

# Trust Matters



## CHAPTER 1



# A MATTER OF TRUST

*I don't ask for much, I only want trust,  
And you know it don't come easy.*

—RINGO STARR © STARTLING MUSIC LTD

Sometimes even principals with the best of intentions don't get it right. Sometimes they are unable to lead their school into becoming the kind of productive working community that they imagined and hoped for. When these well-intentioned principals fail to earn the trust of their faculty and their larger school community, their vision is doomed to frustration and failure. Consider the stories of Gloria and Fred, two principals each leading a school in the same urban district.

### MEANING WELL

When Gloria Davies learned that she had been assigned to Lincoln School, one of the lowest-performing elementary schools in her district, she was determined to turn that school around. She believed that the primarily low-income students at Lincoln, many of whom lived in a nearby housing project, deserved a better

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education than they were getting. She wanted to implement a new, more powerful, and rigorous curriculum, especially in reading. She wanted to get teachers fired up to make the changes that were required to turn the school around. And she planned to fire any teachers who failed to get fired up on behalf of their students. This is what she believed she owed to the students. Gloria often asserted, “I don’t work for the teachers, I work for the students and their families.”

Midway through her third year at Lincoln, however, the school had failed to make the gains she had hoped for. Gloria was mired in an intense power struggle with the faculty at Lincoln. She had been frustrated by union rules and procedures that had limited her authority. Faculty members had filed numerous grievances against her for what they perceived as manipulative and heavy-handed tactics. Building council meetings, a mechanism for shared decision making mandated by the district, had been reduced to a war of the rule books, each side quoting chapter and verse from the district contract or the union guidelines to bolster its position. Although Gloria had been successful in removing one untenured teacher, her attempts to remove veteran teachers had been met with resistance and rebellion that went well beyond the targeted teachers. Morale was perilously low, and student achievement scores had remained stubbornly poor. To protect herself, Gloria often confined herself to her office and was rarely seen around the school, except to make unscheduled observations of teachers she was trying to remove. Sadly, Gloria’s dreams of turning around this failing school had not materialized, in large part because her methods had cost her the trust of her faculty and led to resentment, power struggles, and sabotage.

Fred Martin, principal of Fremont Elementary, a few miles from Lincoln, was a friendly man with a warm smile and an easygoing disposition. He was generally well liked by the teachers, students, and parents in his community, and he was sympathetic to the difficult circumstances that many of his low-income students faced.

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He was equally sympathetic to the stresses inherent in teaching in an urban context. Fred considered himself a progressive principal, and he delegated many important and controversial decisions to the building council. He viewed his low-key role with the council as one of empowering teachers as decision makers in the school. He saw himself as fair minded and could usually see both sides of a conflict. Consequently, he was reluctant to make a decision that would be perceived as favoring one side or another. He was disappointed that his students had done so poorly on the state assessments but felt that policymakers should be made to understand the challenges that he and his teachers faced.

Fred's discomfort with and avoidance of conflict had not made for an absence of strife at Fremont. On the contrary, without direct efforts to address conflict productively, discord and disagreements had escalated. Teachers felt angry and unsupported by Fred when they sent misbehaving students to him for discipline and perceived him as giving those students little more than a fatherly chat. Teachers in conflict with one another were left to their own devices to resolve their differences. When they went to Fred, he wanted to avoid taking sides and so avoided making any kind of judgment at all. Instead he referred them to the building council or told them simply that they were going to need to work things out. As a result, long-standing grudges between teachers had simmered for years. Bitterness between the teachers and the teacher's aides, many of whom were parents hired from the neighborhood, had become an entrenched part of the school culture. Teachers perceived the aides as being lazy and unwilling to do the job they were hired to do, whereas the aides found the teachers unwelcoming, demanding, and rude. In the meantime, student achievement had failed to significantly improve, despite the increasing pressure of state and district accountability measures.

Though well intentioned, neither Gloria nor Fred had been successful at shaping a constructive school environment. What was missing in both circumstances was trust. Because these

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principals were not regarded as trustworthy by their teachers, neither had positive results to show for his or her efforts. On the one hand, Gloria, the overzealous reformer, had been too impatient for change to foster the kinds of relationships she would have needed to enroll her faculty in the effort to make the inspiring vision she had for the school a reality. Her heavy-handed tactics were seen as betrayals by her teachers. Fred, on the other hand, in trying to keep the peace by avoiding conflict, lost the trust of his faculty through benign neglect. His attempts to keep everybody happy resulted in general malaise and a perpetual undercurrent of unresolved tension in the school. Although teachers liked Fred and felt they could count on his sympathetic concern, they could not count on him to take action on their behalf because of his fear of making anyone angry. His teachers were left feeling vulnerable and unprotected.

~~The stories of these two~~ principals demonstrate contrasting approaches in how principals respond to resistance to change among their faculty—they either overly assert their authority or they withdraw from the fray. Both responses damage trust, and both hamper a principal's ability to lead. Gloria focused too narrowly on the task of school improvement and neglected the relationships that she needed for cultivating a shared vision and ~~fostering a collective effort~~ toward improved outcomes. Although she was correct in thinking that her primary responsibility was to educate her students and not to promote the comfort and ease of her teachers, she failed to grasp that principals necessarily get their work done through other people. Fred, in contrast, focused too much on relationships at the expense of the task. But because the task involved protecting the well-being of members of the school community, Fred's avoidance of conflict had damaged the very relationships he sought to enhance. By withdrawing, Fred failed to offer the leadership, structure, and support needed to provide the students in his care with a quality education.

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Both Fred and Gloria can be seen as having demonstrated problems of responsibility (Martin, 2002). Gloria took too much responsibility for the change initiative in her school and so prevented teachers from getting on board with and taking ownership of the process. In vigorously asserting her authority, Gloria made her point all too well that teachers were not in charge and did not have a say in the decisions that vitally affected their work life. Her actions had violated the sense of care that teachers expected from their principal, causing them to question her integrity. Their trust in her had been damaged. Fred, in contrast, took on too little responsibility, handing decisions over to teachers that they did not have the expertise to make. He did not support them adequately through mentoring and training to acquire the skills to contribute to the decision making necessary to run the school. He did not demonstrate the competence and reliability necessary to build trust. So although he was generally well liked, he was not seen as trustworthy by his faculty and the wider school community.

The problems these two principals evidence are not unusual. New principals, like Gloria, often feel the need to enter a school setting and create change. Inexperienced principals tend to be unsure of their authority; as a result, a common mistake among novice school leaders is to be overly forceful in establishing their authority within the school. Barth (1981) observed, “Most people I know who are beginning principals enter their new roles as advocates, friends, helpers, supporters, often former colleagues of teachers. By December of their first year they have become adversaries, requirers, forcers, judges, and setters of limits” (p. 148). This approach can be counterproductive when trying to develop a high-trust school. Building trust requires patience and planning, but novice principals tend to have an impatient “get it done yesterday” attitude.

Fred **apparently** lacked important leadership skills, such as the ability to resolve conflict, and had had insufficient

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professional development and training to hone these skills. Perhaps he also lacked the courage and the stamina to face the sometimes uncomfortable aspects of school leadership and especially school change. In the face of resistance, he withdrew. Although empowering teachers to participate in real decision making within the school can be an effective means of reaching higher-quality decisions, Fred failed to provide the leadership and training to help his teachers be successful at shared leadership. The teachers and students in his school needed more than a sympathetic ear to help resolve their conflicts. They need someone who could structure a process that would lead to productive solutions.

## DOING WELL

Although these two scenarios are not uncommon, principals need not follow either path. Brenda Thompson was principal of Brookside Elementary, a school serving a student body similar to those at Lincoln and Fremont, in the same urban district. Through trustworthy leadership, Brenda earned the confidence of her faculty. By balancing a strong sense of care for her school's students and teachers with high performance expectations, Brenda fostered a school-wide culture of trust. Responsibility for school improvement was shared. By working hard herself, Brenda set an example and was able to command an extra measure of effort from her teachers. These efforts were rewarded with above-average performance from Brookside students on measures of student achievement.

Brenda's care for her faculty and students was evidenced in her accessibility. Brenda was rarely in her office during the school day, preferring to spend her time in the hallways, classrooms, and cafeteria. She spent lunch recess on the playground. She was available to assist teachers and students as they engaged in problem solving

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around the difficulties they faced. She was a trusted adviser who listened well, offering thoughtful and useful suggestions that demonstrated her expertise as an educator. She didn't blame teachers or make them feel incompetent for having a problem or not knowing what to do. Further, her caring extended beyond the walls of the school; teachers, students, and parents sought her out for help with their lives outside of school as well. Brenda's tone of caring was echoed in faculty members' care for one another and for their students. The impetus for school improvement stemmed from this caring atmosphere: caring fueled the enormous effort needed to sustain a positive school environment in this challenging context.

Brenda understood that the work of schools happens primarily through relationships, so she invested time and resources in nurturing those relationships. There were a number of annual traditions that fostered good rapport, not just among faculty members but among students and their families as well. The academic year would begin with an ice cream social at which students and their families could meet teachers and support staff in an informal and fun setting before buckling down to the serious work of school. Another important community-building tradition at the school was an annual fall sleepover called Camp Night, when students and their parents, in mixed grade-level groups, participated in enjoyable, hands-on learning experiences; had a meal provided by the Parent Teacher Association (PTA); and slept at the school. Brenda also made use of a local high-ropes course twice a year for a challenging team-building experience with the third through fifth graders and their teachers—and parents were also invited along for the fun. Brenda joined right in, wearing jeans and hiking boots—which, for the students, were an amusing contrast to her typical heels and professional dress. Brenda structured time for the faculty to work together and share ideas and resources, providing common planning time on most days. The school was not free of conflict, but the strong sense of community supported the constructive resolution of the inevitable differences.

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We can learn much about the vital role of trustworthy school leadership from the stories of these three principals. They are real principals, and the voices of the teachers throughout the book are taken from actual interviews. The short vignettes scattered throughout the chapters come from encounters with teachers and parents as well as exchanges with my students over the years I have been teaching and writing on this topic.

Principals and other school leaders need to earn the trust of the stakeholders in their school community if they are to be successful. They need to understand how trust is built and how it is lost. Getting smarter about trust will help school leaders foster more successful schools.

## TRUST AND SCHOOLS

When we turn a nostalgic eye toward schools in an earlier era, it seems that there was once a time when a school enjoyed the implicit trust of its communities. School leaders were highly respected and largely unquestioned members of the community. Teachers were regarded as having valuable professional knowledge about how children learn and what is best for them. When a child was punished at school, parents accepted and reinforced the judgment of school officials. If those days ever really did exist, they are not what many who work in schools are currently experiencing.

It is important that a school leader not take the general distrust of schools too personally. That distrust is part of a larger pattern in society, shaped by economic, political, and social forces. We now live in an era when all of our social institutions are under unprecedented scrutiny. We are barraged by a steady stream of media attention to scandals, revealing how business leaders, politicians, church leaders, nonprofit executives, and school leaders have acted out of self-interest rather than in the interests of the

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constituents whom they purport to serve. These revelations erode the trust we once had in these institutions and their leaders and undermine their basic legitimacy.

The philosopher Annette Baier (1994) observed that we tend to notice trust as we notice air, only when it becomes scarce or polluted. These days, trust in our society does indeed seem to have been damaged and is in scarce supply. As changing economic realities and changing expectations in society make life less predictable, and as new ways to disseminate information increase both the availability of and desire for negative information, we begin to *notice* trust much more. In the midst of the media blitz of bad news, trust has emerged as a favorite theme of advertisers in promoting everything from investment firms to hair salons. Many of us seem to be longing for the days when trust came more easily.

### Changing Expectations

New economic realities and increasing social problems have led to mounting pressures on schools. Economically, the move toward a more global economy has increased competition and forced society's expectations of school outcomes to change. This economic shift has diminished the proportion of low-skilled jobs in developed countries. Our economy is dependent on there being a more highly skilled workforce and a larger proportion of individuals who have earned a high school diploma. Graduates must not only be proficient in basic skills but also be able to reason and solve complex problems. They must be able to work well in teams, as the problems they are likely to encounter in the workplace will be too complex for an individual working alone to solve. Schools are expected to provide a stronger workforce that will allow ~~the United States~~ to remain economically competitive in a global marketplace. At the same time, economic disparities are growing and the problems faced by low-income populations are growing. Although to some extent the criticism

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of schools in the popular media has been overblown, and our schools are doing a much better job than is frequently reported, pressure is being brought to bear on schools to adapt to a changing world (Berliner & Biddle, 1995).

### Aspirations for Equity

In our society, the value of equity has taken on ever greater prominence. Citizens take seriously the expectation of equal opportunities and the right of all to achieve economic security. As people gain access to more information, they also become more conscious of growing income inequalities, as well as of the disparities in opportunities and outcomes available to people from differing social strata.

With growing awareness, those who are less powerful also wish to feel less vulnerable to the professionals whose greater power vitally affects them. Professionals of all sorts possess increasingly powerful knowledge that influences both individual and public welfare (Barber, 1983). With expanding access to information, many people are no longer content to accept the role of passive client. Doctors are finding that many of their patients have engaged in independent research about their conditions, coming with detailed questions and recommendations for their own treatment. Lawyers are encountering more clients who have read up on legal precedents and maneuvers that might be helpful to their case. Parents, too, are conducting research and feeling ever more empowered to advocate for their children's interests within the education system and to question the professional knowledge and expertise of school personnel.

Much of the responsibility for realizing our society's vision of greater equity is entrusted to our schools. Consequently, higher expectations are brought to bear on those who educate our children. The actions of school professionals influence not just our

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economic potential. Previously, schools functioned largely to sort and rank students for various strata of society. Notable exceptions helped maintain the belief in our society as a meritocracy where anyone with the ability and work ethic could overcome the deficiencies of his or her origins and prosper economically or politically, but in reality, schools generally maintained the status quo in terms of social rank and prosperity. That propensity has come under attack and has largely been supplanted by the goal of fostering greater equality of opportunity and outcomes for all students, even those with disabilities and those from lower socioeconomic strata (Goodlad, 1984).

However, schools—especially those that serve high-poverty populations—struggle to realize these new aspirations. More than half a century after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision to desegregate public schools, the dream of schools' eliminating race and class distinctions and providing equal opportunities to learn seems far from becoming a reality. As educators are charged with reducing the effects of economic disparities in our society, schools are increasingly feeling the brunt of public distrust. Impatient with the pace of change, policymakers have set standards for student performance and worked to increase the rigor of those standards over time. They have imposed reporting requirements to reveal discrepancies in outcomes among students who historically have been underserved by schools. And they have offered incentives for states to develop tough new teacher and principal evaluation systems that hold educators accountable for the learning of their students. The common denominator for these various policy initiatives is a lack of trust that educators are doing all that they can to support the learning of their students.

With increasing expectations—and many instances in which those expectations have not been met—trust in our schools has been damaged. In some ways, these dashed hopes and distrust are the result of the very success of public schools, with the increased knowledge and reasoning skills that a better educated

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public brings to its relations with professionals, experts, and other leaders. The success of our education system has created the very conditions that enable the common person to think critically and to challenge the status quo. Consequently, better education has created greater need for trustworthiness on the part of leaders and professionals.

### Pressure for Change

In this time of societal and economic flux, political forces are pressuring schools to make the necessary changes to meet our new, loftier goals for them. There is an urgent need to identify and solve the problems that plague low-performing schools. As Gloria learned, however, urgency is not enough to turn around a failing school. Standards have been imposed on schools because educators have not been consistently accountable, thereby forfeiting the public's trust. Negative publicity has been used to shift schools from complacency to compliance with new accountability measures. Principals like Fred, however, resist and resent these measures when they are not accompanied by the means and know-how to foster a productive school culture. Principals like Gloria become impatient with the slow pace of change and try to force rapid reform on their reluctant faculty, generating resistance and resentment instead of improved outcomes. It takes the wisdom of a principal like Brenda to patiently apply both support and challenge to lead a school toward fruitful change.

## TRUST MATTERS

Schools must garner trust and legitimacy at a time when these commodities are in short supply in society at large. Trustworthy school leaders must learn to create conditions in which trust can flourish within their school as well as between their school and

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their community. School leaders who, like Brenda, earn the trust of the members of their school community are in a better position to accomplish the complex task of educating a diverse group of students in a changing world. Principals and teachers who trust each other can better work together in the service of solving the challenging problems of schooling. These leaders create a bond that helps inspire teachers to move to higher levels of effort and achievement. These leaders also create the conditions, through structures and norms to guide behavior, that foster trust between teachers, and they assist teachers in resolving the inevitable conflicts that arise. Even more important, these leaders cultivate a culture of high trust between students and teachers through their attitudes, example, and policies.

As citizens become increasingly distrustful of their institutions and leaders, the trend away from trust creates a special challenge for schools because trust is so fundamental to their core mission. A school needs the trust of its parents, as well as that of the community that sponsors and funds it. To learn, students must trust their teachers because for much of what is learned in school they are asked to believe what teachers tell them as well as what they read without independent evidence. Students who do not trust their teachers or each other will be likely to divert energy into self-protection and away from engagement with the learning task. Without trust, teachers and students alike are unlikely to take the risks that genuine learning entails. Moreover, students who do not feel trusted by their teachers and administrators may create barriers to learning as they distance themselves from their school and build an alienated, rebellious youth culture. They may, in fact, live down to the low expectations of a distrustful school environment. Trustworthy school leaders model trusting relationships with students and parents that serve as examples for teachers as they work to cultivate these trusting relationships as well.

Trust can no longer be taken for granted in schools. It must —Short  
be conscientiously cultivated and sustained—and school leaders —Optimal  
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bear the largest responsibility for setting a tone of trust. It is time for school leaders to become knowledgeable about cultivating trust because trustworthy leadership is at the heart of successful schools.

## KEY POINTS ABOUT A MATTER OF TRUST

- School leaders that have the trust of their community are more likely to be successful in creating a productive learning environment.
- Trust is a challenge for schools at this point in history, when all of our institutions are under unprecedented scrutiny.
- Much of the responsibility for realizing our society's vision of greater equity is entrusted to our schools. Consequently, higher expectations are especially brought to bear on those who educate our children.
- Without trust, schools are likely to flounder in their attempts to provide constructive educational environments and meet the challenging goals that our society has set for them, because the energy needed to solve the complex problem of educating a diverse group of students is diverted toward self-protection.
- Trustworthy leadership is at the heart of productive schools.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Recall a time when you worked or studied in a school where trust was high. What was that like, and what effect did that trust have on the learning process? What conditions helped support that trust?
2. What are the signs that trust is either present or absent in your current school? To what extent do teachers trust one another?

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- To what extent do they trust students? What effects of the presence or absence of trust do you notice?
3. How do you know whether you are taking the appropriate amount of responsibility for continuous improvement in your school? What problems emerge from taking on too much or too little responsibility? What skills and support do you need to provide for teachers so they can assume a meaningful role in the change process?
  4. What steps have you taken to cultivate bonds of trust with parents and the community at large? What additional steps might you take to foster a trusting relationship between your school and your community when there is so much negative publicity about schools in the media?
  5. To what extent do you trust the teachers and students in your school? What might strengthen that trust?

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