Trusting Adult Communities Improve Student Achievement

At its core, Open Circle is about relationships, and relationships are the foundation upon which any community is built. Teachers work tirelessly to create classroom environments that are safe, respectful, and open, and continue to nourish and sustain these fledgling communities throughout the school year. But what about the adult community? What kind of environments are being created for and by the adults who guide and nurture young people? If relationships are the basis of a school’s community, how do they impact school culture and student learning?

Researchers have been paying more attention to the adult communities in schools and looking at the impact they have on student well-being and achievement. Much has been written about the need to focus on school reform and improvement, but until recently, little attention has been paid to promoting and valuing teamwork, and intentionally cultivating and nurturing the adult community. In order to have functional relationships among all adults in a school’s community, a strong sense of relational trust is essential.

Researchers Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider were intrigued by the impact adult interpersonal relationships have on student achievement, and conducted an almost decade-long research study in the Chicago Public Schools. What they found was relational trust was critical to student achievement and school improvement. Schools that felt a strong sense of relational trust were three times more likely to improve in reading and math than schools with low trust levels. Schools with consistently low levels of trust had “virtually no chance of showing improvement in reading or math.” (Gewertz, 2002)

If relational trust is a fundamental building block of nourishing and sustaining adult school community, how is it defined, and more importantly, how is it created and strengthened? A variety of adult relationships exist in schools today, and in each of these relationships, the parties involved rely on one another to achieve goals and accomplish tasks. This reliance and invested effort in a common task can be empowering, but it also can make parties feel vulnerable. The mere act of having to depend on one another leaves one open to disappointment and dissatisfaction.

Trust-building happens when people in the relationship meet or exceed the expectations of others and prove themselves. People begin to feel safe and secure, and a level of trust begins to develop. Bryk and Schneider define relational trust in terms of four components:

- **Respect.** Can people in a school community engage in conversation and maintain a sense of respect, even when parties disagree? Feeling respected and not judged if one has a differing opinion than the majority and feeling like others can really listen with an open mind are critical components in building relational trust.

- **Personal Regard.** Teachers often go the extra mile, and often give of themselves beyond what is expected, whether it be a closetful of snacks for the student who forgets, or staying after school to help a struggling student. Being open and willing to perform beyond the job description, to give more of oneself than is expected, builds a sense of relational trust.
• Competence in Core Responsibilities. Are people in the school able to fulfill their roles and responsibilities well? Does the Special Education teacher know how to successfully implement and support a student’s IEP? Is the principal capable of cultivating work conditions that support and enable teachers to teach? If incompetence is not handled appropriately, and people begin to doubt the competence of others in the school community, then trust erodes rapidly.

• Personal Integrity. Will others do what they say they will do? Can people rely on one another? In the context of schools, the driving value is that everything is done in the best interest of the child, regardless of how different members of the school community interpret that value. “Can we trust each other to put the interests of children first, especially when tough decisions have to be made?” (Gordon, 2002)

Traditionally, schools are not set up to foster relational trust-building. Teachers are often cut off from each other, kings and queens of their own classroom kingdoms, and little time is offered for reflection and sharing of teaching practice that would enable professional discourse. “This solo approach to teaching – the culture of connoisseurship, as Harvard’s Richard F. Elmore puts it – sparks competition rather than collaboration.” (Gordon, 2002)

This isolationist structure of classrooms doesn’t foster sharing of what former principal and teacher Roland Barth calls “craft knowledge” – what teachers know to be true, and what they have learned by doing. “These insights offer every bit as much value to improving schools as do elegant research studies and national reports. If one day we educators could only disclose our rich craft knowledge to one another, we could transform our schools overnight.” (Barth, 2006)

Times are changing. Not surprisingly, research has shown that cooperation, teamwork, and collegiality positively impact student learning and achievement, and teamwork is built on trust.

According to Bryk and Schneider, principals play a central role in engendering relational trust. Principals who are fair and consistent, listen openly, and manage day-to-day affairs effectively cultivate trust-building. Principals who demonstrate a clear school vision and work toward implementing that vision through their actions and interactions within the school community aid in establishing relational trust.

Barth recommends principals state expectations clearly and model collegiality. Kelly Clough, principal of the McAvinnue School in Lowell, Massachusetts shares, “As principal, I can easily speak about trust, why it matters, back it up with relevant research, provide professional development for staff and so on, but what I do and how I act as a trusting leader is most important. How do I encourage others to take risks, make mistakes? I often think about what trust should look like in my daily conversations and interactions with others? Do staff members and parents feel safe to express their opinions?”

Each member of the adult community has a role in promoting collegiality and trust-building. There are a few basic elements necessary to develop a trusting and trustworthy professional learning community.

Many of the skills and concepts students learn in Open Circle are relevant in the adult community. Establishing norms - explicitly naming what staff members value for themselves and what they hope of others – and frequently reviewing them, can foster trust. A variety of the team-building activities in the supplementary section of the Open Circle Curriculum can help create connections and uncover commonalities. Kelly Clough has utilized the Open Circle problem solving process when addressing challenging situations with staff members.
As Bryk and Schneider’s study found, as trust is established in a school’s adult community, the impact on student achievement and school culture is positive. Problems are solved more effectively, and teachers are more willing to experiment with new approaches and share openly about successes and failures leading to professional growth and an increase in student achievement. “Even after controlling for factors such as high poverty rates, the statistical link between trust and school improvement is striking.” (Gordon, 2002)

Building relational trust within a school requires effort, commitment, and tenacity on the part of all members of the adult community. The road may be long and winding, but in the end, the journey is worthwhile because of what trust makes possible. Kelly Clough reflects this sentiment, “For me, building and maintaining a school culture of trust is everything for setting a strong and lasting foundation. I know it takes time and requires a lot hard work and effort. Trying to make this happen in schools can be messy, uncomfortable, and at times exhausting, but I believe dealing in this “mess” is what helps strengthen and surface real trust, which is what all healthy good relationship building is about.”

SOURCES:


