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Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for School Reform

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A longitudinal study of 400 Chicago elementary schools shows the central role of relational trust in building effective education communities.



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Important consequences play out in the day-to-day social exchanges within a school community. Recent research shows that social trust among teachers, parents, and school leaders improves much of the routine work of schools and is a key resource for reform.

For example, Comer's School Development Project demonstrates that strengthening the connections between urban school professionals and parents of low socioeconomic status can improve their children's academic achievement (Comer, Haynes, Joyner, & Ben-Avie, 1996). Meier (1995) argues persuasively that building trust among teachers, school leaders, students, and parents was a key component of the success of the middle school that she created in Harlem. The efforts of Alvarado and his colleagues to build learning communities in Community School District 2 in Manhattan also support the importance of the social dimension of school change (Malloy, 1998). And a longitudinal analysis of successfully restructuring schools concluded that

human resources—such as openness to improvement, trust and respect, teachers having knowledge and skills, supportive leadership, and socialization—are more critical to the development of professional community than structural conditions. . . . The need to improve the culture, climate, and interpersonal relationships in schools has received too little attention. (Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1994, p. 8; see also Louis & Kruse, 1995; Newmann & Associates, 1996)

In short, a growing body of case studies and clinical narratives directs our attention to the engaging but elusive idea of social trust as essential for meaningful school improvement. But what is social trust? What factors help to shape it? And what benefits does it produce?

To answer these and related questions, we conducted almost a decade of intensive case study research and longitudinal statistical analyses from more than 400 Chicago elementary schools. We spent approximately four years in 12 different school communities observing school meetings and events; conducting interviews and focus groups with principals, teachers, parents, and community leaders; observing classroom instruction; and talking to teachers about the progress and problems in their reform efforts. Differences between two of these cases, Holiday and Ridgeway Elementary Schools,¹ help illustrate how the dynamics of relational trust across a school community influence its reform efforts.

Combined with this field study, we analyzed periodic surveys of teachers, principals, and

students collected by the Consortium on Chicago School Research to examine the changing quality of relational dynamics in all Chicago elementary schools over a six-year period. We also analyzed trends in individual student reading and mathematics achievement during this same time period to assess the value that each school was adding to student learning and the extent to which this “value-added” measure was improving over time. This improvement in a school's contribution to student learning is a direct measure of its changing academic productivity. By linking evidence on the schools' changing academic productivity with survey results on school trust over a long period of time, we were able to document the powerful influence that such trust plays as a resource for reform.

What Is Relational Trust?

Distinct role relationships characterize the social exchanges of schooling: teachers with students, teachers with other teachers, teachers with parents, and all groups with the school principal. Each party in a relationship maintains an understanding of his or her role's obligations and holds some expectations about the obligations of the other parties. For a school community to work well, it must achieve agreement in each role relationship in terms of the understandings held about these personal obligations and expectations of others.

An interrelated set of mutual dependencies are embedded within the social exchanges in any school community. Regardless of how much formal power any given role has in a school community, all participants remain dependent on others to achieve desired outcomes and feel empowered by their efforts.

The principal, for example, needs faculty support to maintain a cohesive professional community that productively engages parents and students. Teachers' work, in turn, depends on decisions that the principal makes about the allocation of resources to their classrooms. Parents depend on both teachers and the principal to create an environment that keeps their children safe and helps them learn. Such dependencies create a sense of mutual vulnerability for all individuals involved. Consequently, deliberate action taken by any party to reduce this sense of vulnerability in others—to make them feel safe and secure—builds trust across the community.

As individuals interact with one another around the work of schooling, they are constantly discerning the intentions embedded in the actions of others. They consider how others' efforts advance their own interests or impinge on their own self-esteem. They ask whether others' behavior reflects appropriately on their moral obligations to educate children well. These discernments take into account the history of previous interactions. In the absence of prior contact, participants may rely on the general reputation of the other and also on commonalities of race, gender, age, religion, or upbringing. These discernments tend to organize around four specific considerations: respect, personal regard, competence in core role responsibilities, and personal integrity.

Respect

Relational trust is grounded in the social respect that comes from the kinds of social discourse that take place across the school community. Respectful exchanges are marked by genuinely listening to what each person has to say and by taking these views into account in subsequent actions. Even when people disagree, individuals can still feel valued if others respect their opinions.

Without interpersonal respect, social exchanges may cease. People typically avoid demeaning situations if they can. When they don't have this option, sustained conflict may erupt. Such a situation existed at Ridgeway Elementary School, where interactions among parent leaders and professional staff got in the way of needed reforms. For example, parent and community leaders pressed school staff to implement a “respect program toward students,” which included written standards for how adults should talk to students, guidelines to encourage increased sensitivity on the part of school professionals to the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of students, and

procedures for handling student misconduct that refrained from punitive and demeaning adult behavior. But little of this same respect was evident in the social interactions among the adults. Parent and community leaders offered rude personal criticism of school staff with little recognition that their behavior was the exact opposite of the behavior that they desired to foster in the students.

Personal Regard

Personal regard represents another important criterion in determining how individuals discern trust. Such regard springs from the willingness of participants to extend themselves beyond the formal requirements of a job definition or a union contract. The actions of the principal at another of our case study sites, Holiday Elementary School, offer strong testimony. Almost every parent and teacher we spoke with at this school commented effusively about the principal's personal style, his openness to others, and his willingness to reach out to parents, teachers, and students. His efforts helped cultivate a climate in which such regard became the norm across the school community. This climate, in turn, was a major factor in the high level of relational trust found in this most unexpected place—a 100 percent low-income, African American population in a school serving a public housing project, with a white, male principal.

Competence in Core Role Responsibilities

School community members also want their interactions with others to produce desired outcomes. This attainment depends, in large measure, on others' role competence. For example, parents depend on the professional ethics and skills of school staff for their children's welfare and learning. Teachers want supportive work conditions for their practice, which depends on the capacity of the school principal to fairly, effectively, and efficiently manage basic school operations. School administrators value good community relations, but achieving this objective requires concerted effort from all school staff. Instances of negligence or incompetence, if allowed to persist, undermine trust. This was a major factor in the negative parent-school relations at Ridgeway, where some clearly incompetent and uncaring teachers were nonetheless allowed to continue to practice.

Personal Integrity

Perceptions about personal integrity also shape individuals' discernment that trust exists. The first question that we ask is whether we can trust others to keep their word. Integrity also demands that a moral-ethical perspective guides one's work. Although conflicts frequently arise among competing individual interests within a school community, a commitment to the education and welfare of children must remain the primary concern.

The principal's actions at Ridgeway offer a compelling example of how a perceived lack of commitment to students' welfare can undermine trust. Although members of the school community viewed this principal as a caring person, no one was sure where he stood on a number of internal school conflicts. When concerns surfaced about problematic teachers, he chose an approach sensitive to the particular adults involved. He visited their classrooms and demonstrated lessons, hoping that the teachers would adopt new techniques. When the teachers did not improve, however, he dropped the initiative and did not change the situation. In the end, no one interpreted his action as directed toward the best interests of the students, and these events further exacerbated the distrust across the school community.

Benefits of Trust

The myriad social exchanges that make up daily life in a school community fuse into distinct social patterns that can generate organization-wide resources. Collective decision making with broad teacher buy-in, a crucial ingredient for reform, occurs more readily in schools with strong relational trust. In contrast, the absence of trust, as witnessed at Ridgeway School, provoked sustained controversy around resolving even such relatively simple problems as the

arrangements for a kindergarten graduation ceremony.

Strong relational trust also makes it more likely that reform initiatives will diffuse broadly across the school because trust reduces the sense of risk associated with change. When school professionals trust one another and sense support from parents, they feel safe to experiment with new practices. Similarly, relational trust fosters the necessary social exchanges among school professionals as they learn from one another. Talking honestly with colleagues about what's working and what's not means exposing your own ignorance and making yourself vulnerable. Without trust, genuine conversations of this sort remain unlikely.

Further, relational trust supports a moral imperative to take on the difficult work of school improvement. Most teachers work hard at their teaching. When implementing "reform," they must assume risks, deal with organizational conflict, attempt new practices, and take on extra work, such as engaging with colleagues in planning, implementing, and evaluating improvement initiatives. Teachers quite reasonably ask, "Why should we do this?" A context characterized by high relational trust provides an answer: In the end, reform is the right thing to do.

Our analysis of Holiday School provides strong testimony here, too. Both professionals and parents at Holiday shared a commitment "to go the extra mile for the children." Almost every person we interviewed spoke about the school community in these terms. Our longitudinal survey analyses provide strong evidence on this point as well. In schools in which relational trust was improving over time, teachers increasingly characterized their colleagues as committed and loyal to the school and more eager to engage in new practices that might help students learn better.

Not surprisingly, then, we found that elementary schools with high relational trust were much more likely to demonstrate marked improvements in student learning. Our overall measure of school trust, on the basis of approximately two dozen survey items addressing teachers' attitudes toward their colleagues, principals, and parents, proved a powerful discriminator between improving and nonimproving schools. A school with a low score on relational trust at the end of our study had only a one-in-seven chance of demonstrating improved academic productivity. In contrast, half of the schools that scored high on relational trust were in the improved group. On average, these improving schools recorded increases in student learning of 8 percent in reading and 20 percent in mathematics in a five-year period. The schools in the nonimproving group lost ground in reading and stayed about the same in mathematics. Most significant was the finding that schools with chronically weak trust reports throughout the period of the study had virtually no chance of improving in either reading or mathematics.

Conditions That Foster Relational Trust

Relational trust entails much more than just making school staff feel good about their work environment and colleagues. A school cannot achieve relational trust simply through some workshop, retreat, or form of sensitivity training, although all of these activities can help. Rather, schools build relational trust in day-to-day social exchanges.

Through their words and actions, school participants show their sense of their obligations toward others, and others discern these intentions. Trust grows through exchanges in which actions validate these expectations. Even simple interactions, if successful, can enhance collective capacities for more complex subsequent actions. In this respect, increasing trust and deepening organizational change support each other.

Centrality of Principal Leadership

Principals' actions play a key role in developing and sustaining relational trust. Principals establish both respect and personal regard when they acknowledge the vulnerabilities of others, actively listen to their concerns, and eschew arbitrary actions. Effective principals couple these behaviors with a compelling school vision and behavior that clearly seeks to advance the vision.

This consistency between words and actions affirms their personal integrity. Then, if the principal competently manages basic day-to-day school affairs, an overall ethos conducive to the formation of trust will emerge.

In a troubled school community, attaining relational trust may require the principal to jump-start change. Typically, the principal may need to reshape the composition of the school staff by hiring strong people into staff vacancies and, where necessary, counseling out those whose practice remains inconsistent with the school's mission and values.

The principal at Holiday, for example, skillfully used his expanded authority under Chicago's school reform to hire new teachers of his own choosing without regard to seniority or bumping rights. This reshaping of his faculty was a key element in building relational trust. In contrast, the inability of Ridgeway's principal to remove a few problematic teachers undermined trust. Although other teachers were reluctant to directly confront their offending colleagues, the faculty generally did not participate in collaborative activities. Similarly, parents and community leaders became more distrustful because they could not understand how the professional staff could tolerate such behavior. The end result was a school community that was unlikely to garner the adult effort required to initiate and sustain reform.

Supporting Teachers to Reach Out to Parents

Parents in most urban school communities remain highly dependent on the good intentions of teachers. To promote relational trust, teachers need to recognize these parents' vulnerabilities and reach out actively to moderate them. Unfortunately, many schools do not acknowledge this responsibility as a crucial aspect of teachers' roles.

Elementary school teachers spend most of their time engaged with students. Little in their professional training prepares them for working with parents and other adults in the community. Moreover, because of the class and race differences between school professionals and parents in most urban areas, conditions can be ripe for misunderstanding and distrust. Effective urban schools need teachers who not only know their students well but also have an empathetic understanding of their parents' situations and the interpersonal skills needed to engage adults effectively.

Other Key Factors

A number of structural conditions facilitate the creation of relational trust in a school community. Although their existence does not ensure relational trust, the presence of these conditions makes it easier for school leaders to build and sustain trust.

Small school size. We found that relational trust is more likely to flourish in small elementary schools with 350 or fewer students. Larger schools tend to have more limited face-to-face interactions and more bureaucratic relations across the organization. Individuals often define their affiliations in terms of some subgroup and have weaker ties to the larger organization. In contrast, the work structures of a small school are less complex and its social networks are typically fewer in number. As a result, relational trust is likely to be sustained more easily.

A stable school community. The stability of the student body directly affects teacher-parent trust. Building and maintaining trust depends on repeated social exchanges. Teachers find it hard to develop and sustain direct positive engagement with all parents when the student population changes frequently. Moreover, in transient neighborhoods, parents find it difficult to share reassuring information with one another about their good experiences with teachers; lacking such personal communication, parents who are new to a school community may fall back on predispositions to distrust, especially if many of their social encounters outside of the school tend to reinforce this worldview.

Voluntary association. Relational trust is also more likely to arise in schools where at least a modicum of choice exists for both staff and students. Because participants have deliberately

chosen to affiliate with the school, relations among all parties are pre-conditioned toward trust. If subsequent actions reinforce the wisdom of this choice, relational trust will deepen. In contrast, the forced assignment of individuals to schools fosters uncertainty and suspicion about the motivations and commitments of others and may create a formidable barrier to promoting trust.

Keeping the Connective Tissue Healthy

Good schools depend heavily on cooperative endeavors. Relational trust is the connective tissue that binds individuals together to advance the education and welfare of students. Improving schools requires us to think harder about how best to organize the work of adults and students so that this connective tissue remains healthy and strong.

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Endnote

¹ School names are pseudonyms.

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