Taking a Strengths-Based Focus Improves School Climate

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to learn whether focusing on strengths through Appreciative Inquiry (AI) would be related to measurable changes in school climate and trust within a small urban school district. The district studied was a beleaguered, under-performing school district in the Midwest Rust Belt. Through an AI initiative, the district identified three areas of inquiry: student achievement and success, trust and respect, and community pride and involvement. The inquiries led to new initiatives in each of these areas. A longitudinal study was conducted over two years, with data collected at two points, once 12 months before and again 12 months after the AI process was introduced. Significant improvements were shown in seven of the eight climate and trust variables assessed.

Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a both philosophy and an approach for motivating change that focuses on exploring and amplifying organizational strengths. AI contrasts with traditional models of change that focus on weaknesses, problems, and gaps. Instead, AI encourages organizations to identify strengths and imagine possibilities in order to outgrow problems and realize visions. The purpose of this study was to learn whether such an approach would be related to measurable changes in the areas identified for inquiry by a small urban school district. The hypothesis that guided this study was that an AI process around three, self-identified areas of interest (student achievement and success, trust and respect, and community pride and involvement) would result in measureable improvements in school climate and trust.

AI was initially developed by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) as a methodology for conducting organizational research. The process of inquiring into and studying the positive aspects of a system, however, proved to be transformational. Inquiry proved to be not only a prelude to action, but a form of constructive action (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008). AI has therefore come to be seen as a method for stimulating social innovation and organizational change. It springs from the tradition of action research, but criticizes that tradition as being too focused on remediation and problem-solving (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1999). Due, in part, to its linkages with disciplines such as positive psychology (Frederickson, 2009) and positive organizational scholarship (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003), AI has emerged as a generative process for discovering or creating new possibilities that organizations can use to positively alter their collective future (Bushe, 2007).

AI is grounded in five, interconnected principles: the positive, constructionist, simultaneity, anticipatory, and poetic principles (Cooperrider, et al., 2008, Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran, 2010). The positive principle holds that the energy and emotion associated with identifying, celebrating, and building on strengths enables people to transform systems and to get them moving in new directions. Whereas analyzing and solving problems can lead to downward spirals of blame and negative energy, discovering and building on strengths leads to upward spirals of aspiration, possibility, and the collective efficacy for transformational change (Daly & Chrispeels, 2005; Fredrickson, 2003; 2009). To generate that

positive energy and emotion, the constructionist principle focuses on the quality of the conversations and interactions that people are having with each other. The social context is viewed as the crucible which creates the present moment and changes future moments. The constructionist principle holds that people don't just interpret and understand the world through their conversations and interactions with others; people thereby create the reality in which they live. Because the stories people tell become self-fulfilling prophecies, AI encourages people to invent positive, energizing stories (Zander & Zander, 2000).

The simultaneity principle holds that conversations and interactions become positive the instant we ask a positive question, tell a positive story, or share a positive reflection. Ask a new question get a new conversation (Adams, 2004). The simultaneity principle therefore views positive lines of inquiry as quick and effective ways to generate positive changes. Such shifts do not just begin a process that leads to a positive future; they simultaneously create a positive present. They are not just a prelude to change; they are the change we seek to make. The anticipatory principle asserts that questions and reflections flow from the outlook people hold. In the absence of hope, it is hard to seek out, much less to celebrate, the positive. When people anticipate a positive future, however, everything tilts in that direction. Equipped with a glimpse of what things look like at their very best, people become more creative, resourceful, and resilient in looking for ways to make it so. Positive anticipation of the future is a forward look that makes the future palpable and imbues the present with both hope and guidance (Scharmer, 2007). Such anticipation takes more than just vague confidence that things will improve; it takes specific, positive images of the future in order to shift the realities of the present moment. The more concrete and real the image, the more yearning and movement it creates. Bennis and Nanus (1985) defined vision as "a target that beckons" (p. 89); through anticipation this beckoning becomes the hallmark of change.

Finally, the poetic principle connects intention with attention. The more people attend to the positive dimensions of the present moment, the more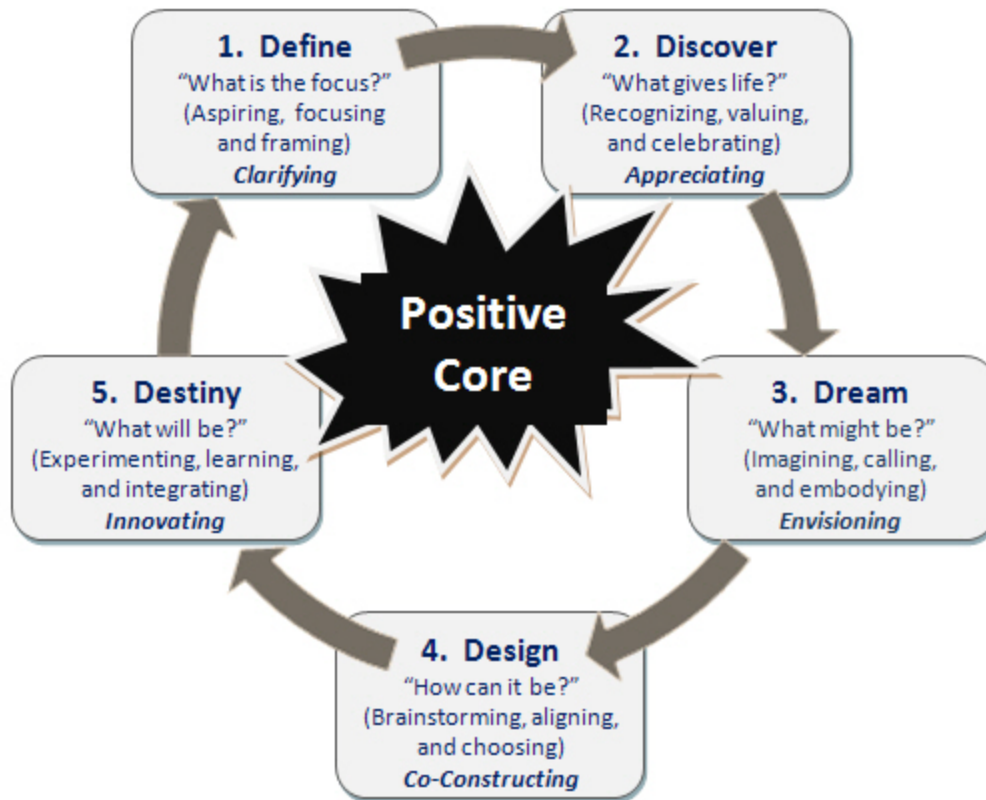 positive will be their intentions for future moments. Becoming mindfully aware of what adds richness, texture, depth, beauty, novelty, significance, and energy to life awakens people to life's magnificent potential (Langer, 2009). Even the most mundane of work in schools can become a work of poetry, filled with hopeful meter, movement, and meaning. By seeing and attending to this poetry, people become inspired. It is not that problems disappear, but other things become more important. When people focus on problems, they get more problems. When people focus on possibilities, they get more possibilities. Noting that "what we appreciate, appreciates," AI seeks to appreciate strengths.

The five principles of AI have resulted in the development of a change process that works well in both large and small groups. Although the process has been described in various ways, the 5-D Cycle is one of the more common (Watkins & Mohr, 2001). The diagram in Figure 1 depicts how the 5-D Cycle of AI generates a spiral dynamic of transformational change around a positive core:

Define. The process starts by clarifying and securing agreements on what people want to inquire into and learn more about (topic choice). The effectiveness of the AI process depends upon an affirmative focus that identifies what people want (e.g., effective and supportive communication) rather than what they don't want (e.g., sniping or backbiting). It also depends upon the willingness of the participants to forego traditional problem-solving in favor of strengths-based approaches that generate new conversations, interests, and opportunities.

Discover. Once the focus of inquiry is clear, AI looks to discover nascent examples of those desired outcomes in the past and present. AI makes the assumption that in every situation at least some examples of desired states can be found. They may be hidden under a patina of problems and discontent, but life-giving examples, images, and stories that support the learning focus can always be discovered. These existing strengths are referred to as the positive core. To facilitate the discovery process, AI has developed a protocol for paired interviews and small-group conversations. As many stakeholders as possible, both internal and external, pair up and interview each other using tailor-made versions of the following four questions:

Figure 1. *The Five-D Cycle of Appreciative Inquiry*

- *Best Experiences*. Tell me about your best experience with this organization, a time when you felt most alive and engaged. What made it so exciting? Who was there? Describe the experience in detail.

- *Core Values*. Tell me about the things you value most deeply, things about yourself, your relationships, and your work. Who are you when you are at your best?

- *Generative Conditions*. Tell me about the core, life-giving factors in your experience. What are the key ingredients, both internal and external, that enable you to be at your best and to find enjoyment and satisfaction in your work?

- *Three Wishes*. Tell me about your hopes and dreams for the future. If you were to be granted three wishes for this organization, what would they be?

The purpose of these discoveries is to strengthen the energy and self-efficacy of people through the vivid reconnaissance of mastery experiences (Bandura, 1997). The more direct, personal, and relevant the mastery experiences the greater their impact on motivation and openness to change. The Simultaneity Principle makes clear that the appreciative interview is not a prelude to strategy; it is part and parcel of strategy. Inquiry into what happens when organizations function at their best is transformational in and of itself. It not only forms the basis for change, the conversations themselves change the tenor of the organization (Cooperrider, 2000). After the interviews are complete, the interviewers share the stories and wishes they heard in small groups. The small groups then identify common themes and report back to the large group. It is a process that lays the foundation for all that follows.

Dream. Once people have appreciated the best of what is, they are primed to envision the best of what might be. They use the discoveries of the last phase to create a dream that is anchored in their

history even as it expands their potential. They articulate grounded and yet provocative propositions about the future. Several considerations impact the dream-making process. The first is the question of calling: What does the world need from us now? The second is the question of energy: What possibilities generate the most excitement for us? The third is the question of support: What can we draw upon from our positive core? In the dream-making process, AI encourages the use of both left-brain and right-brain activities. The Poetic Principle reveals the limitations of information and analysis; it takes stories, narratives, metaphors, dramatizations, and images to make dreams come alive. Once the dream has been articulated such that it becomes a target that beckons, it becomes an anticipatory field that generates palpable energy in the organizations.

Design. Once participants have crafted a compelling vision, the task shifts to generating the strategies for making it so. The design phase of the AI process mobilizes resources and co-constructs the strategies for aligning the system with the dream. People are asked to brainstorm multiple proposals and questions as to how the dream would manifest itself in terms of changed procedures, systems, technology, habits, roles, resources, relationships, finances, structures, and stakeholders. What would shift if the infrastructure fully supported the dream? Imagining and describing those shifts in detail is a fundamental work of the design phase. Brainstorming is an important part of the design phase. It keeps the process playful and encourages out-of-the box thinking. During the brainstorming phase, judgment is suspended and creativity is encouraged (Kelley, 2001). Once enough ideas are generated, individuals and groups can gravitate to the ideas that most interest and energize them. It is not so much a process of evaluating ideas as "good" or "bad"; it is more a process of discerning the ideas that bring energy and life to the participants and the organization. Those are the ideas that people will explore more fully and field test in the destiny phase of the process.

It is important to get very specific and personal when it comes to the steps people want to take to move things forward in the direction of their dreams (Brown, 2009). It is not just systems that have to shift and align with the dream, people also

have to shift and align their own understandings and actions. Participants are asked to specify who will take action through making offers and requests, with time-specific horizons.

- Offers are expressions of what people intend to do themselves, to increase their awareness and/or to change their behavior in support of their dreams.

- Requests are communications as to what people would like others to do, to facilitate a shared understanding of reality and/or to get the support they need to make dreams come true.

Destiny. Once people have designed strategies for moving forward, it is time to innovate those strategies into being. Destiny in an AI organization is not about implementing designs as though they were mandates from the design process; destiny is about empowering people to experiment with and improve upon their designs by trying them out and making situation-specific, real-time adjustments that reinforce what works. Such experiments progressively generate new solutions and expand the realm of the possible, like ripples in a pond. When the spirit of AI is fully realized in a school, educators become more willing and able celebrate and build on their strengths. They become the subjects, rather than the objects, of change in order to realize the destiny of their schools as learning organizations. That is the cultural shift and orientation made possible by AI. By orienting people around the positive, AI enables organization to generate positive actions and outcomes that become self-reinforcing (Watkins & Mohr, 2001).

Research on Appreciative Inquiry in Schools

AI has been used for a variety of purposes in schools including district-level initiatives, building-level school improvement, and classroom-level projects aimed at increasing student engagement. Sometimes it is initiated in an open-ended fashion, and at other times to address specific concerns. The impact of AI on schools has been documented in a number of case studies reflecting these various purposes.

In one district-wide AI initiative, eight school sites engaged in a yearlong process of discovery, visioning, and planning (Bushe, 2008). Schools were selected in a competitive process in

which individual buildings or entire feeder patterns of schools could propose projects. The results of these eight projects were somewhat mixed but generally positive. Four of the participating sites reported experiencing significant transformational change as a result of the initiative. Two more demonstrated positive incremental changes that amplified or sped up change processes that were already underway at those sites. The final two sites failed to evidence significant changes as a result of the AI initiative. The author suggested that a telling difference at the transformational sites were passionate and engaged leadership as well as a shared concern or problem to which the AI initiative responded. At the incremental sites, there was solid leadership but the AI initiative did not connect with any pressing issue at the site. In the two sites where there was little impact, there were problems reported with the site leadership and the integration of the initiative throughout the faculty. Bushe suggested that a lesson learned from this initiative was that the credibility and status of the site coordinator was a critical element that should have been attended to in the selection process, as well as greater attention to the nature of the issues to be addressed. Nonetheless, the district was quite pleased with the substantial positive change that grew out of the investment in this process.

At the building level, the results of an AI project at Ringshaug Primary Schools in Norway demonstrated that after one year, 89% of respondents agreed that "We have a greater sense of solidarity" and that "We are more committed to our vision [of] learning and joy." Three in four teachers agreed that "We have improved our skills to draw upon each other's talents and resources" and 84% agreed with the statement: "I am more motivated to collaborate with all my colleagues." Eight in ten teachers agreed that "I think more positively during my daily work, and 87% agreed that "We focus more on our successes" (Luth-Hanssen, Hauger, & Nesje, 2007; Nesje, 2007). Among the themes that emerged from faculty interviews was that the school functioned more as a community, that the level of collaboration and trust had increased, and that the AI process had made them more open and innovative. The faculty reported more active participation in meetings, a greater sense of shared responsibility to move the school forward ("we do not leave it to the principal"), greater motivation,

and greater eagerness to celebrate the good things going on in the school. The impact of the changes in school culture was not limited to the faculty. This school received the highest customer satisfaction survey results in their municipality (Hauger & Halvorsen, 2007).

Increasing student participation in their education and increasing flexible-learning opportunities for students was the focus of a project that involved six Norwegian schools with students aged 6–16 (Nesje & Nesje, 2007). Participants spent time clarifying different understandings of what was meant by participation and flexible learning, and then they engaged in a search for examples of these practices already in place across the six schools. The students' wishes included fewer interruptions, to work on computers more, to have individual learning plans, and to choose to a greater extent how they would like to work. A theme that emerged from students across all levels was that "the most important thing was that their teacher showed genuine interest and related more to them personally than they do today" (p. 18). In the second phase, students led "Dialogue Conferences" that explored ways to implement the ideas that had been initiated in the first phase. The dialogue conferences in the two primary schools, led by trained 5th, 6th, and 7th grade students, was "how to make sure that every child feels accepted and has several friends in school." One of the primary schools has since hosted several large conferences on the topic, in which as many as 170 people participated, and has received national media attention for their work. Another project on the relations between students and teachers took place in three Norwegian high schools, with a special focus on students at risk of drug abuse, psychosocial problems, academic failure, or dropping out of school. Participating teachers noted that the process helped to foster a greater atmosphere of trust between teachers and students and between students themselves, as well as a greater sense of belonging for students (Luth-Hanssen, & Haavimb, 2007). Two participating students interviewed the following term by an external evaluator asserted that they might well have dropped out of school had it not been for this intervention.

Heathside School, on the outskirts of London, has been recognized as a leader in using AI

in schools and of including secondary students (ages 11-18) as key participants in the process of school change. It has sustained the use of AI for over six years, including students in the process of strategic planning and significantly impacting the school culture along the way. The school first used AI to foster culture change in the sixth form (ages 16-18). The results were so positive that the decision was made to expand the process schoolwide. In developing a process that included significant student voice in planning, Heathside School achieved Healthy School Status – a significant government status – more rapidly than expected, with both school leaders and the assessor recognizing the significant impact of AI in enabling significant strands of the criteria to be met effectively (Price, Scully, & Willoughby, 2007). By encouraging a culture of action research at the school, school leaders have begun to see a number of "self-sown" projects initiated by members of the school community that go beyond the official AI initiatives (Willoughby & Tosey, 2007; Willoughby & Samuels, 2009).

Examples of the use of AI in schools in the United States have demonstrated significant positive results. At Shaw High School, an underperforming urban high school in Ohio, AI was used to promote positive cultural change and to improve the learning environment (Pratt, 2003). Students at Shaw conducted over 100 AI interviews to learn about Shaw's history and to capture stakeholders' wishes for a more effective high school. A three-day community-wide summit resulted in a five-week summer learning institute for students who had not passed their state proficiency exams, with all courses adopting the strengths-based principles and processes of AI. This program has since been expanded to include other high schools as well as monthly sessions during the academic year, and continuing support to guide students through the college selection and admissions process. In another initiative, a team of eighth-grade teachers in an underperforming, rural middle school demonstrated the power of an AI process to break through discouragement and inertia to move the team in positive new directions. The process involved ten team meetings, most 90 minutes in length and several that were four to six hours. Six-weeks after the AI process concluded, the teachers noted "newfound relationships, respect

and belief in each other," greater confidence, and increased motivation (Calabrese, San Martin, Glasgow, & Friesen, 2008, p. 36). The teachers said that the AI process had been "a catalyst for continued collaboration and implementation of cross-curricular learning units" (p. 37), as well as for increased technology integration across the curriculum.

AI has also been used at the classroom level and to address specific concerns among the student population. A concern that was raised at Ringshaug Primary School was the level of bullying that had taken hold among a particular class of eight-year olds. An AI process was initiated in which the school's social teacher (a role comparable to a guidance counselor in the US) and an external AI consultant worked with this class for two weeks. Parents were also invited to participate. Called the Memory-Hunting Project, the students were encouraged to focus on positive behaviors that were characterized as "golden moments." These positive episodes were captured in individual "memory-catcher" books. At a parent program, some children read aloud from their memory-catcher books. Over time, the parents and teachers noted a significant change away from bullying to a more productive working atmosphere in the class (Wigestrand & Hauger, 2007). Similarly, AI was used to foster greater social inclusion of students with disabilities through a program called the Circle of Friends Program that resulted in significant, meaningful positive experiences for both the disabled and non-disabled students who participated (Calabrese, Patterson, et al., 2008).

Although AI has been used extensively around the globe over the past two decades, in corporations, social service agencies, the United Nations, and the U.S. military (Watkins & Mohr, 2001), it has not made significant inroads into the educational realm. As a consequence, the research base on AI in schools is slim and primarily involves qualitative case studies. Although the results reported are compelling, there is a need to supplement these studies with longitudinal cases that include quantitative data. It is this gap which the current study seeks to fill.

Crossroads City Schools: A Case Study in Appreciative Inquiry

The educators in Crossroads, a small city in the Midwest Rust Belt of the USA, were feeling understandably beleaguered and discouraged in the winter of 2005. Caught in the confluence of a 25-year decline in their city's manufacturing base and the ramping up of expectations through No Child Left Behind and the school-accountability movement, Crossroads City Schools (CCS) had suffered a barrage of negative publicity over school performance ratings resulting in an erosion of morale and trust. Recognizing a lack of sufficient progress with traditional problem-solving techniques but still hopeful in their capacity to improve, CCS decided to bring AI into the system with the anticipation that focusing on the life-giving dimensions of their work and relationships would shift momentum in a positive direction.

Background

The State Department of Education Local School Report Cards, first introduced for the 1998-1999 school year, both documented the need and created the urgency for change. In the first year, CCS earned the lowest possible rating: Academic Emergency. By 2005, CCS had moved up two notches, including three years in Academic Watch and two years in Continuous Improvement. Increased efforts at curriculum alignment, electronic monitoring of performance indicators, and improved instruction had not yielded sufficient gains for the District to achieve the rating of Effective. As a result, CCS was becoming vulnerable to corrective action by the State.

Working hard without seeing desired results is discouraging and stressful, and it was especially so at CCS in the early years of State accountability. Antagonistic relationships, a lack of cooperation, and a watch-your-back mentality became the norm for many CCS employees. Newspaper headlines proclaiming Crossroads as having the worst scores among area districts and other negative media coverage created a highly charged atmosphere in the search for blame. Scapegoating and finger pointing became widespread. Some blamed the teachers, others the Superintendent, the administration, the Board of Education, the parents, the students, the community, the economy, or the school-accountability movement itself. Still others adopted a hunker-down mentality, doing the best they knew how with the challenges they faced.

Along with the search for blame came a breakdown in morale and trust. Both relationships and task performance suffered. Failure, frustration, and fear led to a downward spiral and a self-fulfilling prophecy. A district-wide online survey, telephone and face-to-face interviews, as well as the norm-referenced school climate and trust surveys reported on in this study documented how people were feeling in early 2005. Climate and trust scores at three of the five schools in the district were well below the mean of schools in a comparison sample. A common refrain among teachers was that school just wasn't fun anymore, either for the students or for themselves. CCS was a district in need of a fresh approach to change, one that would renew trust, hope, energy, and vitality in the whole system and AI was just such an approach.

Turning Towards Strengths in Crossroads

As a hub of rail lines in the Midwest Rust Belt, Crossroads is proud of its railway tradition. Picking up on this tradition, CCS made "Get On Board the Celebration Express!" their theme for the AI process and their rallying cry for turning towards strengths. This theme pointed to the positive energy they sought to unleash. In February 2006, 11 introductory sessions were held to acquaint people in CCS and the community at large with the AI philosophy and process (Watkins & Mohr, 2001; Ludema, Whitney, Mohr & Griffin, 2003). Sessions were held with the Board of Education, community leaders, business leaders, school administrators, parents and community members, as well as sessions that included teachers and students at all five school buildings. At these sessions, participants interviewed one another about their best experiences with and wishes for CCS. They gathered in small groups to share their stories and to look for underlying themes. Interested participants were invited to serve on an AI Summit Planning Committee.

One month later, 30 volunteers met to plan the Summit. Six groups of five participants each were given sets of cards on which the 141 themes that had emerged from the 11 introductory sessions were printed and asked to sort them into larger, unifying themes that would guide the AI process in CCS. When the small groups reported back to the

committee as a whole, a consensus sort converged on three over-arching themes:

- Student Achievement and Success
- Trust and Respect
- Community Pride and Involvement

Having identified the Summit themes, the Planning Committee met two more times to develop and test an appreciative interview protocol, and to plan the publicity and logistics of the Summit.

The Summit was held a few days after the end of the school year, a less than auspicious time for weary educators. Many of the people who showed up did so grudgingly, planning to fulfill whatever duty seemed to demand, and then to beg off with excuses of other commitments. Others, having had their curiosity piqued through the introductory sessions, came to see if this new method would live up to its promises. The idea that a three-day planning event could be fun and rewarding, much less productive, seemed to be too much to hope for among the discouraged educators and citizens of this small city.

The Summit was not only fun but productive as well. New stories and wishes were shared around the three Summit themes. Provocative propositions were developed by small groups that described CCS at its very best. Creative presentations of those propositions served as powerful metaphors to the gathered community, communicated through the use of songs, dances, and skits. Inspiring plans for implementing these propositions were then developed by six, self-organized innovation teams (two for each of the Summit themes). The teams shared their plans with the whole group. Offers and requests made by members of each innovation team to bring the plans into being were recorded on planning documents.

After the Summit, the innovation teams met over the summer to refine and implement their plans. A video presentation of the Summit was shared with the entire staff of the district during the opening convocation for the 2006-2007 school year, as were reports from each of the innovation teams. To support the outcomes of the Summit, CCS sought to infuse AI throughout the district. Administrators and teacher leaders were trained on appreciative approaches to supervision and conflict

resolution. Telephone coaching was made available to all Board of Education members, administrators, union representatives, and innovation team leaders. The innovation work continued through the 2007-2008 school year.

Method

The question that guided this study was whether focusing on strengths through AI would be related to measurable changes in school climate and trust within a small underperforming urban school district that had experienced a decline in morale as the pressures of the accountability movement intensified.

Study Design and Data Collection

The study design was a repeated-measures longitudinal case study. Survey data were collected at two points, the first a little over a year before the district-wide AI Summit process was conducted, and again nearly a year afterwards. The study was conducted under the auspices of the IRB committee at the university where the first author is employed. Data were collected during a regularly-scheduled faculty meeting. Directions that were read to participants included a statement of the purpose of the study as well as permission to skip any questions they wished and to discontinue participation at any point without penalty. The school climate measures and the trust measures were assessed on separate surveys with about half the faculty of each school responding to each. The results were aggregated to the building and district levels. The district was the primary level of analysis, although the results of one of the schools are reported below.

Participants

The participants of this study were the faculty members of the school district under study. The surveys were anonymous and no demographic information such as the gender or years of teaching experience of respondents were gathered as these were not variables of interest in this study. In the spring of 2005, the participants included 147 teachers (56 high school, 28 middle school, and 63 elementary) who completed school climate and trust surveys at a faculty meeting in their building with outside consultants distributing the surveys, giving directions, and collecting them. In the spring of 2007, the participants included 124 teachers (33

high school, 32 middle school, and 59 elementary) who completed the same surveys with a member of the staff other than the principal designated to administer the surveys.

Measures

Because the items asked teachers about their perceptions of the school as a whole, data were aggregated initially to the building level for analysis. The building results were standardized against a norming sample at each level of schooling on a scale with a mean of 500 and a standard deviation of 100. The norming samples consisted of 97 high schools in Ohio, 82 middle schools in Virginia, and 143 elementary schools in Ohio. For purposes of reporting the district-wide changes over a two-year period, these standardized building-level scores were aggregated to the district level.

The school climate and organizational citizenship behavior survey items were measured with a five-point response scale that asked respondents to assess how frequently each statement was true of his or her school (1 - never, 2 - rarely, 3 - sometimes, 4 - often, 5 - very frequently). The trust items were measured using a six-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree). Although these responses were categorical in nature and lacked a precise underlying metric, we followed the common practice of analyzing them as numerical data. Factor analytic studies of the Faculty Trust Scales support the construct validity of the measure (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 2003). The School Climate, Organizational Citizenship, and Faculty Trust Scales are available online at http://wmpeople.wm.edu/site/page/mxtsch.

Theme One: Student Achievement and Success

As schools respond to the pressures of the accountability movement to improve student achievement, attendance, and graduation rates, there is a growing recognition that the quality of interpersonal relationships are strong predictors of these outcomes. Aspects of school climate that are closely related to student outcomes include academic press and teacher professionalism (Hoy, Hannum & Tschannen-Moran, 1998; Tschannen-Moran, Parish, & DiPaola, 2006) as well as organizational citizenship behaviors (DiPaola, & Tschannen-Moran, 2001).

Academic press. The first of these dimensions, academic press, refers to a school-wide tone that is serious, orderly, and focused on academics. Schools with a high level of academic press are driven by a quest for excellence. In these schools, students who do well academically are respected by their peers and honored by the school community. Teachers set high goals and students respond positively to the challenge of these goals, working hard to achieve them. Schools in which the learning environment is orderly and serious and in which teachers and students set high standards for academic performance tend to have higher student achievement. Empirical evidence suggests that where teachers and administrators work together to establish an environment in which academic press is strong, the school goal of fostering student achievement is more likely to be met (Tschannen-Moran, et al., 2006). Academic press was measured using a six-item subscale of the School Climate Index (Tschannen-Moran, et al., 2006). An example of an item on the measure is "Students respect others who get good grades." The alpha coefficient of reliability for this sample was .92.

Teacher professionalism. The second element, teacher professionalism, refers to behaviors that show that teachers are committed to their work and willing to work cooperatively with one another in service of organizational goals. In schools with a high degree of teacher professionalism, teachers go beyond minimum expectations to meet the needs of students and typically display warmth and friendliness as they work with students and other members of the school community. They take their work seriously and respect the competence and expertise of their colleagues. Teacher professionalism has been correlated to student achievement (Hoy, et al., 1998; Tschannen-Moran, et al., 2006). Where teachers are committed to students, respect the competence of their colleagues, and work cooperatively with one another, an environment conducive to student learning is more likely. Teacher Professionalism was measured using an eight-item subscale of the School Climate Index (Tschannen-Moran, et al., 2006). An example of an item on the measure is "Teachers are committed to helping students." The alpha coefficient of reliability for this sample was .97.

Organizational citizenship behaviors. Organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) describes behaviors where employees go beyond their formal job responsibilities, performing non-mandatory tasks with no expectation of recognition or compensation (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993). Although these altruistic acts are neither prescribed nor required, they are essential to organizational effectiveness (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Although OCBs are not accounted for or monitored by the organization's reward system, they provide the organization with the adaptation and innovation necessary for long-term survival and growth. OCB is defined as "performance that supports the social and psychological environment in which task performance takes place" (Organ, 1997, p. 95). OCB is important in education because organizational charts, employment contracts, and job descriptions fail to address all the contingencies that arise in schools (Stewart, 1985). They generally can do no more than specify minimum performance requirements. Teachers in well-functioning schools consistently go well beyond the minimum expectations of formal job descriptions and contracts. School organizations count on teachers doing so and could not achieve their goals if teachers limited their contributions to those specified in their job descriptions. In fact, "working to rule" is a tactic employed by teacher unions to punish school districts when contract negotiations are at an impasse. This is viewed as an extreme measure and generally brings a quick response because it demonstrates how crucial goodwill and working beyond minimum specifications are to the smooth functioning and efficiency of schools (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2001).

Organizational citizenship behaviors were measured with an instrument developed specifically to capture OCBs in schools (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2001). The measure was adapted from a measure used by Smith, Organ, and Near (1983) for OCBs in private sector organizations. The measure consisted of 9 items assessed on a five-point scale. Examples of items on the measure were: "Teachers voluntarily help new teachers" and "Teachers schedule personal appointments at times other that during the school day." The alpha reliability for this sample was .94.

Theme Two: Trust and Respect

Trust is foundational to learning across all stages of the lifespan. Whether the focus is on student learning of new academic or social skills or on teachers as they experiment with new instructional techniques, learning is enhanced when the learner feels safe enough to take the risks that learning entails. In the absence of trust, learning is impaired as self-protection becomes the primary focus of attention ((Tschannen-Moran, 2004a; 2004b). Energy is diverted away from the learning task when people are either watching their back or plotting revenge. It was an awareness of the fundamental importance of trust to learning and to high-functioning organizations that led CCS to make the cultivation of trust and respect one of their themes of inquiry. CCS sought to discover instances where trust was high and to propagate those instances throughout the district. They wanted to enhance trust in all of their working relationships, whether adult-to-adult, adult-to-student, or student-to-student.

Trust is defined as the "willingness to be vulnerable to another based on the confidence that the other is benevolent, honest, open, reliable, and competent" (Tschannen-Moran, 2004a). Trust matters most in situations of interdependence, where people must depend upon one another to achieve desired outcomes. This interdependence creates a situation of vulnerability. In such situations, trust is essential to the accomplishment of shared goals. Trust is cultivated based on an assessment of several characteristics of the other party, the first of which is benevolence, a sense of mutual concern, good will, and caring. Trust is also based on the judgment that the trusted person has integrity, will tell the truth, and demonstrates authenticity. In the absence of honesty, the communication necessary to build trust is compromised. Openness is another aspect of trust. When people are not sufficiently transparent as to their intentions and actions, others become suspicious, wary, and concerned about hidden agendas. The appropriate disclosure of facts, alternatives, judgments, and intentions is essential for creating trustworthy relationships. Reliability over time is yet another factor that persons consider when extending trust to another. Trust is deepened and strengthened through consistent follow-through on promises; dependability in the hour of need is

what people look for in a trusted colleague or friend. Finally, trust takes more than good intentions. It also takes the ability to perform tasks as expected, according to appropriate standards. In some situations, that ability may be narrowly focused, while in others it may be more broadly defined, depending upon the nature of the shared project and the resulting interdependence. Trust has been shown to be a significant factor in fostering teacher professionalism (Tschannen-Moran, 2009) as well as building capacity for innovation and positive change (Cosner, 2009).

Trust in this study was measured using the Faculty Trust Scales. The Faculty Trust Scales capture teacher trust in four important constituencies within the school: the principal, colleagues, students, and parents. Statistical analysis, however, demonstrated that teachers' perceptions of trust in students were statistically indistinguishable from their trust in parents so these two subscales were collapsed into one, which was labeled Trust in Clients (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 2003). The Faculty Trust Scales (FTS) consist of 26 items divided between these three subscales. The first, Faculty Trust in the Principal, includes 8 items. Sample items include: "The principal of this school typically acts with the best interest of the teachers in mind" and "Teachers in this school can rely on the principal." In the current sample, the alpha coefficient of reliability for this subscale was .98. Faculty Trust in Colleagues also includes 8 items. Sample items include: "Teachers in this school have faith in the integrity of their colleagues" and "Even in difficult situations, teachers in this school can depend on each other." The alpha coefficient of reliability for this subscale was .87. Faculty Trust in Clients (students and parents) includes 10 items. Examples of items on the measure are: "Teachers in this school are suspicious of students (reverse-scored)" and "Teachers can count on parental support." The alpha coefficient of reliability for this subscale was .93.

Respect. An aspect of school climate that embodies the notion of respect is collegial leadership. This construct assesses the quality of interpersonal relations between the principal and teachers. Collegial leadership refers to behaviors of the principal that are supportive and collegial, and are not perceived to be overly directive or restrictive. Such principals seek to balance the needs of the faculty with the goals of the school. Principals who demonstrate collegial leadership are considerate, helpful, and genuinely concerned about the welfare of teachers. They are open to exploring all sides of topics and willing to make changes. During meetings, they accept questions without appearing to snub teachers and admit that divergent opinions exist. Finally, these principals are careful to take an interest in classroom issues that are important to teachers. These principals set a collaborative tone for the school. Although collegial leadership has often been found not to have a direct influence on student achievement, since the principal is not involved in the delivery of instruction in the classroom (Hallinger & Heck, 1996), there is evidence of its indirect influence. Collegial leadership has been positively related to the overall school climate score of a school, which is in turn related to student achievement (Tschannen-Moran, et al., 2006). The principal plays a role in promoting student learning through the creation of a climate that is conducive to achievement. Respect was measured using the collegial leadership subscale of the School Climate Index (Tschannen-Moran, et al., 2006). This subscale consisted of seven items. An example of an item on the measure is "The principal is friendly and approachable." The alpha reliability for this sample was .98.

Theme Three: Community Pride and Involvement

One of the things that was clear to the participants planning the AI process in Crossroads was that it would be difficult for the schools to improve without significant improvement in the level of community support for and engagement in the schools. There was also a recognition of low pride in CCS that was inhibiting a robust level of community involvement. Thus, community pride and involvement was selected as a third focus of inquiry.

Community engagement. Community engagement is the extent to which the school has fostered a constructive relationship with its community. It describes the degree to which the school can count on involvement and support from parents and community members, and the extent to which the school provides the community with

information about its accomplishments. A school with strong community engagement is responsive to the needs and concerns of parents and community members and as a result, is able to marshal community support when needed. Tschannen-Moran, Parish, and DiPaola (2006) found that middle school students were more likely to demonstrate success on state assessments in schools where teachers felt that parents and community members were working with their schools to ensure student success. By engaging their communities in positive ways, educational administrators and teachers are likely to experience favorable results for their students. Community Engagement was measured using a seven item subscale of the School Climate Index (Tschannen-Moran, et al., 2006). An example of an item on the measure is "Community members are responsive to requests for participation." The alpha coefficient for this sample was .90.

Results

At the AI Summit, two innovation teams for each of the three themes worked to identify and plan initiatives to move the district forward in that area. Below, several of those initiatives are described.

Theme One: Student Achievement and Success

In the wake of the AI summit, a number of initiatives were added to those already underway in the district to improve student achievement and success. One such initiative involved training in instructional supervision from a strengths-based approach. In this approach, supervision is structured as an inquiry, guided by the teacher's curiosity about her or his own practice, using objective data collected on a set of classroom observation tools. A second initiative involved offering leadership coaching to all of the administrators in the district, as well as to the union leadership, to assist people as they attempted to implement this new, more positive orientation to leadership. Over a three-year period, this initiative logged 533 coaching sessions with 37 district leaders.

Underlying an interest in improving school climate is the growing body of literature that links school climate to important student outcomes, including student achievement (Hoy, et al., 1998; Tschannen-Moran, et al., 2006). Several of the school climate variables showed measurable

improvement over the two years of this study (see Figure 2). Academic press, an important variable because of its strong correlation with student achievement, improved from a full standard deviation below the mean (M = 403) to close to the mean for schools in the comparison sample (M = 487). Teacher Professionalism began at close to the mean for the schools in the comparison sample (M = 505). Two years later, this had strengthened nearly half of a standard deviation to a mean of 550. Organizational Citizenship showed an even more dramatic improvement, leaping from a mean of 450, half a standard deviation below the mean to a 604, a full standard deviation above the mean, placing these schools in the top 16% of the schools in the comparison sample. There was improvement in the number of state indicators that were successfully met. Although there was still room for growth, this was an indication of a school climate much more conducive to student achievement.
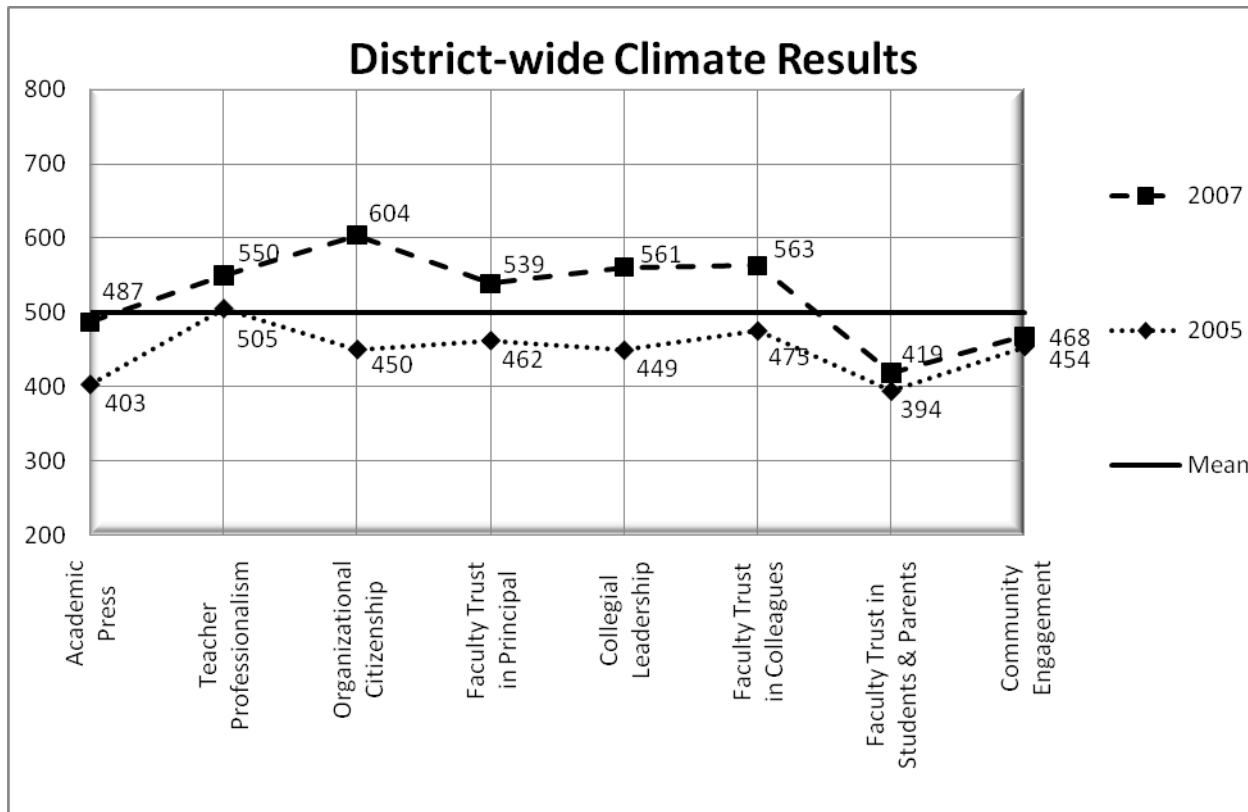
Theme Two: Trust and Respect

Trust and respect was selected as one of the three areas of inquiry for the AI process because many of the participants in the early planning initiatives suggested that this was an area of needed growth. Indeed, in 2005 the mean scores for all of the trust variables were below the mean of the schools in the norming sample (see Figure 2). Faculty trust in the principal was nearly a half a standard deviation below the mean (M = 462), as were teacher perceptions of the collegial leadership of their principal, that is, the degree to which the principal was open to suggestions from the faculty and that these suggestions were put into action (M = 449). The mean scores for faculty trust in colleagues similarly fell below the mean (M = 475). There was measureable improvement in the level of teachers' trust in the other adults they worked with over the two years of the study, with close to a standard deviation of improvement in all three of these variables. Faculty trust in the principal improved to a mean of 539, teacher perceptions of collegial leadership improved to 561, and faculty trust in colleagues improved to 563. An important dimension of trust that did not show much improvement was faculty trust in students and parents. The mean improved only slightly from 394 to 419, still nearly a full standard deviation below the mean. This would indicate scores falling within the bottom 20% of schools in the comparison

sample. These results are of concern as trust in students has been closely linked to student

achievement (Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001; Tschannen-Moran, 2004b).

Figure 2. *District-wide Climate Results*

One district initiative specifically designed to foster greater trust and respect involved training district employees and the Board of Education in Nonviolent Communication (NVC), a communication process designed to facilitate the respectful understanding of people's feelings, needs, and desires (Rosenberg, 2005, 2006). NVC gives people tools for honest expression and empathic reception even when confronted with hard-to-hear messages. In preparation for a district-wide training in this process, four small-group sessions were held involving more than 50 people, including teacher-leaders, administrators, and the Board of Education. This was followed by a one day in-service involving all of the district employees. This training led to a follow-up Board workshop, training for the Freshman Learning Community, student initiatives, and a practice group seminar.

Theme Three: Community Pride and Involvement

Several new initiatives to engage parents and the community at-large grew out of the AI Summit. These included:
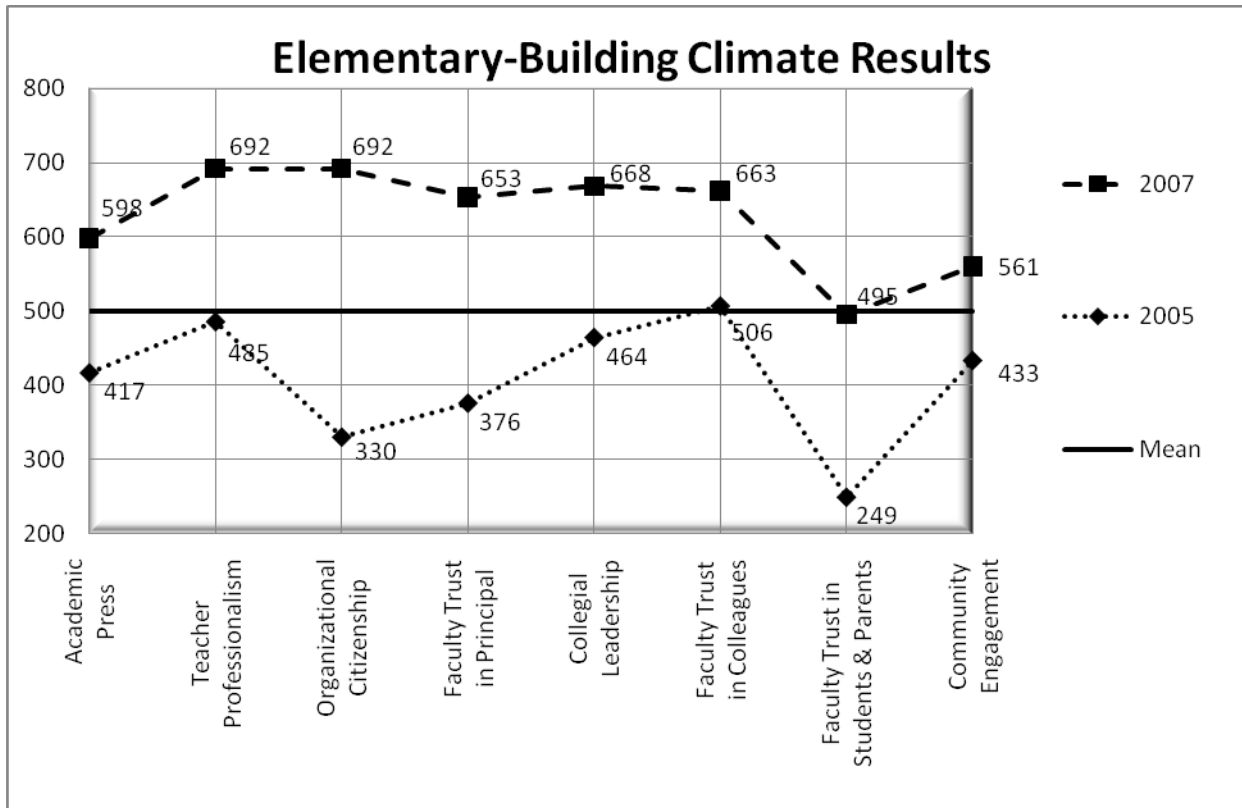
- the founding of a Grandparents Association, that began to play an active service role within the schools and at school events,

- the founding of a district-wide Parent-Teacher Organization to facilitate communication and to support parental involvement across schools and school levels,

- the use of the school-district website to circulate electronic copies of building newsletters,

- the creation of a new staff position and the hiring of a person to serve as school-community liaison,

- the hosting of a Town Meeting by the Board of Education, using the AI paired-interview

process, to celebrate and plan for the arts programs in the schools.

These and other initiatives enabled the district to pass important operating levies with area voters in the springs of 2007 and 2009. The perceptions of teachers in the district schools, however, did not evidence much change over the two year period of this study. The perceptions of community engagement were raised only slightly from a mean of 454 to 468 (see Figure 2).

Figure 3. *Elementary-Building Climate Results*

Although every building in the district showed improvements in various areas, one elementary-school building showed substantial improvements in every area, at some points moving from the lowest 16% of tested schools to the highest 16% (in Organizational Citizenship and Faculty Trust in Principal). See Figure 3. The high scores in all areas except faculty trust in students and parents as well as community engagement were confirmed by interviews with teachers, staff, and administrators throughout the district. Everyone noticed that this building had turned around in the space of two short years, with the appointment of a new principal shortly after the 2005 survey was taken. This new principal was receptive and active in the various strengths-based initiatives reported on in this paper: AI, leadership coaching, and NVC.

Her willingness to engage personally in the process gave others permission to participate as well. This led to a unity of purpose among the staff. Their resolve was tested when the Local School Report Card for the year following the summit (2006-2007) did not evidence as much progress for their building as people expected. Rather than to resort to old habits in the search for scapegoats and blame, there was now a renewed, collective determination to innovate further during the 2007-2008 academic year in order to achieve Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and to serve their students more fully.

In the 2008-2009 academic year, the entire district, not just this one building, met AYP for the first time ever. The district would have moved from "continuous improvement" to "effective" had just three more students passed the State proficiency

tests. Although there was disappointment to have missed their goal by such a narrow margin, teachers and leaders throughout the district felt confident that a rating of "effective" was within reach and that their efforts were paying off. Thus the hypothesis that an AI process structured around self-identified areas of interest would result in measureable improvements in school climate and trust was partially supported, with six aspects of school climate and faculty trust showing substantial improvement, but the areas of community engagement and trust in clients remaining relatively unchanged.

Conclusion

AI works, in part, because it aligns with and amplifies the things that make for positive change. By getting people to focus on their strengths, AI changes the conversations from complaining to celebrating. By noticing and amplifying the good things that are going on, AI turns the tables on old conversation patterns about what is wrong and who is to blame. As the search for scapegoats subsides, the safety required for innovation, risk-taking, and learning grows. People become more open, forthcoming, and confident. This is what unfolded in the small city of Crossroads. By getting people to have conversations with each other about their best experiences, core values, generative conditions, and wishes, AI created a space where new possibilities could emerge. The generation of provocative propositions reconnected people with their passion and, in the process, shifted attention away from the wounds of the past to the possibilities for a desired future.

These new conversations resulted in the planning and implementation of a number of new initiatives designed to enhance performance in the three areas of inquiry. In addition, the quality of interpersonal relationships improved in measureable ways. Nearly a year after the AI Summit, results of the school climate, organizational citizenship, and trust measures showed substantial improvement from what they had been a year before the summit in all but two subscales. Faculty perceptions of trust and respect in relationship to building principals and in relationship to teacher colleagues were improved. Faculty perceptions of the professionalism of their colleagues and of their colleagues' willingness to go beyond contractual

obligations also increased substantially. Academic press, the faculty's perception that the learning environment was orderly and serious and that academic success was honored, moved from an average that was one standard deviation below the mean of a comparison sample of schools to a score that was close to the mean of the comparison sample. The two areas that did not show such dramatic gains were in the areas of community engagement and faculty trust in students and parents, despite the fact that community pride and involvement was a focus of inquiry. The one elementary school that was highlighted did show substantial progress in these areas, but the district as a whole still had a ways to go.

A few caveats are in order. School districts are complex organizations and AI was only one of many initiatives underway in the district during the time of this study. It would be exceedingly difficult to tease out the independent effects of each of these various initiatives, especially when some of them overlapped (particularly in the inquiry focus area of student achievement and success). So caution should be exercised in ascribing all or even most of the improvements evidenced to the AI initiative alone.

This study contributes to a growing body of literature on the use of AI in schools. It adds to the literature by including quantitative measures that have been developed, tested, and used in a wide variety of school settings that allow for comparisons across contexts. This study has provided evidence of how AI gave one downtrodden school system and community new reason to hope for better days and to invest in bringing those hopes to fruition. By celebrating the best of the present, district participants were able to dream even brighter dreams for the future. As the conversations changed, a new social reality was constructed and a cycle of positive energy was built as people encouraged one another to live from their values and do their best.

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