



BOSTON COLLEGE

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TRUST IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN TIMES OF CRISIS

Executive Summary

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How, if at all, does trust influence the relationships and practices of educational stakeholders during times of crisis?



Trust in Educational Leadership in Times of Crisis

Context & Background

Current research contains a wealth of theorizing and empirical research on trust between teachers and principals (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999, 2003; Louis, 2007; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). This research has discovered links between trust, job satisfaction, and positive school climate, as well as increased academic success.

The impact of crisis adds an additional layer of vulnerability and deepens the importance of trust in leadership.

While trust has been widely studied, research beyond identifying the qualities or behaviors which engender the trust of teachers in their principals is limited. Through a qualitative case study of a school district in the Northeast United States, we sought to understand trust among multiple educational stakeholders: teachers, principals, central office staff, union leaders, and the superintendent. Organizational improvement toward student success frequently depends on how much people in an organization trust one another, with that trust built through relationships (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Tschannen-Moran, 2014; Benna & Hambacher, 2020).

Purpose

Our collective study examined practices and relationships across a school district during a crisis to understand how trust plays a role in the district's work. Specifically, this collective study addressed the following research question: *How, if at all, does trust influence the relationships and practices of educational stakeholders during times of crisis?*

We explored the relationships and practices among the following stakeholders: principals; teachers; central office members; union leadership; diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) leaders; and the superintendent. Our study identified the role relationships and trust play across various levels of schools during times of crisis, specifically the COVID-19 pandemic, in order to aid the development of more productive and effective districts.

How, if at all, does trust influence the relationships and practices of educational stakeholders during times of crisis?

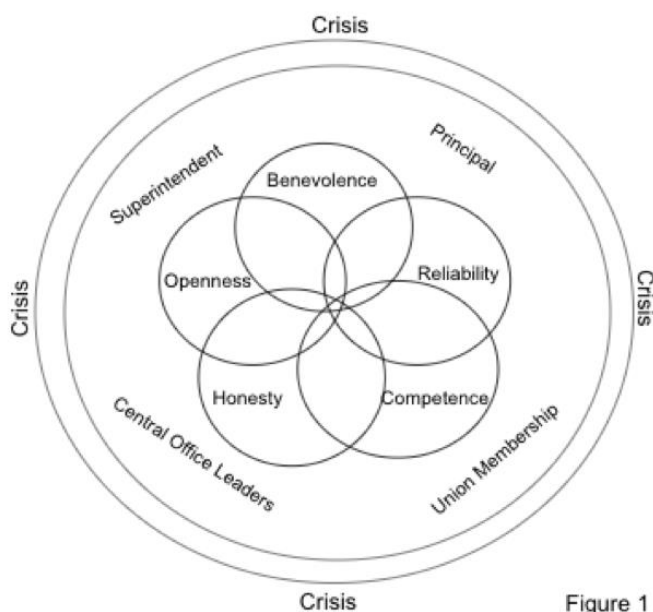
The Five Facets of Trust

Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999) identified five qualities, consistently found across the research, that engender trust within a relationship: benevolence,



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reliability, competence, openness, and honesty. They refer to these qualities as the “five facets” of trust. In our research, we identified how these five facets exist, or did not exist, within various relationships throughout a single district during the COVID-19 pandemic.



The actions that foster trust can conceptually overlap across the five facets. For example, a leader’s action may demonstrate openness by sharing a vulnerability, while also demonstrating honesty with their community, or demonstrating care and support (benevolence) for others who may share a similar vulnerability. Figure 1 visually represents how each of the five facets of trust influences relationships among key stakeholders during times of crisis. It also

shows how each of these facets can stand alone or be connected within the actions of a person and the perceptions of the receiver.

Methodology

Study Design: This qualitative case study explored how trust may influence interdependent relationships across one school district in the Northeast United States during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is likely the first of its kind to look at relational trust during a crisis through the perceptions of teachers, union leaders, principals, central office staff, DEI leaders, and a superintendent.

Site Selection: We purposefully selected a district of at least 5,000 students to ensure sufficient staff, both at the school and district level, from whom we could gather data and gain a diversity of perspectives; we also believed that a larger district could allow for more anonymity because trust could be sensitive to discuss. In addition, we selected a racially diverse district which was currently conducting DEI work, as one of our sub-studies focused on DEI work during times of crisis, and one with a superintendent with sufficient time in the district to develop or erode trust.

Data Collection: We collected data on how trust functions in specific settings and



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between specific groups through document reviews, a survey, observations, and interviews using purposeful sampling. We were interested in how trust functions in specific settings and between specific groups. Therefore, interview participants included the district superintendent and union leader, central office leaders, principals, teachers, and leaders of DEI initiatives for a total of 23 participants.

At times we used snowball sampling to identify individuals experienced with the phenomena we were studying. Our interview protocol was based on the five facets of trust: benevolence, honesty, competence, openness and reliability. We shared the first four questions of our protocol across studies to identify districtwide trends. The remaining questions were tailored more specifically to our individual studies.

Data Analysis: We used an iterative process of coding for all data analysis, beginning with a codebook derived from five facets of trust followed by several rounds of coding using words or phrases from our conceptual framework, themes from literature, ideas or phrases that stood out repeatedly, and connections to our research questions.

We coalesced the codes around categories and identified themes or trends across these categories in response to our research questions. We also identified trends across the five sub-studies, noting connections between the studies, which led to our group findings.

Findings

We examined trust between educational stakeholders across a school district during COVID-19 to understand what role, if any, trust played in these relationships. We sought to determine if trust, when present, functioned differently across roles, as well as if aspects of trust influenced the quality of relationships between educators. To do so, we examined the degree to which trust influenced the relationships and practices of principals and teachers (McCarthy, 2022); central office team members (Hung, 2022); union leaders and the superintendent (Myers, 2022); diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) leaders (Evee, 2022); and the superintendent and principals (Grassa, 2022).

Participants	Number of Stakeholders
Superintendent of Schools	1
Teachers Union Leader	1
Central Office Leaders	6
Principals	5
Teachers	4
Leaders of DEI Initiatives	6*
Total	23



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In response to our overarching research question, we collectively found that trust was present within each of the relationships and practices we studied. More specifically, benevolence was a consistent and important facet of trust formation across all relationships. In addition, we found that having a shared purpose, which the data and analyses suggest starts with shared values, made trust less risky, while the absence of shared purpose negatively affected relationships. Also, we found that the increase of time within a relationship increased the amount of trust with our participants at all levels. Finally, the collective data and analyses suggested that a sense of shared identity accelerates the trust-building process among educational leaders.

The following sections present our synthesized findings, discussion of these findings in relation to the literature, and recommendations for future research and practice.

Theme 1: Benevolence

Some researchers consider benevolence to be the most important facet of trust (Benna & Hambacher, 2020), and that held true in the data from this study. Participants across each sub-study repeatedly described benevolence as an essential facet for building trusting relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participants' benevolent behaviors included listening and supporting, treating

others with dignity, and showing concern for others beyond the job. Benevolence was also described by participants as caring for others and being able to interact and relate to everyone. The act of deep listening was another example of benevolence and a way to successfully bring in diverse voices as needed to implement the work of educational leaders. In addition, we found that nearly all stakeholders expressed deep appreciation for leaders' benevolent behaviors, which led to a feeling of support and contributed to perceptions of trust.

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Finally, we found that, during this COVID-19 crisis, educational leaders tended to focus more on caring for others by authentically asking about the well-being of those they support before discussing professional issues and tasks. This act of kindness, showing care for the whole person, can help employees feel seen, valued, and supported, all of which were referenced by stakeholders throughout this study as components of trust they desired from their leaders.

Theme 2: Shared Purpose

A shared sense of purpose is defined as having a clear sense of direction, noting that



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this is one of the nine conditions that increase educator efficacy toward improved student learning (Seashore et al., 2010).

A shared sense of purpose created a strong bond between the teacher union leader and superintendent, where the union leader stated that he and the superintendent were “on the same team,” working toward the same interests...

While a sense of shared purpose appears to have positively influenced the formation of trust within some groups, the absence of a shared purpose limited trust-formation in many others. Educational stakeholders across all levels of the district we studied articulated a need for a shared sense of purpose in their work, with the stakeholders expressing shared purpose in various ways. Proxy phrases included shared values, mission, vision, and goals.

The importance of shared vision and goals was brought up several times as a means for one principal to more deeply understand why the superintendent made certain decisions (Grassa, 2022). A shared sense of purpose created a strong bond between the teacher union leader and the superintendent, where the union leader stated that he and the superintendent were “on the same team,” working toward the

same interests: “We’re just looking out for the best interests of everybody, the best interests of the kids in the community” (Myers, 2022). A teacher at one elementary school in the district also spoke about the importance of shared values, making a connection between shared values and a tangible feeling of inclusion within the school community (McCarthy, 2022).

Meanwhile, both district leaders and principals spoke about the challenges when a shared understanding of vision and goals is missing in relationships (Evee, 2022; Grassa, 2022; Hung, 2022). Absent a shared purpose, educational stakeholders in this district articulated feelings of misalignment, misunderstanding, and distrust.

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For principals experiencing this disconnect between central office departments and schools, one principal interpreted the disconnect as “distrust” resulting from misunderstandings about the direction in which to go as a district (Grassa, 2022). Whereas, district leaders acknowledged that



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departments within the central office were functioning from different perspectives, with each department navigating the work a little bit differently (Hung, 2022).

A shared sense of purpose impacts the facilitation of knowledge transfer within an organization (Li, 2005). Therefore, an organization's success rests in part on the ability of leadership to facilitate this knowledge transfer for stakeholders, by defining a shared purpose and providing clarity around key decisions within an organization, which also fosters trust.

Theme 3: Trust and Time

Research establishes that trust between parties cannot develop without the benefit of time (Zand, 1973). Our findings strongly support the role that time plays in developing trusting relationships; nearly all of the study's participants cited the role that time played in their decision to trust others.

For example, many of the district's principals had working relationships with the superintendent for five or more years, with some knowing the superintendent far longer, including from her years as a principal in the district. As a result, they had ample opportunity to witness her behaviors and reach conclusions about her trustworthiness. Based on these observations, they trusted the superintendent because they knew who she was and what she stood for (Grassa, 2022). The teacher union leader and the superintendent both cited time as an

important factor for their decisions to trust each other, noting that they had been in their roles together for nearly six years, during which time they had developed a strong working relationship (Myers, 2022).

Principals' perceptions of teachers' trustworthiness were based almost exclusively on their history of past experiences, a phenomenon requiring time (McCarthy, 2022). The district's DEI work was also affected by the role that time plays in developing trust between key relationships (Evee, 2022). Participants specifically cited the length of time that DEI leaders had been in the district as significantly impacting others' willingness to trust them and engage in the work.

...the quality of actions and behaviors within relationships determine whether trust is established.

Findings also support prior research showing that the quality of actions and behaviors within relationships determine whether trust is established (Six, 2007; Zand, 1972). Participants referenced some longstanding relationships in the district lacking trust. Relationship history between employees, which largely resulted in higher levels of trust for many participants, was also seen as potentially negatively impacting trust for some.



Theme 4: Identity and Trust

While research highlights the important role that time plays in allowing trust to emerge (Six, 2007; Zand, 1972), our study also shows that time may not always be the most important factor for developing trusting relationships. Instead, findings indicate that a sense of shared identity can serve as a proxy for time, providing a shortcut to assessing another's behaviors and establishing trust.

For example, principals referenced the superintendent's long tenure as a principal in the district, an identity that made her a member (albeit a former member) of their group, leading them to assume she understands the importance and difficulty of their work (Grassa, 2022). This assumption directly reinforced the trust they have in her leadership because, as a member of their identity group, they believe she understands and supports them.

Both the superintendent and the teacher union leader strongly identified as members of the same in-group, producing a level of certainty about who the other is. The importance that both the superintendent and the teacher union leader placed on being lifelong residents of the community and lifelong employees of the district, for example, allowed each to make assumptions about who the other is and how they will behave; in this case, that the other has the

best interests of the district's children at heart. Leaders in the district's DEI work also noted the importance of hiring employees who reflect both the racial and cultural experience of the district's students, since sharing identities with students and their families could engender trust more quickly (Evee, 2022).

...findings indicate that a sense of shared identity can serve as a proxy for time, providing a shortcut to assessing another's behaviors and establishing trust.

On the other hand, group identity may delay or derail the trust-development process with members outside of one's group. For example, participants holding supervisory responsibilities for teachers—namely principals—were not necessarily viewed as trustworthy by teachers in this study (McCarthy, 2022). In this case, principals appeared to be categorized by teachers as members of a separate identity group and therefore less likely to understand and support teachers. The conflicting ways in which perceiving a shared identity impacted participants speaks to the complexity of this phenomena and raises the need for further study.



Recommendations

Findings suggest that to build a high-functioning organization, school districts should use the five facets as a framework for building relational trust within their organization. This should begin at the central office and principal level, with leaders reflecting on and learning about benevolence, reliability, competence, openness, and honesty, while identifying which systems and behaviors might best foster each facet. Creating collective trust across the school district must start from the top and be modeled, practiced, and tracked.

Recommendation 1

Given this study's finding that benevolence was the most highly valued of the five facets among participants, we recommend that district leaders spend time learning how to recognize and more purposefully practice benevolence in order to foster relationship-building between and within staff members, teams, schools, and the greater community. Benevolent actions may include taking time to get to know the people in the organization on a personal level, listening actively, validating the thinking of others, and leading with compassion. We also recommend explicitly focusing on relationship development, which may be achieved with the use of professionally-trained speakers, shared readings, and/or structured workshops. Key to that recommendation is to increase district leaders' understanding of the need for benevolence and the other facets of trust (reliability, competence, openness, and honesty). Further, district leaders should consider these facets in terms of how they show up in their management style, as well as how they can incorporate the facets into daily interactions.

Recommendation 2

Considering the importance that having a sense of shared purpose can be for trust-formation, we recommend that leaders more clearly define and reinforce a shared purpose across



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institutional roles. Defining a shared purpose may begin with a review of the district's mission and vision, identifying how each educational stakeholder in the district is working toward that shared purpose. While defining a shared purpose is a first step, realizing a vision will require taking additional critical steps to communicate and align this vision across the organization and to empower and motivate educators to carry out the shared purpose (Kantabutra, 2010).

Recommendation 3

Leaders should consider shaping a shared identity by explicitly defining what it means to work for the district. Creating an overarching group identity based on district mission and values may transcend other identity-based memberships and support greater trust-formation. This shared identity could further reinforce a sense of shared purpose and provide clear guidelines for what it means to work for a particular school district, creating a cohesiveness among staff and facilitating a stronger sense of belonging. This can lead to better recruitment of staff and more streamlined hiring practices. A sense of belonging or shared identity can also contribute to longer tenures for teachers and administrators alike.

Conclusion

Trust plays a critical role in relationships, allowing educational stakeholders to effectively collaborate and take risks, all of which is necessary for achieving goals, and perhaps more so during times of crisis.

In this case study, trust played a significant role in a K-12 school district, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, our data analysis concluded that benevolence is a consistent and important facet of trust formation across all relationships. In addition, we found that having a shared purpose, which we suggest starts with shared values, makes trust less risky, while the absence of shared purpose

negatively affects relationships. Further, we found that the increase of time within a relationship increases the amount of trust with our participants at all levels. Finally, the collective data suggests that having a sense of shared identity serves to accelerate the trust-building process. These findings will be useful for district and school leaders who want to more intentionally establish trusting relationships and may also inform the preparation, induction, and learning of district leaders. History has proven that K-12 school districts will continue to experience crises that impact staff, students, and families and, therefore, it is essential that trust serves as the foundational element for success.



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