

Essay

Educational (De)Centralization and School Leadership in Chile

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Abstract

Policymakers in Chile have focused on educational leadership since the mid-2000s, recognizing its importance for successful school reforms. This article reviews key structural reforms that promote school autonomy while simultaneously regulating public school leaders' roles to align with policy goals, resulting in a centralization effect through institutional isomorphism. The discussion is divided into four sections as follows: the first addresses historical policies from the dictatorship that transferred public education responsibilities to municipal governments, fostering a quasi-market model; the second examines initiatives aimed at enhancing public school leadership, including defining principal's responsibilities and strategies for attracting qualified leaders; and the third evaluates the New Public Education (NEP) reform, which reverts municipalization and introduces a new Directorate of Public Education, collaborating with the Ministry of Education to promote school autonomy within the Local Educational Services (SLEP). The fourth section analyzes policies for school leadership development. Despite the intention of enhancing autonomy, the article contends that autonomy is limited due to the pressures of policy alignment, leading to centralization through high-stakes performance assessments and performance contracts. Research shows that while principals may have some decision-making autonomy, it is often curtailed by the necessity to meet centrally defined targets and limited financial autonomy.

Keywords: school leadership; school improvement; structural reforms; centralization; decentralization



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1. Introduction

As the governance of educational systems changes across diverse jurisdictions, school leadership policies have addressed decentralization, school autonomy, and accountability associated with a country's educational improvement agenda (Pont, 2020). These policies are grounded in research showing that the success of school reforms requires effective leadership at both the system and school levels (Barber & Mourshed, 2007). Flessa et al. (2017, p. 16) concluded that results from large-scale assessments in the Latin American region point “to leadership—especially instructional leadership—as a factor that positively influences students' test scores.” Studies examining the improvement trajectory of Chilean schools found that differences in leadership, teachers' professionalism, and school culture were critical to understanding differences in the trajectories taken by schools (Valenzuela et al., 2016). The impact of school leadership as a key driver of school improvement, however, has been questioned internationally (Pont, 2020) and in Chile (Montecinos et al., 2018) as policies do not always cohere in support of leadership practices associated with the implementation of institutional conditions that promote continuous school improvement.

A series of reforms has created a hybrid regulatory system initiated by a dictatorship that promoted a highly marketized system in the 1980s. After the restoration of democracy in 1990, reforms sought to correct, through greater regulation, the adverse effects of marketization, such as the precarization of public education (Bellei & Muñoz, 2023; Valenzuela & Montecinos, 2017). The main objective of this article is to examine some of the key policies implemented after 1990 addressing decentralization, school autonomy, and accountability that have shaped the work of principals leading schools that receive public funding. The remainder of the article is structured into three broad sections. First, we briefly address the decentralization of public education implemented between 1973 and 1989. Next, we examine policies developed after the restoration of democracy in 1990 that emphasized school autonomy while positioning school principals as policy implementers, including the current New Public Education reform. Before concluding, the professional development infrastructure to equip school leaders who can implement those policies is analyzed. In the conclusion we note tensions between school autonomy and accountability mechanisms to align school leadership with goals defined at the central level of the system.

2. Decentralization by Devolving School Administration to Municipal Governments

The history of educational decentralization in Chile dates back to the 1980s, when the dictatorship transferred the administration of state-owned early childhood centers, primary, and secondary schools to municipal governments. Until then, the Ministry of Education (MINEDUC) was entirely responsible for providing public education. Following municipalization, MINEDUC retained technical-pedagogical control of the national curriculum, of the national high-stakes assessment system (SIMCE¹), the distribution of textbooks, school meals, and other forms of aid for schools serving low-income students.

School staff ceased to be civil servants and became employees of municipal governments, the teacher union was dismantled, and the teaching profession was weakened. Each municipal provider defined rules for managing their schools' infrastructure, making administrative, financial, and staffing decisions. The diversity with which each municipality approached the issue of school administration contributed to a fragmented public education system that persists to this day (Bellei et al., 2018).

Although Chile had traditionally offered education with a mixed private-public provision model, the dictatorship introduced a quasi-market governance model to stimulate competition for student enrollment among public schools and between them and privately owned schools. Parents were afforded a choice between tuition-free municipal (public) schools, funded with a state subsidy allocated on a per-pupil basis (considering both enrollment and student attendance), private, state-subsidized schools, many of which charged families a tuition co-payment, and private schools fully funded by families. Competition to attract enrollment, thereby increasing school funding, was advocated as an effective approach to reducing absenteeism, dropout rates, and improving achievement. Privately owned schools could operate as either for-profit or non-profit organizations. All schools were expected to attract and retain students by adjusting their academic offer to meet the needs and interests of students and their families and engaging in various marketing strategies.

These practices led to a decrease in public school enrollments, a highly segregated school system, with low-income students concentrated in public schools that were prohibited from selecting students or charging a co-payment. Between 2004 and 2022, the share of public education enrollment decreased from 51.4% to 36.7%, while the share of private, subsidized schools increased from 41.02% to 54.1%. Enrollment in privately funded

schools rose from 7.6% to 9% (Holz, 2023). This enrollment distribution contrasts with the distribution of schools in 2021: 54.9% are public, 39.1% are private voucher, and 6% private.

3. Leveraging School Leadership

Policymakers in Chile have paid increasing attention to educational leadership since the mid-2000s. In 2003, an OECD commission reviewed Chile's educational policies since the restoration of democracy. Among other aspects, the report concluded that educational policies were weaving a weak link with initial teacher education and school leadership. This, according to the commission, explained why pedagogical practices were not aligned and pertinent with the demanding national curricular goals (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2004). As for principals specifically, the report recommended that they be prepared as instructional leaders and interpreters of available information on school performance in order to supervise and provide feedback to teachers (especially new teachers requiring induction) and support professional development (their own and that of colleagues) by stimulating collaborative learning.

Montt (2012) traced the evolution of school leadership since the restoration of democracy in 1990, identifying four distinct periods. From 1990 to 1995, the author notes an emphasis on what he labeled the recuperation of a new teaching bureaucracy, as the focus was on strengthening the working conditions and status of the teaching profession. The government and teachers agreed on a Teachers' Statute (Law 19.070), which along with ensuring job stability in the municipal sector, committed to strengthening teachers' professional autonomy. The Statute recognized the right of teachers to decide on the contents to be included in their lesson plans, how to evaluate their students, which texts and didactic materials to use, and their interactions with parents and guardians (DFL 1, art. 16). Considering the existence of a mandatory national curriculum, however, the Statute urged teachers to align their decisions with objectives and content defined in the curricular framework. School principals were charged with supporting teachers' adoption and adaptation of the country's curricular definitions to the school context and student intake. Another incentive to remain close to the national curriculum was, and continues to be, the high-stakes standardized assessment results that schools use as a marketing tool and policymakers use as a means to target school-level supports, sanctions, and rewards (Parcerisa, 2021).

In the second period (1995–2001), policies positioned school principals as change agents driving the implementation of national programs to improve educational quality. In the third period (2002–2008), school leaders were charged with implementing educational reforms at the classroom level. In 2004, the Teaching Statute was modified (Law 19.979) as the school day was expanded (Ministerio de Educación, Chile, 2004b). With additional instructional time, schools had to develop new curricular activities, and principals were positioned as leaders of the school's educational project. They were required to monitor and evaluate educational "goals and objectives", implement "study plans and programs" (their own or those offered by MINEDUC), communicate with parents to inform "the progress of their children", and organize the "technical-pedagogical work and professional development of teachers". A shift in principals' work demands from administration to instructional leadership sought to address significant achievement gaps observed when comparing public and private school results on SIMCE. In 2006, Decree 177 introduced an amendment to Law 19.070, positing that the primary function of the director (principal) of a school is to direct and lead the institutional educational project (PEI) as required by Law 19.979 (Ministerio de Educación, 2006). Additionally, they are required to organize and guide the technical-pedagogical and professional development work of the teachers and inform parents about the school's goals and progress.

Soon after, beginning in 2005, a new generation of policies was developed based on a key assumption of the quasi market model, principals and their schools would thrive if provided with entrepreneurial autonomy. Center-left democratic governments, unlike the dictatorship, did not emphasize competition as an incentive for educational improvement, but rather the need to strengthen professional competencies and networking as a condition for establishing and sustaining improvements in students' learning. Policies aimed to enhance quasi market dynamics were complemented by compensatory policies to improve educational quality and equity (Bellei & Muñoz, 2023). These policies explicitly granted school administrators the necessary autonomy to manage financial and pedagogical resources, thereby placing the responsibility for the school's competitiveness and effectiveness squarely on their shoulders.

From 2008 forward, policies sought to institutionalize principals' strategic role in creating conditions for capacity building to drive school improvements. Campos Vergara (2025) reviewed policy documents and statutory regulations defining principals' work, concluding that collectively the 126 documents that currently regulate their work include 551 tasks that principals are expected to execute. Weinstein and Hernández (2016) distinguish four categories of policies enacted over the last 20 years to enhance school leadership. A first set of policies focuses on principals' roles in bottom-up improvement initiatives such as the Preferential Subsidy Law (SEP Law) and Collective Performance Agreement for School Management Teams (ADECO). Other policies focused on defining the responsibilities of principals as instructional leaders and accountability frameworks (the School Leadership Framework and the Indicative Performance Standards for school inspection). A third set of policies focuses on attracting and retaining high-quality candidates and regulating the selection and evaluation of public school principals (Civil Servant Selection Process, ADP). The fourth set aims to prepare a highly qualified leadership workforce that can lead to improvements by enhancing school-based teachers' professional learning.

3.1. Collective Performance Agreement for School Leadership Teams

To incentivize the implementation of several of the policies summarized in Table 1, the Ministry of Education has implemented the Collective Performance Agreement (ADECO) since 2004. ADECO was established by Law No. 19.933 to support the implementation of a bottom-up quality assurance model, which involves the school developing an improvement project tailored to needs emerging from school self-evaluation, external validation, and the development of a school improvement plan (Ministerio de Educación, Chile, 2004a). To participate in ADECO, school leadership teams, with the support of their school's owner (i.e., DEM or Local Educational Services (LES) in the public sector and an educational foundation in the private sector), submit a proposal to the Ministry of Education Center for Improvement, Experimentation, and Pedagogical Research (CPEIP). Public and private state-subsidized schools with an enrollment of 250 students or more are eligible to apply. If accepted, successful completion of an ADECO agreement entails a financial incentive to the leadership team implementing the project.

Although the bottom-up approach has remained, it has been complemented by a top-down approach since 2010 to encourage more applications. CPEIP has defined several Model ADECO projects that leverage the impact of school leadership on school, teacher, and student outcomes. By 2021 model projects seek to support the implementation of four key policies. First, in terms of developing school leaders' capacities, the projects emphasize their role in providing teachers with systematic monitoring, evaluation, and feedback to improve teaching and learning, as stated in the Indicative Performance Standards used by the Education Quality Agency to inspect schools (Ministerio de Educación, 2015a). Second, projects aim to strengthen practices and personal resources outlined in the Framework for

Good School Management and Leadership (Ministerio de Educación, 2015b). Third, projects provide tools and resources to implement the System for Professional Development, which states that teacher professional development is a right and that school leaders must create a school plan to ensure teachers’ access to this right. Fourth, all projects connect professional learning to local and national educational priorities. The post-pandemic reactivation of education programs is a key priority for 2024–2025 (e.g., reading and writing). Finally, all projects aim to support collaboration between school leaders and teachers to strengthen teachers’ capacities for implementing practices defined in the Standards for the Teaching Profession (Ministerio de Educación, 2021), including collaboration and reflective practices that drive professional learning. The scaffolding provided by CPEIP to prepare each model project also represents an approach to strengthening the professional learning of school leadership teams.

3.2. Preferential School Subsidy Law (SEP): Advancing Decentralization

In 2008, the Preferential School Subsidy Law (SEP) was introduced to reduce the high levels of social segregation and unequal educational opportunities and to increase students’ achievement. The state increased the monthly voucher for students from families with an income up to the 50th percentile in the national distribution (priority students) by up to 70%. An additional 10% of extra funding was assigned to schools that concentrated large numbers of these students (Valenzuela & Montecinos, 2017). SEP is open to all schools receiving public funding, and private voucher schools that charge parents a tuition co-payment receive a smaller amount of the voucher. However, they cannot charge a co-payment to priority students. By significantly increasing the value of the voucher for students from the lowest 50% of socioeconomic levels, private schools expanded their potential enrollment, as more funding could be translated into increased profits.

Table 1. Summary of Educational Policies Analyzed for their Impact on School Leaders’ Work.

Law 19.070 Teaching statute. Date of Publication: 27 June 1991
Brief description: • An agreement between the Ministry of Education and the teachers’ union to regulate the work of school administrators and teachers. • Teachers have autonomy in planning their classes and evaluating results, selecting texts and materials that support their work, and interacting with parents and guardians. • Teachers have the right to professional development. School administrators and the Ministry of Education can collaborate in this effort. • School administrators must manage and supervise the school and its staff and ensure the care and education of students.
Law 19.410 Modifies Law 19.070 and other matters Date of Publication: 2 September 1995
Brief description: • Establishes that vacancies for principals in public schools must be filled through an open and transparent competitive selection process, which a municipal-level committee will oversee. The principal elected to the position serves for five years and, after completing this period, must participate in a new competition if they wish to continue in the position. • Limits the discretion of municipal mayors to appoint principals and establishes that the selection criteria must be strictly educational and endorsed by a local committee that is representative of different stakeholders. • Accountability is established with respect to the attainment of the school’s goals, as principals must report the results of their administration to the school’s stakeholders.

Table 1. *Cont.*

Law 19.979 Modifies the full school day Date of Publication: 6 November 2004 Brief description: - Amends the Teaching Statute of 1991, establishing that principals will lead the development of the school's educational project, overseeing curriculum implementation, teacher professional development, and engaging parents to support their pupils' education. - The principal is vested with powers to ensure that teaching is geared toward achieving the learning outcomes set out in the Institutional Education Project (PEI), which is developed with broad participation. - Public school principals may allocate, administer, and control the resources delegated to them in accordance with the law.
Law 19.933 Offers a special improvement to professionals in education as indicated Date of Publication: 12 February 2004 Brief description: - Defines a salary and bonus structure for professionals working in schools receiving public funding. - It defines a collective performance allowance for education professionals in municipal and private-subsidized schools with over 250 students enrolled. This allowance is awarded annually based on the achievement of goals set for the school leadership team, formalized through a collective performance agreement signed each year in the first quarter. The agreement must outline annual goals, indicators, weighting factors, and verification methods to be shared with the school's stakeholders.
Decree 177 Amends the Teaching Statute Date of Publication: 20 April 2006 Brief description: - Redefines the functions of the school principal. Establishes that a public process must be followed to fill positions of the other members of the school leadership team (i.e., the head of the curriculum unit, the inspector general, and the assistant principal). - The local commissions charged with the selection of principals are also responsible for the selection of candidates for other positions in the school leadership team. This measure limits principals' discretion to appoint their collaborators.
Law 20.248 Preferential School Subsidy (Ministerio de Educación, Chile, 2008) Date of Publication: 1 February 2008 Brief description: - Authorizes extra funding to the regular base subsidy, according to the students' socioeconomic status. More resources go to schools with the most vulnerable students. - The school principal, in agreement with the municipal school administrator or school owner, must submit to the Ministry of Education an Educational Improvement Plan (PME) that, in addition to contributing to the implementation of the PEI, closes learning gaps reported by the national assessment (SIMCE). - The school's autonomy in defining the PME is dependent on its classification based on SIMCE results: - Autonomous: schools that consistently demonstrate good educational results among their students. These schools have access to greater autonomy to define their plan and use of SEP funding. - Emerging: schools with low educational results and specific problems in some areas of school management. The PME must include specific actions to address the areas identified as needing improvements. - In recovery: schools that show consistently poor results and therefore require greater resources and external support. These schools must hire external consultants to define and implement the PME. However, if poor results persist, they may be closed.
Law 20.370 General Education Law Date of Publication: 12 September 2009 Brief description: - Reinforces that teachers must teach what is prescribed in the national curriculum and that keeping up to date and participating in the national evaluation processes is a professional duty. - School principals and other members of the leadership team must supervise classroom teaching through observation and feedback. They must also implement a PME aligned with national policies. - School principals are accountable for results aligned with the general objectives of the Chilean education system and the national curriculum guidelines.

Table 1. *Cont.*

Law 20.529 Quality Assurance System Date of Publication: 27 August 2011 Brief description: • Sets up the National System of Quality Assurance of Education (SAC), creating the Superintendence of Education, which audits schools' and their administrators' compliance with legislation. This agency receives and follows up on parents' complaints regarding noncompliance. Schools shown to be noncompliant with regulations receive a sanction. • It creates the Education Quality Agency (ACE) charged with evaluating schools' performance through the SIMCE test and school inspection. • Introduces self-evaluation and external evaluation processes for the PME, based on the Indicative Performance Standards (IPS) for schools. • Refines the categorization of schools, adding personal and social development indicators along with academic results in the SIMCE testing program. • Reinforces that accountability is based on a comprehensive external evaluation (based on SIMCE results, considering contextual factors) that leads to schools being classified as High, Medium, Medium-Low, or Insufficient. • The Quality Agency visits schools rated "High" to learn from their good practices and disseminate them. • Low-performing schools are inspected to suggest changes that local actors, together with the Ministry of Education, should implement. If they do not improve in the medium term, parents should be supported in transferring their children to other schools, especially if the school loses its official recognition.
Quality and equity in education Date of Publication: 26 February 2011 Brief description: • Incorporates the procedures followed by Senior Civil Servants (ADP) for the selection of public schools' principals, to provide government institutions with managers who are efficient and effective in implementing national policies • Public school principals sign a performance agreement that contains goals defined by the municipal department of education. This contract guides the employers' annual evaluation of school principals.
Law 20.845 Inclusion, regulating admissions, eliminates co-payment, and profit in schools receiving public funding Date of Publication: 8 June 2015 Brief description: • Regulates the process and reasons for expelling students. The school cannot expel or cancel the enrollment of students, unless it is fully justified by the law and the school's manual of conduct. • Prohibits the use of student selection processes in schools financed through a state subsidy. Schools must admit any student who applies, if there are vacancies. This respects the right of parents to choose the school for their pupils. • Prohibits for-profit schools financed through a state subsidy. • Gradually reduces the families' tuition copayment as the subsidy increases. • The principal must ensure the school council meets at least 4 times a year and present to the council a report of the school processes and outcomes.
Law 20.903 Teacher Professional Development System Date of Publication: 1 April 2016 Brief description: • Seeks to strengthen the teaching profession within a framework that regulates entry and promotion subject to standards and teacher evaluation, by criteria established by the Ministry of Education and the Quality Agency. • Teachers progress through the following stages: Initial, Early, Advanced, Expert I, and Expert II. From Advanced on, teachers must undergo evaluation through the national system. Results of this evaluation are associated with increasing their opportunities for professional development and salary increases. • In the annual report prepared by the principal, there is an account of the local professional development plan's design, implementation, and results of based on information from the teacher evaluation system and the Quality Agency. • Principals must conduct classroom observation and provide formative feedback to teachers aligned with the expected performance described in the teaching profession standards. • The Ministry should provide teachers in schools with low and insufficient performance with professional learning opportunities to comply with the professional standards that describe the expected performance of schools and the Indicative Performance Standards. • Teachers who, despite the support provided, do not reach the expected level of development (advanced) risk dismissal from the public education system.

Table 1. *Cont.*

Law 21.040 New Public Education Date of Publication: 24 November 2017 Brief description: • Ends municipal administration of schools, creating Local Public Education Services (LES) to administer public schools, coordinated by a national body under the Ministry of Education: Directorate of Public Education (DEP). • DEP develops the National Public Education Strategy that guides educational and performance contracts prepared by DEP for the LES Director and by the LES Director for principals, with the agreement of local steering boards.
Law 21.625 Single Teacher Evaluation System (Ministerio de Educación, Chile, 2023) Date of Publication: 24 October 2023 Brief description: • Establishes an evaluation system that applies equally to teachers in public and subsidized private schools, based on the National Teaching Standards. • Local professional development plans developed by the principal, in consultation with teachers, should give priority to teachers who have not reached the expected stage of their career. • In response to a request from the teaching staff, principals must allocate time so participating teachers can collaborate as they prepare their portfolios. • The professional development plan should ensure that teachers who do not achieve the standard measured by the national teacher evaluation system do so in the short term. • Principals cannot assign additional tasks to teachers that require them to spend more than 50% of non-teaching contract hours. • Principals prepare reports that include information on actions taken to help teachers advance in the career stages, including results of the teacher evaluation conducted at the central level. Teachers voluntarily provide to principals the results of their evaluation.

The SEP law requires that the extra funding be spent according to an improvement plan developed by the school, based on a self-assessment, which culminates in a contract signed by the school's owner and the Ministry of Education. In terms of school improvement, SEP granted schools greater autonomy to design multi-annual improvement plans (PME) and contract external technical assistance. The amount of autonomy granted, however, differed according to the school's performance on SIMCE (see Table 1). By 2009, nearly all public schools had secured their performance agreements to qualify for SEP funding. Although the SEP aims to promote decentralization, principals are compelled to emphasize instructional leadership by setting high expectations, planning instructional programs, and conducting classroom observations. SEP links public resources, performance, and sanctions, requiring schools to commit to goals for SIMCE results. If schools fail for five consecutive years (Insufficient Performance Category), they face the loss of public funding and potential school closures (Bellei & Muñoz, 2023).

The SEP law shaped educational leadership at multiple levels. At the school level, it reinforced the fact that principals must lead a participatory process to diagnose the school's strengths and weaknesses, define short- and medium-term actions, and frame these actions within the PME, all of which are financed with SEP resources. These actions must directly improve teaching and encourage improvements through financial stimuli that complement the allocations based on the voucher. For example, current regulations authorize principals to submit a professional development plan to the municipal director of education (DEM) for approval, allocating an amount not exceeding 5% of what the SEP law establishes for this item (Law 20.903, Article 18, F).

At the territorial level, it opens the possibility for improvement initiatives carried out by a network of schools financed with SEP resources. In short, the SEP law provides financial support to enable instructional leadership to impact teaching practices, but it also presents challenges. Studies on the investment of SEP resources show that a high percentage of subsidies are returned to the fiscal coffers due to under-execution of actions associated with instructional leadership and professional development for school staff,

among other initiatives. This has been associated with the lack of principals' knowledge of what actions can be funded by SEP monies, as well as insufficient preparation to develop local professional development plans ([Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo \[PNUD\], 2023](#)).

3.3. *Framework for Good School Management and Leadership (MBDLE)*

The framework, first introduced in 2005 and revised in 2015, describes school leaders' practices, knowledge, skills, and dispositions encompassing all positions within a school leadership team (principal, head of the technical-pedagogical unit, inspector in charge of school discipline, and other positions the principal might establish). These practices are organized into five dimensions: Shared Strategic Vision, Developing Professional Capacities, Leading and Monitoring Teaching and Learning, Managing Co-existence and Participation, and Leading and Managing the Organization ([Ministerio de Educación, 2015b](#)). The primary purposes of the framework are to foster a shared understanding of the expectations for school leaders' work, to inform professional development financed by MINEDUC for practicing and aspiring principals, and to guide public school principal selection processes.

3.4. *The Indicative Performance Standards for Schools and Their Administrators (IPS)*

In the context of the National Quality Assurance System (Law 20.529, SAC), the Education Quality Agency designed and implemented the Indicative Performance Standards for Schools (IPS) to guide external inspections of school functioning, support self-evaluation, and inform the school's continuous improvement processes ([Ministerio de Educación, 2015a](#)). SAC, however, acknowledges that an essential component for the operations of results-based accountability systems is that schools have enough autonomy and control over their management processes. Therefore, the performance standards are indicative, and schools are not obligated to implement them; their decisions regarding the use of these standards are not subject to sanctions. Moreover, the policy explicitly states that school owners/principals are autonomous in managing their internal processes to comply with mandatory statutory regulations and meet the learning standards and other quality indicators measured through SIMCE.

There are a total of 79 standards, organized into four management areas: leadership (school and intermediate levels, and planning); instructional management (curriculum, teaching and learning, and supporting students' development); formation and co-existence (support student's development holistically, co-existence in a respectful environment, and participation and democracy); and resource management (personnel, finances, and educational resources). The assumption is that if a school implements the standards, then it will achieve the goals defined in its educational project and school improvement plan.

For example, in the Curriculum Management subdimension, one standard states that the leadership team will support and guide teachers in implementing effective instructional strategies. The rubric used by inspectors to judge the school's performance on this standard specifies the expectations that principals will conduct classroom observations to provide pedagogical feedback to teachers. Another expectation is that teacher collaboration is promoted through structures such as professional learning communities. Both practices emphasize job-embedded professional learning opportunities, as these activities take place in the classroom, where teachers interact with students, and are centered on issues of actual practice. These practices are reinforced by the System for Teacher Professional Development, which we address further along.

3.5. Selection of Public School Principals

Law No. 20.501 established standardized procedures for hiring, firing, and evaluating principals following regulations defined for civil servants (ADP). This law aimed to mitigate arbitrary appointments by municipal authorities and political patronage and to increase the recruitment and hiring of qualified candidates by mandating a competitive selection with the municipality's mayor holding final decision-making authority. This legislation introduced incentives for school leaders, including salary increases and performance bonuses, while also allowing greater autonomy in staffing and budget management. Principals gained the authority to dismiss up to 5% of underperforming teachers annually. They could choose two key members of their leadership team: a curriculum coordinator and a general inspector responsible for student behavior. The municipal Department of Education (DEM) was provided with new mechanisms to define their principals' work by mandating a five-year contract in which principals are accountable for achieving specified results (Montecinos et al., 2015). The performance agreement aims to enhance school productivity through the effective management of school processes, as outlined in the SEP law and IPS.

In synthesis, tensions between centralization and decentralization emerge when combining the ADP principal selection mechanism and improvement plans. The performance contract and school improvement plan, on the one hand, must be contextualized within a school-based educational project and self-evaluation. On the other hand, targets are centrally defined to ensure that principals are aligned with the Ministry of Education to implement national policies effectively.

3.6. System for Teacher Professional Development

The System for Teacher Professional Development (STPD, Law 20.903) was enacted in 2016 to strengthen the teaching profession. STPD defines a career ladder for teachers who progress upward based on evaluations that include a portfolio and testing. Advancement to the next career stage brings salary increases and the opportunity to serve as middle leaders who support their peers' professional learning. Additionally, STPD requires that principals, with other members of the leadership team, intervene directly in the professional learning of classroom teachers (providing feedback on their practice), distributing pedagogical leadership to outstanding teachers (e.g., mentoring novice teachers), and supporting professional learning communities to address the national curriculum learning standards and use performance data provided by the national teacher evaluation system. Every 4 years, teachers undergo an evaluation process based on two standardized instruments, a portfolio of pedagogical competencies, and a knowledge test.

School principals are task with ensuring the "professional development of the teachers at the school" by proposing "plans for the professional development of teachers" and promoting "pedagogical innovation and collaborative work among teachers" to acquire "new competencies and the improvement of disciplinary and pedagogical knowledge" (Law 20.903, art. 12 bis). To this effect, non-teaching time for class preparation and collaborative work increased from 30% of the teachers' total contracted time in 2017 to 35% in 2019. The local professional development plan should align with the school improvement plan and be based on data provided by the teacher evaluation system used for determining career advancement (Law 21.625).

An international evaluation of the STPD (Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo [PNUD], 2023) has led to the introduction of new regulations (Law 21.625) that encourage linking local plans to the consolidation of teachers' professional competencies, as outlined in the Standards for the Teaching Profession (Ministerio de Educación, 2021). In this sense, the principal is responsible for ensuring that the teacher performance recog-

dition system is institutionalized at their school and guides local continuous professional development, helping teachers succeed in the national teacher evaluation.

3.7. New Public Education Reform: Re-Centralization

[Kameshwara et al. \(2020\)](#) summarized the negative aspects of decentralization, several of which are observed as a result of decentralization through the de-municipalization of public education. Over the last 40 years, the Chilean education system has reinforced school segregation based on class, structural incoherence in educational policy, the financial crises in public schools due to low enrollment, and political patronage (corruption) in the appointment of school principals ([Donoso-Díaz et al., 2019](#); [Bellei et al., 2018](#)). The lack of the ministry's control over DEM and the potential divergence of interests between the two diminished the impact of several ministerial initiatives that aimed at medium- and long-term goals at the school level. Additionally, municipal governments varied significantly in their ability to provide quality public education.

To address these problems, the New Public Education System (NEP, Law No. 21.040) was introduced in 2017 to reform the governance structure for the provision of public education. Between 2018 and 2025, the intermediate level of the education system will gradually replace municipalities as providers of public education, with 70 Local Public Education Services (LES). Additionally, this law establishes the Directorate of Public Education (DEP) within the Ministry of Education, which will centrally coordinate and guide these LESs. The primary task of a LES is to enhance the quality of public education by structuring and organizing support for schools under their jurisdiction; a key target is to increase enrollment in public schools by offering a high-quality, diversified educational program.

The Director of the LES is appointed through the ADP process, with the participation of a Local Steering Board and a Local Education Council representing a range of stakeholders of the territory (teachers, parents, local businesses, universities, etc.). DEP develops a national public education strategy and each LES Director develops a Local Strategic Plan (a 6-year plan) and Annual Plan, while each school develops an Improvement Plan (a 4-year plan). Each LES's Local Strategic Plan should define local goals that integrate national ones (developed by the DEP, [Ministerio de Educación, 2020](#)) as well as those from each school's Improvement Plan. Each school also creates an Institutional Educational Project, defining its mission, vision, and values, which orients the collective work within the school. All of these plans are developed through participatory processes, ensuring alignment among them ([Montecinos et al., 2021](#)).

A key pillar of this reform is the greater autonomy and protagonist role afforded to schools and early childhood centers. Law 21.040, Article 4, defines these organizations as the "basic unit of the system", and as such, they will have autonomy to define their educational projects in agreement with their identity and characteristics. Moreover, the LES has the responsibility to support and strengthen the internal capacities of each school, safeguarding their autonomy and promoting community participation. To safeguard decentralization, the person responsible for managing each of these plans has a certain level of autonomy to define goals and activities, along with some discretion regarding whether to use feedback from advisory groups or upper-level line managers ([Montecinos et al., 2021](#)).

A recent survey asked principals working in schools administered by a LES about their current work conditions ([Muñoz et al., 2025](#)). Results show their overall positive evaluation of how LESs are administering public schools. However, over 70% of the principals surveyed stated that their administrative work has increased, 61% reported an increased stress level, and 57% noted that the school was receiving less money to support bottom-up initiatives. At the same time, 53% indicated that they were receiving greater technical and pedagogical support from the SLE, whereas 28% reported having greater

autonomy, and 26% reported diminished autonomy. In another study examining changes in principals' perceptions of school autonomy between 2009 and 2019, findings showed that perceived autonomy differs by responsibility areas, mirroring the new regulations discussed above. For example, compared 2009, in 2019 principals reported having less control over teachers' salaries (defined by the System of Professional Development) and student selection (restricted by the Inclusion Law). Additionally, as several of these regulations only affect schools receiving public funding, it is not surprising that principals in private schools perceive greater levels of autonomy.

4. The Continuous Preparation of School Leaders

To complement the policies mentioned above, between 2004 and 2005, the Center for Improvement, Experimentation, and Pedagogical Research (CPEIP) conducted pilot preparation programs for school leaders, which led to the establishment of the Management Team Training Program in 2006. The objective of the Management Team Training Program was to contribute to the strengthening, development, and enhancement of the competencies associated with school management for administrative and technical-pedagogical leaders. This, in turn, led to the establishment of the Educational Leadership Program (ELP) in 2007 (Decree No. 246).

Between 2011 and 2014, the ELP was reformulated as the Preparation of Directors of Excellence program (PDE), administered by CPEIP. The program was a response to an evaluation that identified low professional competencies among Chilean school principals. The objective of the program was to generate professional development opportunities that would enable current and aspiring principals to "acquire, develop, and strengthen competencies to serve as principals of educational institutions" (Decree 44, art.1). The ultimate goal of Decree 44 is to "contribute to the professional development of those who intend to serve as principals of educational institutions, promoting the development of management skills that will lead to actions that contribute to better school management."

Initially, CPEIP invited national and international institutions to submit bids to offer postgraduate degrees, internships, diplomas, and master's degrees in educational leadership. School leaders admitted to the selected programs were provided with a scholarship. The was innovative in that, for the first time, the state invested in preparing a principal pipeline. Teachers aspiring to become principals were given scholarships. After completing the preparation program, they were required to apply for a principal post through the ADP processes. Professional development continues to be a strategy to "disseminate changes or new tools in education policy". For example, each year CPEIP funds programs addressing updates to regulations and curriculum frameworks, changes in government administration, as well as diagnoses made by Local Committees and issues that respond to contingencies.

Currently, an analysis of the professional development infrastructure for preparing educational leaders shows it is implemented at multiple levels of the system, which is consistent with the complexity and continuous evolution of the tasks of leading and managing education (Montecinos & Cortez, 2025). As educational policies place new demands on school and early childhood education leaders, the various agencies responsible for implementing these policies design professional learning and support strategies to ensure their proper implementation. The Education Quality Agency, the Superintendence of Education, the Public Education Directorate, and the Local Education Services have initiatives aimed at preparing school leadership teams, seeking to align their work with their specific priorities. For example, the Education Quality Agency prioritizes training in the use of the tools it has designed as part of its responsibilities for evaluating and guiding the education system. It therefore holds webinars and workshops on the use of data for leaders in the education system. CPEIP emphasizes programs that strengthen the practices

defined in the Framework for Good School Management and Leadership and the Teacher Development System concerning provisions for the Local Plan and the adoption of teaching profession standards.

The Division of General Education in the Ministry of Education offers professional development through its Support for Improvement unit, which provides direct supervision to schools classified as insufficient by the Quality Agency, in addition to activities through the Improvement Networks (RME). The latter promotes peer learning through collective reflection strategies, the exchange of good practices, the analysis of processes and improvement trajectories, and the socialization of educational policies by supervisors (Pino-Yancovic et al., 2019). Alongside these professional development initiatives promoted by the state, evidence suggests that a wide range of master's programs in school management, leadership, and administration are available (Muñoz et al., 2019; Marfán et al., 2021).

5. Concluding Remarks

In this article, we examined a set of policies promulgated mainly in the last 20 years, shaping Chilean school leaders' work demands and priorities as they fulfill the functions defined for their role. The policies examined aimed to mobilize school leaders, and, in particular, principals, as drivers of school improvement. The extent to which the intention of policymakers has materialized is not addressed in this article, as we did not systematically analyze empirical evidence regarding links between school leadership and school improvement in Chile. Our analysis exemplified how policymakers introduce new tasks and reinforce principals' work priorities as they are made responsible for ensuring that diverse improvement policies reach teachers and classrooms. We did not analyze empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of this approach to policy implementation in Chile.

Our analysis suggests that policies advocate for the centrality of school autonomy in defining and developing their educational projects, stressing the delegation of responsibility for school management to school leaders. Our review also suggests that the support for schools' autonomy is placed in tension when the successful implementation of the various planning instruments is determined by targets (outcomes) and practices (processes) that are centrally defined through professional frameworks and accountability mechanisms (Law 20.529, Quality Assurance System). Additionally, our analysis suggests that autonomy is further curtailed by work demands that seek to align principals' work with policy directives and priorities. This alignment effectively produces centralization through the process of institutional isomorphism, facilitated by normative frameworks and coercive pressures resulting from high-stakes assessments and performance contracts (Puttick, 2017). Alignment with educational policy is not the problem; rather, it is when this alignment disregards the necessary "recontextualization." Bernstein (2000) uses this term to refer to the construction of pedagogical discourse and to indicate that the lack of recontextualization of discourse by teachers leads to the national curriculum becoming an irrelevant pedagogical practice. This is replicated (reproduced) at the school leadership level through a non-reflective or a-reflective appropriation of educational policy, encouraged by a central level that aspires to see it "trickle down."

This conclusion agrees with studies showing that principals working in public schools in Chile report having varying degrees of autonomy to make decisions to address local challenges and harness local assets, aiming to improve their school's performance on high-stakes standardized tests (Marfán et al., 2021). School autonomy is "relative," in the sense that it must safeguard the robustness of the local system and contribute to systemic improvement while averting the risk of fragmentation.

The tension between centralization and decentralization in the work of school principals becomes problematic because educational accountability policies make principals

primarily responsible for the successes and failures of their schools. NEP reform marks a change by stipulating that schools and the intermediate level, LES, share the responsibility for school-level outcomes. However, NEP has also introduced additional planning and accountability mechanisms, resulting in a greater administrative burden, which distracts principals from their instructional leadership roles (Montecinos et al., 2021). NEP can provide an interesting case study of school reforms that try to reverse decentralization policies advocated by quasi-market governance models of education. NEP aims at redesigning the intermediate level of the public education sector with regulations that seek to strengthen alignment across the educational system while also stressing the need for school autonomy to address their unique mission statements and the needs of the communities they served.

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Note

- ¹ SIMCE (Education Quality Measurement System) is a national census standardized achievement testing program that is administered every year in fourth and 10th grades. Each year, testing covers mathematics and language, and on alternate years, other subjects and grades are tested.

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