Opportunities for Trust Building in Times of Discord

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We are in a moment of opportunity. The struggle over who controls the future of America's public schools may come down to a matter of trust.

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Trust, built over time, can be lost in a moment. Temporal and fragile, it is vulnerable to missteps, miscommunication, and mischief. Today's school leaders operate in charged political environments fraught with controversies often sparked by design to sew discord and skepticism. Even for established and respected leaders with strong school-community relationships, today's climate makes trust a tenuous commodity.

Public schools have been under scrutiny for at least since the *A Nation at Risk* report was published in 1983 and perhaps before that when in 1954 economist Milton Friedman called for reduced investment in "government schools" while providing parents with choice through vouchers (Friedman, 1955).

Orchestrated efforts to undermine public education to achieve ideological, religious, and entrepreneurial agendas, while often out of the public's eye, have been unrelenting. Attacking school leadership is a pervasive tactic that can be effective, especially when leaders, enveloped by complex and demanding work, struggle to develop close and trusting relationships with their communities.

Successful leaders understand these conditions and recognize the importance of and means for developing trust that is founded upon honesty and reliability. The importance of a substantive entry process for a leader at any level cannot be overstated. Too often and too soon, however, the momentum is lost, as the demands and events of the moment redirect a focus from the plan for information gathering.

Yet, entry is merely the initial phase of a broader approach for continuous improvement via an inquiry and adaptation cycle that engages all stakeholders – and not just at the outset. Such a process, if characterized by an active, predictable, and transparent exchange of information, can create and fortify multiple layers of trust among the community, staff, parents, and students.

When crises arise or accusations, often seeded by outside adversaries, are made, school leaders can be buffered by authentic relationships that have been fostered across the community through such a process. As families enter the system, they are brought into an inclusive cycle of continuous improvement.

They learn that problem solving is not done by a few "experts" huddled in an office, but through an open and engaging process that celebrates what has succeeded and reflects transparency about what needs to improve. Such an approach to building trust requires authenticity of sentiment and patience.

The axiom that trust begets trust and fear begets fear, at times, seems to favor those using the latter to usurp the educational mission of the public schools. Earning trust takes more than issuing such hackneyed promises as,

"Trust me. I am in it for the kids."
"Trust me. I am the leader of the school
  or the district."
"Trust me. I am the educational expert."

Nichols (2017), in *The Death of Expertise*, warns:

Any assertion of expertise from an actual expert, meanwhile, produces an explosion of anger from certain quarters of the American public, who immediately complain that such claims are nothing more than 'fallacious appeals to authority,' sure signs of dreadful 'elitism' and an obvious effort to use credentials to stifle dialogue required by a 'real' democracy" (p.5).

In this "post-truth" era, those spreading fear, decry the school authority's use of "evidence" as elitist and in conflict, for

example, with a parent's liberty to make decisions about their child's educational experience, whether that pertains to curriculum, pedagogy, socio-emotional supports, or health and safety. Under the mantle of "parental rights," groups, such as Moms for Liberty, have formed chapters across the nation, while exploitative and manipulative politicians (e.g., FL and VA) have capitalized on the dissension to get votes.

Ironically, the 54th annual Phi Delta Kappan poll that examines the perceived levels of public trust in schools and teachers, shows that confidence in the local schools has not diminished as one might infer from media accounts of disruptive board meetings and superintendent firings.

Amid post-pandemic recovery for schools and culture wars about diversity, equity, inclusion, and related curricular content, 54% of Americans graded their community's public schools as an A or B, the highest since rating since 1974 (The lowest rating – 31% - was after *A Nation at Risk* in 1983.). 63% of all adults signaled "trust and confidence in their community's schools"; of that group, 72% were public school parents. Familiarity breeds trust – for the most part.

Times of Distrust as Opportunity to Build or Rebuild Partnerships

Families trust their local schools. This represents an opportunity for school leaders. These past few years have been tumultuous and unprecedented. Pandemics, culture wars, and the cynical and paranoid politics of "fear of the other" have contributed to partisan discord that has spilled into schools where, even at the local levels, organized political minorities have been attempting, in some cases successfully, to seize control of education agendas. Disengaged, distracted, or

disenfranchised families have been left out of the discussion. There is perhaps no better time than now to bring them into it.

The Carnegie Corporation's report, *Embracing a New Model Toward a More Liberatory Approach to Family Engagement,* suggests a variety of approaches that will contribute to trust building via a family's engagement with the schools through partnerships among educators and families that create or strengthen structures and conditions for such work.

A recent Brookings report (Perera, Hashim, & Weddle, 2022) suggests that "family engagement has many benefits, including promoting the success of school reform efforts, deepening leaders' and educators' understanding of stakeholder perspectives, and supporting child development outcomes."

Seek out families and other caregivers in the community. Engage community agencies. Build and connect coalitions in small ways to transform the school and district in bigger ways. The work of engagement for trust needs to be proactive, public, strategic, and continuous. It must also be substantive and sincere.

Trust from Within

But such values undergirding the development of trust with the community must exist within the institution. The Winter 2023 issue of the AASA *JSP* examines a theme related to trust among stakeholders within the organizational hierarchies: principals and superintendents; school boards and the superintendents they hire.

Benna and colleagues, in their study, "Superintendent Trustworthiness: Elementary School Principals' Experiences and

Perceptions," examined how principals make sense of superintendent trustworthiness through the question, *What are indicators of superintendent trustworthiness as experienced and perceived by elementary school principals?* They cite Tschannen-Moran (2001) and Hoy et al. (2006) to describe how a culture of trust can provide a setting in which people are not afraid to openly admit errors, take risks, and share ideas.

In a nationwide study of 532 female school district superintendents, the largest such sample to date, Dr. Julia Drake offers compelling evidence that unconscious gender bias exists on the job and further inhibits equitable female representation in the superintendency. Her study, "Female Superintendents' Perceptions of Unconscious Gender Bias in The Superintendency: An Exploratory Quantitative Study," also raises questions about trust. Even though 76% of public school teachers are women, only about 27% of superintendents are female, according to findings released from the School Superintendents Association's (AASA) 2020 Decennial Report.

Drake's findings support Joan Acker's (1990) theoretical assertion that gender inequality is deeply embedded within organizational structures, patterns, and processes. Respondents reported that gender bias occurs more frequently than the profession acknowledges and suggested that it derives primarily from sources other than superintendents' colleagues.

How is it that the nation's educational hierarchies – central administrations and boards of education – are not entrusting the role of leading schools to more women? Drake's study suggests that barriers include the social roles of men and women with the

general belief that management is a man's job, masculine corporate culture, stereotypes against women, and gender bias in recruitment and promotion. This important study raises questions about whom is entrusted to lead our school systems.

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