criteria, we finalized a selection of 37 articles for this review. We used a standardized form to extract data, focusing on: author(s), publication year, sample size, study location, study design, key findings, and productivity metrics used.

We adopted a narrative synthesis approach. The findings were grouped thematically focusing on factors such as teacher autonomy, teacher erosion, teacher retention, standardized testing, top down education leadership and bureaucracy, and third-party curricula for increasing student performance on standardized tests. This review might have selection bias due to the restriction to articles written in English. Additionally, some findings might be missing at the national level due to delayed information coming from state education departments because of the pandemic. Citations were managed using Mendeley. Data extraction and initial analysis were done using Microsoft Excel.

Recommendations

Decline of Teacher Autonomy Impacts Families and Communities

During the interview conducted with Dr. Durham, he expressed several ways that the decline in teacher autonomy profoundly affected families and communities (L. Durham, Personal Communication, February 24, 2023):

1. **Dissatisfaction and Frustration:** Parents have become frustrated when teachers are restricted from adapting materials or methods to better suit their child's learning style or pace due to rigid curricula or testing requirements.
2. **Loss of Local Values and Traditions:** Reduced autonomy can mean that education becomes more "one-size-fits-all," potentially sidelining local history, values, and traditions which communities want integrated into the learning experience.
3. **Decreased Community Involvement:** When teacher autonomy is low, there's often less room for community members to engage with schools, offer expertise, or contribute to the curriculum in meaningful ways.
4. **Teacher Turnover:** Communities may see increased teacher turnover due to job dissatisfaction. This disrupts the continuity of learning and affects the longstanding relationships between families and educators.
5. **Trust Erosion:** When teachers cannot exercise their professional judgment, it can erode trust between parents, who expect individualized attention for their children, and schools.
6. **Stifled Innovation:** The broader community loses out when teachers, who might have piloted innovative and locally relevant educational initiatives, are restricted.
7. **Economic Impacts:** If standardized curricula do not align with local industry and community needs, students may graduate without the skills needed for local jobs, potentially affecting local economies.

Restoring teacher autonomy can, therefore, be seen not just as a measure to enhance education, but as a step towards reinforcing community bonds, values, and the local economy.

Possible Solutions for Increasing Teacher Autonomy

Based on the evidence provided, there are many solutions in reducing the decline of teacher autonomy in today's schools. Regarding high-stakes testing, using a new assessment method such as developing a capstone project at end of a student's senior year would utilize better performance results from students. A capstone project is a multifaceted assignment that allows students to demonstrate their mastery of a particular field of study (program of study) (Lapiras et al., 2023). The features of a capstone project include being:

- Research-Oriented, which often involves students conducting independent research on a topic of interest.
- Application-Based, which has students apply what they've learned throughout their program of study to solve a real-world problem or question.
- Culminating Experience, which takes place at the end of the program or academic year, allows students to showcase the breadth and depth of their learning.

When this type of project is incorporated, there is a holistic understanding by students because they have integrated multiple academic areas, which provides a comprehensive view of a topic (Lapiras et al., 2023). This holistic approach mimics real-world scenarios where challenges don't fit neatly into one subject category. Additionally, students refine diverse skills simultaneously—critical thinking from science, analytical abilities from math, communication skills from language arts, and contextual understanding from social studies, to name a few. This type of project is also more engaging when students can draw from various subjects and understand the interconnectedness of different disciplines. Furthermore, real-world problems aren't isolated to a single subject. A capstone project that spans multiple disciplines better equips students for complex problem-solving, as they learn to draw from a broader knowledge base (Lapiras et al., 2023). Many postsecondary programs and professions require interdisciplinary knowledge and

skills. By engaging in a multifaceted capstone project, students get a taste of these demands early on. Lastly, comprehensive projects often allow for more student choice and autonomy, which can lead to greater ownership of the learning process (Lapiras et al., 2023). When students are invested, their performance often improves. This also broadens the definition of teacher and school success beyond just test scores. Schools can incorporate other metrics like portfolio-based assessments, student engagement, socio-emotional development, and parent/community feedback.

As it relates to top-down leadership and bureaucracy, school district administrators could shift some decision-making powers to the school or classroom level, ensuring that decisions are more contextual and aligned with specific student needs. They should also offer professional development that emphasizes teacher agency and choice by allowing teachers to select some or most of their professional development opportunities based on their perceived needs. Third, establish teacher-led professional learning communities, where educators collaborate, share best practices, and engage in peer mentoring. This not only boosts autonomy, but also taps into collective expertise. Fourth, minimize unnecessary administrative tasks that take teachers away from their core role—instruction. Streamline paperwork, reporting, and other administrative duties. Lastly, cultivate a school culture that trusts and respects teachers as professionals. When teachers feel trusted, they are more likely to take instructional risks and innovate in their classrooms.

Regarding third-party curricula and commercialized content, school district administrators should pilot large-scale implementations of new curricula or teaching methods in select classrooms or schools. This can be done through action research, where teachers identify classroom challenges, implement strategies, and evaluate their effectiveness. This promotes

reflective practice and data-driven decision-making, which allows teachers to play an active role in evaluating and refining new initiatives. Also, while a third-party curriculum can provide necessary structure, allowing flexibility for teachers to integrate supplementary materials or teaching methods can enhance autonomy. Furthermore, allowing decisions about curricula and teaching methods to be made at a more localized level reflects the specific needs and contexts of individual schools and communities. Create platforms where teachers can regularly provide feedback on curricula, teaching materials, policies, and other aspects of the educational environment, this will give them a voice in shaping the instructional landscape. Lastly, allow teachers to foster partnerships with local communities, businesses, and organizations to design real-world learning experiences and projects, giving them more autonomy over instructional content.

Restoring and enhancing teacher autonomy does not mean doing away with all standards or accountabilities. Instead, it's about finding a balance where teachers are empowered as professionals, equipped with the freedom and trust to make instructional decisions that best meet their students' needs.

Benefits of Increasing Teacher Autonomy

Increasing teacher autonomy offers multiple benefits to the education system, teachers, students, and the broader community (Worth & Vanden Brande, (2020); Smith, (2017); Doherty, 2020):

- **Tailored Instruction:** Teachers can adapt instruction to meet the unique needs, interests, and learning styles of their students, leading to more effective and relevant learning experiences.

- **Professional Satisfaction:** When teachers feel trusted and empowered to make decisions, they often report higher levels of job satisfaction, which can lead to lower turnover rates and a more stable learning environment for students.
- **Innovation:** Autonomy provides teachers with the freedom to experiment with new teaching methods, tools, and curricula, potentially leading to more innovative and effective instructional techniques.
- **Building on Expertise:** Teachers are professionals who bring a wealth of experience and training to their roles. Autonomy allows them to leverage their expertise to benefit their students fully.
- **Responsive Education:** Teachers with autonomy can quickly respond to changing classroom dynamics, student issues, or global events, making education more dynamic and current.
- **Strengthened Relationships:** Greater autonomy can foster stronger relationships between teachers, students, and parents. Teachers can adjust their methods based on feedback and collaboration, strengthening community bonds.
- **Local Relevance:** Autonomy often allows for the inclusion of local history, values, and traditions in the curriculum, making education more relevant and engaging for students.
- **Higher Student Engagement:** When lessons are tailored and relevant, students are more likely to be engaged, leading to improved academic outcomes.
- **Professional Growth:** Autonomy encourages teachers to seek continual professional development to enhance their teaching practices, benefiting both their personal growth and student outcomes.

- **Community Collaboration:** With more autonomy, teachers can collaborate with local businesses, organizations, and community members to bring real-world experiences into the classroom.

Increasing teacher autonomy respects and leverages the expertise of educators resulting in a more personalized, effective, and holistic educational experience for students.

Conclusion

In the evolving landscape of education, where standardized testing, top-down leadership and bureaucracy, and third-party curricula loom large, safeguarding teacher autonomy emerges as a paramount concern. Teacher autonomy stands as a beacon of professional respect, allowing teachers to harness their expertise, respond to individual student needs, and foster genuine, meaningful learning. When stifled by rigid testing regimes, bureaucratic edits, or prescriptive external curricula, the educational experience risks becoming formulaic and detached from the dynamic realities of the classroom. Restoring teacher autonomy, therefore, is not merely an educational imperative but a societal one, ensuring that education remains a dynamic, responsive, and deeply personal journey for every student, with lasting positive impacts on families and communities.

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