EL Education

Relational Trust in Schools

"Trust is the connective tissue that holds improving schools together."

– Anthony S. Bryk and Barbara Schneider,
Trust in Schools: A Core Resource of Improvement (2002)

Relational Trust...

- Is built through day-to-day social exchanges in a school community.
- Supports a moral imperative to take on the difficult work of school improvement.
- Facilitates accountability for shared standards, while also allowing people to experience autonomy and mutual support for individual efforts.
- Reduces the vulnerability that teachers feel when asked to take on tasks connected to reform.
- Facilitates the safety needed to experiment with new practices.

Critical Attributes that Build Trust Include…

- **Respect**: Genuinely listening and valuing the opinions of others during social discourse that takes place across the school community.
- **Personal Regard for Others**: The willingness of members of a school community to extend themselves beyond what their role might formally require in any given situation. Actions are made in an effort to reduce others' sense of vulnerability.
- **Competence**: Execution of an individual's formal responsibilities. There is recognition of the interdependence of our roles in attaining the desired outcome. When negligence or incompetence is allowed to persist in any one role in the school, it undermines trust.
- **Integrity**: Consistency between what a person says and does. Others believe and perceive that a moral-ethical perspective guides one's work.

Conditions That Foster Relational Trust:

- **Centrality of Principal Leadership**: Principals establish both respect and personal regard when they acknowledge the vulnerabilities of others, actively listen to their concerns, and avoid arbitrary actions.
- **Authentic Parent Engagement**: In most schools, communities remain highly dependent on the good intentions of teachers; parent vulnerabilities need to be recognized and teachers should be supported to create partnerships with parents and families to promote student learning and growth.
- **Small School Size**: Relational trust is more likely to flourish when there is expanded face-to-face time and limited bureaucratic relations across the organization. The work structures of small schools are less complex and their social networks are typically fewer in number–as a result relational trust is likely to be sustained more easily.
- **Stable School Communities**: The stability of a student body directly affects teacher-parent trust. Building and maintaining trust therefore depends on repeated social exchanges.
- **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.

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Summary of Key Points:

University of Chicago researchers Bryk and Schneider examined the role of social relationships in schools and their impact on student achievement. Their conclusion? That "a broad base of trust across a school community lubricates much of a school's day-to-day functioning and is a critical resource as local leaders embark on ambitious improvement plans."

Bryk and Schneider contend that schools with a high degree of relational trust are far more likely to make the kinds of changes that help raise student achievement than those where relations are poor. They take the bold step of seeking empirical evidence that links trust and academic achievement.

Teachers' relationships with each other can often be more challenging than those between teachers and their bosses, the authors found.

The evidence from Chicago suggests that, while not all schools with high levels of trust improve (that is, trust alone won't solve instructional or structural problems), schools with little or no relational trust have practically no chance of improving.

In top-quartile schools, three-quarters of teachers reported strong or very strong relations with fellow teachers, and nearly all reported such relations with their principals. By contrast, at schools in the bottom quartile, a majority of teachers having little or no trust in their colleagues, two-thirds said the same about their principals, and fewer than 40 percent reported positive, trusting relations with parents.

Bryk and Schneider found that schools with strong levels of trust at the outset of reforms had a 1-in-2 chance of making significant improvements in math and reading, while those with weak relationships had a 1-in-7 chance of making gains.

Good relationships and trust won't compensate for bad instruction, poorly trained teachers or unworkable school structures, as Byrk and Schneider are careful to note. But by the same token, reform efforts are bound to fail if they ignore the importance of how teachers, principals, parents, and students interact.

"Relational trust does not directly affect student learning. Rather, trust fosters a set of organizational conditions, some structural and others social-psychological, that make it more conducive for individuals to initiate and sustain the kinds of activities necessary to affect productivity improvements."