



NEW KNOWLEDGE

Fostering Student-Teacher Trust

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THE BIG PICTURE

At both the national and local levels, education stakeholders continue to discuss, debate, and demand ways to “fix education.” Historically, at the policy level, most solutions or interventions proposed have been technical and academic in nature—less versus more testing, higher standards, graduation requirements, and so forth. However, in recent years, we’ve seen more schools investing in tools and strategies designed to strengthen their social “fabric”, such as school climate surveys and professional development that helps foster more inclusive and supportive learning environments.

Decades of research reveal that a supportive environment that fosters trust between teachers and their students is essential in establishing a supportive learning environment for students and, ultimately, improving our schools.

In his summary article for *Organizing Schools for Improvement*, Anthony S. Bryk, President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, stated this about the importance of a supportive environment for students: “All adults in a school community forge a climate that enables students to think of themselves as learners. At a minimum, improving schools establish a safe and orderly environment—the most basic prerequisite for learning. They endorse ambitious academic work coupled with support for each student. The combination allows students to believe in themselves, to persist, and ultimately to achieve.”

Under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), states are now required to include nonacademic “school quality or student success” indicators in their accountability plans—in addition to traditional indicators of academic success. This new requirement has created the opportunity for states to move beyond the use of multiple-choice bubbles and standardized test scores alone, and to measure the conditions that help children succeed—the non-academic factors essential to student growth and school-wide improvement.

While only a [handful of states are reportedly](#) including school climate surveys in their formal ESSA plans, several of the nation’s largest school districts, including Chicago, New York City, and California’s CORE districts, use school climate surveys that measure the quality of classroom relationships as part of their local accountability systems.

NEW UEI KNOWLEDGE

UChicago Impact is a nonprofit group within the University of Chicago’s Urban Education Institute that develops diagnostic tools and supports for schools grounded in decades of rigorous, foundational education research on what matters most for school improvement and student success. UChicago Impact has partnered directly with hundreds of schools across the nation on identifying areas of opportunity for improving school culture and climate and implementing data-informed improvement plans.

In 2015, UChicago Impact established a deep partnership with CPS’s James B. McPherson Elementary and worked with school leadership to repair trust between students and teachers. During the 2014-2015 school year, McPherson’s 5Essentials Survey results showed the school as “weak” in the area of Student-Teacher Trust, a component of the Supportive Environment Essential.

The 5Essentials Survey is a school culture and climate assessment that provides insight into a school’s strengths and areas for improvement on the five



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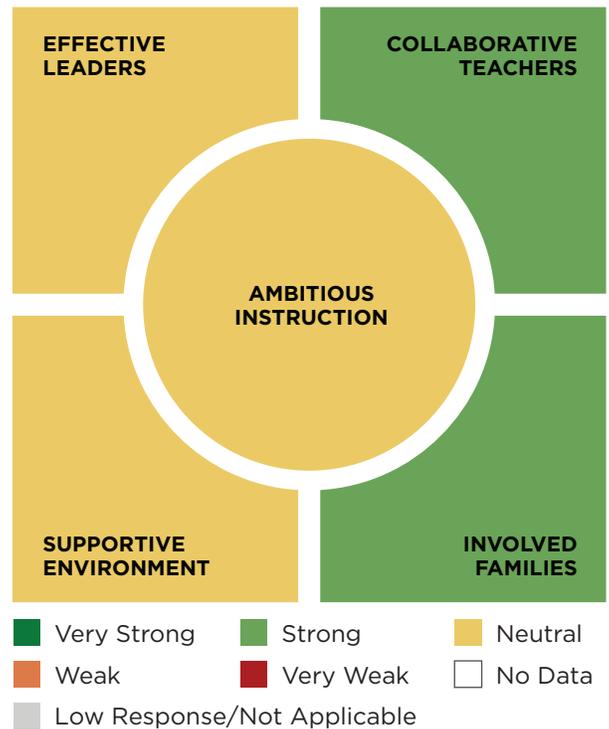
key factors research shows are predictive of school success: Effective Leaders, Collaborative Teachers, Involved Families, Supportive Environment, and Ambitious Instruction. Schools strong on at least three of these five “essential supports” were 10 times more likely to show substantial gains in student learning than schools weak on three or more essential supports.

McPherson scored a 27 in Student-Teacher Trust on a 1-99 scale—23 points below the CPS average. These results came as a surprise to the school leadership team. “We thought everything was a pretty picture,” said Marianne Turk, the school’s International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program coordinator. “We didn’t realize there were issues between students and their teachers.”

Initially, it was difficult for Turk and her team to talk with teachers about their relationships with students. Some teachers were defensive and struggled to process the students’ responses.

UChicago Impact worked closely with school leadership on instating clear social and academic expectations for students that emphasized open-mindedness, acceptance, gratitude, and classroom engagement. UChicago Impact also worked with McPherson’s school leadership on encouraging teachers to see students’ responses as areas of opportunity rather than personal attacks. They provided teachers with different strategies for repairing or strengthening relationships with students such as conducting restorative conversations with students, reflecting and communicating in a manner that helps teachers understand why a student misbehaved and helping students understand the impact of their behavior, before jumping to discipline.

Within just two years, the school’s 5Essentials results for Student-Teacher Trust improved 20 points — outpacing the improvement of four points for CPS overall.



DEVELOPMENTS TO WATCH

This year, the study “Loss of Institutional Trust Among Racial and Ethnic Minority Adolescents: A Consequence of Procedural Injustice and a Cause of Life-Span Outcomes,” published in *Child Development* by researchers at The University of Texas at Austin, Columbia University, and Stanford University, illuminated the **Trust Gap**, the gap between how much students of color trust their schools and teachers and how much their white peers trust their schools and teachers.

[The study shows](#) that Black and Hispanic students are less likely to trust their schools than their white counterparts, and that a lack of trust has serious implications for a student’s long-term academic success. Specifically, the study found that middle school students of color who lose trust in their teachers are less likely to attend college.

According to the report, the Trust Gap is widening due to the students’ perceptions of racial biases and unfair discipline practices. As David Yeager, one of the study’s coauthors and an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Texas at Austin put it, “Perceived bias and mistrust reinforce each other. And like a stone rolling down a hill that triggers an avalanche, the loss of trust could accumulate behavioral consequences over time...negatively stereotyped [students] may disengage, defy authorizes, underperform, and act out.”

Ultimately, the study highlights that “teachers can work more systematically to create a classroom climate that boosts the trust of students who may have to contend with discrimination.” This reinforces the role that teacher

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preparation programs can play in combatting unconscious bias and stereotyping. The University of Chicago Urban Teacher Education Program, for example, places a strong emphasis on “providing forums for intentional, critical, honest conversations about race, class, and unconscious bias” and “helping teacher candidates unlearn some of their socialized, preconceived notions.”

We’re also seeing schools across the country leverage partnerships with philanthropic organizations and nonprofits as a way to invest resources in establishing supportive environments and improve student-teacher relationships. For example, thanks to the support of The Chicago Public Education Fund, GROWCommunity, and The McKnight Foundation, multiple schools in Chicago and Minnesota are working with UChicago Impact on using 5Essentials Survey data and School Leadership Coaching support to improve their school’s climate and organization. And for many of the schools, improving student-teacher relationships is priority number one.

To download the University of Chicago Urban Education Institute’s full New Knowledge in Public Education Report, visit: <https://www.ueiknowledge.org/newknowledgereport>