Relational Trust

Why Is This Strategy Useful?

Relational trust among school stakeholders (e.g., teachers and teachers, teachers and principal, teachers and students) fosters a set of organizational conditions, some structural and others social-psychological, that make it more conducive for individuals to initiate and sustain the kinds of activities necessary to affect productivity and the kinds of efforts to improve student outcomes. A dynamic concept, relational trust refers to the trust built into relationships that is based on many factors including respect, personal regard, competence, and personal integrity. Relational trust does not directly affect student learning, but higher levels of relational trust support the conditions in which student learning and outcomes improve.

Description of Strategy

Relational trust is not a concept with a prescribed set of steps. Rather, it is best described in terms of enabling conditions at an individual level and an organizational level. Individual conditions that are important to fostering relational trust among individuals include respect, personal regard, competence in core role responsibilities, and personal integrity. Respect requires the kind of social discourse that takes place across the school community, genuinely listening and valuing the opinions of others. Personal regard is the willingness of members of a school community to extend themselves beyond the formal requirements of a job definition or a union contract. Competence in core role responsibilities recognizes the interdependence of our roles in attaining the desired outcome. When negligence or incompetence is allowed to persist in any one role in the school, it undermines trust. Last, personal integrity is the belief or perception that a moral-ethical perspective guide’s one’s work. Organizational factors that foster relational trust include principal leadership, small school size, stable school communities, and voluntary association. Principal leadership is important for establishing both respect and personal regard through acknowledgement of personal and others’ vulnerabilities and modeling active listening. Smaller school size creates an environment in which there is expanded face-to-face time and limited bureaucratic relations across the organization, an environment in which relational trust flourishes. In addition, the work structures of small schools are less complex and their social networks typically fewer in number. As a result, relational trust is likely to be sustained more easily. A stable community is an important factor that allows for individuals to have repeated social exchanges, while leadership changes, high teacher turnover, and student mobility can result in lower levels of relational trust. Last, relational trust cannot be mandated; there must be a voluntary association among individuals, which contributes to a greater change in school culture.

Research Evidence

In one longitudinal mixed methods research study of school reform in 12 elementary schools in Chicago, evidence showed that schools with higher levels of relational trust among teachers and between teachers and a principal were more likely to have improved student outcomes over time. The conditions that contributed to higher levels of relational trust included a sense of personal regard, respect, established competence, and personal integrity among teachers and the principal. Organizational conditions supported the ability of teachers and the principal to develop relationships through modeling of the behavior, creating a culture or trust, smaller school size, and the ability for individuals to voluntarily associate themselves with the culture.
Sample Studies Supporting This Strategy


Presents a study that examined the role of relational trust in the building effective education communities in elementary schools in Chicago, Illinois. Information on the social exchanges in schools; Factors to consider regarding relational trust; Benefits of relational trust

Additional Resources:

