



Creating an Atmosphere of Trust

Lessons from Exemplary Schools

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Educators in effective schools know that a trusting school environment contributes to the success of teachers and students. According to analysis of the 2006 North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey data, establishing an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect was strongly correlated with overall student performance at the elementary, middle and high school levels. Trust in the school environment was strongly correlated with teachers' employment decisions as well.¹ Consider the following:

- Sixty-six percent of North Carolina educators who intend to stay at their school agreed that there was an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect. Conversely, only 22 percent of educators planning to remain teaching but move to another school agreed that such an atmosphere exists in their school.
- Approximately 20 percent more educators in the state's highest achieving schools agreed there was trust and mutual respect in their school than educators in schools with the lowest student performance. This gap on the question of trust was the largest of all questions on the survey.
- In schools with the lowest teacher turnover rates, about two-thirds of educators agreed that there is an atmosphere of trust, compared to about half of the educators in schools with the highest turnover rates.

While we know that trust matters for the success of schools, we need to know more about the actual conditions, factors and practices that create trust within them. From the working conditions data, we know that the factors most strongly associated with trust include:²

- 1) a school-wide commitment to a shared vision;
- 2) an effective process for making collaborative decisions and solving problems; and
- 3) school leadership that consistently supports teachers.

Recognizing the considerable significance of schools' ability to create an environment of trust and mutual respect, the Center for Teaching Quality—in collaboration with the North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards Commission and with generous support from the Karen and Christopher Payne Family Foundation—conducted two focus groups with eleven schools to learn more about how they create these environments at their respective schools. The schools were selected based on their teachers' overwhelmingly positive responses to the trust and mutual respect-related items on the 2006 Teacher Working Conditions survey. Each school team included a principal and at least one teacher representative.

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In order to promote the trust and mutual respect needed to support student learning, schools across the state can benefit from the lessons and practices of these exemplary schools. Toward that end, this brief examines the efforts of eleven North Carolina schools whose educators report exceedingly high levels of trust. Lessons from the focus groups provide the opportunity to move beyond the recognition of high working conditions performance toward an understanding of the specific practices and strategies that promote and sustain these environments.

ABOUT THE SCHOOLS

The participating schools were diverse in size, setting and the characteristics of the students they serve (Table 1). The schools, from across the state, represented all levels—five elementary, three middle and three high schools—and ranged in size from 120 to 1,559 students. Additionally, the schools are located in a mix of urban, rural and suburban settings and serve populations of both high- and low-poverty students.

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School	District	Students	FRL	Location
Archdale Elementary	Randolph County	396	40%	Suburban
Comfort Elementary	Jones County	120	77%	Rural
Easley Elementary	Durham County	670	15%	Urban
Hendersonville Elementary	Henderson County	386	18%	Suburban
Thornton Elementary	Newton-Conover City	412	65%	Urban
Anson Middle	Anson County	662	70%	Suburban
Hope Mills Middle	Cumberland County	725	46%	Suburban
Mineral Springs Middle	Forsyth County	464	84%	Urban
Alexander Central High	Alexander County	1,559	26%	Rural
Croatan High	Carteret County	776	20%	Small Town
East Davidson High	Davidson County	933	23%	Rural

Educators in these schools were considerably and consistently more positive about key measures of trust and mutual respect than their colleagues across the state (Table 2).

TWC Trust and Respect Related Items	Focus Group Schools	State Average
There is an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect within the school.	97%	64%
Teachers are trusted to make sound professional decisions about instruction.	95%	72%
The faculty has an effective process for making group decisions and solving problems.	90%	57%
Teachers are centrally involved in decision-making about educational issues.	84%	53%
The school improvement team provides effective leadership at this school.	87%	58%
The faculty and staff have a shared vision.	94%	67%

STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING TRUST

The role of the principal in establishing trust in a school is critical. Oftentimes, an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect is attributed to the unique personality and disposition of principals and school leaders. Yet, it appears there is no one right way to act or lead. The eleven principals in the focus groups exhibited a wide range of personality characteristics and leadership styles. However, some important practices were common across all schools and leadership styles. These strategies included consistent support for teachers, school level decision-making based on a shared vision, and an effective group decision-making and problem-solving process.

Administration and Faculty Share a Vision for the School

Teachers and principals from the eleven schools all described open communication between leadership and staff that facilitated the creation of and adherence to a shared vision. Through everyday behavior, principals ensured communication patterns that promoted trust and commitment to a shared vision. Teachers said the principal's office door was always open for any teacher's concerns. Teachers were expected to bring concerns and constructive ideas to school leadership for achieving the school's collective vision. Most importantly, teachers believed that the school leadership takes the opinions and perspectives of teachers into consideration when making decisions that affect the school community.

Consistent and sustained communication, particularly about how policies and practices relate to the school's vision, is critical to sustaining trust and mutual respect. Building trust is not a one-time event, but an ongoing process. The principal of Thornton Elementary explained it this way:

It is your actions over time. You don't immediately go into a school and just because you are there this occurs ... It's taking the time or making the time to have conversations with people. More than having the conversations, it's helping them feel like you were listening to them, that they were heard. If they don't feel heard, they will not be as likely to come to you with their ideas.

The principal of Anson Middle School agreed on the value and necessity of building this shared commitment over time: "Trust and respect happens over time with teachers, if we share a common history and go through trials and tribulations together."

It is not only the on-going conversations between staff and administration that is important for building trust. It is also the actions of the school leadership, particularly how they interact with staff. Principals explained that what teachers see is as important as what they hear from leadership. These principals emphasized the importance of being visible and approachable. The actions they described were meant to communicate to staff that "we are all in this together" and that all staff are working hard toward the same goals. As the principal of Alexander Central High School said, "You can't talk about it. They have to see it in your actions."

East Davidson High School

In her first year, the principal asked faculty and staff to identify their most pressing concerns. She then focused on the most commonly identified issues and dealt with them. Teachers' concerns were heard and acted upon. The result, the principal explained, is that teachers felt heard and valued. The principal summed up her philosophy this way: "We want to be the example of how you treat people. If you want people to treat kids right, you better treat your teachers right. That's the basis of everything. Let them know that you are in there with them."

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Leadership must also accept blame for mistakes. Many principals said they make an effort to diffuse praise among others while owning mistakes. The Thornton Elementary principal described his thinking this way: “If you make a mistake, own up to it. That will give you much more respect and buy in from people than if you become defensive.”

This shared vision must be more than an ideal; it must be implemented in the operations of the school. While consistent and open communication can help create trust and a shared vision for a school, action must be taken to ensure the implementation of that vision.

Archdale Elementary

The principal of Archdale Elementary explained that all decisions “roll back into, are we doing what is best for children ... it’s not so much that I am watching you, it’s the children are watching you.” A teacher at Archdale explained that an important role of the principal is to push teachers to see beyond their classrooms: “Even when we are disagreeing she gets us to think about what is right for kids. She looks at the big picture and not just our classrooms.”

Each of the eleven schools described a similar student-focused vision or mission. While schools across the state likely would claim similar visions, these schools excel in making decisions which translate the vision into action.

Decisions are based on how they affect students first and how they affect teachers second. Everything that happens in the school is in support of that vision. Teachers knew that vision was shared throughout the school because there

was continuous communication about how decisions were being made and why. It is clear that students were front and center on every big decision. However, the ways that schools ensured the implementation of the vision differed between elementary and secondary schools.

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Croatan High

A Croatan teacher described the school culture as focused on students and maximizing teaching. The principal demands accountability from teachers, does not micromanage, and protects teachers from duties that interfere with teaching. The teacher explained, “my job is to teach and that is it. I don’t worry about discipline, about staying in the lunchroom or standing in the hall controlling behavior.” The principal agreed saying, “My sole job is make sure those teachers can teach. When I look at the hierarchy, I am at the bottom of the heap. (Everyone’s job) is to support students ... and anything that gets in the way of that has to be moved out of the way. Whatever it is, I am going to make sure they can get that mission done.”

In the elementary schools, the implementation of a common vision took the form of expanding teachers’ focus beyond their individual classrooms to think more broadly about school processes and procedures and how they affected all children in the school. The principal played an important role in helping teachers think about the implications of school policies and procedures on every child.

In the high schools, the focus on students played out as maximizing teaching and protecting teachers from extra duties that would take time away from planning and instruction. As a teacher from Alexander Central High School explained, “There is a design plan to make sure that we are not dealing with things that take us

away from teaching. Our administration and counselors are very concerned about the time we have with our students.”

Schools Have an Effective Group Decision-Making and Problem-Solving Process

Teachers are centrally involved in decision-making at the eleven schools. A number of principals explicitly stated that an underlying goal of involving teachers in decision-making is building consensus. The result is building not only consensus, but trust and leadership as well. As a teacher from Archdale Elementary said, “(our principal) encourages our leadership skills. She encourages us to do the things that she thinks we would be really good at, making it a meaningful experience. It adds to that trust and builds leadership throughout the school.”

Teachers and principals at all eleven schools described the structure of their schools as non-hierarchical. As a teacher from Croatan High School said, “Where you fit in the hierarchy has a lot to do with trust. A good principal will have the teachers elevated to be at least equal with (administration and others in the school).”

The primary mechanism for creating this kind of shared leadership is the School Improvement Team (SIT). Generally, in the ten schools, large school-level decisions were made through the SIT with broad input from faculty and staff. However, the mechanisms schools use for ensuring schoolwide input varied.

At Comfort Elementary every staff member was on a committee and the chair of each committee was on the SIT. Others relied on more informal methods. At Thornton Elementary the SIT was made up of representatives from the various constituencies in the building. It was expected that concerns would be taken to an SIT member anonymously who would then bring the concern to the full SIT. At Mineral Springs Middle School, issues were never resolved at the meeting in which the topic was first discussed. SIT members went back to their constituents for their input and took that input to the next meeting. The informal methods were found more often at the elementary and middle school levels. As high schools tend to be larger, ensuring that SIT members communicate regularly with their constituents is more problematic. Alexander Central High School dealt with the issue by making important announcements at the SIT meeting. Representatives were expected to take that information back to their constituents. The principal described why this system works: “if, (it is) two or three days down the road, and some department didn’t know about it (an announcement), they are harping on their representative.”

Principals also differed on their involvement with the SIT. Some principals attended all meetings, but did not run the meeting. The principal of Croatan High School described his participation in SIT meetings: “I’m a member, but I will try not to make any comment. I intentionally don’t give input unless information is needed. I don’t vote.” At Alexander Central, the principal did not attend all SIT meetings: “I oftentimes stay away so they feel free to say what they want to say. The SIT chair person will share information that I need to hear.”

School Leadership Consistently Supports Teachers

Teachers in the eleven schools described principals who are supportive, respectful and trusting. Teachers explained that they are trusted to make professional choices that are best for themselves, their students and the entire school community. As described in the previous sections of this brief, their knowledge, experience and expertise are respected and valued by the school administration.

The importance of showing respect for all staff was emphasized by the principals. As they explained, all schools have teachers at different skill levels. Some require more support or

Easley Elementary

The SIT and school committees play a large role in decision-making at the school. The principal helps teachers identify their areas of strength and encourages them to take a leadership role in that area. For example, the budget committee is co-chaired by the bookkeeper and a teacher. The committee makes recommendations to the principal about the budget and is then responsible for managing the budget. The staff development committee, chaired by a teacher, is responsible for determining how the school’s PD funds will be spent. Involving teachers with these committees broadens their focus beyond their individual classrooms to their grade level and the school.

The principal at Easley Elementary summed up his leadership style this way: “When you lead from behind, when you are the support and the encourager, you see a lot more from the back when you are the boost rather than out there trying to pull things along.”

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Teachers described feeling respected and valued as people as well as professionals. Teachers and principals explained that part of professionalism is respecting teachers' needs to balance their work life and personal life.

Mineral Springs Middle

The Mineral Springs Middle School principal explained that respect is the key to building strong professional relationships. He explained, "I do not have blind trust of everyone in my building. But, I try to treat everyone as a professional ... The other teachers appreciate that you are trying to help that teacher (who is not at the expected skill level). I feel the support of other teachers when I am trying to support a teacher."

schools said some teachers are recognized as exemplary, many are recognized for success, and all are treated with respect.

Teachers described feeling respected and valued as people as well as professionals. Teachers and principals explained that part of professionalism is respecting teachers' needs to balance their work life and personal life. Teachers said that because they were trusted to make decisions about their work and personal life, educators were more likely to make positive decisions for the school community whenever possible.

As a teacher from Archdale Elementary explained, trust is a two-way street: "We trust you (the principal) because you trust us." The trust and support these principals provide for their

teachers were ultimately reciprocated in the trust and support that teachers provide for their principals.

Hendersonville Elementary

The Hendersonville Elementary School principal described a situation with a teacher whose daughter was going through a difficult time. One morning, she called the principal and said, "I really need to take her skiing. Can I take a personal day?" The principal didn't hesitate. He knew that she would do what needed to be done to catch up and be prepared for class the next day. That afternoon the teacher was back at school. The principal explained, "I was treating her as a professional." He trusted her to make a decision that was appropriate for her family and to do what she needed to do for work.

Principals and teachers also reported that part of supporting educators meant communicating positive messages whenever possible. Schools with high levels of trust often described a culture that consistently celebrates success of educators and students. Teachers at these schools said that everyone avoids the "gotcha" mentality where individuals are blamed for problems in a school. Instead, leadership understands and plays to the greatest strengths of educators in the school.

Creating Trust in Schools

In the final analysis, there will be as many different recipes for creating trust in schools as there are types of school leaders and educators, and each will reflect differences in local context. Despite these differences, listening to principals and teachers from exemplary schools that have achieved high levels of trust indicates that a few ingredients must be in place. While the methods of implementation vary across school settings, all successful schools find ways to 1) create a shared vision; 2) provide an effective group decision-making and problem-solving process; and 3) ensure school leadership consistently supports teachers.

1. Create a Shared Vision

Ensure that the mission and vision of a school translates directly and consistently to the daily operations of the school. While most schools articulate a vision related to doing what is best for students to succeed in life, schools with high levels of trust and mutual respect can also point to examples of how that mission influences the way policies are developed, decisions are made and teachers are engaged.

- Schools should regularly assess the clarity of their mission and vision, the way that mission and vision is communicated to everyone in the school community, and the extent to which school operations reflect the stated vision.
- Part of the induction process for new and experienced teachers coming into schools should be a detailed description of the mission and vision of the school, how it was created, and how it is achieved and maintained in daily activities.
- Ongoing conversations among all faculty and staff regarding the school practices that most and least effectively reflect their mission and vision will facilitate successful implementation of the vision.

2. Provide an Effective Group Decision-Making and Problem-Solving Process

Empower teachers in ways that make a difference. Effectively involving teachers in decision-making requires considerable effort and skill. Schools with high levels of trust and mutual respect demonstrate a commitment to many essential elements of teacher empowerment. Schools should develop mechanisms to regularly assess and discuss how well the school achieves each of the following aspects of empowerment:

- Educators must be involved in relevant decisions with real influence over their school and classroom.
- These decisions must pertain to issues that educators want to be a part of and feel well prepared to engage in.
- When the perspective of teachers is collected, leadership must be responsive. In cases where the recommendations of teachers cannot be enacted, leadership must explain the rationale.
- Teachers must recognize consistency and equity in the way teachers are selected to participate in decision-making.
- There should be expectations and structures in place for educators involved in decision-making to communicate with the teachers they represent.

For many schools, specific areas that would benefit from greater teacher involvement include the selection of professional development opportunities, hiring new teachers, and the development of school discipline policies. Schools should actively seek out examples of how districts and other schools facilitate teacher participation in leadership roles by asking for the input of those affected by decisions, providing the background information necessary for teachers to participate in decisions, treating teachers as capable professionals with valuable insights, and providing teachers with opportunities to try new things and to take risks.

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Schools with high levels of trust and mutual respect commonly describe approachable leaders capable of creating and maintaining relationships with educators.

Ensure the School Improvement Team is an Effective Mechanism for Building Trust. In schools with high levels of trust, the SIT is a highly representative body of teachers making significant contributions to the effectiveness of the school. Schools should take all necessary actions to review the overall effectiveness of the SIT, particularly the degree to which:

- Principals do not exert undue influence or control over the work of the SIT;
- Educators serving on the SIT communicate important developments and decisions to the teachers they represent; and
- The SIT works toward actionable items that promote the mission and vision of the school.

3. Ensure School Leadership Consistently Supports Teachers

Maximize opportunities for leadership to interact with staff in meaningful ways. Schools with high levels of trust and mutual respect commonly describe approachable leaders capable of creating and maintaining relationships with educators. Teachers and educators should use the Teacher Working Conditions Survey information and other data points to inform constructive conversations about the interaction between leadership and teachers. Despite differences in methods, there are consistent trends to look for and incentivize in the behavior of school leaders who create trust.

- Leaders successful in building relationships were consistently described as authentic, responsive, approachable, humble, honest, accountable and consistent.
- Leaders were willing to listen to teachers and able to respond appropriately, not always agreeing, but always listening, clearly communicating, and explaining important decisions that impact teaching and learning.

Treat educators as professionals and trust them to balance work and personal life. School leaders at exemplary schools have an expectation that educators will make consistently good decisions for their school community relative to their personal well being, and educators consistently meet those expectations. School leaders and faculty should engage in constructive conversations about professional expectations and behaviors.

Communicate positive messages whenever possible. When educators at these schools succeed at high levels they are publicly recognized, and others are privately encouraged and supported to work toward goals that help the school reach its mission. Schools should have a collective process to assess the tone and frequency of regular school-wide communication efforts. Systematic and consistent processes for gathering input and communicating about important decisions should be created by the entire faculty

Trust is one of the most important characteristics of highly functioning schools, and research from North Carolina indicates that the presence of trust benefits both students and adults. While the significance of trust is clear, there are no easy answers or shortcuts for creating trust in schools. It can not be mandated from above; trust must be built over time from within. The best practices featured in this brief reveal how schools across North Carolina have successfully sustained trust and mutual respect. By learning from their example, schools can integrate effective strategies for building trust in a way that responds to their own unique school environment.

NOTES

1. Hirsch, E. and Emerick S. (2006) *Teacher Working Conditions are Student Learning Conditions: A Report on the 2006 North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey*. Hillsborough N.C.: Center for Teaching Quality.
2. A regression was created using eight survey questions across the domains of empowerment, leadership and time that explained 80 percent of the variance in agreement that trust and mutual respect was present in a school.

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