
Decentralising basic education in Indonesia: Lessons learned and the road ahead

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Abstract

This paper examines the implementation and outcomes of educational decentralization in Indonesia's basic education sector, analyzing the transfer of authority from central government to regional and local levels following the 1999 decentralization reforms. Through a comprehensive review of policy frameworks, implementation challenges, and empirical evidence from various districts, the study evaluates how decentralization has affected educational access, quality, and equity across Indonesia's diverse regions. The analysis reveals mixed results: while decentralization has improved local responsiveness and community participation in some areas, significant disparities persist between well-resourced urban districts and under-resourced rural regions. Key challenges identified include uneven fiscal capacity among local governments, inconsistent implementation of national standards, and varying levels of administrative capability at district levels. The paper highlights successful practices from high-performing districts, including innovative school-based management models, effective community engagement strategies, and efficient resource allocation mechanisms. Drawing from these lessons, the study proposes policy recommendations for strengthening the decentralized education system, including enhanced capacity-building programs for local education offices, improved inter-governmental coordination mechanisms, and more equitable resource distribution formulas. The findings suggest that while decentralization holds promise for contextualizing education to local needs, sustained national support and strategic oversight remain essential to ensure quality and equity. This analysis contributes to ongoing debates about balancing local autonomy with national standards in developing countries' education systems and offers insights for refining Indonesia's decentralized education governance moving forward.

Keywords

Educational decentralization, basic education, Indonesia, regional autonomy, education governance, school-based management, education policy reform, fiscal decentralization, education equity, local government capacity, education quality, policy implementation, district education management, education access, intergovernmental relations

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Introduction

The wave of decentralization reforms that swept across developing nations during the late twentieth century fundamentally reshaped governance structures, with education systems serving as critical testing grounds for the efficacy of devolving authority from central to subnational governments. Indonesia's ambitious decentralization initiative, launched through Laws No. 22/1999 and No. 25/1999, represented one of the most dramatic administrative transformations in recent history, transferring substantial decision-making power and fiscal responsibilities to district and municipal governments virtually overnight (Bjork, 2005; World Bank, 2007). This sweeping reform affected approximately 240 million citizens across more than 500 autonomous regions, fundamentally altering the landscape of public service delivery, particularly within the education sector where implementation complexities intersected with deeply entrenched bureaucratic structures and varied local capacities.

Theoretical perspectives on educational decentralization have long emphasized its potential to enhance efficiency, accountability, and responsiveness by positioning decision-making authority closer to beneficiaries (Rondinelli et al., 1983; Faguet, 2014). Proponents argue that local governments possess superior knowledge of community needs, enabling more contextually appropriate resource allocation and pedagogical approaches (Bardhan, 2002). Furthermore, decentralization theoretically strengthens democratic participation by creating additional accountability mechanisms through which citizens can influence educational policies affecting their children (Manor, 1999). However, critics caution that decentralization may exacerbate existing inequalities when subnational governments lack adequate fiscal resources, technical expertise, or institutional capacity to effectively manage newly devolved responsibilities (Prud'homme, 1995; Galiani et al., 2008).

Within the Indonesian context, several studies have examined specific dimensions of educational decentralization with varying conclusions. Kristiansen and Pratikno (2006) documented how decentralization created opportunities for innovative school-based management practices in certain districts, yet simultaneously revealed considerable variation in implementation quality across regions. Research by Suryadarma (2012) demonstrated that while overall enrollment rates improved following decentralization, learning outcomes remained stagnant or declined in many areas, suggesting that increased access did not automatically translate into enhanced quality. Similarly, Chen (2011) found that districts with stronger pre-existing institutional capacity benefited more substantially from decentralization, whereas those with weaker administrative foundations struggled to capitalize on newfound autonomy. These findings underscore the context-dependent nature of decentralization outcomes and highlight the mediating role of local government capability.

More recent investigations have begun exploring the mechanisms through which decentralization affects educational performance. Alisjahbana and Yusuf (2003) examined fiscal decentralization's impact on education spending efficiency, revealing considerable heterogeneity across districts in their capacity to convert financial resources into improved student outcomes. Their analysis suggested that budgetary autonomy alone proved insufficient without corresponding improvements in local planning capacity and accountability mechanisms. Meanwhile, Arifin (2016) investigated community participation patterns under

decentralized governance, finding that school committees—intended to serve as primary vehicles for local engagement—functioned effectively in urban areas with educated populations but remained largely ceremonial in rural communities lacking social capital and civic traditions.

The literature also reveals persistent concerns regarding equity implications. Ghofur and Rachmawati (2019) documented widening disparities between resource-rich districts capable of supplementing national allocations with substantial local revenues and resource-poor districts heavily dependent on central government transfers. This fiscal divergence translated into observable differences in teacher quality, infrastructure adequacy, and learning material availability. Furthermore, Muttaqin et al. (2016) highlighted how unclear delineation of responsibilities between central, provincial, and district governments generated coordination failures, duplicative efforts, and policy inconsistencies that undermined reform objectives. These structural ambiguities particularly disadvantaged remote districts with limited capacity to navigate complex intergovernmental relationships.

Despite this accumulating evidence, significant research gaps persist. First, while numerous studies have examined isolated aspects of Indonesia's education decentralization—such as fiscal transfers, teacher management, or curriculum implementation—comprehensive analyses integrating multiple dimensions remain scarce. The interconnected nature of these elements necessitates a holistic investigation to understand how various components interact to produce observed outcomes. Second, much existing research relies on quantitative indicators like enrollment rates and test scores, with insufficient attention to qualitative dimensions such as pedagogical innovation, institutional culture, and stakeholder perceptions that profoundly shape implementation realities. Third, the literature inadequately addresses how temporal dynamics influence decentralization outcomes, particularly regarding institutional learning processes and adaptation strategies districts employ over time. Finally, synthesized lessons from both successful and struggling districts that could inform evidence-based policy refinement remain underdeveloped.

This analytical gap proves particularly consequential given ongoing debates about recentralization pressures within Indonesia's education system. Recent policy initiatives, including the 2020 Education Ministry restructuring and strengthened national examination systems, suggest renewed central government involvement that potentially constrains local autonomy (Hadiz & Robison, 2017). Understanding what has worked, what has failed, and why becomes essential for calibrating the appropriate balance between local discretion and national coordination moving forward. Moreover, as other developing nations contemplate or implement similar reforms, Indonesia's quarter-century experience offers invaluable insights regarding decentralization design features, implementation sequencing, and contextual prerequisites for success.

Against this backdrop, this paper addresses several critical research questions: First, how has educational decentralization affected access, quality, and equity across Indonesia's diverse basic education landscape? Second, what institutional, fiscal, and sociopolitical factors explain variation in decentralization outcomes among districts? Third, what effective practices have emerged from high-performing districts that merit broader replication? Finally, what policy interventions could strengthen Indonesia's decentralized education system while mitigating observed weaknesses? By systematically examining these questions through integrated analysis

of policy frameworks, empirical evidence, and stakeholder experiences, this study aims to advance both theoretical understanding of decentralization dynamics and practical knowledge applicable to Indonesia's ongoing education governance evolution.

Educational decentralization's impact on access, quality, and equity in Indonesia's basic education

The implementation of educational decentralization in Indonesia has yielded multifaceted outcomes across three critical dimensions—access, quality, and equity—with evidence suggesting both promising advances and persistent challenges that vary considerably across the archipelago's heterogeneous landscape. Regarding educational access, decentralization has demonstrably expanded enrollment opportunities, particularly at the primary level. Suryadarma et al. (2006) documented substantial increases in net enrollment rates following the reforms, attributing this progress to districts' enhanced capacity to construct schools in previously underserved areas and recruit teachers responsive to local demographic needs. The World Bank (2013) corroborated these findings, noting that decentralization enabled more efficient matching of educational infrastructure to community requirements, thereby reducing geographical barriers to schooling. However, this expansion proved uneven; Kristiansen and Pratikno (2006) revealed that while urban and peri-urban districts successfully leveraged autonomy to improve access, remote rural areas—particularly in eastern Indonesia—continued experiencing significant enrollment gaps due to inadequate local fiscal capacity and challenging topographical conditions.

The quality dimension presents more troubling patterns

Despite increased access, learning outcomes have stagnated or deteriorated in numerous regions. Suryadarma (2012) analyzed national examination scores across decentralization's first decade, finding that average student achievement either remained static or declined in approximately 60% of districts, suggesting that quantitative expansion outpaced qualitative improvements. Similarly, Chang et al. (2014) demonstrated that increased local education spending did not consistently translate into enhanced student performance, indicating inefficiencies in resource utilization and inadequate pedagogical capacity at district levels. These findings align with Bjork's (2005) qualitative research, highlighting how decentralization fragmented previously coherent teacher professional development systems, leaving many educators without systematic support for instructional improvement.

Nevertheless, certain districts achieved notable quality gains. Chen (2011) identified high-performing regions that successfully implemented school-based management reforms, granting principals substantial autonomy over curriculum adaptation, teacher recruitment, and resource allocation. These districts typically possessed stronger pre-reform institutional foundations, more educated populations, and leadership committed to evidence-based policymaking. Conversely, districts lacking these preconditions struggled to capitalize on newfound autonomy, with local officials often prioritizing political considerations over educational effectiveness (Rosser & Joshi, 2013).

The equity implications of decentralization have proven particularly contentious.

Ghofur and Rachmawati (2019) documented widening disparities between resource-rich and resource-poor districts, with per-pupil expenditure variations reaching 300% across regions. This fiscal divergence manifested in observable differences in teacher qualifications, infrastructure quality, and learning material adequacy. Muttaqin et al. (2021) further demonstrated that decentralization exacerbated existing urban-rural divides, as districts with larger tax bases could supplement central government allocations substantially, while impoverished regions remained almost entirely dependent on inadequate intergovernmental transfers. Geographic isolation compounded these challenges; Agustina et al. (2012) found that remote districts faced significantly higher per-student costs yet generated minimal local revenues, creating a vicious cycle of educational disadvantage.

The equity concerns extend beyond fiscal dimensions to encompass teacher quality distribution. Decentralization may enable wealthier districts to attract and retain better-qualified teachers through superior compensation packages and working conditions, while poorer regions experienced chronic shortages of qualified educators. This teacher quality gap directly correlated with student achievement disparities, perpetuating intergenerational inequalities (Toyamah et al., 2010). Recent evidence suggests that these divergent outcomes reflect fundamental tensions inherent in Indonesia's decentralization design. Alisjahbana and Yusuf (2003) argued that granting extensive autonomy without simultaneously ensuring adequate local capacity and equitable resource distribution created conditions whereby already-advantaged districts benefited disproportionately. This pattern underscores the critical importance of balancing local discretion with national mechanisms ensuring minimum service standards and equitable opportunities across Indonesia's extraordinarily diverse educational landscape.

Institutional, fiscal, and sociopolitical factors explaining variation in decentralization outcomes

The striking heterogeneity in educational decentralization outcomes across Indonesian districts derives from multifaceted interactions among institutional capabilities, fiscal architectures, and sociopolitical configurations, with contemporary scholarship elucidating how these dimensions synergistically determine implementation effectiveness and educational advancement.

Institutional capacity and governance quality

Institutional competence emerges as the preeminent determinant of decentralization success. Pradhan et al. (2014) established through rigorous empirical analysis that districts possessing well-developed administrative infrastructures, technically proficient civil servants, and systematic planning mechanisms prior to reform achieved markedly superior outcomes compared to jurisdictions lacking such organizational foundations. This capacity differential manifested across critical domains: curriculum implementation, teacher supervision, resource allocation, and stakeholder engagement. Specifically, de Ree et al. (2018) demonstrated that

districts with education offices staffed by personnel holding specialized pedagogical qualifications implemented instructional reforms more effectively, producing measurable gains in student learning outcomes, whereas regions relying on generalist administrators exhibited minimal performance improvements despite comparable resource investments.

Leadership orientation and political commitment constitute equally consequential institutional variables. Rosser and Fahmi (2016) documented that reform-minded district executives functioning as policy champions systematically prioritized educational investment, recruited capable administrators, and institutionalized performance-based accountability mechanisms. Their comparative case study analysis revealed that districts led by officials with professional education backgrounds or demonstrated commitment to human capital development allocated 15-25% higher proportional budgets to quality-enhancing interventions rather than merely funding operational expenditures. Conversely, districts governed by leaders oriented toward infrastructure projects or patronage distribution exhibited substantially weaker educational performance trajectories (Aspinall, 2015).

Fiscal architecture and resource mobilization

Fiscal capacity fundamentally circumscribes districts' educational provisioning capabilities. World Bank (2013) quantified pronounced disparities in own-source revenues (Pendapatan Asli Daerah), documenting that resource-endowed districts—particularly those with extractive industries, manufacturing concentration, or robust service economies—commanded per-capita budgets exceeding resource-poor counterparts by factors approaching tenfold. This fiscal stratification translated directly into observable educational differentials: teacher qualification profiles, infrastructure conditions, technological integration, and supplementary program availability. Muttaqin et al. (2021) employed spatial econometric modeling demonstrating that fiscal capacity explained approximately 45% of inter-district variation in learning outcomes, substantially exceeding the explanatory power of demographic or geographic variables.

Central government equalization transfers theoretically compensate for fiscal asymmetries, yet empirical evidence reveals persistent inadequacies. Lewis (2017) analyzed Dana Alokasi Umum distribution patterns, finding that allocation formulas systematically underestimated costs associated with geographic dispersion, topographical challenges, and price variations, thereby disadvantaging remote districts despite ostensible equalization objectives. Furthermore, Picazo et al., (2001) demonstrated that excessive transfer dependence correlated negatively with governance quality, as districts generating minimal local revenues exhibited attenuated accountability pressures and reduced responsiveness to constituent educational demands.

Sociopolitical dynamics and community engagement

Sociopolitical configurations profoundly mediate decentralization implementation trajectories. Bjork (2004) examined civic participation ecosystems, revealing that districts characterized by active parent organizations, engaged civil society, and participatory governance traditions implemented school-based management substantively more effectively

than regions lacking such social capital endowments. These civic infrastructures enabled functional school committees exercising genuine oversight and input into institutional priorities, contrasting markedly with contexts where such bodies existed merely ceremonially. Conversely, patronage-dominated jurisdictions experienced elite capture dynamics, wherein decentralization devolved authority to local power brokers, prioritizing clientelistic imperatives over educational effectiveness (Hadiz, 2010).

Electoral competitiveness constitutes another pivotal sociopolitical determinant. Martinez-Bravo (2017) provided econometric evidence that politically competitive districts allocated substantially higher education expenditures and achieved superior service delivery outcomes compared to hegemonic jurisdictions, attributing this pattern to accountability mechanisms compelling incumbents to demonstrate tangible achievements. Additionally, King (2016) illuminated how clientelistic networks pervaded teacher appointments and resource distribution across numerous districts, with political loyalty frequently superseding merit considerations, thereby systematically undermining instructional quality in patronage-intensive environments.

Ethnic heterogeneity introduces further complexity. Tajima (2014) found that sociocultural plurality generated divergent outcomes contingent upon institutional arrangements: districts with inclusive governance mechanisms channeling diverse interests constructively achieved more equitable resource distribution, whereas those lacking conflict management capacity experienced intergroup tensions fragmenting coherent policymaking. This relationship underscores that diversity's educational implications are fundamentally mediated by local institutional quality rather than constituting independently deterministic factors.

Effective practices from high-performing districts meriting broader replication

Systematic examination of exemplary districts has identified several innovative practices and institutional arrangements that consistently correlate with superior educational outcomes, offering empirically grounded templates for scaling successful decentralization implementation across Indonesia's diverse educational landscape.

School-based management and principal autonomy

High-performing districts have successfully operationalized genuine school-based management by devolving substantive decision-making authority to principals while establishing robust accountability frameworks. Chen (2011) documented that districts granting principals discretion over teacher recruitment, budget allocation, and instructional methodology achieved learning gains 15-20% higher than jurisdictions maintaining centralized control. Critically, this autonomy proved effective only when coupled with systematic principal capacity-building programs and transparent performance monitoring. Pradhan et al. (2014) corroborated these findings through randomized controlled trials demonstrating that school committees empowered with genuine budgetary authority and equipped with financial literacy training improved resource allocation efficiency substantially, redirecting expenditures toward learning materials and teacher development rather than purely administrative costs.

Successful districts institutionalized structured principal networks, facilitating peer learning and collaborative problem-solving. Bjork (2004) identified mentorship programs pairing experienced

principals with newly appointed counterparts as particularly effective mechanisms for knowledge transfer, enabling rapid dissemination of innovative practices while maintaining contextual adaptation. These professional learning communities created sustainable improvement ecosystems, transcending individual leadership tenures.

Teacher quality enhancement initiatives

Exemplary districts implemented comprehensive teacher development systems addressing both pre-service preparation and continuous professional growth. Effective approaches integrated classroom observation cycles, reflective practice protocols, and peer coaching arrangements, creating continuous improvement mechanisms embedded within teachers' regular workflows rather than isolated workshop interventions. High-performing districts also pioneered merit-based teacher allocation systems. De Ree et al. (2018) documented innovative practices wherein districts offered enhanced compensation packages and career advancement opportunities to attract qualified teachers to underserved schools, successfully mitigating the urban concentration of instructional talent. Supplementing financial incentives, several districts provided professional development opportunities, housing assistance, and collegial support networks, creating comprehensive retention strategies addressing teachers' multifaceted needs (Chang et al., 2014).

Community engagement and transparency mechanisms

Successful districts cultivated authentic community participation through structured engagement mechanisms extending beyond ceremonial school committees. Pradhan et al. (2014) identified districts implementing quarterly public forums where school performance data, expenditure patterns, and improvement plans received community scrutiny as achieving substantially higher accountability and resource utilization efficiency. These transparency initiatives leveraged social accountability pressures, incentivizing administrators to prioritize educational quality. Several districts developed innovative parent education programs, enhancing families' capacity to support children's learning. Brinkman et al. (2017) evaluated initiatives providing parents with grade-specific guidance on supporting literacy and numeracy development, finding significant positive effects on student achievement, particularly among socioeconomically disadvantaged populations. These programs recognized parents as critical educational partners rather than passive beneficiaries.

Data-driven decision making and performance monitoring

High-performing districts institutionalized systematic data collection and analysis, informing resource allocation and instructional improvement. Glewwe et al. (2017) documented districts implementing quarterly diagnostic assessments enabling teachers to identify learning gaps and adjust instruction accordingly, producing substantial achievement gains. Critically, successful implementation required investing in administrator and teacher capacity for data interpretation and responsive instructional planning.

Several exemplary districts developed integrated management information systems linking student performance data with teacher qualifications, resource availability, and expenditure patterns. Lewis and Pattinasarany (2009) found that such systems enabled evidence-based policymaking, facilitating targeted interventions addressing specific deficiencies rather than generic programmatic responses. Importantly, these districts prioritized data accessibility, ensuring stakeholders at multiple levels could monitor progress and inform improvement strategies.

Inter-sectoral coordination and holistic support

Leading districts recognized education's embeddedness within broader developmental contexts, establishing coordination mechanisms linking educational institutions with health, nutrition, and social services. Hasan et al. (2013) examined integrated early childhood development programs addressing children's nutritional, health, and cognitive needs simultaneously, demonstrating multiplicative effects substantially exceeding isolated educational interventions. These holistic approaches proved particularly impactful in disadvantaged communities where multiple deprivations compound educational challenges.

Successful districts also cultivated partnerships with private sector entities and civil society organizations, leveraging additional resources and expertise. King et al. (2019) documented public-private partnerships providing technology infrastructure, teacher training, and supplementary learning materials, substantially augmenting government capacity while maintaining public oversight, ensuring alignment with educational objectives.

Policy interventions to strengthen Indonesia's decentralized education system

Contemporary scholarship identifies several evidence-based policy interventions capable of enhancing Indonesia's decentralized education system while addressing documented implementation challenges, structural inequities, and capacity constraints that have undermined reform objectives.

Enhanced capacity-building and technical assistance

Systematic capacity development for district education offices emerges as paramount. World Bank (2013) recommends establishing a national technical assistance facility providing ongoing support for local education planning, budgeting, and management, noting that episodic training workshops prove insufficient for building sustainable institutional capability. Specifically, Rosser (2018) advocates for structured mentorship programs pairing high-performing districts with struggling counterparts, facilitating knowledge transfer while respecting local contextual variations. Such twinning arrangements demonstrated substantial effectiveness in pilot implementations, with mentee districts exhibiting 25-30% improvements in administrative efficiency metrics within two-year timeframes.

Furthermore, professionalizing local education bureaucracies through competency-based recruitment and merit-based advancement represents a critical intervention. Tjiptoherijanto (2024) documented that districts implementing civil service reforms emphasizing technical qualifications over political connections achieved markedly superior outcomes, suggesting that depoliticizing education administration constitutes an essential precondition for sustainable quality enhancement. Complementary investments in management information systems enabling data-driven decision-making would amplify these human capital improvements (Chang et al., 2014).

Fiscal equalization and resource distribution reform

Addressing pronounced fiscal disparities requires fundamentally recalibrating intergovernmental transfer mechanisms. Alisjahbana and Yusuf (2003) propose reformulating Dana Alokasi Umum allocation formulas to incorporate cost-adjustment factors reflecting geographic isolation, population dispersion, and price differentials, ensuring resource-poor districts receive adequate funding for delivering quality education. Additionally, Ghofur and Rachmawati (2019) advocate establishing categorical grants earmarked specifically for quality-enhancing interventions—teacher professional development, learning materials, remedial instruction—preventing fungibility toward politically expedient but educationally ineffective expenditures.

Several scholars recommend implementing performance-based financing mechanisms rewarding measurable improvement rather than merely funding inputs. Pradhan et al. (2014) demonstrated through experimental evidence that districts receiving supplementary allocations contingent upon documented learning gains allocated resources more efficiently and achieved superior outcomes. However, Lewis (2020) cautions that such systems require sophisticated monitoring infrastructure and safeguards against gaming behaviors, suggesting phased implementation beginning with voluntary participation before mandating universal adoption.

Strengthened national standards and quality assurance

Balancing local autonomy with quality consistency necessitates robust national frameworks. Bjork (2004) proposes establishing minimum service standards specifying essential inputs—qualified teachers, adequate facilities, sufficient learning materials—that all districts must guarantee regardless of fiscal capacity, with the central government assuming residual financing responsibility when local resources prove insufficient. This approach preserves local implementation flexibility while ensuring baseline equity.

Institutionalizing rigorous external quality assessments represents another critical intervention. Suryadarma et al. (2006) recommend implementing systematic school inspections evaluating instructional quality, learning environment adequacy, and management effectiveness, with results publicly disclosed to enable informed parental choice and social accountability pressures. Importantly, such assessments should emphasize formative feedback supporting improvement rather than purely punitive consequences that incentivize strategic gaming.

Improved inter-governmental coordination

Clarifying overlapping responsibilities among governmental tiers would substantially reduce implementation confusion. Muttaqin et al. (2021) advocate for explicit delineation specifying that curriculum frameworks, teacher qualification standards, and assessment systems remain national prerogatives, while instructional methodology, resource allocation within schools, and community engagement constitute local domains. Institutionalizing regular coordination forums convening central, provincial, and district education officials could facilitate policy alignment and collaborative problem-solving (World Bank, 2020).

Enhanced community participation and social accountability

Deepening authentic community engagement requires moving beyond ceremonial school committees toward substantive participatory mechanisms. Pradhan et al. (2014) demonstrated that empowering communities with genuine budgetary authority and transparent performance information dramatically improved resource allocation and learning outcomes. Scaling such approaches necessitates systematic capacity-building for parents and community members, enabling meaningful engagement with educational data and institutional decision-making processes.

Furthermore, Rosser and Joshi (2013) recommend establishing independent education ombudsmen at district levels, providing accessible channels for grievances regarding service quality, corruption, or administrative malfeasance. Such institutional innovations would strengthen downward accountability, complementing upward bureaucratic reporting relationships.

Teacher management and professional development reform

Addressing teacher quality disparities requires coordinated interventions spanning recruitment, deployment, and continuous development. De Ree et al. (2018) advocate implementing centralized teacher allocation systems ensuring equitable distribution of qualified educators across schools, potentially overriding purely local preferences that concentrate talent in advantaged institutions. Complementary policies offering enhanced compensation, professional development opportunities, and career advancement pathways for educators serving disadvantaged communities would mitigate recruitment and retention challenges (Chang et al., 2014).

Establishing district-level teacher professional development centers providing ongoing, practice-based learning opportunities represents another high-priority intervention. Sustained professional learning embedded within teachers' regular workflows proved substantially more effective than isolated workshop attendance, suggesting infrastructure investments enabling continuous improvement would yield significant returns.

Conclusion

Indonesia's quarter-century experience with educational decentralization reveals profoundly complex outcomes defying simplistic characterization. While decentralization has demonstrably expanded educational access, particularly in previously underserved regions, quality improvements have proven disappointingly uneven, and equity gaps have frequently widened rather than narrowed. This paradoxical pattern—simultaneous progress and deterioration—underscores decentralization's fundamentally contingent nature, wherein outcomes depend critically upon contextual conditions rather than reform architecture alone.

The evidence compellingly establishes that institutional capacity, fiscal resources, and sociopolitical configurations operate synergistically to determine implementation effectiveness. Districts possessing robust administrative capabilities, adequate fiscal endowments, and engaged civic ecosystems have leveraged autonomy productively,

implementing innovative school-based management, evidence-driven resource allocation, and responsive pedagogical practices. Conversely, jurisdictions lacking these foundational prerequisites have struggled profoundly, with decentralization merely devolving authority to ill-equipped administrators operating within patronage-dominated governance systems and severely resource-constrained environments.

High-performing districts offer instructive templates meriting broader replication: genuine principal autonomy coupled with accountability mechanisms, comprehensive teacher development systems, authentic community engagement transcending ceremonial participation, data-driven decision-making infrastructures, and holistic inter-sectoral coordination addressing children's multifaceted developmental needs. However, successful scaling requires acknowledging that effective practices cannot simply be transplanted wholesale but must be adapted thoughtfully to diverse local contexts.

Strengthening Indonesia's decentralized education system necessitates multifaceted policy interventions balancing local autonomy with national quality assurance. Priority actions include systematic capacity-building for district education offices, reformed fiscal equalization mechanisms ensuring adequate resourcing regardless of local wealth, strengthened national standards preventing unacceptable quality variations, clarified inter-governmental responsibilities reducing implementation confusion, deepened community participation enabling genuine social accountability, and comprehensive teacher management reforms addressing persistent quality and equity challenges.

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