

Impact Of The Two-Tier Local Government Model For Education: International Comparisons And Implications For Vietnam

Dr. Nguyen Thi Nham, Dr. Nguyen Ngoc Anh, Prof. Dr. Mai Van Hung,
Assoc. Prof. Nguyen Chi Thanh, Dr. Pham Thi Kim Giang, Dr. Nguyen Van Ngo
University Of Education – Vietnam National University, Hanoi

Abstract:

This study examines how a two-tiered local government model affects education management, drawing on the theoretical frameworks of multi-tiered governance and education decentralization. Combining international literature with interviews with domestic experts, the research shows that the success of the two-tiered model depends significantly on establishing clear boundaries of authority, local implementation capacity, and central coordination mechanisms. Case studies from Finland, the UK, Japan, and South Korea demonstrate that decentralization is only effective when power is genuinely distributed, while the central government maintains a strategic, data-driven, and quality-standardized role. Based on this, the paper proposes several directions for Vietnam, including: clarifying the scope of authority, strengthening local capacity, ensuring regional balance, and redesigning the accountability system in education.

Keywords: *educational decentralization, multi-level governance, two-tiered local government, Vietnam.*

Date of Submission: 16-05-2026

Date of Acceptance: 26-05-2026

I. Introduction

In many modern governance systems, changing the model of local government is seen as a way to streamline the administrative apparatus, simplify the multi-tiered bureaucracy, and improve practical governance. The two-tiered government model is a more practical approach to organizing power. This model allows for quicker feedback and adjustments based on local demographic characteristics and learning needs. However, the success of this model varies globally, depending on local operational capabilities, the level of coordination with the central government, and the development of supporting institutions.

Based on that reality, this study poses three research questions: (1) How does the two-tier government model mechanism affect education management?; (2) Advantages and disadvantages of the two-tier model compared to the traditional three-tier model; and (3) Lessons for Vietnam as it transitions to a two-tier local government model.

From an operational perspective, the two-tier structure reduces the number of intermediate layers in the educational decision-making process. This enables localities to be more proactive in adjusting policies, allocating resources, and organizing professional activities, based on a thorough understanding of local students' needs and context. However, the advantage of speed of response is not always sustainable in the long term. In many cases, when localities lack a management foundation, strong decentralization leads to disparities in educational quality across regions or even undermines the uniformity of the implementation of national educational standards.

Conversely, the three-tiered model—with a central-provincial-district structure—helps stabilize the system and maintain synchronization in policy implementation across a wide area. However, this multi-tiered organizational structure increases operating costs, prolongs the policy response process, and slows the ability to adapt to changes in educational practices.

Therefore, comparing the two models involves not only the number of management levels but also the depth of governance: one prioritizes speed, flexibility, and contextual adaptability; the other prioritizes stability, system control, and balance across regions. This consideration of both models will help Vietnam find a suitable approach as it transitions its education management model in the coming years.

II. Research Methodology

This qualitative study aims to clarify the operation and influence of the two-tiered local government model on education management under different contexts. In the initial phase, the authors selectively reviewed and analyzed international works on educational decentralization, multi-tiered governance, and the transfer of authority within the education system. The entire process was guided by two fundamental theoretical frameworks: the multi-tiered governance model of Hooghe & Marks (2003) and Bush's (2011) theory of education management.

After synthesis and analysis, the sources were reorganized into general themes, forming a theoretical basis for comparison and identifying research gaps regarding the impact of the two-tiered model on the education system.

The empirical results were supplemented through semi-structured interviews with 12 experts, selected based on the criteria of information saturation in qualitative research (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). The expert group included: 5 current and former leaders of the Department of Education and Training, 3 education policy researchers, and 4 university lecturers holding managerial positions, such as vice-rectors and deans, all with direct experience in organizing, implementing, and evaluating the decentralization of education management. The interview questionnaire was designed around four thematic axes: the boundaries of authority between the two levels of government, vertical and horizontal coordination mechanisms, the implementation capacity of the local and school levels, and changes resulting from streamlined administrative procedures. Interview data were processed using three coding tiers – open code, pivot code, and selective code – based on the guidelines of Bogdan & Biklen (2016) and Saldana (2016). The coding table formed from this process shows four key thematic groups of the study: (1) hierarchical structure of decentralization and coordination; (2) capacity to implement educational autonomy; (3) regional differences in implementation conditions; and (4) monitoring and accountability mechanisms.

To ensure the reliability of the results, the study used triangulation. Measurements were taken by comparing and cross-checking three sources: interview data, theoretical framework, and international experience. This multi-layered comparison helps mitigate the limitations of the research results while confirming the consistency of the findings. As a result, the conclusions and policy recommendations proposed in the study have a solid evidence-based foundation, reflecting both the international context and the practical realities of education management in Vietnam.

III. Research Results

Theoretical Framework

Multi-level management

In this study, the authors use the Multi-Level Governance Framework (MLG) to explain how power and responsibility are distributed across the different levels of educational management. According to Hooghe and Marks (2003), the power structure in modern states does not operate along a simple vertical axis but is divided among many entities that participate in shaping and implementing policies, including organizations outside the government sector. This organizational structure creates a multi-centered governance mechanism, where coordination between levels is crucial for management.

Hooghe & Marks (2003) also classified them into two types: Type I, emphasizing a clear stratification between levels, and Type II, with more flexible jurisdictional boundaries, allowing agencies to handle policy issues that require multidimensional collaboration jointly. This classification framework is particularly suitable for educational realities because in many countries, issues such as personnel, budget, or school organization are delegated to local authorities (EDUFI, 2020; OECD, 2018), while curriculum standards, quality assurance, and assessment systems remain centrally decided to ensure consistency (Ho, 2006; OECD, 2014).

In addition to legal regulations, the education system also operates through soft mechanisms such as professional collaboration, data exchange, experience sharing, and the promotion of autonomy. These mechanisms often play a supplementary role, allowing for flexible adjustments when rigid regulations are not comprehensive enough. As Abbott & Snidal (2000) and studies on network management in the UK education system have shown, a harmonious combination of legal regulations and soft coordination mechanisms enhances policy implementation (Greany, 2015; Salinas, 2019). This is also an important prerequisite for the effective operation of a two-tiered government model in education, which adapts to local conditions while maintaining the system's overall quality goals.

Decentralization of Education

The educational decentralization framework helps explain the purposeful allocation of power to lower levels to enhance contextual adaptability. International studies show that many countries not only delegate power through legally binding regulations but also supplement it with incentive mechanisms, consensus agreements, and flexible guidelines.

OECD analyses—including Salinas's research—show a clear link between decentralization of decision-making and teacher quality, a factor that strongly mediates student learning outcomes. When schools and local authorities have autonomy over personnel and curriculum, the responsibilities that come with that authority become a real driver of improvement. However, effectiveness only emerges when local authorities possess the expertise and administrative capacity to implement the delegated authority.

Therefore, in education, decentralization is not a process of transferring power downwards, but rather of building competencies accompanied by mechanisms for transparent accountability.

The impact mechanism of the two-tiered government model on education

The framework for decentralization in education is an important theoretical tool for explaining how power is intentionally allocated from the top down to enhance the ability to adjust policies to the specific conditions of each locality. Many studies indicate that the decentralization process is not solely based on mandatory legal regulations but also includes soft mechanisms such as incentives, cooperation agreements, and flexible guidance to facilitate practical application (Abbott & Snidal, 2000; OECD, 2014). The combination of hard and soft tools creates a decentralization system that is both legally binding and adaptable to the context.

OECD analyses and Salinas's (2019) research show a significant relationship between the level of decentralization and the quality of the teaching staff – a factor considered a key mediator in improving student learning outcomes. When localities and schools are empowered in areas such as personnel, curriculum, and professional governance, the responsibilities that come with authority become a driving force for innovation and improved educational effectiveness (OECD, 2018). However, a positive impact can only be achieved when the empowered level possesses sufficient professional competence, managerial skills, and resources to undertake these new tasks.

Therefore, decentralization in education is not simply a transfer of authority from the central government to local authorities, but a process of building institutional capacity coupled with clear accountability mechanisms. An effective decentralization system requires a combination of local autonomy with transparent standards for monitoring, evaluation, and accountability – ensuring that increased autonomy does not undermine the fairness and effectiveness of the entire system.

Legal Basis And Policy Orientation

Legal framework guiding the two-tier model

In the Vietnamese legal system, documents from the Party, the National Assembly, and the Government have gradually shaped a reform roadmap towards a more streamlined local government organization. Resolution 18-NQ/TW (2017) of the Central Committee is an important foundation, setting out requirements to eliminate unnecessary intermediate layers, restructure administrative units, and establish governance models suitable for each type of territorial space: rural, urban, island, and special economic zones. A highlight of this resolution is its emphasis on operational efficiency rather than expanding the organizational structure.

The government has implemented the Comprehensive Administrative Reform Program 2021–2030 (Resolution 76/NQ-CP), identifying organizational reform and delineation of authority as fundamental pillars of state reform in the current period. The goal is not only to consolidate administrative levels but also to establish a clear mechanism for decentralization, limit task duplication, and create an institutional environment that encourages localities to be proactive and innovative in management.

The application of the urban governance model in Hanoi, as stipulated in Resolution 97/2019/QH14, involves a two-tiered administrative structure: City - Ward, eliminating the district/county level. This is not only an experiment in organizational models but also a test of governance awareness: to see if localities are adequately equipped to directly handle tasks previously under the authority of intermediate levels.

Decentralization orientation in education under the two-tier model

In the field of education, the direction for management reform has been established since Resolution 29-NQ/TW (2013), with clear requirements: strengthening decentralization, encouraging autonomy of educational institutions, and establishing the boundary between state management and school governance. These directions remain valid to this day, especially as Vietnam gradually adjusts its governance structure to a two-tier model.

In relation to the Law on Organization of Local Government (2025), the functional allocation in education can be understood as follows: At the provincial level: it acts as a "regional education coordinator," responsible for strategic direction of the school network, allocation of funds, specific regulations and guidelines within the framework of central laws, and is also responsible for overall educational outcomes in the area; At the commune/ward level: it is responsible for directly operating the processes taking place at the grassroots level – including supervising preschools and primary and secondary schools, coordinating with the community and parents, and handling daily issues arising in school education.

Thus, applying a two-tier model to education management is not simply a change in the number of administrative levels, but a transformation in how power and responsibility are structured within the system. Reorganizing management functions along the chain from orientation, resource allocation, implementation, and supervision creates the foundation for evaluating the effectiveness of the new model in terms of equity in access to education and training quality nationwide.

International experience

When analyzing the educational management functions, the role of the two-tier model becomes clearer. In the human resources field, many systems delegate the authority to recruit and evaluate teachers to local

authorities or schools, while the central government maintains responsibility for establishing a common competency framework. OECD (2018) and Salinas (2019) show that human resource autonomy can create a strong impetus for change but is only effective when local authorities have the capacity to manage, as demonstrated by the consistent results across schools in Finland (EDUFI, 2020).

In financial management, the two-tier model provides local authorities with greater flexibility to allocate resources according to actual needs. However, this flexibility is always accompanied by regulatory constraints from the central government, such as financial quotas or soft guidelines (Abbott & Snidal, 2000). The UK experience shows that granting extensive financial autonomy to schools must be linked to a horizontal coordination mechanism among multi-academy trusts to avoid resource dispersion or increased inequality (Greany, 2015).

In professional and curriculum management, the two-tier model is often reflected in the principle of "central government maintains standards - local government implements." The central government issues framework programs and quality standards, while local governments and schools handle implementation decisions. This is a clear manifestation of a type II decentralization model, in which authority is allocated along a network rather than a vertical line (Hooghe & Marks, 2003). In East Asia, Japan and South Korea maintain strict curriculum standards, while Hong Kong grants schools more autonomy in designing teaching activities (Ho, 2006).

In monitoring and accountability, the central government often takes a leading role. The OECD (2014) notes that effective two-tier systems build data-driven, evidence-based monitoring frameworks rather than administrative control models. As performance data becomes evidence rather than a control, countries like the UK and some Nordic countries have formed horizontal accountability networks in which schools support and learn from one another (Greany, 2015; OECD, 2018).

Overall, the two-tier model not only changes the administrative apparatus but also restructures how power is separated and used in each educational management function. When local capacity is strong enough, the central government guides standards and data. When hard and soft tools are harmoniously coordinated, the education system can operate more flexibly, transparently, and more closely aligned to improve quality.

Educational management models around the world show that many international authors have contributed important information on the decentralization process in education. However, most current works only describe the management systems of each country at a general level, without clearly explaining how the two-tiered government model operates in specific contexts. For example, studies on Finland, the UK, or Japan often mention the general management structure but lack a detailed analysis of the separation of powers according to each pillar of educational management, including personnel, budget, curriculum, and quality assurance mechanisms (EDUFI, 2020; OECD, 2018). Therefore, the impact of decentralization on each area of governance is still interpreted quite generally, without clarifying how the roles of the central and local governments are divided in each function.

This limitation becomes even clearer when considering the practical impact of the two-tier model on education management in different countries. In the UK, the shift to a self-improving school system model has significantly altered the role of local authorities, but many studies stop at description without analyzing the mechanisms of school network coordination or changes in accountability (Greany, 2015). Similarly, in East Asia, Ho's (2006) analysis highlights differences among Japan, South Korea, and Hong Kong but does not clarify how each management function – teacher recruitment, financial management, or curriculum development – is decentralized and how it is operated. Furthermore, assessments of hard and soft tools in education administration, which are crucial for two-tier systems, have not been convincingly described (Abbott & Snidal, 2000; OECD, 2014). This leaves many of the mechanisms by which decentralization impacts education in each country still unclear.

Lessons learned for Vietnam

The experience of many countries that have adopted the two-tiered education model shows that the effectiveness of decentralization does not stem from a technical division of authority but rather from the ability to restructure the relationships among the central government, local authorities, and schools in a flexible manner while still ensuring the unity of the system. In Finland, the UK, and Hong Kong, authority is granted at a substantive level and is closely linked to the operational capacity of the level to which it is delegated, a fact noted in international analyses (EDUFI, 2020; Greany, 2015; Ho, 2006). This assessment is also consistent with the opinions of many experts in Vietnam, who believe that decentralization is only valuable when local authorities have sufficient human resources, data, and authority to address educational tasks fully.

International experience also indicates that if subordinates' management capacity is not strengthened from the outset, decentralization can easily become merely a formality. OECD (2018) and Salinas (2019) show that positive results from decentralizing personnel and expertise appear only when localities and schools can recruit, evaluate, and develop staff in accordance with competency standards. Interviews with experts also reveal

similar observations: many localities currently lack data analysts, lack professional development policies for teachers, and lack autonomy in resource allocation.

Furthermore, systems like Finland's and Japan's maintain a strong central coordinating role through program standards, competency frameworks, assessment systems, and data-driven monitoring mechanisms. Vietnamese experts argue that if national programs, output standards, and database systems are not interconnected and standardized, the ability to monitor quality will be limited. The OECD (2014) also noted the problem of decentralized systems lacking consistent coordination mechanisms.

The stable operation of the two-tier model also requires horizontal coordination mechanisms. Experiences from the UK and Hong Kong show that the risk of fragmentation increases when cooperation between localities or schools is lacking (Greany, 2015). This is clearly reflected in the assessment of leaders of the Departments and Offices of Education and Training in Vietnam, who acknowledge that current coordination is fragmented, lacks professional sharing, and has few forums for mutual learning. Therefore, the formation of school clusters or expanded education councils, similar to the Finnish quality network model (EDUFI, 2020), is an urgent requirement.

Furthermore, many international studies emphasize that sustainable decentralization is always based on the coordination between mandatory legal tools and soft mechanisms to support implementation. Abbott & Snidal (2000) point out that combining hard and soft power makes the system more flexible and reduces administrative pressure. In Vietnam, experts believe that current policies remain heavily regulatory, lacking soft mechanisms such as professional guidance and data-driven support tools – elements that play a crucial role in successful two-tiered systems.

Furthermore, the two-tier model only brings about change when the central government plays a guiding role through quality standards and data, while local authorities are responsible for implementation and adjustment tailored to local contexts. Schools become centers of implementation with genuine autonomy in professional matters. This three-tier structure aligns with the logic of multi-level governance (Hooghe & Marks, 2003). It reflects a shift that many Vietnamese experts believe needs to be promoted: from a procedural-oriented administrative model to a governance model based on competence, data, and accountability.

Based on international experience and expert opinions, we propose three key directions for Vietnam. Firstly, the legal framework needs to clearly define the scope of authority at each level, while strengthening soft tools to support implementation. Secondly, mechanisms or institutions must be expanded towards cross-level cooperation and horizontal professional networks to maintain system cohesion. Thirdly, local capacity, especially in governance, data utilization, and human resource management, needs to be enhanced to ensure that autonomy is used appropriately and responsibly.

IV. Conclude

The above analysis shows that the two-tiered education management model is not merely a reorganization of administrative levels, but a profound shift in the distribution of power and responsibility among the central government, local authorities, and schools. The experience of many countries shows that educational quality improves only when the roles at each level are clearly defined: the central government plays a key role in regulating and guiding; local authorities proactively implement policies based on their management capacity; and schools have genuine autonomy in their professional work. Experts interviewed also affirmed that empowering individuals without competence and coordination mechanisms is unlikely to bring about change and may even hinder the system.

For Vietnam, the context of educational governance reform demands a more cautious yet decisive approach. International experiences, compared with domestic practices, show that decentralization is effective only when accompanied by a transparent data system, clear accountability mechanisms, and a reliable platform for cooperation across different levels of management. If these conditions are firmly established, a two-tiered model could become a driving force for the Vietnamese education system to operate more flexibly, adapt better to local contexts, and still ensure quality and equity.

Reference

- [1]. Abbott, K., & Snidal, D. (2000). Hard And Soft Law In International Governance. *International Organization*, 54(3), 421–456.
- [2]. Central Committee Of The Party. (2013). Resolution No. 29-NQ/TW On Fundamental And Comprehensive Reform Of Education And Training. Hanoi.
- [3]. Central Committee Of The Party. (2017). Resolution No. 18-NQ/TW On Continuing To Innovate And Streamline The Organizational Structure Of The Political System. Hanoi.
- [4]. Bogdan, R., & Biklen, S. (2016). *Qualitative Research For Education*. Pearson.
- [5]. Bray, M., & Thomas, R. (1995). Levels Of Comparative Education Research. *Harvard Educational Review*, 65 (3), 472–490.
- [6]. Bush, T. (2011). *Theories Of Educational Leadership And Management*. Sage.
- [7]. Government. (2021). Resolution No. 76/NQ-CP Promulgating The Overall Program For State Administrative Reform For The Period 2021–2030. Hanoi.
- [8]. Government. (2021). Decree No. 32/2021/ND-CP Detailing The Implementation Of Resolution 97/2019/QH14. Hanoi.

- [9]. Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2018). *Research Methods In Education* (8th Ed.). Routledge.
- [10]. Denzin, N. (1978). *The Research Act: A Theoretical Introduction To Sociological Methods*. McGraw-Hill.
- [11]. EDUFI – Finnish National Agency For Education. (2020). *Education In Finland 2020*. Helsinki: EDUFI.
- [12]. Faguet, J. (2014). Decentralization And Governance. *World Development*, 53, 2–13.
- [13]. Flick, U. (2018). *An Introduction To Qualitative Research* (6th Ed.). Sage.
- [14]. Greany, T. (2015). More Fragmented, And Yet More Networked: Analyzing The Responses Of Two Local Authorities In England To The Coalition's 'Self-Improving School-Led System' Reform. *London Review Of Education*, 13 (2), 125–145.
- [15]. Ho, SC (2006). Educational Decentralization In Three Asian Societies: Japan, Korea And Hong Kong. *Journal Of Educational Administration*, 44 (6), 590–603.
- [16]. Hooghe, L., & Marks, G. (2003). Unraveling The Central State, But How? Types Of Multi-Level Governance. *American Political Science Review*, 97 (2), 233–243.
- [17]. OECD. (2014). *Governing Complex Education Systems (EDU/WKP(2014)8)*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
- [18]. OECD. (2018). *School Autonomy And Student Performance: Cross-Cycle Analysis Using PISA 2000–2015*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
- [19]. Nguyen Ngoc Anh. (2025). *The Impact Of Administrative Restructuring And Organization On Teaching Geography Towards Sustainable Development In Vietnam*. 6th International Conference On Culture And Education 2025 (ICCE 2025).
- [20]. National Assembly. (2019). *Law Amending And Supplementing Several Articles Of The Law On Organization Of The Government And The Law On Organization Of Local Government, No. 47/2019/QH14*. Hanoi: National Assembly Office.
- [21]. Nguyen Chi Thanh. (2025). *Educational And Training Reform To Promote Innovation: The Case Of Decentralization Of Education Management In Vietnam*. International Scientific Conference "Local Governance In The Context Of Digital Transformation: International Experiences And Policy Implications For Vietnam".