

FOSTERING A “CULTURE OF TRUST” WITHIN AND OUTSIDE A SCHOOL SYSTEM

Excerpt from Toronto research compilation

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What is the Relationship between District Effectiveness and Trust?

Since the 1990s, there has been a renewed interest in the role of school districts in educational improvement and reform. In the accountability systems of recent years, it has become increasingly clear that schools are unable to meet these demands without the support and influence of the district. As a result, researchers have attempted to identify characteristics of effective and high-performing districts in the same way as effective schools research has done to identify characteristics of effective schools (Anderson, 2003; Togneri & Anderson, 2003; Trujillo, 2013). The literature on district effectiveness characterizes effective districts as having working relationships with open communication, collaboration, and trust among constituents in the district. As illustrated in the following section, these elements are embedded in the language of effective and improving districts.

Fullan, Bertani, and Quinn (2004) described 10 essential components for district improvement based on their study of school districts undergoing reform. We describe three of these components as they reveal the importance of communication, relationships, and trust in district improvement.

- Districts need to have a ‘*collective moral purpose*’ - This means that everyone in the district needs to be responsible for student achievement and have an interest in the success of all schools, not only an individual school. This commitment to a common moral purpose requires trust, whereas competition between schools weakens “interdependence, trust and loyalty” (p. 43).
- There is a need for ‘*productive conflict*’ - As Fullan et al. (2004) explain, the changes that come about through district reform are complex and may lead to disagreement among various parties. As part of this process, district leaders need to be able to distinguish between productive and unhealthy conflict. They also need to allow for different points of view and “work through differences” (p. 45). This component implies the need for communication, collaboration, and respect, which have a bearing on trust.
- There needs to be a ‘*demanding culture*’ – This means that in order to engage and motivate schools to succeed and work through demanding situations necessary for district reform, there is a need for a culture of trust.

One of the features of strong school districts noted in the literature is the good working relationships with constituents in the district

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(Leithwood, 2010; Leithwood, 2013). In a paper commissioned by Ontario’s Institute for Education Leadership and Council of Ontario Directors of Education, Leithwood (2013) notes:

The relationships that matter most and that are the focus of development in strong districts lie within the central office and between the central office and its schools, parents, local community groups and the Ministry of Education. Communication throughout the system and within schools is nurtured by structures which encourage collaborative work. (p. 20)

Collaboration is a key element for district improvement, as noted by many authors (Anderson, 2003; Bjork & Bond, 2006; Leithwood, 2012; Togneri & Anderson, 2003).

The district-wide emphasis on collaboration and team work in professional learning communities leads districts on a continuous improvement cycle and supports the development of “shared beliefs” and a “commitment to reform” (Anderson, 2003, p. 12). In strong districts, collaboration is an inclusive process that involves many groups of stakeholders across the district, including board members, principals, teachers, and union leaders (Togneri & Anderson, 2003).

To achieve good working relations, stakeholders need to learn to work together in

order to improve teaching and learning (Togneri & Anderson, 2003). As Togneri and Anderson (2003) note, in their study of U.S. school districts that made improvements in student achievement:

Collaboration and trust did not simply happen in the districts; rather, they were the result of deliberate and involved processes. Led by their boards and superintendents, the most collaborative districts in the study worked on working together. They engaged in ongoing dialogue, created cross-role leadership structures to facilitate communication among stakeholders, and intentionally sought tools to facilitate collaboration. (p. 32)

Research indicates that collaborative districts have an easier time introducing innovations, have strong positive interactions, and have educational leaders who bring together stakeholders to address issues and challenges within the district. Studies indicate that these collaborative processes increase trust (Togneri & Anderson, 2003).

Furthermore, in research on high-performing districts, collaboration seems to give staff the perception of a “flat” organization where they feel “organizationally close to those working in the central office” (Leithwood, 2010, p. 260). In these districts, there is more communication both vertically and

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horizontally which can lead to greater collaboration and shared values.

A key variable for district improvement is high quality governance characterized by strong working relationships between board members and educational leaders who foster trust, respect, confidence, support, and open communication (Anderson, 1992; Carol et al., 1986; Goodman, Fulbright, and Zimmerman, 1997, as cited in Land, 2002; the International Association of School Boards, 2000, as cited in Agullard & Goughnour, 2006). Quality governance also includes having good relations between the Board Chair and senior educational leadership, as well as between board members (Land, 2002).

Open communication and trust are also noted as key elements for improving districts. According to Agullard and Goughnour (2006), these elements are essential to create a ‘cohesive theory of action’ for district-wide improvement and for understanding the roles and structures needed to support improvement. To support the district’s improvement efforts, it is also important for central office staff to provide opportunities for input from principals, teachers, and staff on the district’s continuous improvement efforts (Agullard & Goughnour, 2006). As Agullard and Goughnour (2006) point out:

- Continuous improvement is a dynamic process requiring constant reflection and questioning. Dialogue among school staff,

among central office staff, and between the two provides opportunities to reflect and examine the process and the results of actions. Creating and sustaining a trusting and open relationship between central office and school staff is crucial to establishing open dialogue. (p. 11)

There are two other characteristics noted in the literature on strong districts that should be noted. First, the governing board should have a clearly defined policy-making role and hold the educational leadership responsible for administration of schools. The clearly defined roles of the board create a climate of trust (Agullard & Goughnour, 2006; Togneri & Anderson, 2003, p. 33).

Finally, there is some evidence to indicate that high-performing districts have a distributed or shared approach to instructional leadership. This is illustrated in the case of a principal who shared leadership with central office administrators by asking for their expertise and help with consultation, coaching, and mentoring support in classrooms (Eilers & Camacho, 2007, as cited in Leithwood, 2010). Section V addresses the topic of distributed leadership.

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