

# **Exemplary Superintendents' Experiences with Trust**

**Frank D. Davidson**  
*Northern Arizona University*

**Thomas R. Hughes**  
*Northern Arizona University*

*Trust is essential to success at both the school and district levels. While its presence provides no guarantee of organizational success, its absence reliably predicts failure. Trust in institutions including the government, the church, and the media has declined in recent years. This is certainly true of public schools as well. The purpose of this qualitative study was to better understand the lived experiences of exemplary superintendents in developing trust and credibility. Participants included 12 current or former school superintendents who had received statewide recognition from their peers for ethical and capable leadership. The findings suggest that board-superintendent relationships and superintendent-principal relationships can have a substantial effect on trust in the organization. The findings also point to the importance of networking, supporting employees, and valuing dissent. Furthermore, insights are provided regarding the restoration of trust once it has been broken.*

This study sought to contribute to the understanding of the important role trust plays in leadership by focusing on the lived experiences of recognized educational leaders in developing the trust and credibility that has been established with peers, colleagues, and elected officials. Participants included school superintendents who have received statewide recognition from their peers for ethical and capable leadership.

Already approaching 20 years into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, it is clear that distrust abounds. Distrust in institutions including the government, the church, the media, and schools has significantly increased in recent years. Worldwide surveys regarding trust in various institutions reveal that the U.S. has experienced the steepest decline in trust ever documented during the nearly 20 years that these surveys have been administered (Friedman, 2018).

It should come as no surprise that school leaders are all too familiar with the struggles involved with earning the public's trust. Public schools, facing growing and complex challenges (Hughes, 2014), are perhaps as experienced as any institution in contending with the causes and effects of distrust. Strier and Katz note that "There is general agreement among researchers that public trust in schools has decreased significantly in the last decades" (2016, p. 367). It is reasonable to conclude that rising distrust has led to the multitude of state and federal government accountability measures implemented in recent years that are never far from the minds of school leaders:

Today's principals and superintendents function in a context shaped by the rise of not only high-stakes testing as a means of holding schools accountable, but also one that is heavily influenced by a number of free market accountability approaches, generally focused on competition for students. Widespread school choice and school privatization plans have proliferated across the states and at the federal level, reflecting a belief that schools will improve only when market forces compel them to do so (Papa, English, Davidson, Culver, & Brown, 2013, p. 50).

The complex work of leading schools requires leaders who understand that meaningfully improving outcomes for students requires investing in people-development, at all levels of the organization. As will be conveyed in the words of the superintendents who are the focus of this study, the work of earning trust, of building organizational capacity, and developing people is a daily, never-ending endeavor.

### **Conceptual Framework**

In our view, at the level of the superintendency, the phenomena of trust-building and trust-restoring are rooted in the well-established five facets discussed below (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Handford & Leithwood, 2013; Tschannen-Moran, 1997, 2000, 2014, 2017; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1997). However, it is important to note that trust in a superintendent's competence, reliability, benevolence, honesty, and openness occurs in a context that is substantially different from that of a principal. As a result, while establishing and maintaining trust is no less important than for principals, superintendents face distinctive challenges in earning and restoring trust.

Much of the research on trust in schools focuses on relational trust involving the principal, in particular on collegial trust between and among the principal and faculty members. In their study of teacher trust in district administration, Adams and Miskell note that "research on trust in district administration is scarce" (2016, p. 677). When the role of the superintendent is discussed, it is generally in the context of the collegial trust relationship between superintendents and

principals (Tschannen-Moran, 2014; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1997). Such collegial relationships are of critical importance, but they represent just a portion of the relationships that affect trust in a superintendent. There are two important elements of trust in the superintendent that merit consideration: first, that trust in the superintendent is judged by a much more diverse constituency than is the case with principals, and second, it is inevitable that superintendents will face, at some time, the challenge of recovering from broken trust involving one constituency or another.

Because of the highly public nature of their role, superintendents answer to a wide variety of constituencies including parents, faculty, support staff, students, principals, district-level administrators, employee organizations, board members and other elected officials, taxpayer groups, civic and service organizations, faith-based groups, organizations affiliated with political parties, advocacy groups, neighborhood associations, and major corporate employers. Many constituencies tend to have long memories, and do not easily overcome suspicions or forgive transgressions.

Many long-established constituencies also have memories that predate their current superintendent, and their perceptions of how the job is supposed to be carried out often differ from perceptions concerning best practices today. Inevitably, superintendents are bound to experience an ebb and flow in the measure of trust and credibility in the view of such diverse groups, many of which pursue competing interests. Earning trust at all times and with all constituencies is an impossibly high standard. We see it as a fact of professional life that every superintendent will at some time face the challenge of recovering from broken trust.

Given such varied groups to which a superintendent must answer, a superintendent's competence is often not necessarily attributable to one's expertise or training as an educator, but instead to one's acumen in actions such as correctly judging public sentiment, understanding and reconciling competing sources of power, managing conflict, engaging in symbolic actions of importance to stakeholders, or wielding political influence. Similarly, views of the superintendent's competence may be entirely based on a combination of the other traits associated with trust – benevolence, integrity, openness, and reliability – along with views of the superintendent's humility.

## **Literature Review**

Trust is critical to success at both the school and district levels. While its presence provides no guarantee of organizational success, its absence is likely to produce a host of problems. Chief among these is often a resistance to change initiatives, which can be seen in visible manifestations of suspicions of a leader's motives.

Megan Tschannen-Moran is widely recognized as a leading researcher on the subject of trust in relationships between stakeholders in the school community. She has described trust as involving five facets: benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, and competence, reflecting “a willingness to make oneself vulnerable to someone else in the belief that your interests or something that you care about will not be harmed” (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015, p. 68). She notes that, “If trust breaks down among any constituency, distrust can spread like a cancer, undermining academic performance and, ultimately, the tenure of instructional leaders” (2014, p. 251).

Scholarly work related to the phenomenon of trust in schools has been taking place for some time. In the early 2000s, Bryk and Schneider carried out an extensive study of Chicago

elementary schools. This research provided significant insights about the relationship between schools' academic performance and the levels of trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Schools that reported high levels of trust in 1994 were three times as likely to make improvements in reading and mathematics than those reporting trust low levels of trust.

Cosner (2009) conducted research involving 11 high school principals recognized by peers for their capabilities in building organizational capacity. This research identified specific strategies in which principals engage to strengthen interaction and interdependence among faculty and to increase collegial trust.

In research on trust in school leaders serving in high- and low-trust schools, (Handford, 2011; Handford & Leithwood, 2013), a measure of trust reflecting the construct developed by Bryk and Schneider (2002) was employed. In this research, principal competence was judged to be a critical factor, though other qualities, including leader integrity, were judged to distinguish high-trust settings from those low in trust.

Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015) found significant relationships among faculty trust and both collegial and instructional leadership, as well as in factors related to school climate. This study demonstrated that, absent a sufficient level of trust, the likely outcome will be leader ineffectiveness and an inability to achieve learning outcomes. To earn such a level of trust requires "more than good intentions; it takes a strong set of ethical principles and core values as well as the skills and knowledge to enact those values" (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015, p. 85).

The level of trust in a district's administration can hinder or help efforts to build capacity in an organization. Adams and Miskell (2016) sought to develop a measure of teacher trust in district administration and to examine the relationship between such trust and the organization's capacity to improve over time. Not only did this study yield evidence of such a relationship, but it also provided some indications that teacher trust in district administration may be at least as important as teacher trust in principals. Their research also provided support for the conclusion that district administrators can build trust through actions perceived by teachers as evidence of benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, and competence.

Change is an unavoidable fact of life for school superintendents, and a significant level of interdependence exists between an organization's capacity to successfully negotiate change and the degree of trust in the leader (Davidson & Hughes, Forthcoming, 2020). Often the challenges associated with managing change lead to conflict that not only limits progress but potentially also affects perceptions connected with purpose, process, and personal relationships. Even when addressed directly, reform initiatives originating from both within and outside the organization can dominate the time and attention of leaders, and such initiatives can leave school faculty feeling as if they are constantly being asked to undo or revise measures with which they have just gained some degree of proficiency. Those leaders who have gained recognition from their peers for exemplary leadership may be expected to provide helpful insights into their experiences regarding the formation of relational trust that could be instructive in designing learning experiences for practicing and aspiring superintendents.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Questions**

This study sought to address the following questions:

1. What roles in a school district are considered to be significant agents of trust?

2. How do superintendents describe their career experiences involving trust? What themes emerge from these experiences?
3. To what experiences do superintendents refer in explaining where they learned lessons having to do with trust?
4. Do superintendents express a responsibility to explicitly address the topic of trust in their communication with others?

## **Research Design**

This was a qualitative study involving a purposive sample of superintendents from a single state in the southwest U.S. Following the receipt of approval from the Institutional Review Board to conduct this research, participants were recruited from a pool of 22 superintendents who had received one of two statewide awards for ethical and effective leadership over a 17-year period of time. Upon receipt of written consent to participate, interviews were scheduled with the 12 individuals who could be reached and from whom consent was received. The researchers were unsuccessful in making contact with the remaining candidates for the study.

The study was conducted by carrying out phenomenological telephone interviews with participants. Participants were asked to take part in one interview of between 30-60 minutes. The structured interviews were designed to gain insights into leaders' lived experiences related to trust. Efforts to probe participants' responses sought to avoid theories or explanations of the phenomena of trust, but instead attempted to unearth the personal, lived experience of the phenomena recalled by each participant.

In addition to being university faculty, both investigators are experienced school superintendents, with thirty-four years of combined experience in this role (involving three districts in two states, set in small, medium, and large school districts). Given that these experiences have demonstrated the importance of trust in schools, topics related to trust comprise a primary focus of our research. As a result of our training, experiences, and ongoing research, part of the process of understanding the phenomenology of relational trust as experienced by the educational leaders who participated in this study involved acknowledging the lens through which we make meaning of such experiences. While it can be argued that "bracketing," i.e., setting one's own views aside, is not entirely feasible, we endeavored to be transparent and open to the participants' own interpretations of the phenomenon being studied.

Creswell describes phenomenological research as an approach "in which the researcher describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants" (2014, p. 14). Hein and Austin (2001) argued that there is no single best way to conduct a phenomenological study. The background and the goals that a researcher brings to any qualitative research are of critical importance. Moustakas (1994) wrote that, "Each research project holds its own integrity and establishes its own methods and procedures to facilitate the flow of the investigation and the collection of data" (p. 104).

## **Description of the study participants**

In keeping with the methodology employed in this study, the findings will come largely from the words of the participants themselves. The superintendents in this study were selected specifically because they had received statewide recognition from their peers across the state for ethical and effective leadership. Two-thirds of the participants had retired from the superintendency at the time the interviews were conducted. The sample included six female and six male participants.

Seven of the participants were in suburban districts at the time they received statewide recognition, four were in urban districts, and one was in a rural district. The enrollment of the districts represented ranged from 1,500 to over 60,000. All of the participants had spent at least three decades as educators. Even those who were still serving as superintendents were either eligible for retirement under the state's retirement system, or soon would be. Having reached this station in life, participants had reason to, and tended to look back on their careers with pride and a sense of fulfillment.

### **Interview protocol**

Both investigators conducted interviews with participants using a structured interview protocol. The interview questions were influenced by the researchers' own experiences in building trust and recovering from episodes of fractured trust, but they were designed to limit the amount of interviewer talk and to maximize the participants' comfort in sharing memories of lived experiences. Once drafted, the interview questions were field-tested with individuals who were not participants in the study.

After discussing background information on each participant, participants were informed that the focus would be on individual experiences of trust. The core of the interview included these prompts:

- Within a school district, whom do you view as the most critical agents of trust?
- Are there any particular experiences involving trust from your role as a superintendent that come to mind? What in particular stands out from this experience?
- Can you identify where you learned your most valuable lessons having to do with trust?
- Have you explicitly worked to help others whom you have supervised understand the importance of trust?

### **Coding and Analysis**

Following transcription of the audio files, the transcripts were formatted so as to be imported in a uniform manner into Microsoft Excel employing a methodology described by Ose (2016) to systematically and manually code all of the content (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Saldana, 2015). Each transcript was coded separately, and a code list was constructed consecutively through analysis of each transcript. After an initial review of all transcripts, the transcripts were again reviewed to verify the codes that were assigned. New codes were added as content was analyzed, with some codes ultimately being combined into a single code. Upon the completion of coding, all transcripts were combined into one worksheet, and this worksheet was exported to Microsoft Word, with data sorted by participant, the specific code, and the sequence in which the content was documented in the interview. A process of content analysis was then applied in order to logically organize and interpret the data.

## Findings

### Agents of trust

**Board-superintendent relationships.** When asked to identify the agents of trust within a school district, several participants spoke to the importance of the relationship between the superintendent and the governing board. As an example, Participant 18 asserted that,

*One of the biggest challenges that I think we have is building, establishing, and growing that trust with the board. Boards, by the nature of our society... are sometimes very distrustful. They come in with preconceived ideas about the bureaucracy and the leadership and are very critical of everyday actions.*

Maintaining effective working relationships with the board can be a daunting task, particularly when board members believe that they have been elected specifically for the purpose of being in an adversarial role with the superintendent and administration. Participant 17 recalled such an experience when a majority of the board saw their role in this light, and noted feeling compelled to inform the board up front that they would likely disagree on many issues. The superintendent described efforts to build trust with adversarial board members, including frequent communication and periodic lunch meetings.

Participant 3 also spoke of the importance of frequent Board-Superintendent communication:

*When it comes to superintendents and their boards, that is a different level of trust, in that at that point it's more about attempting to make sure that the board knows that you are keeping them informed, that you're not hiding things from them, that you're doing your best to address issues in a consistent and effective manner.*

Participant 3 spoke to the importance of tailoring communication strategies to the needs of each Board member:

*We need to treat board members equitably, not necessarily equally. By that I mean that we look at the individual board member and differentiate based on their need. We always communicate the same information, but, with one board member, they may want information in hard copy, and another wants a phone call.*

As another example of this same point about the need for awareness of the needs of all board members, Participant 5 recalled,

*With one board member, if any vehicle with any siren or light flashing shows up at one of the schools, she needed to be the first to know, and she was one of these that even before texting and social media, she would manage to find out. Another board member who didn't have that need to know would kind of be put off if you gave him that kind of detail. But that was up to me to know who needed what.*

Participant 3 stressed how important it is to issue responses to questions from individual board members to the entire board, and to make sure that Board members understand that this would be the process used with each request for information. This superintendent sees this approach as a way to build and sustain trust with the board, noting that it is important that board members feel they are receiving the information they need.

Participant 18 noted that a common misunderstanding on the part of new superintendents is the failure to realize that board development is a primary responsibility of the superintendent, and not just something that will happen on its own. Participant 18 noted that new superintendents often

*look at teacher development and principal development and those kinds of things, and they don't often think of the fact that one of the primary needs is to develop and grow your board.*

With respect to the challenge of superintendent-board communication, Participant 18 went on to assert that

*Board management is difficult, because as boards change, and, you know, if you have one new board member, the whole dynamic changes.*

When considering the agents of trust in a district, participants often spoke about the damage that can be done to a district's reputation should an individual as prominent as a board member engage in questionable behavior in public. Participant 7 commented that,

*We can cite examples of board members whose behavior made the news and reflected poorly on the district. Individual board members have the potential to do a lot of damage if they are not trustworthy.*

**The tone established by the superintendent.** Repeatedly, participants remarked on the critical role that superintendents play in creating trust in the organization. When the superintendent is trustworthy, and the superintendent sets the expectation that principals and other administrators must earn trust from teachers, parents, and students, trust in itself becomes a means to build organizational capacity. Participant 4 spoke of the importance of listening and exercising patience in order to build trust. Participant 5 spoke of the importance of having the power of reflection to learn from one's mistakes in creating an atmosphere of trust. Speaking of the importance of respectful relationships with staff, Participant 6 stated that trust is strengthened when

*You let people know that you care about and you honor what they have to say.* Participant 11 said that

*Superintendents must walk the talk so that the superintendent is trusted by all the stakeholders.*

Participant 3 noted that

*The superintendent is the individual that guides that trust, guides the culture of the organization.*

Trust increases when staff members believe that their voices count. Participant 3 described an approach taken to negotiations over compensation and benefits that is uncommon, particularly for larger districts – that of having the superintendent directly involved in negotiations with faculty and support staff.

When in the midst of implementing change initiatives, faculty members are more likely to be willing to risk failure if they have trust in leaders (Handford & Leithwood, 2013). Participant 17 remarked that,

*If your leadership is not seen as trustworthy, there will be questions about the direction that we are moving.*

It is common for superintendents to experience resistance to change initiatives from staff or parents, particularly if they feel their voices have gone unheard. Participant 20 related an experience when a major district-wide change initiative had been explored, with the final decision being dependent on a vote by parents. Many parents voiced their concern that the decision had already been made, and were skeptical that their objections would be taken into consideration. In the end, there was scant support for the proposed change, and the plans were scrapped. Parents who had expressed disbelief that their voices counted subsequently communicated to the superintendent that they did not realize “that you meant what you said.” Participant 20 referred to this as a lesson that

*It is important that you do what you say you are going to do. You might win over some people who weren't in your court.*

Many participants also spoke to the importance of superintendents being open, visible, and available. Anyone who has ever served in this or a similar role understands the numerous and varied demands in a position of this nature, and that there are only so many hours in the day to attend to such demands. Finding the proper balance between competing demands, while still attending to the trust-building work of being visible and available, is a constant struggle. Superintendent 17 spoke of the value of

*being accessible to one's cabinet and principals, and being open and prepared to meet their needs.*

Participants spoke of the particular importance of integrity when superintendents face adversity. One example that came to mind for Participant 17 had to do with dismissing principals. Participant 17 remarked that,

*You always want to preserve their dignity and their integrity, and be very factual about why you are not going to be recommending them to the board.*

Similarly, Participant 11 stated that, when it was necessary to terminate an individual's employment,

*It was done with dignity, respect and lots and lots of communication.*

Participants argued that empathy and respect can go a long way in the face of adversity. Speaking in the third person, Participant 4 stated,

*[The superintendent] can chew you up one side and down the other in such a nice way you thank [the superintendent] when you leave. You don't even know you've been scolded.*

Participant 18 stated,

*I can tell you that the relationships that you build over time with people are important. If you gain trust, when you ultimately have to do some difficult things with different staff - you know you either have to reassign or ultimately have to dismiss - I can tell you that without exception the trusting relationships that I had developed with those individuals over time made those conversations and the ultimate outcome achievable. I was able to do that because even in a bad situation they trusted in that relationship of trust that had been nurtured over time.*

One of the more damaging conflicts that many superintendents face is that of closing a school, as this can lead to a level of distrust that may never be overcome. Participant 20 spoke directly of the difficulties of maintaining or regaining trust in this circumstance, noting that, once the decision was made, there was not much to be done. The superintendent's approach was summarized as,

*I met with lots of people and listened, and said I would be upset too.*

As noted above, when leaders consistently act in a manner that reduces uncertainty for others, they are generally seen as being more reliable and dependable (Van Maele & Van Houtte, 2015). Speaking of the negative consequences of being seen as unreliable, Participant 18 stated that

*Inconsistency can be a huge challenge for leaders. Sometimes leaders get sidetracked, just constantly bouncing from one thing to another.*

Many educators have witnessed evidence of staff slow-walking a new initiative until they see if the leader is genuinely committed to it, or if a newer, better initiative will be announced at the next faculty meeting. Effective leaders maintain a disciplined focus (Davidson, 2015), finding a balance between the sometimes competing facets of openness and reliability.

Participants spoke of the unique challenges of large and small districts, along with the challenges of being new to a district vs. being a long-time veteran in a district. Participant 18 spoke of the importance of effective communication to enable stakeholders to understand the interrelationships in a large organization. Participant 7 noted that, coming from a large district,

*I have always said that If I know your name, you're either really good or really bad.*

Participants noted that visibility can be much more easily achieved in a smaller district. Participant 2 asserted that, in a relatively smaller district, it is easier for the superintendent to develop familiarity and trusting relationships. Participant 7 recalled,

*I have prided myself on getting into at least 500 classrooms a year.*

It is certainly feasible for superintendents to visit 500 classrooms in a year; in a large district with upwards of 5,000 classrooms, such a level of visibility would be unattainable. In smaller districts, Participant 3 stated that

*The smaller you are, the more intimate it becomes, and now you have staff members who are oftentimes fellow high school graduates with your board members or engaged with your board members socially, so it becomes much more granular, and there are many more areas where trust has to be maintained and where the trust bond has to be considered because of the fact that in a smaller setting, people know so much more about the individual.*

Participant 7 remarked that,

*In a large district, the superintendent's trustworthiness is going to come through their interactions with others and through their communication in print. In a large district, it is highly unlikely that most residents or employees will have any kind of relationship with the superintendent. Most people would probably not know the superintendent if they were in line with them in the grocery store.*

**The critical role of the principal.** In districts large and small, participants viewed the role of the principal as a critical one in developing and maintaining trust in the broader organization. Several also mentioned their work to develop in principals those competencies and traits that would “establish a culture of trust and ethical behavior” (quoting Participant 3). The most important step in developing such competencies and traits, as stated by Participants 6 and 22, involves modeling them.

The influence that principals have is attributable to their direct contact with the school community. Participant 18 said,

*[Principals] are the key because they're the messengers everyday. They have to be aware of community values and thoughts and strategic initiatives. They are the keepers of the trust with students and with the parents and teachers and with their school communities. They provide that link between the building principal and the superintendent; this has to be very strong and it is based on trust.*

The duties of a superintendent are such that their work often needs to be conducted behind closed doors and, on any given day, may involve contact with a relatively small number of individuals. In contrast, as a public figure in a very public place, a principal's demeanor is regularly on display. As a result, their competence (or lack of it) may be subject to the daily judgement of students, teachers, support staff, and parents. Speaking of the principalship, Participant 18 stated,

*Trust and credibility depend on competence in leadership. You have to understand teaching and learning, and you have to be able to understand strategic planning and change. Through principals, districts can leverage opportunities across the community.*

*Developing an open, honest, sincere communication style is essential. People need to see their principal as honest and reliable.*

Participant 7 stated,

*Principals are critical in perpetuating the district's culture and in building trust in the organization.*

**Where trust is learned and earned. Parental modeling.** Participants were asked to respond to the question, "Where do you think you learned or how did you learn about trust?" The following are examples of responses that pointed directly to parents and family:

*I learned from my parents teaching about being genuine.* (Participant 20)

*You learn your most valuable lessons having to do with trust from your family. My core values are deeply rooted in my upbringing, my parents, and my faith.* (Participant 22)

*I think it probably started back in my family.* (Superintendent 4)

*They were building trust and teaching you how to behave and treat people with respect and dignity.* (Participant 5)

*My mom was a single parent most of my childhood. My mom and two of her sisters lived in close proximity to one another. From them, I learned the importance of being purposeful, loyal, dedicated to family, supportive of one another, and willing to help others less fortunate.* (Participant 7)

*My mom always told me you need to do the best that you can and you need to give over 100 percent in everything you do. Trust came from my Mom and I have carried that through my life.* (Participant 17)

**Life lessons related to trust.** In addition to the influence of family, participants cited professional experiences that shaped their views regarding trust. In some cases, participants pointed to their experiences of the culture of the organization, or to

*a leader whose benevolence helped me to learn even more about trust* (Participant 22).

Participant 11 cited

*the teams of people I have worked with around me as a source of inspiration and accountability, as well as professional relationships which were based on treating people as they would want to be treated.*

Participant 18 spoke of the lessons taught by students during the early years of teaching:

*They can recognize whether your conduct is lip service or if you're truly genuine.*

Professional networks were also cited as sources of learning about the value of trust.

Participant 18 spoke of the value of

*interfacing with remarkable leaders across the state.*

Participant 11 said that,

*Where I really learned was while becoming involved with the professional association, and by networking with people who were not necessarily in my district.*

Other participants spoke of the value of mentors in shaping their attitudes regarding trust.

Participant 18 recalled an influential mentor who spoke about the importance of leadership and the responsibility that came with it. Participant 5 recalled a principal who served as a mentor. The principal needed an assistant, but, absent the funding for the position,

*He decided he was going to get one himself, and I started having a mentor pretty early in my career.*

Some professional experiences were less positive, but nonetheless shaped views regarding trust. Participant 3 recalled an earlier time when duplicitous behavior was observed in other district administrators. In their interactions with the superintendent, they signaled compliance and

support, but otherwise undermined or derided the superintendent's decisions. Participant 3 attributed this duplicity to the superintendent's lack of openness to other points of view, and Participant 3 vowed to not make the same mistake.

In some cases, participants recalled mistakes they had made as the source of valuable learning about relational trust. Participant 11 recalled being asked by a principal to alter a report, then having the superintendent discover that this had occurred. Participant 11 said,

*I thought to myself I will never ever, ever do that for someone again. I need to take the high road. When you own your mistake and learn from it, you show you are human and it's ok to fail forward as long as you own it and move forward with it.*

Participant 3 recalled learning, as a young administrator, that staff members could not necessarily always be trusted to follow through on actions to which they had agreed. This learning led to a realization that, while a nondirective approach might be warranted in some circumstances, other situations require a more directive approach. Tschannen-Moran writes, "There are dangers in both trusting too little and trusting too much" (2017, p. 16). Participant 7 observed that,

*Seasoning and experience help us to develop some perspective and appreciate that we're all human.*

**Supporting/Protecting employees.** Some participants recalled instances when trust was built through measures that were undertaken to support or protect employees who had made mistakes or who were subject to unjustified criticism. Speaking of a time when building administrators were under fire for the manner in which a situation had been addressed, Participant 7 described the steps that were taken to shield the individuals from unwarranted criticism and retribution. Participant 7 noted,

*You sometimes stick your neck out when you need to. It builds trust when employees know you'll stand up for them.*

Examples were also provided of casual, daily, respectful interactions that increased trust in the leader. Participant 6 spoke of the importance of equanimity in relationships with individuals in more and less prestigious positions, noting that all stakeholders are deserving of respect.

**Valuing dissent.** Participants pointed out the value of creating a culture where the expression of thoughtful dissent is an expected norm. Leaders who fail to foster such a norm inevitably create an unhealthy atmosphere in which disagreement is not eliminated, but is discouraged from being subject to honest consideration. Participant 18 observed, "At times you know, there are leaders - and we've all seen them - that lead in ways that are kind of an iron fist type of leadership and that cause people to distrust." Participant 3 approached this issue as follows:

*I think that trust goes back to the fact that you are an open listener as a leader. You are willing to take the criticism that will ultimately get to a better decision. We need to be willing to listen to criticism, to dissension, because ultimately if we don't, then we run the risk of losing trust. When stifled, dissension doesn't go away. It goes underground.*

Participant 2 spoke of the importance of maintaining a constructive relationship with the teacher's association:

*If we didn't agree on every issue, which we didn't, we were always able to sit down and talk and explain to each other and feel that "this is a person that I can trust as well"*

The issue of loyalty was also raised. Loyalty is a powerful and complex variable in leadership. There are variations of loyalty that can forge and strengthen trust, and competing loyalties can sometimes irreparably damage an otherwise effective working relationship. An expectation of blind loyalty can stifle disagreement and produce intellectual dishonesty.

Participants noted that, while it is reasonable to expect loyalty to the organization, insistence on loyalty to oneself inevitably discourages dissent and breeds distrust. Noted Participant 22,

*One of the leaders for which I worked viewed loyalty as a synonym for trust, and I don't necessarily agree with that view. I don't see loyalty and trust as the same thing.*

Loyalty to the organization can also mean being willing to voice unpleasant facts. Participant 5 spoke of a time when a serious health issue temporarily reduced this superintendent's inhibitions about using profanity in an administrative meeting; fortunately, an employee who was loyal to the organization as well as to the superintendent pulled the superintendent aside and advised that it was probably too soon to return to work. It was. Participant 5 recalled,

*That was the right thing, but we had that level of trust. No hard feelings. He was right. I was wrong.*

**Trust, easily broken, sometimes restored.** Trust is fragile and difficult to restore once broken. The restoration of trust "is an arduous process that requires effort and humility and may extend over a long period of time (Tschannen-Moran, 2017, p. 18). Every participant could recall a circumstance that involved overcoming distrust. All acknowledged that, given the varied roles that a superintendent must fulfill, and the diverse constituencies in a school district, there are many areas of potential vulnerability. Participant 4, with a long record of service in a large district, credited the ability to weather a period of seemingly unending community controversy to the deep well of trust that had been created over decades:

*I don't know how many could have survived that kind of hit if there hadn't been a foundation of trust and a record of success.*

Trust, said Participant 18,

*could fall apart in a second, so it's something that as a leader you have to hold on to.*

Participant 6's perspective was poetic:

*Trust is like trying to trying to pick up water and hold it in your hand.*

Participant 20 remarked that,

*It doesn't take much to lose trust but it takes a lot to gain trust.*

Noting the value of taking responsibility and demonstrating humility, Participant 3 stated,

*I think that the question of whether trust can be rebuilt depends upon the particular situation. When people see you are honest and you are willing to take a hit to make sure that you reestablish that relationship, I think that starts to help.*

The optimal level of trust that is warranted comes into play when trust is broken. Notes Tschannen-Moran, "Trust needs to be tempered by a willingness to confront and punish exploitive behavior" (2017, p. 16). Participants spoke of their approach of placing trust in building administrators to do the right thing until it was demonstrated that such trust was unwarranted. Participant 11 recalled the frustration of repeatedly working with the same administrators to ensure their compliance with student discipline policies to the point where the administrators were asked in exasperation, "What do you not understand?" Participant 11 observed,

*You want to trust them, but sometimes you get to where they are insubordinate or where maybe they don't get it or who knows, and you realize this is not changing. I have to be able to trust you that you are going to do the right thing.*

Participant 3 stated,

*Throughout my career, I have had situations where there are individuals that you believe you could trust, but then you would start to see them taking actions that would throw you under the bus, where they would tell you one thing, then ultimately go out and do another.*

Standing up for one's principles can erode trust with some, while increasing it with others. Participant 2 recalled a loss of trust when disciplinary action had to be taken involving an administrator. While the trust with that individual might never be restored, the superintendent's moral authority and level of trust increased because others saw the superintendent follow through on a difficult decision. When it comes to broken trust in such circumstances, said Participant 2,

*Sometimes you just have to ride it out.*

Participants also described instances in which the level of trust was damaged beyond repair, so that the only available option was to move on. Participant 22 described a circumstance when it was evident that a board member could not be trusted. Similarly, Participant 7 stated,

*When board members ask you to look the other way on student conduct with their child, when they ask you to hire their friend, I don't think it's a culture that I want to remain in.*

Participant 22 concluded,

*It's important to understand what leaders go through when trust is broken. I'm worried, candidly, about superintendents. It was really difficult for me because it's hard to recover from the loss of trust. It's very difficult to share your reasons for moving on when you can no longer trust critical people in your organization.*

## **Discussion**

The superintendents in this study described a wide variety of experiences related to trust that reveal that trust can indeed be earned through actions that are perceived as exhibiting benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, and competence. In many cases, the presence of these facets of trust, expressed in an attitude of sincere humility, provided a path forward in those instances when trust in the organization or the individual had been broken. For the participants, trust that had been earned over a long period of time helped them to weather the storms that many ultimately faced. Their practical examples could serve as rich conversation-starters for those involved with mentoring or preparing new leaders at any level.

New superintendents are sometimes unaware of the importance of relationship-building with the board. Since superintendents' careers have usually taken them from the classroom to the principalship to the superintendency, their familiarity with these roles may lead them to be more attentive to communication and relationship-building with internal constituents. Communicating effectively and building relationships with teachers and principals is essential to district leadership; however, as noted by the participants in this study, the development of relationships with the board is of critical importance. Perceptions of board-superintendent relationships by stakeholders inside and outside the organization can have a significant effect on trust in the organization as a whole.

The leaders who were the focus of this study were at the pinnacle of their careers at a time of deepening distrust in public schools. This distrust helped to produce accountability policies and free market reforms that, in many ways, provided validation of the public's distrust. It requires the work of exceptional teachers and leaders to reframe an unflattering label as a catalyst for positive change, to gain the trust of staff and parents, and to create a culture with essential norms including "persistence in the face of challenges, hard work to achieve desired ends, and honest performance appraisals" (Davidson, 2015, p. 402). The lessons from the leaders in this study can serve to illustrate how to navigate such challenges.

Effective school district leadership requires taking risks which may result in failure that can damage views of a superintendent's competence. One of the authors recalls a particular bond election to fund renovation of older schools. Despite having received voter support for several

measures prior to this effort, and despite following the same formula that had previously led to voter support, the measure failed after a local taxpayer group posted signs across the school district proclaiming, “It’s not for the kids.” This strategy, combined with published attacks on the superintendent’s character and motives, served to arouse distrust in the individual and the organization. Five years later, a ballot measure proposed by the same superintendent and for twice the amount of the previous election earned unanimous support from both major local political parties, and passed by a 2:1 margin. While not all leaders enjoy the gift of time to recover from a loss of trust, the acknowledgement of missteps, gestures of openness to those with opposing views, and the passage of time appear to be essential for recovering from the loss of trust, as is acceptance of the fact that all five traits will never be in evidence at all times for all stakeholders.

In addition to facing vulnerability on many sides on account of the wide array of constituencies to which they must answer, trust in the superintendent can also be tenuous due to constant exposure to risk through the many functions of a school district’s operations where mistakes may result in grave consequences. What of the kindergarten child who fell asleep at the back of the bus? Was the fact that the child was overlooked by the driver attributable to neglect on the part of the driver, who did not comply with existing protocol, or was it due to the superintendent’s failure to ensure the existence of such a protocol in the first place? What of the student found with a gun at the middle school? Was there a failure of leadership in taking appropriate steps to implement safety measures?

There is reason to believe that future research involving the reflections and lived experiences of superintendents could yield additional information that would be helpful in furthering the development of leaders in this and similar roles. In the present study, we intentionally sought out award-winning superintendents who had been recognized by peers for ethical and effective leadership. Participants in this study had generally spent long periods of time in a single school district, which meant that many had seen their careers develop in stable and healthy organizations. Most had retired from the superintendency at the time of this study. Few spoke of ever having to deal with pressure to leave their positions. We believe that there would be great value in discussion of their insights in leadership-preparation coursework.

It is reasonable to assume that a cross-section of superintendents in varied circumstances might provide different insights into the challenges of earning and keeping trust, particularly with respect to efforts to repair broken trust. Moreover, similar research involving early-career superintendents could provide a better understanding of pre-service training and on-the-job support that would be of benefit. Research involving the relationship between trust in the superintendent and other variables such as student achievement, trust in principals, faculty retention, and conflict resolution would help to strengthen understanding of the influence of trust in the superintendent.

Several helpful instruments for investigating trust in the school setting have been developed (Tschannen-Moran, n.d.). A worthwhile endeavor would involve the development of a tool for district self-reflection on issues of trust that could be used for self-study and strategic planning. Such a tool could bring the discussion of trust into the open and facilitate honest appraisals of actions that foster and diminish trust. Given the importance of the board-superintendent relationship, the field would also benefit from modifications to existing board self-evaluation instruments or development of a stand-alone tool for aiding the board in annually reflecting on actions that promote or erode trust in the organization.

## Conclusions

Our research adds insights to the existing body of scholarly work on trust in school leaders. Through this work, exemplary leaders give voice to how they define trust, life lessons related to trust, factors in their careers that have increased or diminished trust, and the critical role that trust plays in relationships throughout the organization.

Our system of public education faces challenges like never before, and trust in school officials will play a central role in determining how successfully schools meet those challenges. We expect our school leaders to anticipate future trends, improve student achievement, focus the collective will of stakeholders, manage change, resolve conflict, and keep students and staff safe, while doing so with resources that are not always up to the task. Leaders that will fare well in meeting these challenges will do so through approaches that build a shared sense of purpose (Fullan, 2008; Hughes & Davidson, Forthcoming, 2020; Marks & Louis, 1999; Papa et al., 2013; Wagner, 2001).

Organizations which have developed the resiliency to withstand the inevitable shocks and setbacks faced by all public institutions are able to do so in large part through confidence that is instilled through the credibility of key personnel. Participants in this study often referred to the benefits of being able to draw upon a reservoir of trust that had developed over a long period of time and with diverse constituencies. When adversities large and small arise, as is bound to happen, the degree of trust in the institution and its leaders will substantially affect the course taken as conflict unfolds.

Whatever words the participants in this study used to describe the ideal, they indicated that trust is a critical component of leadership, and that building trust should be the first order of business for a leader. Leaders who instill trust do so largely through creating respectful and open relationships that go well beyond an organization's hierarchy, through taking responsibility for errors, and through demonstrating humility in their interactions.

One of the authors recalls stepping into a special education leadership role where team members – against their objections – had previously been told that they were to conduct future IEP and other decision making meetings alone, based on an argument that this would be a more streamlined and efficient approach which would free up additional time for staff. Knowing the importance of openness and respect in helping this team to serve most capably, this leader listened to the concerns of staff, and never carried out the plan to have team members work in independent silos. Although this apparently simple decision was but a small step, it yielded great benefits in the team's capacity and in the level of perceived trust. Recognition of the fact that staff would do the right thing rather than take the easy path also served as affirmation of their professionalism. Trust is built (or lost) through countless decisions, large and small, that leaders make on a daily basis.

On any given day, superintendents carry out tasks that are both routine and out of the ordinary. While every leader would benefit from a "to do" list to ensure that critical tasks are attended to, the participants in this study did not appear to start and end their days with the word "trust" written on the palms of their hands as a reminder. Based on respect that was earned over long careers, and based on their reflections, these individuals had been invested for some time in the personal qualities and actions that lead to trust. Trust, in their experiences, was less about the things that they did, and more about the way that they did them.

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