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# Foreword

As Barbara Schneider and I brought to a close our decade-long study that culminated in *Trust in Schools* (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), we sought to test out our draft ideas against the critical reactions of colleagues. We looked to other scholars to critique our theoretical framework of trust as social resource for collective action, to scrutinize our overall methodology, and to offer plausible alternative explanations for the evidence that we had assembled. Similarly, we sought occasions to present our conceptual framework and core findings to diverse practitioner audiences, including school principals, teachers, and central office leaders. Our aim in *Trust in Schools* was to develop an empirically grounded theory of practice. A critical test in this regard was whether these ideas found salience among diverse groups of school practitioners. Quite simply, did our emerging understandings about relational trust help them think better about the improvement work in which they were involved?

While the reactions of both academic colleagues and school practitioners to *Trust in Schools* were generally quite positive, many of these early reviewers—especially practitioners—invariably asked a question for which we did not have an answer. These questions typically took the following form: “So I understand now that trust functions as an important resource for school improvement, but what do we know about how to develop such trust that I can use in direct work with a school community?” It is in seeking a response to this core question of practice improvement that the investigation reported on by Julie Kochanek in this book took root.

Although this is a short book, it is ambitious in its goal—to offer an empirically grounded theory of practice improvement. Our field is now rich with accounts of outstanding schools (call this “condition B”) as well as critical commentary about the weak state of practices commonly found in many other schools (call this “condition A”). Good evidence, however, about how one might best navigate from “A” to “B” is much harder to secure. To date, we have had to rely mostly on retrospective accounts of

successful school changes and more general clinical commentaries about school improvement practice.

Kochanek brings disciplined inquiry to this problem. She synthesizes concepts from a variety of literatures searching for clues—discerned in prior investigations in other applied fields—about the core processes involved in building trust. She then proceeds to delve deeper into these insights using both in-depth case studies and large-scale survey analyses from more than 400 school communities engaged in reform efforts during the late 1990s. *Building Trust for Better Schools* weaves together a complex tapestry of argument and evidence in specifying, testing, and refining an integrated set of propositions about effective trust building and the contextual features that shape these developments in varied school communities.

Along the way, Kochanek offers some provocative findings. Like many previous professional accounts, she documents the value of shared local school governance as a basis for trust formation among school professionals. She also, however, offers new evidence that the success of such arrangements is contingent on the base level of relational trust present in a school community. Absent at least some modicum of social resources to start with, a naïve effort to implement shared governance, rather than enhancing trust, could easily produce the opposite effect.

In a related vein, Kochanek documents that inclusive, facilitative leadership—another common feature in many professional accounts of good schools—can contribute powerfully to trust formation. However, she also documents that the deliberate use of formal role authority can likewise enable trust. Specifically, she describes how principals' efforts to counsel weak teachers contribute to trust building. To be sure, this strategy, if arbitrarily employed, would quickly eviscerate trust between teachers and their principal. When used thoughtfully as a last resort with teachers whose classroom practices are deeply problematic and who have clearly resisted improvement efforts, such actions demonstrate a principal's resolve to act in the best interest of children. Others in a school community quickly take notice and value leaders who are willing to take on the hard and sometimes painful tasks necessary to advance teaching and learning for every child. These are essential discernments about the integrity of leadership, which in turn fuel wider school–community trust building.

These accounts by Kochanek illuminate a fundamental confusion in much of the writings about school reform—conflating a desired end state with effective and necessary mechanisms for achieving it. While accounts of “condition B”—for example, school-based professional communities anchored in shared norms and with strong collegial accountability—can be very compelling, the necessary processes for getting to this state may be far from collegial.

On balance, some may well disagree with Kochanek's findings, and others may offer alternative explanations for the body of evidence documented in the pages that follow. This is precisely what a book like this should do—catalyze more informed, evidence-based conversations about the improvement of school practice. As Kochanek herself notes in her concluding chapter, this volume represents a first sketch of an interrelated set of school practices conducive to building trust. Much work remains on expanding these accounts and further testing these ideas through the day-to-day efforts at improving the organization and operation of our nation's schools. *Building Trust for Better Schools* now offers us new guidance for these next steps.

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