

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

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:** the kind of social discourse that takes place across the school community, genuinely listening and valuing the opinions of others.
- **Personal Regard:** the willingness of members of a school community to extend themselves beyond the formal requirements of a job definition or a union contract.
- **Competence in Core Role Responsibilities:** recognizes 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.
- **Personal Integrity:** the belief or perception that a moral-ethical perspective guide's 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 urban 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 its 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.

“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.”

Adapted from: Bryk, Anthony S. and Barbara Schneider. *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource of Improvement*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation Publications, 2004.