

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

INTRODUCTION: The birth of The Trust Project

Since 1992, Patron Insight, Inc., Stilwell, Kansas, has worked alongside school districts in 11 states (to date), using research techniques to unearth the opinions of what we have come to call “typical” members of a stakeholder group.

A “typical” member of a group is the amalgamation of the passionate advocates, the dedicated critics, and the very large group of episodically interested people whose place exists somewhere between the two extremes. Using such terminology makes it clear that our goal is not to catalogue the opinions of those who already speak up, but to discern the views of a true cross-section of residents, staff, parents or whatever the stakeholder group may be.

The passionate members of any stakeholder group often get the attention of a school district, either because of the frequency of their comments, the “volume” with which their ideas are delivered, or a combination of the two.

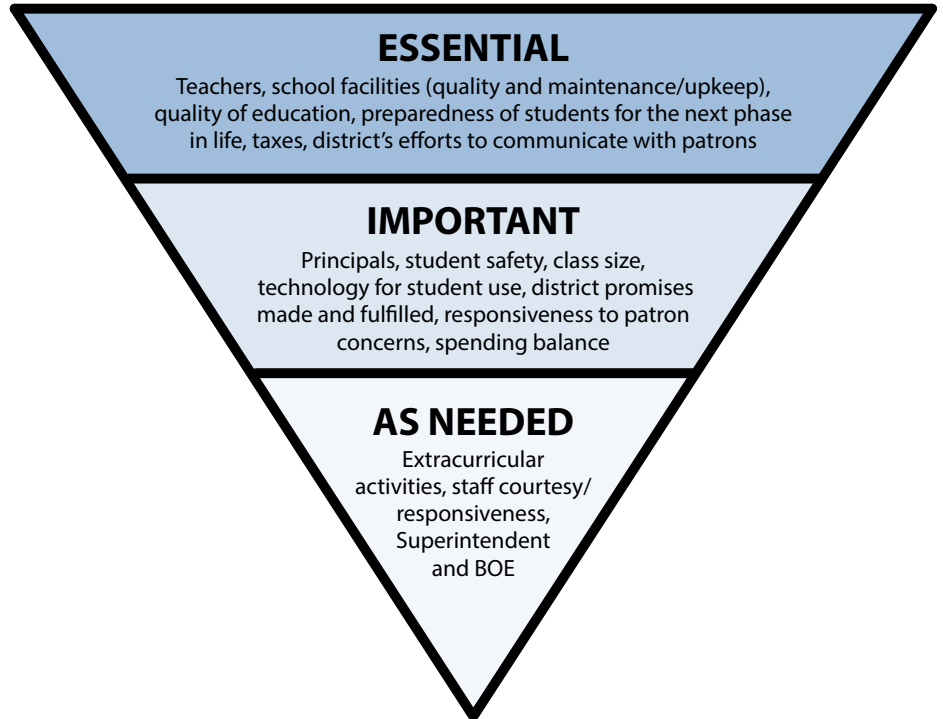
But study after study that we have conducted on behalf of individual school districts confirms that having a clear understanding of what draws the attention – and the support – of those stakeholders who make up what we call the “mass in the middle” is essential for effective strategic planning.

The research approach we use unearths this information through a carefully planned series of questions that elicit a person’s areas of interest (among all the news and information a school district *could* disseminate), without pointedly asking what the school district should “talk more about.” School districts that respond appropriately to these stated interests by adjusting communications messaging have the best opportunity to connect with *everyone* more effectively.

In doing this work, we began to see patterns in the responses – patterns that were generally unaffected by differences in demographic factors, such as the size of the district, its location (rural, urban, suburban, etc.), its community’s level of wealth, and so on. These patterns were captured, analyzed and displayed in what we have termed the Patron Information Pyramid™, which is presented in the book *School Communication that Works*. The Pyramid is intended to be a *starting point* for school district communicators seeking to maximize the effectiveness of their strategies and tactics.

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The Patron Information Pyramid™



These relationship factors kept leading us back to one word:

TRUST.

Our ongoing search for patterns in our data led us back to the same set of questions and answers, to see what other information we could discern.

This analysis revealed that school districts that were rated by “typical” patrons as being competent in what we call the “relationship factors,” and that scored above average on stakeholder perception of how the district uses tax dollars, also tended to receive more support for their project ideas and what it would cost to pay for those ideas, such as in a future ballot issue.

These relationship factors – such as, for example, the perception of the district’s problem-solving skills, the level of involvement stakeholders feel in the district’s decision-making, and the effectiveness of the district in sharing information – along with general approval of how tax money is being spent by the district kept leading us back to one word: Trust.

Understanding that most of the residents in any school district pay only a modest amount of attention to anything their school district says or does, or to media reports, or to the ongoing social media chatter (unless the information being shared is interesting, in a gossipy way), having solid scores on these more nebulous rating factors suggests the presence of a higher level of *benefit-of-the-doubt support*. Put another way, it seems that school districts who score well in these areas have built up a reservoir of trust.

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So, we wanted to find out if school district leaders perceived these building blocks of trust the same way.

For stakeholder groups where school district leaders believe that trust is strong, what concrete steps have been taken by the district to engender that trust?

What data affirming the presence of trust is measurable, and collected by a process that is repeatable? Is the level of trust getting better, getting worse or staying relatively stable?

What can school districts teach each other about building trust?

With that, The Trust Project was born.

THE TRUST PROJECT: Format, topic areas and distribution

The goal of The Trust Project was to secure as much participation as possible from individuals across the leadership spectrum in public schools. The targeted respondent groups were Superintendents, Assistant/Associate Superintendents or a similar title, Cabinet-level staff, (with a separate listing for Communications Directors and staff) and Board of Education members.

Understanding the challenging schedules of individuals in these positions, the survey was limited in its scope, kept simple in its design, and distributed via e-mail to encourage participation. We recognized that this being an e-mail survey would limit its statistical reliability (because the respondents would not be drawn at random). In the end, however, we determined that the goal was to provide a platform to let respondents share their stories so that we could look for patterns, and that the statistical side of the project was of less importance.

The diversity of job titles, locations and demographic factors of The Trust Project participants means that the information contained in this report represents a solid cross-section of school district leaders.

The survey itself (which is attached in the appendix of this report) focused on five areas:

- Demographics of the individual who was responding and of his or her school district.
- Rank order of the perceived importance of the presence of a trusting relationship with seven different stakeholder groups.*
- Perception of the current level of trust of the school district within each of these seven stakeholder groups.
- “Evidence” to support the respondent’s assertion of an above average to superior trust relationship, in cases where such a claim was made. (Respondents who scored their district’s relationship with a particular stakeholder group as average or below average were NOT asked to provide supporting evidence.)
- Most successful steps taken in the last year to build trust and the trust-building steps planned for the near future.

**The seven stakeholder groups were Current district parents, Current students, Staff members, Non-parent patrons (or residents), Local government leaders, Business and community leaders, and Local media.*

The survey questions were drafted by Patron Insight and were edited by individuals on the Board of the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA). The survey was promoted by NSPRA and by the National School Boards Association (NSBA) to their respective memberships, along with being made available to the readers of Patron Insight’s monthly e-newsletter. The survey was available to be completed from December 2014 through April 2015.

A total of 405 school district leaders chose to participate, which, if the participants had been chosen at random, would give the results contained in this report a Margin of Error of plus or minus 4.9% (based on a September 2014 estimate of 13,588 public school districts, and using an average of seven Board of Education members, one Superintendent and a Cabinet of six individuals per district).

Even though the Margin of Error with a “quasi-quantitative” methodology like online research is difficult to gauge, the diversity of job titles, locations and demographic factors of The Trust Project participants means that the information contained in this report represents a solid cross-section of school district leaders. (And, again, the goal was to provide a platform to let respondents share their stories on the subject of trust, to seek out patterns that might be helpful to public educators as a whole.)

Patron Insight is indebted to NSPRA and NSBA for their encouragement and their active promotion of this project with their respective members.

More than two-thirds of the participants were from districts with 7,500 students or fewer (37% from districts with fewer than 2,500 students).

Close to half of the participants said that their student population was “staying about the same,” with nearly equivalent groups saying their student population was growing and declining.

THE TRUST PROJECT: How the results are presented

This report presents results using a “Findings” approach, rather than a rote presentation of questions and answers.

Doing so provides the reader with a very straightforward presentation, without the need to pore over page after page of charts and graphs. This approach also recognizes that The Trust Project was always intended to be an exploratory research endeavor – a bit like having the 405 participants take part in a focus group discussion – to learn from each other the components that suggest and affirm the presence of a trusting relationship.

In this report, stakeholder group names are presented with first letters capitalized (such as “Current District Parents”) when the reference is to the specific group, but with lower case first letters (such as “parents”) when the reference is more general.

The results begin after the presentation of demographic information below.

THE TRUST PROJECT SURVEY: Demographic characteristics of the participants

The survey began by asking respondents to provide a variety of data points for their districts and basic information about themselves. Those results are as follows:

Student population size and level of wealth

Considering the dominance of small- to mid-size school districts in the United States – in terms of a percentage of all school districts – it is no surprise that the respondents to The Trust Project study followed the same pattern.

In fact, more than two-thirds of the participants were from districts with 7,500 students or fewer (37% from districts with fewer than 2,500 students; 31% from districts with between 2,500 and 7,500 students). Interestingly, all the options on the student population question were selected in some quantity, including seven participants in the largest size group – more than 150,000 students.

In terms of the percentage of Free and Reduced Lunch students, the results were a true Bell Curve, with 5% each in the “less than 10%” and “86% or higher” categories, and 22% (again, each) in the “26% to 40%” and “41% to 55%” categories.

Student population trend

When asked whether their student populations were growing, declining or “staying about the same,” respondents provided what would be an expected pattern, given the intentionally casual phrasing of the answer options. Close to half (47%) of the participants said that their student population was “staying about the same,” with nearly equivalent groups saying their student population was growing (27%) and declining (26%).

Percentage of school-age children who attend a district school

On the subject of how many school-age children living within the district’s boundaries attend a district school, 46% said that more than 90% did, while 45% said it was 71% to 90% for their districts. A total of 65% of the respondents said that the percentage of school-age children who attend school in their district was “staying about the same,” while 18% said it was declining and 17% said it was growing.

Type of school or school district

K-12 school districts represented 98% of the participant group, with extremely modest participation from individuals from either K-8 school districts, or “a parochial or independent school or school district.” No charter school representatives took part in the study.

Individuals selecting the job title option of “Director of Communications/Public Relations/Community Relations” made up the largest percentage (34%) of survey participants.

District location

Participants in the study were from all regions of the United States, plus two participants from Canada.

A total of 39% of the participants identified their location as rural, followed by 38% who said they were suburban, 11% who said urban, 9% who said “county-wide/varied geographically,” and 2% who said exurban.

Job titles of participants

Individuals selecting the job title option of “Director of Communications/Public Relations/Community Relations” made up the largest percentage (34%) of survey participants, followed by “School Board Officer” (23%), “School Board Member” (22%) and “Superintendent” (11%). There was much more modest participation among individuals selecting “Member of the Communications/Public Relations/Community Relations staff,” “Other school district Cabinet-level position” or “Assistant Superintendent.”

THE TRUST PROJECT FINDING 1:

Current District Parents are judged as the stakeholder group whose trust is most important to the district’s success, followed by Staff Members and then Current Students.

Participants were presented seven different stakeholder groups and asked to rank order them in terms of *how important it is to the district’s success to have each group’s trust*. (The question wording did acknowledge the difficulty of this exercise, because the trust of all these stakeholder groups is important.)

The responses were analyzed using a weighted scale, in which each “Most important” response was given 7 points, down to each “Seventh-most important” response being given 1 point. The points were totaled and divided by the number of participants to arrive at a single number for each stakeholder group that, in turn, creates the overall rank order. The results show three stakeholder groups clearly separating themselves from the other four:

- Current District Parents – 6.24
- Staff Members – 5.87
- Current Students – 4.86
- Business And Community Leaders – 3.63
- Non-Parent Patrons – 3.34
- Government Leaders (state legislators, county board, county commission, etc.) – 2.41
- Local Media Representatives – 1.89

The differences of opinion based on the demographic characteristics of the respondents were modest in number, with all of them being nothing more than a one-spot switch (meaning, for example, the Non-Parent Patron group and the Government Leaders group switched spots in the rank order among those respondents from districts with 15,001 to 30,000 students).

The only respondents that had a different stakeholder group identified as the most important was the Superintendents, who had Staff Members first and Current District Parents second.

WHAT THIS MEANS: Survey participants have their attention clearly fixed on what could best be described as “internal stakeholder groups” – Parents, Staff and Students – with the others trailing behind. The fact that “Local Media Representatives” was in such a distant last position likely is indicative of the fact that school districts are dealing with fewer and fewer traditional media outlets, let alone true “education reporters.” The other three groups clearly contain some percentage of individuals who could be labeled as “influencers,” but the attention paid to them is clearly at a secondary level.

The results show three stakeholder groups (Current District Parents, Staff Members and Current Students) clearly separating themselves from the other four.

THE TRUST PROJECT FINDING 2:

Trust of the district by each of the seven stakeholder groups is strong, according to the study participants. Current District Parents, Current Students, and Business And Community Leaders topped the ratings.

All seven stakeholder groups were judged to have an above average level of trust of the school district.

After creating a 1 to 7 rank order of the importance to the district's success of a trusting relationship with the seven stakeholder groups, study participants were presented with the same list and were asked to rate (not rank) the current level of trust of the district by each one. In this case, participants used a range from 10 ("completely trusting relationship"), down to 1 ("a complete lack of trust").

The points (10 for each "10" answer, etc.) were totaled and divided by the number of survey participants to produce a score for the "trust of the school district." In doing so, *all seven stakeholder groups were judged to have an above average level of trust of the school district*, meaning all the scores were above 5.50, which is the midpoint on a 10 to 1 scale.

Specifically, the scores were as follows:

- Current Students – 7.55
- Current District Parents – 7.23
- Business And Community Leaders – 7.11
- Local Media Representatives – 7.00
- Government Leaders (state legislators, county board, county commission, etc.) – 6.87
- Staff Members – 6.86
- Non-Parent Patrons – 6.14

Considering that the stakeholder group with the highest score on this topic was only 23% higher than the group with the lowest score, the rank order on this topic is not nearly as dramatic as it was on the subject of the *importance* of the group's trust.

Nonetheless, a review of the subgroups reveals interesting trends and, in some cases, differences of opinion:

Superintendents and Assistant Superintendents/other Cabinet-level participants gave higher trust of the district grades to the three "internal audiences"... than did those respondents from the Board of Education and those whose position is in the Public Relations area.

- In the subgroup defined by the size of the student population, the participants from school districts with fewer than 2,500 students, and those with 2,500 to 7,500 students *were consistently higher on trust* of the district scores than were the mid-sized and large districts.
- In the subgroup based on the trend in the student population count, respondents from districts with a declining population had the lowest trust of the district scores for *all* seven stakeholder groups, as compared to districts with growing or those with stable student populations.
- Respondents from districts with a Free and Reduced Lunch population of less than 10%, and those with a population from 10 to 25%, had higher trust of the district scores for *all* seven stakeholder groups than the other Free and Reduced Lunch segments.
- And while the scores were relatively identical among all the different job titles, it is interesting to note that Superintendents and Assistant Superintendents/other Cabinet-level participants gave higher trust of the district grades to the three "internal audiences" – Current District Parents, Current Students and Staff Members – than did those respondents from the Board of Education and those whose position is in the Public Relations area.

An additional data point worthy of review is to compare the rank order of the *importance* of a trusting relationship with the perception of the current trust level. Those results are as follows:

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 of the district</u> 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

The most significant area of concern is with Staff Members, where the current trust of the district is not nearly where the respondents perceive it needs to be.

The differences that stand out are the results for Current Students and for Local Media Representatives (higher current level of trust than deemed to be necessary, based on the rank order of importance) and, most particularly, Staff Members (much higher level of importance than the perceived current level of trust).

WHAT THIS MEANS: While there is always room for improvement, the *current level of trust* of the district by each of these seven stakeholder groups is above average and – for the most part – *the importance to the district of having the trust of a stakeholder group* has a rank order position that is nearly the same. This means that, with these stakeholder groups, respondents believe that the effort being made to build and nurture trust is (again, in most cases) appropriate for that group’s importance.

The most significant area of concern is with the Staff Members stakeholder group, where the current trust of the district is not nearly where the respondents perceive it needs to be (even though the score for the trust of the district by this group is above average).

This is a finding that demonstrates a keen agreement among the study participants of what Patron Insight’s individual school district research has also found: Because Staff Members are a primary source of news for community members, maintaining their trust is vital to the *public perception* of the district and its performance (and is a non-stop assignment).

THE TRUST PROJECT FINDING 3:
Study participants saw the level of stakeholder trust holding steady over the last year, for the most part. Trust of the district among Current District Parents and Staff Members were the positive exceptions, however, as these two groups’ “improved” scores were higher than their results for “stayed the same” or “diminished.”

For each of the seven stakeholder groups, respondents were asked to state whether they thought that trust of the school district had “Improved significantly,” “Improved somewhat,” “Stayed about the same,” “Diminished somewhat” or “Diminished significantly” over the last year.

“Stayed the same” led the way in five of the seven stakeholder groups, with scores ranging from 65% (Current Students), down to 50% (Business And Community Leaders). In each of these five stakeholder groups, the second highest score (after “Stayed the same”) was the combined “Improved significantly/Improved somewhat” response.

The two stakeholder groups in which the combined percentage on the two “improved” answers was the most popular response were Current District Parents (48% “Significantly/Somewhat improved,” compared to 42% “Stayed the same”) and Staff Members (43% “Significantly/Somewhat improved,” compared to 37% “Stayed the same”).

While the spread between the positive and mid-point answers for these two stakeholder groups was rather modest, the results within some of the demographic subgroups were a bit more demonstrative.

Specifically:

- In the case of the Current District Parents stakeholder group, numerous demographic subgroups were even more positive than the overall “Significantly/Somewhat improved” score of 48%. Groups whose positive score topped 50% were districts with 7,501 to 15,000 students, districts with 30,001 to 50,000 students, districts where the student population is growing, districts whose location is best captured by the term “county-wide,” those with Free and Reduced Lunch populations of 41% to 55%, and 86% or higher, and those who identified themselves as either a Superintendent or an Assistant Superintendent.
- Only two subgroups had a “Significantly/Somewhat improved” score over 50% for the Staff Members stakeholder group: Respondents in districts where the student population is growing, and those who identified themselves as occupying “other Cabinet” positions (besides Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent or Communications/PR Director).

WHAT THIS MEANS: This is a fairly typical answer pattern on questions such as these, because, unless there is compelling evidence that the respondent can recall completing the survey, choosing the middle ground is the safest response. It is also common for the combined negative answers to take a distant third position in such an exercise, unless, once again, there is recent evidence that would make such an answer more accurate than the positive or neutral options.

What is most compelling about these results is the two groups where the positive responses outpaced the neutral option. While the margin was not wide in either case, the fact that Current District Parents and Staff Members are seen as groups where the trust of the district has improved says two things:

First, it says that two critical “internal” stakeholder groups are getting the lion’s share of the district’s trust-building attention and that the results of these efforts are noticeable.

Second, these results at least would hint at the fact that some tangible ways to actually measure the elements of trust are being employed, along with an unscientific evaluation of the day-to-day “mood” of individual representatives of these two groups.

When typical residents in a school district are asked where they turn to find out the latest district news, “friends and neighbors” (a group that would clearly include Current District Parents) is almost always at the top of the list, while “Teachers” (who, of course, would be included in the Staff Member group) are often in the third, fourth or fifth position. As such, making these two stakeholder groups a priority in the district’s trust-building efforts – something which these results would suggest is happening – benefits the district across all stakeholder groups.

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THE TRUST PROJECT FINDING 4:

Tangible/measurable proof that there is a high level of trust in the district is greatest for the external stakeholder groups. For the internal groups – Staff Members, Current District Parents and Current Students – Tangible/measurable and Intangible/anecdotal evidence were mentioned either equally, or nearly so.

As mentioned above, survey participants were asked to rate the level of trust of the district by each of the seven stakeholder groups, using a scale of 10 to 1, with 10 being “a completely trusting relationship,” down to 1, meaning “a complete lack of trust.”

Respondents who rated a stakeholder group's trust level at a 7 or higher were then asked to provide "evidence, examples or recent experiences" that led that individual to rate the trust level that highly. (Those who selected a 6 or lower automatically skipped the "evidence" question.)

The answers provided by survey participants were separated into two categories:

Tangible, or measurable, evidence – These proof points are statistical in nature, or suggest that they could be statistical. Significant leeway was used in determining whether or not a piece of evidence was Tangible, with the benefit of the doubt being given frequently, if there was the possibility that a statistical measurement could be applied.

Examples of Tangible evidence (in category form) provided by those who scored the trust level of a stakeholder group at 7 or higher included:

- Results from research surveys that had been completed at least twice – e.g., an annual staff survey – so that the results could be compared.
- A change in the percentage of parent participation in school activities, such as Parent/Teacher conferences.
- A measurable increase in positive media coverage, rather than just a sense that the tone of traditional media stories had improved.
- More people filling needed volunteer spots than had been the case in the previous year.
- The creation of a committee with a stated purpose, when no such committee existed before, or a more extensive meeting schedule of an existing committee (with no notable drop-off in attendance)
- Documentation of measurable results – or a measurable improvement in results – in the work being done by a committee.
- The offering of an internship by a local business, or an increase in the number of internships or similar opportunities, the addition of businesses to such a program, or both.
- Stories about parents or others who identified a need and proposed a compelling solution to the problem; this is statistical, because it requires the stakeholder group to do something that its members had not done to date.
- Greater measurable engagement (meeting attendance, foundation donation, etc.) from business, civic and government leaders.
- Passage of a ballot issue.
- The disappearance (or at least measurably diminished activity) of a previously entrenched opposition group or individual.
- A measurable increase in social media connections (although just adding "followers," for example, would qualify as one piece of evidence where leeway was given, because being a follower does not automatically confirm that trust exists).

Intangible, or anecdotal, evidence is based on the respondent's perception, rather than a statistical measurement. Examples include:

- School culture statements, such as "Our schools are happy places."
- Blanket pronouncements, such as "The teachers trust administration."
- The lack of something negative, such as limited outside attendance at Board of Education meetings, unflattering articles in the media, no evident organized opposition/negative group, etc.
- Perceptions about the quality of relationships, such as "Our reporter trusts me."
- Any non-statistical judgment of the "mood" on social media, in e-mail exchanges or in letters to the editor.

To summarize, 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 evidence.

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Using these definitions as a guide (and, again, offering significant leeway in placing a proof point in the Tangible group), the breakdown of Tangible and Intangible evidence for each stakeholder group was as follows:

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 THIS MEANS: These results show that the amount of tangible, measurable evidence of trust is *lowest among the three stakeholder groups whose trust is considered most important*, according to survey participants.

Instincts, experience and a sense of the “vibe” are important skills... however, relying heavily on such evidence as proof of a trusting relationship has a number of pitfalls.

The above statement is not intended as a criticism, but as a research observation. Instincts, experience and a sense of the “vibe” are important skills for all school district leaders and Board members. However, relying heavily on such evidence as proof of a trusting relationship has a number of pitfalls.

First, one observer’s perception may be totally different than another’s, leading to uncertainty about the true level of trust. If, as the expression goes, beauty is in the eye of the beholder, so, too, is trust, if that trust is measured primarily by “gut feeling.”

Second, Patron Insight’s research for individual school districts has shown that a large majority of the members of any stakeholder group rarely speak up, meaning that intangible perceptions can easily be the result of monitoring the impressions of the relative handful of individuals who make their views known.

While it is quite normal to pay close attention to what the “squeaky wheels” are saying, doing so exclusively provides a very unclear picture of the true level of trust.

Third, without statistical measurement, it is impossible to accurately evaluate a change in attitude, the effectiveness of specific strategies and tactics, the effect that news and activities outside the district have had on the trust level, and so on.

Make no mistake, keen awareness of what is taking place with a stakeholder group will always be valuable, because it can provide somewhat of an early alert that a change in mood – either positive or negative – is occurring.

But a true measurement of whether or not a school district is trusted by a cross-section of the members of a stakeholder group requires an approach that is statistical, that includes diverse segments of that stakeholder group and that is repeatable.

THE TRUST PROJECT FINDING 5:

Targeted communication/engagement activities and school district leadership changes were judged to be the most successful trust-building strategies.

The study concluded with two open-ended questions that asked participants to look back and then to look forward.

Specifically, the next-to-last question asked respondents to identify the specific steps the district had taken in the last year to build trust with key stakeholder groups.

The responses were coded, meaning that common words, phrases and ideas were identified and tabulated. This process brings the opinions of the overall group into sharper focus, by identifying the ideas that were expressed by the most participants.

If one were to identify a set of single words that would describe what has been most successful for participating districts, according to the study participants, those words would be: Inclusion, Communication and Personnel.

There were no “aha” tactical steps executed during the year that made a significant impact on trust.

In no particular order, the following trust-building steps were most frequently mentioned as having made a positive impact in the last year:

- 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 THIS MEANS: If one were to identify a set of single words that would describe what has been most successful for participating districts, according to the study participants, those words would be:

- Inclusion – Making an overwhelming effort to offer participation opportunities to stakeholders, building trust by making them part of important district decisions and, in the process, involving them more deeply in the life of the district.
- Communication – Expanding communications tactics and channels, building trust by connecting with stakeholders on their terms, rather than as the district would prefer to do so.
- Personnel – Having the right people in place disseminating messages and demonstrating behavior that builds trust.

In other words, it appears there were no “aha” tactical steps executed during the year that made a significant impact on trust, according to the research participants. Instead, success came at the most basic, almost “golden rule” level, by executing a greater commitment to a service-oriented mentality that is guided by the needs of the stakeholders, rather than by the wishes of the school district.

THE TRUST PROJECT FINDING 6:

The trust-building steps that are anticipated for the future are best described by the expression, “Stay the course.”

When asked to name any *additional* steps that the respondents envisioned their school districts taking in the next year to continue building trust with key stakeholder groups, the answers were an echo from the previous question.

Specifically, the coded answers to this open-ended question were as follows:

- Continue engaging more frequently with key stakeholders, using a variety of venues, partnerships and other opportunities to encourage their involvement.
- Keep the lines of two-way communication open and increase the district’s media presence and targeted communications, using all available communication channels (especially through social media).
- Continue improving transparency and trust with key stakeholders within the district and around the community.
- Have new and/or better leadership that is more visible and interacts more with key stakeholders.
- Involve all stakeholders in the Strategic Planning process, seeking input on policy development and following through.

WHAT THIS MEANS: The results on this question may, on the surface, suggest that not a lot of thought was put into the answers. Yet, upon a deeper review, these responses do tell a larger story.

It is only appropriate that respondents would say that they expect to continue following the same course that had been successful. Any changes would primarily involve expanding these efforts.

Every stakeholder group with which a school district interacts has a measure of importance. But, at a time when budgets are shrinking and communications staff members are few, setting priorities becomes even more important.

The Trust Project sought to better understand the connection between stakeholder group trust and stakeholder group importance to help set priorities.

Earlier in the survey, respondents said they believed that trust of the district by each of the seven identified stakeholder groups ranged from what would be called “solidly above average,” up to a level that would be considered “strong.” The level of stakeholder trust was seen as either remaining stable or, in the case of Current District Parents and Staff Members, improving somewhat. And the most successful strategies over the past year focused on personnel, inclusion and communication.

With these results earlier in the survey, it is only appropriate that respondents would say that they expect to continue following the same course that had been successful. Any changes for the future would primarily involve expanding these efforts.

It also suggests quite strongly that, as mentioned before, there is no magical, previously unconsidered, strategy or tactic that respondents expect to launch in the coming year to further expand trust. Instead, respondents believe that building trust requires sound, strategic and ongoing effort, with carefully evaluated tactical adjustments, when warranted.

EVALUATION OF THE RESULTS

Trust seems to be one of those words where the definitions vary in form and intensity, based on the individual.

At its most basic level, an individual worthy of trust is someone who is known for honesty and integrity. The same could be said about an organization – such as a school district – that is seeking to be trusted by those whose advocacy is essential to its success.

The purpose of The Trust Project was to expand the definition beyond these foundational qualities, as it pertains to the world of public education.

Which stakeholder groups have the highest level of trust of their school district? How do we know that this is the case? What steps are being taken to deepen that level of trust or to create trust with those groups where it currently falls short of the mark?

How does the list of stakeholder groups where the trust is the highest compare with the list of those whose trust is considered most important to the school district? In other words, are the district’s trust-building efforts focused on stakeholder groups in order of importance?

Of course, every stakeholder group with which a school district interacts has a measure of importance. But, at a time when budgets are shrinking and communications staff members are few, setting priorities becomes even more important.

The Patron Information Pyramid (referenced earlier in this document) was identified as a way to help prioritize communications content disseminated by a school district through its various venues, based on what typical patrons have said interests them the most. Giving priority to these topics builds a stronger connection between the school district and all its patrons – not just those who are passionately interested.

The Trust Project, on the other hand, sought to better understand *the connection between stakeholder group trust and stakeholder group importance* to help set priorities. At the same time, the goal was to learn where survey participants are putting their energies to build stakeholder trust, to determine if patterns exist that would be informative to the peers of these participants.

Having the trust of “internal” stakeholder groups, that is, those with a daily, direct relationship with the school district (Staff Members, Current Students and Current District Parents) is seen as having the greatest impact on a district’s success.

Trust building requires meeting stakeholders on their terms, and doing so with a great deal of sameness over time.

In summary, the findings were as follows:

First, research participants said that trust of their school district was strong across all seven stakeholder groups that were evaluated. In comparing the trust level from last year to this year, trust is seen as either remaining stable or – in the case of Current District Parents and Staff Members – growing somewhat. This was a nearly universal view, no matter where the respondent’s district was located, its demographic or economic data, or the job title of the respondent who was offering the evaluation.

Second, having the trust of “internal” stakeholder groups, that is, those with a daily, direct relationship with the school district (Staff Members, Current Students and Current District Parents) is seen as having the greatest impact on a district’s success. However, research participants see much work to be done in this area with the Staff Member stakeholder group, as they rated the importance of having their trust second out of the seven stakeholder groups, but the current level of trust sixth out of seven.

Third, the evidence offered by participants in cases where an above average level of trust was claimed was Intangible/anecdotal 46% to 50% of the time for the three stakeholder groups judged as the most important, in terms of having trust in the district. These were the highest percentages of Intangible/anecdotal evidence among the seven stakeholder groups that were evaluated. This means that, for the three most important stakeholder groups, trust is being measured by perception, rather than statistics, up to half the time.

Fourth, having leadership that is approachable and transparent is a trust-building “strategy” that was judged to be as important as is deploying more and/or better one- and two-way communications initiatives to stakeholders, according to the participants’ review of past trust-building strategies, and those that are planned for the near future.

These findings lead to the following conclusions, based on the opinions of the 405 school district leaders who participated in The Trust Project.

Trust cannot be built or sustained through any one – perhaps not yet identified – strategy or tactic.

There is no “aha” moment, no perfect strategy or tactic, and no stroke of luck that will build and nurture strong, trusting relationships with key stakeholders. Trust building requires meeting stakeholders on their terms, and doing so with a great deal of sameness over time.

As tedious as it may seem, that sameness is what makes it work.

Patron Insight’s pre-election research with individual school districts suggests that up to 80% of school district patrons pay a minimal amount of attention to anything their school district says, unless it is truly newsworthy (which, unfortunately often means that it is negative) or it affects that individual personally.

As presented in the Patron Information Pyramid seen earlier in this report, there are certain topics that our research has shown will be more likely to attract the attention of a typical patron than will other topics. Focusing on these topics first (but not necessarily exclusively) in outbound communications increases the likelihood of building a greater connection with stakeholders occupying all levels of the interest spectrum. The feeling generated by such a focus is that the school district “gets” (meaning “understands”) that individual.

Over time, it is that consistency that builds and nurtures the school district's brand, meaning the myriad thoughts, feelings and emotions that surface when the district is encountered or thought of by an individual. That is why it is so positive to see that the respondents felt that, while there will be strategic and tactical adjustments from time to time, building trust requires a sound strategic approach, executed over time, with a heavy dose of patience and consistency.

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.

Certainly, common sense would suggest that school district leaders demonstrating openness and transparency should be a given. But the study results also suggest that there is a growing separation between leaders who are skilled at their responsibilities, and those who also understand the important role they have in building and nurturing the district's brand.

Those leaders who recognize the basic principle of brand building – that every encounter or experience with a person or a company either strengthens or diminishes the brand – set the tone in their community and internally. In doing so, every other member of the staff is positioned to be a more effective brand builder in the encounters he or she has with stakeholders. The arrival of such a leader in the district (or improving these skills in existing leaders) makes the shortcomings of his or her predecessor in this area painfully evident.

And the need for this skill doesn't stop at the door to the Superintendent's office. It's clear from the data that other Cabinet members, Building Principals and members of the Board of Education are more and more expected to play an important, but often unstated, role in brand building by understanding the importance of every encounter, no matter how minor it may seem.

Staff Member trust, and the impact it has on the vitality of the school district, is most concerning to survey participants.

As reported earlier, Staff Members were judged by The Trust Project participants to be the *second-most important stakeholder group* whose trust is essential to the district's success, but the *sixth highest, in terms of the current trust level*.

These results alone would suggest that efforts to build and nurture trust with this stakeholder group are often frustrating. The evidence offered by respondents who said they were succeeding would seem to affirm this frustration, as their proof points included diverse ideas such as the success of recent collective bargaining efforts, the presence (or lack of) staff members at School Board meetings, the thoughts of staff members about the quality and value of the district's professional development offerings, and the amount of willingness to pitch in on district-related programs.

The wide variety of proof points and the heavy reliance on Intangible/anecdotal evidence suggest that participants often find themselves seeking any positive clue that the relationship with Staff Members is, if not positive, at least calm for the time being. Moving toward more statistical measurements of trust with this stakeholder group – starting with perhaps, an annual staff survey – would provide a more reliable road map for other trust-building strategies.

Leaders who recognize the basic principle of brand building – that every encounter or experience with a person or a company either strengthens or diminishes the brand – set the tone in their community and internally.

The perception that trust of the school district is above average for all seven stakeholder groups that were evaluated – and that there is almost no variation in that perception, based on the district or the respondent’s demographic factors – is an encouraging result.

On a scale of 10 (completely trusting relationship) to 1 (a complete lack of trust), the results were impressive, ranging from Current Students at an average score of 7.55, down to Non-Parent Patrons at 6.14. Considering that the mid-point on a scale of this sort is 5.50, these results are quite positive.

Even more interesting, however, was the fact that it was rare to find an individual respondent who gave his or her district stellar trust scores for all seven stakeholder groups. Nearly all participants had at least one stakeholder group whose trust level was a concern, meaning that the participants did not simply glaze over the questions on trust levels, but gave their answers some thought, making the results even more compelling.

The significant reliance on Intangible/anecdotal evidence to document perceived high levels of trust is worrisome, because of the variability of perception from one person to another and because it prevents effective tracking of the impact of trust-building strategies and tactics.

While it is comforting to say that there is “Peaceful existence” with a particular stakeholder group, as one respondent put it, leaning on such “evidence” to affirm the presence of a trusting relationship is the most troublesome finding in the entire study.

Without concrete, measurable and repeatable processes of evaluation, it is impossible to accurately evaluate the effectiveness of trust-building strategies from one time period to the next. In such a case, how does a school district leader know if his or her time and the school district’s resources are being spent wisely?

Such measurement need not be complicated or expensive.

It should begin with a thorough review of any statistics related to a stakeholder group that are readily available. For example:

- How many internships are being offered by local businesses to the school district for its students?
- What is the percentage of families who participated in the most recent round of Parent/Teacher conferences?
- How many staff members signed up to help with a recent event?
- What was the result of your last ballot issue that involved a tax increase?
- How many non-parent patrons attended the district’s most recent Town Hall meeting?
- What was the result from the latest climate survey with staff?

While the stakeholder groups are different, the approach is the same: What can we count and then compare from one time period to the next?

Growth in time, money, attendance, etc., are all indications that there is trust between the school district and a stakeholder group, because *individuals and organizations do not increase their participation in such ways when trust is lacking.*

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Converting from Intangible/anecdotal to Tangible/statistical evidence can (and probably should) be approached in steps.

Begin with the measureable data that is readily available within the district. Determine where improvements are necessary. Set a numerical goal for improvement and identify when the results will be analyzed (beginning of next semester, one year from now, etc.) and then lay out the specific steps the district will take to achieve the targeted results.

Such an approach moves the district away from “evaluation by gut feeling,” by instituting a truly measurable, repeatable process to guide the design and execution of trust-building strategies and tactics.

THANK YOU

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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