

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A nationwide study on school district and stakeholder trust, as seen by public school leaders

From December 2014 through April 2015, 405 public education leaders (403 from across the United States and two from Canada) took part in an online research study examining the complex issue of trust between a school district and the stakeholder groups that are most important to the district's success.

The study was created by Patron Insight, Inc., Stilwell, Kansas. It was distributed to the members of the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) and the National School Boards Association (NSBA), in addition to being made available through Patron Insight's own e-newsletter.

This study was the outgrowth of research work completed by Patron Insight since 1992 for individual school districts.

In that work, a link was discovered between targeting communications to subjects of most interest to the "typical" resident – meaning everyone from the most passionate supporter to the harshest critic – and building a strong connection for the district with all stakeholder groups. These findings led to the creation of the Patron Information Pyramid™, which is a tool that can serve as a starting point for setting school district communication priorities.

Whereas the Patron Information Pyramid was based on the findings from "typical" school district patrons, The Trust Project covered much of the same ground – but from the perspective of leaders in public education.

For example:

- *Which stakeholder groups do public education leaders believe are the most important, in terms of those groups having trust in the school district? What is the current level of trust of the district among various stakeholder groups?*
- *For stakeholder groups where school district leaders believe the trust is strong, what evidence do they have to support those views?*
- *What concrete steps have been taken by the school district to engender trust?*
- *Is trust growing, receding or remaining stable?*
- *And, finally, what can school districts teach each other about building trust?*

Who participated in the study?

Almost all (98%) of the respondents were from K-12 school districts. They identified those districts as being "rural" (39%), "suburban" (38%), "urban" (11%), "county-wide/varied geographically" (9%) and "exurban" (2%).

Two-thirds of the respondents work in school districts that have 7,500 or fewer students, although all sizes were represented in the study (including seven participants from districts with more than 150,000 students). More than nine out of 10 participants said that at least 71% of the school-age children within their boundaries attend a district school.

Close to half (47%) of the participants said their student population was "staying the same," while 27% said it was "growing" and 26% said it was "declining."

The participants' Free and Reduced Lunch percentages were led by 26% to 40% and 41% to 55% (22% of the participants each).

The most frequent job titles of research participants were "Director of Communications/Public Relations/Community Relations" (34%), "School Board Officer" (23%), "School Board Member" (22%) and "Superintendent" (11%).



Which stakeholder group's trust is considered most important to the success of the school district?

Research participants were asked to rank order seven different stakeholder groups, based on how important having that group's trust was to the district's success.

Using a weighted scale to analyze the answers, the three "internal" stakeholder groups occupied the top three spots in the rank order. The results were:

1. Current District Parents – 6.24 on a 7.00 scale
2. Staff Members – 5.87
3. Current Students – 4.86
4. Business And Community Leaders – 3.63
5. Non-Parent Patrons – 3.34
6. Local Government Leaders (state legislators, county board, county commission, etc.) – 2.41
7. Local Media Representatives – 1.89



How much does each of these stakeholder groups actually trust the school district?

Using a scale of 10 ("completely trusting relationship") to 1 ("a complete lack of trust") participants were asked to rate the current level of trust of the district by these same stakeholder groups.

Again, using a weighted scale, the results were as follows (shown in rank order from the group with the highest level of trust down to the group with the lowest level):



1. Current Students – 7.55 on a 10.00 scale
2. Current District Parents – 7.23
3. Business And Community Leaders – 7.11
4. Local Media Representatives – 7.00
5. Local Government Leaders (state legislators, county board, county commission, etc.) – 6.87
6. Staff Members – 6.86
7. Non-Parent Patrons – 6.14

Remembering that the mid-point on a scale from 10 to 1 is 5.50, this means that research participants believe there is an above average level of trust of the school district by all seven stakeholder groups.

How do the scores on "importance of having the trust of a specific stakeholder group" compare with the results for "current level of trust of the school district by that same stakeholder group?"

The results reveal a modestly higher level of trust of the district than is deemed necessary for the Current Student and the Local Media Representatives stakeholder groups, and a much lower level of trust (as compared to the stated importance of having that group's trust) for Staff Members.

Stakeholder group	Rank order of the <u>importance</u> of a trusting relationship with this stakeholder group	Rank order of the <u>current level of trust</u> of the district by this stakeholder group
Current District Parents	1	2
Staff Members	2	6
Current Students	3	1
Business And Community Leaders	4	3
Non-Parent Patrons	5	7
Local Government Leaders	6	5
Local Media Representatives	7	4

How is the level of trust of the district changing?

For five of the seven stakeholder groups, respondents to the study reported that the level of trust of the district had “stayed about the same” over the past year. The two exceptions were Current District Parents and Staff Members.

For Current District Parents, 48% of the participants said that the level of trust was either “Significantly” or “Somewhat improved,” while 42% said it had “Stayed about the same.”

In the case of Staff Members, 43% selected one of the two “Improved” options, compared to 37% for “Stayed about the same.”

In all seven stakeholder groups, the combined percentage for the two “Diminished” responses was a distant third.



What is the evidence to support a claim that a stakeholder group has a high level of trust of the district?

Respondents who said that a stakeholder group’s level of trust was a 7 or higher (on a scale where 10 is the highest) were asked to provide “evidence, examples or recent experiences” to support that score.

The reported evidence was divided into two separate groups for analysis.



Tangible, or measurable, evidence was the term used to define those proof points that were statistical in nature, or that suggested that they could be statistical. Some examples were data from research surveys that had been completed at least twice (so that changes could be seen), a change in the percentage of parent participation in Parent/Teacher conferences and the passage of a ballot issue.

Intangible, or anecdotal, evidence is drawn from the respondent’s perception. For example, stating that “Our schools are happy places,” sharing perceptions about the positive quality of relationships (“Our reporter trusts me.”) and any non-statistical judgment of the “mood” on social media. If a statement of evidence could be preceded by a phrase such as “I think,” “I believe,” “I feel” or “I know,” it is most likely Intangible/anecdotal evidence.

How much of the evidence was Tangible/measurable versus Intangible/ anecdotal?

The three stakeholder groups whose trust of the district was considered by the respondents to be most important to the district’s success had the three highest percentages of Intangible/anecdotal evidence. Specifically:

Stakeholder group	Tangible evidence of trust	Intangible evidence of trust
Local Government Leaders	68%	32%
Non-parent Patrons	66%	34%
Business and Community Leaders	63%	37%
Local Media Representatives	60%	40%
Current District Parents	54%	46%
Current Students	52%	48%
Staff Members	50%	50%

What trust-building strategies have been most successful in the last year, and what strategies are planned for the future?



The answers to both of these questions are nearly identical, as the strategies that were judged by respondents to have been effective in the last year are going to continue (or be expanded) during the coming year. Those strategies (as reported for the past year) were:

- Improved two-way communication with key stakeholders and increased/enhanced communication channels (e.g., expanded social media presence).
- Increased stakeholder outreach and engagement through open forums, focus groups, surveys and development of community committees.
- The presence of new and/or stronger leadership that is more visible around the community and within the district.
- A stronger commitment by leadership to be more transparent and open, and to follow through on initiatives (with evidence that that has taken place).
- Making it a practice to include key stakeholders in the entire Strategic Planning process and long-term planning.

What was learned from The Trust Project?

The key overall findings were as follows:

1. Trust cannot be built or sustained through any one – perhaps not yet identified – strategy or tactic. Trust-building requires meeting stakeholders on their terms, doing so consistently and demonstrating the patience necessary to realize the results.
2. There is a growing awareness of the significant role of those in leadership positions in building trust, not just by doing their jobs well, but by also taking a more active role in furthering the district's brand. And this role is not limited to the Superintendent, but extends throughout the Cabinet, the Board of Education and Building Principals; all types of school district leaders play a critical, day-in and day-out role in trust building.
3. Staff Member trust, and the impact it has on the vitality of the school district, is most concerning. To develop the most accurate picture of trust of the district among Staff Members, however, will require an improved focus on Tangible/measurable evidence; this is essential information for trust-building plans with this stakeholder group.
4. The perception that trust of the school district is above average for all seven stakeholder groups – and that there is almost no variation in that perception, based on the district or the respondent's demographic factors – is an encouraging result. What makes these findings most valid is that nearly all respondents had at least one group where trust was a concern; this means that trust is always top of mind.
5. The significant reliance on Intangible/anecdotal evidence to document perceived high levels of trust is worrisome, however. The variability of perception from one person to another makes it difficult to get a true assessment using such evidence. Employing more Tangible/measurable evaluation processes would offer a higher degree of confidence in the evaluation of the level of trust, allowing for the deployment of the most effective trust-building strategies.



www.patroninsight.com

For more information, please contact
Ken DeSieghardt, CEO/Partner,
816-225-0668 (direct) or
ken@patroninsight.com.



Patron Insight, Inc.
19733 Birch Street
Stilwell, KS 66085
913-814-7626
www.patroninsight.com

Special thanks to:

