

“Low Trust” and “High Trust” Accountability in England and U.S.: Part of the Problem or Part of the Solution?

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Abstract

Participants in the Global Education Policy Leadership Program (GEPLP) in the U.S. collaborated with the Schools, Students and Teachers Network (SSAT) in England in 2023 to conduct a study of three high performing schools that are members in the SSAT Leading Edge Network. This article describes U.K. and U.S. educational accountability systems as based on trust level; shares observations of two voluntary accountability initiatives from low trust counties; and reviews two specific school effectiveness frameworks. Results from three schools in the UK revealed that there were several consistent themes related to the school improvement literature, such as leadership style, evidence-based continuous improvement, student engagement, community involvement and addressing equity challenges. Implications for strengthening instructional cultures are identified.

Key Words

instructional cultures, school improvement policy, trust, external reviews, accountability

Introduction

*“Trust. Noun. 1. Faith or confidence in the loyalty, strength, veracity, etc. of a person or thing.”
Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, Sixth Edition (2007), Vol. 2, p.3363.*

How do you strengthen an instructional culture for professional growth? Let’s begin by stating the obvious: schools are people-oriented, social organizations held together by the trust that members have in each other. The amount of trust perceived among members influences their morale and motivation to work together for the common good (Six, 2017). We also know that the morale of teachers and principals influences teaching, learning, and assessment. Finally, schools operate within the cultural norms of the communities and countries within which they are situated. If the public reports low levels of confidence of teachers and principals, then trust in them will be low. If state and local governments establish education policies that reflect a low level of trust in public education, evidence from these schools in these two “low trust” countries can lower educators’ confidence in themselves and lower their morale.

In this article, we intend to:

- 1) Describe the U.K. and U.S. educational accountability systems as based on either the “high trust” or “low trust” the public has of government;
- 2) Share observations of two voluntary accountability initiatives from low trust counties where school leaders and teachers have strengthened the instructional culture; and
- 3) Share two specific school effectiveness frameworks used by these consortia to improve morale and strengthen their instructional cultures.

Perceptions of High Trust and Low Trust in Government

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2019, 2021, 2022, 2024) and the Pew Research Center (2018) have conducted large scale surveys of the general public in OECD countries to determine the level of trust citizens place in their governmental institutions. These studies have reported respondents’ perceptions of “low trust” and “high trust” in their public education systems. In sum, these studies characterize countries as either “low trust” (e.g., the United States and England) or “high trust” (e.g., Finland, Iceland, New Zealand and Norway). The U.S., while an OECD member, has not

participated in the annual OECD *Drivers of Trust Survey* for several years. The 2018 Pew Research Center conducted a similar survey to describe U.S. public attitudes about government.

Establishing Consortia of Schools to Improve Instructional Cultures

Data shared in this article were collected by the authors who were members of a 2022-23 Global Education Policy Leadership Program offered through the College of Education at Michigan State University. The authors spent five days visiting English schools, talking with teachers, students and head teachers as well as Ofsted school inspectors. Individual interviews

and classroom observations in England and telephone conversations informed this analysis.

An English Improvement Consortia and its Framework

In June of 2023, participants in the Global Education Policy Leadership Program (GEPLP) collaborated with the Schools, Students and Teachers (SSAT, 2025) Network, based in London, to conduct a study of three high performing member private schools. To identify lessons learned, we asked about how

SSAT Reviews and Ofsted Reviews were used for school improvement.

SSAT is a professional development and improvement network of schools across the United Kingdom and Western Europe. They use the Framework for Exceptional Education (FfEE) to guide much of their work that strengthens a constructive instructional culture among teachers and school heads. Table 1 provides an overview of the twelve components of this framework.

Table 1

SSAT Framework for Exceptional Education

TEACHING AND LEARNING			
Climate for learning	Culture of reflection	Effective learning behaviors	Variety of teaching approaches
PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE			
Engagement with key stakeholders	Engaging with evidence and research	Principled assessment	Principled curriculum design
LEADERSHIP			
Leadership through moral purpose	Professional learning	Quality assurance	Wellbeing

The following are brief definitions of each of these 12 components.

Teaching and Learning

***Climate for learning** focuses on relationships between teachers and learners, environment for learning, and classroom management.*

***Culture of Reflection** entails teacher self-reflection and planning for development.*

***Effective Learning Behaviors** include awareness of skills and attributes of effective learners, explicitly practicing and developing these skills and attributes, and applying them in new settings.*

***Variety of Teaching Approaches** involve being open to new approaches, understanding what is effective, selecting appropriate strategies/activities, use of assessment, and questioning to deepen understanding.*

Professional Practice

***Engagement with Key Stakeholders** involves identification of opportunities for engagement with stakeholders in multiple ways.*

***Engaging with Evidence and Research** means that teachers understand its importance.*

***Principled Assessment** is a recognition that assessment systems provide data and evidence.*

***Principled Curriculum Design** not only meets statutory requirements, but there is also a whole school approach to it, it is clearly articulated, it goes beyond the classroom.*

Leadership

***Leadership through Moral Purpose** entails translating the vision for the school into action and communicating that vision, which is collaboratively formed.*

***Professional Learning** provides opportunities to staff, is comprehensive, collaborative and results in joint practice, sharing beyond the school is part of the collaborative joint practice.*

***Quality Assurance** reviews a set of school policies that cover all key areas, to ensure that those priorities are evident at all levels.*

***Wellbeing** starts with safeguarding students and strategically promoting positive wellbeing of students. It is widely promoted and is a collective responsibility.*

Learning about how the SSAT Framework was used by three high performing SSAT member schools for improvement has the potential to inform school improvement policy. These review processes, tailored to the context of each site, inform school leaders about directions that improvement may take. The use of the SSAT Framework is entirely voluntary and guides a faculty's discussion about development priorities each year. SSAT provides professional development opportunities in the use of the Framework as well as providing a cadre of SSAT coaches to visit the school and provide feedback.

Ofsted is the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills created by Parliament in the 1990's and is independent from the Ministry of Education. It is legally charged with periodically evaluating all schools in England. Ofsted has a published list of criteria for effective teaching and learning (*School Inspection Handbook, 2024*). Based on an announced (i.e. 24 hours prior to arrival) site visit by an Ofsted inspector and government accountability test scores, each school is characterized as either "outstanding, good, requires improvement, or inadequate" and placed in a "league table" that is published in the media. The Ofsted review process is perceived by the school staff we interviewed as a low trust accountability system due to its overall impersonal one-word evaluation descriptor.

In June of 2023, the GEPLP researchers spoke to 5 administrators, 3 lead teachers and 6 student leaders at three schools that belong to SSAT and use the FfEE Framework for school development. The sites were recruited by SSAT from the Leading Edge Network of high performing schools.

Interviews were conducted through the ZOOM conferencing platform. Our team conducted semi-structured interviews to

determine interviewees' perceptions of the SSAT and Ofsted criteria and processes. We were interested in how results from SSAT reviews were used by sites for school improvement, who was involved, and asked about awareness and use of Ofsted review reports. Ultimately, we were interested in how reactions to these reviews could inform similar efforts in the United States.

As expected, many of the findings related to our common understanding of correlates for school effectiveness, such as a clear vision, focus on student engagement, teacher-student relations, differentiated instruction, high expectations, use of evidence-based practices, and a focus on continuous improvement (Hopkins, et. al, 2014). All three sites were very positive about their work with the SSAT Framework and used it to guide their school improvement efforts.

When asked about how their schools get good and stay good, responses included a focus on simplicity and consistency in an environment where everyone "really trusts each other." When such trust exists, they explain that they can be "restless in trying to improve things" and trying new things to continuously improve becomes part of the culture. In addition, in lieu of pressure to improve, it is reinforced among the teachers that it is "cool to do your best", fostering a shift in culture.

We were surprised by the finding that students were directly engaged in meaningful ways about the operation of the school. As an example, staff regularly solicited and acted upon student opinions about instruction and how it could be improved. Student participants in the interviews had significant leadership roles and served in ambassador-like roles in the schools. An environment has been fostered which keeps the students "future focused" and they foster the belief that "if students perform well, teachers perform well", which reflects

equal accountability among students and teachers creating a more communal atmosphere.

The lack of utility of Ofsted reports for informing improvement efforts at the schools was unexpected. The process was described as punitive and unfair by some interviewees. The information was rarely used to inform school improvement efforts and wasn't always shared with staff. Interview comments reflected issues with these "snapshot evaluations" since Ofsted often did not provide advanced notice of their evaluative visits and rated the school efforts based on this unexpected and non-collaborative visit. Oftentimes this resulted in the fostering of tense school environments where leaders led in anticipation of judgment. At times this even led to mental health crises among the school leadership, infecting the school climate. Several school staff even viewed some of the practices as "unethical" due to the system's approach of laying perceived low-performing schools out as public examples of ineffectiveness. This public

humiliation made leading with moral purpose almost impossible in the face of looming Ofsted visits.

The Tri-State Consortium (Connecticut, New Jersey & New York)

In 1993, thirty-six suburban public school districts in Connecticut, New Jersey and New York created a consortium to develop an alternative to the regional accrediting process required by state laws. Teachers, principals and professional development staff from the current 57 member districts agreed upon a set of indicators of systemic school effectiveness and a consultancy process whereby member districts could visit each other to gather data about essential questions identified by the host school faculty.

A required professional development program was designed to prepare teachers and principals in serve as critical friends in the consultancy process. Table 2 contains the current list of eight indicators (Tri-State Consortium, 2025).

Table 2

Tri-State Consortium Indicators

STUDENT PERFORMANCE		
Performance-Based Assessment	Student Metacognition	Metrics of Student Performance
INTERNAL SUPPORT		
Curriculum & Instruction	Professional Learning, Supervision & Evaluation	Equitable Support for Student Needs
EXTERNAL SUPPORT		
	Shared Vision & Environment for Change	

Following are brief definitions of each indicator:

Student performance

Indicator #1: Performance-Based Assessment. Educators utilize performance-based assessments to capture the extent to which students can construct, apply, and transfer knowledge.

Indicator #2: Student Metacognition. Educators design and provide a learning environment that asks students to reflect on what they have learned and how they have learned.

Indicator #3: Metrics of Student Performance. Assessment practices, including norm-referenced and criterion-referenced assessments, provide data and evidence of student knowledge and higher-level thinking.

Internal support

Indicator #4: Curriculum & Instruction. Teachers and administrators collaborate to develop an articulated and aligned curriculum and instructional decisions grounded in current research.

Indicator #5: Professional Learning, Supervision, and Evaluation. Embedded, collaborative and reflective district professional learning plans based on current student and teacher needs linked to district goals and is attentive to teacher voice.

Indicator #6: Equitable Support for Student Needs. Identification of and addressing students' academic and non-academic needs in challenging ways that are nondiscriminatory and are evidence-based.

Indicator #7: Shared Vision & Environment for Change. Shared vision and goals developed with staff and community that includes a process to review student and teacher work and learn from experimentation.

External support

Indicator #8: Parent & Community Support. Active district involvement of parents and community constituent groups, supported by budgeting and community resources to advance student learning.

Like SSAT, the Tri-State consultancy process and indicators are voluntary initiatives of member districts. In 2024, fifty-seven suburban public school districts belong to the Tri-State Consortium (A. Selesnick, personal communication, August 2024). All three state departments of education have adopted provisions to exempt Tri-State districts from the New England and Middle States accrediting processes.

Implications for Strengthening Instructional Cultures

Three important implications emerged from our work as part of our interviews in the United Kingdom and Tri-State Consortium.

#1 Low trust accountability systems function as “sea anchors” slowing the improvement work of schools. While taxpayers have the right to know that their money is being well-spent in schools, efforts to hold schools and districts accountable can be punitive, demoralizing and even unreliable. Low trust accountability systems can negatively impact instructional cultures.

Rather than take information from Ofsted site reviews and use it to inform improvement, schools and districts found ways to discount or bury the findings in the hopes of mitigating damage to the instructional culture.

#2 High trust accountability systems, even when developed by consortia within low trust national or state policy mandates,

function as accelerants or force multipliers to the work of member schools. Instructional frameworks developed within a high trust environment motivate leaders to join collaborative cultures. These frameworks are then used for internal self-reflection about the presence of evidence of optimal learning by children and adults. We observed evidence of a shift in perceptive paradigms from “fixing something” to “building something”.

#3 Both challenges and opportunities of leading in a low trust culture exist. As noted, accountability systems developed in a low trust culture negatively influence the instructional culture and can lead to distrust of external reviews and even freezing or reversing improvement efforts. However, external reviews in a low trust climate can be useful if they are processed appropriately by the recipients and can strengthen professional growth. Efforts to ensure reliability and validity of external reviews are essential. It is important that these reviews are not politicized. It is challenging to process information from critical external reviews in ways that do not negatively impact instructional cultures if they are not credible. External reviews implemented effectively with authenticity and collaboratively, as was evidenced in England and in the Tri-State Consortium, provide fresh insights to districts and schools. When external reviews in a high trust culture are used for improvement, great things can happen for students.

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