



vernondickason.com

*Welcome to a space for thoughtful exploration -
Where ideas grow, stories take shape,
and real change becomes possible.*

*This is where education, leadership, and big-picture
thinking come together, to help people grow and
make institutions stronger from the inside out.*

Site:
vernondickason.com

Email:
connect@vernondickason.com

Address:
Cape Town, South Africa

What if school governance became fully decentralised? Power to the People, or Pressure on the Periphery?

Author: Vernon Dickason

Opening Reflection

Governance is not just about control, it is about care. In South Africa, School Governing Bodies (SGBs) were born from a democratic impulse: to place decision-making in the hands of those closest to the learner. But what if that impulse became policy in full? What if, by 2030, school governance were entirely decentralised, budgeting, admissions, staffing and curriculum decisions all resting with local communities? Would this empower transformation, or entrench inequality?

The Scenario

By 2030, the Department of Basic Education has shifted to a fully decentralised governance model. Provincial oversight remains minimal, and national policy provides only broad guidelines. Each school's SGB now holds authority over:

- Admissions and language policy
- Budget allocation and fundraising
- Staff appointments and performance management
- Curriculum enrichment and community partnerships

Urban schools with strong SGBs flourish, innovating, expanding and attracting resources. But rural and under-resourced schools struggle to keep pace. Some SGBs lack training, others face internal conflict. The promise of autonomy begins to fracture under the weight of uneven capacity.

What It Reveals

This scenario reveals the tension between local agency and systemic equity. Decentralisation offers responsiveness, but risks fragmentation. It also exposes the myth that all communities begin from the same starting line. Without scaffolding, autonomy becomes abandonment.

From a systems-thinking lens, governance must be distributed but supported. Decentralisation without capacity-building is not empowerment, it is abdication.

Why It Matters

Governance shapes culture, accountability and access. When schools govern themselves well, they become hubs of innovation and inclusion. But when governance is uneven, learners inherit the consequences. The question is not whether decentralisation is good or bad, it is whether it is just.

Philosophically, this scenario touches on subsidiarity, relational governance and constitutional stewardship. It asks us to balance freedom with fairness, and autonomy with solidarity.

Reflective Responses

What must decentralised governance include to succeed?

Training, mentorship, legal clarity and financial support. Autonomy must be scaffolded, not assumed.

How do we prevent decentralisation from deepening inequality?

By investing more in under-resourced schools, creating provincial support hubs, and ensuring oversight is relational, not punitive.

What risks emerge if governance is decentralised without safeguards?

Mismanagement, exclusion, and erosion of national standards. Schools may drift apart, each one a silo, rather than a node in a shared system.

Sidebar: Facts and Philosophy

Insights from South African Governance Studies (2025):

- The South African Schools Act (1996) introduced decentralised governance via SGBs
- Studies show that SGB functionality varies widely across provinces, with rural schools facing the greatest challenges
- The DBE's Schooling 2030 Action Plan calls for strengthened district support and clearer governance frameworks

"Decentralisation is not a shortcut to democracy. It is a long road, paved with training, trust and time." - Jordan Naidoo, UNESCO Education Policy Expert
