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Connecting Educational Institutions Through the "Professional Cluster" Model in the Context of Vietnam's Two-Tier Local Government System

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Abstract

Enhancing the effectiveness of state management in education is of great significance in meeting the demand for greater decentralization and delegation of authority, accompanied by appropriate resource allocation, increased institutional autonomy, and stronger accountability among educational institutions. Many management responsibilities that were previously under the authority of district-level administrations have now been transferred directly to commune- and ward-level governments. This shift enables local authorities to take a more proactive role in educational governance; however, it also presents considerable

challenges in organizing and implementing professional and academic activities at the grassroots level. Meanwhile, Departments of Education and Training continue to play a leading role in providing professional guidance and oversight for the entire local education system. In the context of Vietnam's two-tier local government system, the "Professional Cluster" model serves as an organizational solution to strengthen connections among educational institutions, support professional development activities, and facilitate the dissemination of effective teaching practices and experiences.

Keywords: Educational Management, Digital Transformation, Professional Cluster, Two-Tier Local Government System

1. Introduction

In the current context, enhancing the effectiveness of state management in education is of great importance to the process of fundamental and comprehensive educational reform. Resolution No. 71-NQ/TW of the Politburo (2025) ^[1] on breakthroughs in educational development emphasizes the need to strengthen decentralization and delegation of authority in conjunction with appropriate resource allocation, while promoting greater autonomy and accountability among educational institutions. At the same time, the two-tier local government model is bringing about significant changes in the organization and governance of education. With the elimination of the intermediate administrative level, many management responsibilities previously assigned to district-level authorities have been transferred directly to commune- and ward-level governments. This shift enables local authorities to take a more proactive role in educational administration; however, it also presents considerable challenges in organizing and implementing professional activities at the grassroots level. Meanwhile, Departments of Education and Training continue to play a leading role in providing professional guidance and oversight for the entire local education system. This situation creates a need for a supportive and connective mechanism that can facilitate the dissemination of professional directives to schools without altering the existing management authority structure.

The establishment of professional support networks among educational institutions has attracted considerable attention from educational management researchers. Studies have suggested that educational governance should adapt to changes in social and technological contexts while enhancing institutional autonomy and promoting the efficient use of educational resources (Jingxian, 2021; Elbanna, 2020) ^[2]. According to Charoenkiatkan *et al.* (2021) ^[3], this approach is associated with diversifying teaching and learning methods, strengthening the application of technology, and adjusting management mechanisms to better meet learners' needs. Furthermore, research on collaboration and resource sharing in education highlights the importance of cooperation among educational institutions and teaching staff in exchanging experiences, sharing knowledge, and providing professional support (Littlejohn, 2010; Littlejohn & Margaryan, 2018; Armstrong, 2015; Bliss, 2022) ^[4]. In addition, studies on educational quality assurance indicate that strengthening joint professional development activities among schools can contribute to reducing educational quality disparities across regions (Ehlers, 2017; Weis, 2021) ^[5]. These theoretical perspectives suggest that establishing professional collaboration mechanisms among schools represents an appropriate

approach in the current context of educational management reform.

2. Professional Collaboration Among Educational Institutions

A **Professional Cluster** is a collaborative organizational model that links educational institutions within the same locality in order to strengthen professional exchange, share teaching experiences, and provide mutual support in carrying out educational tasks. This model is not an intermediate administrative structure; rather, it serves as a professional networking platform connecting schools and educational practitioners. Members of a Professional Cluster typically include educational administrators, school leaders, and core teachers from educational institutions within the region. Through activities such as seminars, professional learning communities, lesson study, and the sharing of teaching experiences, schools are able to support one another in innovating teaching methods, improving assessment practices, and implementing digital transformation initiatives in education.

In addition, the Professional Cluster functions as an information bridge between the Department of Education and Training and educational institutions. Through cluster coordinators and teams of core teachers, educational policies, directives, and professional guidelines can be disseminated rapidly and effectively to schools. At the same time, challenges arising during the teaching and learning process can be reported and addressed in a timely manner. Furthermore, the model creates opportunities for educational leaders and core teachers to play a more active role in providing professional support to their colleagues, thereby contributing to the enhancement of professional competencies and the overall quality of education across the system.

Based on geographical conditions and the educational development characteristics of each area, five Professional Clusters will be established. This division is intended to ensure operational convenience while reflecting similarities in the socio-economic conditions of the localities involved. The coordinating board of each cluster generally consists of leaders and specialists from the Department of Education and Training, education officers at the commune and ward levels, as well as school administrators and core teachers from participating educational institutions. Such an organizational structure ensures close coordination among educational authorities, local governments, and schools.

Professional Clusters play an important role in connecting educational institutions and creating an academic environment for interaction among teachers and educational administrators. Through thematic workshops, lesson study activities, and demonstration teaching sessions, educators have opportunities to discuss professional issues and collaboratively seek solutions for improving teaching quality. The clusters also assist schools in developing educational plans and designing learning activities oriented toward the development of students' competencies and character. Educational innovations, including new teaching methodologies and assessment practices introduced through regulations and guidelines issued by the Ministry of Education and Training, can be implemented consistently through cluster-based professional activities.

Moreover, experts within each cluster directly organize professional development workshops, model lessons, and

experience-sharing sessions. These activities provide valuable professional resources that enable educational institutions to access innovative teaching approaches and strengthen teachers' professional capabilities. As a result, Professional Clusters contribute significantly to improving educational quality, fostering collaboration, and supporting the sustainable development of the education system in the context of increasing decentralization and educational reform.

3. Digital Transformation and Digital Ecosystem Development

An important factor in the operation of the Professional Cluster model is the establishment of a data interoperability mechanism among educational institutions and management agencies. Through shared digital platforms, professional and administrative data from schools can be standardized and integrated into a unified information system. All professional reports generated by educational institutions are digitized and uploaded directly to the shared platform, enabling local authorities and educational management agencies to monitor educational activities without relying on multiple intermediate administrative levels.

In the context of ongoing digital transformation across educational management and teaching activities, the organization of professional development activities among schools is also evolving. The application of digital technologies has expanded opportunities for professional exchange, strengthened connectivity, and facilitated the sharing of educational resources among institutions. Accordingly, technology- and data-driven solutions can contribute significantly to improving the effectiveness and cost-efficiency of the Professional Cluster model.

A **digital ecosystem** can be understood as a network of interconnected technological platforms, data resources, and users operating within a unified system. According to Fasnacht (2024) ^[6], digital ecosystems enable organizations to optimize operational processes and create sustainable value through the integration of technological components. For Professional Clusters, the development of a shared digital ecosystem allows digital resources, teaching material repositories, demonstration lesson videos, and examination banks to be connected through a common platform. Online management tools such as Microsoft Teams and learning management systems can assist cluster coordinators in monitoring the implementation progress of professional activities in real time.

As a result, resource sharing and coordination among schools become more efficient and convenient, while also establishing a foundation for data-driven educational innovation. The integration of digital technologies into Professional Clusters not only enhances collaboration and communication but also supports evidence-based decision-making, continuous professional development, and the sustainable improvement of educational quality across the system.

4. Educational Workforce Management and Resource Sharing

Online professional development activities represent an important solution in contexts where significant geographical distances exist between Departments of Education and Training and educational institutions. In Official Dispatch No. 5555/BGDĐT-GDTrH (2014) ^[7], the

Ministry of Education and Training provided guidance on organizing online professional activities through the “Connected Schools” platform. Within the Professional Cluster model, activities such as classroom observation, lesson study, and thematic discussions can be conducted online through platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, and Microsoft Teams. Demonstration lessons can be recorded and reviewed multiple times, enabling teachers to gain deeper insights into teaching methodologies and instructional practices. This approach not only reduces travel costs but also makes it possible to invite experts from the Ministry of Education and Training or other localities to participate in professional exchanges with teachers throughout the entire cluster.

The use of data in teacher workforce management can further enhance the effectiveness of Professional Clusters. One promising approach is the development of a digital personnel map that stores information on the qualifications, expertise, and professional competencies of teachers within the cluster. When a school experiences shortages in specialized subjects such as English, Information Technology, or Arts education, the data system can support decision-making by recommending teacher deployment strategies or facilitating inter-school teaching arrangements. In addition, online feedback systems allow teachers to evaluate the quality and relevance of professional development activities. Such feedback provides cluster management boards with valuable information for adjusting support programs and professional activities to better align with the actual needs of teachers and schools.

By integrating online collaboration tools and data-driven workforce management, Professional Clusters can improve resource utilization, strengthen professional collaboration, and ensure more equitable access to educational expertise across schools. These innovations contribute not only to operational efficiency but also to the long-term development of a flexible, responsive, and sustainable educational support network.

5. Conclusion and future works

Within the two-tier local government model, the **Professional Cluster** is not an administrative entity formally prescribed by the legal system. Rather, it functions as a professional coordination mechanism established by sectoral authorities to strengthen collaboration and professional support among grassroots educational institutions. The model serves as a flexible intermediary structure that contributes to improving governance effectiveness through network-based collaboration, adaptability, and responsiveness to the demands of large-scale urban administration.

The implementation of the two-tier local government model has brought significant changes to educational management, particularly as professional guidance and supervision have become increasingly centralized within the Departments of Education and Training, while educational institutions are granted greater autonomy in their operations. In this context, the Professional Cluster model emerges as an appropriate organizational solution for connecting schools, supporting professional development activities, and disseminating educational innovations and best practices.

Through a well-designed organizational structure, flexible operational mechanisms, and the support of digital platforms, Professional Clusters can function as an

“extended arm” of the Department of Education and Training, ensuring that professional guidance and educational policies are effectively communicated and implemented at the school level. At the same time, the model contributes to the development of a collaborative academic environment among educational institutions, strengthens the role of core teachers and educational leaders, and promotes the digital transformation of educational management. As a result, Professional Clusters not only enhance professional capacity and instructional quality but also support the development of a more connected, efficient, and sustainable educational system in the era of educational reform and digital transformation.

In the future, the Professional Cluster model should be further developed into a data-driven and digitally connected professional network that supports continuous improvement across educational institutions. One important direction is the establishment of an integrated digital ecosystem that enables real-time sharing of educational resources, professional development materials, lesson repositories, assessment banks, and teaching innovations among schools. In addition, the application of artificial intelligence, learning analytics, and educational data mining can support evidence-based decision-making in teacher development, curriculum implementation, and educational quality assurance. Professional Clusters may also evolve into regional innovation hubs where teachers, school leaders, researchers, and educational experts collaborate to design and evaluate innovative teaching practices.

Another strategic direction is the expansion of inter-regional and cross-provincial professional networks. Through digital platforms, schools from different localities can participate in joint professional activities, share best practices, and access expertise regardless of geographical constraints. This approach can contribute to reducing educational disparities between regions and promoting more equitable access to high-quality professional support.

Furthermore, future research should examine the effectiveness of Professional Clusters through empirical studies focusing on teacher professional development, student learning outcomes, organizational performance, and digital transformation readiness. The findings from such studies would provide evidence-based recommendations for refining the model and supporting its sustainable implementation within Vietnam’s evolving educational governance framework.

Ultimately, the Professional Cluster model has the potential to become a key component of a modern educational governance system characterized by collaboration, autonomy, innovation, and digital transformation, thereby contributing to the long-term improvement of educational quality and equity in Vietnam.

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