

Investments in High-Trust Relationships Produce Big Dividends for Collaborative Teams

By Thomas W. Many and Susan K. Sparks

Adapted from *Texas Elementary Principals & Supervisors Association's* TEP SA News, September/October 2015, Vol. 72, No. 5, www.tepsa.org

“Building a culture of trust in a given school may require time, effort, and leadership, but the investment is likely to bring satisfying returns.”

—Megan Tschannen-Moran

In their seminal study of trust in schools, Anthony S. Bryk and Barbara Schneider (2002) establish a clear connection between the level of relational trust in a school and improved student learning. Bryk and Schneider (2002) argue that “relational trust is the connective tissue that binds individuals together to advance the education and welfare of students” (p. 44).

There is a robust body of evidence supporting the relationship between trust and high levels of learning. Since Bryk and Schneider’s (2002) early work, Tschannen-Moran (2014) found that high-trust cultures are associated with higher levels of student achievement, “*even when taking into account the socioeconomic status of students*” (p. 146). Other researchers reported similar results confirming that high levels of relational trust are associated with high levels of student achievement (Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2005; Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011; Moses, 2019). While these studies shine light on the positive effect trust has on student achievement, what has received far less attention is the positive impact trust has on collaborative teams.

“Trust is the foundation for collaboration, and collaboration is what makes organizations great.”

—Jane Modoono

Researchers have that found trust and collaboration are reciprocal, mutually reinforcing, and closely linked. Tschannen-Moran (2014) observes that the level of collaboration in a school is related to the level of trust present in the school. According to Paul S. Sutton and Andrew W. Shouse (2016), “Collaboration builds teacher trust and expertise and enables schools to implement changes in instruction with greater ease and comfort” (p. 69). Miesner and colleagues (2019) report that “when teachers trust their colleagues, they are likely to collaborate more often *even if the time for collaboration is not allocated during the regular school day*” (emphasis added). Clearly trust and collaboration are closely linked to one another.

In addition to promoting higher levels of collaboration in general, trust also promotes other, more specific benefits that support development of collaborative cultures. In high-trust schools, teams are more highly motivated, better able to adapt to challenges, and more likely to achieve school goals (Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011). In cultures where trust is high, teams demonstrate higher levels of engagement and self-efficacy and more effective problem solving (Miesner et al., 2019), exhibit a greater commitment to the success of students (Brewster & Railsback, 2003; Modoono, 2017), and are more willing to take risks. The consensus is, “While trust alone does not guarantee success, schools with little or no trust have almost no chance of improving” (Brewster & Railsback, 2003, p. 7).

“The latest work on trust in schools ties the growth of trust to gains in school [teacher] productivity and increased school [student] achievement.”

—Julie Reed Kochanek

Principals certainly set the tone for building high-trust relationships, but they cannot accomplish the task alone. Trusting relationship experts and coauthors Cori Brewster and Jennifer Railsback (2003) argue that “The responsibility for building trust among teachers falls on the shoulders of principals and teachers alike” (p. 15). Brewster and Railsback (2003) suggest, “Identifying the specific causes of mistrust in the school and making a sincere commitment to address them is the first and probably most important step” (p. 11).

One excellent way to begin building (or rebuilding) trust is to gather data. Several authors and experts have developed surveys that can be helpful in identifying the specific causes for the lack of trust in a school (Kochanek, 2005; Sanderson, 2005; Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Utilizing these surveys, teachers can generate data and establish specific goals around improving the level of trust in their schools and on their teams. Data from the surveys also help principals identify and celebrate the specific behaviors that build trust while simultaneously minimizing those that erode trust. The following process will produce a set of measurable goals to improve the level of relational trust in a school.

- **Step 1:** Teachers complete a survey that measures the level of trust in schools. Experience has shown that gathering the data anonymously will create a safer environment and encourage participation.
- **Step 2:** The completed surveys are turned in to a trusted member of the faculty who, working with the principal, compiles the results anonymously. What we have learned is that compiling the data anonymously will generate even more comfort among the faculty. The resulting data create a *trust profile* for the school.
- **Step 3:** Publicly share the school’s trust profile during a faculty meeting where teachers, working together in teams, identify trends or reoccurring patterns of behavior that contribute to high or low levels of trust. Reflect on the level of trust at the school and on the team.
- **Step 4:** Teacher teams use the data to establish specific goals to promote the development of higher levels of relational trust on their teams and in their schools.

As Brewster and Railsback (2003) correctly observe, “If relationships between teachers are to change significantly, teachers themselves must work to identify barriers to trust within the faculty and take the initiative to improve, repair, and maintain relationships” (p. 15).

“Just as the tax created by low trust is real, measurable, and extremely high, so the dividends of high trust are also real, quantifiable, and incredibly high.”

—Stephen M. R. Covey

Leadership expert and author Stephen M. R. Covey (2006) argues that all organizations either “pay a tax” or “collect a dividend” based on the level of trust in their culture. In low-trust schools, the *trust tax* is high and negatively affects the productivity of collaborative teams. In high-trust schools the opposite is true; the *trust dividend* is high, and the level of trust enhances the productivity of collaborative teams. The most effective principals are intentional around their efforts to avoid taxes and increase dividends in their schools.

The bottom line is that creating healthy relationships based on high levels of relational trust requires an investment of time and energy. It can be challenging but the payoff—*the return on investment*—is improvement in both student achievement and the productivity of collaborative teams.

References

- Brewster, C., & Railsback, J. (2003, September). *Building trusting relationships for school improvement: Implications for principals and teachers*. Portland, OR: Northwestern Regional Educational Laboratory. Accessed at <https://educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/trust.pdf> on March 1, 2021.
- Bryk, A. S., & Schneider, B. (2002). *Trust in schools: A core resource for improvement*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Covey, S. M. R. (2006). *The speed of trust: The one thing that changes everything*. New York: Free Press.
- Goddard, R. D., Tschannen-Moran, M., & Hoy, W. K. (2001). Teacher trust in students and parents: A multilevel examination of the distribution and effects of teacher trust in urban elementary schools. *Elementary School Journal*, 102(1), 3-17.
- Kochanek, J. R. (2005). *Building trust for better schools*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Louis, K., & Wahlstrom, K. (2011). Principals as cultural leaders. *Kappan Magazine*, 92(5), 52-56.
- Miesner, H. R., Blair, E. E., Packard, C. C., Velazquez, M., Macgregor, L., & Grodsky, E. (2019). *Collaborating in context: Relational trust and collaborative structures at eight Wisconsin elementary schools*. Accessed at www.wcer.wisc.edu/publications/working on May 21, 2021.
- Modoono, J. (2017). The trust factor. *Educational Leadership*, 74(8), 30-34.
- Moses, L. (2019). *How trusting relationships advance school culture and influence student achievement*. Accessed at www.ascd.org/blogs/how-trusting-relationships-advance-school-culture-and-influence-student-achievement on March 9, 2021.
- Sanderson, B. E. (2005). *Talk it out! The educator's guide to successful difficult conversations*. Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education.
- Sutton, P. S., & Shouse, A. W. (2016). Building a culture of collaboration in schools. *Kappan Magazine*, 97(7), 69-73.
- Tschannen-Moran, M. (2014). *Trust matters: Leadership for successful schools*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.