BRYK, et al. (2010) - Relational Trust

Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu & Easton (2010)

Organizing Schools for Improvement
Lessons from Chicago

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(2010)

The University of Chicago Press Chicago and London

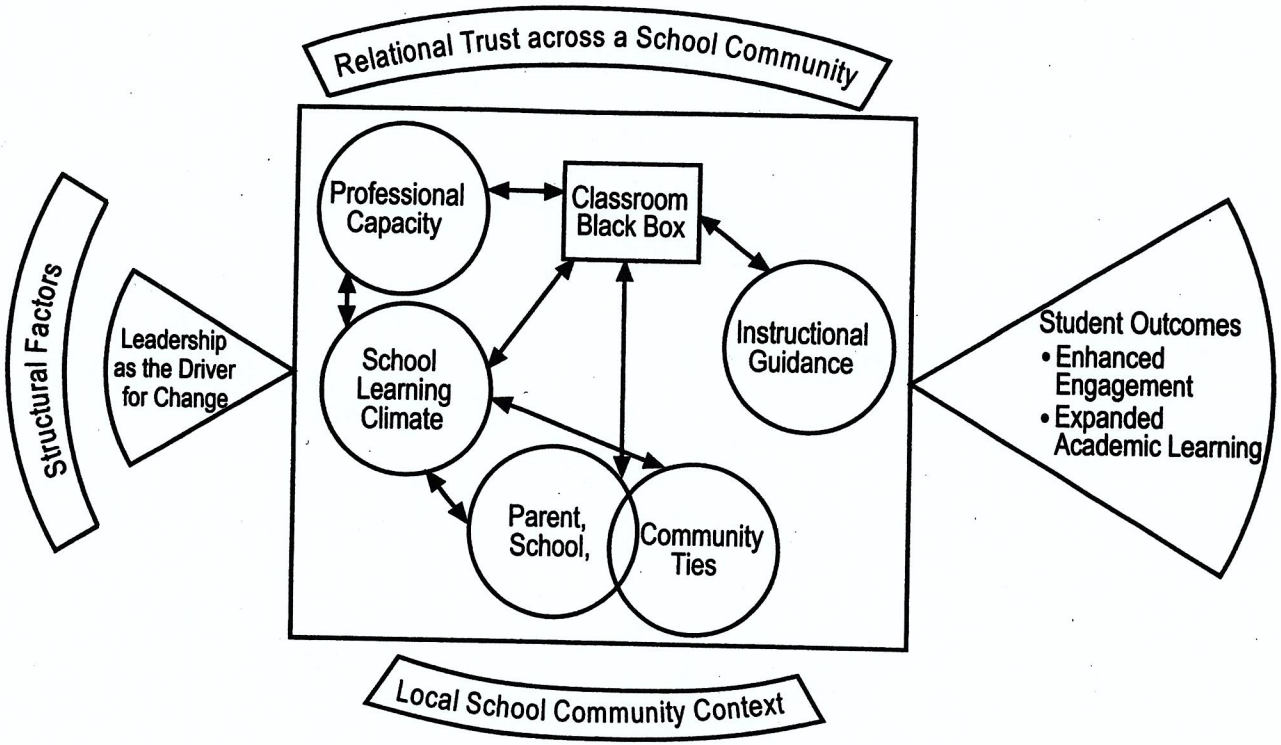

Figure 2.4. The larger school-community context for developing the essential supports for improvement.

together over several years to examine closely the results of standardized tests, their own internal assessments, and students' classroom work in order to determine the areas of strength and weakness in academic performance. These detailed analyses led to significant changes, including the adoption of a common framework for literacy instruction that included regular formative assessments of student progress that were used across all classrooms and grades.

Bonnie Whitmore combined an inclusive and a facilitative approach to leadership, with a sustained, strategic focus on instructional improvement. Whenever an individual teacher left, Principal Whitmore took care to recruit smart, committed individuals who cared about the Oak Meadows community and would augment the school's instructional improvement efforts. She also invested heavily in professional development, while simultaneously using this as an opportunity to nurture a collegial spirit among the faculty. Not surprisingly, teacher survey reports placed Hancock school at the 99th percentile on our overall school leadership indicator.

Over time, Whitmore sought to nurture a more distributed form of local school community leadership as individual teachers stepped forward to take responsibility for various projects, and parent and community members did so as well. This pluralized leadership greatly enhanced the overall human and social resources across the school community to support improvement—whatever the next task might be. As Whitmore explained, "I can't be the leader of everything, and there are leaders within the school, people with strengths and talents. As the overall leader, part of my job is to help these other leaders emerge."

CHAPTER 5 TRUST, SIZE, AND STABILITY: KEY ENABLERS

We found in chapters 3 and 4 that strong local school leaders working in tandem with parents and faculty can advance systemic changes in the organizational life of their school, resulting in improvements in student learning. Although specific details may vary greatly from school to school, such organizational improvement will likely entail a combination of activities aimed at strengthening ties to parents and local communities, enabling the professional capabilities of a school's faculty, nurturing a more student-centered learning environment, and enhancing the technical core of instruction with new tools, materials, and instructional routines.

In this chapter we probe more deeply into the nature of the relational dynamics that make all of this possible. We begin by summarizing the key elements, identified in previous research, that form relational trust within a school community; then we discuss how the presence of this trust in turn enables fundamental change. Subsequently, we consider how certain structural features in the organization of schools act to facilitate such change. Specifically, we consider how school size and enrollment stability may operate both to enhance trust and to influence directly the development of essential supports for school improvement.

Relational Trust as a Social Resource for School Improvement

Relationships are the lifeblood of activity in a school community.[1] The patterns of exchanges established here and the meanings that individuals draw from these interactions can have profound consequences on the operation of schools, especially in times that call for change.

Micro = Classroom Level
School Level

The Microdynamics of Trust

Embedded within all the social exchanges in school communities is an interrelated set of interdependencies. This observation is key to understanding the significant function served by relational trust in school improvement. Regardless of how much formal power attaches to any given role in a school community, all participants remain dependent on others to achieve desired outcomes and feel efficacious about their efforts. These structural dependencies create a sense of vulnerability for all involved. This dynamic plays out within each of the major sets of adult roles within a school community—the school principal with teachers, teachers with one another, and school professionals with parents. All parties in these role sets maintain an understanding of their personal obligations and hold some expectations about the obligations of the "other." These understandings and expectations form the basis for judging the actual social exchanges that occur within each role set.

As individuals go about their everyday lives in schools, they are constantly engaged in a process of discerning the intentions embedded in the actions of others. These discernments take into account the history of interactions that have previously occurred between the parties. In the absence of prior interpersonal contact, participants may initially rely on the general reputation of the other party and also on ascriptive similarities—for example, commonalities in terms of race, gender, age, religion, or upbringing. The actual process of making trust discernments fuses several considerations, including the likelihood of achieving instrumental outcomes and the ability to influence the processes that directly affect these outcomes; psychic concerns about advancing one's sense of status, self-esteem, and efficacy; and ethical considerations about "doing right by children."

At the most basic level, relational trust is grounded in social respect. Key in this regard are the conversations that occur within a school community. Respectful exchanges are marked by a genuine sense of listening to what each person has to say, and in some fashion taking this into account in subsequent actions. Even when people disagree, individuals feel that the value of their opinions has been recognized. Such social exchanges foster a sense of connectedness among participants and promote affiliation with the larger institutional context.

Personal regard represents a second important criterion operating in trust discernments. Social encounters in the realm of schooling are more intimate and sustained than those typically found in most other modern

institutions. Powerful interpersonal bonds can form when members of the school community sense that others really care about them. A key practice in this regard is participants' willingness to extend themselves beyond what is formally required by a job definition or a union contract. "Going the extra mile" for another person may take many different forms, such as a teacher's staying after school to work with a colleague or parent, or a principal's taking a personal interest in a staff member's career development or family situation. Actions such as these can be deeply meaningful for the parties involved and forge strong social ties between them.

Third, discernments about role competence also constitute a critical concern. Each participant in a school community assesses the likelihood of attaining desired outcomes when interacting with others. Quite simply, do colleagues have the knowledge, skill, and/or technical capacity to deliver on their intentions and promises?

Finally, perceptions about personal integrity shape trust discernments as well. At a basic level, we ask whether others can be trusted to keep their word. Judgments about reliability—aligning "the walk" with "the talk"—are essential to trusting another. At a more fundamental level, we seek to discern whether a moral-ethical perspective guides the activity of others: Do I see their behavior as really being about the children, their education and welfare?

In short, relational trust is forged in day-to-day social exchanges. Through their actions, school participants articulate their sense of obligation toward others, and others in turn come to discern the intentionality enacted here. Trust grows over time through exchanges in which the expectations held for others are validated by actions. Even simple interactions, if successful, can enhance capacities for more complex subsequent actions. In this regard, increasing trust and productive organizational changes reciprocate each other.

Macro-Organizational Consequences: How Trust Supports School Improvement

Relational trust within a school community affords resources for improvement in three distinct ways. First and most generally, broad teacher and parent buy-in on reform efforts occurs more readily in schools with strong relational trust. Regardless of which of the essential supports that local leaders might emphasize (enhancing parent outreach, professional capacity building, improving the quality of the student learning environment, or the instructional guidance system), trust facilitates the initiation of

these improvement efforts. This feature is especially significant in times that call for major structural change, as was the case in the Chicago Public Schools throughout the 1990s.

Second, relational trust creates a motivating force for taking up the difficult work of school reform. Most teachers work hard, doing the best they can for as many students as they can. Reform, however, typically asks teachers to take on extra work as they engage with colleagues in planning, implementing, and evaluating school improvement initiatives. Similarly, it asks teachers to confront conflict, as this commonly occurs in organizational change processes. From a purely self-interested point of view, it would seem quite reasonable for teachers to ask, Why should we do this? A context characterized by high relational trust provides an answer. In the end, trusting that colleagues share a belief that "reform is the right thing to do" can provide a powerful moral catalyst for action.

Third, reform initiatives are more likely to be deeply engaged by individual teachers and to diffuse broadly across the school when relational trust is strong. At the individual level, relational trust reduces the risk associated with change. When school professionals trust one another and feel supported by parents, they feel safe to experiment with new practices in the classroom and to launch initiatives for reaching out to parents. Similarly, relational trust facilitates the social exchanges among school professionals as they seek to learn from one another in the trial-and-error phase of implementing new practices. To be able to talk honestly with colleagues about "what's working, what's not" means exposing one's ignorance and making oneself vulnerable. Absent trust, genuine conversations of this sort remain unlikely.

We note that this concept of social learning, along with efforts to enhance collective responsibility among a school's faculty for improving student learning, forms the core functional and normative elements that constitute a school-based professional community, as introduced in chapter 2.[2] In essence, trust functions as the social glue necessary for this work of school reform to coalesce and be maintained.

In pulling this all together, it is important to recognize that relational trust among the adults in a school community does not directly affect student learning. Rather, it creates the basic social fabric within which school professionals, parents, and community leaders can initiate and sustain efforts at building the essential supports for school improvement. In short, trust facilitates core organizational change processes that instrumentally contribute to improving academic productivity.

Measuring Relational Trust

The conceptualization of relational trust, summarized above, evolved during our longitudinal research. The instrumentation for measuring trust evolved in tandem with this theory development. Our measure-development effort was also informed by direct school observations and the analysis of results from earlier attempts at measuring this concept. Were we launching this research anew today, we would ask each key participant (the school principal, teachers, and/or parents) about the judgments that they make regarding one another. In the context of this study, however, we are limited to teachers' reports about their discernments of other teachers in the school, their principal, and parents. Specifically, teachers were asked a series of survey questions as to whether respect, personal regard, integrity, and competence in execution of basic role responsibilities characterized each role set of which they were a part. In 1991, we had a simple omnibus measure consisting of 10 relatively general items about role relations within the school community. By 1997, this had expanded to three distinct and highly reliable measures, based on a total of 27 survey items that focused separately on teacher-teacher trust, teacher-principal trust, and teacher-parent trust. (For further details on the 1991, 1994, and 1997 measures, see appendix C.) Subsequently, these measures were cross-validated against direct field observations.[3] Based on relatively brief visits to schools, independent observers have described palpable differences in the quality of day-to-day social exchanges occurring in schools classified in the top versus the bottom quartile on these measures.

Evidence Linking Relational Trust to Improvements in the Essential Supports

In theory, the base level of trust at any given time point conditions a school's capacity to undertake new reform initiatives. In addition, we have argued that a reciprocal dynamic operates between relational trust and the processes of school change. "Small wins" at school improvement help expand relational trust, thereby creating an enlarged capacity to undertake more complex changes in the future. Assuming that subsequent efforts are also successful, this should further enlarge the social resources of the school community for the next round of work. In short, the processes of school improvement and relational trust development occur together over extended time periods and in a real sense fuel each other.

Analytic approach. Consonant with this theoretical perspective, we would expect to find improvements over time in our indicators of the essential supports in school communities where the base level of relational trust is reported as relatively high. Conversely, improvements in the essential supports should be very unlikely in contexts that begin reform with a weak trust among the adult members of the school community. This observation directs us toward examining the linkages, if any, between the reported *base level of relational trust* at any given point and *subsequent changes in the essential support indicators* during the next period. Similarly, if a reciprocal dynamic operates between relational trust and school improvement, as suggested above, we would also expect to find that changes in these two domains occur in tandem with each other. This observation directs us then to examine possible linkages between *changes in relational trust* measures and *changes in the essential supports* indicators over time.

Specifically, we posed an array of analytic models similar to those used in chapter 4, where we examined the effects of school leadership. These models allowed us to assess the effects of the base level of trust in 1991 on changes from 1991 to 1994 in teachers' work orientation, outreach to parents, and reports about school safety and order. They also allowed us to examine the link between *changes in relational trust* over time (1991 to 1994) and changes over this same period in these three core organizational indicators. To extend and cross-validate these findings, we then replicated these analyses using changes in the organizational indicators from 1994 and 1997 as the outcomes to be explained. In addition, we were able to analyze changes in the curriculum alignment indicator during this period.[4]

As in chapter 4, we controlled for various aspects of school context, including school racial composition and the social class of the local neighborhood.[5] We also controlled for school size and enrollment stability. As detailed in the next section, these two structural features may both facilitate the development of trust and directly affect the development of the essential supports. By including both variables in these analyses, we were able to estimate trust effects net of these structural conditions.

Effects of the base level of trust on school improvement. Figure 5.1 documents substantial differences in school improvement associated with relational trust. Essential supports were more likely to improve between 1991 and 1994 and again between 1994 and 1997 in schools that began each period with a strong base of relational trust. In contrast, schools lacking such social resources found the task of improvement much more difficult.

Specifically, we found strong effects for the base level of relational

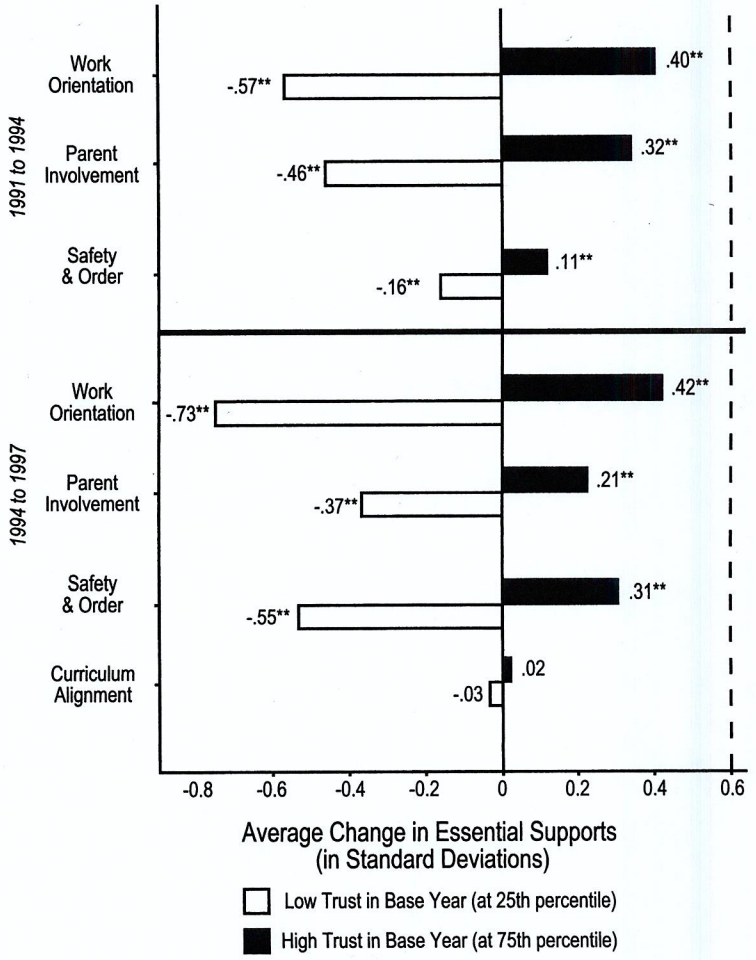

Figure 5.1. Net effect of the base level of relational trust on improvements in the essential supports. Note: Asterisks denote relationships significant at $p < .01$.

trust on subsequent improvements in work orientation from 1991 to 1994. Those schools that were at the 75th percentile on relational trust in 1991 improved their measure of work orientation (teachers' embrace of innovation and commitment to the school) by 0.40 standard deviations (SD) in 1994 (black bar on the graph). At the same time, schools that were at the 25th percentile on relational trust in 1991 declined in work orientation by 0.57 SD (white bar) by 1994. This means that there was a difference of 0.97 SD in the measure of work orientation three years later between schools beginning reform with high versus low trust.

The comparable effect on changes in parent involvement was 0.78 SD, and for safety and order it was 0.27 SD. Similar large effects appear for the period between 1994 and 1997, where respective SD differences of 1.15, 0.58, and 0.86 were recorded. The only exception to this pattern was for the curriculum alignment indicator, where the estimated effects for improvements in the period 1994 through 1997 were small and insignificant.

To illustrate the substantive magnitude of these relationships, we developed several examples of the organizational changes predicted based on the results presented in figure 5.1. Specifically, we computed the effects of the base level of relational trust on subsequent developments in the essential supports for two different schools. We assumed that both schools were average on their school compositional measures, the same with regard to size and stability, and at the median level of each respective essential support indicator in the base year (1991 or 1994). We allowed just one significant difference between them: the first school had a relatively low level of trust in the base year (at the 25th percentile of the Chicago school distribution), while the other was fairly high on trust (at the 75th percentile). Given the results of our analyses, how much would these two schools diverge on each essential support three years later?

Figure 5.2 documents quite large effects. Consider, for example, the effects on changes in work orientation. Our model predicts that the school with high relational trust in 1991 would move from the 50th percentile in the Chicago distribution to the 70th percentile on work orientation by 1994. In contrast, the first school, which was comparable in all regards except for a weak base of trust in 1991, would have dropped from the 50th percentile to the 33rd percentile over the same period. For the 1994 to 1997 period, the projected differences were even greater, the 75th versus the 27th percentile. Although the projected effects are somewhat smaller for changes in parent involvement and safety and order, they are still striking, with differences exceeding 25 percentile points in three of the four cases.

Evidence of a reciprocal dynamic between trust development and school improvement. Figure 5.3 summarizes our results concerning concurrent changes over time in trust and in the essential support indicators.[6] Each bar in the figure displays the degree to which changes in trust levels align with changes in the core organizational indicators, even after controlling for the base state of trust in the school, the base state of the respective organizational indicator, and other school-level background characteristics. For example, consider the changes in parent involvement from 1991 to 1994.

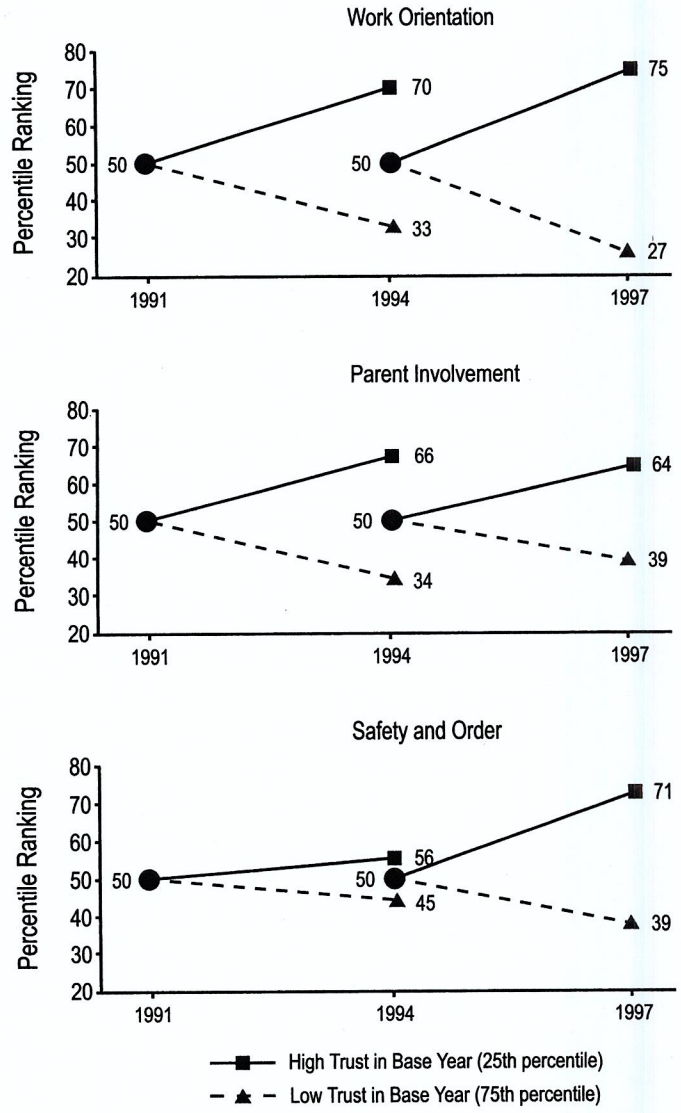

Figure 5.2. Projected effects of the base level of relational trust on improvements in the essential supports.

The difference between schools with strengthening trust over this period (at the 75th percentile in terms of observed change in trust) and those where trust is atrophying (at the 25th percentile in the change distribution) aligns with a corresponding change in parent involvement of 0.84 SD. The comparable effects on changes in work orientation and safety and

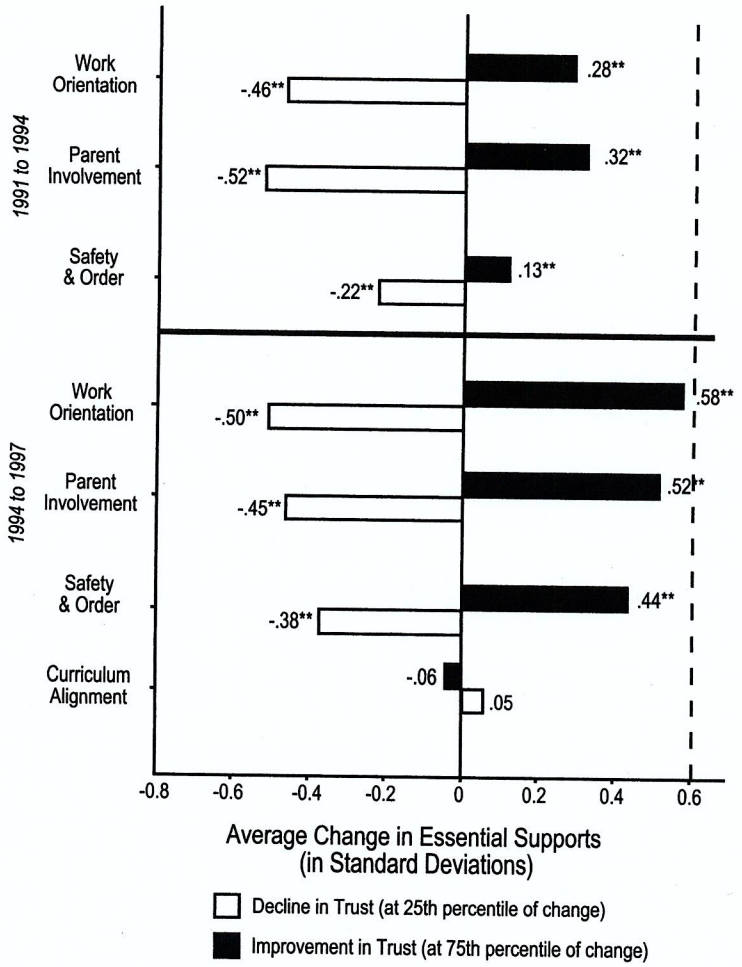

Figure 5.3. A reciprocal association: changes in trust and the essential supports over time. Note: Solid black and white bars represent relationships significant at $p < .01$.

order over the same period are 0.74 and 0.35 SD, respectively. Moreover, all three of these associations are substantially greater for the 1994 to 1997 period (1.08, 0.97, and 0.82 SDs, respectively).

In general, we see that as trust grew in schools so did improvements in teachers' work orientation, the school's engagement with parents, and the sense of safety and order experienced by students. And the opposite was also true. Schools with deteriorating trust experienced significant declines in these three core indicators of organizational functioning. The only exception to this overall pattern occurred with the curriculum alignment indicator, where no change relationship was found.

Pulling It All Together: The Influences of Trust on School Improvement

These results build on and extend the overall pattern of evidence that we have been developing over the previous several chapters. They further advance the empirical warrant for our overall account of the influence of school and community on student engagement and academic learning. We have seen that strengthening the core organizational subsystems of a school is key to improving its academic productivity. We now also know that the state of relational trust in the school community conditions the school's capacity to enhance the functioning of these core organizational subsystems. Presumably, then, schools that initiate reform with weak relational trust and weak organizational subsystems are doubly challenged. Much change is needed in these contexts in order to effect desired improvement in student engagement and learning, but few social resources exist to fuel this. We will return to this theme in chapter 6, where we extend our examination to consider the social capital in the community surrounding each school and the influence that this has on the processes of school improvement. Before proceeding there, however, we first consider how two key structural features of school communities may differentiate the dynamics of school improvement as well.

Structural Factors Affecting Organizational Improvements

We theorized in chapter 2 that school size and the stability of the student-parent group also affect a school's capacity to improve. Previous research suggests that both of these factors influence the formation and maintenance of relational trust, and that both may also have a direct influence on the development of some essential supports.[7] Figure 5.4 illustrates these hypothesized relationships.

Benefits of Small School Size

Early studies by the Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) suggested that school size acts as a facilitating factor for improvement.[8] These CCSR findings are consistent with a larger body of evidence about the positive impact of small school size on teachers' work satisfaction, student engagement in learning, and the efficacy of school change efforts.[9] More