Elevating Relationships

How Collaboration Shapes Teaching and Learning
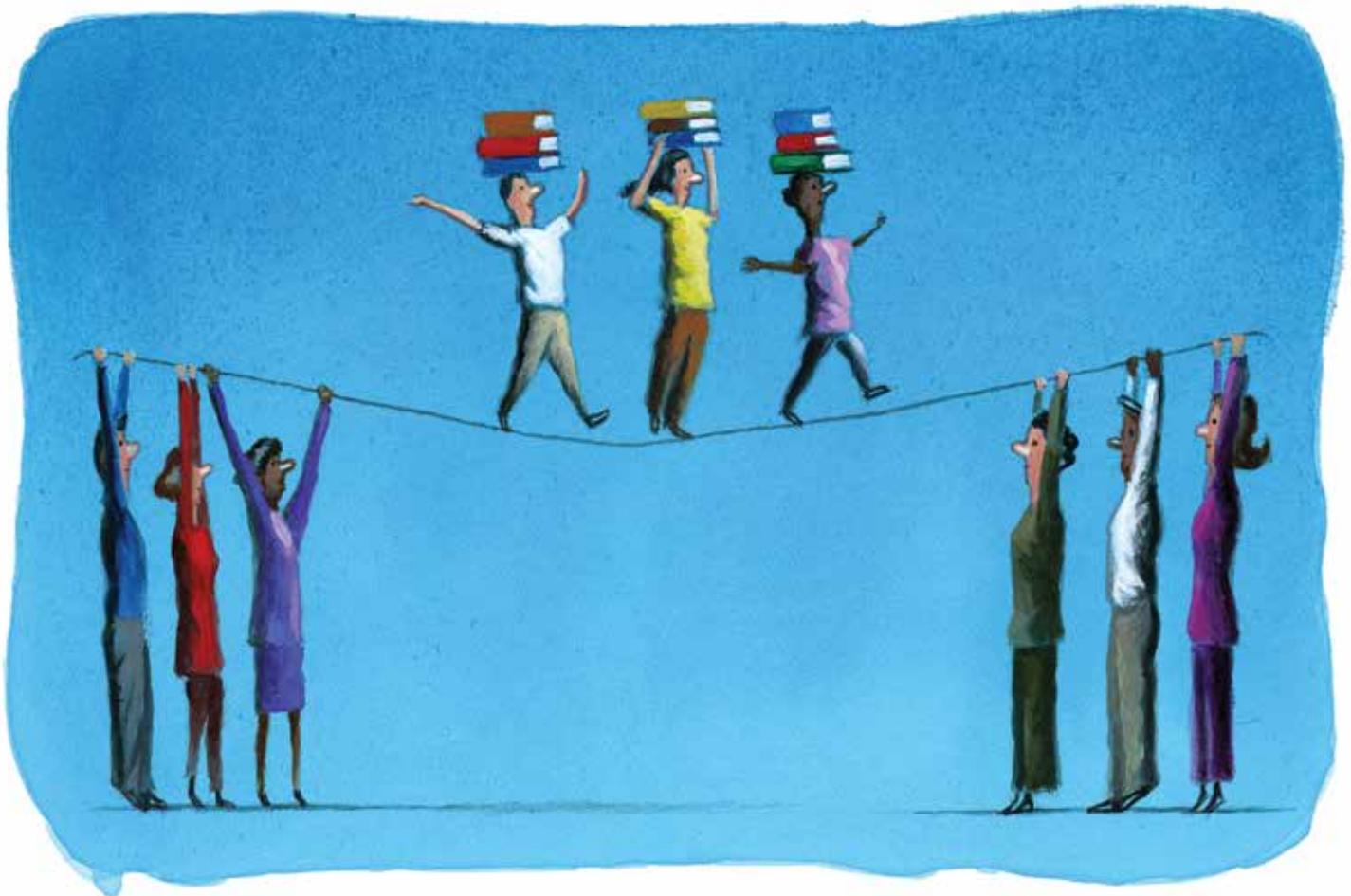
BY ESTHER QUINTERO

"Whatever level of human capital schools acquire through hiring can subsequently be developed through activities such as grade-level or subject-based teams of teachers, faculty committees, professional development, coaching, evaluation, and informal interactions. As teachers join together to solve problems and learn from one another, the school's instructional capacity becomes greater than the sum of its parts."[1]

This quote from Harvard professor Susan Moore Johnson may make perfect sense to you. Our systems and organizations, however, are largely structured around individual values. As such, a primary goal is to optimize and

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reward performance at the individual level. So, while some of us (perhaps many of us) might agree that a team's capacity can exceed the sum of individual members' capacity, we generally have a difficult time translating that knowledge into action—for example, rewarding individual behaviors that enhance team dynamics. Part of the problem is that there's still a lot to learn about how teamwork and collaboration are effectively nurtured.

No matter how challenging, understanding the social dynamics that underpin our work organizations seems particularly timely given the interdependent nature of the modern workplace. According to a recent *Harvard Business Review* article, "the time spent by managers and employees in collaborative activities has ballooned by 50% or more" over the past two decades. At many companies, employees spend more than 75 percent of their day communicating with their colleagues.[2]

The disconnect between what organizations need and do (i.e., collaboration and teamwork) and what they support and reward (i.e., individual performance) underscores the need to develop a better understanding of the social-relational dimension of work and work performance. What makes some groups work better than

Most measures of teacher effectiveness ignore the social and organizational factors that are foundational to teaching quality.

others? How does one build an effective team? Are the best teams made up by combining the "best" individuals? These questions are as important for schools and educators as they are for organizations and professionals in other fields.

A 2015 study sheds light on some of these questions.[3] The researchers looked at data from various sports and demonstrated that, when a sport requires coordination among team members, having too many superstars on the team can actually hurt overall team performance. If, as indicated earlier, much of today's work is precisely about coordination and working with others effectively, a focus on top talent may do a disservice to the team (or organization) and its performance.

But these ideas aren't exactly new. More than a decade ago, organizational behavior experts cautioned about the pitfalls of seeking to employ only extraordinary employees, but for different reasons. If every business were to follow this strategy, they argued, we would all be headed to an escalating "war for talent." Furthermore, in the right environment, most people can thrive and contribute meaningfully to their organization's performance and growth. A smarter strategy would be to focus on improving work environments so that "regular" people can perform at a high level. This research offers examples of organizations that have achieved extraordinary levels of success "with people who really aren't that much different or smarter than those working in the competition."[4]

While research shows that teamwork increases organizational performance, and firms are seeking out employees who work effectively with peers, collaborative behaviors aren't necessarily rewarded, or even monitored, in the modern workplace. In fact, the study described in the *Harvard Business Review* article mentioned above suggests that, while collaborators are in high demand, they feel overwhelmed and overloaded, and their good deeds often go unnoticed.

This study was conducted across more than 300 organizations and showed that those employees "seen as the best sources of information and in highest demand as collaborators in their companies ... have the lowest engagement and career satisfaction scores." In addition, it showed that the distribution of collaborative behavior can be extremely unbalanced: "In most cases, 20% to 35% of value-added collaborations come from only 3% to 5% of employ-

ees." And "roughly 20% of organizational 'stars' don't help; they hit their numbers (and earn kudos for it) but don't amplify the success of their colleagues."

Paradoxically, as skilled collaborators are drawn into more and more projects and the volume and diversity of work they do with others increases, their contributions become less and less noticed. In fact, as the researchers explain, when they analyze the strongest collaborators in organizations, "leaders are typically surprised by at least half the names on their lists." The bottom line is, if collaborators add value to the organization, they need to be recognized and protected. They are the real "organizational stars," but they are often invisible.

Ultimately, we must learn to identify and reward employees who both perform well individually and contribute to the success of their peers. "Efficient sharing of informational, social, and personal resources should ... be a prerequisite for positive reviews, promotions, and pay raises," the researchers say.[5] Evidently, we are not there yet.

Seeing Education as a Social Endeavor

What's now happening in schools and with educators is not so different from the picture described above. For the past two decades, teachers and their individual effectiveness have been the primary focus of education reform in the United States. Most measures of teacher effectiveness, however, ignore the social and organizational factors that are foundational to teaching quality.

There is solid evidence that strong professional environments (e.g., collaborative colleagues, a culture of trust) increase
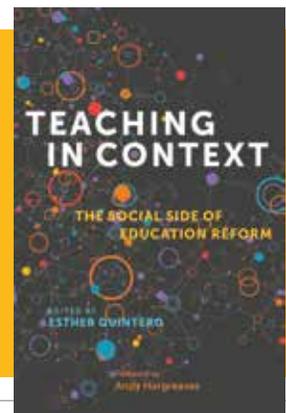
teacher effectiveness, and that teachers' professional interactions (e.g., formal and informal social contact) with colleagues as well as teacher collaboration (e.g., lesson study and professional learning communities) produce student test score gains. While these social aspects of teaching are starting to receive some attention as a vehicle for teacher and student growth,

Collaborative school cultures and professional relationships must be facilitated and nurtured.

there is still much to learn about how to understand, incentivize, support, and reward the cooperative practices and norms that would sustain reforms based on these tenets. This caution, however, should not preclude us from acting on some of what we do know; after all, the learning that needs to happen will not come from knowledge generated by research and researchers exclusively, but from experimentation with practitioners in school settings.

To take on this challenge, we need a different way of envisioning educational improvement. The social side of education reform underscores a critical oversight in the public debate on education and its policies: the idea that teaching and learning are not solo but rather social endeavors that are achieved in the context of schools and their broader school systems and communities, through relationships and partnerships rather than competition and a focus on individual prowess.

This perspective shifts the focus from the individual attributes

of stakeholders (e.g., teachers, principals) to the supports and constraints afforded by the school and the broader social context in which individuals operate. It also highlights the interdependence at all levels of the system—for example, among teachers within a school, leaders across a district, schools within the community, etc.—and the idea that a complex system is more than the sum of its parts. Finally, it recognizes that valuable resources (e.g., information, advice, support) are exchanged through relationships within and across social networks, and that monitoring and strengthening this infrastructure is crucial for educational improvement.

Reviewing the Research

Context, relationships, and collaboration aren't magic, but, as research synthesized in *Teaching in Context: The Social Side of Education Reform* (which I edited) shows, these factors are at least as important as individual (e.g., teacher quality) and technical (e.g., standards) aspects of improvement. In the remainder of this article, I share some findings from the book that educators and policymakers alike would do well paying attention to in order to nurture the kinds of collaborative school cultures and systems that drive and sustain improvement.

First, contrary to what has become conventional wisdom, it is not clear that teachers always "plateau" in their effectiveness after their first few years as teachers.[6] Educators working in schools with strong professional environments continue to learn throughout their careers and improve at much faster rates than colleagues in schools characterized by weaker professional environments.[7]

Second, successful schools that serve predominantly disadvantaged students seem to have one thing in common: they use a comprehensive approach to hire, evaluate, and develop their faculties. Importantly, leaders in these schools know how to orchestrate these human and social capital systems.[8]

Third, not all collaboration is created equal. Both in-service and pre-service teachers improve at faster rates in schools where teachers report that collaboration is more extensive and helpful.[9]

Fourth, collaborative school cultures and professional relationships don't just happen by chance. Instead, they must be facilitated and nurtured. While it's true that you can't force individuals to work with each other, social relations in schools are malleable and shaped by elements like job titles, organizational routines, and scheduling. Tweaking these aspects to encourage teachers to work together is possible and can produce positive results.[10]

Fifth, schools are not alone in how interpersonal aspects of work affect the performance of staff members. Research that has looked across settings (e.g., education, medical, and manufacturing) has established that social aspects of work are critical to the success of *any* type of work organization. In schools, this research has found that student performance increases dramatically when teachers have frequent and instructionally focused conversations with their peers.[11]

Sixth, excessive levels of personnel churn can make systems vulnerable, disrupting social relations that are critical for improvement. In their article on page 24 of this issue, Alan J. Daly and Kara S. Finnigan explain how leadership churn can work to disrupt reform efforts.[12]

Student performance increases dramatically when teachers have frequent and instructionally focused conversations with their peers.

Seventh, interpersonal aspects matter across the board: among teachers, between teachers and administrators, and between school staff and the larger communities in which schools are situated. While neighborhoods influence the climate of a school, recent studies show that it can go both ways. When parents, teachers, and students work together, safety improves meaningfully in schools that serve disadvantaged communities.[13]

Most teachers don't need research to be persuaded by the idea that their colleagues, as well as their school systems and communities, matter a great deal to their job performance. Educators who teach in schools characterized by supportive cultures know this firsthand; they are allowed to share their expertise with colleagues, receive support from administrators who cultivate their staff, and benefit from working in a climate of learning for students and adults.

But what about teachers who have never worked in these kinds of schools? What about educators who have experienced collaboration very differently—as another required, often inauthentic activity? And what about decision makers who are far removed from the classroom? For them, as well as educators already working in collaborative schools, *Teaching in Context* can serve several purposes:

- It can help them persuade policymakers that bettering the organizations where teachers work is an urgent and research-supported policy goal. For more than a decade, decision makers have focused on individual teacher accountability, neglecting to look at the social dynamics of schools and how they shape teachers' ability to be successful with students. This research says it's time to broaden our policy focus.

- It provides a road map on how to go from a kind of school where faculty are friendly but work independently, to a kind of school where faculty are interdependent and operate as a learning community. The book offers specific strategies, interventions, and policy proposals.

- For practitioners who know and have experienced how these things matter, it can strengthen and validate their experiences. In a context where teachers are routinely blamed for student underachievement, research that contextualizes this simplistic view, and offers concrete solutions, could be of great value to educators, inoculating them from explanations that are incomplete at best.

Clearly, individual teachers are important to educational progress, and major structural issues like poverty and inequality are tremendous challenges to educational achievement. However, when schools and school systems prioritize strengthening the interpersonal aspects of teaching and learning, even schools serving low-income students can attract, develop, and retain skillful and stable faculties and achieve good academic results. Many teachers have long known or suspected this. Now it's time to get others on board; we cannot ignore this evidence any longer. □

Endnotes

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2. Rob Cross, Reb Rebele, and Adam Grant, "Collaborative Overload," *Harvard Business Review* 94, nos. 1–2 (2016): 74–79.

3. Roderick I. Swaab, Michael Schaerer, Eric M. Anicich, Richard Ronay, and Adam D. Galinsky, "The Too-Much-Talent Effect: Team Interdependence Determines When More Talent Is Too Much or Not Enough," *Psychological Science* 25 (2015): 1581–1591.

4. Charles A. O'Reilly III and Jeffrey Pfeffer, *Hidden Value: How Great Companies Achieve Extraordinary Results with Ordinary People* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2000).

5. Cross, Rebele, and Grant, "Collaborative Overload."

6. See, for example, Steven G. Rivkin, Eric A. Hanushek, and John F. Kain, "Teachers, Schools, and Academic Achievement," *Econometrica* 73 (2005): 417–458; and Charles T. Clotfelter, Helen F. Ladd, and Jacob L. Vigdor, "Teacher-Student Matching and the Assessment of Teacher Effectiveness," NBER Working Paper Series, no. 11936 (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2006).

7. John P. Papay and Matthew A. Kraft, "Developing Workplaces Where Teachers Stay, Improve, and Succeed: Recent Evidence on the Importance of School Climate for Teacher Success," in *Teaching in Context: The Social Side of Education Reform*, ed. Esther Quintero (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2017), 15–35.

8. Susan Moore Johnson, Stefanie K. Reinhorn, and Nicole S. Simon, "Reaping Rewards for Students: How Successful Urban Schools Systematically Invest in Teachers," in Quintero, *Teaching in Context*, 37–69.

9. Matthew Ronfeldt, "Better Collaboration, Better Teaching," in Quintero, *Teaching in Context*, 71–93.

10. James P. Spillane, Megan Hopkins, Tracy M. Sweet, and Matthew Shirrell, "The Social Side of Capability: Supporting Classroom Instruction and Enabling Its Improvement," in Quintero, *Teaching in Context*, 95–111.

11. Carrie R. Leana and Frits K. Pil, "Social Capital: An Untapped Resource for Educational Improvement," in Quintero, *Teaching in Context*, 113–129.

12. Alan J. Daly, Kara S. Finnigan, and Yi-Hwa Liou, "The Social Cost of Leadership Churn: The Case of an Urban School District," in Quintero, *Teaching in Context*, 131–145.

13. Elaine M. Allensworth, "How the Organization of Schools and Local Communities Shape Educational Improvement," in Quintero, *Teaching in Context*, 147–161.

What Teacher Collaboration Looks Like

BY JOSEPH VINCENTE

So, 300 homework assignments checked, 200 emails replied to, 100 quizzes graded, 50 more lab reports left from Monday still to read, 30 lessons executed, 10 revised notebook entries regraded, five phone calls and texts made to check in with parents, four curriculum maps revised, three extra-help sessions held before and after school and during lunch, two pep-talks with students about their college aspirations, and one mediation between quarreling best friends conducted.

Phew.

I take a deep breath and do a bit of mindless silent cleaning and organizing in my classroom to decompress. Another exhausting week in the life of a high school teacher comes to a close. Must be time for the weekend, right? Well, almost.

Friday afternoon at my school is when we do some of our most demanding but essential work as teachers. You may be thinking it's time for the dreaded weekly professional development meetings or for some "collaboration." Yes, that's right, but at East Side Community High School in New York City, a sixth- to 12th-grade college-preparatory public school where I teach 10th-grade chemistry, collaboration

Joseph Vincente, a former 10th-grade chemistry teacher, is an assistant principal and science and math instructional coach at East Side Community High School in New York City. This article, written when he was still in the classroom, was originally a blog post for the Albert Shanker Institute, posted on March 29, 2016, and available at www.shankerinstitute.org/blog/vincente.

isn't just an activity or being friendly, respectful, or cooperative with colleagues. Rather, collaboration underpins how we structure and conduct most of our work, how we serve students, and how we learn and grow as professionals. In the next few paragraphs, I describe some of East Side's collaborative structures as well as the norms and conditions that support them.

* * *

At East Side, I work with a "grade team" that shares a cohort of students. This allows me, the 10th-grade science teacher, to have powerful conversations with the history, math, and English teachers who teach the same students.

Throughout the year at daily "kid talk" meetings, we compare successes and struggles across subject areas by discussing the varying strengths and needs of our students. At these meetings, we look deeply at student data and write "smileys"—postcards commending students for improvement or great work. After that, we may brainstorm academic interventions for struggling students, such as mandating afterschool tutoring, reviewing individualized education plan supports, or sharing successful strategies particular to a student. We also consider a spectrum of students' social-emotional needs through counseling referrals or extracurricular activity recommendations.

Grade teams are organized into smaller advisory classes, in which teachers advise small groups of students, that also meet at the start and end of each day for a five-minute check-in and twice a week for

longer lessons. And grade teams work together to design the advisory class curriculum that is taught in those longer advisory lessons, which cover everything from health and healthy relationships, to college and career preparation, academic support, discussion of current events, and more.

In these ways, the grade team structure allows each individual teacher to leverage the collective expertise of a group of close colleagues all striving to serve the same group of students and forge authentic relationships with them.

"Vertical teams" are another vehicle for teacher collaboration at East Side. These teams include all same-subject teachers—in my case, all science teachers—within the school. I personally look forward to science meetings because I know the work we do as a sixth- to 12th-grade science team benefits us all.

Over my nine years of teaching, we have had reiterative discussions to articulate curriculum. It is incredibly powerful to sit in a room full of other science educators who are designing curricular materials that leverage the instruction of teachers in preceding grade levels and that intentionally feed into the following year's work. I know that the ninth- and 11th-grade science teachers who flank my chemistry class are depending on me to pick up where they left off or pave the way for more advanced work in the upcoming year.

Vertical teams meet about once or twice a month to set schoolwide instructional goals, develop common language, reflect

on pedagogy, test-drive new lesson ideas, discuss new reads in their subjects, share lesson materials, collectively design rubrics, and honestly critique our interdependent curricula. The kind of mutual accountability that vertical teams create seems more authentic to me than other attempts to standardize accountability and assessment. It feels like I answer more directly to our students and to my colleagues as we all drive toward the same set goals.

A third collaborative structure at East Side is "professional learning groups" (PLGs), which are organized around shared professional development interests, needs, or themes. Though we have been experimenting with the exact design of PLGs for a few years, they have evolved to focus on peer observation and feedback. Belonging to a community where high-level pedagogical teacher-to-teacher talk is nurtured motivates and challenges me to attempt new instructional strategies. This is an example of how collaboration can support innovation. PLGs provide the space that teachers need to try out new teaching techniques and refine them. PLGs are especially useful when master teachers model strategies and other peers provide nonevaluative feedback.

Finally, "roundtables" are another collaborative hallmark at East Side. Twice a year in each grade (at the end of each semester), students present their choice of best work from each class. Roundtables are special because, beyond celebrating their work, students must also demonstrate on demand what they have learned throughout the semester. They often present to outside guests, such as parents, scientists, mathematicians, historians, writers, professionals from a variety of fields, college professors, and educators from other middle and high schools. All staff members at the school also serve as roundtable judges, and this builds trust as my colleagues evaluate what my students have learned. In such an authentic system of assessment, collaboration is a critical part of planning for and providing feedback on each other's roundtables.

* * *

As with all relationships, sometimes it's the small things that matter the most. Much of the crucial work done during the meetings described above depends on the smaller interactions that occur daily among teachers, way before they sit next to each other to work together formally. And in many cases, it's not even what you do, but how you do it, that counts.

When you take time to simply listen—

maybe not even give advice, but just truly hear another colleague—it can build the trust necessary for future joint work. For example, you build trust when you listen to the new science teacher on your team who vents about a lesson that went well in one block but crashed in another. Those small moments can plant the seeds for meaningful collaboration. That new teacher might have an administrator to help him or her formally, but the idea that a peer can also provide support through nonjudgmental listening creates professional friendships that set the foundation for us to work together authentically in other contexts.

In my experience, genuine trust and sustained professional friendships lead to increased teacher and student learning.

Throughout my career, strong relationships with peers have enriched my efforts to grow as a teacher.

Being able to visit a colleague's classroom because I know he or she is really strong at facilitating rich classroom discussion, routinely being asked to share student work across grades or disciplines, and regularly meeting to discuss the needs of a cohort of shared students—these are all examples of structures stemming from a school culture where collaboration isn't one activity, or something we do during a designated day and time, but rather, it's the way we do everything.

Throughout my career, strong relationships with peers have enriched my efforts to grow as a teacher. And it looks like I am not alone; research shows[1] that collaboration can be directly linked to both teacher improvement and student achievement.*

Some of the structures described above—grade teams, vertical teams, PLGs, and roundtables—may be similar in name to what other schools across the country do. What I believe makes my school's structures especially authentic and effective is their focus on rigorous project- and portfolio-based work. East Side is one of a growing number of New York

Performance Standards Consortium schools,† mainly in New York City, where students complete capstone projects, known as performance-based assessment tasks, in each subject area to meet their graduation requirements.

Consortium schools gather regularly to hold each other accountable through "moderation studies," in which many schools get together to blindly study, score, and provide feedback on other schools' performance-based assessment tasks. We tend to be very tough on each other's work, but in a professional, constructive way that spurs each of us to return to our schools and raise the level of our work. Interschool collaboration can be a powerful way for teachers to share ideas relating to curriculum and instruction, inspiring us to work harder in the context of our own schools' individual contexts, needs, and student populations. In addition, the sharing of student work within and across schools provides a larger sense of professional community.

Teachers and schools cannot create and sustain this collaborative, interdependent culture on their own. Policies and incentives must encourage trust among teachers and among teacher teams. At a minimum, existing policies shouldn't get in the way of collaboration and coordination, as might be the case in other schools. If, at the end of the day, my students and I are judged primarily on a single exam score from a single day, I imagine this could inevitably breed isolation and an unhealthy competitiveness among teachers, and in the long run, fail to foster collaboration as a way of doing things.

Endnote

1. See Esther Quintero, ed., *Teaching in Context: The Social Side of Education Reform* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2017).

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*For more on how collaboration can strengthen education, see the Winter 2013–2014 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/winter2013-2014.

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†For more on the New York Performance Standards Consortium, see "Putting the Focus on Student Engagement" in the Spring 2016 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/spring2016/barlowe-and-cook.

The Trust Gap

Understanding the Effects of Leadership Churn in School Districts

By Kara S. Finnigan and Alan J. Daly

As every educator knows, it's important who your colleagues are—fellow teachers and principals alike. After all, relationships with colleagues shape so much of what goes on in schools. Over time, these interactions transform into what researchers call formal and informal networks; it is through these networks that learning takes place, as educators interact with one another, exchanging knowledge, advice, and professional support and engaging in friendships. The strongest of those social ties are grounded in trusting relationships, which are the cornerstone of productive human relations.

Indeed, much has been written about how positive relationships, by their very nature, involve a high level of reciprocal trust developed and earned over time.[1] Trust is based on interpersonal interdependence[2] and involves an individual's or group's willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that that party is benevolent, reliable, competent, honest, and open.[3] High levels of trust have been associated with a variety of efforts that require collaboration, learning, complex-information sharing, problem solving, shared decision making, and coordinated action[4]—the very types of efforts that occur daily in high-functioning organizations (including schools).

When we interact with others in our networks, we assess "risk" in terms of how they might react. Over time, with repeated positive interactions, our level of trust increases and our caution concerning risk decreases. Individuals can interact more effectively with high levels of trust. Consider how you and a work colleague might have a shorthand for communicating and acting; it is trust that allows for this efficiency. Moreover, when you have a high-trust relationship with someone, you are more likely

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Change at the top can change life in the classroom, and constant change can make teachers want to hunker down and wait things out.

to share your struggles, and it is in that moment of vulnerability with a close colleague that some of the best learning happens.

The back and forth exchanges between individuals in the process of developing trust are referred to as "reciprocal relationships." In reciprocal relationships, each person contributes to the other; these relationships provide opportunities for individuals to interact, learn together, and build trust, critical components in education systems oriented toward change.[5]

The opposite is true in networks where individuals come and go. When there is what we call "churn" among colleagues, opportunities for trust and reciprocal interactions can't fully develop, and the risk or cost of interacting increases significantly.

Ultimately, the social and economic costs of churn are deeply intertwined. For instance, when someone who's a trusted colleague, key listener, helpful resource, friend, or confidant leaves a school, that departure creates a hole that's hard to fill. The departure can involve a loss of knowledge, social support, and institutional memory. Moreover, it can create a sense of instability and disrupt routines, which in turn can lead to a loss of productivity. These are very real social costs associated with turnover in schools and districts—in addition to the financial expense in terms of training and development.

By and large, research has focused more on the departure of teachers and has overlooked the fact that central office leaders and principals also leave school districts at high rates, especially in large urban districts. This oversight is important to highlight for several reasons. First, we know that educational leadership matters for educational improvement.[6] Second, research suggests that it takes about five years for education reforms to take hold.[7] Third, absent district leadership, churn can potentially have a cascading disruptive impact, from the superintendent's office all the way to the classroom. Our research attempts to broaden understanding about leadership churn and how it affects the entire school system.

In an era of multiple education reforms, administrator churn, particularly at the district office, can disrupt educational priorities and initiatives and cause classroom teachers to adopt the mentality of "this too shall pass." At some point, most teachers have wondered, "How long will this approach last?," "What will be the *new* focus?," or "Who will be in charge next and what does that mean for my school?"

Anyone who's been in education even a short time knows that change at the top can change life in the classroom, and constant change can make teachers want to hunker down and wait things out.

The anxiety and concern caused by administrative churn can take enormous time and energy, moving the focus away from creating the conditions to support teaching and learning. Moreover, classroom teachers are often given conflicting messages about what they, their school, and their district should prioritize. This is a reality that many teachers, particularly those in urban schools, face frequently. Given the ubiquity of this experience for educators across the country, we wanted to better understand administrator churn and shine a light on how system disruption can take the work of education in some not-so-promising directions.

In this article, we argue that studying churn among central office leaders and school principals can improve retention of high-quality leaders who can better support teachers.[8] To be clear, we are not saying that all churn is negative. In fact, some turnover can be healthy and healing to relationships and wider communities. However, constant churn often means that initiatives barely have the opportunity to get off the ground before a new central office administrator or principal comes on board and rolls out a different approach. In essence, constant churn at the leadership level has a significant social cost that affects teachers on multiple levels.

To study administrator churn, we use social network theory, a core aspect of which is social capital. Social capital is concerned with the resources that exist in relationships between individuals.[9] The ability to access relationships with others and the quality of those relationships often determine opportunities for success. Networks can be seen as the patterned structure of relationships that exist within a particular organization or group. To make this come to life in an educational setting, we use a technique called social network analysis to answer two questions: To what extent do leaders in low-performing school districts have the relationships necessary for large-scale learning and improvement? And how does network churn affect the underlying social networks of educators?

A District Example

While studies of churn have often focused on the classroom level, we argue that it is critical to examine churn across the

Those leaders who were really important in terms of sharing expertise and knowledge were overwhelmingly the ones who left.

entire school system. Specifically, we focus here on the relationships among and between school principals and central office leaders to understand the district as a larger organizational unit. Districtwide leadership, in particular, is critical to systemwide (as opposed to school-by-school) change.

In this work, we focus on educators in formal leadership roles who directly support teachers and the core mission of teaching and learning. That said, the ideas we present also apply to networks of teachers. So consider this work as insight into what is happening at the formal leadership level and how this affects the work of teachers. But also consider this as an example of what can happen when a trusted teacher leaves your school.

To illustrate these ideas about relationships and churn, we turn to our recent study of a midsize urban school district in the northeastern United States serving approximately 32,000 students. Although here we present results from this one district, our use of social network analysis in other districts has found similar patterns, suggesting broad implications, particularly for urban districts and districts on the "urban fringe." Initially, we were not focused on churn but rather on the underlying relationships among district leaders and the structures and conditions necessary for school improvement. However, churn quickly rose to the surface as an important aspect of improvement efforts in these districts.

Labeled as "in need of improvement" under No Child Left Behind, the federal education law at the time, the district's student enrollment is 90 percent nonwhite, with 88 percent of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch. Within the district, nearly all of the high schools and many of the elementary schools are identified as "underperforming," based on state and federal accountability guidelines. This district typifies many across the country in that it serves primarily students of color from low-socioeconomic communities, has a pattern of underperformance, and is engaged in districtwide improvement efforts to move beyond sanctions.

As part of our study, we surveyed individuals in formal leadership positions in the district, including the superintendent, chiefs and directors from the central office, and principals at each school. Each person was given a list of every other central office administrator and principal in this network of more than 120 people and asked to indicate, for each of them:

- Do you work with this person regularly?
- Is this person a source of knowledge and new ideas for you?
- Do you have an emotional connection with this person?

Our survey questions asked people to consider two types of relationships—those that are work-related (e.g., with people you seek for advice about your work or consult as your "go to" experts for doing your job better), and those that are more emotional, expressive, and social (e.g., with people you consider friends or you vent to). For example, for a work-related relationship, we ask, *"Please select the frequency of interaction for each school/district staff whom you consider a reliable source of expertise related to your work."* And for an emotional relationship, we ask, *"Whom do you consider a close friend, and by 'close friend' we mean someone you really trust and engage in activities with outside of school?"*

We asked respondents to quantitatively assess their relationships with each individual on a scale ranging from 0 ("I do not interact with this person at all") to 4 ("I interact with this person one or two times a week"). As such, the survey questions asked them to consider and then quantify both work-related relationships and emotional relationships. Both are important for change and improvement. Emotional relationships are especially critical during times of change, because individuals can be quite vulnerable when trying out new approaches and such relationships can make change seem less daunting .

We administered the survey to the district's leadership team annually during our four-year study,* from 2010 to 2013, and found substantial leadership churn—51 percent. A 51 percent churn rate is particularly significant when one considers that academic outcomes, especially in high-poverty schools, typically decrease the year after a leader leaves.[10] Our study revealed that those leaders who were really important in terms of sharing expertise and knowledge were overwhelmingly the ones who left. In addition, we found that during the time of our study, work-related relationships increased while emotional relationships diminished among district leaders, hindering the formation of the high-trust relationships necessary for productive work. Below, we provide details of our study as well as its significance for teachers.

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*In total, we surveyed 181 individuals over the four-year period.

A Constant State of Flux Undermines Connections around Work

Work-related interactions tell us whether a district has the set of relationships necessary for school improvement. We started by examining the work-related relationships among school and central office leaders, as these relationships help illuminate connections around a particular work practice—in this case, the work of educational leaders.

In 2010, the district's leaders were on average connected to roughly six other leaders from whom they sought work-related information. These linkages more than doubled in the time period of our study, to an average of 12 connections in 2011, 10 in 2012, and 11 in 2013, suggesting that leaders were seeking other leaders' work-related expertise at a higher rate after the first year of our study. This increase in connections is important because it provides leaders with more sources of work-related expertise, which could help improve practices and outcomes at their schools. However, we found that those who were more highly sought for work-related expertise were ultimately the ones who left.

From 2010 to 2013, as mentioned above, approximately half the leaders moved into and out of the district over the four-year period. Given this churn, one can imagine how difficult it would be to support teachers in meaningful ways. Any educator reading this article has likely experienced the disruption when one leader leaves. Now imagine one out of every two leaders leaving over four years. As discussed earlier, school improvement is grounded in relationships, trust, and collaboration—all difficult to develop and sustain with a revolving door of leaders.

Weakened Emotional Ties

While we found work-related ties were increasing, we simultaneously found emotional relationships were decreasing. The average number of connections between leaders decreased from five in 2010 to two in 2011, then slowly built back up to just three emotional connections in 2013. This decrease matters because we know that work practices are enhanced through such relationships. Having fewer or weaker social-emotional relationships hinders the ability of educators to collaborate on school and district improvement.

Mapping our social network analysis can help us visually represent these patterns. Network maps are not yet that common in education, so a bit of explanation and orientation will be helpful. In the maps below, each symbol represents a leader in the district, while the lines between them represent the connections—in this case, emotional connections—the leaders have to each other. The maps also show leaders by shape, with school leaders designated by squares and central office leaders designated by circles. The lines are directional, and the arrow indicates whom the person goes to (in this case, for emotional support). If the line has an arrow on both ends, it indicates a reciprocal relationship, meaning they mutually seek out each other for an emotional connection. Dots running down the left-hand side of the map are leaders who were isolated from everyone else—in other words, no school or central office leader turned to them, nor did they turn to anyone else. The symbols are sized by how much activity a particular individual has in the network—that is, the larger dots mean that more people go to these particular leaders.

The maps show the entire leadership network, with the pink symbols representing the "stayers"—or those leaders who stayed throughout the four years—and the other colors representing those who left. These network maps illustrate the decrease in

> Having fewer or weaker social-emotional relationships hinders the ability of educators to collaborate on school and district improvement.

Network Churn for Emotional Ties, 2010 to 2013
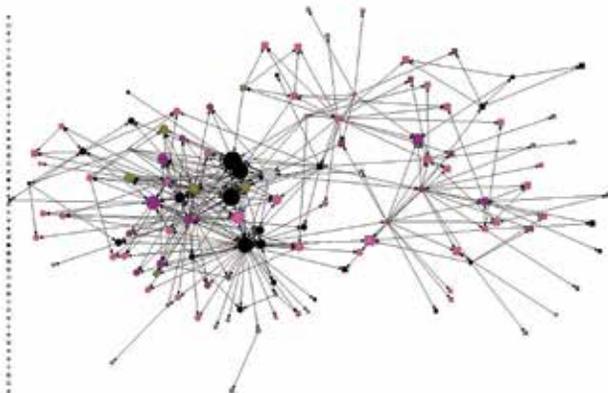
2010
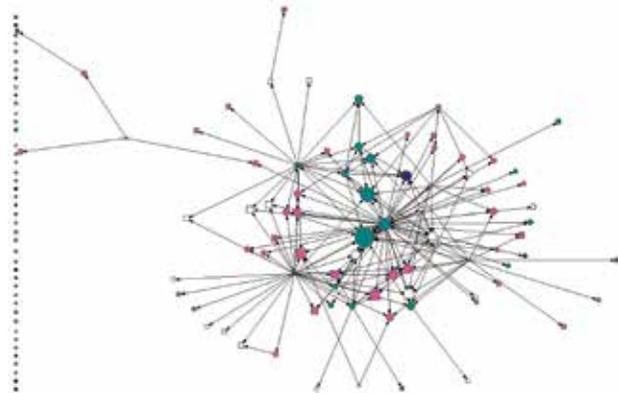
2013

emotional ties from churn and, importantly, the challenges it could lead to, since there are no central symbols in the stable group of leaders (in pink).

Ultimately, leaders in this district had to re-establish underlying relationships each year, both work-related and emotional, because of the movement into and out of the district. Our analysis indicates just how tenuous these relationships were, with leaders having slightly more work-related ties than emotional

With a revolving door of leaders, educators often get pulled in multiple directions or are presented with conflicting approaches.

ties. In addition, reciprocal ties (which are considered a reflection of strong relationships) represented less than 17 percent of work-related ties identified in 2013. Reciprocated emotional relationships dropped from 12 percent to 4 percent during our study, suggesting weak emotional connectedness in the district and making the formation of trusting ties—and ultimately the collegiality necessary for collaboration and improvement—extremely difficult. Compared with other studies we have done, this proportion of strong (i.e., reciprocated) relationships is quite low, particularly in terms of the emotional relationships.

Principal Churn

Since we know the work of principals directly influences the lives of teachers and the overall school climate, we looked more care-

fully at the networks of principals specifically. In looking at principal churn, we found the underlying relationships among principals were quite sparse, indicating a weak system of connections between school leaders in this district. Our data suggest that principals were cut off from both other principals and central office leaders, effectively making them islands in the leadership network. While some principals may find it useful to just "do their own thing," being isolated from the rest of the network of leaders likely means less access to information and other resources that flow through these connections. This isolation has direct implications for a principal's ability to support teachers within a school as well as limits the overall district's ability to bring about support and improvement across schools.

Besides examining social-emotional ties, we also examined the overall work-related ties among principals. While work-related ties initially increased, the principals who were sought for advice by other principals subsequently left. In 2012, and again in 2013, we saw a decrease in work-related relationships between principals. Importantly, nearly all of the high schools and many of the elementary schools in this district were under sanction, and they faced even greater challenges because of the revolving door of school leaders. Principal flux and a lack of work-related relationships, as well as a lack of social-emotional ties, can result in less trust in schools and, potentially, in every classroom.

Our work also suggested that the principals of the lowest-performing schools were least likely to be connected into the larger network. This is particularly troubling, as the leaders of these schools may be the ones who most need to identify new strategies and approaches to support teachers in the hard work of teaching students with academic, and often socio-emotional, challenges. Without relationships with other principals and central office leaders—which provide access to information and supports—it may become increasingly difficult for leaders of these schools to turn around low performance, a task that is already very challenging.[11] Moreover, this isolation does not position these high-need schools to be in the flow of resources and support that often come from central office leaders and help shape districtwide efforts.

Think about it as a web of relationships that provides support and information for district leaders—and now picture the principals of the highest-need schools as operating outside of that web. Ensuring principals are well connected and supported may be one of the most important roles of central office leaders, as the support of and care for principals directly affects the lives of teachers.

While the performance of schools in urban settings receives overwhelming attention, the organizational instability that results from the churn of educational leaders is generally overlooked. As our data show, more than half of the leaders in the district we studied left during a four-year period, with the constant flow into and out of leadership positions resulting in fiscal, human, and social capital losses. Those losses, including the departure of people who helped bind together a social system, have detrimental effects on an organization in terms of training, development, and support. The sense of foreboding and anxiety teachers face when there is churn at the top is real.

Greater attention should be paid to relationship building and leadership development for both central office administrators and principals.

Constant churn has two distinct and negative effects on the lives of teachers. First, the ongoing movement of leaders into and out of the district and schools can undermine a consistent vision and set of approaches. With a revolving door of leaders, educators often get pulled in multiple directions or are presented with conflicting approaches. This alone is disruptive to the heart of teaching and learning. Second, this disruption can inhibit the formation of relationships among teachers. Further, with a lack of clarity and consistency in direction, low morale is likely to follow as educators struggle to move forward. High levels of churn are not just limited to the district we studied but are present elsewhere and show few signs of abating, particularly in school systems that serve youth from high-poverty communities.

Our research suggests that greater attention should be paid to relationship building and leadership development for both central office administrators and principals, to allow leaders to develop relationships within and between these groups built on the trust and respect that enable true collaboration. Unfortunately, our data show that, over time, leaders who played a more central role in the expertise network left the district—shattering the underlying relationships that did exist—while more-peripheral leaders remained in leadership positions. Our results align with a previous study[12] that found that leaders who were most sought for their expertise but received less reward and recognition tended to leave the school system. Such departures contribute to challenges in professional growth districtwide.

Finally, our data indicate weak connections among principals, resulting in extremely limited sharing of ideas and practices across schools. Most connections that existed in the last year of our study were among those principals who had remained across the four years, with newcomers either occupying peripheral positions or isolated from the existing expertise network. In fact, newcomer principals rarely connected with other principals. As a result, these longer-term principals' schools, and ultimately the teachers in them, may suffer, since it is through newer principals that new ideas and strategies enter schools and school systems. Because these leaders were isolated from others in the district, their schools' potential for innovation was diminished.

These results have implications at both the state and local levels, as well. First, as states work to support schools and districts in the current educational policy context, it will be important to review policies that result in high levels of movement into and out of the leadership team (including principals and central office staff). Prior accountability policies may have contributed to the churn we see here—for example, the school turnaround strategy requiring the replacement of principals in struggling schools. Second, strengthening trust within a system should be given top priority. This can be difficult, given the emphasis on technical aspects of reform (e.g., teacher evaluation and testing), particularly in places where emotional ties have become highly fractured. At the heart of forming trusting relationships is the ability to be vulnerable and share, to show respect for others' ideas, and to learn from the knowledge that others bring to an organization. Both innovation and improvement require risk taking and idea sharing, but underlying emotional connections are critical in helping the technical aspects of work to take hold.

An African proverb states, "If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together." For too long, we have focused on going fast at the expense of going far. Worse, we have strayed from focusing on the relationships necessary to bring about change. At its core, our education system succeeds by virtue of its professionals. We have been calling for complex changes in our system without understanding how change happens. To ensure the people with expertise stay to do the important work of leading schools, supporting teachers, and educating our children, leadership competency must include learning how to develop trusting and collaborative relationships among all educators within schools and school systems. □

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