Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for School Reform

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The issue of conveying and accepting trust is a matter that affects every school system, employee, parent and student associated with our nation’s educative process. This article addresses the issue of social trust as it relates to our schools and school communities, focusing specifically on the various facets of social trust and the conditions that foster trusting environments.

The authors structure their article on a decade of case study research studies from 400 Chicago elementary schools. Using the observations of school meetings, events, and classrooms, and by conducting interviews and focus groups with principals, teachers, parents, students, and community leaders, the researchers sought to better define social trust, its progress and problems with reform efforts. Additionally, periodic survey data from the Consortium on Chicago School Research and trend analysis of reading and mathematics achievement scores were collected.

Noting that each given role (administrator, teacher, student, parent) in the school community is dependent on and vulnerable to the others, the enhancement of social trust focuses on four considerations: respect, personal regard, competence in core role responsibilities, and personal integrity. Respect is highlighted as individuals work towards more active listening of others and the consideration of others’ views in subsequent actions. Personal regard is facilitated by the willingness of individuals to extend themselves beyond their required duties or assignments, thereby building a more open and willing community. The display of competence in core roles is a central factor to sustaining trust, as the absence of competent professionals exhibits negligence within the school community. Finally, social trust is also shaped through perceptions of an individual’s level of integrity, including one’s willingness to keep his word and the moral and ethical perspectives that guide one’s work within the school community.

Additional discussion focuses on the benefits of enhanced trust within schools. Collective decision making between administrators, teachers, parents, and students is encouraged as the trusting relationships grow. Strong trusting relationships among all parties also allows for implementing and sustaining reforms and significant amendments to curriculum and supervisory practices within schools. With the institution of trust within a school, teachers are more willing to admit their vulnerabilities and shortcomings, and they more willingly put forth additional efforts, as they trust their energies are for worthwhile and valued causes. Student achievement scores also benefit from enhanced trusting relationships, as reading scores rose 8 percent and mathematics scores increased by 20 percent in the five year period that data was collected.

Closing remarks in this article focus on the role of the principal in fostering a growth in trust within his/her school community. Additionally, structural factors, such as small school size, stable school communities, and a voluntary association with a school, are shown to enhance the amount of social trust within a school.

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