

Resource 7: Bryk and Schneider on trust

The extract below is taken from the Harvard Education Letter, July/August 2002, Volume 18, Number 4.

'How do teachers relate to each other? How do school professionals interact with parents and community? What are principal-teacher relations like? The answers to such questions are central to determining whether schools can improve.

That's one lesson learned from Chicago's decade of school reforms, according to a new book by Anthony S Bryk and Barbara Schneider. In *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement*, the University of Chicago researchers examine the role of social relationships in schools and their impact on student achievement. Their conclusion? That "... a broad base of trust across a school community lubricates much of a school's day-to-day functioning and is a critical resource as local leaders embark on ambitious improvement plans."

Bryk and Schneider contend that schools with a high degree of "relational trust", as they call it, are far more likely to make the kinds of changes that help raise student achievement than those where relations are poor. Improvements in such areas as classroom instruction, curriculum, teacher preparation, and professional development have little chance of succeeding without improvements in a school's social climate.

What is relational trust?

- **Respect** – Do we acknowledge one another's dignity and ideas? Do we interact in a courteous way? Do we genuinely talk and listen to each other? Respect is the fundamental ingredient of trust, Bryk and Schneider write.
- **Competence** – Do we believe in each other's ability and willingness to fulfil our responsibilities effectively? The authors point out that incompetence left unaddressed can corrode school-wide trust at a devastating rate.
- **Personal regard** – Do we care about each other both professionally and personally? Are we willing to go beyond our formal roles and responsibilities if needed – to go the extra mile?
- **Integrity** – Can we trust each other to put the interests of children first, especially when tough decisions have to be made? Do we keep our word?

Trust is the connective tissue that holds improving schools together.

Using data from the 1997 school year, Bryk and Schneider looked at levels of trust in schools in the top and bottom quartiles in terms of academic performance. In top-quartile schools, three-quarters of teachers reported strong or very strong relations with fellow teachers, and nearly all reported such relations with their principals. In addition, 57 percent had strong or very strong trust in parents. By contrast, at schools in the bottom quartile, a majority of teachers reported having little or no trust in their colleagues, two-thirds said the same about their principal, and fewer than 40 percent reported positive, trusting relations with parents.

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Bryk and Schneider found that schools with strong levels of trust at the outset of reforms had a 1 in 2 chance of making significant improvements in maths and reading, while those with weak relationships had a 1 in 7 chance of making gains. And of the latter, the only schools that made any gains were those that strengthened trust over the course of several years; schools whose poor relationships did not improve had no chance of making academic improvements.'

Further information – AS Bryk and B Schneider, *Trust in School: A Core Resource for Improvement*. New York: Russell Sage 2002.