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A Study of School Board & Superintendent Relations: Strategies for Building Trust in the Mistrustful Context of K-12 Public Education

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Bowers, Kelly Dawn

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A Study of School Board & Superintendent Relations:
Strategies for Building Trust in the Mistrustful Context of K-12 Public Education

By
Kelly Dawn Bowers

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education
in the
Graduate Division
of the
University of California at Berkeley

Committee in charge:
Professor Heinrich Mintrop, Chair
Professor Cynthia E. Coburn
Professor Christopher K. Ansell

Summer 2016
A Study of School Board & Superintendent Relations:
Strategies for Building Trust in the Mistrustful Context of K-12 Public Education

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By

Kelly Dawn Bowers
Abstract

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Doctor of Education

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Professor Heinrich Mintrop, Chair

As illuminated in my study, which is only a small subset of the larger public education governance system, the mounting political pressure that school boards and superintendents face does not seem to be diminishing. It is well documented that boards under fire from constituents often make the superintendent the scapegoat, which undermines trust and threatens their strength of relationship with an uneven power dynamic. Whether attributed to general dissatisfaction with American governance which leaves superintendents subject to the political whims and winds of school boards (Lutz & Iannaccone, 1978); their increasingly limited sphere of influence in an era of high stakes external accountability (Howell, 2005), or the acute pressures of the politics of personalism (Feuerstein & Opfer, 1998), the odds of forming solid, trusting relational bonds are stacked against them. Over the past few decades, there has been a growing movement in many fields and industries, including public education, to develop new, collaborative models and approaches to managing and governing, as an alternative to more adversarial, bureaucratic and top-down methods (Ansell & Gash, 2008). With this move away from competitive toward collaborative governance, relationship building at all levels has taken on new importance.

In this case study, I examined the conflict-ridden relationship dynamic and tense micropolitical climate inherited by two superintendents and boards, within a general context of distrust directed toward public education and elected officials, which is further exacerbated by negative interactions with their immediate predecessors. Using Bryk and Schneider’s (2002) concept of relational trust which was developed in other public school system settings, as an ideal measure, I was able to gather evidence of substantive change in the tenor and positive quality of the board/superintendent relationship over time. My findings highlighted two newly hired superintendents who took stock of their somewhat damaged and mistrustful board/superintendent relationship status upon entry and strategically cultivated relational trust with their respective school boards, as substantiated by increased and genuine displays of mutual respect, personal regard, integrity and competence in their public and private interactions.

My findings indicated that a board/superintendent relationship is not static but malleable, and with concentrated focus and customized strategic intervention by a new superintendent, a previously damaged governance team relationship can be repaired and trust restored. Even in a high-trust situation, however, my conclusions divulged cautionary implications, as a board and superintendent that become too close, too trusting in the public’s perception or reality, risk becoming insular or out of touch with the larger constituency they represent and serve.
Dedication

For my husband, Rob

Your steadfast love, strength and encouragement helped me throughout this challenging journey.
You have sacrificed so much so that I could pursue my goals and dreams.
Without you by my side, I would not be who I am today.

For my son, Steven

From the moment you were born, you gave me renewed purpose, and a reason to always push
myself to the limit and never, ever give up, even in the face of adversity.
I hope that by my example, you have learned that the most important pursuits
in life are never easy, but in the end, worth the struggle and effort.
Thank you for serving as master editor, proofreader and homework project manager.
I am so proud of all you are and have become and I hope that I have made you proud as well.

For my mom and dad, Brenda and Bob

Your belief in me, and in my ability to reach this milestone, even when I didn’t think it was
possible, has been unwavering. Thank you for ingraining in me such a strong work ethic.
Thank you for fostering my childhood fascination with books and learning
as it has culminated in this achievement
Most of all, thank you for your unconditional love.

For my brother, John

Your support of this pursuit, both emotionally and financially, has been invaluable.
I can never repay you for being there for your “little sis” and helping me to persevere and finish.
I am so lucky you are my “big brother.” You and your beautiful family (Sabrina, Sophie & Cole)
have made this significant accomplishment in my life even more special and meaningful.

I can hardly wait to spend time and be fully present with my entire family, once again!
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1 The Leadership for Educational Program is a doctoral program offered by UC Berkeley’s Graduate School of Education that prepares professionals for leadership roles in school districts and organizations committed to student success and equity. Source: https://leep.berkeley.edu/
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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Background

America's democratized and decentralized public education system has been described as a hybrid byproduct of national interest, state function, and local operation (Crum, 2007). Despite federal educational edicts and mandates in the wake of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act,² America maintains a highly decentralized approach to public schooling that manifests in significant local control by lay people serving on school boards. Individual states, by virtue of their unique demographics and political bent, vary in the level of rigor of standards, per pupil spending allocation, class size and educational initiatives. Although the state is responsible for educating its students, the duties of establishing and overseeing public schools are ultimately delegated to each local community. To compound the complexity, nearly 15,000 locally elected or appointed school board governments, consisting of more than 95,000 board members (Smoley, 1999; The Twentieth Century Fund, 1992), are empowered to establish district-level educational priorities, set policy and make local decisions. Each state, including California, has a host of local boards that wield considerable decision-making power and influence, both directly and indirectly, on key aspects of education, curriculum, resource allocation, practice and policy as it relates to students, parents, staff and the community they represent (Petersen & Fusarelli, 2005). In light of this internationally unprecedented local control, the significant impact of local board action should not be underestimated; public education decision-making remains the very lifeblood of a school board (Smoley, 1999) and at the heart of all educational administration (Griffiths, 1959).

Yet, school boards do not function in isolation; they are a body of individually elected or appointed officials and thus subject to levels of political pressure. In the modern landscape of public education that increasingly touts collaborative leadership models and interdependent working environments, they are an integral part of a district governance team along with the superintendent, operating in response to competing values and demands in a broader, complex political system (Kirst, 1994; Wirth, Whidden & Manson, 2008). A key influential actor is the district superintendent whose responsibilities as chief executive officer include informing the board of educational mandates and trends, making policy recommendations, and translating policy into administrative action (Duvall, 2005; Fusarelli, 2006). The superintendent is by no means the sole source of influence. The governance team interrelationship is constrained by virtue of its politicized nature and as a body, must respond to a slew of competing pressures exerted from local constituents, collective bargaining units, the media, public interest groups, private industry, and legislative mandates.

In the wake of political scandals, economic crisis and policy shortcomings, public organizations that once enjoyed the confidence of their constituents, are facing a deficit of trust and a consequent loss of inherent institutional trustworthiness (La Porte & Metlay, 1996). School district decision-makers are not immune to this growing challenge. Fueled by the media amid fears of increased global competition that is rending our high school graduates underprepared, many are quick to scapegoat and cast blame. In this era of high-stakes accountability and

² The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which passed Congress with overwhelming bipartisan support in 2001 and was signed into law by President George W. Bush on Jan. 8, 2002, is the name for the reauthorized version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. It was recently replaced by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) that was signed into law by President Barack Obama on December 11, 2015. Source: http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/index.html
corresponding punitive measures, district leaders face demands for transparency, are targeted by the media, and must defend or prove their trustworthiness.

Impetus for the Study

Historically, school board and superintendent relations have not been the focus of extensive, well-designed research and studies were limited in that they were based on personal testimonials and anecdotal evidence focusing on individual rather than collective behavior (Alsbury, 2008; Land, 2002). Despite emerging awareness of its import, few empirical studies have been conducted over the last several decades and theoretical extension is scarce in the arena of board relationships (Alsbury, 2008). The research has leaned toward chronology, historicism, and descriptive review (Cistone & The National School Boards Association [NSBA], 1975). In the past decade, scholars have renewed interest in this topic and more rigorous studies indicate board and superintendent relations have far-reaching leadership, decision-making and policy implications, particularly as political and economic tensions mount (Cunningham & Cordeiro, 2000; Petersen & Short, 2001; McCurdy, 1992; Nygren, 1992; Odden, 1995). Studies also investigate the uneven dynamics between boards and superintendents (Bjork, 2001; Boyd, 1975; Danzberger, 1993; Mountford, 2004). In a few case studies, there are instances of harmonious governance. Most often, the board and superintendent relationship is characterized as strained and conflict-ridden (Kowalski, 1999; McCurdy, 1992) and attributed causes are due to: role definition confusion; competing power or political motivations; and varying degrees of strength of relationship (Duvall, 2005; Fusarelli, 2006; Kirst, 1994; 2005; Mountford, 2004; Petersen & Fusarelli, 2005; Wirt & Kirst, 2009; Wirth, Whiddon & Manson, 2008).

There are some studies that look at board behavior and political pressures on decision-making and the subsequent impact on superintendent tenure (Cistone & NSBA, 1975; Lutz & Iannaccone, 1978). A few examine interaction patterns between boards and superintendents relative to expectations and boundaries (Carol, Cunningham, Danzberger, Kirst, McCloud, & Usdan, 1986). Though the research is not exhaustive, there is speculation and evidence that a district’s success in managing change and effective decision-making is dependent on the level of productivity and quality of interplay between the superintendent and board (Blumburg & Blumberg, 1985). A tense superintendent/board relationship weakens overall district stability; negatively influences public credibility; impedes reform; and increases instability or the likelihood of the revolving door syndrome of superintendents (Alsbury, 2008; Dansberger, 1993; Tallerico, 1989). Additional studies suggest a governance team lacking in social capital is likely to falter (Petersen & Fusarelli, 2005). It begs the as yet unanswered question of whether a solid superintendent/board relationship would be more conducive to long-term stability and thus result in a more unified governance team and approach that is better able to withstand external political pressure and infighting that can detract from its focus and purpose of educating public school students.

Compounding the issue of relationship building among a district governance team is the general climate of mistrust that permeates the entire K-12 public school system. Analyses

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3 The National School Boards Association (NSBA) is a nonprofit educational organization operating as a federation of state associations of school boards across the United States. Founded in 1940, NSBA represents state school boards associations and their more than 90,000 local school board members. It argues that education is a civil right, and public education is America’s most vital institution. Source: https://www.nsba.org/
of the critical role of trust are the focus of many studies on governance of public entities (La Porte & Metlay, 1996) and trust is cited as a crucial element in collaborative governance enterprises that merge public and private entities for key decision-making (Ansell & Gash, 2008). A burgeoning literature base that encourages the development of professional learning communities as a vehicle for educational reform identifies trust as a key ingredient to the sharing of expertise and the building of professional capacity within an educational organization. Studies of conditions and factors that influence, encourage or constrain trust-building focus on a range of private and public institutions and even at many levels of school organizations (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2004), but none concentrate on the district governance team level. Some researchers explore the dominant patterns of relationship between boards and superintendents and suggest the level of trust is a pivotal lever influencing policymaking power, ranging from a strong, well-trusted superintendent, who dominates policymaking to a strong board that doesn’t seem to trust the superintendent that succeeds in curtailing the superintendent’s influence (Hess & Leal, 2003; Kirst, 2008). However, they do not go much beyond identification and description of these patterns.

**Purpose of the Study**

The literature establishes the importance of trust in collective decision-making (Jagd, 2009; Marsh, 2007; Newton & Sackney, 2005) and in collaborative governance between private and public actors during joint decision-making (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Surprisingly, although local district governance teams are part of a two-century old tradition and a formidable collective political body, the role of trust in board and superintendent governance remains largely unexamined. To address an apparent gap in the literature, I examine the superintendent’s unique positional and relational capacity for elevating trust with a board. I analyze how trust is cultivated by superintendents who have inherited initially poor relations and identify factors and strategies that influence trust building by investigating superintendent/board relations in two school districts.

The goal of this qualitative case study was to shed light on what superintendents can strategically do to facilitate trust building with a previously untrusting team, thereby increasing functionality. This dissertation first sought to illuminate the factors (external and internal) that foster or impede the cultivation of trusting relations at the district level and then demonstrate how a superintendent can, over time, deliberately develop skills and capacity to trust-build. At a time when public school district leaders are facing harsh criticism for inefficiency and dysfunction, the findings in this study:

1. increase understanding of the interpersonal dynamics of trust that influence governance teams; and
2. empower superintendents to work strategically with their boards to enhance levels of trust and improve efficacy.

**General Problem of Practice**

There is an emerging crisis in superintendent/board relations that hinges on a lack of trust and results in a lack of clear role definition and boundaries. This is acknowledged by both boards and superintendents and reinforced by external accountability inputs. The result is
an almost universal lack of trust in public education in general, and an increasing lack of trust between boards and superintendents in particular. A modern-day superintendent faces a significant problem or challenge in cultivating positive board relations:

(1) A superintendent must manage/shape the board to implement the agenda or he/she won’t survive; and

(2) A superintendent must engender sufficient confidence and trust so that the board understands and accepts it role in the policy realm and doesn’t micromanage or interfere with the superintendent’s leadership.

Neither of these goals can be accomplished unless trust is established, nurtured and maintained. That does not mean to imply that a high level of trust within a governance team automatically translates into a trusting relationship with community stakeholders, however. My comparative case study between the two public school district governance teams will reveal many tangible benefits of boosting trust between a superintendent and a board, as well as the potential pitfalls and drawbacks. In one case, trust-building strategies will be successfully transferred into practices designed to engender higher levels of trust with the larger community. By contrast, in the other case, my findings and analysis will surface a latent downside as the superintendent and board develop such a strong, close knit, trusting relational bond that they actually start to lose sight of their constituents’ needs and rights to be included and informed in the name of transparency and public accountability. In the former instance, the trust building actions extend beyond the team. In the latter, the protocols for trust building between the superintendent and board members will eventually contribute to a public perception of blind trust which is not considered optimal trust for a democratic, representative body (Jagd, 2009).

**Practitioner Perspective: Problem at the Local Educational Agency (LEA) or District Level**

My personal and professional interest in this inquiry was spurred by my experiences working in public education for over 28 years, first in the classroom and then in varying leadership roles at both the site and district level. The increasing level of administrative responsibility corresponded to a heightened level of awareness, engagement, and personal interaction with various superintendents and school board members. I have worked in two districts for four different superintendents and reported directly to two of them. I also have worked closely with many elected cycles of boards and individual board members. In my years of doctoral and residency study at UC Berkeley, I have observed and studied a range of other local boards and superintendents in action. I have witnessed firsthand respectful, cordial and productive governance team interactions and relations. I have also observed and at times struggled to professionally deal with the unpleasant ramifications and uncertainty of taking direction from a governance team with members at odds with one another.

My interest in this particular research focus has been heightened considerably as it has immediate application and key implications for my role as superintendent of the Livermore Valley Joint Unified School District. One of my first charges upon being hired in May 2010 that was written into my goals for evaluation as superintendent of schools was to restore and repair previously damaged relationships and trust with the board and the collective bargaining units. This charge highlighted a problem (poor relations); it also presupposed a solution, (trust-building). More importantly for me, it assumed an agent (the superintendent) who was
empowered and therefore expected to bring about or facilitate the desired change. As a leader known for having strong interpersonal skills, I realized it was no easy task to use my influence to alter organizational conditions, change ingrained habits and behaviors, and cultivate relationships built upon trust without a solid foundation. Therefore, I began to pore through scholarly research, practitioner guidebooks, and even political science textbooks, in an attempt to gain relevant knowledge and guidance. I turned to my within-district colleagues, retired superintendents serving as ad hoc mentors, and my UC Berkeley professors for answers. I consulted with more seasoned Bay Area superintendents, many who had inherited similar situations and were at varying stages of success or failure in repairing and restoring trusting relations with their boards. It was then that I realized I was not alone in this undertaking; nor was my district particularly unique. The problem of practice I had inherited in my district was fairly commonplace.

It is not surprising that six years later, I have become dismayed as superintendent after superintendent in Alameda County has either retired on schedule, retired early, been terminated, left the district, or even left the profession, either voluntarily or at the behest of the board. Currently, in Alameda County alone, during my six-year tenure, the County Office, the Chabot Las Positas Community College District, and Tri-Valley ROP, as well as Alameda, Albany, Berkeley, Castro Valley, Dublin, Emery, Fremont, Hayward, Mountain House, New Haven, Newark, Oakland, Piedmont, Pleasanton, Richmond, San Leandro, and San Lorenzo Unified School Districts have had turnover or now have an open superintendent position. The sole exception is one K-8 school district, Sunol Glen. Several have had consecutive superintendent changes during that time frame. The official reasons cited publicly by superintendents for vacating these positions are almost always family, personal, relocation, or to seek new challenges and new opportunities but the unofficial private word is the majority are parting ways or seeking change due to irreconcilable interpersonal relationship issues with their board that impede progressive work. Those of us who remain longer in our positions, while still experiencing ups and downs, have expressed overall satisfaction with the quality of governance team relations.

This study helps shape our understanding of the integral role of trust building in collective, collaborative governance. I studied two districts where superintendent/board relations went from poor to strong and identified specific strategies superintendents used to accomplish that feat. I realize I have a rather unique perspective as both a practicing superintendent and researcher. By undertaking this study, I hope to contribute to and inform future theory and practice in public education in the key areas of superintendent/board relations and governance team trust building.

**Organization of the Dissertation**

Chapter one is an introduction. It provides background, outlines the impetus for the study, focus of the study and talks more explicitly about the problem of practice at the heart of the inquiry: relations of trust between superintendents and school boards. Chapter two of this dissertation is a review of the literature focused on:

- Superintendent and school board (governance team) relations
- Decision making and trust-building in complex political organizations
- Theories of trust and trust-based leadership

Chapter three draws from the areas of research and various theories presented and discussed in the literature and highlights the conceptual framework of this study. Chapter three delineates the
research design and methodology for the study, including rationale and process for case selection, data collection and data analysis. It also addresses any issues of validity or transferability. Chapters four, five and six summarize actual findings and conclusions arising from my study, and provide a cross-case comparison. In these chapters, I argue that political and organizational conditions affect the initial level of trust in the working relationship between a board and superintendent. Further, I assert that a superintendent upon hire and entry into a district, after taking into account the unique political circumstances, can successfully implement customized strategies to build and boost relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002) with a previously mistrusting board. I contend the high level of trust that is ultimately established between a superintendent and board does not necessarily translate into an optimal level of trust with respective community stakeholders, as it may lend itself to insular behaviors, which are counter to the democratic body they represent. The final section, chapter seven, contains recommendations to expand upon my findings and prompt further research.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature, Knowledge Base, and Conceptual Framework

My study of governance team relationships and superintendent strategies for trust-building is situated in a much larger body of research that encompasses superintendent/board roles and relationships; macro- and micro-political and organizational factors that affect those relationships; and most germane, theories of trust and trust-based leadership, with an emphasis on Bryk and Schneider’s (2002) conceptualization of relational trust, as that is most demonstrably and immediately applicable to public education settings and corresponding trust-building efforts.

Superintendent and School Board Relations

Over the past few decades, we have experienced the deterioration of superintendent and board relations as a result of a lack of trust in public officials in general, that translates into dissatisfaction with public school officials in particular (Alsbury, 2008). District leaders who were once buoyed by public confidence face increased public scrutiny that results in loss of discretionary power and limits to their local control and sphere of influence (Kirst, 2008; Lutz & Iannaccone, 1978; Strauss, 2009; Trujillo, 2013). Ironically, in this uncertain political environment, it is more critical than ever to a school board’s and superintendent’s effectiveness to develop a collaborative, trusting, working relationship; yet the conditions are not conducive, and the odds are not favorable. Both parties benefit to some extent from political posturing and role-aggrandizement. Some boards invite or incite occasional conflicts that raise public visibility and reinforce the democratic expectation of checks and balances to counteract any appearance of rubber-stamping that implies a lack of oversight. Often, modern-day board members take office with a host of personal agendas or are elected on special interest platforms designed to combat viewpoints of incumbents, challenge administration, or disrupt the status quo (Mountford, 2004). Amid a somewhat idealized modern socio-cultural expectation of effective leadership through cooperation, collaboration, shared governance and interdependence (Bryk & Schneider, 2007; Covey, 2006; Tschannen-Moran, 2004), a successful superintendent must have or develop skills and strategies to navigate board relations that may initially be characterized by varying levels of mistrust.

Extant research suggests that both the political backdrop and the informal, personal relationship between the superintendent and school board are key factors affecting district functionality, healthy working relationships and sound, collaborative decision-making, yet often superintendents and their boards operate at seemingly counter purposes (Alsbury, 2008; Howell, 2005). As a result of competing personal and sometimes power-based or politically motivated influences, superintendents and boards struggle to effectively function and find it challenging to negotiate parameters within which they can operate and carry out their respective roles and formal responsibilities (Bjork, 2001; Petersen & Fusarelli, 2005). Given that superintendents and school boards, operating as interdependent governance teams, are charged with rendering and implementing many decisions ranging from routine to those with far-reaching consequences for students, it behooves a superintendent to consciously work to create an effective working relationship with the board, in spite of a multitude of micro- and macro-political obstacles.

A host of studies illuminate a wide range of intense external pressures (unfunded mandates, accountability measures, budget constraints, the politics of personalism, backdoor
deal-making, social activism, constituent or bargaining unit unrest) that impede superintendents’ success in fostering positive, functional relations with their boards (Feurstein & Opfer, 1998; Glass, 1992; Kirst, 2008; Wirth, Whiddon & Manson, 2008). Very few studies focus on the internal dynamics and tensions affecting the strength of relationship (Mountford, 2004; Petersen & Fusarelli, 2005). We know far less about the scope of agency that a superintendent has in affecting the depth and quality of interpersonal relationship, although Hackett (2015) makes recent inroads on that topic with her work on board/superintendent relationship building and increasing productivity. Some studies contend that in an era of shared governance and distributed leadership, a superintendent’s overall effectiveness is primarily dependent on an ability to influence the board’s critical policy decisions (Blumberg, 1985; Danzberger, Kirst, & Usdan, 1992). Research suggests this ability to influence trust building may actually hinge on the quality and strength of interpersonal relationship (Duvall, 2005), yet no specific strategies for doing so are delineated. Similarly, scholars conclude that interpersonal skills such as communication, empathy, trust, and persuasiveness are increasingly vital to developing and retaining healthy relations between the board and superintendent and defining roles and protocols for interaction (Petersen & Short, 2001; Tallerico, 1989). Yet, recommendations for superintendents to cultivate these traits are relegated to practitioner guidebooks, rather than stemming from rigorous research-based findings. Additional research is warranted to identify strategies for superintendents to solidify trusting relations with boards and successfully carry out their district mission.

**Political and Organizational Factors That Impact Board and Superintendent Relations and Foundations for Trust**

Context matters in school district governance. Kirst’s (1994) studies just over two decades ago document that a changing context essentially means school board reform. Political and organizational contextual factors are major influences in local decision-making and must be further examined as they relate to relationship and trust building with governance teams. The arena in which boards and superintendents operate is inherently political at multiple levels, as it involves elected public officials or politicians who, although they are officially party-neutral, are subject to and must respond to special and public interests as part of their role. In addition, the board’s work is conducted in the public eye, paid for by tax-paying citizens, and thus is expected to be representative of a larger constituency with all dealings posted, transparent and subject to the Brown Act⁴ and the Public Records Act⁵. Furthermore, because the mission and focus of a school district is the education and molding of our youth, many external stakeholders (not only the parents and guardians of the students being served) have a vested interest, whether political, philosophical or values-based.

While the literature on political decision-making in both private and public settings is plentiful, it is rarely specific to local school board or governance team decisions. A

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⁵ The **California Public Records Act** (Statutes of 1968, Chapter 1473; currently codified as California Government Code §§ 6250 through 6276.48) is an act passed by the California State Legislature and signed by the governor in 1968 requiring inspection or disclosure of governmental records to the public upon request, unless exempted by law. Source: [http://ag.ca.gov/publications/summary_public_records_act.pdf](http://ag.ca.gov/publications/summary_public_records_act.pdf)
school board is comprised of elected officials so the political connection and ties are understandable. Although a district superintendent is not an elected official or politician, as a high profile public official operating in a public arena, many aspects of the role are highly politicized (Edwards, 2007) and have political ramifications. For this reason, political factors must be considered as influencers of the superintendent’s actions and/or inaction as well.

The most obvious example of the very public political nature of the board/superintendent relationship is the nexus at which they connect, the initial search, selection and hiring process. The impetus for the hiring, the manner in which the search is conducted, and the outcome, are all indicative of and impact the board/superintendent relationship. One of the most important political decisions that a governing board makes, and is solely its discretion, is the selection and appointment of the superintendent. The recruitment searches are usually national in scope and involve a range of stakeholders engaged over many months. Even the selection of the search firm and decisions regarding interim, internal and external candidacy can be controversial and challenged by communities (Hess, 2002). From the outset, the hiring and negotiations prior to approving a superintendent’s contract are very public and often scrutinized (Hess, 2002; Howell, 2005). The selection process can also be very controversial. In the case of Compton Unified, there were highly visible racial tensions causing rifts in the community and board resulting in power struggles and control issues that affected major decisions such as superintendent selection (Straus, 2009). According to the 2011 California School Boards Association’s governance guidelines, a unanimous public approval of the superintendent candidate and contract by the board is the first symbolic if not genuine show of confidence and trust in the individual hired. Some researchers suggest this initial relationship is where the first public political ties are created and that from that moment on, the board members’ political fates are intertwined with the rise and fall of superintendents they hire and even subsequently fire (National Council of Professors of Educational Administration [NCPEA], 2007) due to pressure from external political powerbrokers.

There are also heavy-duty politics shaping the hiring and negotiation of the superintendent’s contract. Depending on the organization and political pressures from unions and communities, it can be hotly contested and in some cases (e.g., the high profile Berkeley Unified School District’s superintendent search in 2012), negative input from community activists can derail a board’s original selection. Superintendents who do not receive unanimous endorsements for hiring or their initial contracts are starting off with an organizational challenge that is difficult to overcome, as it signifies a rocky relationship from the onset, and a lack of foundational trust from which to build.

Political theorists posit that there are also very real effects of basic contract structure on trust and the likelihood of continued collaboration. Some examine trust and collaboration levels in the aftermath of conflict and its effect on contract structure in private industry. Findings suggest control provisions in a firm’s contract increase

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6 The California School Boards Association (CSBA) is a nonprofit education association representing the elected officials who govern California public school districts and county offices of education. Its membership of nearly 1,000 educational agencies advocate for effective policies that advance the education and wellbeing of California’s more than 6 million school-age children. Source: https://www.csba.org/

7 The National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) was established in 1947 to serve the interests and needs of professors of educational administration and practicing school leaders by supporting research, practice, professional development and study. Presentations, papers and data reports are shared at bi-annual conferences hosted by NCPEA. Source: http://ncpeaprofessor.org
competence-based trust but reduce good-will based trust, resulting in a net-decrease likelihood of collaboration. By the same token, coordination provisions in contracts increase competence-based trust and lead to an increased likelihood of continued collaboration (Malhotra & Lumineau, 2011).

By extension, any study of a district’s governance team must include a review of the superintendent’s contract at the outset, as it sets the tone and stage for the future work and parameters of the relationship. The political and organizational conditions that affect the formation of the contract are relevant and telling in terms of the relational dynamics. Thus, analyzing the contractual trust arrangement and environment (Molm, Takahashi, & Petersen, 2000) is germane to understanding how the school district governance team operates. The contract is a legally binding, codified version of both parties’ expectations of each other. The superintendent/board relationship is contractually and legally constrained by definition, contract, policy and provisions of the Brown Act. To be more explicit, the written superintendent contract as the embodiment of contractual trust, serves as a documented frame for board/superintendent relations, thus warrants initial analysis. It is of particular interest when there are unique elements of the contract incorporated in direct response to a need for correction, based on a negative experience with an incoming superintendent’s predecessor.

Although the formal working relationship is prescribed in many ways as outlined above, the informal working relationship is more organic and malleable, which is reminiscent of social contract theoretical constructs. The approved contract does not begin to cover the many nuances of superintendent/board interactions and relationship that develop over time. Generally, the official, approved contract will delineate formal expectations for goal-setting, salary, evaluation and contract extension. Amendments are usually on an annual basis and are limited in scope. Hobbe’s voluntary social contract theory⁸ is very useful then, as a backdrop for a study of superintendent/board relationships, as so many of their daily interactions are interpersonal or social in nature, and each governance team ultimately arrives at consensual agreement regarding day-to-day operating norms, procedures and protocols (McCurdy, 1992; Petersen & Short, 2001; Tallerico, 1989). Combined, the limits and controls embedded in the superintendent’s contract as well as established behavioral norms that are co-developed by a board and superintendent during their elected or appointed terms, serve as telling indicators of organizational conditions of high or low trust and can influence trust development.

A major, complicated political reality that affects the governance team members’ relationship (both positively and negatively) and dynamic is their political and professional interdependence. The superintendent’s professional future and board members’ political fates are intertwined and highly dependent upon one other. Superintendents must deliver on their boards’ promises to their electorate in order to receive satisfactory evaluations from their boards or face eventual termination; while, elected officials must please their constituents in order to be re-elected, while relying almost solely on the leadership, competence and wherewithal of the superintendent to carry out their will and direction (Alsbury, 2008; Fusarelli, 2006; Howell, 2005).

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⁸ Thomas Hobbes, (April 5, 1588 – December 4, 1679), was an English philosopher, best known today for his work on political philosophy. His 1651 book Leviathan established social contract theory, the view that moral and political obligations are dependent upon a voluntary agreement or consenting contract among individuals to form the society in which they live. This theory was the foundation of most later Western political philosophy. Source: http://www.biography.com/people/thomas-hobbes-9340461
When it comes to superintendent evaluation, the political importance of maintaining a positive relationship between superintendent and the board cannot be overstated in the literature. In a National School Boards Associations (NSBA) Survey, 86.4% of 784 board members participating indicated that “the relationship with the school board” was Very Important and an additional 12% indicated it was Important to focus on when hiring or assessing superintendent performance. The board/superintendent relationship outranked all other categories of importance to board members, including morale, safety, student performance, operations, equity and reform. Furthermore, in a more recent version of the same national study, it was stated that the superintendent evaluation is the most important factor in the board/superintendent relationship (NSBA, 2010). The outcome of the evaluation is an obvious indicator of the level of confidence and trust. It is important to note that the manner and process in which the board evaluates the superintendent’s performance also factor into the trust relationship.

Since the majority of local board members are democratically elected, they are influenced by the voting stakeholders, which places a tremendous amount of external political pressure on the board/superintendent relationship and bond. It is well documented that even if a board member is personally pleased with a superintendent’s performance, if empowered or vocal segments of the community he/she represents are dissatisfied, the board member, as the elected representative, must act accordingly (Howell, 2005; NCPEA 2007; Petersen & Fusarelli, 2005; Strauss, 2009). In these instances, the level of interpersonal trust is damaged and possibly trumped by the level of political trust, which is defined as a litmus test of how well a political system is performing in the viewpoint of the citizenry (Newton, 2001). According to Newton’s theory, a climate of low political trust may suggest that the politicians and institution are performing poorly or that expectations are unreasonably high. In either case, as political pressures mount, particularly around board election time, tensions tend to arise in superintendent/board relations (Fusarelli, 2006; Howell, 2005).

Other theorists identify specific external political or organizational conditions that may promote or corrode the development of relational trust. The theory of institutional trustworthiness, as outlined by La Porte and Metlay (1996), and the theory of trust-enhancing organizational contexts, as outlined by Six (2005), suggest that contextual factors are key influences. La Porte and Metlay (1996) identify conflict with citizens, intervenor groups, and the media as arbiters of public mistrust, while Six (2005) delineates five institutional arrangements that affect trust: norms and values, socialization, control, interdependencies, and human resource practices. The research indicates that external political factors as well as district organizational conditions can affect school board/superintendent relations and trust building. Public sentiment as expressed in the media or by constituents in public settings also has the potential to impact trust levels and the board/superintendent relationship, as a school board’s business is the public’s business and their work takes place center stage in a public forum.

By first establishing the level of conduciveness for trust building, given each district’s unique political and organizational setting using a combination of the theories cited above, and then gauging the baseline level of relational trust using predetermined components of Bryk and Schneider (2002) and Tschannen-Moran’s (2004) theories, I better understood the sociopolitical dynamics and challenges that the two governance teams faced in relational trust-building, thus setting the conceptual and theoretical stage for my
study (Bryk & Schneider 2002; Lenz, 2006; Six, 2005; Tartor & Hoy, 2004). Of particular interest throughout were the superintendent strategies that were developed and implemented in direct yet customized response to each district’s unique political dynamics and organizational circumstances, as well as any pertinent variance in outcomes.

**Theories of Trust and Trust-Based Leadership**

Modern day governance teams, consisting of a school board and superintendent are intended to be collaborative by design, even if in practice that isn’t always the case. The impactful role of trust in collaborative governance has been well documented. According to research, collaborative leadership requires a culture of cooperation and an atmosphere of trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Along similar lines, Ansell and Gash’s (2008) studies of public and private partnerships suggest that trust building is one of the three most critical factors affecting the collaborative governance process, along with face-to-face dialogue and the development of commitments and shared understanding. While trust isn’t the only contributing factor, according to Ansell and Gash (2008), collaborative governance is demonstrably influenced by starting conditions, such as baseline levels of trust, conflict and social capital; institutional design; and strength and type of leadership.

School boards and superintendents are more than collaborative governance teams, however; they are political actors and agents. Scholars also explore different dimensions and theories of interpersonal trust as it relates to politically charged situations and the high profile relationships that abound in public school system policy-making settings. Namely, Marsh’s (2007) school-based studies uphold how levels of trust (or mistrust) contribute greatly to deliberative democratic practice. Marsh (2007) cites trust as an important precondition necessary for substantive collaboration between professional educators and laypersons. She further contends that trust plays a crucial role in political and policy decision-making as it relates to cognitive discernment which guides the depth of individual investment in a potentially mutually beneficial relationship. Likewise, Tschannen-Moran (2014) details *five facets of trust* that matter the most in school relationships:

- **Benevolence**: confidence in the caring intentions or altruism of another; assurance that one’s wellbeing will not be harmed by the other;
- **Honesty**: truthfulness; reliability; integrity; match between a person’s statements and deeds;
- **Openness**: a process by which people make themselves vulnerable by sharing information, influence and control;
- **Reliability**: dependability; sense of predictability of care, commitment and consistent response;
- **Competency**: beyond good intentions; the ability to perform a task as expected and to standard.

These separate findings from political scientists, educational theorists, sociologists, and policy wonks alike, validate how vital trust is relative to collaborative governance, particularly in a political or educational leadership setting. Each body of research offers concrete elements by which to define and measure trust relations in a given context, many of which overlap.
Perhaps the most pertinent research on the topic of building trust in schools is that of Bryk and Schneider (2002). They assert that schools are social enterprises thus dependent on the relationships among the various community members. They introduce the concept of *relational trust*. Their research at the school site level suggests that relational trust reduces vulnerability among school professionals; facilitates public problem-solving; reshapes power distribution; is contingent on norms of social control; and reinforces reciprocal commitments. Their research upholds that relational trust is a vital component of positive, effective school governance, essentially the glue that holds relationships together when determining policies for school improvement. Bryk and Schneider (2002) go on to conclude that site administrators, who are bombarded daily by conflicting political interests, must establish a certain level of what they coin *relational trust* with constituents in order to effect school reform. To date, their theoretical work has not been extended to the district governance team level.

The application of the concept of Bryk and Schneider’s (2002) theory of relational trust to the study of trust at the district governance level is a logical next step, as there are many shared characteristics between the public school community ecosystem and the public school district level environment. A district, like a school, offers a more social-based than factory-based production climate. A superintendent and school board, not unlike a principal and school site council as studied by Bryk and Schneider (2002), operate in an atmosphere of differential or asymmetrical power distribution as well as interdependence, which places additional strain on the relationship at a public and highly scrutinized level that is not experienced in a private setting, or in a more defined hierarchy where a singular role may be dominant or all-powerful. Those individuals charged with leadership and decision-making at both the site and district level ultimately experience increased vulnerability as a result. Not unlike at the school site leadership team level, there is likely a strong need for relational trust among district-level leaders, that until fully established, requires taking leaps of faith that others will come through and meet set expectations and role obligations.

An important distinction should be made between two types of trust, positional trust (sometimes akin to institutional trust) and relational trust, relative to superintendents and their school boards. Relational trust among public school leaders and governance team members is starkly different from positional trust, whereby trust is implicit or implied with the professional or social role and responsibility, title and/or power granted in the election or appointment to the role, or by association. There is a modicum of positional trust that arises whenever someone receives a promotion or is elected to a new position, yet it is based on surface indicators or a prior vote of confidence as yet unproven, and thus can be superficial or fleeting (Sztompka, 2000). Relational trust, according to Bryk and Schneider (2002) is earned, not guaranteed as an entitlement. Building relational trust takes time and concentrated effort; it does not develop overnight and cannot be presumed upon hire or official designation. Relational trust, as defined by Bryk and Schneider (2002) consists of interpersonal social exchanges that take place in a school community, wherein each party maintains an understanding of role obligations and holds expectations about role obligations of the other. Relational trust hinges on four key criterion: respect, competence, personal regard for others, and integrity (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). It is also essential to point out that relational trust is not synonymous with uniform agreement and homogeneity. It is not blind trust, thus it is not only compatible with, but highly desirable relative to deliberation, civil discourse, debate, oversight and basic democratic principles of checks and balances that are the hallmarks of a healthy governance team relationship.
Conceptual Framework

Relational Trust

Here, I draw primarily on Bryk and Schneider’s (2002) theory of relational trust to investigate the strategies superintendents employed to build trust with their school boards. In studying superintendent and school board relations relative to establishing and cultivating trust, I first elaborate on the concept of relational trust, drawing directly from the research of Bryk and Schneider (2002). The conceptual framework for my study is an extension of their empirically grounded theory in which they described the nature, function and varying levels of social trust and exchanges unique to school communities. In their study, Bryk and Schneider (2002) find that schools have evolved into increasingly interdependent work environments, requiring different norms of operation. A key underlying concept is that an attitude of cooperation is not sufficient to create interdependence; discrete skills and processes to support attitudes are also needed. Trust is essential for cooperation and people will cooperate if they trust each other. This is their concept of relational trust. Bryk and Schneider (2002) operationalize relational trust in schools at varying levels (teacher to teacher; teacher to principal; teacher to parent) and identify four empirical indicators of trust that are in constant dynamic interplay in complex social organizations:

- **Respect**: civil social interaction; recognition of role importance; genuine interest in other’s views;
- **Competence**: faith in one’s own abilities and the abilities of others in the execution of one’s formal role responsibilities, as opposed to incompetence which corrodes trust relations;
- **Personal Regard for Others**: reciprocal good or benevolent intentions; actions that reduce other’s sense of vulnerability; kindness, care and empathy;
- **Integrity**: consistency between what people say and do; words synonymous with action or deed.

Bryk and Schneider (2002) find that each of these qualities must be demonstrated in an interaction. If these qualities are not demonstrated, trust is diminished. When these qualities are demonstrated, trust is increased. In order for the trust level to be sufficient, the majority of interactions need to develop or engender relational trust.

I examine superintendent/board relations through the lens of relational trust. With this theory as a backdrop, I hone in on the four aforementioned indicators of trust as operationalized by Bryk and Schneider (2002) and apply it to the politicized context of district governance team relations. Similar to teachers and principals who no longer work autonomously, board members and superintendents have lost some independence and stature due to increasing public accountability measures and mandates (Trujillo, 2013). The site-based shared leadership model embedded in many schools is not unlike the district governance team that must work and make decisions as one body (Bjork, Glass, & Bruner, 2005), with different iterations and interpretations of what that looks, sounds, and feels like in terms of establishing trusting relations in a political setting.

A key premise of Bryk and Schneider’s theory is that the form trust takes is dependent on the specific social institution in which it is embedded (Blau, 1964, 1994; Bryk & Schneider,
2002); thus it is important in my study to highlight the unique organizational and political context of superintendent/board relations in which mistrust is inherent and political tensions are heightened, by comparison to the more temperate school settings in Bryk and Schneider’s (2002) work. For the purpose of my study, I position relational trust in a broader social, organizational and political context, extending beyond the school-level community and site-based leadership to district-level leadership. Bryk and Schneider (2002) note the quality of social exchanges and level of relational trust can substantially impact an organization and leader’s capacity for reform and innovation. They reinforce the idea that a solid base of relational trust can reshape formerly destructive power relationships among site leaders and constituents; their theoretical premise suggests a similar causal effect at the district governance team level.

For the purposes of this study, similarly to Bryk and Schneider (2002), I examined relational trust at various levels of interaction: superintendent to board member, board member to superintendent, and board member to board member. My preliminary research indicated that interactions with the board president did not necessarily warrant being categorized and examined as distinct from other board members; thus, I chose not to make that interaction a distinct, separate area of study.

My conceptual framework is depicted in the figure below, *A Working Model to Improve Superintendent & School Board Relations by Cultivating Relational Trust*. The diagram shows how certain political and organizational conditions and inherited board dynamics create an initial context of low trust, which then influences the selection and implementation of trust-building strategies by the superintendent; and, once implemented, leads to establishment of a high level of relational trust, characterized by healthy and consistently strong indicators of competence, respect, integrity and personal regard.
Strategies for Building Trust

Fostering organizational trust is no simple task. School districts must function amid a societal and economical context that is ripe for the inevitable occurrence of *trouble*, which makes successful building of trusting work relationships challenging (Six, 2005). In his research on work relations within organizations, Six (2005) makes a compelling case for the importance of establishing and maintaining trust in contemporary organizations that are faced with a need for continuous change, innovation, learning, and risk taking in order to survive. Six (2005) explicitly identifies specific trust-building actions that stimulate and guide behavior and workplace dynamics and if present, help build a high trust organizational environment:

- **Be open**: disclose information in an accurate and timely fashion; provide positive and negative feedback; be open and direct about task problems; be honest and open about your motives;
- **Share influence**: initiate and accept changes to decisions; seek and accept counsel of others; give and receive help and assistance; recognize legitimacy of other’s interests; show a bias for other’s positive intentionality; and show care and concern for others;
- **Delegate**: make yourself dependent on others’ actions; delegate tasks; give responsibility to others; take responsibility rather than make excuses;

- **Manage mutual expectations**: Clarify general and explore specific expectations; surface and negotiate differences in expectations; process and evaluate how effectively you work together.

In my study, I examined the role of trust, exposed and analyzed varying levels of trust and mistrust, and explored the process of building up and healing relationships where trust had already been broken down in terms of board and superintendent relations. I identified successful strategies used by two different superintendents to boost and build trust. On the surface level, I found they mirrored those that Six (2005) puts forth in his research on trust building within other complex organizations. Six’s (2005) research is more generalizable and my focus was not only on commonplace strategies but identifying and analyzing unique strategies that had been designed and customized by each superintendent studied in direct response to unique political or organizational conditions.

With these two overarching theories on relational trust and trust-building actions, serving as the genesis, I will identify and make explicit the strategies successfully used by superintendents to purposefully cultivate and build trust with their individual school boards.
Chapter 3: Study Design & Methods

Study Focus

The body of research alludes to the importance of building trust at many levels but does not resolve the identified problem of practice. The existing literature focuses on school site level administration and the importance of trust building with staff and the community. The political and organizational factors that affect trust building and the role and strategies of the superintendent in building trust at the district level remain unexamined. This study will address these gaps by answering the following research questions:

(1) What strategies do superintendents in districts characterized by initially low levels of trust use to establish, build or restore trusting relationships with their board?
(2) How do these strategies differ depending on political and organizational context?
(3) What external and/or internal political factors and preconditions influence the use and success of these strategies?

Research Design and Methods

In the following section, I describe the research design, the rationale and methods for case selection and data collection, and address issues of validity and reliability. My dissertation project is a Type I, in which I attempt to deepen understanding of an increasingly common problem of practice experienced by superintendents as they work to establish, nurture, repair and/or sustain trusting relationships with their boards in a high-stakes political environment characterized by competing interests. I explore and describe the issues and factors surrounding relational trust that the superintendents singularly or jointly face and identify strategies that the superintendents successfully employ in an attempt to foster trusting relations with a board.

The role, relationship and influence of the superintendent in shaping school board relationships and establishing trust in order to impact decision-making is by its very nature a complex socio-political process. Since the focus of my study is on the development of relational trust through the purposeful processes and influences of interaction as, and among individuals (Creswell, 2007), in this case superintendents and boards, I employed a social constructivist perspective and framework. When exploring the complexities of educational policy and decision-making, I immersed myself in a qualitative case study designed to determine the scope of relational trust in the context of governance team relations. Throughout, I sought to understand the strategies employed by superintendents to establish trust and their impact on board dynamics and interactions, in light of their unique individual backgrounds and within the context of the organization, and group socio-political dynamics.

I employed a qualitative cross-case study design to investigate the research questions outlined above. I studied two superintendents and their respective school boards, who inherited relatively poor governance team relations, characterized by mistrust and were able to establish
over time, high-functioning, collaborative governance teams and healthy, working relationships. With this method, I was able to identify, understand and contrast political and organizational factors that affected varying levels of trust and identify unique and common strategies successfully employed by superintendents to establish, build, restore, and maintain trusting relations (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2003). A comparative case study was an appropriate strategy to investigate my questions because it allowed me to study a phenomenon (relational trust) by drawing on a range of perspectives and experiences within a naturally bounded system (a district governance team, consisting of a superintendent and board).

Case Selection

Cases were purposefully selected to enable close examination of the focus area of my study (Creswell, 2007). Case winnowing and selection took place in phases over a period of three months. I used both convenience and reputational sampling to identify a large pool of potential cases prior to narrowing selection based on pre-established criteria and ultimately selected two cases to study.

First, at a regular monthly meeting of 19 different Alameda County Superintendents (a group of which I am part), I shared an executive summary of my proposed research study and informally surveyed all present to see who would be voluntarily interested in participating. From that first introduction, eleven superintendents indicated interest in the topic and focus of my study and believed their boards would also be eager and/or willing to participate. Although my own board members were interested, I ruled out my district to eliminate bias perspective and/or perceived/potential conflict of interest, and to preserve the objectivity of my research. I also ruled out a small one-school district of fewer than 600 students; a Regional Occupational Program that included my own district as part of its Joint Powers Agreement; the most socioeconomically homogeneous suburban district and board that was somewhat of an outlier and not truly representative of the Bay Area’s diversity; and four districts going through recent superintendent transition due to a contentious non-renewal of contract, a retirement, a forced resignation and a voluntary relocation. In regard to the remaining four districts, I emailed a brief synopsis and overview of my prospectus to the superintendents that they shared unofficially with their respective boards. All indicated receptiveness and some were openly intrigued by the concept of relational trust and found it pertinent and relevant to their work and role. Next, when considering case selection from these four prospective district governance teams, I consulted with the Alameda County Office of Education (ACOE) board president, vice president and superintendent, a regional representative from the Association of California School Administrators (ACSA) and a Graduate School of Education professor from California State University East Bay (CSUEB), as well as some of my UC Berkeley Leadership for Educational Equity Program (LEEP) colleagues who work in these same districts, to solicit their recommendations and expert opinions. Those consulted were in positions to know the district and governance team reputations and worked closely with them in many capacities. They were also familiar with the standards of operation for model governance teams as determined by the California School Boards Association (CSBA) and district leadership effectiveness criteria as established in the research literature.

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10 The Association of California School Administrators (ACSA) was founded in 1971 as an umbrella organization for school administrators, serving more than 17,000 California educations. ACSA’s top priority is advocating for public school students, K-12 and adult. ACSA focuses on school leadership and education policy issues at state and federal levels. Source: [http://www.acsa.org](http://www.acsa.org)
Based on these recommendations, proximity, and general feasibility, I decided to conduct further background study of two candidate districts and their respective governance teams. I reviewed their demographic and achievement data. I perused their websites, social network outputs and commentary, and mission statements to obtain a sense of their focus, standing, and reputation. I then attended and observed their governance team interactions with each other during one of their public school board meetings, read their biographies and curriculum vitae as available, and reviewed media reports and labor union commentary regarding them. I also had the opportunity to meet face to face and personally interact with both governance teams during a joint professional development workshop session sponsored by the Alameda County Office of Education. Via these methods, I was able to generally discern the extent to which the two initially selected governance teams interacted with an outward level of functionality and trust, and confirm they did not openly display evidence of dysfunction, damaged relations, or low trust.

Each superintendent’s expressed willingness to participate and obvious comfort level with a probing study were key considerations in my case selectivity. There were other contextual factors such as pre-existing and current organizational conditions, demographics of the district, and the composition of the governance team, that I took into consideration. However, these were secondary considerations serving as background information and a point of contextual comparison, rather than the central focus of my study.

The case selection and corresponding evaluation included a review of the literature related to governance teams and trust-building factors, an informal observation of them in their public governing roles at a regularly scheduled public board meeting, and a brief private meet and greet with governance team members. It is important to note there were definite limitations to reputational case selection based on others’ opinions and somewhat cursory observation in limited public settings. Nevertheless, it was important to use some filtering criteria in the form of multiple measures. This input from a range of sources helped me identify and secure two cases that had experienced a low-trust climate in the past, engaged in trust-building over a period of at least three years, and were now experiencing noticeably improved governance team relations. Ultimately, I decided to focus on the two district teams exhibiting:

- the greatest stability of both superintendents and boards in terms of length of service and uninterrupted time working together;
- a documented pre-history of low-trust or discord; and
- a current reputation of being much higher functioning.

Instead of selecting two contextually identical districts, I also took into account contextual variables for comparison purposes as they might indirectly or directly influence the superintendent’s strategies for building trust, e.g., difference in district size, differences in community demographic makeup, and difference in ethnicity between one of the superintendents and all of his board members.

I selected two governance teams from two Alameda County, Bay Area school districts, which I will refer to by pseudonyms to preserve confidentiality, the Reed Unified and Sycamore Unified School Districts. Both districts had undergone a transformation over a period of years from a relatively low trust environment characterized initially by poor relationships and dysfunction to a higher-level trust relationship during the tenure of a single superintendent. The two districts, although both in the Bay Area, differed in size and
demographics (ethnic makeup, socio-economic status, parent education level) and thus were ideal for comparison of strategies successfully employed depending on the differing micro-political climate and forces at play, as well as demographic context. Both superintendents were male and had at least three years of experience in the role. Both had many years of prior district level leadership experience (superintendent and other senior cabinet positions) from which to draw upon in previous districts. The gender makeup of their respective boards was identical, consisting of four female members and one male who was the board president. A key variable between the two cases that could have turned out to be an influential factor relative to selection and implementation of strategies for relationship and trust building was the ethnic makeup of the governance teams. The Sycamore superintendent was African American with an all-white board of five members, while the Reed superintendent was white, with three white, one Asian, and one African American board member. Neither board composition reflected the multi-ethnic diversity of their representative school district constituents, which could have potentially presented challenges when trust-building (Fraga & Elis, 2009; Straus, 2009).

After completing the painstaking process of elimination and case selection, based on all of the aforementioned criteria, I was confident that the two cases selected for inclusion were suited to the purposes of my study. Although their roles were high profile and politically charged, the superintendents and individual board members of both districts expressed enthusiasm about participating, interest in the study’s focus, and proffered advance verbal commitments to participate over a time period of several months to a year, if/as warranted.

Case Descriptions

District Demographics

The Reed Unified School District is a large urban district that, at the time of the study, hosted 32,000+ K-12 students in 42 schools, including 29 elementary, five junior high schools, and six high schools, plus 8,000 adult school students and a Regional Occupation Program (ROP). Approximately 19% of the students qualified for Free or Reduced Lunch, and 28% were classified as English Learners. As for ethnic makeup, there were one half percent American Indian; four percent African American; 15% Hispanic/Latino; 19% white; 58% Asian students; and four percent mixed race or other. Reed boasted some of the highest performing schools in the state of California.

Only 20 miles away, the Sycamore Unified School District had a very different demographic at the time of the study, housing approximately 12,000 students, with 48% living in poverty or qualifying for Free or Reduced Lunch, and 42% classified as English Learners. As for ethnic composition, there were one half percent American Indian; 11% white; 12% African American; 20% Asian; 51% were Hispanic/Latino students; and five percent were mixed race or other. The majority of the families were working class, blue collar, and there was not a high parent education level. The district was in federal Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) Program Improvement or PI status for comparatively low standardized tests scores among certain

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Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) is a measurement defined by the U.S. federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act used by the Department of Education to determine how every public school and district is performing and progressing academically according to standardized testing results. Schools and districts that do not meet AYP targets overall or for demographic subgroups are placed in mandatory Program Improvement (PI) status, with additional, sometimes punitive, requirements to meet. Source: http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ae/ay/
subgroup populations; however, its overall and subgroup achievement scores (Academic Performance Index\textsuperscript{12} or API) had been steadily improving each year.

**Board Member Demographics**

In analyzing the demographic background of the members of the respective governance teams, I looked for trends, commonalities and differences, in order to identify any exceptions to the norm or possible outliers. In reviewing both districts, although the boards were predominantly female, the board presidents and most recent and current superintendents were male. The Reed District board was 100\% college educated, while the Sycamore District board had a wider formal education range, from high school diploma to doctoral level. All four superintendents from both districts had doctoral degrees. The age range of the Reed District board members was 40-59 years old, while the age range of Sycamore District was slightly older, 50-85 years old. The average years of board service in Reed District was just over five years, while the average years of service of the Sycamore District board members was 12.2 years, indicating a higher level of stability and longer tenure. One hundred percent of the members of both boards were elected (more frequently with contested or close elections in Reed), and many for multiple consecutive terms (more common in Sycamore), indicating a strong level of continuous base support from their respective stakeholders.

The tables below display the demographic data of the Reed District board and the Sycamore District board. The makeup of both boards mirrored the demographic makeup of boards in California for boards that were elected at-large, being largely white and college educated, while their constituencies were increasingly more ethnically diverse with parents with lower education levels. The position of board president is held generally by a white male according to statewide trends, which was also true of both Reed and Sycamore Districts.

\textsuperscript{12} The Academic Performance Index (API), pass by the California legislature in 1999, was a measurement of academic performance and progress of individual schools in California. It was one of the main components of the Public Schools Accountability Act. API scores ranges from a low of 200 to a high of 1000, with 800 being the State target. Source: [http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/aj/](http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/aj/)
Figure 2. Demographics of Reed School District Board Members

Reed School District
Information Obtained from Interviews and Public Document Review

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Age Bracket</th>
<th>Highest Education Level</th>
<th>Professional Background</th>
<th>Years of Service on Board</th>
<th>Elected or Appointed</th>
<th>Support Base</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>President</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>Consultant Recruiter</td>
<td>11 years</td>
<td>Lost first time</td>
<td>Elected 3x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustee A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Teachers’ Union Parents PTAs/PTOs School Site Councils Social conservatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>Mom/Parent volunteer Former worldwide sales controller Business marketer</td>
<td>six years</td>
<td>Elected 2x</td>
<td>Attendance area residents Arts &amp; music supporters Church affiliates PTAs/PTOs Extracurricular &amp; Athletic Boosters Ethnically diverse constituents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustee B</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>European-American</td>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>Student Substitute Teacher Ohlone College Board Parent</td>
<td>one year</td>
<td>Elected 1x</td>
<td>Arts &amp; music supporters Underrepresented ethnic groups Teachers/all district staff Parents Moderate conservatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustee C</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vice President</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>Business Administrator Nonprofit Human Services Parent volunteer</td>
<td>seven years</td>
<td>Elected 2x</td>
<td>Democratic Party Facilities Committee Mother’s Club Progressives NO Teacher union support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustee D</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerk</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>Church Executive</td>
<td>One year</td>
<td>Elected 1x</td>
<td>President of Reed Education Foundation Teacher’s Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustee E</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary Characteristics, Reed District Board Members:
- 4/5 female; president was the only male with longest term of service; (president position rotated, though, among all board members, so not a significant factor)
- 3/5 age 50-59; 2/5 age 40-49
- 3/5 white; 1/5 Asian; 1/5 African American
- 100% hold a Bachelor’s Degree
- Average years of service = 5.2 years; 100% percent elected to position

13 Descriptors of all demographic categories, including ethnicity, were self-identified and provided by individual board members during personal interviews, which resulted in different terminology being recorded for categories such as race.
Figure 3. Demographics of Sycamore School District Board Members

Sycamore School District
Information Obtained from Interviews, Observations and Public Document Review

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Age Bracket</th>
<th>Highest Education Level</th>
<th>Professional Background</th>
<th>Years of Service on Board</th>
<th>Elected or Appointed</th>
<th>Support Base</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>President</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White 14</td>
<td>60-69</td>
<td>Ed.D.</td>
<td>School District Superintendent Retired Educator</td>
<td>17 years (14 years as president)</td>
<td>Elected 5x</td>
<td>Conservatives School administrators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustee V</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>60-69</td>
<td>Ed.D.</td>
<td>School District Administrator Former Teacher and Principal</td>
<td>nine years</td>
<td>Elected 3x</td>
<td>Mormons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustee W</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Anglo-American</td>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>M.S.</td>
<td>Youth Services Librarian Adjunct Professor at a local Cal State University</td>
<td>one year</td>
<td>Elected 1x</td>
<td>Teachers Progressives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustee X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VP/Clerk</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Spanish (European)</td>
<td>70-79</td>
<td>H.S.</td>
<td>Beautician Computer Tech support at community college</td>
<td>12 years</td>
<td>Elected 3x</td>
<td>Classified employees PTAs/PTOs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustee Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>80+</td>
<td>A.A.</td>
<td>Stay at home parent</td>
<td>22 years</td>
<td>Elected 6x</td>
<td>Classified Employees Senior citizen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustee Z</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary Characteristics, Sycamore District Board Members:
- 4/5 female; 1/5 male; board president was the only male with repeated presidencies
- 1/5 age 50-59; 2/5 age 60-69; 1/5 age 70-79; 1/5 was 80+ years of age
- 1/5 H.S. diploma; 1/5 A.A. degree; 1/5 Master’s Degree; 2/5 Ed.D.
- Average years of service = 12.2 years; 100% elected to position
- 100% white

(Note by comparison: Sycamore student population: 11% white; 20% Asian; 51% Hispanic/Latino, 12% African American; one percent American Indian; five percent mixed race or other)

14 Descriptors of all demographic categories, including ethnicity, were self-identified and provided by individual board members during personal interviews, which resulted in different terminology being recorded for categories such as race.
Superintendent Backgrounds

Superintendent S-1, the Sycamore superintendent, originally worked in other industries, specifically at a Steel Mill in Southern California, followed by a stint in the corporate setting in Information Support Systems. He had been in public education for the prior 23 years, beginning in a small lake town. He then worked for a larger Joint Unified School District in San Bernardino County for eight years as superintendent, and had been superintendent in Sycamore for six years. He earned an Ed.D. from the University of Southern California (USC) and his total compensation (combined pay and benefits) was the highest of any superintendent in the entire Bay Area. The board president had been quoted in the news saying, “Superintendent S-1 has set the tone for the district, charting a course regardless of the winds of change, working closely with the board members in responding to competing demands. Superintendent S-1 has provided realistic leadership during difficult economic times, successfully responding to the demands of all the constituencies in the district community.”

Superintendent R-2, the Reed Unified superintendent, held an Ed.D. from the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA). He worked in the Los Angeles Unified School District for 30 years in a range of roles, spanning from classroom teacher to school district-level superintendent and had most recently served as Chief Operating Officer and Chief of Staff, prior to coming to Reed. When hired after a national search, he was described by those who had worked with him as: "an icon; a great listener; one who goes beyond the call of duty; smart; someone who works incredibly well with people; a man of integrity; dedicated; someone who displays #1 concern for students; approachable; fair; a positive role model; truthful; and patient."

The typical profile of a superintendent in a California public school district with approximately 10,000 students was and still is a white male, with a doctoral degree, in the 50-69 years old age bracket. With the exception of the prior superintendent in Sycamore, who is African American, the other three superintendents in Reed and Sycamore fit that mold. I will discuss in my findings how demographic mismatches between the boards and communities impacted trust building among each governance team, as it led to the development of a shared belief about race neutrality and an overall focus on all kids rather than any one ethnic group.

Figure 4. Demographics of Reed District Superintendents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographics of Prior and Current Reed Superintendent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Position</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former Superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summary Superintendent Characteristics, Reed District
- 100% male
- 100% white
- 100% 50-59 years of age
- 100% percent Ed.D.
- 50% internal candidate; 50% external candidate

Figure 5. Demographics of Sycamore District Superintendents

Demographics of Current and Successor Sycamore Superintendent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Age Bracket</th>
<th>Highest Education Level</th>
<th>Years of Service</th>
<th>External or Internal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Current Superintendent</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>60-69</td>
<td>Ed.D.</td>
<td>Retired six years served 2007-2013 3 yrs. still left on contract</td>
<td>External (Southern California)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Successor Superintendent</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>Ed.D.</td>
<td>two years + 8/1/2013 – present (4-year contract)</td>
<td>External (Northern California)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary Superintendent Characteristics, Sycamore District
- 100% male
- 50% white, 50% African American
- 50% age 50-59; 50% age 60-69
- 100% Ed.D.
- 100% external candidate

Data Collection

I collected data in each district through a combination of interviews, informal, in-person and videotaped observations, field-note, artifact and document analysis. These data collection efforts spanned the period from August 2013 through August 2014.

Confidentiality

I made verbal and written assurances of confidentiality due to the exceedingly political nature of all participants’ roles. I used pre-selected, neutral pseudonyms for the two districts and all informants. The informants had the option of selecting their own pseudonyms and declined. Data and transcriptions were encrypted so as to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.
Interviews

I developed an open-ended interview protocol and initially interviewed a total of ten active board members (five from each of the two district governance teams), two new superintendents, and one active community member or self-described “board watcher” from each district. I digitally audiotaped all interviews. In addition, I conducted and audiotaped two follow-up interviews with each new superintendent and one additional interview with each of the respective active board members. I interviewed the prior superintendent in Reed, and the successor superintendent in Sycamore as well, since Supt. S-1 retired during my term of study. All interviews were professionally transcribed to ensure an accurate and complete representation of the entire dialogue and exchange. Interviews with board members were designed to reveal the basis of perceptions of trust and confidence level in the superintendent and to elicit examples of trust-impeding factors and trust-building actions. Interviews with superintendents surfaced strategies that they intentionally used to create conditions conducive to the formation, cultivation or restoration of relational trust with their boards. Interviews with actively engaged community members revealed insights into the transition and change from low to high-trust relations as perceived and observed by members of the public. Interview questions stemmed from my aforementioned research on relational trust (indicators of respect, competence, personal regard, integrity) and trust-building tools (occurrence and frequency of being open, sharing influence, delegating, managing expectations, and interdependency) (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Six, 2005; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). I probed into unique or relevant political factors and organizational conditions (norms and values, socialization, control, interdependence or other practices) that influenced the trust levels between the respective board and superintendent (Six, 2005).

Artifact and Document Analysis

Artifact analysis took place throughout my study. I conducted some initial document analysis in the case selection process and in customizing my interview protocols. I reviewed board agendas in advance to determine which board meetings to observe in order to be exposed to a range of interactions and setup an outline for structuring my notes. I conducted additional online research and reviewed board documents, superintendent search criteria, superintendent contracts, governance team norms and protocols, and mission/goal statements for the two districts to establish the level of importance of trust, both symbolically and in practice, in each context. Throughout, I reviewed media releases, editorials, blogs, etc., that shed light on political dynamics (community groups, unions, etc.), both past (baseline) and present. I reviewed compliance, accountability, financial audits, and other reports to determine if there were any organizational factors (Program Improvement or federal accountability status, fiscal solvency issues, turnover of staff, etc.) that influenced trust building. This background information helped me understand the conditions and political pressures/hot-button items (such as request for approval of controversial novels that stirred a conservative political outcry and response in Reed), which were unique to each district and/or potentially impacted or challenged the superintendent’s ability to nurture relational trust.

During another phase of my analysis, I studied press releases, public statements, superintendent search firm recruitment postings, and Internet commentary regarding the prior and current superintendents of each district, focusing on key traits desired, specifically
highlighting those serving as indicators of relational trust, quotes from board members, and areas of focus or challenge during the transition.

Data Analysis Methodology and Overview

During the preliminary phase of my data analysis, I analyzed the two cases and the data collected for my study via interviews, direct and videotaped observations of board meetings, and primary source documents. These cases consisted of a total of 16 volunteer participants (five governing board members, the current superintendent, as well as one successor superintendent, and a key, longtime community member) from each of two Bay Area school districts, the Reed District and the Sycamore District.

I decided to focus primarily on one case (Reed District) first, in order to identify any major themes or big ideas that emerged, and have those as a referent when conducting my subsequent in-depth analysis of Sycamore District.

The first level of analysis took place during the actual processing of the data. I read all transcribed interviews for accuracy. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, I changed any specific references to names of participants, districts, schools, places of attendance, people or locations. Throughout this process, I identified broad thematic categories using my research questions and Bryk and Schneider’s (2002) key empirical indicators for relational trust: integrity, personal regard, competence and respect. With this general framework as a backdrop, I developed and filled in applicable data collection charts and was able to sift and sort hundreds of participant responses, observational data, and information from corroborating documents in a logical and cohesive way for coding, triangulation, further analysis, and cross-case comparison with Sycamore District’s governance team.

At the next level of analysis, as initially planned, I took note of indicators of relational trust and identified factors that enhance or detract from relational trust at various levels of reciprocal interaction within the governance team. The initial factors (potential trust enhancers or trust detractors) included the demographic makeup of the governance team and superintendent, hot-button issues of board members, the inherited climate of the district during superintendent hiring and transition, as well as political and community dynamics and race relations. The primary relationships on which I concentrated initially were:

- individual board member to individual board member;
- individual board member to superintendent (prior, current); and
- superintendent (prior, current) to individual board member

A prominent category of relationship, ripe for analysis, arose during the course of this portion of data analysis, so I added an additional category or level of interaction between superintendent (prior and/or current) to the board as a whole entity.

It became clear to me that although each superintendent I interviewed developed individual relationships unique to each board member, each superintendent also had a very defined role and relationship and many interactions with the entire board consisting of all five members. Subsets of relational trust interactions that called for additional inquiry were the implications of the board/superintendent relational trust level on the governance team’s relationship with the community at large, and the student board representatives / superintendent / governance team relationship, neither of which were a focus of this study, although they are
impacted by and in many cases illustrative of or an extension of the relational trust level within the governance team.

Interviews with a representative long-time community member and self-described board watcher provided an outsider’s perspective and served to validate the board member and superintendent statements about their level of relational trust and the positive shift with the transition to new superintendent.

All data analysis took place through the lens of developing and building mutual relational trust.

**Observations and Running Ethnographic Notes**

I paid a brief visit to observe firsthand a board meeting in each district prior to finalizing my case selection. Since they were available in archive form, I reviewed videotaped board meetings immediately prior to and at the onset of both of the current superintendents’ hiring. This allowed me to establish a baseline of prior interactions for comparison to the meetings that I observed more than three years later, when a higher trust level, as measured by Bryk and Schneider’s (2002) indicators, was evident.

I attended three board meetings in each district over a several month period to conduct more in-depth observations. I observed the same superintendents and board members (either directly or via videotape) as they interacted, exchanged dialogue, debated, and cast votes in a public meeting setting over a twelve-month period, August 2013 through August 2014.

I observed and recorded interactions and documented voting patterns during board meetings to gauge the perceptible level of relational trust or frequency of trust-building actions as represented in the actual political arena. This allowed me to witness superintendent strategies in effect and governance team interactions firsthand.

During public board meeting observations, I paid attention to comments, voting patterns, behaviors, and interactions between the superintendent and board members. I recorded body language, facial expressions, questions and even silence of participants as signifiers of their level of relational trust. This data was recorded for later use as a basis for my analysis and as evidence of displays of respect; demonstrations of personal regard; signs of integrity in matching their words to actions; and shows of confidence in one another’s competence. I took into consideration the tenor, tone and content of their discourse and debate, as research upholds that trust is an essential virtue cultivated through dialogue, conversation, agreements, commitments and actions taken (Solomon & Flores, 2003) built through daily social exchanges, actions and interactions (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; National Equity Project, 2010).

I recorded comprehensive running ethnographic field notes from the beginning to end of each meeting for later analysis, coding and “chunking” because I realize that the decisions, discussion, interchange and interactions were significantly more complex than a simple data collection table could portray. I designated an adjacent column in the margin for personal reflections, commentary, points of interest and areas for further exploration (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 1994). I used a low-inference Observational Protocol table to record data relative to

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15 The National Equity Project, also known formerly as the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools (BayCES) is a nonprofit that provides education coaching and related services to schools or districts in support of their educational reform efforts. Its mission is to create improved schooling conditions so as to provide better educational experiences, outcomes, and opportunities for traditionally underserved students. Source: nationalequityproject.org/
the interactions, actions, statements, questions, voting outcomes of board members and corresponding topics as they related to levels of relational trust and predetermined indicators. This allowed me to determine patterns and trends relative to certain types of decisions or topics (budget, achievement, accountability, legal compliance, curriculum, hiring, etc.). I used a structured protocol to record any change in dynamics or superintendent/board interactions that occurred in response to audience member presence or public speaker statements. This additional data allowed me to determine if the organizational conditions or political actors who participated in the meeting acted as triggers to directly affect the tenor of relationship of the board and superintendent, or vice versa.

**Member Check and Peer Review/Response**

I deliberately varied my pattern of data collection, sometimes conducting the interview prior to observation, and sometimes reversing order, which allowed me to customize interview questions based upon observed interactions. For example, after I observed the board members overturning or tabling a superintendent’s recommendation in a public board meeting, I inquired as to the basis, i.e., whether it was a philosophical issue; a clash in core values; a power play; or a lack of preparatory information or clarity by the superintendent. These questions provided insight into the depth and quality of relational trust and how the superintendent’s actions may or may not have affected the voting outcome. Midway through the study (February 2014), I conducted a member check by sharing interview transcripts with each interviewee. I emailed follow-up questions to participants to ensure I was accurately representing experiences and provided an opportunity to confirm or clarify. On an ongoing basis, I composed self-reflective and analytical memos, with my peer cohort group and advisor critiquing and serving as external auditors for my methods and accounts, to push my thinking and analysis to a deeper level (Morrow, 2005) and therefore strengthen my findings.

Throughout the interviews, analysis of transcripts, observation and running note taking, I kept pre-designated categories and focus areas gleaned from my literature review and conceptual framework in the forefront of my mind. My data collection instruments contained headings that helped me record, pre-sort, and triangulate my data, e.g., “trust-building, trust-enhancing” or “trust-impeding, trust-diminishing” actions or comments; baseline or current conditions, evidence of indicators of high-trust or lack of trust; superintendent strategy and outcome/response.

After my observations, I reviewed board agendas and minutes, scrutinized voting and decision-making patterns to fill in any gaps, uncovered contextual factors that may have influenced levels of trust, and identified leadership implications and consequences for decision-making of low/high trust environments. In addition, I reviewed published minutes of prior board meetings that I was not able to attend, in order to collect data and statistics regarding individual votes and decisions as well as types of decisions, for comparison purposes and to document and note change. I looked specifically for voting, comments, questioning, social discourse, debate and discussion patterns or trends for individuals, the superintendent, and the board as a whole. I tallied and compared votes cast to superintendent's recommendations, decisions made, and items tabled or pulled, as this could be considered a key indicator of trust/mistrust and degree of confidence in competence (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). I also examined board-established decision-making protocols, norms and
policies related to trust and superintendent/board relations and interactions in order to ascertain values, expectations, patterns, supports and challenges.

Data Analysis and Coding

I compiled a rich data set of information stemming from my independent qualitative research, running ethnographic field notes, interview transcripts, videotapes, audiotapes, agendas and minutes. During the process of data analysis and coding I identified patterns, trends, and themes; made cross-case comparisons (Creswell, 2007; Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 1994; Wolcott, 1994) and validated or noted discrepancies between any of the participant’s personal accounts and observed behaviors and actions. I coded my data using pre-developed codes as well as incorporated inductive coding processes so that as unforeseen trends, categories or themes arose, I could make connections and improve the depth and breadth of findings. I began initially with an a priori set of pre-figured codes encompassing strategies for building relational trust found in Bryk and Schneider’s (2002) theoretical model, specifically: (1) respect; (2) competence; (3) personal regard for others; and (4) integrity.

Subsequently, I created an additional coding structure to address categories of built-in board meeting actions (e.g., question, motion, statement, vote); structures (e.g., consent, resolution, discussion; action); positions (e.g., president, superintendent, staff, bargaining unit representative; community member); and topics (e.g., budget; curriculum; facilities; discipline, etc.). I then took a broader, expansive look and incorporated an inductive, open-coding approach by creating interrelated themes and codes that emerged from initial data. This analysis process yielded more abstract codes (e.g., level of confidence/trust in staff, role definition, competency, etc.), which helped inform my final comparative analysis and findings.

Using summary data display tables and drawing from multiple sources of data (interview transcripts, observation field notes and documents), I analyzed each superintendent and board member’s individual responses and actions, coding for internal and external influences and factors. I then developed a set of multi-variable matrices to triangulate the data. Using the matrices, I examined and compared responses and more complex influences between the two superintendents and each of the ten board members, checking for representativeness (Creswell, 2007); looking for patterns or common themes unique to a certain individual; common to a particular governance team; or consistent with an additional factor such as position (board president); active status; background; or demographic. Key to the analysis was critically examining the data as a signifier of the level or measure of established relational trust or confidence in superintendent and its tie to a superintendent’s specific strategic actions.

Analysis of District Context

Although I engaged in background research when vetting for case selection, I conducted additional, extensive background and historical research regarding the individual districts, so that the political context, organizational preconditions and potential influences and issues were very familiar. I intentionally included theories of contractual, political and institutional trust in my literature review and background research. In-depth examination of political and organizational factors that affected the development of relational trust made my
study more complex, but also more robust. The superintendent in each case was the primary, but not the only influencer of relational trust building with the board. It remained important to be cognizant of the micro-politics and internal power dynamics of each district as well as socio-political forces at play. I also attended to the larger macro-political context of school board governance, given the larger, high-stakes accountability environment where nationally, public trust in public education institutions and leaders has somewhat diminished (Trujillo, 2013). This in-depth analysis helped me to understand external factors and identify potential or actual barriers to relational trust building by the two superintendents.

Research Limitations

The nature of this exploratory and descriptive study as well as the relatively small sampling population of two active superintendents, one prior superintendent (Supt. R-1) one successor superintendent (Supt. S-2) and ten board members representing two distinct districts will render the findings insufficient to establish generalizable conclusions, although there may be some transferability of findings or application to other contexts (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 2006; Yin, 2003). According to Bryk and Schneider (2002), relational trust is built through day-to-day social exchanges and due to the constraints of the Brown Act, public governance team social interactions are highly constrained and formalized, making them infrequent and difficult to observe. In addition, important discussions regarding superintendent evaluation, personnel, pending litigation and student expulsions occur during closed session, which I was not able to directly observe, although I was able to hear and record the outcome of closed session votes and decisions as reported in open session. Access to actual written superintendent evaluations, which might provide insightful information regarding quality of relationship between superintendents and boards and corresponding levels of trust, was not granted, although pertinent details were shared privately and the positive endorsement and voting outcomes were reported publicly.

Ideally, all superintendents and board members would have participated and remained active during my research timeframe, so that I wouldn’t have to rely on retrospection. There were board elections during my study’s timeframe and some transition of incumbents who were not reinstated in January 2014, which is why I obtained commitments from the exiting board members for continued participation as warranted. Another possible limitation was that any of my informants could have been somewhat reluctant to share controversial perspectives. It is also possible, since some of the interview focus was retrospective, spanning at least a three-year period, that time had softened highly charged issues or slightly skewed perceptions in hindsight. This is why it was important to allow for that possibility via member-check, and align the interview responses with other documentable evidence, such as community member validation, videotaped meetings, newspaper accounts, etc. Another potential limitation, not as likely with the two selected cases, was recognizing that if there were residual issues of low-trust either the superintendent or any member of the board could be so mistrustful as to be reluctant to speak freely on any livewire topics, as it could be perceived as politically or professionally risky.
Research Validity and Reliability

In order to address validity concerns, given the politically charged and confidential nature of the data collection process, the complexity of my research study, and my close connection to those participating, I had to ensure that there were protective mechanisms for all in place. Through journaling, I revealed and confronted any potential researcher bias I may have harbored, so that the reader could better understand my biases or assumptions that could potentially impact the focus or development of the research protocols or my subsequent analysis. Triangulation of the data ensured a proven vehicle for corroborating evidence from multiple sources and methods. I also engaged in what Creswell (2007) calls member checking, which is the process of the researcher asking the participants to review and verify the credibility of the findings and interpretations of the data.

Another important litmus test for gauging the relative quality or integrity of a research design is reliability, or whether the fundamental operations of the study, such as the case selection, or data collection efforts, can be repeated with similar results. I incorporated three different reputable strategies (Yin, 2003) to increase the reliability of my qualitative case study, namely:

1) a case study protocol that contains and outlines all instruments to be used in the study (surveys, coding procedures, etc.) and includes the procedures and general rules that will be followed;
2) a case study database that includes all of the data collected along with the written record and accompanying reports of the researcher; and
3) a chain of evidence that was maintained throughout the study. This chain of evidence allowed for any external observer to follow step-by-step, the development of evidence and analysis from the posing of the first research questions to the data summaries, revealing of the findings and the final case study conclusions.

My Aim as Superintendent Practitioner/Researcher

Superintendents whose reputations are established, whose board relations have become more functional over time, and whose tenure is stable, are likely to have developed a range of interpersonal leadership skills and strategies that contribute to their success. They will tend to be cognizant of pitfalls to avoid and strategic actions to take in order to establish, restore, cultivate or maintain trust with their board members. Some of the strategies they employ will be deliberate and conscious and some may be innate or subconscious, but the outcomes and positive effects should become apparent to board members and the public.

Through this study, by deliberate design, the successful strategies and influential factors became visible and apparent enough in their daily interactions that they could be identified, coded and even quantified. Thus, my study allowed me to derive some common themes, uncover concrete actions, strategies, and measures that could be taken to establish and boost relational trust within the governance team, as adjusted for context. Hopefully this study, the findings and cross case comparative analysis, revealed in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 will serve as a valuable resource for superintendents by providing proven strategies to restore and build trust when faced with boards and communities who have been conditioned to mistrust.
Chapter 4: Summary of Reed District Findings

What Strategies Were Employed Successfully by the Reed Superintendent to Build Trust with his Board, Given the Reed District’s Unique Political Circumstances?

When the new superintendent was appointed in the Reed District in 2010, there was a climate of pervasive mistrust throughout the district evident at every level, including amongst the governance team. As a result, Superintendent R-2 strategically made very intentional commitments that contributed to gradual trust building and maintenance of a trusting relationship with his board. I found that Superintendent R-2 strategically established residency within the Reed community; treated each board member equally; promoted a strong sense of team; willingly shared power and information with his board; provided them with political cover whenever warranted; insisted upon clear role definition and boundaries; provided formalized training; and even allowed for agreeable disagreement and debate, in order to cultivate relational trust. These strategies and established expectations were in direct response to his analysis of the unique contextual circumstances of the Reed District when he arrived. In this section, I will present the political and organizational realities as inherited by the new Reed superintendent.

Political and Organizational Conditions that Pre-existed in Reed District

Superintendent R-2 faced a range of challenging political and organizational conditions. There was a documented refusal by the prior superintendent to reside in the Reed community, despite board offers of financial assistance and incentives, which was perceived by board members as a lack of genuine investment and commitment. This was a major misstep as it set the stage early on for a tense and tenuous relationship and made it challenging to forge initial bonds as a governance team.

Dysfunction and Discord in Reed

The prior superintendent didn’t appear to feel the need to share in-depth information with them or solicit their input. The board members’ perception was that the superintendent relied on superficial rather than genuine, transparent information sharing with them particularly in relation to major issues, district weaknesses, or community concerns. In response to this relatively opaque environment there was a tendency by the board members to overcompensate for perceived lack of information and transparency by becoming increasingly demanding and publicly disparaging, leading to open discord, dysfunction, and sometimes stasis. It is not surprising this somewhat volatile environment resulted in Superintendent R-1’s increasingly defensive and deflective posture in response to probing board questions or what was described by others as, “being grilled on the open barbecue,” (Reed Trustee B), which caused the relationship to further deteriorate. The atmosphere and backlash were uncomfortably apparent to all in attendance at open session, as described by a community member:

Yeah, with two previous superintendents. They were always suspicious of whenever a board trustee asked a question. It was like, why are they asking? …. And so, I kind of know that there’s no mal-intent. Just answer the question. The board members are asking because somebody’s asking them, so just give them the answer and they’ll say
thank you very much. There really is nothing to hide unless you’re not doing something, or you’re not seeing to it that something else is being done, or looked after, or watched, or whatever the case may be. But that’s not how they saw it back then. – Reed Community Member

Superintendent R-1 made what the board members interpreted as half-hearted attempts to answer questions and they fired back by questioning his answers. Superintendent R-1 openly questioned their motives, suggesting that they had personal agendas or didn’t understand their roles, and they, in turn, felt that the superintendent was overly defensive and threatened by their questions. As one board member said,

“The (prior) superintendent, he didn’t want us to question, he did not want us doing that stuff. He took it as an attack on him and his staff. He would say, ‘leave me alone and my staff. You’re attacking the way we did that’.... He couldn’t or didn’t want to answer the questions...He was threatened by it. – Reed Board Member C

One frequent attendee at Reed board meetings described the atmosphere and exchange with these words,

Years ago.... years ago... attending Reed board meetings, I’d seen it. There was a lot of tension over certain subjects. We went out for a bond, I don’t remember which one it was, ‘99, ‘97....somewhere in there, and one of the board members publicly said they would not support it. That caused – huge – that caused problems between board members and the superintendent. Rude comments were exchanged, publicly. So it used to be pretty lively in terms of their interactions..... there was debate, unhealthy debate. - Reed Community Member

According to Bryk and Schneider (2002), comporting oneself with integrity is vital when working to restore or nurture a trusting relationship; in its absence, team members will neither take risks nor display vulnerability, preventing them from truly connecting or establishing relational trust. The perceived lack of transparency and follow through by Supt. R-1 translated into a board perception that Supt. R-1 lacked integrity. As Trustee D detailed, “The supe listened, I saw him take notes, but then he didn’t always let us know the follow-up. And he glossed over the details, so we never really knew if we had the full scoop.” This perception can impact willingness to display vulnerability necessary for relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), which may account for the level of defensiveness by Superintendent R-1 and the unforgiving onslaught of questioning by the board on virtually every matter before them.

According to board trustees who had worked with him, ultimately, Superintendent R-1 thought of them as “votes he needed to win” (Reed Trustee A) in order to push his agenda forward. This stance implied to board members a lack of value and personal regard or care for the trustees as individuals relative to their experiences, expertise, ideas and basic competence, as well as marginalized their role as elected officials representing the voice of Reed’s constituents. Scholars refer to this calculating yet somewhat dismissive approach to garnering board support by superintendents as the Rule of Five (Hackett, 2015), and consider it counterproductive to building relationships with boards as it measures and quantifies the individual vote cast (whether in support or opposition), as a tallied transaction while essentially ignoring the human viewpoint.
that shapes the vote. This approach by Superintendent R-1 alienated Reed board members who found themselves on the losing side of votes and contributed to mini-alliances which were destructive to board/superintendent relationships over time. For example, one board member explained:

*I’d seen the dynamics…. There was a pretty strong 2:3 split; it was pretty obvious no matter what the topic. The superintendent’s and other two board members’ ideas were discarded or discounted… people felt like we had become dysfunctional* – Reed Trustee E

The prior superintendent often claimed the board members were overstepping boundaries, micro-managing, or venturing beyond the prescribed limits of their defined policy role, thereby preventing him from doing his job (Reed Trustee A). They, in turn, countered with blatant criticism of his performance, thus undermining his authority with staff and members of the public. These negative interactions impeded candid communication, lowered morale, made some trustees feel devalued, and diminished the governance team’s capacity to work collaboratively. Communication was stilted, awkward and devoid of niceties. When I viewed the videotaped board meetings, other than the initial greeting by the board president, board members didn’t make any small talk or express words of appreciation to staff or the superintendent. Normally routine consent items such as the approval of the minutes were often dissected in public, disputed openly, corrected, and required multiple readings and reworking of statements, prior to approval, which was only garnered with a split vote. Consent items are generally unanimously approved as a bundle, yet in Reed, individual items were often pulled for separate votes. The approvals seemed to disintegrate into contentious power struggles, with the superintendent and governance team members appearing increasingly guarded with each other, offering very little personal opinion or interjection, which Reed Trustee A attributed to their desire to avoid a counter response or backlash from their peers.

Community members noticed the prior superintendent’s reluctance to respond to the board’s questions, and related it to the level of mistrust:

*In a couple of instances (prior to Supt. R-2) there was a lot of mistrust on both sides. It wasn’t one-sided, it came from both directions. It was very mutual, and so it’s very difficult to move things along when there’s always that underlying tone of ‘what’s really going on here?’ From a board’s perspective, ‘Do I really have all the information? From the superintendent’s perspective, it’s like, ‘Why are they micromanaging, and they don’t need to know that,’ and whatever. ‘I’m the superintendent, I know what I’m doing, don’t ask....’ And then people, sometimes superintendents get—they dig their heels in. And so, it just kind of snowballs and it escalates...* – Reed Community Member

Malfunction and discord in the Reed boardroom were commonplace and the environment did not appear to be conducive to trust or relationship building.

**The Politics of Personalism in Reed**

The lack of trust was further exacerbated by a legacy of what Feuerstein and Opfer (1998) refer to as the politics of personalism. Local boards are supposed to be responsive to local
concerns as expressed by their stakeholders, implying a level of personal accountability. However, the politics of personalism in the community context becomes counter-productive when individual board members’ votes are disproportionately influenced or swayed in open forums or behind the scenes by a few vocal or well-connected constituents with an agenda.

The Reed governance team customarily faced an active and engaged audience during public board meetings, which began at 7:00 p.m. and generally lasted well past midnight with 25 to 75 passionate speakers on a given topic. It was often tempting for an elected official or the superintendent lacking full confidence in board support, to be swayed by the emotion of the moment, as a sign of constituent responsiveness rather than cast votes and make decisions based on the rational, decision-making process, weighing pros and cons, analyzing data and outcomes, and thinking of the board’s charge to make decisions on behalf of all students’ best interests. The board and superintendent seemed outwardly at odds (as demonstrated by increasing numbers of split votes or overturned superintendent recommendations and as documented via a tally of voting records from Reed board meeting minutes during the prior superintendent’s term). This fracture left the Reed District even more susceptible to political pressures and lobbying from individuals, union leaders or fringe groups whose special interests were not necessarily representative of the interests of the educational community at large. The climate of the Reed board meetings was disparagingly referred to by many I interviewed as something akin to that of a sensationalist reality talk show, due to the general unpredictability and the volatile tenor and tone of the participants. As a case in point, Superintendent R-2 described it in vivid terms:

Going to a board meeting was like being on the Jerry Springer show...wild...unbelievable.... I mean, I’m telling you when I first got here the Wednesday night entertainment in Reed community was to come to the board meeting. Not even watching it on TV or webcast, just coming in person and watching the fray. – Supt. R-2

The incoming superintendent (Supt. R-2) was new to Reed, but the board members were not, and they had a near decade-long history of relations and interactions characterized by mistrust, antagonism and skepticism. Given the rapid turnover of prior superintendents, and a corresponding perception of their lack of genuine investment in the community, all five Reed board members acknowledged upon hire that they were hopeful, yet wary of the new superintendent, his intentions, and his level of commitment. This was a very shaky foundation upon which to build relational trust and Superintendent R-2 definitely had his work cut out for him.

**Strategic Actions the Superintendent Took in Response to Reed District’s Conditions**

**Show Skin in Reed’s Game**

Given the circumstances and atmosphere of distrust, the new superintendent felt that it was important to signal commitment immediately and visibly in other ways that were meaningful to this particular Reed board. As he assessed the situation, he realized he needed to do more than “talk the talk” or verbalize his commitment. Rather, he needed to “walk the walk” which he identified as signing a multi-year contract and take bold, deliberate steps designed to demonstrate that he had “skin in the game” (Supt. R-2). Superintendent R-2 made a very conscious choice to live within the Reed District boundaries. During his interview and prior to being hired, he made
it clear to the search firm consultants and the board that he would move to Reed, not only because it was the board’s preference, but also because it was his preference. Superintendent R-2 acknowledged his stance and its departure from precedent, saying:

*Supt. R-1 retired after only two years. He was the third consecutive superintendent who served only two years of a four-year contract, so going forward, the board was looking for someone who would move to the community, stick around, commit and stay awhile, some continuity. I was that someone.* – Supt. R-2

The board, in turn, financially supported his family’s relocation from Southern California and by taking up residency in Reed, he quickly ingratiated himself with the community, but more importantly, with an initially mistrusting and doubtful board. The board read this move as an indication of a long-term investment and it went a long way toward establishing a foundation for trust to develop. Indeed, Reed Trustee E reports:

*Having that security...and stability and trust that our superintendent doesn’t want to go anywhere else makes it so that we – I’m free to say, ‘Yes. Go do a speech some place. Go be a part of something else. Come to see us, be with us because you’re not out looking.’ …. So when the recruiters come by, you’re saying, ‘Oh, no thanks.’* - Reed Trustee E

The Reed trustees saw the move into the district as a marker of commitment. They were not alone in that thinking. In her research on board/superintendent relationships, Julia Hackett (2015) finds that the best advice for a superintendent who desires to establish community connections is to live where he/she leads. The Reed board members, one by one, acknowledged that Superintendent R-2’s residency was a strong indicator that he was an invested leader and a man of integrity because his actions (moving) matched his words (his desire to be an integral part of their community). Thus, they expressed that he was someone in whom they could place some trust, as he wouldn’t automatically use the district as a career stepping stone, a mechanism for a salary spike just prior to retirement to inflate his pension, or be immediately on the lookout to go elsewhere with the ulterior motive of being recruited away.

Relational trust is cultivated over time, via day-to-day interactions and social exchanges (Bryk & Schneider, 2002) and small wins (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Research also shows trust is not automatic or inherent in a leadership position, but earned and accrued over time, through cognitive discernment of each interaction, behavior or comment, which constitutes someone’s track record (Marsh, 2007). Superintendent R-2 deliberately developed formal and informal structures and frequent opportunities to implement these key strategies. The positive relational outcomes and critical indicators of trust (integrity, respect, personal regard and competence) were then continually reinforced via unwritten rules, informal reciprocal commitments, shared understandings, and formal agreements or norms of social control (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). In the following section, I demonstrate that the Reed superintendent through his intentional and strategic actions responded to the unique political conditions of Reed and established a solid foundation upon which relational trust could be built and eventually flourish.
Recognize Board Members as Individuals, Yet Treat All Equally

When discussing respect, which is a harbinger of relational trust according to Bryk and Schneider (2002), it is couched in terms of genuinely listening and attending to what is said by different individuals, and valuing or taking into consideration others’ perspectives, which in turn signals that each person’s ideas actually have value. By acting in ways that allowed each board trustee to be a contributing member, with unique skills, talents, experiences and expertise, Superintendent R-2 created this atmosphere with his board.

In the past, the board’s perception was that some members’ opinions and ideas not only dominated the conversation but also were more influential with the superintendent as he shaped his agenda. The new superintendent devoted considerable time and took the board through exercises to mutually identify the unique qualities, attributes and contributions that each individual had to offer to the governance team. For example, he asked each of them to anonymously list contributing talents or positive traits of other board members and then shared those with the entire team. He acknowledged and reinforced the value of their individual strengths, thus modeling respect and promoting their attributes in front of their fellow electeds. Rather than focusing on their rank or position, he honed in on and celebrated their ideas and contributions. I observed in board meetings, during his formal report, that Superintendent R-2 would not only share district highlights about student achievement, awards and honors, he would also make a point of providing board member highlights, alluding to their attendance at key events, and acknowledging their time and commitment to district committee meetings and making site visits. Superintendent R-2 emphasized that they were all elected equally by the larger constituency and he realized he needed to consciously and publicly treat each one equally so as not to indulge the prior stratified point of view. Acknowledging the unique and distinct personal contribution of each board member did not necessarily mean they were treated or valued differently. Supt. R-2 described his approach:

Different board members have different personalities and different needs but I still treat them the same. I get used to different communication styles and we adjust and learn a different way. They each have a different way they want to do it and a different way they want input, so we work at that, but they’re still getting the same input from me. They are different; I’m the constant. I’m the equalizer. – Supt. R-2

Every Reed board member echoed the superintendent’s value for balance of diverse backgrounds and viewpoints, demonstrating the ways this behavior had become a shared value. Reed Trustee C said it best:

And I would say, beyond that, that there are different dynamics on the board. There’s different people who have different strengths and who have different areas of interests and emphasis. We even hold different offices but no one is considered better or all-powerful. Each of us brings those different skills, have different ideas and it helps us see to see the overall balance. Just like any team – when I think about sports or stuff — everyone has strengths and weaknesses, and how do we then recognize those and work on them together. And I think, actually, for our board, there’s some balance because of that. That’s how our supe sees it, anyway. – Reed Trustee C
The board perceived that the superintended respected his board members’ diversity while treating them equally, which further cemented their relationship, and as a result, they no longer felt discounted or disenfranchised in comparison to the others on the board. Their attention shifted to what could each contribute to the whole, rather than perseverating about who was jockeying for the role of the next president or how best to gain the superintendent’s ear.

Superintendent R-2 emphasized more than once that he treated all board members equally and with equal respect. He characterized his stance:

*It’s the responsibility of the superintendent to treat everybody else in the group or organization the same way. Maybe sometimes they make mistakes and maybe sometimes they are mistaken and maybe sometimes they need coaching or have missed the mark, but we all do. We aren’t always going to be on the same page but we can’t let that get to us.* – Supt. R-2

He made a conscious effort to ensure private and public neutrality during board campaigns and elections and was supremely confident that he could work well with anyone and everyone on his board. Although he admittedly shared some affinity or was naturally more aligned philosophically with one or two board members on key issues, he said that he intentionally never allowed that bias or connection to interfere with or affect his treatment or relationship with them or any of the other board members. Over time, friction between board members diminished as the superintendent’s actions brought them closer together rather than further dividing them. According to Bryk and Schneider (2002), relational trust is like the glue that holds relationships together. It appeared that the Reed superintendent’s applied strategy, which dissolov prior factions and reframed them as equal contributors on his team, set the foundation for him to forge preliminary bonds.

The prior superintendent’s unequal distribution of information had also served as a divisive influence. In contrast, Superintendent R-2 used his individual recognition, yet equal treatment strategy relative to the distribution of key information. In regard to daily, weekly, or regular communication with the board, Superintendent R-2 upheld the importance of each board member receiving or having access to the same information and message, (the “what”).

*The thing I have been very deliberate about is just on information sharing. Nothing is a secret. Nothing is a secret. I think that has been the most effective thing-just put the information out there, and they all get the same information. Even when we meet separately, I have an agenda and pretty much tell them all the same thing. I give them information they don’t even need to know! It’s better to have too much information than not enough.* - Supt. R-2

He acknowledged that he made adjustments to the manner of delivery (the “how”) as he felt it needed to be somewhat customized, as “one size doesn’t fit all” (Supt. R-2), given his diverse board, their schedules and communication preferences and styles, and the options available via modern technology. He adapted and was flexible in meeting their needs. In response to their expressed preferences, Superintendent R-2 met in-person periodically or only as needed with one board member, weekly with a different board member, participated in bi-weekly phone conferences with another, and relied primarily on email and sometimes text with the remaining two trustees. Figure 6 displays his customized methods of communication:
His willingness to modify modes of communication based on their preferences demonstrated his personal regard for their time and need to be heard and informed in a manner of their choice. This seemingly small demonstration of personal regard made a substantial impact and fostered trust because it signaled what Bryk and Schneider (2002) term benevolent intentions by showing that he was willing to extend himself beyond what his formal role required in order to attend to their unique, personal needs and likes.

According to the board members, the Reed board now was literally inundated with information from the superintendent. This was a bonus initially and so well received that it was later developed into a standard expectation and accepted protocol. Every Reed trustee told me enthusiastically and proudly that they were entitled to and received the same information regardless of role or length of tenure on the board, although the method and frequency of delivery was individualized and uniquely personalized to meet one another’s preferential communication styles, schedules and needs. Reed Trustee D captures this concept:

*Our superintendent is available. He actually enjoys sharing the information. He wants everyone to be comfortable and in the know— he has a unique knack – it seems like for each person, he’s made those adjustments, rather than say ‘you fit into my box.’ He knows what we need to do our job and he treats us well.* - Reed Trustee D

Superintendent R-2’s customized and equitable information-sharing strategies helped to repair relationships damaged by discord and power struggles over withholding and sharing vital district governance information. The board was now able to make informed decisions due to Superintendent R-2’s willing and regular provision of key background information. By sharing
information, influence and control (Tschannen-Moran, 2004), the seeds of trust were planted. For the first time, the Reed board was unanimously open to receive suggestions, ideas, and recommendations from its superintendent, without a cloud of suspicion automatically hanging over him.

Another rather unique manifestation in Reed of the superintendent’s belief that “every voice is equal and valuable” (Supt. R-2), was the regular rotation of officers in Reed. The president of the board, vice president of the board, and clerk were officer positions. Studies uphold that traditionally, the officer position, particularly of the president or chair of the meeting who assists the superintendent in setting the formal agendas, wields considerable power over other board members. That was the situation when Superintendent R-2 came on board. This no longer seemed to be the case in the Reed District. All board members were being viewed and treated as equal in stature, influence and power, regardless of their position or role as a member or officer. Every board member felt they would have their time, their turn, and their term in those roles, so there was no longer a sense of permanently stratified rank in the room. Each could gain from and be useful in a variety of roles while on the board. These ingrained practices, albeit informally introduced and instituted by Superintendent R-2, discouraged favoritism or perceptions of preferential treatment or attempt to exert extra influence on him. From a practical standpoint, this practice appeared to reduce the need for internal lobbying or formation of sub-alliances among board members, which in turn, allowed them to focus their full attention and energy on making sound decisions, not the acquisition of titles. This structure provided for rotating roles within the board and seemed to lower the threshold of tension within the board by keeping internal politics at bay. From the standpoint of trust building, this strategy manifested in a very visible sign of respect by the superintendent for his board, as well as an acknowledgment of equal competence and confidence in each board member, which are important precursors to building and boosting relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). According to Superintendent R-2, the idea was to make sure that “Everyone has a voice and everyone gets to be president; that’s the respect for the fact that the people wanted you there and deserve a chance to see that you can do it.” The trustees responded with favor to this informal framework for distributed, collaborative leadership. It also dispelled any myths that the board president had special or increased access to the superintendent, as had been the case in the past. Reed Trustee B best captured the spirit, intent, and relational benefit of this courtesy rotation with these words:

*We still vote, but the rotation is a sign of respect and order and that way you don’t have to jostle for the position. There’s no politics so that’s part of accountability for all, too. -- Reed Trustee B.*

Instituting and adhering to this protocol, although not codified in formal policy, seemed to help maintain harmonious relationships among the board members as it served to interrupt the usual backdoor dealing and internal micropolitical pressures. In keeping with this theme, the concepts of equal voice and that all board members had something valuable to contribute were also regularly observed and demonstrated in the Reed board meetings, with a standard protocol insisted upon and visibly reinforced by Superintendent R-2, that no one spoke twice until everyone had the opportunity to speak once, so as not to dominate meetings and to ensure all were heard. This applied to the superintendent as well, who intentionally tried not to monopolize the dialogue at the board table during open session. Reed Trustee D summed up the value of this habit as a sign of mutual respect for the board members’ roles, positions and opinions:
No problem if you have a contrary opinion. When I run a meeting, everybody gets a turn to speak. It’s fair and it’s equitable, everyone gets their say. There is no domination. No one can speak twice until everyone has spoken at least once. If you want to pass, you don’t have to speak on everything. Some people say, you let everyone speaks, that takes time. Well, every one of those people were elected, somebody elected them. They have their moment. - Reed Trustee D

Superintendent R-2’s implementation of this protocol curbed the Reed board’s sense of anxiety about diminished voice and the previously commonplace power struggles. By strategically reducing the pre-existing competitive pressures and arguments over airtime between the board members and himself, it became gradually easier to support one other. Under Superintendent R-2’s leadership, the board bond was internally strengthened, which formed the underpinnings of what could potentially become a trusting, unified team that ideally, would not cave in, disintegrate, or turn on the superintendent as soon as external political forces were exerted. The transformation in the board room became apparent, as exemplified by increasing numbers of unanimous votes on routine consent matters, and markedly fewer instances of board members changing their minds or tabling and reversing previously expressed opinions on agenda topics and superintendent recommendations, in response to a last minute contingent of public speakers pressing on them publicly.

**Remember You Are On the Same Team**

Superintendent R-2 impressed upon the board his ideal of a functional governance team that included five board members plus one superintendent, rather than five board members vs. one superintendent. According to Bryk and Schneider (2002), “the power base held by each individual directly affects the nature of relational trust in any given role set.... (and) the most significant structural feature is that no one person typically exercises absolute power” (p. 26). By disrupting what had been perceived as a built-in power structure and eliminating the need for constant internal power struggles, relational trust could take root. Superintendent R-2’s more even distribution power of power, coupled with his strong sense of team and insistence on shared responsibility, became the pivotal cornerstone of many subtle and even more dramatic changes in relationship, behavior, norms and interactions with the board that ultimately elevated the level of relational trust.

Bryk and Schneider (2002) identified role set-relations as an area of focus for trust building, particularly as it related to shared obligations, mutual expectations, interdependence and vulnerability to each other. Taking Superintendent R-2’s cue, the Reed governance team arrived at a shared understanding of their relationship and respective roles, which was inclusive, not exclusive of the superintendent as part of the unified group. A strong sense of team permeated their conversations and associated imagery, analogies and references to their superintendent and fellow board members. For example, throughout the interviews and in my observations of the board meetings, it is of note that Superintendent R-2 almost always said “we” instead of “I” or referred to “my board;” likewise, Reed board members consistently referred to “*my* superintendent” or “*our* superintendent” when speaking. Superintendent R-2 strategically worked with them in tandem, in workshops side by side, rather than in isolation. Although he still worked for them, they were more often than not, working together on visioning and
developing policy, which blurred the traditional lines that separated the appointed or hired staff from the elected officials. Building on the first strategy, the metaphorical images that he promoted and that surfaced from the participant interviews were of a team. The Reed team was made up of different and unique individuals (board and superintendent) who came together to jointly and individually contribute, using their skills for a common purpose, and were in alignment even in the face of challenge. In keeping with the team analogy, there was also an expressed feeling of shared value for balancing their sometimes-competing interests and responsibilities in order to function in a constructive manner.

The team concept of governance stemmed from the superintendent’s core philosophy. As seen in the following quote, the superintendent never abdicated his defined leadership role as he identified himself as the team captain. Nevertheless, he realized he was intertwined with the board members and not a separate entity as evidenced in his statement:

_I really believe it’s a team. I’ve had to work really hard to make sure that the board knows I’m PART of THEIR team…. I think it is kind of a team and you have to build like-mindedness and get everybody on the same page. ... On the team, I guess I’m like the general captain._ - Supt. R-2

Two of the Reed trustees claimed that prior to Superintendent R-2, they saw themselves as the bosses of the superintendent, and asserted that the board needed to exert authority over him to ensure that he did his job properly. Interestingly, that viewpoint had morphed. One by one, every Reed trustee echoed the value of this team approach to leadership and seemed to share it. Reed Trustee D captured its essence:

_It is a good metaphor, actually because I do think we’re like every team, people aren’t outstanding, they’re not the fastest, they’re not the toughest, let’s say a football team, but you have the players you need and I think everybody recognizes the value. ... I would say we are a pretty good team. ... we’re really, really good, I think.... I would say it’s the idea that you are a team working towards a common goal, and that if you have that respect for each other, that you agree this is ultimately where we want to be, then those other pieces you kind of can work out. .... And the supe? Don’t forget we are on the same side, same team as him, too. If we were a crew team, he would be our coxswain and we would all be rowing together in the same direction._ - Reed Trustee D

Trustee A, a tough critic of past superintendents’ communication and leadership styles, lamented the fact that they weren’t able to select all of their teammates, yet still had an important job to do and decisions to make. All Reed board members used the word team to describe themselves and the need to work together toward a shared goal, regardless of their predispositions. Their buy-in to this concept demonstrated a renewed sense of unity and aligned purpose as evidenced by a shared desire to operate as an interdependent governance body. Under the backdrop of the team approach, the superintendent and board members were more open to examining, reflecting upon and redefining their roles and ways of communicating and interacting, in a combined, concerted effort to improve relationship and functionality.

As part of their adopted team approach, Superintendent R-2 acknowledged that even if they worked well together and bonded, their strength of relationship would be continually tested
by external forces. Soon after his appointment, Superintendent R-2 began working steadily with his board members to help them recognize there would always be political pressure applied by a few vocal and organized constituents or groups, and that they may or may not be truly representative of the nearly 35,000 families they were elected to represent, some who were less savvy about navigating the political or educational system. He supported them by anticipating questions and challenges they might receive and encouraged them to direct any complaint letters and community concerns to him first to address, while cc’ing them in his response, to keep them in the role of active listeners and elected officials ensuring accountability, rather than becoming part of management working to problem solve.

Rather than allow outside challengers to weaken their relationship, the Reed governance team actually was receptive to their input, took it to heart, and Superintendent R-2 helped them come up with protocols and processes to manage and respond to it. During my interviews, all five Reed board members felt it was important that they listen to constituents who attended and spoke at public board meetings and they took their opinions into consideration. They also stressed the importance of directing said concerns first to the superintendent for follow-up and response rather than engaging directly, and they were jointly determined not to be unduly swayed until all sides of the matter were fully explored and researched. Four of five Reed board members stressed that they needed to be strong and consistent in their informed and research-based convictions, because perceived “back pedaling based on squeaky wheels who show up and sometimes aren’t even members of the community” (Reed Trustee A), might reduce their credibility and might hurt the governance team reputation with the larger, silent and sometimes disenfranchised majority. This represented a more unified approach, leaving them less susceptible to personal attacks or splintering caused by the divide and conquer strategies that had plagued them in the past.

Unlike his predecessor, who seemed reluctant to respond to detailed requests for information or appeared threatened or challenged by questioning and probing, which he claimed was micromanagement, the incoming superintendent believed it was the board members’ right and duty to receive timely, comprehensive responses to their inquiries. He pledged in his hiring interview to give his board members an answer even if he sensed they might not like the answer they received. He worked for their interests, yet also among and with them, so he refused to withhold information. He had a different role, but he was always, an integral part of their team.

The transition to the team mindset was not without bumps in the road along the way. Periodically throughout their work together, Superintendent R-2 had to remind his board members to let go of the election and campaign propaganda and embrace and recommit to a governance team way of thinking and interacting. According to Trustee A, Superintendent R-2 was frank and brutally honest in his approach:

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At some point we realized point blank that we just have to put aside the election and endorsement issues once elected in order to get our work done as a team. He (the new supe) said, ‘Look. That was the election. You’re elected. You’re part of this team now. I’m going to do everything I can to help you learn what you need to learn to be successful…. So, guess what? It’s a new day--(The day you are elected)--and you need to start working together, now, and never stop.’ - Reed Trustee A

The Reed board members uniformly credited their superintendent’s active intervention and assistance for the transformation they underwent that would ultimately help them fulfill their
trustee roles as part of a healthy, functioning governance team. Under his tutelage, they seemed better able to refocus and channel their energy into their future productive work as opposed to staying mired in past transgressions, real or perceived.

**Share Power, Knowledge & Responsibility**

Superintendent R-2 didn’t pull any punches when molding and shaping the board. He made it very clear that 5-0 voting outcomes were not necessarily perceived negatively by the public as rubberstamping. In fact, he suggested that there was perceived “strength in solidarity” (Supt. R-2), particularly on high profile and important issues. The team metaphor he promoted was further underscored as he moved the board away from operating as singletons with individual agendas to the whole group. With his lead, they progressed along the spectrum from what Mary Parker Follett’s (1927) research terms an operational mindset of *power over* toward more frequent incidents of sharing *power with* the superintendent. For the first time, the public and even the Reed employee unions seemed less likely to challenge superintendent decisions that had the full support and endorsement of the board. Not surprisingly, his clout correspondingly increased with staff and in the community. The Reed board’s transition, shepherded by Superintendent R-2, exemplified Ansell and Gash’s (2008) depiction of a larger movement among boards away from competitive to collaborative governance, characterized by information sharing and collective empowerment as a part of a more cohesive governance unit, within their respective roles. Reed Trustee A suggested that this approach to power-sharing and collaborative empowerment shifted the board members’ focus away from asserting power over the superintendent by questioning his every move to demonstrating power with him by co-developing a shared vision that was sanctioned by a unanimous vote. The shift from *coercive* enforcement of power and will to what Parker Follett (1927) terms *co-active* power seemed transformational. The superintendent was now seen as central to the implementation of the board’s collective will and a formidable extension of the board’s voice, not a counterpoint to them.

Research reveals that in conflict-ridden and competitive rather than cooperative governance forums, there are often power imbalances and tallies of wins/losses among individuals. Furthermore, in collaborative governance models, reaching consensus is a preferred outcome (Ansell & Gash, 2008). As Superintendent R-2 worked to establish trust and cohesion, he made a conscious effort to show unanimity and a unified front whenever possible with his board (what Ansell and Gash consider “small wins” when building trust), in order to provide them with a safe space and multiple opportunities to agree. According to Ansell and Gash (2008), these small wins provide opportunities for those involved in public forums and policy making to deepen trust, as well as solidify their shared commitments and shared understandings. Superintendent R-2 accomplished just that, as he artfully arranged for the board to publicly endorse his recommendations and agree with him on certain pre-selected initiatives. Over time, it appears that there was reduced staff and constituent negativity toward the district and board and an alleviation of external political pressure previously hindering the cultivation of a positive governance team relationship. Reed board members, some who aspired to be elected to the Reed city council one day, experienced less constituent pressure and scrutiny, allowing them to lower their defenses and refocus on positive endeavors rather than cast blame or look for scapegoats on staff. By the same token, as the Reed governance team relationship became more functional, the board and district’s reputation was enhanced in the city and once caustic district/city relations.
improved. A Reed community member and various Reed board members used the following words to describe the new relationship: “more collaborative . . . there’s meetings, dialogues . . . a strengthening going on . . . it’s much more positive, and we all benefit” (Reed community member, Reed Trustees A, C, D). Gradually, and with conscious work, their reputation and stature were elevated in the public eye and the community. For the first time, the superintendent and board appeared to be “on the same page” (Reed Trustee E).

Even a longtime community member recognized the positive shift and the importance of positive day-to-day interactions in building and boosting relational trust. This board watcher offered a unique perspective on the transformation observed, which she couched as a move from being constantly at odds to a collaborative partnership between the superintendent and board:

Well, from what I’ve observed -- and I think it’s working very well -- it’s more of a partnership as opposed to one side (the board) over here and the other (the supe), over there or vice versa. I think there is mutual respect currently between the folks. . . . I think because it’s a partnership, there’s day-to-day interaction and communication. - Reed Community Member

There is an age-old saying attributed to Francis Bacon, that “information is power.”¹⁶ As a case in point, in Reed’s past, when information was withheld or only some board members had been privy to information that the superintendent held close, this contributed to perceived power imbalances. The board’s perception that they were only partially in the know created friction with the prior superintendent and each other. The new superintendent managed to ensure they all received and grasped critical pieces of information so as to have equal knowledge, power and credibility with the community. He shared information freely and in so doing, he did not cede his power; rather he shared his power, and they all felt more empowered as a result. Again, the change was palpable, as a Reed community member picked up on it:

Not a day that goes by that he (the superintendent) is not giving them some kind of information. I can’t remember a day. Anything that goes on, they know. They know. So that if a community member comes up to them, or they get a phone call or this random e-mail that says blah, blah, blah, they already know what’s going on. He says, ’Let me know. I’ll give you a response and you can all say the same thing so that nobody gets pitted against somebody else,’ because that’s happened in years past.... I think right now it is a really good partnership. – Reed Community Member

In the previous section, I argued that equal information sharing showed respect for each board member as an individual. Information sharing as a strategy served another purpose by generating a sense of power with because it prevented blindsiding, which can shatter trust, sometimes irrevocably. The superintendent and all five Reed board members identified that their information sharing was reciprocal and was a sign of respect to make sure that people weren’t caught off guard. This suggests a groundwork for trust because it reduced vulnerability in the

¹⁶ This phrase is commonly attributed to Sir Francis Bacon, although there is no known occurrence of this precise phrase in his English or Latin writings. However, the expression “ipsa scientia potestas est” (knowledge itself is power) occurs in Bacon’s Meditationes Sacrae (1597). Source: www.iep.utm.edu/bacon.
public eye and with each other. Full disclosure posed a particular challenge under prior leadership, because in an atmosphere of low trust it is tempting to withhold or omit information or data that might place the district, board, superintendent or staff in an unfavorable light. Superintendent R-2 revealed all, so his board was fully informed relative to district strengths and weaknesses or areas warranting improvement. His commitment to openness and honesty demonstrated his trustworthiness. Gradually, their energy and focus could be redirected from information seeking to visioning and setting policy to guide the direction of the district, based on the information that was readily provided and at their fingertips. Over time, the board members learned to rely on his advance, comprehensive information. However, considering their past experiences, they didn’t take it for granted. Superintendent R-2 even made it a point to share information that he thought was important that they had not requested, to further build their knowledge base and understanding of the daily happenings and workings of the district. He met or conferred regularly in order to touch base on items of mutual interest. He also used this format as a bonding opportunity. Superintendent R-2 acknowledged that it was a good idea to share candidly, as his board would eventually find out the full truth anyway (from other, perhaps less reliable sources). Thus, his philosophy was that it was far better that accurate and balanced information be relayed through him, rather than risk a biased perspective or receipt of just one side of the story from others. He used the weekly Friday memo board packet as a consistent medium for this important type of communication:

No blindsides or gotchas. From any of us. They (my board) are really good about not doing that. I try not to surprise them and I think they’re very respectful about not doing that to me. - Supt. R-2

As outlined above, a key application of this rule of thumb was that it was reciprocal and applied to everyone on the governing team, not just the superintendent. The Reed board members felt a deep obligation to promptly pass on to the superintendent any information or concerns they heard even casually, in the grocery store or after church, or came across so that he would be able to immediately explore, address, and resolve. From my interviews, it became evident that among all five board members, there was a strong commitment to keep from blindsiding the superintendent and each other, particularly in the public arena, where to do so might cause embarrassment and serve little constructive purpose. Reed Trustee B summed up their stance best:

I think that it’s important that people are not blindsided. I work really hard to make sure that that doesn’t happen to our superintendent because I, personally, have a great deal of respect for our superintendent. So what I try to do is to keep him informed of anything that I’m hearing whether positive or negative. I have heard some real negative things and I’ll just go to him and say, ‘Let’s close the door. I’m going to tell you what I know. I’m going to tell you who said it. I’m not going to hold back.’ That’s trust between he and I. - Reed Trustee B

Provide Political Cover for Your Board

Prior research on interpersonal trust indicates that social similarities by race, ethnicity and/or class provide an initial basis for fostering trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Additional
research suggests that in more homogeneous communities where few challenges to the board and district’s decisions arise, the board/superintendent relationship remains somewhat untested and appears more stable and solid (Alsbury, 2008). The Reed District faced increasing demographic diversification throughout Superintendent R-2’s term. Consequently, the Reed board confronted multiple controversial issues that had the potential to negatively affect trust building, test and strain the strength of relationship with Superintendent R-2. He realized he needed to navigate carefully when under fire, to preserve the board relationship. Thus, he decided to provide political cover for his board by keeping some decisions completely away from the board table and under his sole purview, or strategically shepherding them through precise agenda placement and management. With these actions, Superintendent R-2 created a political buffer to allow his board, as elected officials, to withstand these intense constituent pressures that in many districts tore governance teams apart. He knew that a vital part of his role was to take care of the district’s business as well as preserve his relationship with his board, so if/when things went awry, he realized it was his job to take the heat off of them. Unlike his predecessor, Superintendent R-2 saw it as part of his role to take responsibility and ultimately protect the board when it came to unpopular or divisive issues or decisions in the community or among the staff. This created a shield of sorts for the board, who as elected officials, served at the pleasure of the voters, who were sometimes fickle or easily swayed by media propaganda. The superintendent described his role in safeguarding the board as a successful technique and something that definitely brought them closer to each other:

I would advise a new superintendent to begin with a deep understanding of how difficult it is to be a board member. They have a tough job. They really are public servants who are doing a lot and getting absolutely nothing in return. And they take all kinds of flack...Your job as the superintendent is to be the bad guy and make the board members look good. That’s what your job is, to make them look good. And so, always in public settings...But when there’s tough stuff or bad stuff has to happen, you (the supe) need to be the face of it. Don’t let a board member anywhere near that (like when a teacher was arrested). I sometimes see in other districts the board president commenting on behalf of the district; well it should be the superintendent only dealing with the bad stuff. Let the board members do all the good, happy stuff; let them be the one to get the National Blue Ribbon Award. Remember, you as a supe have to only get five votes, each of them needs to get about 10,000 or more. – Supt. R-2

Providing political cover was no easy task in a large school district facing its fair share of socio-political division and acrimony. For example, during the time I was studying the district, Reed faced a range of polarizing issues, e.g., controversial novels, installation of automated external defibrillators (AEDs) on sites, deploying drug-sniffing dogs on campus, passing a Harvey Milk Day Resolution, and adopting new sexual health education curriculum. The superintendent and district staff members came up with and approved compromises to appease community members with regard to controversial curricula, such as parental opt out provisions and allowing alternative curriculum without academic consequences. This prevented some of the

17 Harvey Milk Day is organized by the Harvey Milk Foundation and celebrated annually on May 22nd in memory and honor of Harvey Bernard Milk, an American politician elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors and a gay rights activist who was assassinated in 1978. Source: http://www.harveymilkday.co/harvey
predictable constituent backlash that the board might have faced in moving forward with an unpopular decision. On occasion, the superintendent revealed he deliberately kept a contentious decision at the administrative staff level, rather than raising it to the very public board policy level. The superintendent explained this strategic approach:

Because of my experiences, I am pretty skilled and sensitive in a way that maybe others aren’t, to the challenges and pressures that elected officials face. I get that they are elected officials and my job is to make them look good…. My job is to make them look good and I try at all times to make them look good, to always acknowledge them and recognize they do hard work, and they’re doing it for basically nothing, basically a community service.... With controversial items, such as book approvals, sometimes I just say no to them so they never go to the board. It protects them from having to take the hits publicly. – Supt. R-2

The Reed superintendent and all five members of the board, as elected officials, acknowledged that they faced very real political repercussions (potential to lose elections, be recalled, disparagement on social media, etc.) whenever the community was not satisfied with the direction, decisions or leadership of the district. The Reed superintendent was politically savvy enough to recognize this stark reality and consequently acted as a shock absorber when appropriate. This was not a one-sided protective relationship, however. Along the same lines, the board reciprocated and showed outward support, or as one Reed community member said, “by and large the board members had his back” (Reed Community Member), when he needed to make an unpopular decision, such as movement or transfer of a beloved principal. By including political cover as an essential part of their roles, the board and Superintendent R-2 formed trust.

In Alsbury’s Dissatisfaction Theory of American Democracy (2008), a superintendent’s fate (as an appointee) and his board’s (as political figures) election vulnerability and re-election prospects are inextricably linked. In a similar vein, Hackett’s research (2015) upholds that a superintendent who successfully deflects constituent anger or discontent away from the board can strengthen their relationship, as the public can be very unforgiving and take it out on them at the ballot box. Thus, it is in a superintendent’s best interest (as well as the board members’), to have each other’s backs when under fire, and vice versa. Superintendent R-2 recognized that connection as did his board, and they each did what they had to do to help one another survive and continue in their respective roles.

With that protective mechanism in play, the Reed superintendent strategized about every aspect of the public board meeting, in the pre-planning stages and throughout. Unlike his predecessor, the superintendent provided extensive background information to the board in written form at least ten days prior to any decision with major financial or organizational implications. Some topics, such as establishing budget priorities, reviewing audits, appraising feasibility of future political measures, or substantially revamping programs or policies, were deliberately reserved for initial vetting during daytime board study sessions before being introduced into the main board meeting agenda. Superintendent R-2 would regularly manipulate the agenda so that he could ensure political cover. By creating discrete space for learning, through deliberate separation of information and action, precise placement of or re-ordering of agenda items, and/or by calling recesses during intense moments, the governance team became less susceptible to attacks and criticism in the heat of the moment. These strategies when implemented during board meetings made the Reed governance team less vulnerable to political
hassles or coercive influences while learning. The workshop structure also allowed them to fully study a topic, ask probing or even basic questions, and ascertain the pros and cons of any particular decision in a relatively neutral and less potentially volatile or polarized setting.

Any one of these socio-political issues could have permanently damaged the fledgling board/superintendent trust relationship. As part of what he saw as his role and responsibility, the Reed superintendent was determined to cultivate and implement protocols that would allow them to maintain decorum and mutual respect even under acute scrutiny and public pressure from riled constituents. He sought to protect and defend them politically and also safeguard the sanctity and reputation of the boardroom and district. Certainly they encountered philosophical differences and split votes, as in any democratic voting body. Due to the conscious efforts of the superintendent, however, their sometimes-divided voting records were no longer evidence of an insurmountable rift with their superintendent that would potentially be career ending for him or them. They were actually signs of differing opinions and philosophical viewpoints. This was a refreshing change from the past, where battle scars never seemed to heal, and instead of “drawing lines in the sand” (Supt. R-2), they were busy forging healthy and trusting relations even in the midst of regular controversy and substantive disagreement.

**Know Your Role and Stay in Your Lane**

Superintendent R-2 realized that every board member came in with different backgrounds, experiences and understandings of purpose and role. Taking this into consideration, he felt that it was important that each learned his/her role, understood that role, and that they all adhered to their roles and used them to benefit the entire team. He did not leave it up to chance. Rather, he was very hands-on and participatory when it came to introduction, orientation and training. Superintendent R-2 carefully planned, coordinated and hosted prospective candidate forums, oversaw a New Board Member Orientation session once they were elected, contributed his perspective, and provided additional access to pre-vetted training. Whenever a new Reed board member was elected to serve or appointed in the event of a board seat vacancy outside of the standard election cycle, Superintendent R-2 made it a point to personally orient the new board member and freely shared his philosophy and norms for interaction. He was known to facilitate one-on-one or workshop and study session opportunities for incoming and returning board members to learn about or refresh themselves on the background and history of items and decisions that might be coming before them.

This practice of superintendent-driven orientation maintained a semblance of neutrality by preventing one or another veteran board member (namely the sitting president), from overtly influencing newly elected board members by inserting his/her personal opinions, interpretations or political agenda into the onboarding or information gathering process. Trustee A and Trustee D repeatedly stressed the critical role of the superintendent in influencing each new board member’s introduction to the board and sharing the newly established norms of functional operations, which were vital to relationship building:

> There are two new board members, so they will need to go through the ‘forming, storming, norming stage’ and figure each other out. They’ve been together for 11 months now, so they are probably not at the highest inter-relationship trust level yet, but working on it. They’re okay with one another, I suspect. Anytime there is someone new, there is transition and it can change the dynamics…. The
superintendent helps set the stage and intervenes to work through all that so we can work together and be productive. We don’t need one board member to take ‘another under his or her wing’ and overly influence that person or cultivate a sub-alliance…. We have come too far to go backwards now. - Reed Trustee D

Bryk and Schneider (2002) detail some of the challenges that occur in trust building as a result of ambiguity in role relations, particularly if they are asymmetrical. Individuals in interdependent relationships of authority may worry about favoritism, being undermined, or about others shirking responsibilities that will in turn, result in a negative reflection of their own performance. This was evident in the relationship between the previous superintendent and the board. Reed Trustee A directly links the board’s micromanaging tendency with a lack of trust:

One of our former superintendents caused us to micromanage, and it’s because we didn’t trust him. So to me, the micromanaging is directly related to trust. You don’t think that they’re doing their job right? If they say, ‘Yes, I’ll do that,’ but they don’t, then you start getting on top of them about it and you start calling them constantly, ‘Have you done this yet? You said you were going to do this. Really, what’s going on here?’ You don’t trust ‘em. - Reed Trustee A

Superintendent R-2 didn’t risk these factors potentially negatively influencing their relationship. He made sure that his board learned its proper role at entry and he helped them to stick to it. He also made sure that he did the same, and he describes his and their efforts to that effect with these words:

The biggest thing I’ve done to build trust is just trying to follow-up. When we say we are going to do something, to make sure it’s done…. This board is good about sticking to policy level stuff. Now, that’s not to say that if they drive by a school and see a tree falling down…. they don’t call me and say would you look into this? And so, what I try to do in every case like that is follow-up and let them know how I followed up. They’re pretty good about running things through me not directly to staff. I think probably the key strategy I have for preventing [board] micromanagement is to make sure that I follow up and do what I said I would do. - Supt. R-2

Superintendent R-2 attributed the fact that his board’s tendency toward micromanagement dissipated to his own acceptance of the micromanager role and his belief that his role should include a meticulous track record of keeping them informed of the action steps he took to address issues and resolve concerns. Furthermore, he never seemed offended when they questioned or inquired about his decisions, rationale or follow-up. He admitted he understood that was part of their role in holding him accountable.

Superintendent R-2 eagerly shared information with his board as part of his job, soliciting their differing perspectives and even their probing questions. With Superintendent R-2, there was no longer a power struggle arising over the practices of answering questions and questioning answers. As the board learned to accept his role as a professional leader and he accepted their role and their right to question and double-check his follow-through, mutual trust was gradually built.
My board can be tough. They can ask a lot of questions. When I came to Reed, everybody said, ‘Oh, that board micromanages.’ Now, they don’t micromanage. I do, so they don’t need to. Micromanaging to me, is more about trying to get into areas that you shouldn’t. They ask tough questions; they ask smart questions…. They ask more questions, they ask more tough questions, but that’s their job. They ask tough, tough questions and they hold me accountable. If I say I’m going to do something, I better do it or I know I will be asked why I didn’t. I don’t think that’s micromanaging…. that’s accountability. I think it’s pretty clear that I run the school district. They don’t. I do. So, we don’t really tussle over that. - Supt. R-2

As Superintendent R-2 kept the Reed board better informed and shouldered his true responsibilities, the board members gradually learned to back away and back off, allowing him to focus on his work, rather than explaining and justifying every one of his decisions and detailing his follow-through. They gained a valid sense of his high level of competence and his measure of integrity, which according to Bryk and Schneider (2002), buoy trust. The Reed superintendent’s strategic approach to understanding and fulfilling his role while accepting and appreciating the board’s responsibility to hold him accountable, reduced the need for micromanaging, which increased trust.

This shift took time and required adjustments on everyone’s part. The board developed a fresh perspective on and value for the district’s top educational leader’s professionalism. Likewise, while every board member claimed to have a specialty interest or focus on the board, they alluded to the fact that they had a comprehensive understanding of their role, which stemmed from a growing respect for the superintendent as a highly competent professional. As Trustee B stated, “I’ve learned just enough about education to be able to support the educators to let them do their job and get out of their way, and that’s the key thing” (Reed Trustee B).

Role definition was still, by necessity, clarified on a continual basis by the superintendent through explicit expectations. Superintendent R-2 established a clearly communicated non-negotiable that just like the students, staff and superintendent, the board needed to always “be prepared and do their homework” (Reed Trustee C). He stressed that the board members needed to adhere to that obligation, as part of their official elected role, and fortunately, every one of them wholeheartedly bought into it:

To me, there is no excuse for not being prepared that is straight out. You can sit there and complain all you want but if you’re going to show up at a meeting and not be prepared, I don’t trust anything you say. I have zero tolerance for people who are not prepared. – Reed Trustee A

The importance of being prepared was described by two of the board members as an essential cornerstone for trust building. Being prepared, in their view, created trust as it was a means for them to demonstrate competence and also a means to show respect and personal regard for others, by devoting a comparable time commitment to do well in their role.

**Provide Formal Spaces and Structures to Learn Together**

An extension of the superintendent’s efforts to define roles was the provision of formal training opportunities for his board. Orientation was not sufficient, as they required ongoing
support and training. These additional opportunities also allowed them to learn and interact together in a semi-structured way, which allowed for their interpersonal relationship to develop as well. The Reed superintendent supported the concept of team bonding thus he and his board participated in an annual workshop retreat to provide a forum for teambuilding activities. The retreat allowed for building rapport within a framework, under somewhat less constrained parameters than formal public sessions. Trustee C reports on the benefits of these sessions:

_We had a retreat ... it's usually a half-day where we discuss different issues and goals and policies, and we have that led by a moderator or a facilitator. We've done that a couple of times. It's a publicly noticed meeting but people from the outside don't really come. But we've had them at different locations. And it's a good opportunity. At the end of the day we have a dinner together too. So that way we get to break bread and talk to each other. It's just a chance for us to pull away from the daily day grind and discussions about specific agenda items but focus more on the interactions. How we operate too._ – Reed Trustee C

In Reed, however, the initial retreat was hardly the panacea for the deep-rooted, historical patterns of behavior characterized by mistrust; rather, it was an initial baby step, and not instantaneously embraced by every board member. In order to address some of the relationship challenges he inherited, the superintendent took several additional action steps. Superintendent R-2’s professional development structure was a unique combination of collegial, collaborative and formal training, similar to a research-based professional learning community model. He augmented this framework with additional low-key, low pressure opportunities to learn and interact together that made a major impression and created a comfortable atmosphere where relational trust could be cultivated and nurtured, one positive exchange and interaction at a time. Early on, he insisted that the new governance team members, regardless of their longevity on the board or past training, go through substantial formal training through the California School Boards Association (CSBA). His unique caveat for the required training was that they all register, participate and attend a minimum number of sessions together, as a governance team, rather than attend individual sessions at their personal convenience or in isolation. He believed that learning as a cohort increased their likelihood of collegial bonding and rapport building.

In my interviews, all Reed governance team members were able to articulate their official role, purpose, and general protocols for interaction according to California School Board Association (CSBA) guidelines and official training manuals. During my observations of public Reed board meetings and document review, CSBA’s influence was apparent, as it was evidenced in the established meeting procedures, referenced by Superintendent R-2 and board members in their dialogue, as well as in the use of CSBA policy guides as models for local adoption. Trustee D reported on its value and importance, which was not only the content focus (determining protocols) but also the facilitated process that they went through of arriving at shared understandings, which brought them closer together as a team, even as new team members were introduced:

_And so, the more we can do teambuilding .... at least once a year, a board retreat we do every year. We made sure that this last one was right after elections to talk about, you know, here are some of the things we want to work on; here are some of the things we want to consider; how we work together. And having that dialogue_
where we can talk to each other. When you have one new board member come in, that you really have a whole new board. You do, you do. I would definitely agree.... and so when you have new people come... it could totally throw you, .... you know. - Reed Trustee D

Although determining meeting protocols seems relatively minor in the larger scheme, Superintendent R-2 looked at every structured occasion to interact with his board as chance to demonstrate mutual respect, personal regard, integrity and competence. As a result of the sessions designed to co-develop meeting protocols, they mentioned they felt better prepared, which boosted their confidence and assessment of each other’s competence. They also felt heard and respected as the protocols addressed their needs, which they felt indicated regard for them as individuals. All committed to follow-through and to adhere to the protocols, which gave them an opportunity to prove they operated with integrity.

**Accept That Respect ≠ 100% Agreement or Cohesion**

Superintendent R-2 introduced a tried and true approach to foster respect and encourage respectful interactions with his board that focused on civil discourse. As already pointed out, all board members agreed to put aside prior tensions and differences once elected to work together as a governance team. Yet, ironically, they still had to come to agreement regarding how to handle inevitable disagreements. The members of the governance team acknowledged that there would still be dissent and debate, and because they were a democratic governing body representing different community members and factions, they believed that was an optimal situation. With the superintendent’s guidance, it became important to all, however, that their exchanges be tempered and their dialogue stay respectful. The superintendent set the stage and the tone:

*We disagree and commit. We keep saying that to each other. You have to understand that you’re committed to a bigger purpose and we actually value your disagreement.* – Supt. R-2

The superintendent’s words and stance were echoed and reiterated by every member of his board, showing just how ingrained this norm became in their vernacular and practice. The alignment among the board members and superintendent, even similarity in the choice of words, without prompting or solicitation, was remarkable, particularly given the dysfunctional operating and erratic behavioral patterns of the not so distant past:

*I don’t lose any sleep over it if we disagree, if the others are fine with it; a vote is a vote, right? I’m a big believer in disagree and commit. You can disagree, but once a decision made as a board, you commit and we all move forward, whether you’re for or against it.* – Reed Trustee B

*And while we may disagree on personal philosophies, religious, business, political processes sometimes, we respect each other. And also, when decisions are made, even when they’re against what you had hoped for, to be able to move on and work together. I think that’s really important and critical...You disagree agreeably;*
you agree to disagree. - Reed Trustee C

The renewed atmosphere of cordiality and respect among the Reed governance team members extended to the treatment of not just each other and the superintendent, but to all staff members in public settings and was epitomized by the way in which formal requests for additional information were made and presentations by staff received, in open session board meetings. In my observation of one public session, which lasted over six hours, I counted 71 distinct words or phrases of appreciation (e.g., thank you, thanks, great job, we appreciate your hard work, we are impressed by your diligence, etc.) by the superintendent and the board members, directed toward each other, as well as various staff members at all levels, classified to senior cabinet. This was in marked contrast to the exchanges observed prior to Superintendent R-2’s appointment.

Trustee E was admittedly skeptical early on about others’ genuine ability to let go of past grievances and communicate respectfully while arguing points or debating passionately. Similarly, Trustee A admitted that he initially scoffed at the concept because it might make him or others appear weak in their convictions or phony by merely pretending to get along. He had been on the board for many years and originally confused showing respect for other board members or the superintendent with forced or fake agreement, but eventually realized the difference:

As long as each person individually has it (cohesion) with the superintendent and then everyone else can respect and function, you don’t necessarily need to be all ‘kumbaya.’ If you are, then sometimes you get in that alliance thing and the rubber stamp. That’s not us. Not how we operate. – Reed Trustee A

Gradually they all came around, aided by the fact that Superintendent R-2 modeled respectful communication for them verbally and in written communications. The days of angry and terse email exchanges (of which I saw documented examples) between the superintendent and board were also over. Superintendent R-2 worked closely with each of them, even taking the extra step of asking two board members who were most often at odds in public, to view themselves afterwards as they interacted on videotape during a contentious school board meeting, so that they could reflect and improve on their decorum in public. With Superintendent R-2 taking such a strong stand to reinforce a respectful climate at the board table, it wasn’t long before every member of the Reed governance team understood the importance of maintaining civil discourse even during their lively political debate and dialogue. I had the opportunity to view excerpts of Reed board meetings, before and after Superintendent R-2 instituted this non-negotiable expectation, and the difference was profound.

They moved from a private and very public “we vs. them” attitude of board vs. district superintendent/administration vs. staff, rife with “blaming and shaming” (Supt. R-2) to a team approach to governance characterized by mutual respect and inclusiveness. Granted, there were some deep-rooted philosophical and conservative religious underpinnings represented in the diverse Reed district community, which contributed to the sometimes publicly divisive votes on controversial issues by the board. However, these new unwritten rules kept them from harboring ongoing grudges and resentments or forming permanent voting blocs or alliances within the board. Together, they made a concerted, conscious effort to discuss live wire topics civilly and respectfully. The superintendent no longer allowed the meetings to deteriorate to the point of
raised voices, hurling insults or the need to escort folks out of the building, as in the case of the Jerry Springer-like board meetings of the past.

In addition to the parameters for civil discussion, the superintendent structured spaces to explore differences while maintaining trust. Superintendent R-2 facilitated and mediated face-to-face reconciliation meetings between two different board members who were originally squaring off on a variety of issues, by creating a safe place for them to have a productive dialogue on a topic of mutual value. He always emphasized their values in common but recognized the value of unique and different viewpoints as well. One board member described the transition:

*And probably on both sides, beforehand, there we were, having preconceived notions of who the other person was. I am delighted that, as board members, the superintendent helped us see that there are things where we have very much the same–same–focus. Yes, we really agree with one another—I think both of us are very geared towards underperforming students and making sure that their needs are met. Same philosophy there, who would have thought?* – Reed Trustee C

On a similar occasion, when it appeared that some individual board members were on philosophically opposite sides of the spectrum, (conservative vs. progressive stance), the superintendent provided them with multiple opportunities to communicate openly and listen to other perspectives in a more informal daytime study session / workshop format, rather than wait until the more formal general board meeting, to ease the pressure to posture or grandstand in front of the larger audience, including those watching on LiveStream. Reed Trustee B describes the impact of this strategy:

*Communication is the biggest thing in building a relationship. It’s starting with that understanding of each other, where you’re coming from - basics. ... According to our Superintendent, if you think you know where somebody is coming from and then you’re wrong about it – or on the other hand, you might be totally right, but at least if you both look at each other and go, ‘I know where you’re coming from...that’s progress.’* – Reed Trustee B

Trustee B admitted that the board members had experienced an epiphany of sorts about the value of open communication and of validating other’s perspectives and experiences in forging relationships. The superintendent’s informal sessions provided them with renewed perspective, and the dialogue revealed that they actually shared many goals in common, despite different philosophies, which allowed trust to germinate.

The concept of reciprocal or mutual respect extended and applied to the superintendent’s work with his board, as he knew they would not always agree with him or his recommendations on certain key issues. He strategically stressed the importance of them being able to distinguish between “a vote against his idea or recommendation” and a “vote directly against him or his contract” (Superintendent R-2). This was a major step forward from the past perspective. Reed Trustee E sums it up:

*When it comes to respect just being a board member, .... respect with your fellow board
members or in your interactions with the superintendent. So you respect them or him (the superintendent) if you understand their reasoning even if you vote against ‘em. That’s what respect means. – Reed Trustee E

Unlike with the prior superintendent, the board learned from this superintendent that a healthy, functioning board should try not to stay mired in alliances and deep political divisions, but instead consider each vote separately, regardless of past disagreements or being on the losing end of a vote. All five board members stressed the importance of this mindset as a way to remain a functional and healthy governance team and boost trust, even when disagreeing at the board table. Not only was the expectation in Reed district, as established and modeled by the superintendent, that everyone moves on from the vote, the collective expectation was that once the board votes, all five board members would then publicly support the outcome and decision, even if he/she actually voted against it. Trustee A always the pragmatic, put it rather bluntly:

_We say what we want to say and the majority votes, and then we all walk out of here and we all support it, whatever the majority is. If you’re on the losing side, you need to just suck it up._ - Reed Trustee A

Rather than ascribe to the Rule of Five that his predecessor had perpetuated, Superintendent R-2 took a different tactic. His was a preferred approach according to Hackett (2015), when investing in relationship and trust-building, is called the Rule of All. Although more time-consuming on the part of a superintendent, this strategy requires the superintendent to pulse check board members and conduct regular litmus tests on topics to gauge initial levels of support and respond to their concerns and questions when developing recommendations. As my findings from my study of the Reed governance team can attest, this is an inclusive, collaborative, consensus-focused process of arriving at decisions that everyone can eventually live with and support.

**Evidence and Indicators of Relational Trust Being Achieved in Reed: Competence, Personal Regard, Integrity & Respect**

One by one, each Reed trustee in his or her own words, acknowledged the increasing strength of personal relationship and the development of trust and confidence in each other over time. They admitted that the relationship transformation allowed the superintendent to work through difficult issues with individual board members to arrive at mutual understanding and problem solve together. They realized it had been quite a journey and at times an uphill battle because their old habits and patterns of dealing with each other were not easily abandoned or disrupted. All five admitted that they felt better about each other, discerned positive intentionality more often than not, and actually worked better together as a result of the leadership transition and Superintendent R-2’s innovative inputs, structures and models for interaction.

Up until now, I’ve outlined different steps that the superintendent took to intentionally foster the development of trust. Here, I discuss evidence that relational trust was achieved to substantiate my argument about the effectiveness of the superintendent’s strategies. I draw on Bryk and Schneider’s (2002) four indicators of trust, competence, personal regard, integrity and respect.
Competence

A key indicator of trust goes beyond good intentions in that one must have confidence that the individual must have sufficient competency and capability to carry out the intended action. Tschannen-Moran (2004) adds the important caveat that competency must go beyond well-meaning intentions, as it implies the ability to actually perform the expected task to the level of standard. There was substantial evidence to support the board’s assessment of the Reed superintendent as highly competent, and vice versa.

From the moment of his hire, the search firm, the board, staff, and Reed community were keenly aware of Superintendent R-2’s extensive professional experience, prestigious educational background, his qualifications for the job, and his vast knowledge base. Reed Trustee A, who claimed he was not one generally to be effusive with compliments, praised the superintendent for his ability to know what is going on at all times in their very large district, suggesting that the believed that the superintendent not only had sufficient knowledge and experience for the role, but that he was up for the daunting task. He remarked:

Supt. R-2 is understated. He understands and knows everything that is going on. He has a larger school district perspective and he knows what can work and is smart enough to walk away if it won’t. We ask, ‘Can we have a K-12 school?’ and he gives us 1-2-3 advantages and 1-2-3 disadvantages, and BOOM he’s been there and done that. Wow. - Reed Trustee A

Likewise, the superintendent indicated that he believed his board members were intelligent and very competent in their respective roles. When describing them, he asserted, “They happen to be very smart. I learn a lot. And they have different perspectives” (Supt. R-2). The fact that Superintendent R-2 insisted that every single board member, regardless of their predisposition or background, could and should serve as board president or in other officer roles, was a direct testament to his assessment and belief in their ability and competence level. He recognized that they were at different places in their board tenure and that for some there was initially a steeper learning curve in adjusting to their roles and responsibilities on the board. Nevertheless, he expressed complete confidence in their individual and collective ability and willingness to “get up to speed” and “do their homework” in order to fulfill their obligations; be both “vigilant and diligent” in representing their constituency; and make informed, data-based decisions (Superintendent R-2).

Personal Regard

Bryk and Schneider (2002) argue that personal regard for another’s wellbeing, or a genuine and sincere sense of caring both promotes trust building and is an indicator of trust. Similarly, Tschannen-Moran’s (2004) designation of five facets of trust that matter includes benevolence, or confidence in the caring, kind intentions or altruism toward one another; assurances that one’s personal well-being will not be harmed by another. Ill will or goodwill toward others can manifest in many different ways, and since relational trust is built up over time and is the aggregate of many minor, daily interactions, only those that are sincere and positive in nature will result in boosting trust. The data indicated that even though the Reed board members may not have been intimate friends with the superintendent, he showed genuine interest in them
on a personal level, which went a long way in establishing trust. Trustee E described how uniquely close and special the superintendent made each of them feel, and how connected:

*I think with our current superintendent – I can’t imagine a better situation. I can’t. I think that he takes—taking that personal interest, you know, I think is good. I think that he has a good relationship with every one of us. I think he makes each one of us feel like, ‘Oh, you have the best relationship with him.’* - Reed Trustee E

Superintendent R-2 took an active interest in the welfare of each board member. He made a point of remembering important personal milestones of the board members, which they felt demonstrated his authentic sense and spirit of caring for them. He commemorated their birthdays, sent a get-well card when one of their spouses was ailing, and even visited them when sick or confined in the hospital. He maintained professional boundaries at all times, and never stayed into their private lives. However, by going above and beyond in this way, and showing legitimate interest in their wellbeing, Superintendent R-2 made a personal as well as a professional connection and intentionally strengthened the bonds of trust with them. By the same token, the superintendent acknowledged that he enjoyed a cordial and congenial relationship with each of his board members and had developed true affection and admiration for them.

*For me, personal regard is really about that belief system of saying that all have unique gifts and talents…. I genuinely like all of them (board members). Not a lot of superintendents can say that. They each have their quirks, but guess what, I do too…. I value them all, regardless of the position. I really love them all.* – Supt. R-2

Unlike the past Reed governance team experiences, individual board members held each other and their superintendent mutually in high personal regard and demonstrated their vulnerability and humanity on a regular basis. This came across as a protective instinct, not unlike the superintendent buffering them from political attack. They routinely came to his and one another’s defense when caught in the crossfire, as well. Trustee D acknowledged this tendency:

*To me, personal regard for my fellow board members and superintendent is that even if there is somebody I completely disagree with on every single thing and somebody from the audience was attacking them, I’d jump right in and say there’s no time for that. And I think the other board members, and the superintendent might do the same for me…. I’d say it’s mutual respect or what have you. I don’t see a whole lot of attacking. If I have a question I’ll be very nice. I’ll compliment another board member when she deserves to be complimented and when she’s done a good job…. Heck, I compliment the superintendent for a job well done, on a regular basis. He’s earned it.* -- Reed Trustee D

All five Reed board members expressed how much they genuinely cared about Superintendent R-2, tried to avoid upsetting him, and how much they worried about him being overworked and losing personal balance. They saw him in his professional element yet were mindful of his human side. Thus, they shared his frustrations, allowed him to occasionally vent and even shouldered his concerns at times. Most importantly, the board members were united with him and supportive when facing a crisis or an unsettling incident, rather than attacking or
blaming him. After particularly intense work weeks, individual board members sometimes emailed him an uplifting or motivational quote, shared a humorous anecdote, or conveyed appreciation for his leadership with a simple card, text, note or call. The Reed board members, in direct response to his kind and caring treatment of them, developed a deep sense of personal regard, admiration and fondness for their superintendent.

When I think about the strengths of our current superintendent, the things that I think make him an excellent leader, is that he’s positive the majority of the time. He’s a positive person, and that he respects the people that he’s talking with even if they have a different viewpoint. And I think people get that positive vibe when they’re respected. I admire him for that. We respect that…. We’ve grown quite fond of him, even. - Reed Trustee D

My observations of Reed board meetings supported the participant statements that there was no longer lingering animosity among the board and superintendent. As documented, at one time, the board meetings were overly long due to the incessant bickering and arguing between the governance team members, and caustic exchanges with the superintendent. The mood and tenor improved dramatically, as newbie Reed Trustee C acknowledged:

When I first got here (after Supt. R-2’s arrival and initial work with the board), the nice thing was that the board members (and superintendent) here genuinely really liked each other. Actually part of the reason the board meetings go so long now, is because they did a lot of banter and back and forth with each other. Fine by me.
- Reed Trustee C

Integrity

Another key indicator of relational trust is integrity, which consists of an individual being true to his/her word, then being committed and taking action in accordance with words and promises. Tschannen-Moran (2004), defines integrity as honesty, truthfulness, and reliability, or a match between statements and deeds. Reed board members viewed the superintendent as a man of integrity and Reed Trustee A said it best, “Superintendent R-2 is known for not just talking the talk, but walking the walk” (Reed Trustee A). Within a few months of his hire, Superintendent R-2 was praised publicly for his interpersonal attributes, which included a specific mention of his integrity, by the Reed board president at the time, functioning as media spokesperson for the board:

The great respect for Dr. R-2’s work, commitment to excellence and personal ethics was clear in every conversation. Some of the many words heard to describe Dr. R-2 over and over are: ‘icon, great listener, goes beyond the call of duty, smart, works incredibly well with people, integrity, dedicated, #1 concern is for students, approachable, fair, role model, truthful and patient.’ – Reed Trustee D, (as quoted in the local newspaper)

The Reed board members saw his honesty and openness as signs of his integrity and noted that he followed through on every commitment or promise he made to them. They
considered his interpersonal qualities, commitment, and superior work ethic as additional evidence of his ethical integrity as they felt he would never let them down or give up on a noble cause or initiative for personal gain or convenience, or because it was too much work.

*Integrity means that your superintendent’s word is good...there is no hidden agenda there. Supt. R-2 is really doing what he is doing for the right reasons. He really believes it whereas other people do stuff for whatever suits them at the time.* – Reed Trustee B

Likewise, Superintendent R-2 revealed he revered his board members for their sense of higher purpose, honesty and integrity. In our interview, he described integrity as matching statements to deeds and words with actions. By all accounts, his board members, despite the general populace’s negative perspective about politicians, operated with integrity. He summed up his assessment of them in this way:

*With my board, you get what you see. They have good intentions and good hearts for our kids. They aren’t working the system for their own advantage or expediency and if they say they will do something or are committed to doing something they will stick to it and won’t give up. They are true to their word and their actions reflect more than the typical electeds’ promises and speeches.* - Supt. R-2

Superintendent R-2 stated that elected officials who used their office or position of power just to advance their own interests and then renge at the least sign of resistance or challenge, are not really operating with strong ethics and integrity. He provided many examples of how his board members did not just give lip service or sound-bite promises to potential voters in order to win elections; instead they actually “under-promised and over delivered” (Supt. R-2) as they set out to do what they intended to do, and often surpassed all expectations. Whether it was appearing at an important milestone event like a high school graduation, devoting hours of volunteer time for a General Obligation (G.O.) Facilities Bond campaign, or poring over lengthy legal, financial or curriculum documents in anticipation of a board vote, the superintendent counted on his board to be prepared, do their homework and come through in a pinch. They did not disappoint or embarrass themselves, him, each other, or the public, now that they better understood their roles and had norms and protocols for interacting. “They take their roles very seriously and fulfilled them to a T.” (Supt. R-2).

**Respect**

Another critical indicator of relational trust is mutual respect as evidenced in all interactions. Respect became the cornerstone of the Reed district’s governance team relationship and was evident in tone, tenor, language choice and signs of sincere appreciation observed in public board meetings, even under high-pressure situations. For example, one board member apologized when accidentally speaking over and interrupting the superintendent. Another waited to be recognized by the board president and for the superintendent to finish his statement before speaking. The board members always referred to the superintendent as “Dr.” in recognition of his academic credentials in formal settings and likewise he always referred to them respectfully as “Trustee” with their given surname. The atmosphere of respect seemed to pervade the boardroom...
and started with the superintendent, as exemplified in his interactions with the board, and attested to by a community member:

_And he (Supt. R-2) shows respect for them (the board) as individuals...as people, not just the position but as a person... He listens, he even acknowledges their ideas, and his manner is sometimes gentle, sometimes firm, but never condescending or dismissive._ - Reed Community Member

Superintendent R-2 insisted that everyone treat everyone else with respect, regardless of their role, rank, or position and he actually caught and checked himself or others in board meetings in those instances when there was even the slightest slip in polite interchange. At a deeper level of analysis, the very strategies he selected and implemented during his trust-building stages demonstrated that he viewed each person in the organization and each individual board member as equals. The protocols he established were specifically designed to promote respect, and upon observance of the board meetings once these protocols had taken root, it was apparent that those in attendance were listening intently, considering one another’s input, and that he was willingly responding to their inquiries. He displayed no obvious signs of favoritism toward the board president. The respectful manner in which he addressed everyone was displayed with people at every level of his organization, regardless of title or position, which was further evidence of his core philosophy in action:

_Respect comes about mostly by being very humble. Just because someone gave you a job, doesn’t mean you are hot s$%& *. It’s the responsibility of the superintendent to treat everybody else in the organization the same way. Just having that humility to say, ‘everybody puts the pants on one leg at a time.’_ -- Supt. R-2

Superintendent R-2’s demonstrated respect for the board members even when opinions differed, a quality that made him unique among his peers, as pointed out by Trustee C:

_Well, I think the basic rule at least is to be courteous to each other, to respect each other. There are times obviously in the past when we’re having discussions and if you have very strong differences of views that you can take things personally and want to lash out at someone. But we’ve never had that in this board, with this superintendent, any public confrontations that were ugly. It’s amazing. Because I look at some of the other surrounding districts or districts I’ve seen on TV who had been televised or—They walk out, they yell at each other. Not happening here.... Reed Trustee C_

Superintendent R-2’s influence on his board became so instilled in them over time, as evidenced in their interviews with their word choices, phrases and comments that were so akin to his basic philosophy and statements that it was as if he were channeling through them. The superintendent’s value for what each member of the governance team brought to the table seeped into almost every aspect of the governance team and appeared to be truly ingrained and operationalized. It was even more remarkable in contrast to the disrespectful interactions that had become the norm in Reed under previous leadership. Reed Trustee B alluded to the difference and directly credited Superintendent R-2:
And for me, it doesn’t matter if you’re the custodian, the secretary, the cafeteria worker, the teacher...everybody counts. And giving that message that you’ll make a difference, I think, really changes. And so, I really appreciate that Supt R-2 has that belief...everybody has something to contribute. And to be able to see that and recognize that everybody has a skill or talent is a very tough thing to do. And to respect one another I think makes a big difference on how you operate. It’s something that I fully believe in. – Reed Trustee B

The Reed board members acknowledged that Superintendent R-2 had to “work for and earn their respect” because it “doesn’t just come with a title, corner office, or salary” (Reed Trustee A). There was substantial evidence that Superintendent R-2 earned and gained their respect over time. All five board members considered him, to recap and combine their reiterated words and sentiments: a man and leader whom they deeply admired, cared about, valued, supported, and most of all, trusted implicitly (Reed Trustees A, B, C, D, E).

Relational Trust Achieved in Reed

Research suggests that relational trust reshapes power distribution. Indeed, Superintendent R-2’s strategic actions and the Reed governance team’s outcomes provide support for that theoretical premise in practice. This was a win-win for Reed and the superintendent. According to Bryk and Schneider (2002), the quality of social exchanges and interplay between members of an organization (in their work, namely school site level), can substantially impact a leader’s capacity for reform and innovation. As the Reed governance team raised its relational trust level, the perception of each team members’ competence and capability was enhanced considerably, as well as their desire to productively work together. An atmosphere of heightened trust allows leaders to be open, share influence and delegate, which increases efficacy and overall health of an organization (Six, 2005). That is not to imply that the Reed governance team members functioned in total synchronicity or lost their individual perspectives, only that they were more receptive and respectful, demonstrated care and regard for each other, displayed integrity, and increased competencies. As their trust levels were enhanced, they did not automatically shut down or revert to verbal and political attacks that would have resulted in far-reaching negative consequences for each other and the students of their district.
Chapter 5: Summary of Sycamore District Findings

What Strategies Were Employed Successfully by the Sycamore Superintendent to Build Trust with his Board, given the Sycamore District’s Unique Political Circumstances?

The Sycamore superintendent (Superintendent S-1), worked for years to improve superintendent/board relationships. Supt. S-1 inherited a subtle, outwardly almost imperceptible climate of mistrust and an accomplishment-based power imbalance within the board, negatively affecting the board/superintendent relationship. During his multi-year tenure, he made substantial progress, laying a solid foundation on which trust could be restored and improving the overall functionality of his relationship with individual board members and the board as a whole. Since the board composition remained essentially unchanged for the duration of his tenure, Superintendent S-1 continued strategic efforts to maintain and enhance relational trust with his board in order to ensure that they didn’t revert to former destructive habits that contributed to the pre-existing climate of mistrust.

Upon hire, Superintendent S-1 devoted considerable time and attention to assessing the quality and health of the governance team relationship, as well as the distinctive political and organizational realities that regularly tested its strength and overall operating efficacy. I found that Superintendent S-1 strategically modified his initial contract to lower the board’s guard; confronted and eased the internal political tensions with the board by being inclusive and stabilizing the power structure; created a boardroom atmosphere of civility; insisted upon transparency; attended to their individual needs and preferences; developed close, almost familial relations with them to make sure they felt equally valued; and established informal yet non-negotiable ground rules and norms for working together, in order to restore trust. In the next section, I will present the political and organizational realities, both external and internal, that were inherited and taken into consideration by the new Sycamore superintendent (Supt. S-1) as he implemented his strategic actions to build and boost relational trust.

Political and Organizational Conditions that Pre-existed in Sycamore District

When Superintendent S-1 started in the district, he had to deal with various political and organizational conditions. According to a Sycamore community member, in the absence of heated political campaigns, there was an assumption of little political pressure on the governance team relationship. That was not the case. The tensions were there, just less easily identifiable to the casual observer and even to the board members themselves. There were concerns about finances, issues around race and political correctness, and underlying relational issues that created obstacles for trust.

The Sycamore public school district that Superintendent S-1 inherited, like most in California, had experienced a severe financial crisis amid the recession, which increased pressure from bargaining units/labor unions for scarce resources. It didn’t help that the outgoing Sycamore superintendent, although overseeing one of the smaller districts in the county, was the highest paid in the entire county, by over $35,000 even during the budget crisis! This was a sore point of contention for many in the community and consequently, the board. Various Sycamore board members resented the fact that the community was displeased with them for overcompensating the prior superintendent and took out their frustration on the superintendent to some extent. Sycamore Trustee Y captured their ongoing vexation:
“It’s like getting betrayed, you know, like you find out someone’s sleeping with your husband or whatever. It’s so egregious. You can’t get over it. And I feel like the superintendent’s salary is one of those things that they just can’t get over no matter how many years it’s been since that thing happened.” - Sycamore Trustee Y

Likewise, the depth of bitterness in the community over the elevated salary contributed to strong political pressure being placed on the board to curb the incoming superintendent’s salary, which is contrary to standard practice whereby a new superintendent comes in at a comparable salary with similar or even better contract terms than his/her predecessor. The undercurrent of hostility around this issue was palpable and the board was consequently guarded and defensive toward negotiating the terms of a contract with the new superintendent.

**Sycamore’s Catch-22**

The Sycamore board members and prior superintendent were predominantly white, older, educated and conservative, and continued to field criticism from a handful of stakeholders due to a perception that they were out of touch with the community they were actually charged to represent. In a seemingly Catch-22, the Sycamore board was lambasted by a few vocal members of the public and even some labor leaders for the board’s somewhat entrenched membership, yet when opportunities arose to change it up, those same critics didn’t take advantage of them. Thus, that same unrepresentative membership remained relatively unchallenged and unchanged over time. Incumbents were summarily elected in landslides or in uncontested elections. This issue was compounded by a lack of local engagement and disempowerment of stakeholders, since Sycamore was unincorporated and host to many traditionally disenfranchised socioeconomic and demographic groups. There was a budding desire by union leadership but insufficient wherewithal to force a change in the board’s makeup or demand that they assert community priorities, which then perpetuated the problem and ensured the alleged lack of representation continued. The individual board trustees’ impetus to change was minimal as each saw their uncontested elections or popular re-elections as a mandate to continue in office with business as usual. The citizenry failed to take full advantage of the external mechanisms to change the composition and representation, yet held the board responsible in some way.

This long-term stability was something the governance team itself considered one of its greatest assets. Constant turnover of boards and superintendents is not generally ideal for educational reform and governance, so the members were proud of their lengthy tenure. On a positive note, Sycamore had somewhat of a small-town feel relative to its unchanging board membership; on the downside, it produced tendencies toward complacency. The Sycamore board and superintendent were unapologetic for their long-term stability as they valued consistency and longevity. Within the community, however, there was a growing concern that they might become stagnant or choose to maintain status quo instead of implement progressive reform. The Sycamore governance team also valued traditions. These core values, coupled with the fact that they were not necessarily a demographic match for the larger community, left the board open to criticism for being overly insular as noted by a Sycamore community member:

“So I think that our district is a microcosm of the wider society in the Bay Area where the people in power, the white people, run the board and the rest of the
constituency which makes up the majority of the people that you’re serving are silent and they don’t talk and they don’t come forward and express their concerns and views. It’s been perpetuated in this district I think partially because we have a stable board that is never changing, and every ten years we’ll get a new person but they fit the same bill as everyone else, and so it makes it so that there is no demand for change and it’s not coming from the external people either.

- Sycamore Community Member

A sense of political stasis was further exacerbated in Sycamore, as neither the prior superintendent, (who was nearing retirement), nor the board members, entertained political or leadership ambitions outside of their immediate role. Four of the five trustees indicated they had absolutely no intention of running for something else later. They did not see the position as a stepping-stone. The evident challenge for the incoming superintendent in Sycamore was to keep his board current and introduce new ideas, since there was no inherent push for change from outsiders or from outsiders with fresh ideas coming in to join the board. Sycamore trustees expressed pride in what they viewed as a long-term investment and wore their lack of political ambition for higher office attainment, like a badge of honor:

Almost forgot, the most important unique thing. Most people, once they’ve been elected to a school board it’s an entrance into higher politics..... We’ve never had anyone go into higher politics. You know, we’re not a city so we haven’t got a city council so that’s probably another big factor for us. I don’t know of anybody that has been on our school board that has gone on to higher political office. We're not political like most of the school boards are and I think that might be a real important point. It’s why we stick around. - Sycamore Trustee Z

To further aggravate matters, as the economy picked up and the statewide school funding formula changed, Sycamore received a large (and somewhat disproportionate by comparison to other local districts) influx of new money from the Local Control Funding Formula\(^\text{18}\) (LCFF) concentration grants that subsequently created a new set of pressures about priorities for spending. Whether having insufficient or surplus funds, budget priorities and salaries were suddenly hot topics in Sycamore for the superintendent and board. Within the board, based on each board member’s individual experiences and political bent, there were differences in priorities and competing interests. They were definitely not on the same page. Not surprisingly, the Sycamore board members’ spending and budgeting priorities were based on personal preferences, past precedent and historical tradition, and not necessarily informed by their increasingly diverse constituency. Their reputation was that they were generally nonresponsive to their constituency in most areas, and budget planning was no exception. This had not been a particular problem in the past, as political activism by the constituency was rare, thus the board was ill prepared for and unused to a strong community presence and voice in its governance.

\(^{18}\) California’s Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) was enacted in 2013–14, replacing the previous kindergarten through grade 12 (K–12) public education finance system. For school districts and charter schools, the LCFF establishes base, supplemental, and concentration grants in place of a range of previously existing K–12 funding streams, including revenue limits, general purpose block grants, and more than 50 state categorical programs. Supplemental funding provides additional targets funding for unduplicated counts of foster youth, English Learners, and socioeconomically disadvantaged students. Concentration grant funding provides additional funding for districts where the percentage of targeted students is greater than 55% of a given district’s enrollment. Source: [http://www.cde.ca.gov/fg/aa/le/lcffoverview.asp](http://www.cde.ca.gov/fg/aa/le/lcffoverview.asp)
policy and decision-making. Thus, a major issue confronting the Sycamore governance team did not really stem from a series of particular external pressures; rather it was its basic inadequacy and inability to handle any significant vocal stakeholder challenge or activism of any sort as it was outside of their realm of direct or immediate experience.

The existing Sycamore governance team had no frame or working model for developing relational trust with each other or their various constituencies. They didn’t necessarily recognize the value of less formal and more congenial interactions when it came to negotiations or working with staff or constituents and seemed to rely heavily on lawyers to represent the district and board rather than engage directly and develop genuine relationships with bargaining unit leaders or cooperatively work through issues, collaborate and compromise. The union relations were also somewhat damaged and trust was diminished between the district and unit members. By extension and association, the board bore the brunt of the resentment and angst. The Sycamore board meetings, for the first time, were emotionally charged forums during those uneven financial times.

_We’ve been picketed in front of the school; I mean in front of the district office before board meetings. We’ve had TV cameras then. We’ve had the unions picket us. In fact, I was almost waiting for tomatoes to be thrown there a few years back. We’re trying to do catch up now and bringing everybody back up to par, but there were years that, God, we were just trying to stay alive._ – Sycamore Trustee W

This tense issue affected the board’s relationship with the prior superintendent, which was strained and stiffly formal at times, as they knew each other much better than they knew the superintendent. The board was also ill equipped to deal with angry constituents, as it was a fairly rare occasion for their voices to be activated publicly. During those occasionally stressful times, the board members would not react well. Some would slip into public attacks of the superintendent when under fire from the public or unions. This over-reaction then fueled disrespectful interactions and mistrust and created an atmosphere where senior staff didn’t want to give presentations to the board in public or even attend, as they could be called out from the audience and “grilled unmercifully” (Sycamore Community Member). Which, in turn placed increasing pressure on the superintendent who was responsible for staff performance and staff morale yet reported to the board, and was somewhat of a middleman.

Another hot-button issue that was intensified by the board’s inability to respond appropriately, was a boundary change for school enrollment and attendance, which resulted in non-voluntary busing. The atmosphere at the board meetings was again, at least temporarily, politically charged, characterized by unruly and disrespectful interactions. As in the case of challenges about salary or budget priorities and allocations, the previous superintendent and board were ill prepared for the severe backlash and public onslaught, as vividly recalled by one multi-term Sycamore trustee:

_The changing of boundaries was very difficult especially when we had to do some shipping of kids ... and the things that were said at the board meeting were just abhorrent and lots of yelling and screaming and even booing. So that was one of our very difficult board meetings.... Someone, like the supe, the board president, someone, anyone, should have stepped in and stopped the bloodbath._ – Sycamore Trustee Y
Since there were no clearly established protocols for multiple speakers ranting and raving during board meetings, they were chaotic at worst and unproductive at best. This left the board members feeling attacked by the community, and “ill prepared and unprotected by the (former) superintendent who left them hanging out to dry” (Sycamore Trustee W).

**Sycamore’s Social Pecking Order**

At the crux of their relationship and trust issues was the Sycamore governance team’s self-described social pecking order based primarily on levels of academic and career achievements, that was either indulged or ignored by the prior superintendent. This internal dynamic, which stratified the board in a self-imposed caste system caused significant long-term relationship damage, rivaling the negative impact resulting from outside political forces that were sporadic, and less permanent stressors on the governance team relationship. The composition of the Sycamore board members consisted of elected officials with vastly different age, education, career ladder success, and confidence levels. The five Sycamore board members ran the gamut when it came to their formal education level, ranging from holding a high school diploma to earning a Doctorate in Education. Similarly, their workplace experiences varied, from clerking at a children’s library, or being a stay-at-home mom, to serving as a public school district administrator, one as a sitting superintendent, the other as Director of Human Resources. This variance fostered insecurities among different board members and provided a rationale for over-empowering others, which the prior superintendent either intentionally or inadvertently allowed. As a case in point, when there was debate or verbal sparring, some of the less confident or less formally educated board members automatically shut down and kept their opinions to themselves, in deference to those with extensive educational backgrounds and doctoral degrees.

Since the superintendent also had a doctoral degree, there was an added complication, as he was considered uniquely linked to those members who were considered his academic peers, as opposed to the others who were less formally educated. Even more problematic was the fact that the two board members with doctorates were also district-level administrators in other districts, so had become accustomed to giving direction to Sycamore staff directly, circumventing and in some cases seemingly undermining the superintendent. At times, the others perceived that the superintendent caved into their pressure or gave more credence to their opinions and ideas than their own. These two board members dominated most board conversations and the others acquiesced publicly, but behind the scenes they complained, undermined, or attempted to sabotage their colleagues. There was a great deal of malicious gossiping behind each other’s backs, and sometimes the prior superintendent would engage in it as well, or at least not intervene to stop or address it or the underlying motivation behind it.

Asymmetrical power imbalances (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), may have contributed to insecurities and vulnerabilities, and led to negative behaviors. Ansell and Gash (2008), reveal additional challenges that arise amid power imbalances in governance, particularly when stakeholders have differential capacity or status to participate on equal footing with their peers. Most often, it manifests in manipulation or undue influence of those less empowered by stronger or more powerful agents. Sycamore’s governance team was a prime example of this problematic outcome. On more than a few occasions, there were reported acts of overt aggression, exploitation of and between board members, and some may have overcompensated in response via passive aggressive behaviors. Since the superintendent allowed, or was either indirectly or directly engaged in and involved in these counterproductive behaviors, the result was a
resoundingly negative impact on the overall superintendent/board relationship. Not surprisingly, for the incoming Sycamore superintendent, there was a verbalized sense of urgency around establishing clear role definition, stabilizing the internal power structure, and discouraging micromanagement or overstepping of boundaries by individual board members in relation to his leadership and direction to senior staff. He needed to stifle the dominant voices on the one hand, while simultaneously encouraging others to speak up, in order to level the playing field among the board members and activate everyone’s voice, while allowing all to save face. As one Sycamore board member put it, Superintendent S-1 needed to be part superintendent, CEO and leader, as well as part therapist, counselor and psychologist (Sycamore Trustee X). The new superintendent’s first order of business was to heal deep-seated wounds and setup new rules for interacting and valuing each other, in order to repair, restore and reboot severely damaged relationships.

**Strategic Actions the Superintendent Took in Response to Sycamore District’s Conditions**

**Early Wins for a Foundation of Trust**

Ansell and Gash (2008) outline steps that can be taken to move away from adversarial and managerial governance toward more collaborative governance in both theory and practice. They identify key contributing factors as critical ingredients when forging a collaborative arrangement, namely, face-to-face dialogue, trust building, and the development of commitment and shared understanding. In cases where the prior history of antagonism, internal conflict, and non-cooperation is high, as in Sycamore, Ansell and Gash (2008), introduce the concept of *small wins* which by design, take less effort and buy-in, but can generate more immediate positive outcomes, as a way to accelerate and encourage longer-term commitment to the development of the collaborative leadership cycle, which builds relationship. The Sycamore superintendent provided an almost textbook example of this research-based entry-level approach to trust building. Accepting the pay reduction during early contract negotiations with the board and adopting a handbook to formalize unwritten rules within the governance team were two, less controversial, lower investment, initial quick fixes or, early wins that were primed to lay the groundwork for trust to bloom. With the new superintendent coming in, and the Sycamore board’s value for longevity and stability, the board wanted to continue the practice of a generous salary, but not outrageously high by comparison. The incoming superintendent knew better than to come in with a divided board endorsement over his contract terms, salary and benefits, so he made it clear that he was willing to negotiate something more palatable and defensible in the community. Superintendent S-1 wanted to be compensated and to command a commensurate salary as his peers, but certainly not at the risk of damaging fragile board relationships due to constituent pressures or disagreements among themselves. Therefore, the Sycamore board showed its confidence and trust in the superintendent and still rewarded him, which boosted their governance team relationship, but no longer was it at the expense of the community’s favor.

Superintendent S-1 also publicly donated large amounts of money to the district foundation and other important school causes. As a key donor to the schools and programs, the board and public didn’t begrudge his pay as had happened with his predecessor. The new superintendent appreciated the board’s vote of confidence and financial investment, but didn’t want it to be a continual source of contention as he wanted a clean slate with his board, devoid of lingering resentment, which could hamper his long-term trust building efforts. He took the pay
reduction to signal a new term, a new way of doing business and he committed to generous donations. As a result of his initial contract negotiations, he started to win them over; this was essentially Early Win #1.

The district had always relied on many informal or unspoken rules, protocols, mores and norms in their interactions and dealings with each other. Superintendent S-1 saw some value in this, as it seemed to be somewhat customized and fluid, a living code of commitment, rather than a stale guidebook on a shelf or list of commandments to be memorized, cited, or blindly followed. Yet, he also saw some drawbacks, particularly in the current context he inherited, as it was not codified and thus largely left open to individual interpretation. A lack of set, agreed upon rules of order and operation were particularly problematic when there were large audiences of irate constituents testing their mettle. Likewise, when board members were experiencing hurt feelings and personality conflicts, there was no set protocol for intervention, reprimand or remedy to follow. After an initial assessment and very early on, Superintendent S-1 developed a Sycamore board governance handbook, which expanded over time, and was comprised of a series of compacts and agreements. Essentially, it was an informal guidebook that was an organic, living document and what he termed “homegrown protocols to define roles and encourage teamwork” (Supt. S-1). In perusing it, I saw there were clear role definitions, followed by graphic organizers and Venn diagrams illustrating how each governance team member’s role intersected and overlapped, but no one position overshadowed another. Of note, the superintendent was a center point in the governance team, not a separate entity in his own right.

As evidenced by the governance handbook, the importance of defining one another’s roles and establishing basic operating protocols, was key to planting the initial seeds of trust and setting a preliminary foundation for relational trust and collaborative governance to blossom. Many areas of relational concern would need to be worked out later, but this was a baby step in the right direction. Before other, deeper trust issues could be addressed, the superintendent worked to establish his authority and nip in the bud any micromanagement tendencies, which was a habit of the two board members who were district-level administrators in other public school districts, including one who was a seated superintendent. Superintendent S-1 pronounced a need for the board to accept role boundaries and clarity in order to prevent stepping on each other’s toes:

*Everyone needs a constant reminder of exactly what are their roles and responsibilities. On my (wall) board up here I have the CSBA clock. What is the role of the board? What is the role of superintendent? board: accountability, set direction, establish structure. That’s the what. This is the how: (superintendent) giving progress reports, options, action plans. It’s a continual process of educating and clarifying. - Supt. S-1*

As an added bonus, because the handbook was in print, it could be referred to in the future, when there were inevitable missteps or blurring of boundaries and roles. It definitely seemed to calm the waters and jumpstarted the collaborative governance process, as he encountered only enthusiasm and very little opposition. This handbook was also critical in a symbolic way. Superintendent S-1 recognized that it was important for the board to eventually present a publicly united front with him on all matters of importance, including proposed allocations, expenditures, and compensation to employees, or risk solidifying divisions between labor and management and various stakeholders. He knew that would take time and prolonged
effort, and he didn’t have that luxury. He needed a visible moment of victory. Superintendent S-1 summed up the situation at hand and the importance of showing and experiencing strength in unity early on:

*The board and superintendent have to find themselves on the same page or it’s going to be a free for all or free fall.* - Superintendent S-1

This mantra and these quick steps were his starting point. His grassroots developed handbook of protocols represented Early Win #2. To build on these small, early wins, Superintendent S-1 devoted a large part of his tenure to the deliberate implementation of a series of long-term strategies designed to cultivate a deep level of relational trust with his board, as outlined below.

**Check Your Ego at the Door**

Superintendent S-1 established a ground rule of “checking your ego at the door” (Supt. S-1), starting with himself. The previous superintendent had a reputation for expecting people, including the board, to always use the title of “Dr.” when directly addressing or conversing, even during informal, casual or private interactions. Sycamore Trustee Z described this as someone who was “drunk with power… just so full of it” with an attitude which didn’t lend itself to establishing interpersonal connections. The fact that two board members also held doctorates and insisted on using their degree title habitually, served as a constant reminder of the stark educational differences among the governance team and made it seem that those two were somehow more closely connected with the superintendent. From the interviews, it appeared that the elevated title and salary of the former superintendent had left at least two of the remaining board members feeling less valuable. This sense of inferiority had manifested in counterproductive ways that allowed the more educated, confident trustees to monopolize board conversations, leaving the others to either shut down or shut up.

The disparity in education levels that had led in the past to unbalanced power dynamics needed to be addressed by the new superintendent. Once he realized that some board members were intimidated by the title of “Dr.” he encouraged them to call him “Superintendent” or “Mr.” in public board meetings. Once aware of the depth of the harm the educational pecking order had created, which hampered the governance team relations by making some feel over or undervalued, Supt. S-1 felt that an adjustment in the previously accepted social-status hierarchy of the governance team was warranted. Superintendent S-1, by effectively removing the monikers of rank in the room and refusing to adhere to them, leveled the playing field, reduced the barriers, and alleviated the insecurities. He emphasized that they were all elected officials, fair and square, and that no one individual was superior, more valued, or more empowered than any other in his or the community’s eyes.

Superintendent S-1 expected due respect for his role and position, but stated that he didn’t feel, and didn’t want anyone else on the governance team to feel, superior to one another, or self-conscious about their lack of education or career status:

*A lot of people like to think that if you were a supe., that’s something special. You know what? That means you go to work, period. Not more special.... Earn your keep. Do your work! That makes you special not the title and*
big salary. – Supt. S-1

Superintendent S-1 was proud that he had an earned doctorate, but made it clear that the board could and should address him by his first name in email and phone communications, and any and every in-person setting except for a formal board meeting or awards event in front of students. Another way Supt. S-1 ensured value for everyone was ending a practice that created resentment whereby some previous board members had expected everyone to stand when they entered the boardroom. Superintendent S-1 ended that protocol and Sycamore trustees appreciated it in their own ways. They experienced a reality check and a renewed sense of equality and dignity with their colleagues:

* I don’t have that whole princess thing going on. They don’t have to stand up for me. They don’t have to bow. They don’t have to do any of those things. None of those, just the same way you would deal with anyone – Sycamore Trustee X

This strategy had a profound effect on the two board members who felt the most embarrassed or threatened and were less likely to speak up or speak out on issues of importance to the district in the past. Board members Y and Z shared that this strategy allowed them to feel safe and more open and vocal in expressing opinions to their colleagues without reservation. In time, Trustee Y and Z’s embarrassment about their lack of formal academic achievements diminished, as Superintendent S-1 focused on giving everyone equal voice among the governance team members and valuing each for their individual contributions, not just their resumes:

* Supt. S-1 always made me feel like my opinions and thoughts and questions are as valued and as important of your time as even the people who have doctorates on the board. - Sycamore Trustee Y

The issues around inflated board member superegos surfaced in other ways than just power dynamics and confidence levels among the board members. They also affected role definition between the superintendent and the board, and specific protocols for managing or directing the work and employees of the district. After assessing the situation, the superintendent realized he needed to tackle head-on the issues (real and perceived) of over-empowerment and boundary crossing by two board members. In as much as he checked his own ego at the door, Superintendent S-1 thought it was important to put the two most educated and accomplished board members in check, in order to establish a foundation of mutual respect and trust.

Superintendent S-1 was persistent in his approach, as he didn’t want to alienate or insult anyone in the process. He set about establishing protocols and asserting his own strength of leadership, focusing first on ending the practice of these two board members of providing direction to the superintendent or lead staff, which was for all intents and purposes undermining his authority. He had a private, tactful, but frank conversation with each of them on this sensitive topic. He didn’t pull any punches and he described how he ended that bad habit definitively:

* My board members learned my protocol, ‘You don’t call any staff members and ask for anything. You come to me and I will assign them because my staff may be busy working on things; and besides that, I don’t want to give you something that could get you in trouble as a board member with all the other board members.
So you give that to me, I'll take care of it. .... It wasn't overnight, old habits die hard. So yeah, there were times where I still had to slap a board member's hand, like, I don't want you going directly to my staff, you need to come through me. Eventually they got it. (laugh). - Supt. S-1

Notably, the two board members responded well to the superintendent’s honest message. They reported that they had not realized that their tendencies to overstep were ill advised and tearing apart the already fragile social fabric of their governance team. Superintendent S-1 modeled humility, downplayed his academic credentials so as to not alienate others, and insisted on equal voice among board members, and ultimately what is he got.

**Don’t Make the Board Room Your Battle Zone**

In the past, when the board members attacked the superintendent in an open forum, or nitpicked over minor issues, there would be collateral damage to their reputation and their relationship. Supt. S-1 implemented protocols and deployed strategies to interrupt the battle zone dynamic of the boardroom and ensure more civil discourse. This allowed all board members to feel as if their ideas would be heard, ensuring that all voices were equally valued, and that no one left a meeting upset or hurt by their peers.

Trustee V reiterated Supt. S-1’s philosophy about not only when to pick a battle but also how and where. Trustee V expressed, in no uncertain terms, the importance of “probing in private and praising in public” when working with the superintendent and fellow board members in order to maintain respectful interactions and preserve the ongoing relationship. This viewpoint was introduced and emphasized by Superintendent S-1. He showed his board members that there were other, more productive ways, to voice their opinions and express themselves in a manner that would not set off or offend other members of the governance team.

The superintendent let all of the board members know that their prior behaviors and ways of speaking to the superintendent and senior staff, particularly when under stress during public board meetings, were unacceptable and could not continue. When confronted, their original excuses and defense of such behavior centered around listing the failings of the prior superintendent or the fact that they were responding and reacting to political constituent pressures in the “heat of the moment” (Trustee W). Superintendent S-1 accepted that defense at face value and thus focused on setting up protocols, systems and procedures for surfacing and addressing concerns on an ongoing basis, so that issues would not fester and compound. He also set out to take charge and work with his board to be more proactive rather than reactive to constituent issues and pressures, which would prevent or at least diminish the over-reaction or emotional outbursts in the boardroom. He shared advance information so that they could anticipate potentially controversial issues and be better prepared to handle them.

His ideal was respectful communication among the governance team at all times, thus he consciously worked to break down barriers and walls, either real or perceived that had built up over time. The change took time, as the once frustrated board moved away from “blaming and shaming of the past” toward “naming and framing” (Trustee X) of their legitimate questions and concerns. He didn’t want a board that “put staff on the spot,” “dressed people down,” or were otherwise “mean and rude” (Supt. S-1), as he recognized that staff would retreat or lash back in that climate of disrespect where there was no trust on either side. Superintendent S-1 laid down the ground rules. He seemed masterful with his approach, patient, yet insistent. He even
developed and distributed sample phrases and sentence frames to guide them and help them practice how to speak appropriately during public board meetings. He actively interceded during their exchanges if they made a rude statement, allowing them the opportunity to rephrase or restate in a more positive tone. Over time, using “I” messages instead of accusatory language, and speaking politely without interruption or talking over one another, became the norm in Sycamore. It didn’t happen overnight, as Superintendent S-1 revealed:

There had been a lot of mistrust of the leadership in the past few years. And I’m having to rebuild those relationships.... The board’s going to ask questions, they’re going to ask hard questions. Their job is to ensure they’re not being mean. This is what they’re doing and this is why. I’m not going to have the staffers shut down or be humiliated. So, literally, ‘Does everyone understand this is what’s happening now? Go ahead and ask your questions!’ If someone asked it in a mean way, I would say, ‘Let me try and reframe that.’ ...The reason I sat forward in my chair poised (during the meeting) was I knew I had to intervene at any time to fix, address, reframe, translate. I led board engagement, governance team, professional development, about roles and responsibilities. I gave them question stems. I gave them response stems when they didn’t have an answer. I put that in front of everyone during board meetings. I made sure they had no excuse and no opportunity to fall back into those mean, bad habits. - Supt. S-1

Adherence to these strategies was not optional, in Supt. S-1’s book. Whether described as “being called on the carpet in front of everybody” (Sycamore Trustee V), or as an “in your face in the public” (Sycamore Trustee W), or a “gotcha” (Sycamore Trustee Z), Superintendent S-1 didn’t tolerate the boardroom serving as a battleground for the board and superintendent. He also introduced a strategic response in counter direct verbal attacks. The superintendent was explicit about not entering into philosophical combat every single time with a board member by responding in such a way as to diffuse the verbal assault. He described his relationship building response to such an attack in this way:

So what I’ve learned is, as those types of conversations get hotter, ... you start to lower your voice. Slow down your response. Speak in a calmer manner, and it would help calm your board members down too and it helps ease the trust back in. So you’re not frightened, you’re not getting in any fight, you’re not engaging in warfare; you’re not going to go off the handle or enter the fray. You don’t get rattled. That’s what they’re looking for... Start to talk softer, slower. Less is more, many times. Don’t allow yourself to be dragged into the trap. It will diffuse quickly instead of escalate. It works every time. - Supt. S-1

Speak Up Yet Listen to Each Other

As part of his strategic arsenal, Superintendent S-1 had other ways to promote civil discourse and discourage verbal sparring and infighting. To create a climate more conducive to decorum, and in the interest of valuing everyone’s voice and contribution, Superintendent S-1 worked to activate the less vocal board members’ opinions, even insisting that the board president call on each board trustee to speak on every single agenda item. According to Trustee
Y, this discouraged domination of the dialogue by a few, and the board members “experimented with how we would take turns asking questions or making comments during board meetings” as a form of practice (Sycamore Trustee Y).

During early implementation of that protocol, the result was slight bickering and occasional infighting, as there were perceived challenges to the pre-established stratification, which over time diminished completely. Superintendent S-1 experienced that, and insisted that expressing differing opinions didn’t need to be an indication of a full-scale fight, that it was merely input and perspective being given and taken into consideration. Providing negative feedback in a constructive manner was a preferable method of communicating. Being a good listener was continually emphasized by the superintendent. He worked to re-orient his board to the idea that they needed to “listen, listen, listen” (Supt. S-1), to each other and especially to him. This effectively interrupted the board’s prior pecking order based on rank, education, and position outside of the governance team. Superintendent S-1 did not leave it up to chance or earlier habits. He was very intentional about aiding the listening process by establishing specific procedures and protocols to ensure everyone had a chance to be heard, and reinforcing them continually. In so doing, he created a climate characterized by respectful dialogue and ripe for trust building. Although Superintendent S-1 did not refer to any specific a priori theory of action, this particular strategy upholds Six’s (2005) theory of positive relationship-signaling when cultivating interpersonal trust among organizations, whereby the behavioral clues exchanged between individuals are perceived as either well-intentioned and positive, and likely to contribute to one’s wellbeing, or not. Six (2005) acknowledges that trust building is context dependent and asserts that an atmosphere where opportunism and displays of one-upmanship are the norm, is not conducive to forming trust. Superintendent S-1 intuitively recognized the importance of defining acceptable norms for interaction:

I put together another protocol. ‘Here’s how we behave, here’s what we’ll do, here’s who does this, who does that.’ Because if you don’t have that, it’s kind of every man for himself and the least confident gets run all over……. You can get past that, only the loudest or the squeaky wheel gets heard, if you just listen to your board, listen to every one of them, every single time – Supt. S-1

Along similar lines, Superintendent S-1 encouraged the demonstration of personal regard and respect, key components of relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), by promoting the idea that there are two sides to every story, while strategically including his perspective in that frame as well. He felt that this acknowledgement would deter the board members from overreacting to a one-sided version of an incident and would compel them to consistently request the whole story. Unnecessary and uncomfortable clashes were occurring in the boardroom because board members jumped to conclusions and lashed out at the superintendent or each other. Sycamore Trustee V eventually ingrained the new superintendent’s philosophy and realized, “We can’t make decisions in a vacuum based on one version of reality” and Sycamore Trustee W concurred, stating, “You cannot run on just one side of a story. There’s just always two, always, if not more.”

In keeping with the goal of moving away from public skirmishes and transforming the former combat zone into a professional, business-like boardroom, Superintendent S-1 focused on harmonious interactions, working toward consensus and unanimity, and encouraging more
persuasion than argumentation. That didn’t imply that there would not be lively discussion, occasional disputes or healthy debate, merely that their conduct throughout would be civil:

*I believe that a healthy, robust organization team has discussion, debate, dissent, and that keeps you sharp. And that’s okay to have those debates in public and then vote and move forward. Sometimes we disagree on things, but it’s never disagreeable... They now will go out of their way to make sure that they don’t humiliate, degrade or embarrass another board member or me. They will go the opposite direction to build it up and say, ‘I thought that was good, but I think it can be stronger if we did this, this and this also.’ When we disagree, we do so respectfully and thoughtfully. I like disagreement. Like I said, I thrive on it, I want it, I demand it. But the way in which we interact is huge.* - Supt. S-1

Superintendent S-1 also insisted upon moving on after any split or divisive votes or disagreements and not holding grudges regardless of the outcome of a decision. This prevented smaller issues or differences in opinions and votes from festering and escalating into full-scale warfare. Each Sycamore trustee, most who had been on the board for several years, celebrated this characteristic, “I’ve never seen any grudges if the vote was not unanimous;” “it didn’t carry on past that vote;” “there was no fallout, ever;” “people were not angry;” and “the superintendent wasn’t mad at me” (Trustees V, W, X, Y, Z). This was true from Supt. S-1’s standpoint as well:

*Occasionally you might get a split vote, but it’s very respectful. No one goes out and says, ‘Why did you vote that?’ They don’t do that. They feel all right. They understand you have a right to do whatever you wish and we support you. Then once they vote, it’s over. They accept it. I accept it. Yes, it’s over. Done deal.* - Supt. S-1

With fewer underlying tensions, and no mechanism for one or two board members to hijack the meeting with their agenda since everyone had an equal say, cordial interactions became the surface norm. Behind the scenes, Superintendent S-1 worked closely with the board to help them understand that compromising on issues would not necessarily mean compromising one’s integrity, caving in, or not being true to oneself. His strategies were real-life examples of La Porte and Metlay’s (1996) findings, which hint at an inverse relationship between conflict and a stronger climate of trust. As each board member learned to listen, was heard, felt valued, and learned to express criticism without negativity, the mood and tenor of the boardroom, even during tense or challenging situations, became lighter, calmer, and more disposed to positive relational trust-building. It wasn’t long before they began to open up and even enjoy one another’s company.

**Be Open and Honest with Each Other Even if the Truth Hurts**

A linchpin of trust building is integrity (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), characterized by honesty, openness, and words matching actions. Integrity reduces vulnerabilities and allows one to cognitively discern true intentions and depth of sincerity without a hint of a hidden agenda (Marsh, 2007). Unlike his predecessor, who shied away from sharing uncomfortable truths with the board in an attempt to suppress any revelations of weakness or perceived failings, Superintendent S-1 was brusquely truthful with his board members. According to them, this
approach was appreciated as they always knew where he stood. If he determined that their behaviors or manner were offensive to others or impeded their relational development as a governance team, then he called them out on it in private. He deliberately surfaced the issue to address it and confronted them head on, privately and individually; provided alternative models; and took decisive action to make swift corrections so that it wouldn’t escalate.

The importance of this shift in stance, which discouraged backstabbing and forced everyone to demonstrate integrity in word and deed and be respectful when speaking to and about one another, cannot be overstated. It made a major difference in the level of engagement and trust, as well as the overall morale of the team, as Sycamore Trustee W acknowledged:

*We learned to be fair and don’t talk about the supe or one board member to another board member. Previously, years ago, that apparently was a big problem.*

*Not anymore. We talk about issues and decisions, not each other.* - Sycamore Trustee W

The manner in which the superintendent addressed gossiping among the board members, serves as a prime example of how destructive tendencies were nipped in the bud in the name of trust building. As soon as he realized that board members were in the habit of gossiping, sometimes maliciously, about each other and the prior superintendent, he addressed it. He met with trustees separately to let them know it was disrespectful and counterproductive to the team, their relationship, and his leadership. He made it clear that they needed to express dissatisfaction with him and the others openly, not end run or sabotage behind the scenes. He wanted them to express themselves directly to each other rather than behind one another’s back, and this dovetailed nicely into his other strategies, to respect and value one another’s voice, reinforce listening and agreeably disagree. Supt. S-1 described his focus and actions, as he setup a system that allowed and made it safe for the board and him to operate honestly and be forthcoming, even when sharing uncomfortable truths. The key protocol that the board members referred to during the interviews was very explicit, in that they all agreed that they wouldn’t bad mouth each other.

Superintendent S-1 established guidelines about open and honest communication, and modeled it, by calling them out when warranted, which is a hallmark of any trusting relationship:

*Open communication is really the key...If I got someone who is real problematic, I might go to lunch with them too. I might go to several lunches with them...You have five board members. Many times they don’t like each other... one of the board members will make a comment about the other one, ‘I can’t stand that person!’ or ‘That one’s an idiot!’ or ‘That one makes bad decisions,’ do not nod and say, ‘Yes, I agree,’ because I can promise you, sooner or later that board member will go tell the other person.... The rule of thumb is talk to your board frequently because if you’re not talking to them, they’re talking about you or each other.* – Supt. S-1

Superintendent S-1, as part of his commitment to open communication, ensured that he kept his board fully informed, and that there were no blindsides or surprises. This was part of his strategy for earning their trust, as he was able to be straightforward with them even if things were going wrong within the district, e.g. liability claims, pending lawsuits, lower than expected standardized assessment scores, or major discipline issues. He also saw this as an opportunity to articulate how he handled crisis situations and problem-solved, which increased their estimation of his competence and in turn, boosted trust. Superintendent S-1 alluded to how sharing bad
news, as well as good news, paid off in the long run by stronger and more frequent unanimous shows of support from his board, even on dicey issues. One Sycamore trustee attributed the accelerated rate for buildup of trust with Supt. S-1 to the fact that they always had a heads-up from him, which was particularly important if the situation was prominent in media coverage:

>This superintendent, I thought there was a significant amount of trust and he built it overtime; following through on things, giving heads up about things that we might be called on, trying to be really clear.... There was an incident that happened last spring at one of the schools. It appeared on the local news, but I really appreciated that before I saw it on the news or in the paper, the superintendent always emailed whenever there was going to be something like that so we’re not caught unaware.... I feel that that’s been a positive trust measure that builds my trust in our supe. - Sycamore Trustee V

A trust relationship is reciprocal, so the fact that the board also learned to adhere to the no surprise rule and share pertinent information with him directly was notable. The same rule of no surprises applied on those occasional instances when a board member didn’t agree with the superintendent. The protocol was to give him fair warning so that he wouldn’t be caught off guard in the public arena. As Trustee X stated:

>It’s rare that I have voted against the superintendent’s recommendation but I have, yes. I have, it’s very rare mainly because we would have discussed it ahead of time. I think the superintendent doesn’t deserve any surprises either, especially not in front of everyone. - Sycamore Trustee X

Studies show that the mutuality of trust in relationships is important, particularly when there are actual or perceived power imbalances, as it is not a one-way street and a trusting relationship between parties is interdependent. Bryk and Schneider (2002) expand on Putnam’s (1993) argument for mutuality or what is termed generalized reciprocity as the basis for normative social trust at the school level, and the implication is that a colleague will behave in a certain favorable manner toward another colleague, with the implicit understanding that in a similar situation, the favor would be returned. According to Bryk and Schneider (2002), this type of outlet and tit-for-tat demonstration of personal regard results in psychosocial rewards in school relations. By extension at the Sycamore superintendent and board level, reciprocity promoted a risk-taking atmosphere where trust could flourish, as full disclosure and exposure were not met with repercussion, but rather encouragement and praise for transparency. The experience of the Sycamore governance team is a prime example of Bryk and Schneider’s (2002) research in action as it showed a positive outcome that arose as a result of the mutuality of trust. Essentially, reciprocity allows for putting oneself in another’s shoes, and more particularly in this instance in Sycamore, board members learned to trust the superintendent and not blindsider or badmouth him, because they became increasingly confident that there would be redress, and that he would honor and uphold that same commitment to them.
Care For and Feed Your Board

The Sycamore superintendent never made his board members feel as if they were imposing on his time or his job. He considered “the care and feeding of the board” an “important part of his duty and role” (Supt. S-1). This created a condition of trust because it boosted their morale and confidence, and made them feel individually cared for, and valued.

Superintendent S-1 emphasized the importance of timely, regular, and equal information to all, when building his relationship with them, as it assuaged any doubts, questions, or insecurities about differential access to him and pertinent information. Memos and the board agenda packet were the main forms of formal communication but they were continually supplemented by daily updates and tidbits of information. Daily updates were one way the superintendent demonstrated that he cared for the board, by continually attending to their needs and information requests. He made sure that he kept them informed so they could be aware of concerns and respond appropriately to constituents, thereby showing his understanding of their responsibilities as representative elected officials.

Even if only one board member asked an informational, clarifying or follow-up question, Superintendent S-1 made sure that every board member received the question and the response via email. This was particularly important in trust building as some Sycamore board members had felt slighted or excluded from the prior superintendent’s inner circle:

In the old days what we used to do on Fridays, you put together the big list of the things you did this week and what occurred in the district in a big memo and you send it out to the board members…I don’t think that works in today’s environment…I talk to my board members almost every day. There’s somebody I’m talking to everyday. So if it’s something that I think is important, I email them and I will call them. Many times I probably email too much, but I’d rather give you too much than not enough and try to follow up with calls to let you know what’s going on. In case you get a call from a community member or a parent, you’ll have an idea of what we’re doing and why we’re doing things. - Supt. S-1

In light of the fact that his board members expressed different preferences for communication depending on their level of comfort with modern technology and work schedules, Superintendent S-1 customized his communication mode of delivery. Instead of imposing a one-size fits all approach that might have affected their level, frequency or ease of engagement, as well as hampered their relationship by making some feel less important, he responded to their unique needs and wants. He also personalized communications to meet their preferences and styles and remarkably, didn’t complaint about them barging in unexpectedly or interrupting him. He was available and accessible, which was appreciated and made the board members feel secure, valued, and privileged. Figure 7 displays Supt. S-1’s customized communication methods with his board members:
The welcoming, caring feeling that allowed for informal communication and interactions outside of scheduled board meetings was where trust between Superintendent S-1 and the board thrived. With the prior superintendent, the two board members who felt most comfortable in the offices were the busiest with their own district roles, so they didn’t have many opportunities to interact and get to know the prior superintendent. The remaining three board members had the time, but were slightly intimidated by the atmosphere and never wanted to intrude, so they too, were constrained by being limited to interactions within formal board meeting settings. Superintendent S-1 transformed his district office into a warm, welcoming place that was the board’s safe place, too. He established an open-door policy and true to his word, his door never closed, especially to them. Trustee Z had been the most hesitant and reluctant board member initially, about making an appointment to see him or to stop by. Within a few months of his tenure, she felt very differently:

*He has an open door policy, which has been wonderful for me…. Very welcoming. I mean I’ve never been shrugged off or, ‘I have no time for you,’ kind of thing. I’ve always felt very comfortable,* - Sycamore Trustee Z
There was one important caveat, however. Feeling right at home did not imply that they could take advantage of one another, however. They did not have the run of the place. Although Superintendent S-1 felt it was important to attend to the board’s needs and give them sufficient amounts of his time and regular attention, he stressed the importance of each of them respecting the equal sharing of his time and not putting one member’s individual needs above the others. He felt this was a way to ensure that no one board member monopolized his time at the expense of the others or became resentful of one another for having his ear. By insisting that each member had equitable access and time, he was able to disrupt the political influence maneuvers that had been allowed by his predecessor and lay the groundwork for each to trust him and his intentions. He set these informal ground rules early in board orientation. Sycamore Trustee V sums it up:

*We had the orientation for board candidates and talked about the way it ran and we also have agreements on how board members visit. They have to make an appointment through the superintendent’s office.... You can’t just show up... If it becomes a problem, it is a problem. ... we don’t assume that the superintendent has two hours to spend with just so special you every morning.* - Sycamore Trustee V

Supt. S-1 also often coordinated board member visits with him to coincide with his site visits and other special events involving students or staff, so that he was still going about the business of his day instead of making a trade off by meeting with a board member at the expense of maintaining his site connections. It was a way to chat and bond with each other, and see and enjoy the fruits of their collective labor. All five board members expressed that they looked forward to their campus visits with him.

Likewise, the board members checked each other against one member or another monopolizing the superintendent’s time unnecessarily. Superintendent S-1’s strategy was so effective and this respectful understanding of equivalent time so ingrained in the board, that when Superintendent S-2 came in after him he benefited as well. Supt. S-2 was shocked at the difference, as compared to his prior district, saying about the Sycamore board members:

*Here, they have asked me, ‘Is anyone taking up too much of your time? Your job is to do the work, not to talk to us and be bothered by us.’ So they’ve asked me that. It’s a very, very different experience, they are genuinely concerned about my balance, and my health.* - Supt. S-2

The recognition that everyone’s time was valuable was an example of demonstrating personal regard for one another and the insistence that everyone respect each other’s time gave them a deeper understanding and appreciation for one another. They craved his undivided and uniformly administered attention and in response, he cared for, nurtured, and fed them both figuratively and literally. He attended to their expressed individual demands and made sure there were plenty of beverages, snacks, and food provided for their meetings. He also nourished and fed their combined innate desire and personal craving to feel valued, appreciated and of equal import in their respective roles.
Show You Can “Hang” - Get to Know Each Other at a Personal Level

Once Superintendent S-1 laid the foundation of trust and each board member was either eager to or at least open to forming a deeper connection and bond, he deliberately cultivated close-knit friendships with his board members and, once again, they reciprocated. He set out to eliminate some of the artificially constructed boundaries and rules that had been in place in the name of professionalism that had kept them from engaging in casual conversations, dining together, or going on non-work-related outings together. With mingling, socializing and just hanging out no longer taboo, he introduced and invited them to a series of social and networking events. Additional unstructured opportunities to spend time together, even imbibe and celebrate together, allowed them to further open up and share of themselves, and broke down any of the lingering barriers that had built up over time.

We know from Bryk and Schneider (2002) that trust is developed from the day-to-day social interactions and exchanges. By strategically and dramatically increasing the frequency of opportunity for such positive, personal interactions through informal spaces, Superintendent S-1 greatly accelerated the development and cultivation of trust with his board. He stated that it was very important to him that they “spend down time together and chill,” and not just interact within their formal roles (Supt. S-1). He used multiple informal opportunities to humanize himself such as taking drives with them to visit schools or special events, engaging in breakfast or lunch chats, instituting study sessions, and providing and partaking in dinner during closed session with his board before every public board meeting. These informal structures allowed for what he termed the “hang factor:”

**Key to a superintendent’s success, especially with the board, one of the pieces is what I like to call the hang factor. What I mean by that is the social interaction. Is this a person who can hang and connect with all the different stakeholders, people? Is this person genuine, authentic, and do people like being around this person? That’s one foundation. It’s no fun if we can’t just hang. Even when we go to formal events that are required, like the Teacher of the Year thing, we will drive together sometimes. We do have to do those kind of things related to work events. Yes, but we’ll still have a nice social time doing it. It’s important to spend time with the board outside of the official meetings. I think because it begins to humanize you, that people don’t just see you as the position itself, but more as a human. - Supt. S-1**

The hang factor fostered the ability to just relax with each other and decompress, reflect, and unwind, which he felt would help rejuvenate them and keep them unified when they faced stress and challenge in their respective governance team roles.

Superintendent S-1’s emphasis on really getting to know each other at a deeper, more base human level, led him to administer the Briggs Meyers Personality survey. Sycamore Trustee W described its positive effect on their functionality and relationship:

*The one thing that came to my mind was the training where we all together did the*
Myers... Personality test. The Briggs Myers, where we found out where we were coming from, what quadrant and how we operated. I think it was very useful. In fact, for several meetings after that, we would banter with one another about, ‘Oh this is because this is where you're coming from. Yes, Mr. Supe. and fellow board member, we know where you are coming from now.’ - Sycamore Trustee W

This personality survey was the instrument that prompted a meaningful, facilitated discussion, which gave the governance team the opportunity to reflect and share of themselves in a less inhibited fashion. In the past, they had been prone to gossip and judgment based on surface details; by learning each other’s truths directly from the source, they gained new understandings and appreciation for each other’s varied experiences, perspectives and viewpoints. They were finally connecting at the most basic human level. In alignment with Newton’s modified social capital theory (2001), these interactions and goodwill transactions boosted their relational ties, increased their cohesion, allowed them to both demonstrate and receive empathy, and enhanced their personal investment in the relationship, which in turn, facilitated trust building.

It is this strategy, more than any other, that distinguished Superintendent S-1 from other superintendents. In California, the Brown Act prohibits in some cases, and strongly discourages in others, a majority of the board being in the same place at the same time for any reason so as to avoid the impression of back-door dealing or advance collusion in decision-making. Thus, as a matter of course, it is frowned upon when more than two board members at a time get-together outside of their regular duties, and if a superintendent is in the mix, eyebrows are sometimes raised. Superintendent S-1 didn’t pay particular mind to what he characterized as a misperception or misapplication of the Brown Act. Rather, he promoted the social benefits and positive relationship building aspects of networking and intermingling with his board, away from the somewhat unforgiving glare of public scrutiny and the added political pressure of being in a livewire situation. He was of the mindset that a unified, tight knit governance team that was internally at ease and solidly bonded would present a genuinely strong front and be immune to undue external political influences or pressures.

Superintendent S-1’s intentional blurring of professional and personal lines of communication and interaction in the name of trust building, when combined with the unique factors of long-term stability of the board, securely sealed the bonds of their interrelationship. Within a matter of years, the Sycamore governance team was so tightly enmeshed, and the relational trust level so deep-rooted and strong, that it seemingly could withstand any outside political force or pressure and outlast any contractual appointment or elected term of office.

Evidence and Indicators of Relational Trust Being Achieved in Sycamore: Competence, Personal Regard, Integrity & Respect

You could say that trust is the key ingredient to a healthy, functional relationship with the superintendent and board. After all, we are called trustees. - Sycamore Trustee X

During the course of my interviews, each Sycamore trustee emphasized the positive, trusting relationship and deep personal as well as professional bond that had developed over time with their superintendent. All had worked with him during the entire course of his tenure, spanning over six years, so they knew him well. Even after Superintendent S-1 retired, they were in fairly regular contact with him by phone, email, or text. The board composition had remained
relatively unchanged during his tenure, yet the trust level between the board and superintendent demonstrably increased. On the surface level, it might appear to some that the build-up of trust was, perhaps, a natural consequence of working together for years as governance team members. According to Peshkin (1986), this phenomenon is known as organic trust— the type of trust that individuals place somewhat unconditionally in an institution or representatives of an institution based on common moral or ethical beliefs, which is generally fostered among homogeneous groups and is based on a presumption that everyone involved means well. Bryk and Schneider (2002) claim that organic trust does not suitably apply to modern American schools and public school systems due to the sheer complexity, diverse and politicized environment. Yet, Sycamore’s circumstances were not the norm for a public school setting, as the board was unusually stable, apolitical and homogeneous by comparison. Even so, Bryk and Schneider’s (2002) theory of relational trust, as represented by four indicators, is a more fitting lens by which to analyze the depth and strength of their governance team relationship.

Earlier, I delineated the specific strategies that Superintendent S-1 deliberately employed to cultivate a trusting relationship with his board. Next, I will share evidence that relational trust was eventually established, to demonstrate the success of the superintendent’s strategies. I will categorize my findings by category in accordance with Bryk and Schneider’s (2002) four markers of relational trust: competence, integrity, personal regard, and respect.

**Competence**

Over time, the Sycamore board developed confidence in the superintendent’s competence and qualifications. Bryk and Schneider (2002) discuss role competence and the importance of discerning whether or not someone is capable of fulfilling set expectations within a defined role in order to place trust in that individual. The Sycamore board trusted the superintendent not only in his official capacity, even describing him as their “chief teacher” (Trustee Y) and “head trainer” (Trustee W) because they knew that he was well read, diligently prepared, respected in his field by others, and effectively oversaw and led the operations and initiatives of the district. No board member shared or articulated any instance of negligence, flawed judgment, or incompetence in Superintendent S-1’s execution of his professional responsibilities. His formal evaluations were glowing and praise for his many varied accomplishments effusive.

An additional sign that they trusted his judgment and recommendations was that as time went on, they rarely challenged or questioned him publicly. This is not completely surprising, as Marsh’s (2007) work on trust and collaboration reveals that the stronger the climate of trust, the less likely conflicts will emerge, and vice versa, as there is an inverse relationship between trust and institutional conflict. Toward the end of his tenure, the Sycamore board trusted Superintendent S-1 almost to a fault in the eyes of the community, as with increasing frequency, they seemed to accept his decisions and direction without question or pause. While this was not always ideal for the public in terms of accountability and checks and balances, it was an indication that the board implicitly trusted his level of competence as a leadership and as a professional. Trustee X captures it best:

*Well the criticism has always seemed to be that we’re a rubber stamp board. So it’s kinda a backhanded compliment about the supe. That tells you that more often than not, the superintendent has…done his homework. He knows his stuff; he’s on the ball. Who are we to question that? We’re not the experts, he is.*
We’re lay people. He has it down to the T. I don’t think as a board member, I have to be an expert in every part of the school district because we already have someone who is. - Sycamore Trustee X

Two Sycamore trustees made it a point to distinguish between the prior superintendent who meant well and had the best of intentions and Supt. S-1 who had noble intentions but also had the wherewithal, capacity and capability to carry through on them and make good things happen for kids. According to Sycamore Trustee W, Supt. S-1 had a strategic plan of action, not just vision and ideas. Similarly, Trustee V reported:

I don’t think you can base your trust on people’s good intentions. I really don’t because whatever their intentions - they may be totally ignorant or incapable in which case – then there’s a disconnect there somewhere that has to be met. What I like about Supt. S-1, (he) knows you can’t just throw this stuff against the wall and see what sticks (like prior supe) …. (he’s) capable and competent.

-- Sycamore Trustee V

The mutuality of estimation of competence was also key. Superintendent S-1 felt that his board members were equally devoted and also competent in their respective roles. The superintendent called them his thought partners showing his esteem for their opinions as well as their roles. Superintendent S-1 acknowledged that the long tenure of the board president specifically and other board members gave them a deeper level of understanding of public education in general and Sycamore in particular, which increased his already glowing assessment of their competency level. The superintendent described the board president as “smart and politically savvy” and the others as “engaged, prepared, knowledgeable, and experienced,” (Supt. S-1), which were testaments to their competence level.

In evaluating their competency in their respective roles, Superintendent S-1 also took into account his board members’ considerable efforts to stay on top of their game. He described their commitment to training, research, and preparation for board meetings, as well as their collective desire to learn and stay current in relation to new initiatives and reforms. This was their basic core value: to increase their knowledge base and become well versed in educational issues, laws, and initiatives, and one that applied to the superintendent as well, that they all needed to be lifelong learners. Supt. S-1 acknowledged the importance of ongoing training to gain and maintain competence in response to changing educational needs, trends and reforms, and he included himself in that imperative:

There’s no ideal board member and many times you hear people say, ‘Well, first they have to have an educational background.’ I disagree….I value one who can see things in different ways and everything, and who wants to learn more…I’d recommend that all board members go through orientation and training, ... you might have some that say, ‘I’m not doing it. I already know everything; I don’t need to go.’ That to me is a problem...In fact, the former superintendent would say, ‘I don’t have time to go to a workshop.’ That’s another thing too. You got a lot of superintendents who never go to a workshop to learn anything. They’ll go to a superintendent conference so they can go play golf. You need to keep learning, just like the kids. Every one of us and that’s what we do in Sycamore,
we learn together. If they don’t know it, they learn it. – Supt. S-1

The cycle of continuous learning improved their core competencies and consequently, validated his assessment of them as competent, which is a vital indicator of relational trust.

**Personal Regard**

Bryk and Schneider (2002) describe the trust component of personal regard as it relates to schooling environments as more sustained and intimate than is typical in other modern organizations and institutions. Their study centered on the schoolhouse, but Superintendent S-1’s approach to his governance team’s social interactions was intensely personal and involved, not unlike that experienced at the school site campus or even classroom level. They weren’t just friendly; they became friends. One Sycamore trustee affirmed their personal connectedness:

*I would say it probably averaged an email a day for all the time. I would say we texted, we went out to lunch occasionally, ... usually if we did that, occasionally went out to dinner, I mean we had a friendship besides the district stuff that went on.* - Sycamore Trustee V

Superintendent S-1 made it a point to really know his board, their likes and dislikes, their quirks and preferences, their families, and their personal triumphs and challenges. Likewise, they knew him very well. Their depth of interpersonal connection appeared to be stronger than the professional ties or circumstance that brought them together, in that even after he retired, they maintained substantial contact. Prior to his superintendency, the personal interactions with each other and the superintendent tended to be negative in nature, focusing on sharing hearsay, instances of nosiness, passing rumors or even hinting at scandalous personal details. As a result of his modeling, insistence, and trust-building strategies, the Sycamore board members were able to show kindness to each other and to their superintendent, rather than digging up possible skeletons. Bryk and Schneider (2002) discuss the vital role that personal regard plays in the development of relational trust, particularly when the day to day social interactions that are the building blocks of trust are so positive that they actually result in personal rewards for the individuals who engage, which in turn, incentivizes and further strengthens their commitment to and investment in the relationship. Shows of sincere personal regard among the Sycamore governance team automatically reinforced their strength of relationship resulting in increased displays of personal regard.

The tremendous personal regard that the board members developed for their superintendent and that he, by the same token, showed for them was most evident in their dialogue and interactions during public board meetings. They made careful word choices when disagreeing on topics, showed small courtesies (opening doors, pulling out chairs for each other), displayed positive body language (smiling, leaning in, giving direct eye contact to each other, and listening attentively when others were speaking, nodding assent, and not being distracted by cell phones or people coming and going, etc.). There was a reassuring ease in their cordial manner with each other, that must have developed over many hours, many meetings, many years spent together. This transformation was even more remarkable in light of the discordant atmosphere prior to Superintendent S-1’s tenure.
Each team member described how the superintendent earned their regard and demonstrated care in their own terms. For one Sycamore trustee, the fact that the superintendent never ridiculed her for asking questions and that he made sure she knew that there was no dumb question, showed that he was courteous and understanding of her, even though she didn’t have a doctorate like him or two of her colleagues. For another, it was the fact that Superintendent S-1 acknowledged and celebrated each of their unique individual skills and talents. For another, it meant that they had ceased gossiping and saying hurtful things about each other and the superintendent. The high level of care, kindness and personal regard was noticeable, even to an observant member of the Sycamore community:

*The superintendent and board members do know personal facts and information about each other and that shows personal regard because they know it not in a gossipy or hurtful way but as a way to show knowledge of their issues and occasions in their lives such as one whose sister who had passed away, another one who has an active dating life, and so they know these things so that they feel very comfortable sharing personal information and it is not just a formal professional relationship. In that way there is more empathy and understanding for each board member and the superintendent as a human being and for the person, not just the position and role. - Sycamore Community Member*

The small demonstrations of care or concern, and intentional acts of kindness during the board meetings were frequent. One of the elderly board members would lose her place at times, or experience difficulty tracking the conversation, and the superintendent was sensitive and helpful, discreetly, so as never to call attention or embarrass her. When she no longer had her driver’s license, the superintendent and other board members voluntarily took turns transporting her back and forth to meetings and events. Similarly, a member of the governance team had been injured and was on crutches; he temporarily needed assistance with mobility. I observed how the others pulled out his chair, gave him extra space and made other accommodations, without being asked. No one seemed forced or fake in their interactions and they even shared inside jokes showing their comfort level and trust in being able to reveal vulnerabilities about their increasing age, idiosyncrasies, and quirky habits. The superintendent and board also shared fond memories, and even affectionate, but appropriate, nicknames with each other. According to a Sycamore community member, there was lighthearted banter throughout, it was always in good taste, and even standing jokes that everybody could refer to and enjoy.

The high level of personal regard that blossomed seemed to stem from Superintendent S-1’s “hang factor” strategy. Superintendent S-1 and the board members considered the personal associations and interactions as an asset in building relationship and trust and they took pride in it. Their sense was that it brought them closer together at a deeper level than just fulfilling their formal, intersecting roles. Superintendent S-1 even described how they would go out to San Francisco together to have fun, with spouses or significant others. They transitioned first from foes to unlikely friends. They then formed friendships that deepened and evolved over time, and spent so many hours, days, weeks and years together that they eventually began to feel like part of one another’s surrogate family. Ultimately, their close, interdependent relationship that sometimes put personal interests and needs above professional demands, made them seem more like a family than a governance team, at times:
Well, maybe we’re like a family in some ways…. I think it’s because that’s the way we operate as a board. Not a family in that we have intimate relationships but like a family. I want to say it’s like a family in that you respect each other, look out for each other if somebody is in trouble. We are there for each other no matter what. - Sycamore Trustee Y

The metaphor of family is apropos, as families rely on expectations of mutual dependence, concern, and care for one another. Personal regard is a powerful dimension of trust that generates, according to Bryk and Schneider (2002) psychosocial rewards and intense, personal social affiliation and value. The Sycamore governance team functioned as extended family members who cared for one another deeply, and knew they could count on each other during the ups and downs of personal, as well as professional life.

**Integrity**

Studies reveal that one cannot trust someone if they cannot deliver on their promises, and reliability is a necessary ingredient for collaborative trust (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Someone who doesn’t have the competence or skill level to deliver nor the wherewithal or reliability to come through with promised outcomes, simply doesn’t garner trust. Superintendent S-1’s track record showed that he not only had the expertise but also the professional ethics and integrity to always deliver, thus his board members were able to wholeheartedly place their trust in him. Bryk and Schneider (2002) discuss the concept of integrity as it relates to a personal, ethical, and moral compass or guide. This comes into play when people have differential power or competing personal interests. According to the board members, the fact that Superintendent S-1 took reduced pay when he was appointed to his role showed that he sacrificed his personal interest for the overall good of the district, and this gesture went a long way in demonstrating integrity in his ethical stance. Bryk and Schneider (2002) also describe integrity as the manifestation of consistency between words and actions, or what people say and do. Inherent in that definition is an assumption of truthfulness, transparency and reliability/follow-through, all of which Superintendent S-1 displayed.

Although they provided varied definitions and examples, every Sycamore trustee considered Superintendent S-1 a person of integrity who didn’t shy away from the truth and never said one thing and did another. Trustee V had this to say:

*His (the supe’s) word is our bond and I feel very strong about that, very strong about that. If he says I’m going to do something or how he feels about something, it is real.* - Sycamore Trustee V

The Sycamore board admired Supt. S-1 for his penchant for blunt truths, even if the truth was unpleasant, and felt that they could rely on him implicitly to follow-through on his promises. Likewise, Superintendent S-1 wanted his board to have a pragmatic view of his strengths and limitations in the job. He certainly was confident, qualified and skilled, yet according to Trustee X, one of his greatest assets was his humility, manifested in his honesty and his genuine desire to learn from others, which endeared him to them:

*Whenever there’s an area that he’s not sure about, he’s not afraid to ask others or do his
research. ...He admits he’s not all knowing and he’s not the savior of the district, but he doesn’t claim to be. He’s real. The real deal. He’s truth in advertising. - Sycamore Trustee X

Likewise, Superintendent S-1 appreciated his board members for their moral and ethical integrity, as it related to maintaining confidentiality on sensitive or closed session issues. This was particularly critical in Sycamore, as board members had close personal or family ties with union members and also worked in other districts, where it could be tempting to share information of a confidential nature, even without ill intent. Recognizing that the board had at one time engaged in gossip and negative commentary, he saw tremendous growth in this area over time. He shared how he defined integrity in a board member and how it was upheld:

As for confidentiality - It’s no longer been an issue as long as I've been here because these board members actually have great integrity. I can’t think of an incident of that (breach of confidentiality) happening. I know there are often feelings that it might happen because Trustee A’s wife happens to be a teacher in the district and was on the Exec. Council of the bargaining unit. Yes, so that’s a little close and made it subject to rumor and innuendo at one time, but it’s never caused a problem as far as I know. - Supt. S-1

Truthful sharing, frankness and candor on everyone’s part was another way in which they all demonstrated integrity. They were consistent in their words and deeds, sincere in their statements, and no longer felt conflicted in relation to their personal moral compass, as they were open about their doubts, insecurities, ideas, and concerns, rather than outwardly acquiescing while secretly undermining or disparaging one another. They enjoyed the fact that they were comfortable enough that they no longer had to “worry about being politically correct or misinterpreted” (Trustee W). The fact that they were open and honest with each other and also maintained strict confidentiality promoted trust as it lowered their natural guard and inhibitions and permitted increased vulnerability without fear of personal or professional harm or repercussions.

Respect

We just pretty much understand we’re public officials and that we owe each other and our superintendent respect if we want to receive respect. A civil discourse. – Sycamore Trustee X

Bryk and Schneider (2002) discuss respect in the schooling arena and context as being necessary to sustain civil social interactions. They assert that respect in a mutually dependent relationship is best demonstrated in terms of how one values the important role played by the other in the relationship. Bryk and Schneider (2002) gather most of their evidence of respect in a relationship by analyzing the conversations and signals that are given. They pay particular attention to and make a distinction between the right for someone to speak, and actually listening, which is a deeper level of demonstrated respect in a given relationship. In Sycamore board meetings I saw that everyone had the opportunity to speak and be heard, and they adhered to their adopted mantra of “listen, listen, listen” (Supt. S-1). There were signs of attentive
listening, leaning in, nodding assent while others talked, and never eye-rolling, sighs, or looking away from the designated speaker or presenter which seemed more closely aligned to actual listening as opposed to exercising a right to speak. Two trustees noted that their superintendent listened attentively to each of them, instead of “just clicking off when they talked,” (Trustee W) or “tuning out and going through the motions” (Trustee V). In the same vein, Sycamore board members were demonstrably listening to each other during meetings and their superintendent and displayed no obvious signs of disrespect in tone, tenor, facial expression or body language, even if they were expressing opposing opinions.

I know other districts and, my God, what a farce to show that kind of attitude to your supe and your community that you represent. Oh my God. Come on. I think we’re all individuals and we like to see we all bring something different to the board, but I think there’s respect enough to listen to what people have to say and what they think. – Sycamore Trustee Y

Sycamore Trustee X didn’t always find it easy, but she described how she remained composed and respectful in board meetings regardless:

I have to watch myself sometimes because I can get very angry about something, but a board meeting is not the place to display that. I’d say I respect my fellow board members and superintendent too much to go down that road. – Sycamore Trustee X

Another apparent indicator of respect in a more trusting Sycamore governance team centered around what they said to each other in both public and less formal settings (e.g., as when they chatted with audience members, including me just prior to the start of board meetings or during breaks), and their use of polite, cordial word choices, containing frequent praise and acknowledgement for work, preparation, and one another’s perspectives. In board meetings, I observed that they didn’t talk over one another or interrupt in order to interject, but waited their turn or to be called upon by the president. As each was shown respect, each then showed respect.

A community member shared a similar observation of the way the board not only gave each other the right to speak but also genuinely listened to each other:

The person who is the oldest person, maybe not in the amount of time on the school board, but just in age, that person speaks up as much as that person wants to. In fact, if she has more to say after her turn is up, she will stick up and say, ‘Hey, I want to say something,’ and she does, and they all sit up and listen. – Sycamore Community Member

The Superintendent felt the board valued his leadership in sustaining a well-functioning board. He shared with me a handwritten note that Trustee V had written him:

You are the superintendent. You are the person with the training and experience to lead us. We are entrusting that you will do it. Do it. Make it happen. - Trustee V

Insofar as demonstrating respect for their respective roles, and contributing to a climate of interchange where civil discourse prevailed, Supt. S-1 described the improved atmosphere:
Well, there’re several levels of respect that you’ll see with our board members. Respect is to allow one board member to speak and carry out some of their desires without humiliating or degrading or saying the negative about the other board member’s comment. Our board members never do that, not to me, not to each other, not to staff or community speakers. Respect permeates our meetings.… For us, it’s almost like a glove and fingers laced together. It’s just very smooth operating. You don’t feel any stress. None of the partners feel any stress. You’re not worried about what a board member might say to staff or a community member and they’re not worried about what the superintendent might say or do to them. – Supt. S-1

Relational Trust Achieved in Sycamore

Not only did the trust level between the superintendent and the board improve as a result of these communication strategies and interventions, in that they felt less vulnerable and more confident in the one another’s positive intentions, they also began to trust the fact that their superintendent would have their back and protect them from angry constituents. Whether they saw him as their buffer or their protector, Superintendent S-1 provided political cover for them, and when they no longer felt besieged, they let down their guard, and were more open to building a trusting relationship with him.

The Sycamore superintendent inherited a powder-keg boardroom and managed in a span of six years to mitigate critical threats to trust building that he encountered and uncovered. He saw that some board members were feeling undervalued, others had become over-empowered and that it was negatively affecting the atmosphere at the board table. He was determined to change the contentious relationship and uneven power dynamic and he did. A demonstrable outcome of the Sycamore superintendent’s intentional strategies was the transformation of the relationship with the board, from low to high trust, as well as improvement of the overall ambience of the boardroom. Their dialogue and exchanges were no longer forced or formal, and never cynical or negative; instead they experienced a new, more positive way of interacting and engaging in their work together. Their closeness showed how much they trusted and believed in each other and they admittedly enjoyed coming together for social reasons as much as their official reasons. All five board members stated they trusted the superintendent 100%, and he responded in like. They saw him as a competent professional with deep integrity, who cared about them and was worthy of their respect. Their relational ties and bonds were unbreakable and their affinity for one another apparent. They were more than congenial and friendly, they became first colleagues, and then ultimately, lifelong friends.

During his tenure Superintendent S-1’s explicit strategies resulted in high relational trust, but the question remains, was it optimal trust? According to Wicks, Berman and Jones (1999), a high trust situation may not be the optimal level given certain circumstances, if it results in unconditional cooperation and lacks checks and balances or accountability, as it can turn into blind trust rather than a more pragmatic, discerning trust. Unconditional trust may be ideal for a familial unit, which is what the Sycamore superintendent fostered to some extent. However, in a democratic, representative governance model, it could lead to potential abuse. In this case, it did not, because Superintendent S-1 was a man of unquestionable integrity. However, there were other unintended consequences of this close-knit, trusting governance team relationship, that warrant further study and evaluation.
Chapter 6: Cross-Case Comparison: Variances in Context, Philosophy and Strategies

Inherited Context: Varying Degrees of Trust

By examining the relationship between school board governance teams and their environments (Alsbury, 2008), I found that building trust among board members and superintendents improved their ability to work with each other but differently impacted their ability to work with their constituencies. Both the Reed and Sycamore District superintendents inherited low levels of relational trust upon hire. We know from Bryk and Schneider (2002) that the key components of trust are based on mutual assessments and demonstrations of competence, integrity, personal regard and respect over time. The roots of the mistrust in the two districts differed in some respects, as it was based on the boards’ experiences and impressions of their prior superintendents as well as the distinct socio-political climates of the districts. In both districts, the basic competence level of the superintendents and board members didn’t seem to be the most glaring issue. Integrity came into question to some extent in both Reed and Sycamore districts, relative to a lack of honest, frequent and in-depth communication, which led to skepticism about motives and intentions. Still, in both cases, the deep-rooted mistrust stemmed primarily from a lack of genuine personal regard and respect. Most damaging to the governance team relationship in both districts were the individual board members’ feelings of being devalued or differently valued, empowered or under-empowered, as neither of the prior superintendents regularly engaged each and every one of them at a personal level or seemed to consider their unique needs and individual demands. Most of the stresses on the Reed governance team relationship were externally based, stemming from heated campaigns and vocal constituent pressures. In Sycamore, the relationship strains were triggered by internal dynamics and social stratification. Regardless of the source or type of tension, the impact and outcome were the same: low levels of relational trust.

Vision: Assemble a Team vs. Form a Family

Both the Reed and Sycamore superintendents were quick studies, assessing and evaluating their situations and recognizing the importance of relationship building early in their tenure. I found that there were similarities in their trust-building goals and many of their strategic approaches, but they were guided by distinct metaphors. The differences in implementation of their strategies stemmed from their unique political and organizational contexts, as well as their overall vision of what the ideal board and superintendent relationship could or should be, which shaped their selection, implementation of, and outcomes of their trust-building strategies. For instance, the Reed superintendent was aware of the competitive power struggles that took place during the campaigns that had carried over into their board dynamics. Thus, he sought to evenly redistribute power and aimed to build a team mentality based on clearly defining roles and valuing different skills and contributions. He emphasized the importance of sharing power with each other rather than exerting power over one another, which research shows has positive implications for school board and superintendent relationships (Mountford, 2004). The Sycamore superintendent, on the other hand, worked to recalibrate his board by surfacing and addressing undercurrents and insecurities to form more of a family feeling, encouraging stronger social and interpersonal ties, and promoting somewhat unconditional acceptance. Both types of socialization, whether a team orientation in Reed, or a
family orientation in Sycamore’s case, are in line with Alsbury’s studies (2008) that suggest we move away from studying the impact of board composition and processes and instead focus on their socialization in order to understand how they best work and function together.

In order for teams to perform and succeed or family units to function and flourish, a substantial level of relational trust is needed. It is not surprising, then, that both superintendents made trust-building with their board a priority and put forth considerable focus and energy with that precise aim in mind. In this chapter, I will first delineate the high-leverage trust-building strategies that the two superintendents, despite their different contexts, had in common. These were centered on: demonstrating investment and commitment; providing orientation and training; promoting positive formal and informal interactions; establishing protocols for respectful practices; valuing and protecting each individual; focusing on all kids; and ensuring unity via small, easy wins. Then, I will outline some of the notably different strategies each superintendent employed in light of their different political conditions and basic philosophical premise. A comparison and contrast of the two districts and their respective superintendent’s strategies and approaches, highlights the assumption that trust-building strategies are dependent upon context and are uniquely implemented in response to a given political situation or dynamic. Strategies that are similar may have more universal applicability, while others are differentiated and tailored to the circumstances. This deepens our understanding of why certain strategies are selected and what prompts certain outcomes, both intended and unintentioned.

Superintendent Strategies in Common

Despite the differing political and organizational contexts of each district and distinctly different visions of the end-goal relationship, both the Reed and Sycamore superintendents implemented some similar strategies to build trust with their respective governance team. The superintendents implemented a series of similar strategies that reflected their commitment and established norms, values, and protocols to keep interactions and operations running smoothly and to boost trust with their boards. These strategies had similar aims, implementation steps, and outcomes that predictably, produced higher trust levels. Some of the common strategies, however, were implemented with varying approaches and aims in mind, resulting in higher trust within the governance team, yet yielding other, demonstrably different results, both intentional and unintentional. These revelations I will highlight and explain in particular detail:

Show That You Are “All-in”

My findings suggest that an incoming superintendent can be strategic in thinking about how best to address school board history and demonstrate that he/she is “all-in” or as the Sycamore superintendent says, “has skin in the game.” In Reed, that manifested in the voluntary relocation to the district boundaries and living in the community, with agreement to a lengthy, multi-year contract. The community became his home and residency alleviated concerns that he was a short-timer. In Sycamore, the new superintendent’s depth of investment was evident by his immediate, visible community presence at any and every event that was youth or school-related. He described the importance of making a considerable personal investment of time and participatory presence in this way:

Because you got to become part of the community and let the community become
The conscious efforts of both superintendents to take a first major step toward foundational trust building laid the groundwork for the other strategies to take root. The Reed superintendent’s actions demonstrated that his position was not going to be used as a career stepping stone or a mechanism for salary spiking just prior to retirement. The Sycamore superintendent’s actions showed that he was one of them, part of their community, and not going to be sitting in an inaccessible ivory tower or putting on airs. Both strategies revealed that the two superintendents were not only professionally invested, but also personally invested whether it be in the form of their money, presence, or time.

The slightly different tactics revealed the underlying tendencies of both superintendents, with Supt. R-1 navigating primarily within the professional domain of contract terms and residential relocation and Supt. S-1 crossing beyond the professionally constrained boundary into the interpersonal realm of direct social connection.

**Onboard New Board Members Through Training**

Both the Reed and Sycamore superintendents emphasized training and professional development for board members. Both superintendents acknowledged that even one new board member would result in an entirely new board or new board composition, thus new dynamics. Both superintendents also realized the value of orientation for new board members particularly in order to get up to speed on controversial or potentially dicey issues, so as to avoid blindsides or surprises, which would aid in trust-building. The Reed District had a higher turnover rate among board members, as they were more politically, upwardly mobile. Of note, in Reed there was a great deal more emphasis on participation in formal California School Boards Association (CSBA) trainings, conferences and workshops, as an entire governance team and whole group, rather than in isolation.

Since the Sycamore District was more stable, with little transition of board members, board turnover and ongoing orientation and training were not as much of an issue. Newcomers were rare. Unlike in Reed, the Sycamore superintendent didn’t think the cost of outside memberships or training was justified. Thus, the Sycamore superintendent took a major role in serving as both the trainer and facilitator. The Sycamore governance team elected not to become members of CSBA and held workshops and retreats in-house. The Sycamore board members saw their superintendent as the professional expert and the one who knew most about education and the unique needs of Sycamore. They referred to the homegrown handbook of protocols as their guide and resource and accepted him as their primary teacher and trainer:

*I don’t think that board members are all experts on the details of what goes on in a district but hopefully they’ve got some sense of an overview and then the superintendent takes that responsibility of training them up so that they’ve got something on which to base that decision.* - Sycamore Trustee W

The difference in approach to orienting new board members was in keeping with each superintendent’s intent to build trust as well as symbolic of their disparate goals of creating either a unified team or a closely tied family. In Reed, outside resources and facilitators for formal training were accessed frequently to increase overall individual and group competence.
level (which boosts trust), while the emphasis on learning together from external experts and others helped strengthen the team bonds. In Sycamore, on the other hand, the superintendent, as sole training source, served as something of the familial patriarch. They tended to trust the superintendent’s and veteran board members’ experience and guidance more than that of outsiders who were unfamiliar with Sycamore and its unique needs, and built their team through internal sharing rather than external influences and mechanisms. Superintendent S-1 ensured they were all on the same page and adhered to their role placement. This created a situation where they were effectively buffered from external pressures or differing perspectives that could potentially threaten or cause them to challenge their bonds of trust with him but also prevented new ideas from coming into the district. As Superintendent S-1 put it, “We do our own thing, and I work them, and they learn from one another.” Notably, the Reed superintendent’s strategies toward onboarding and orientation were wide open to outside influences and perspectives, while the Sycamore superintendent’s tended to be more insular and closed off.

**Promote Interactions in Both Informal and Formal Settings**

Both the Reed and Sycamore superintendents recognized the limitations of their formal, professional role in relationship building. Bryk and Schneider (2002) argue that relational trust is developed through day-to-day social interactions. When official meetings were held only two times each month and conversation is restricted in keeping with the district’s business and a given agenda, on topics that may spur discord or result in opposing views, the chances of that occurring are slim to none. To complicate matters further, their boards, like all school boards in California, were legally constrained by Brown Act regulations, disallowing more than two trustees meeting or discussing matters in the same space or place without an advance public posting of an agenda and guaranteed public access.

It was not surprising, that both the Reed and Sycamore superintendents deliberately created opportunities for both formal and informal interactions with their board members. Both superintendents surveyed their individual board members and setup somewhat detailed and elaborate customized communication protocols that allowed for a range of formal opportunities to interact, including, but not limited to: touching base at a minimum daily via a combination of texts, emails, formal memos, newsletter updates, phone calls, in-person one-on-one or paired meetings, as well as group sessions.

The Reed board’s socializing was limited to special events, trainings or conferences, while engaged in subcommittee work, when traveling to school sites for observations or visits, or during down-time immediately preceding or following official meetings or functions. In Reed, the superintendent worked with the board to maintain and model friendly, cordial, sociable in appropriate settings, yet set professional boundaries for relationships. He demonstrated personal regard but did not slip into what could be perceived as too close. “We are not all kumbaya” by design multiple Reed trustees reiterated. For example, Reed Trustee A said:

> As for the superintendent, we are friendly but not a friend. Would I still have some sort of relationship with him if I weren’t in my position? If he weren’t in his? Probably not...We work together. We can respect each other and function. And we don’t have to be that close ... and we don’t strive to be.... We live separate lives. - Reed Trustee A
Regardless of personal background or length of term on the Reed board, each member was treated outwardly with the same value and mutual respect by the superintendent, with skills and perspectives that were valued, as contributors to a common cause.

By contrast, in Sycamore, perhaps as a result of intentional actions by the superintendent who encouraged informal social interactions as a way to boost relationship, there were perceptions of cronyism. As one community member commented, “The Sycamore board members and superintendent are personal friends. To some, it’s very incestuous, intertwined” (Sycamore Community Member). Yet it worked for the Sycamore governance team and, according to the superintendent, brought them closer together and decreased friction when they faced external pressures. They admittedly went to non-work-related lunches or dinners and engaged in frequent outings outside of the workplace that were purely social in nature. Superintendent S-I and his board members expressed pride in and were unapologetic for their friendships that extended far beyond work roles and alluded to the fact that this closeness would continue and eventually outlast the work relationship, and even pending retirements.

The Sycamore superintendent’s propensity for informality influenced formal structures such as board meetings. He created a series of board study sessions held prior to open session board meetings. These sessions were devised in such a manner as to diminish scrutiny and political pressure by constituents in order to help board members feel more at ease with each other and him. Along the same lines, he made sure that none of their open sessions were televised. He provided dinner during closed sessions, which again, simulated the experience of a family gathering for a meal or the breaking of bread together. This created a more relaxed atmosphere, designed to allow them to let down their guards. The Sycamore board trustees responded favorably to this less formal structure:

*Study sessions, I think, are wonderful because they allow people to ask questions. The superintendent are very good at explaining or if we’ve got questions. There are people there that answer. We’re very relaxed. It’s very informal. I think our sessions - I think they’re great…I love ours. I just love it, the whole concept of being able to ask questions .... I mean at least people get to ask their questions.* - Sycamore Trustee Z

In their deliberate efforts to boost trust within their governance teams, both superintendents increased opportunities for less formal interactions with their board. These situations turned out to be well suited for breaking down barriers, mending fences, and demonstrating personal regard, which promotes trust. Both superintendents solidified their interpersonal bonds with their respective board members. Still, there was a marked difference in long-term after-effect.

In the case of the Reed District, these informal gatherings and settings were extensions of their professional interactions and focused still on the business of the district. The lines between collegial interaction and friendship remained intact. In addition, the events hosted by the district served the dual purpose of providing opportunities to increase the board’s exposure to and engagement with the public, as they were not exclusive to the board, but included members of the community at large.

With Sycamore, on the other hand, despite a similar intent and strategy of providing alternative settings to bond and interact, very different outcomes were achieved. The Sycamore superintendent’s strong emphasis on cultivating friendships and deepening social ties served to enhance trust between the superintendent and his board; however, the social aspects seemed to
overshadow the professional focus, and were at the expense of the public’s access and involvement. For example, the subsequent Sycamore superintendent (Supt. S-2) questioned the personal focus of the relationship between the board and Supt. S-1 as perhaps detracting from their true purpose:

>I was a little bit surprised how much in board reports personal sharing there were about weddings and travel plans and less focus in board reports on instruction...student learning.... I would say there’s a lot of camaraderie, they joke, they share about their personal families and stuff, and it’s nice. Does that necessarily mean they’re effective? Harmony does not necessarily mean effectiveness. I would say, again, that I have some concern about the lack of robust conversation, debate, and engagement, outside of the board meetings. I think some of that can help you be more thoughtful. - Supt. S-2

The fact that the Sycamore governance team went out to dinner and socialized with each other in different cities for the pure purpose of hanging out and getting to know each other, did not necessarily advance any district or student-centered causes. The time spent in closed session, informal work sessions and dinner prior to the board meetings in Sycamore averaged two to three hours, while the actual board public sessions averaged twenty to thirty minutes. Perhaps the strong elements of personal regard went too far, in some estimations. Once again, the implementation of a similar strategy by both superintendents resulted in a measurably different outcome and the analogy of the team vs. family approach was evidenced. The Reed team convened informally with a set purpose, to connect, learn together and to improve group or team performance during the fulfillment of formal role obligations. The Sycamore family, on the other hand, assembled voluntarily during off hours, and while becoming increasingly at ease with each other, more trusting and more comfortable, the gravitas of their formal roles was diminished.

Establish and Insist Upon Protocols of Respect for All

In light of the fact that much of the mistrust the two superintendents inherited centered on the perceived or genuine lack of respect among the governance team members, establishing protocols of respect was a major area of focus for both of them. Reciprocal respect, according to Bryk and Schneider (2002), is the cornerstone of relational trust. Both superintendents established protocols, norms and guidelines designed to promote respectful interactions. First off, there were the overt, symbolic signs of respect in Reed and Sycamore, where they addressed each other in respectful tones, by surname with appropriate titles, and learned to listen attentively to one another, without glancing at cell phones or being distracted. Both superintendents also developed a mechanism to ensure all board members would have equal opportunities to speak. In so doing, they were able to diminish friction, palliate insecurities, and smooth over internal yet sometimes very public power struggles.

In Reed, the superintendent required every board member to speak to every item, which elongated the meetings, but guaranteed equal voice. Reed board members viewed the very long meetings as evidence of respect for their opinions and roles, in that they each had ample time for their voices to be heard. In so doing, the Reed board and superintendent grew to respect differences of opinion and others’ right to express those without rancor or interruption.
Simultaneously, the public at large became very aware of Reed board members’ opinions and thoughts on matters, which increased transparency and trust with the outside community.

In Sycamore, even with a similar strategy, the opposite sentiment rang true. Everyone spoke freely and asked questions in study sessions which resulted in very brief open session meetings, as the meaty dialogue had already taken place.

*I really appreciate that there wasn’t a lot time wasted but still everybody’s voice could get heard. I appreciated that. Our supe respects our time commitment. I don't know why for other districts – what was important enough to keep the board members until such late hours. We have lives.* - Sycamore Trustee W

By contrast to Reed, Sycamore trustees saw their very short meetings as a sign of respect and value for their time, and their need for balance in their life outside of their board role. The Sycamore board and superintendent, in the protected space of the more private study session environment, grew ever more comfortable with each other; yet, the larger community was not generally privy to the dialogue and discussion, leading to some suspicion and wariness, as well as eventually, allegations of cronyism and lack of transparency.

Once again, we see how the same strategy, while it increased trust among the governance team members, once implemented, resulted in different outcomes as it related to the constituency. The Reed team adopted an inclusive mindset that not only allowed each of them to speak freely, but encouraged stakeholders to do so as well. The Sycamore family members successfully activated their voices to the exclusion of outside stakeholders, preferring a more robust internal and private dialogue. The Reed discussions were videotaped and LiveStreamed, while the Sycamore meetings were not, thus further protecting them and isolating them from outside influences.

**Refuse to Play the Game of Survivor\(^\text{20}\)** with Your Board

Both the Reed and Sycamore superintendents saw the importance of not developing or encouraging alliances and refraining from showing favoritism or affiliating with factions within the board. At the heart of this strategy or rule of thumb, was the credo of treating all board members equally. In the case of the Reed district, this manifested in the automatic rotation of the board president and other officer positions, which cemented an equal distribution of power during the lifecycle of each and every board member’s term. The superintendent also was committed to the equal dissemination of information to each and every board member, an approach he saw as key to maintaining unity:

*I treat all of my board members exactly the same regardless of their office, okay? Never send anything to one board member you don’t give to all of them at the same time, because that’s how they wind up separating you and what you’ll wind up doing is separating your board.* - Supt. R-1

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\(^{20}\) *Survivor* is a competitive reality television show first airing in 2000, in which contestants are stranded in a remote geographical setting with little other than basic necessities. The contestants try to *outwit, outlast and outplay* one another in order to earn the title of the final lone survivor and be awarded a million dollars. Source: [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0239195/](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0239195/)
In the case of the Sycamore District, this focus on equal treatment was exemplified by the intentional breakdown of the social/educational stratification that had taken place previously among board members, the elevating of all board members to equal access to their superintendent, regardless of rank, formal education level, or career.

In a similar vein, both superintendents acknowledged the importance of “never selling their boards down the river” (Supt. S-1) or leaving them “wide open to take all the hits” (Supt. R-1) so were determined to provide political cover for them when challenged from organized labor or other factions.

*Part of your job is to protect your board from the unions too. You can’t just put them in a position where they’re gonna get their heads torn off. We’ve got this thing here, my gosh, when that goes public, these people are going to go crazy, so I have to tone it down some, have to temper some of that with you know, diplomacy.* – Supt. S-1

However, the efforts to reduce politics within the board showed up differently when the board and superintendent turned externally to their stakeholders. The Reed superintendent made a point of hosting many community committees and all board members served on different task forces, so that they worked side by side with constituents and gathered input directly while creating and developing policies or advisory recommendations. In this way, he attempted to provide expanded avenues for communication and connection, which aimed to promote inclusiveness. The Reed superintendent reduced political wrangling among his board members by making himself readily accessible to them and increasing habitual lines of communication. He adopted a similar approach to reduce political shenanigans between the board and the community, by opening up access points, and encouraging community stakeholders to interact in structured settings with his board members.

In marked contrast once again, the Sycamore superintendent’s efforts to boost internal trust with his board didn’t transfer well to the community. Supt. S-1 took on a rather narrow, protective approach to trust building, whereby he interacted with his board members frequently, yet shielded them from interfacing with potentially disgruntled constituents. His buffering actions served as an unintentional barrier to widespread community access. He ended up reducing the opportunities for real-time public input and potentially hampered the district’s level of responsiveness to an increasingly concerned constituency.

**Develop A Shared Mindset About Race**

Since both districts were demographically diverse in constituency, unlike their boards, issues of race could have been potentially divisive when trust-building. Both superintendents broached issues of race and worked to develop a shared mindset with their boards. Both adopted their own modified versions of a *colorblind*\(^{21}\) attitude about race in general, which was more like “color neutrality” or “race neutrality”\(^{22}\) and although not explicitly stated, seemed to be shared and articulated in different ways by all members of both governance teams during the interviews.

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\(^{21}\) **Color blindness** (also called race blindness) means to believe that race does not, or should not, matter. It is a sociological term for the disregard of racial differences. Some sociologists believe **colorblindness**, while intended to purport equality of treatment, actually negates the cultural values, norms, expectations and life experiences of people of color. Source: [http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/color-blind](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/color-blind)

\(^{22}\) **Race neutrality** is an approach in education where there is consciousness of race differences but it does not allow for decisions to be made based solely on these differences, as with university admissions. Source: [http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/edlite-raceneutralreport.html](http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/edlite-raceneutralreport.html)
They seemed to be peripherally aware of ethnic differences yet balked at dwelling on them or didn’t want to indulge or attend to such distinctions, particularly if it served as a divisive influence among themselves or with their stakeholders. During my participant interviews, which included posing demographic background questions, trustees from both boards shied away initially at responding when I asked them to identify their own ethnic category, with one Reed trustee and two Sycamore trustees in particular, making a point to not self-identify as “white,” preferring the terms “European American” (Reed Trustee C), “Anglo-American,” (Sycamore Trustee X) and “Spanish European” (Trustee Y). In the long run, both superintendents emphasized the importance of getting along with each other, regardless of ethnic differences, and of meeting the needs of all kids, irrespective of ethnic background. Both superintendents also stressed that they needed to consider specialized needs of students relative to socio-economic status and Superintendent R-2 went further to say that they should “not make blanket assumptions, categorize or over-generalize relative to race” (Supt. R-2).

In analyzing the Reed superintendent strategy, it was essentially to acknowledge cultural differences existed yet not dwell on issues of race or treat students differently because of those types of distinctions. The Reed superintendent helped develop this race neutral attitude, which was a strategy for building trust with a board that didn’t reflect the diversity of the community it represented. There was an awareness and acknowledgement of race differences among the governance team members and an overall mismatch with the community. There was a mention of different ethnicities, religions and political leanings, but a sense that in the end, they needed to put that aside and remember that their commitment was to all kids. They steered away from and some spoke ardently against generalizations based on race or ethnicity and refused to indulge race-based division. Religious or political affiliation came up much more frequently as a potentially divisive or unifying influencing factor in voting and decision-making. They all were adamant that the ethnicity of the superintendent and/or individual board members did not impact their relationship building, saying:

*I’m telling you, it (race) is not an issue. The reason it’s a non-issue is because just because you are that race doesn’t mean that you represent everybody or that you necessarily are reaching out and understand everybody’s issues more... There can’t be an exact match for every type of student, so they/we have to be for all students regardless of their race or socioeconomic or handicap or transgender or whatever that is.* – Reed Trustee D

Likewise, in Sycamore, the topic of race surfaced on occasion, but took a back seat to the benefit for all kids regardless of ethnicity. The Sycamore district superintendent, as an African American, admitted he faced some initial race-based assumptions with his board and he managed to work through those, impressing upon his board that a superintendent needn’t be an ethnic minority in order to move an equity agenda for all students forward. He was adamant that students not be pigeonholed or have different expectations or treatment due to race:

*This district, you show me something that benefits all 28,000 kids and we’ll do that. I’m not interested in breaking apart my kids within; there’s a program for black kids, there’s a program for white kids. Forget that, a kid is a kid. As I said, if a kid is low performing, then show me that. Don’t come here and show me something ethnically. That’s one of the stupidest things, when we separate our kids.* - Supt. S-1
Both superintendents thought that it might be divisive to have race-based assumptions and differential treatments with their constituency as well as within their own governance team. The Reed team’s makeup was more diverse yet their external training focused on culturally responsive pedagogy and practices, allowing them to be exposed to different ideas about equity and race. Due to the fact that their constituency was activated and vocal, different race-based groups spoke regularly at board meetings and provided their perspectives. The Sycamore family, with the exception of the superintendent, was very homogenous, with limited access to outside professional development on topics of race and equity. Sycamore’s governance team also had a somewhat apathetic constituency with no televised access to board meetings, so the topic didn’t seem very high on anyone’s radar.

**Ensure Easy Wins: Show a United Front Whenever Possible**

The development of a shared understanding about race ultimately bonded each governance team closer together because it signified a common value and shared mindset. Both superintendents acknowledged the importance of taking full advantage of and even somewhat contriving additional opportunities to align and show a united front, whether it be in co-developing a shared vision or mission, or adopting a set of protocols to guide their work. It seemed that as long as each governance team was in agreement about any of its preferred practices and the rationale behind it, then it was no longer a point of contention in the team’s relationship. This served as a counter balance to the controversial topics in which there was stronger evidence of natural disagreement. Thus, on every board agenda, both superintendents ensured that there were many items and votes that would result in 100% unanimity and accord. At multiple points in my data analysis, it became apparent that regardless of the actual topic of discussion, practice or protocol, if all governance team members (superintendent and board members) were supportive of it, privately and publicly, then the vote served as a rallying point and all pointed to it later as a symbol of their unified purpose, cohesion and alignment. With this in mind, both superintendents purposefully worked with their respective boards to add to and in some cases pad agendas with items and decisions that were lower level and lacked any semblance of controversy, resulting in almost guaranteed 5-0 votes. The thinking behind bringing the board together to jointly adopt a given protocol, practice, rule, or core value, was to allow them to publicly rally behind something without continual question or challenge, and promote general cohesion. Superintendent R-1 described this approach:

> There are going to be plenty of times when the board members and I feel at odds about some issue or decision and even if they feel strongly about it, and agree to move on afterwards, it creates some temporary discord. Someone wins or loses in the public eye. So I like to bring forward items and recommendations that they can all get behind and show support for me and my ideas and give us all some wins. We need that boost sometimes…. and then the public can actually see they are not a bunch of dysfunctional electeds always at each other’s throats, they are actually accomplishing something. – Supt. R-1

Both superintendents brought forward a series of “feel-good” resolutions and somewhat innocuous or even pabulum-type recommendations or recognitions that were considered to be easy wins. Both made sure their governance teams had ample opportunity to demonstrate unity.
of purpose and action on a fairly regular basis. This was another way of providing political cover and support for the board members, who were elected officials, as all could point to their voting record as proof that they didn’t have personal agendas and had shown unified agreement on many occasions.

Superintendent Strategies: Different Means to Different Ends

Both superintendents assessed their inherited political and organizational environments and recognized almost instinctively that the first months on the job would be critical to foundational trust building with their boards. The first order of business was for them each to take stock of their relational status and situation, and try to build a cohesive front going forward. As noted earlier, even when they implemented similar strategies, the results differed based on the district context and each superintendent’s metaphorical vision for the ideal, as the Reed superintendent strived to build team and the Sycamore superintendent desired a family unit. Before most of the other strategies could take root and be effective, both superintendents had to make sure their boards were receptive to them and ready to accept change. Whether the tensions were public and visible as in the case of Reed or under the surface as in Sycamore, they needed to be addressed in order for relationship building to take place. Both Superintendents proved early on that they were invested and “all-in.” Next up, they needed to take decisive steps to trust-build.

Create a Circle of Trust: One That Includes Community or Is Tightly Closed?

The two districts differed in how they defined and demonstrated transparency about their work and decisions together with their respective constituencies. Integrity is a key indicator of trust and honest, transparent communication and freely sharing information is a measure of integrity, as it matches words and promises to deeds and actions (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Both superintendents worked to develop transparency internally with their governance teams in order to combat mistrust with their boards. However, their expressed commitments to transparency manifested in dramatically different manners beyond the closed circle of six team members. In Reed, trust building led to more accountability with the community, whereas in Sycamore’s, public accountability and engagement decreased, as it was narrowly constrained to the immediate members of the governance team.

The Board’s Business in Public or the Public’s Business? The two districts had distinct ideas about their constituencies and the way they influenced board work. They also had distinct ideas about their roles as leaders of a public institution. Reed board members and superintendent viewed their work as “the public’s business” whereas Sycamore board members and superintendent felt their work was “the board’s business” merely conducted in a public setting. These ideas are most evident in their differing rationales and philosophies around the televising of board meetings. In Reed, the consensus of the board and superintendent was that the meeting should be televised and even closed-captioned and LiveStreamed so the public was immediately aware in real time of their interactions and decisions. There was a strong sentiment expressed by all Reed governance team members about their commitment to transparency with the public. Superintendent R-2 had this to say:
Transparency is an overused word in our district. If you watch any board meeting it is probably used, like 40 times in one meeting. It’s a big deal. We really try to do that. Just like I am with the board and they are with me, no surprises, no hidden agenda, we are like that with the public. My board gets copies of everything and our district website lays it all out for everyone to see, every time. – Supt. R-2

Likewise, the Reed board members seemed proud of their openness with their constituency, particularly as compared to their impressions of other boards. Reed Trustee C offered this explanation:

Transparency. I think we all agree it is very important. It’s interesting because I’ve been to other districts and other board meetings for county and other stuff where information is not always available. We pride ourselves in making sure that after our presentations are made or minutes are posted, that they’re available to the public, that we are clear…. it’s all visible to the public. Because I think they deserve that right to know because it’s their kids’ education. And I think that leads to more credibility and respect overall. Whether or not you agree with us, you can see what we based our decision on and how the thought process was. – Reed Trustee C

A Reed community member perceived this as an indication that the board thought the board’s meetings were truly the public’s business.

The level of transparency of this board and superintendent and each other and with the public is very high. Not only because they are televised. I think that helps…. They know they need to have their community stand behind them and stand behind their schools and I think they actually get it that they are sitting there to take care of our business, like well it’s really the public’s business, after all we are talking about public schools here. - Reed Community Member

This suggests that the board and superintendent of Reed district felt that the public was an important audience and key stakeholder in their work. In contrast, all five Sycamore board members and their superintendent were equally adamant that their meetings not be televised to ensure the average, unsophisticated speaker would feel comfortable speaking, and diminish opportunities for the public to act out or create a squeaky wheel effect on their decision making. The Sycamore board meetings were never taped or televised and there were no plans to begin to do so:

You know what? When you televise a meeting, many times you have community members and just Joe Blow off the screen who comes in, make a lot of comments then race home to see themselves on TV. In addition to that, it gives your elected officials an opportunity to become politicians. Many times after every item, you find one or two who have comments on every item on the agenda. Not productive. - Supt. S-1

Thus, the general feeling was that the Sycamore meetings were purposely not televised to reduce the chance of political shenanigans by the audience, or the board. This reflected a lack of outward transparency that would not have been acceptable in Reed.
Another reason I should think that we don’t televise because we have some people that would.... that would just play to the camera. To the audience, right. Yes, grandstand, you know, and ask questions that aren’t necessary. I think that not televising it keeps us focused. It prevents grandstanding. People getting up to hear themselves talk. It takes so much time and it wastes so much time. That could be very detrimental to our having an effective process. - Sycamore Trustee V

This suggests that the board generally viewed the public as a threat to the harmonious interactions and work of the board. It is no wonder that when I attended Reed board meetings, they often lasted well past midnight, with staff members joking with each other about bringing sleeping bags to stay overnight; while the Sycamore board meetings were over so quickly that the offhand comments made by support staff implied that if a constituent were to arrive 15 minutes late or so, he/she might end up missing the entire meeting! The different approaches to transparency and being televised show a different value for whose voice should be heard and influence the Superintendent and Board and whom they represented and served.

Whose Voices Should Be Heard? The perceptions of the public impacted whether transparency extended beyond the boardroom. Their perception of the public as a stakeholder in their work was reflected in the many active participatory committees that included parents and the board meeting audience was generally filled with local reporters and key community members. Reed District meetings with 75+ attendees were commonplace, with multiple speakers from the audience during public commentary and on key agenda topics, thus the meetings averaged five to seven hours in length. Transparency and public participation in Reed was also observable in active community engagement; frequent dissemination of electronic public surveys; citizen involvement in advisory committees; protocols for agenda items being placed for open discussion prior to action and voting instead of being placed on the routine consent calendar; public posting of data and documents on websites with automatic email alerts to stakeholders; and the accessibility and visibility of the superintendent and board in the community. Thus, the Reed District’s commitment to transparency within the governance team, as they shared openly with each other, extended to the public in ways that included the public in the board’s work. The extension of transparency to the public suggests that there was some trust in the public and for Reed, the “team” included public voice.

For example, the superintendent's strategies of ensuring civility among board members were applied to public discussion as well. Thus, the Reed District was equally insistent that the public have the opportunity to participate fully in open sessions, even at the risk of someone acting out. They seemed to take the responsibility for taking public input very seriously. Reed Trustee A called it out:

I think the important thing for us is we’re in charge of the public trust. We are ‘trustees’ after all, so we gotta stay in touch with them. When I observe other boards, I think oh my gosh, you can make this go much easier. Some other boards are so out of whack and control they might as well be a rubber stamp. Press the paper on it each time like a lipstick seal thing because that’s all it is.... They don’t even let people speak under public comment? So they call that accountability? I sent them an email and called them dolts and mush heads. – Reed Trustee A
Notably, the Reed governance team set a tone prior to activating the public voice. The superintendent and board modeled and demanded respect in such a way that even the public speakers who were expressing dissatisfaction with decisions or rationale of the board, superintendent and/or district, were expected to do so with the utmost respect. The stated guidelines on the speaker cards and the board president’s script for reviewing the board meeting protocols at the beginning of each meeting, contained reminders of politeness and the board president automatically called for a recess or motioned for quiet if the audience became rowdy, boisterous, rude or loud. Thus, the Reed superintendent worked with his board on how to comport itself in meetings that were filled with irate audience members. Sycamore governance team’s transparency seemed to be limited to their work with each other. They revealed all and dissected every issue with one another, and were always well informed. When it came to the community, however, the communication methods were still very traditional (printed minutes, postings on doors, etc.) and Sycamore didn’t seem to take advantage of the many technological advances that could facilitate instant communication and information sharing with a larger audience. Thus the perception of the public as potentially intrusive, distracting, or even hostile seemed to result in limited transparency with the public.

The Sycamore District ensured decorum by minimizing the chances of disruption happening by discouraging attendance and limiting public commentary. Superintendent S-1 tightly controlled the public speaking portion of his meetings, to support his board’s preference for shorter, calmer meetings. He introduced protocols to reduce the time frame for public commentary in favor of unfettered board and superintendent comment periods during study sessions. These measures could be seen as a way for the board meetings to be civil and efficient. They could also be interpreted as a way for Superintendent S-1 to influence the board without contrary opinions from the public or without a spotlight and external scrutiny. Although open to the public, the early time of day for staring the Sycamore study sessions (3:30 or 4:00 p.m.) precluded many working folks from attending and Sycamore was primarily a working class community. The public session would then proceed at a much quicker pace, as many items were bundled into the consent calendar and approved in bulk, an ulterior motive that was alluded to by one Sycamore trustee:

*Every week we have a study session. That way the whole board knows everything...So we’ve all been indoctrinated to what the superintendent, where the superintendent’s heading. We have an opportunity to get up and have a say. So the board supports...We’ve had the opportunity to ask questions, too. Well the secret is we’ve done all the hard work and homework before the board meeting. I felt a little guilty when some think there is too much trust when a lot is on the consent calendar. We really do put a lot of things on the consent calendar.* - Sycamore Trustee W

**Who is Invited to the Table?** Superintendent R-1 used the agenda to increase transparency. He was in the habit of placing items on the board agenda for full discussion prior to voting, rather than placing them on consent as a bundle, for approval, which he felt should only be utilized for routine items, rather than items of major importance, impact, or cost. The Reed superintendent and board also made sure that closed session was appropriately utilized only for legally defined closed session topics, with all other items being discussed and deliberated in
open session. The Sycamore closed sessions, bordering on social dinner gatherings, created a more casual atmosphere where topics and discussions were more likely to stray off the set agenda. No public access is allowed during closed session, by law, although the public has the opportunity to speak to items on the closed session agenda.

The open and lively dialogue between the superintendent and the Reed board members that was encouraged in Reed open session was evidence that decisions were not predetermined or in violation of the Brown Act, which guided the board’s decision-making format and structure. Since the Reed board members didn’t socialize outside of the professional arena, there was hardly a speculation or suspicion about a predetermined voting bloc or decision. The Reed superintendent guarded against that inference as it was important that the trust he built extended beyond his inner circle of board members and to his stakeholders. His board adopted his stance:

(If you engage in that type of interaction), people are going to get suspicious that
‘wow did you guys meet? Did you talk ahead of time? Is there other information?’
It’s a trust thing. - Reed Trustee B

In the Reed District, this value for differences of opinion and perspectives extended to the public board meetings, and translated into respectful discourse with each other as well as a renewed respect and value for community perspectives and voices that sometimes openly challenged the district’s direction. Supt. R-2 was intent upon reducing the negative effect of the politics of personalism on the board, not by keeping them away from their constituency, rather by educating them about the potential trap they posed.

Both superintendents’ influence on healthy and respectful board dynamics and interactions was apparent. However, by extension, Reed board members felt that they were also held more acutely accountable to the particular voters who placed their trust in them and elected them to office. All five Reed board members and their superintendent acknowledged that their highly engaged constituency was well aware of their governance team agreements and held them accountable to the operational protocols and shared understandings they had set among themselves. By communicating the superintendent’s expectations of the board to the Reed community at large, there was an extra check and balance that promoted decorum, respect and functionality. The importance of being open and forthcoming seemed to go beyond the governance team, as it extended to the Reed community, which also demanded and expected transparency. The Reed district’s PowerPoint presentations, minutes, agenda, user-friendly budgets and other key documents were made readily available and public. Other methods to increase transparency were to form many board committees that included volunteer community members as well as independent oversight groups as needed in critical areas such as parcel tax or bond measures.

In the case of Sycamore, the board and superintendent did not embrace the regular input of the public via committees or e-communications, and relied instead on more traditional means of communication, such as snail mail letter writing and formal correspondence, which was not utilized very often. True transparency, which is a sign of trust, was promoted internally among the governance teams, but once beyond the inner sanctum, it was encouraged in Reed without limits and tightly constrained in Sycamore. The Sycamore circle of trust was limited to a membership of six, while the Reed circle of trust expanded to include all who had a vested interest. What started out as an ideal to attain, that of a high-trust governance team, was not without unforeseen complications.
Put Aside Past Wrongs: Calm the Waters or Ride the Waves?

Trust cannot be formed in chaos. In Reed, the superintendent actively interceded in order to mend fences after elections between competitors as a way to lay the groundwork for trust building. He figuratively bandaged bruises and smoothed feathers. He confronted those who would habitually carry grudges. In contrast, the more casual, apolitical Sycamore election atmosphere allowed the Sycamore board to come together without carryover rancor from a hard fought election. The Sycamore superintendent’s role was different, then, and he was able to capitalize on their sense of unity and build upon it. The difference in the external political environment was apparent, and thus his strategy was to dive right in, embrace and welcome them, anticipating that major attitude adjustments would not be necessary.

_They come on, without all that (election) baggage, the come on and just like a glove, fit perfect._ - Supt. S-1

All was not completely calm under the surface, however, in Sycamore. Despite the fact that there were no major hot-button campaign issues, Superintendent S-1 had to address and dismantle the internal pecking order that had developed over time, that had left some trustees feeling insecure and less important than others. Both superintendents felt that no amount of protocols or guidelines could be effective if the board members were reeling from past grievances with each other, real or imagined. The Reed superintendent tackled external factors to build team by intervening directly with individuals and developing rotations of power positions. His emphasis was on establishing norms, structures and public protocols. The Sycamore superintendent, with his socio-emotional focus and his goal of building family, focused on internal, emotional factors, and worked to boost everyone’s individual sense of value and esteem. His protocols promoted respectful dialogue and he both modeled and encouraged displays of personal regard. Both governance teams were then able to start with a clean slate.

Address Power Imbalances: Take Turns Stirring the Pot or Keep the Peace?

Both Reed and Sycamore district governance teams felt that power struggles on the board were unhealthy and detracted from a positive and functional relationship. Each superintendent expressed a need to quash the power struggles in order to boost relational trust and bond in order to function as a team or a family unit. Even so, they had polar opposite approaches to accomplish that end. In Reed, where there was a historical pattern of board members jockeying for power and a desire to leverage their elected positions as political stepping-stones, the superintendent’s strategy was to continually disrupt the power dynamic, by automatically shifting and rotating officers. This practice ensured that power was loosely held and not ingrained in one individual, giving that board member more access, publicity, or influence, either real or perceived. In the same way that teams often switch positions, to build a deeper bench, support each other, and cross-train, the Reed superintendent effectively disseminated power throughout the team, rather than give one captain a stronghold. Moreover, according to the Reed superintendent and board, this practice ensured the office elections were not a distraction.

In contrast, Sycamore superintendent’s strategic approach was to continually maintain the same power dynamic and the status quo of officers, so as to eliminate opportunities for unrest.
and jockeying for power. In other words, he never wanted to rock the boat or stir up potential controversy. In the Sycamore district, with the same goal in mind, to avoid the internal governance team power plays and keep consistency, the same person was elected and served as president for more than ten years. Similar to a family structure and dynamic, everyone in Sycamore knew and accepted their respective roles and they didn’t try to maneuver or undermine one another, as every knew their place and regardless of their role, had equal time with the superintendent.

*It’s been consistent. They love the way the current president runs the meetings, they keep things going...it hasn’t changed in over a decade. If it isn’t broken, why fix it?* - Supt. S-1

It seemed that the Reed superintendent’s strategy of rotating power positions tended to encourage differing viewpoints and more easily allow for introduction of innovation or new ideas. In contrast, the Sycamore superintendent’s strategy of solidifying the power structure, although equally effective in boosting internal trust with his board and creating harmony, was more apt to uphold the status quo and contribute to a sense of stasis relative to district matters.

**Build Cohesion: Get Different Voices to Harmonize or Sing Same, Familiar Song?**

Both superintendents felt it important to build a sense of cohesion, a unity of purpose, and provide for civil and respectful discourse and interaction. Superintendent R-1 stressed the value of equitable contribution, rotating roles and entertaining and encouraging different points of view in order to keep relationships even keel and ensure all voices and perspectives were heard. The Reed superintendent and board members felt this fostered a shared goal of developing cohesion and promoting amicable relationships to facilitate trust-building. The Reed performance team metaphor is apropos, in this case extending to a choral performance group, where different voices, pitch and range combine with a unity of purpose or song, maintaining the individuality, yet contributing to the team, and also allowing for some improvisation.

On the other end of the spectrum, to reach the same outcome of harmonious relationships and get along, the Sycamore superintendent and Sycamore team members valued like-mindedness, stability and longevity above almost all else, as evidenced in almost every aspect of Sycamore district governance team operations. This continuity enhanced the trust-building environment in a different way, as described by one Sycamore trustee:

*In education, we talk about how important it is that there be stability in the principal of the school. We talk about how important is there be stability in a superintendent and there be stability in the classroom with the teacher who’s experienced and yet, so many boards rotate the presidency of the board through – rather than picking someone who works well in that combination... stability and consistency are what’s important.* - Sycamore Trustee W

Reed and Sycamore both eventually developed strong, cohesive relationships but of a different nature. While this indicates trust for both, there are implications for how the governance team ultimately functioned, as a result. A level of personal closeness akin to family relations, predicated on unconditional acceptance and trust, is not necessarily optimal in a democratic
body, which requires checks and balances, as well as trust. The contrast in superintendent tactical approaches was evident in how opposing opinions, which are desirable in an optimally functioning democratic body such as a governance team, were treated. In the interest of trust building, the Reed superintendent concentrated on his board members expressing opposing viewpoints respectfully, and staying in their lanes or defined roles and positions. The Sycamore Supt. S-1’s strategies, on the other hand, resulted in Sycamore trustees sometimes suppressing viewpoints in the interest of keeping the peace. Some Sycamore board members mentioned that they were occasionally opposed to the superintendent’s recommendation, but didn’t want to rock the boat or hurt his feelings, so they didn’t always express it, which could be counter to their purpose of representing their constituency. In this instance, the familial setting, with the superintendent as the prominent, patriarchal figurehead, was not conducive to challenging the status quo.

**A Tale of Two Districts: High Trust ≠ Optimal Trust**

Overall, my study showed that relational trust indicators were evident among both district governance teams and can be attributed to the conscious and customized trust-building strategies and techniques of both superintendents. Both teams developed high trust over time. High trust among the board and superintendent transferred into more inclusive practices in the case of the Reed governance team. In Sycamore’s case, however, emerging perceptions of cronyism and isolationism did not translate into increased community trust, but the opposite, unfortunately.

> The (Sycamore) board and supe get along great. There is trust in the position and then the person. Lately, I don’t think it’s ideal. I still think that they are too insular, I guess that’s my phrase for them right now, it’s too insular right now. So they work very well together. But it’s that next layer, I think they need to be more open to a variety of perspectives beyond themselves. - Sycamore Community Member

The Sycamore superintendent and his board members didn’t anticipate this particular problem arising. Both the Sycamore community member and successor superintendent indicated that there was a somewhat counterproductive consequence of deliberate trust-building with a select, closed group of board members that had experienced relatively unchanged membership spanning many years. Superintendent S-2 was able to expressly pinpoint the potential risks associated with the board and superintendent relationship becoming overly trusting, and he hinted that even longevity and stability presented some challenges:

> Our school district generally is old-fashioned in a lot of the politics that have gone on. There’s not been a lot of change or interest in change by the constituents. We don’t have a lot of parents banging on our doors demanding to have our board meetings televised for example. Plus, we’ve had the same people on our school board for many, many years. ... We’re very stable. So while on the one hand that’s good for consistency, it’s difficult in terms of progress and new ideas coming in. We don’t want to remain stagnant. - Supt. S-2

According to Bryk and Schneider (2002), high trust environments, ideally encourage risk-taking and innovation, which are conditions conducive to educational reform in a school
environment. In the Reed District case, high trust meant exactly that, as Superintendent R-1 created an environment where trust developed with his board, and subsequently, exponentially increased throughout the community. This resulted in reduced vulnerability and dissent, along with higher levels of engagement and democratic participation, as evidenced by more actively involved and informed constituents engaged in community committees and open forums. In the case of the Sycamore District, however, the opposite effect occurred. The high trust environment that developed between the board and superintendent, coupled with long-term stability and protocols that discouraged negative outside political influences, began to stifle external political voices and input, which is not optimal for a representative governing body. Eventually, despite well-intentioned rationale, the Sycamore board and superintendent’s airtight connection led to the promotion of exclusionary rather than inclusionary practices relative to the community at large. While the superintendent and board members grew correspondingly closer with each other, the governance team gradually became more insular and isolated from the outside world. If, as Bryk and Schneider (2002) assert, relational trust serves as the essential glue that holds an organization together, it must be applied appropriately, and be managed strategically, so as not to clog or prevent the community’s access to a public organization and governance team.
Chapter 7: Discussion of Findings, Implications for Practice and Further Research

There is a saying among some boards that “superintendents are hired to be fired” (Santiago Wood, qtd. in Frey, 2012). Such a mentality among board members creates a revolving door and high turnover rates, making the development of trusting relationships between a superintendent and the board, as members of a governance team, extremely challenging. According to a 2002 report by the Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) the average California public school superintendent’s tenure lasts between two to three years yet research suggests successful system reform takes five or more years of a superintendent’s continued focus and work to accomplish (Grissom & Anderson, 2012). Moreover, it takes substantial time on the job to build trust and a relationship-oriented culture in order to collaboratively work to implement lasting change or reform (Six & Sorge, 2008; Tschannen-Moran, 2004,). Bryk and Schneider (2002) demonstrate that relational trust is not something that can be developed overnight, or in a workshop, retreat or conference training, although foundations of trust may be initiated or abetted in those settings. They posit that “trust grows over time, through exchanges where the expectations held for others are validated in action….. and forged in daily social exchanges” (pp. 136-137). Therefore, a basic conundrum exists. Scholars have shown that relational trust is vital, yet cultivating relational trust takes time, a luxury that a new superintendent doesn’t necessarily have, particularly since board members serve four-year terms, and individuals and subsets of the board are either re-elected or replaced in alternating cycles of two years.

I found that when incoming superintendents quickly assess the macro- and micro-political realities they inherit and gauge the level of trust/mistrust and its contributing factors, they are able to deploy strategies that help them establish and cultivate trust. I also discovered their strategies were different depending on their inherited context. In addition to the external political and organizational conditions, the superintendents in this study took into consideration the underlying power dynamics of their boards and adjusted accordingly. Every district culture, every board dynamic, and every superintendent is unique; thus there is likely no practical “to do” checklist or formula that will automatically generate high levels of trust between a superintendent and a board. There are, however, some tried and true strategies that the two superintendents in this study used to boost relational trust.

My research revealed that during their tenure, both superintendents strategically and effectively repaired previously damaged relations, restored and built relational trust with their respective boards. Both superintendents intentionally developed relationships with board members as individuals and differentiated their work and communications with them in response to their needs and personal tastes. Both struck a balance between treating and valuing them equally as members of a unified board when it came to rules for information sharing, formal interactions and protocols, and customizing methods to suit individual needs. Notably, both

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23 Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) was founded in 1983 as a cooperative venture between Stanford University and the University of California (Berkeley and Davis), PACE is an independent policy research center and its primary aim is to enrich education policy debates with sound analysis and hard evidence. PACE provides analysis and assistance to California policymakers, education professionals, and the general public. Source: http://pace.berkeley.edu
superintendents managed the internal power dynamics as a way to enhance trust, one by implementing rotations to share and rotate power amongst all board members and effectively eliminate jockeying or alliances, and the other by firmly cementing the existing power structure, so as not to rock the boat.

Unexpectedly, I found that in one district, the high level of trust that was attained and corresponding trust-building actions eventually extended beyond its governance team, which appeared to increase what La Porte and Metlay (1996), would term the district’s overall institutional trustworthiness in the eyes of the public. This finding is in keeping with research claims (Goodman, Fullbright, & Zimmerman, 1998; Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000) that governance teams may serve as springboards for creating trust in the entire educational system. In contrast, the other governance team became so visibly close and socially intertwined that the relationship seemed to be growing overly insular. This could be considered a detriment in the eyes of the public, and gradually, questions began to surface about the team’s depth of professional focus, commitment to transparency, and perceived rubberstamping.

Discussion

District Baggage

Vital to my study was arriving at an understanding of the organizational and political context that each superintendent inherited, as it influenced and shaped the selection, implementation and effectiveness of the strategies. School districts are public institutions run by elected politicians and appointed officials, thus inherently political in function and nature.

Six and Sorge’s (2008) study and analysis of what they termed trust and trouble events—those that either promote and encourage trust-building or hamper trust-building and cause one to reconsider, question or safeguard instead of placing trust—support my findings. They identify corresponding relational signaling as the key mechanism for increasing or decreasing trust. This process accounts for the ways that individuals interact with one another and have trust-enhancing or trust-detracting experiences. The individuals then process those experiences, take in positive or negative social cues, and react accordingly by becoming even more trusting or increasingly more cautious and guarded. Both superintendents were plunged into situations plagued by messy, disconcerting interpersonal situations where trust-detracting relational signaling had led to increased suspicion and concern and did not stimulate trust. One district governance team (Reed) carried a great deal of baggage and deep scars from contentious political campaigns rife with negative exchanges and interactions that took place prior to taking office. My findings demonstrated that the Sycamore District governance team encountered trouble while formulating trust, in the form of ingrained power imbalances and difficult internal relationship issues. Bryk and Schneider (2002) acknowledge that an individual’s assessment of positive intentionality is influenced by real or perceived differential power associated with one’s relative social status in a group or organization. The Sycamore governance team had developed a pathology over time, an unspoken social caste system of sorts based on educational and associated professional achievements which over-empowered some trustees at the expense of devaluing others, and left bruised egos and hurt feelings in its wake.

Although my primary focus was the development of relational trust, since this study was conducted in a highly politically charged environment, I took social and political trust theories in organizations into account. After gaining a solid grasp of the basic principles of contractual trust,
institutional trust and political trust theories through my literature review, I identified an apparent inverse relationship between trust and organizational conflict, which informed my research. My findings illustrated that there was a connection between the political forces in play, the strategies the superintendents chose, and their relative effectiveness. According to Newton’s (2001) modified social capital theory, social trust and relational ties can develop in a socio-political system and the resulting level of political confidence that arises is a direct reflection of the external or social conditions during the gestation of the trust relationship. Both superintendents responded early on to the pre-existing political conditions and unique macro- and micro-political influences that they assessed to be influencing their team’s capacity for trust building, as well as any likely obstacles. Likewise, La Porte and Metlay (1996) underscore the importance of first identifying the root causes of mistrust in order to combat it and then respond appropriately when attempting to restore or enhance trust. The superintendents identified and tailored their strategies to their unique situations with calculated precision. The superintendents’ customized strategies, protocols and actions might have seemed to the casual observer somewhat insignificant in isolation; however, to this researcher, they took on crucial and sometimes nuanced meaning when understood in the context of the external district pressures and pre-existing internal team dynamics.

An additional factor taken into account by both incoming superintendents was the conscious shifting of their board members’ mindsets away from an emphasis and over reliance on contractual, transactional, and/or positional trust to define and bind the relationship, to the need to build relational trust to cement and deepen their professional and interpersonal bonds. This was counter to the both districts’ prior superintendents’ viewpoints and their original conceptions and claims that trust is and should be inherent in the job appointment and title. Their predecessors felt that trust was essentially a given and that boards, specifically the hiring board, should automatically and implicitly trust the superintendent. In hindsight analysis, Superintendent R-1 speculated that the prior superintendent’s assumption that the CEO was entitled to the board’s unconditional and unwavering trust, might have contributed to the deficit of trust he inherited. It appeared that no one on the prior governance team had actively focused on ensuring they continually earned and kept one another’s confidence and respect.

**Cultivating Trust**

My study, with its focus on district leadership, expands on Bryk and Schneider’s (2002) groundbreaking work on school level trust and site-based leadership, and supports its application with a different set of school-related individuals. My research results mirror theirs, in that they uphold that relational trust is built from day-to-day social interactions and interplay and is predicated on demonstrations and cognitive discernment of genuine respect, integrity, competence and personal regard.

My findings were consistent with various a priori theories. Scholars have demonstrated that the critical sociological underpinnings of relational trust as an important precondition for collaboration and reform in schools (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Lenz, 2006; Marsh, 2007; Tarter & Hoy, 2004). My findings extend previous research by demonstrating they play a role at the district governance team level as well. In particular, I highlight positive transformational impact of trust building among a governance team. My data revealed that the former superintendents in Reed and Sycamore relied heavily on contractual and positional trust, whereby coercive power was established and influence was exerted in keeping with titles or by pulling rank, and legal
processes trumped intentions. Due to that mindset and operating frame, there was little evidence of investment in interpersonal relationship building with their boards. They took umbrage when their motivations, words, promises or actions were called into question and didn’t seem to feel the need to continually prove themselves worthy of their position or the board’s confidence and trust. The two new superintendents’ approaches were more in line with research claims regarding the importance of the track record or demonstrable history of actions matching words (Covey, 2006; Marsh, 2007), in that they were acutely aware that every single decision, action and statement they made (and even those they didn’t make) were being judged as signifiers of their basic credibility, sincerity and trustworthiness. Neither superintendent took the board’s level of trust for granted, even during the best times. Both continually engendered and cultivated trust by keeping the board fully informed on matters from A-Z; following up and following through; sharing the good, the bad and the ugly; providing rationale and timely, valid data to support recommendations, and ensuring transparency in decisions.

The complicated political context in which the board and superintendent relationship develops added a problematic dimension to both superintendents’ trust building and teambuilding efforts. Studies show that political power is generally sought in order to satisfy an individual’s needs rather than the team’s (Mountford, 2004). According to Covey (2006), in an organization, politics is defined as using tactical strategies as a means to increase power, which has self-interest and individual empowerment as its prime motivation and thus is somewhat antithetical to the formation and perpetuation of trust and collaboration. Research abounds that examines the motivational theory of politics, conflict and power and reveals those levers have an undeniably and significantly negative impact on trust relationships (Fusarelli, 2006; Howell, 2005; Marsh, 2007; Mountford, 2004). Every board member I interviewed during my study shared his/her unique perspectives, expectations and individual desires regarding status, attention, empowerment, information and interaction with the superintendent, which are all influential factors in relationship building among governance team powerbrokers (Petersen & Fusarelli, 2005). The board members’ expressed preferences ranged the gamut, from a need to know basis to daily check-ins. Likewise, board members are individually elected and beholden to various, sometimes differing groups of constituents with competing interests, powerbases, ties and agendas. Since superintendents are appointed by and report to the board as a whole rather than any one individual, this sets up a political and power dynamic that presents exclusive challenges for individualized and one-on-one trust building. Various scholars allude to the inevitable tension that arises in this type of negotiated system and reference the complex and dynamic interrelationship of the individuals in such an open system that doesn’t rely on traditional hierarchy, clear chain of command or professional dominance (Alsbury, 2008; Tallerico, 1989). Since trust-building is based on reciprocity, both superintendents crafted additional, non-politicized opportunities to interact with individual board members and focused on attending to board members’ individual needs, as part of their overall strategy to build trust, one person, one positive interpersonal and socio-political interaction at a time.

There is no denying that under the surface, many political forces and power imbalances were in play. Nevertheless, I found as others have discovered before me that power dynamics and political role don’t necessarily always need to detract from a trust relationship (Petersen & Short, 2001). Both superintendents were experienced, intuitive, and politically savvy enough to recognize these competing interests and unique preferences, and incorporate attending to them into their toolkit of strategies to build trust. My findings illustrate how both superintendents were able to navigate these potential political landmines. Each made a point of differentiating in order
to be responsive to and aware of quirks, expressed demands, personal history, and maintenance level of each board member, rather than operate from a fixed mindset or one size fits all standpoint, when developing trust and relationships whether informally, formally, interpersonally or professionally. This paid off for them in the long run. Unlike their predecessors, they withstood the potentially destructive forces that threatened their trust building efforts.

In the Sycamore District, the unique role and influence of the board president as spokesperson, co-developer of the board agenda, official speaker and moderator, (with the caveat that he was established and well-trusted), appeared to support and boost the credibility of the superintendent among the other board members. Favorable board decision-making for superintendent-recommended action appeared to be closely tied to the board president’s agreement or approval, which conveyed a sense of trust in and credibility of the superintendent. My data in Sycamore supports previous empirical findings that suggest that there is a certain relational dynamic between a superintendent and board president that is grounded in trust and/or respect, which is ultimately vital in order for school governance and progressive reform in education (Allison, Allison & McHenry, 1995; Carpenter, 1987; Feurstein & Opfer, 1998). However, previous literature on this topic has limitations. The conclusions are based on self-reported influence and voting patterns showing president/superintendent agreement, which could also be due to other, unreported or unstudied factors. My data from Reed contradicts this finding, to a certain extent. It shows the critical importance of contextual response when implementing strategies to promote trust. In Reed, the position of president was so important that it was highly sought after by every board member. If the Reed superintendent had chosen to support one trustee as the ongoing president of the board year after year, this might have improved his relationship with the favored board president, but would have seriously damaged his relationship with the other four. The Reed superintendent was astute enough to realize that the best way to avoid continual infighting over holding offices was to setup, encourage and reinforce an automatic rotation, allowing everyone to have a turn and a guaranteed term as president. It wasn’t in the team’s best interest or his own to curry favor with one board member at the expense of all of the others.

With so many scholarly examples of superintendent turnover due to lack of confidence and loss of board, public or staff trust (Alsbury, 2008; Howell, 2005;) new superintendents need to be on the lookout for pitfalls and controversial or divisive issues that have the potential to erode trust. They also should be thoughtful and strategic when working to generate trust. My findings uphold extant research that claims the joint establishment of norms and protocols for communication and interaction, and continual and equal distribution of information are crucial to the establishment of initial trust (Smoley, 1999; Townsend, Johnston, Gross, Lynch, Garcy, Roberts & Novotney, 2007). To elaborate, a key finding in regards to maintaining and fostering trust for a superintendent was keeping board members equally and fully informed of both the good and bad news, and ensuring transparency in decision-making, including rationale and justifications. According to Townsend et al., (2007) a superintendent is ultimately responsible for ensuring that the board is informed instead of surprised and that they are not blindsided, especially relative to high profile or issues and controversies the might lead to public embarrassment for the school district and the elected trustees. Additionally, providing information as far in advance as possible and being inclusive, rather than exclusive, about input and decisions, engenders and boosts trust and cooperation (Marsh, 2007). Adopting this approach to unilateral information sharing helped the two superintendents build trust. Similarly, both ascribed to an essential, reciprocal rule of no blindsides, gotchas or surprises and both
provided ample opportunities for both informal and formal bonding, which, as already noted, the Sycamore superintendent took to a rather extreme level.

Soon after assuming their positions, both superintendents developed or co-developed with their board unwritten rules and/or guidelines to facilitate and cultivate trust. Eventually, Superintendent S-1 created a written handbook of sorts. Here, in the establishment of protocols for communication and access to the superintendent, is where there were many strategic similarities, suggesting that some of these actions may be more generalizable, regardless of context. For example, both superintendents implemented protocols to ensure that everyone had a turn to say something on board agenda topics, which increased trust and reduced the chance for the superintendent to play one board member against each other or engage in political hijinks. Both added to this sense of fairness by touching base with each individual board member frequently, on their terms, and further augmented that practice by ensuring crisis or important communications were sent out to all, indiscriminately.

Implications for Practice

School districts are complex systems. They are microcosms of our larger society. Within their leadership construct, we find many examples where well-intentioned educational professionals and bona-fide elected officials fall into counterproductive patterns and habits of dysfunction, characterized by mistrust. This study suggests that an atmosphere of animosity and political discord between superintendents and boards does not have to be perpetuated. Rather, it can be disrupted and transformed into a positive, trusting relationship through deliberate, strategic action by a committed, connected superintendent who works and governs collaboratively with his/her board.

Who will take note and possibly benefit from these findings and conclusions? It may resonate with and provide valuable insight to:

- aspiring superintendents who hear horror stories about boards who are jaded and mistrusting and can now take heart and hope in knowing that by taking stock of the situation, and following through with commitment and specific strategies, it is possible to repair, restore and/or reboot formerly damaged relationships;

- school board members who are skeptical of a newly hired superintendent and his/her intentions based on the experiences of the past, and can now begin anew with a fresh start, an open mindset, by making their needs and doubts known so that the superintendent may respond and adjust in order to improve the tenor and depth of inter-relationship; and/or

- a community that has lost confidence in its governing board and superintendent because they seem to have lost the desire or ability to engage in civil, respectful discourse, may now feel reassured that there are exemplars, working models and tried-and-true protocols available, and that with renewed awareness, reflection, training, dedication and persistent work, an entirely different and positive atmosphere can be co-constructed.

As a practicing superintendent, I acknowledge there are critical lessons to be learned from scholarly and practitioner research, my residency, and the experiences of other
superintendents. My research reinforces the fact that superintendents are at the center of a complicated and complex web of interpersonal relationships with their board. My data reinforces prior research and reveals that a superintendent’s effectiveness is affected by varying levels of trust resulting from prior and ongoing perceptions of his/her level of expertise; his/her given track record of truthfulness and credibility, his/her awareness of and response to a given political context, and resulting referent power.

My findings and research indicate it is wise for superintendents at every stage in their careers from rookie to veteran to understand the critical importance of establishing foundational relational trust and continually fostering that trust with each individual board member, as well as the board as a whole. In districts like Sycamore, where board presidents carry more weight, my data reveals the value of paying particular attention to developing a strong, mutually supportive relationship with the board president in order to gain credence and confidence. From my perspective, the most important leadership lessons learned and reinforced by my study are: (1) positional authority without relational trust is difficult to sustain at any level of leadership; and (2) never take trust for granted. As Superintendent S-2 pronounced, “Board and governance team relationship building begins before you ever meet in person and then never, ever really ends.”

My findings align with previous research which identifies the qualities and characteristics possessed by superintendents who are labeled high trust, high impact, and effective as: informative, forthcoming, truthful, and open about sharing information (Hackett, 2015). This suggests that a superintendent intent upon building or boosting trust should err on being overly communicative at least initially, be true to his/her word, and never hide or shy away from revealing uncomfortable truths. These strategic actions will signal to board members and help them cognitively discern that he/she is someone likely to be trusted. In the same vein, the manner, sincerity, and frequency of communication were viewed as critical to a superintendent’s success in leading a district (Petersen & Short, 2001; Townsend et al., 2007). A practicing or incoming superintendent should therefore design and provide a framework and structured mechanism for communication with the board that ensures regular, forthright communication to all board members in order to establish organizational procedures and conditions that foster trust.

**Leadership Lessons Learned**

Before I became a superintendent, I thought that board meetings were supposed to last until all hours of the night, because that was my professional experience. I had been advised by various board members and other superintendents that in order to ensure everyone maintained the utmost professionalism, boards and superintendents should never engage at a personal level, nor interact informally or socially. Yet, I continually saw board members and the superintendent taking things personally, when disagreements or voting splits occurred and witnessed deep personal divisions that never seemed to heal and affected their professional roles. I have learned valuable lessons during my more than six years as superintendent, making me one of the longest seated superintendents in Alameda County. Some knowledge was gained by trial and error, and much more through research, study, dialogue with and observation of high functioning governance teams. My practical experience mirrors much of what my colleagues have gone through as I have worked to build trust with my board, even as my original board composition has changed, with one going on to higher office, one retiring, one passing away, and one losing re-election. With each new board member, I realize I have an entirely new board, and have worked to orient and adapt my style accordingly. My research and findings inform my practice.
and make me a better, more inclusive superintendent who now actively resists the natural tendency to align with a favored board member who was a longtime family friend, or malign another when we clash over issues, tactics, or ways of thinking.

I have been studying this topic throughout my tenure as superintendent. All along, I have experimented and tested what I have learned and put theory into practice as best I could. It has not been an easy or simple task to develop relational trust with my own board, as it was not a given upon my hire. Our foundation for trust building was shaky for a variety of reasons and our relationship has been challenged by many external forces and hot-button issues over the years.

I live in the community where I am superintendent and my research suggests that residency goes a long way in setting a solid foundation for trust-building with a board as a symbol and sign of personal investment and commitment. Both districts I studied valued the fact that the superintendent was connected, visible and available, as well as involved and engaged in the community, both personally and professionally. In Reed, it was a major selling point that influenced the superintendent’s selection and hiring. Research has shown it is important to “live where you lead” (Hackett, 2015) and if that isn’t probable or possible, then Hackett gives this follow-up advice, “if you don’t live there, you must give twice the care” to compensate (p. 148-149).

This study should empower superintendents and boards and give them a new sense of agency by illustrating how their peers and colleagues were able to assess their situation and actively engage in productive relationship building. There are far too many governance teams and community members who seem to, whether blithely or begrudgingly, merely accept the status quo and become defeated as they give in to the inevitable. Others continue to lament the fact that tension and disrespectful interactions between political leaders are just signs and symptoms of modern times. They will now see real-life examples in ordinary districts of superintendents and boards who seek to improve relations, co-develop healthy, constructive models of interaction, and do not accept dysfunction as the new normal.

Despite our tenuous and sometimes rocky beginnings, my various board members and I have all grown together over the years. We have learned to value one another; to communicate with and treat each other with respect; to do what we say we will do or own up when we don’t or can’t; to show goodwill and good grace toward each other even when it is challenging; to do our part and be prepared; and perhaps most importantly, to just let it go and move on, when it doesn’t go our way. Our board meetings are businesslike, full of lively exchange, and have a positive vibe. Our board meetings generally last two to three hours on average and we make it a point to both start and end them with recognitions and words of appreciation for each other, our students, our staff and our supportive community. Like the cases I have studied, we have grown into a respectable governance team as we have grown in our depth and strength of relationship. I know that relational trust is the glue that holds us together and I never take it for granted; I keep working at it every day, proving that I am worthy of that trust, and so do they, as board trustees.

Study Limitations

Limitations of this study include a small sampling of two governance teams in two districts located in the San Francisco Bay Area. These cases are not necessarily representative of the many thousands of public school district governance teams across the nation, with their wide range of variances in demographic composition, geographic location (rural, suburban or urban), size, and political bent. Both superintendents and their board members worked and served under
different conditions; their districts were different in size and constituency, and each team had varying resources at their disposal, so the findings are not generalizable or applicable to all districts or governance teams.

The length of my study was longer than originally anticipated, which allowed for more in-depth research, yet increased the reliance on retrospection. Retrospective accounts run the risk of being less accurate they are contingent on participants’ memory and details and often events are not as fresh in the participant’s mind or available. Furthermore, retrospective study participants may be prone to recall bias or reporting bias, so key data may be omitted, either intentionally or unintentionally during the retelling. In addition, there was a superintendent change and transition in the Sycamore District during my extended research timeframe, which should be taken into account, as the successor inherited the effects of the trust-building work of his predecessor. Superintendent S-2’s input was used primarily as a referent for the enhanced trust condition of the Sycamore governance team as a result of Superintendent S-1’s strategies.

My position as a seated superintendent in the Bay Area presents both benefits and drawbacks for my study. On the positive side, due to the fact that I conducted practitioner research and given my unique position and access as a superintendent studying and interviewing fellow superintendents and boards, my study offers an insider view and perspective that might not otherwise have been obtained. Very little restraint was shown and a great deal of candor was evident in our interviews, with little emphasis on politically correct responses, which often are the norm for leaders in these types of high profile leadership positions. As a result of my own trusting relationship with my colleagues, access, openness, and concerns about confidentiality were never an issue. My study unveils the curtain and reveals the thinking and rationale behind the strategic actions of the superintendents and their boards’ uncensored reactions to them, thus there is likely a level of depth that is obtained going beyond the general surface or more superficial tactics that are usually promoted. The importance of providing political cover for a board is just one example of something that usually isn’t discussed openly in workshop seminars for boards and superintendents, only referenced behind the scenes among close confidantes. On the other hand, my positionality as a superintendent may also have introduced some unintended bias into my data collection or analysis, as I may have had unconscious predispositions or judgments based on my prior experiences, or even protective instincts toward certain individuals based on my prior experiences and interactions, and these could have affected the impartiality of my research and subsequent findings.

**Implications for Further Research**

Although my cross-case comparisons touched on the topic of how the governance team trust relationship extends (or not) to the staff and larger community, it warrants further study. In the case of the Reed District, many of the superintendent’s strategies and techniques to build trust with his board were incorporated into other facets of Reed’s operations, which seemed to boost trust and morale on a larger scale. In the case of the Sycamore District, it seemed that the trust-building among the governance team was exclusive to the six team members, leaving others feeling left out and somewhat marginalized, and potentially leading to an erosion of trust in the community at large. It is not an exact correlation, but certainly worth reviewing and exploring successful strategies to extend relational trust beyond the boardroom. After all, democratic engagement, public participation and representation are the very hallmarks of American public education governance and school board governance has been described as one of the last, lingering mainstays and bedrocks of democracy and lay control, at the local, grassroots level.
(Tallerico, 1989). If overly high-trust governance teams are counterproductive to that purpose, then energy and investment in building relational trust, while still valuable, may need to be mitigated for that possible effect.

Along the same lines, my study did not produce empirical evidence that the board/superintendent relationship impacts or correlates to student academic success or opportunity. Still, the importance of studying these relationships was predicated in the hope that improved relationships will result in increased stability, lower turnover rate of superintendents and reduced conflict, which could lead to a climate more conducive to innovation and reform, and as a result, benefit students and the schools. In the example of Reed, trust and transparency developed hand in hand with the community at large, addressing the larger deficit of trust by introducing more widespread, potential benefits, which included stakeholders. However, in Sycamore, the opposite effect occurred, in terms of actually discouraging large-scale community engagement. Further research could actually test the connections to these extended relationships and outcomes.

In the same vein, the recurring theme of “high trust” vs. “optimal trust” in a democratic body such as a public school governance team could be examined in more depth. When I began my preliminary research, as I was identifying, and narrowing the selection of my two cases, I was originally drawn to the polar opposite outliers, the very high trust teams and the very low trust teams. I ended up not selecting those teams, as the high trust teams operated more on organic or even blind trust and were not truly indicative of the ideal, in that they appeared to rubber stamp or automatically approve anything and everything the superintendent recommended without question or back-up documentation. There was a notable lack of information sharing, transparency, and rare instances of follow-up questions. Board members were not expected nor did they expect advance information for decisions and their attendance at meetings was sporadic. When present, they did not appear deeply engaged in the meetings, as demonstrated by arriving late, leaving early, being distracted by cell phones and texting throughout, and providing little or no commentary before a vote, which was always unanimously in favor of the superintendent’s recommendation. The low trust settings were interesting to observe, but difficult to study, as there was such little trust and so much turmoil and tension between the boards and superintendents, that they were hesitant to talk or say anything that could be construed as politically incorrect, misinterpreted, misquoted, slanderous or used against one another. In these incredibly chaotic settings, both superintendents lasted slightly more than one year in their positions, making it even more challenging to study retrospectively or over time. Research indicates that longevity and stability of both boards and superintendents promote trust, but it would be interesting to determine when/if there is an actual tipping point where the long-term, consistent and unchanged relationship becomes somewhat stagnant, insular, or promotes the status quo, which might not be ideal for risk-taking, innovation and reform, a climate in which educational systems thrive and strive to meet ever-changing demands.

My study barely touched on the dynamics and perceptions of power and increased depth of trust and relationship between the board president or other officers and the superintendent, as it wasn’t a critical factor to consider in my original inquiry. However, in the case of Sycamore, there were times when the board president, who had held the role for over a decade and outlasted two superintendents, initially took over some or shared the superintendent’s responsibilities such as onboarding and orienting new trustees or answering questions in preparation for the board meetings. In my pre-work and case selection, I identified other districts where there are impressions (or actual instances) of board presidents becoming over-empowered or functioning
as co-superintendents and that might be a power dynamic worth researching further. I know of one fairly recent example whereby in the Oakland Unified School District, when Superintendent Tony Smith resigned, the board president actually took over the role of acting/interim Superintendent until a suitable permanent replacement was found. The implications behind that decision and arrangement seem intriguing, particularly in how it relates to forging relations and trust building with the remaining board members.

There is a need for further study regarding training and professional development for prospective or seated superintendents and their boards in the area of trust building. Perhaps a design-study could be conducted that includes creation of facilitated training modules to assist superintendents and boards in arriving at shared agreements and codifying them. One of the districts I studied was well versed and experienced with CSBA formal training and that seemed to have some influence on their shared mindset and values, although not nearly as much as their superintendent’s example and reasoning. The other district relied on a homegrown guidebook of protocols and agreements. Since there didn’t seem to be a difference in outcome between formal and informal training or agreements, it might be valuable to determine interest and need for a training framework for superintendents and boards on the specific topic of “How to Build Relational Trust” with pre and post survey and self-assessments to measure actual impact and growth over a period of time.

Further research could also be conducted on strategies for building trust during the period of time that has been termed re-entry when a seated or veteran superintendent might want to reboot or revamp a waning, stressed or tested superintendent/board relationship. My study focused on pre-entry assessments, and an incoming superintendent trying to setup a brand new frame for interaction after his predecessor had left the position. It would likely take a different set of skills and unique strategies for the superintendent/board relationship to change and improve while the major players remain the same. The existing research indicates that a major breach of trust is something that is almost impossible to overcome (Covey, 2006; La Porte & Metlay, 1996; Six, 2005) and the superintendents I studied did not experience a severe transgression. That is not to say that an unstable relationship can’t be rebooted or enhanced with the right focus and purpose, though. A mid-course correction by a practicing superintendent who is experiencing tension might result in salvaging some previously doomed relationships. Based on my findings and research, I would hypothesize that in the event that relational trust is temporarily broken or damaged, it would be imperative that the superintendent admit responsibility, take initiative and implement crisis response strategies to remedy, repair and restore trust. According to Covey (2006), and as evidenced by the inherited conditions of the superintendents I interviewed, trust can be damaged through a variety of factors, including but not limited to: a conscious act of betrayal, poor judgment, an honest mistake, a failure of competence, or a simple misunderstanding or miscommunication. It is Covey’s (2006) opinion that violations of character (integrity or intent) are far more difficult to restore than a violation of competence (capabilities or results).

Although difficult, restoring relational trust can be accomplished by a conscious, deliberative effort that begins by first reflecting and confronting reality and failings or owning-up. The next logical steps would be working to re-establish respect and ensure transparency; utilizing any and all resources, including allies, witnesses and the formal evaluation process to right past wrongs; and providing ample opportunity for the board to save face and publicly agree, both symbolically and genuinely. I would venture to assert that it would be vital for the superintendent in such a situation to remain professional throughout and not react personally, and
to keep commitments and one’s word on every occasion. Attention to unifying acts and decisions to signify early, small wins, would be important first steps to begin to establish foundations for trust to take root. Certain tools, like agenda setting, scheduling and calendaring, could be used to reduce potential conflict and create opportunities for positive interaction and dialogue in both formal public and informal private settings. If such strategies were successfully implemented, it would most likely lead to less frequent turnover by superintendents. It would definitely be interesting to study superintendents who successfully repaired and eventually transformed relationships with their boards, midstream or mid-career. I find that research topic even more personally and professionally relevant and compelling at this point, as that is the stage where I am in my career, after just over six years as a superintendent.

**Closing Thoughts**

As a result of this study, I have clarified the pivotal role and impact of relational trust and how superintendents develop that trust with their boards to enhance relationships and facilitate governance team functionality. Essentially, when it comes to governance teams, “no confidence is a no win” (Superintendent S-1). I identified real and potential conditions, barriers and actions that can potentially hamper the development of relational trust. I uncovered the positive attributes characterized by a high-trust culture as well as possible drawbacks, and also surfaced the negative consequences of a low-trust culture, revealing its potentially stifling impact on a governance team, district or organization’s capacity for reform and positive public engagement. I outlined contextual conditions of politics, roles and power to be aware of and responsive to when team- and trust-building. I cited key superintendent strategies to foster trust building and promote efficacy and collaborative decision-making among a governance team. Finally, I drew conclusions from the facts and data I gathered in order to make general and specific recommendations for superintendents like myself, who seek to establish, build, maintain, sustain or restore relational trust. My findings, in conjunction with my examination of a body of pertinent research, constitute evidence that has allowed me to answer my initial inquiry questions and also inform future research and professional practice.
References


Crane, E. (2005, January). The effective school board: do whatever it takes to get your board to understand its role and to communicate civilly with each other. District Administration, retrieved March 6, 2009 from http://www.districtadministration.com/article/effective-school-board


**Appendix A: Data Collection Table and Timeline**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Collection Type</th>
<th>Timeline</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Location/Method</th>
<th>Protocol</th>
<th>Total #</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Case Selection:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District demographic data; Board and superintendent bio; press releases</td>
<td>April 2013 – July 2013</td>
<td>Select two districts that have moved from low to high trust with different political organizational context. Determine which superintendents are willing to participate who inherited poor board relations and now have a reputation for functionality and trust. Ensure school districts have experienced superintendent stability over a period of at least three years</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>District Context Data Collection (for each case):</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Document review: district mission and philosophy statements (publically available)</td>
<td>Sept - Oct. 2013</td>
<td>Understand district goals and how they are communicated to constituents, how they have changed over time.</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Document review: media releases, community or union position papers on political or organizational issues and challenges faced (publically available)</td>
<td>Sept – Oct. 2013</td>
<td>Understand political and organizational conditions that might influence development of relational trust. Note how they have changed over time.</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Document review: Audits, accountability, bond or parcel tax audits, other compliance or evaluative reports</td>
<td>Sept - Oct. 2013</td>
<td>Understand issues of accountability or oversight that might influence development of relational trust. Note how they have changed over time.</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Document review: referenced in interviews, norms, protocols, etc.</td>
<td>Sept 2013 – May 2014</td>
<td>Understand District progression from low to high-trust.</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Primary Data Collection – Interviews (for each case):</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>One interview (1.5 hrs.) with two key community member informants with historical/political perspective</td>
<td>Sept – Dec. 2013</td>
<td>Understand the context, historical key events and milestones that impacted trust relationship over time</td>
<td>District office in person</td>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two Interviews with Superintendent (2.0 hours each) + One follow-up, 1.5 hrs.)</td>
<td>Sept – Dec 2013</td>
<td>Understand the role of the superintendent in establishing and building relational trust and identify specific strategies used</td>
<td>District Office in person</td>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One interview with individual Board members (2.0 hours) + one follow-up;1.5 hrs.)</td>
<td>Sept – Dec 2013</td>
<td>Understand the change in governance team relations and dynamics and the Superintendent’s role in facilitating that change.</td>
<td>District Office in-person</td>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member-Check phone call with individual Board members (2.0 hours)</td>
<td>Sept – Oct 2013</td>
<td>Understand the climate of poor relations with prior governance team and identify examples for baseline/comparison purposes.</td>
<td>District Office in-person</td>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One Interview with Prior or Successor Superintendent (2.0 hours)</td>
<td>Sept – Oct 2013</td>
<td>Understand the climate of poor relations with prior governance team and identify critical incidents or examples for baseline/comparison purposes.</td>
<td>District Office in-person</td>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Secondary Data Collection – Observations (for each case):</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations of 2 Board meetings at the beginning of Supt. tenure or just prior with poor relations</td>
<td></td>
<td>To observe and analyze the dynamics of the board and superintendent interactions and relationship and establish baseline comparison. To observe political pressure and organizational context that may have influenced dynamics</td>
<td>Videotaped archives</td>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation of 3 Board meetings with current Supt and high trust relations</td>
<td></td>
<td>To observe and analyze the dynamics of the board and superintendent interactions and relationship and confirm interview perceptions. To observe political pressure and organizational context that influences dynamics. See supt. strategies in action.</td>
<td>District Board Room Live, and Taped</td>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total Number of Data Collection Events (excluding initial case selection):** 60
**Appendix B: Initial Codes**

Document Review, Board Member and Superintendent Interviews & Observations

**Symbols:**  
+ with any Code indicates trust enhancing, trust building factor  
- with any Code indicated trust reducing or trust diminishing factor

B = Baseline (prior to current superintendent hiring)  
P = Present Status

BM = Board Member  
BP = Board President  
VP = Vice President  
BC = Board Clerk  
SUP = Superintendent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>KEY INDICATORS / MEASURES:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RLT = Relational Trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- = Trust Diminishing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ = Trust Enhancing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OC = Organizational Context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OI = Organizational Issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CI = Critical Incident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MM = Micromanagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CM = Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PI = Personal Interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NV = Norms &amp; Values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SO = Socialization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IN = Interdependence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HR = Human Resource Practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CF = Cultural Factor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RF = Race Factor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GF = Gender Factor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IC = Inherited Context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC = Present Context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MO = Motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CN = Control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS = Power Struggle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PF = Political Factor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PP = Political Pressure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AP = Accountability Pressure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ST = Strategy to:  
RT = Restore Trust  
BT = Build Trust  
MT = Maintain Trust

BR = Breach of Trust  
MBR = Minor Breach  
FBR = Fatal Breach

RE = Reaction to Incident  
AC = Action of Leader  
TR = Trigger  
IR = Impact on Relationships  
EE = Evaluation of Event  
IS = Interpersonal Skill  
DE = Demographic Factor  
GD = Governance Team Dynamics  
CD = Cognitive Discernment  
EM = Emotion

BL = Body Language  
TT = Tone/Tenor  
FE = Facial Expression
Appendix C: District Document Review Protocol

District: ___________________________________________________________

Document Title: _______________________________________________________

Date on Document: _______________________________________________________

Author: ______________________________________________________________

Coding:

   Document Reviews – Establish Context – Baseline & Present

   AP = Academic Performance Status
   APP = Academic Performance Philosophy
   APD = Academic Performance Data
   APE = Academic Performance Expectation/Goal
   ISP = Interpersonal Skills Philosophy
   ISE = Interpersonal Skills Expectation
   DV = Racial/ethnic Diversity
   DVP = Racial/ethnic Diversity Philosophy
   DVS = Racial/ethnic Diversity Statistics
   DVE = Racial/ethnic Diversity Expectation/Goal
   DOC/DCA = District Organizational Challenge/Asset
   DCC/DCA = District Contextual Challenge/Asset

   SQ/D = Superintendent Qualities/Deficit
   Prior
   Desired
   Present
   SQ/D = Superintendent Skills/Deficit
   Prior
   Desired
   Present

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Page/Location</th>
<th>Reflective Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>


Appendix D: Demographic Background Data Form – Board Members

Pseudonym: (Pre-selected or Name Yourself) ________________

1. Gender: ______________

2. Age in years’ span:

21-29 30-39 40-49 50-59 60-69 70-79 80

3. Number of Years of Service on Board _____ Number of Terms on Board: _____

    Appointed or Elected? _______

4. Profession: ________________________________

5. Ethnicity: Circle one

    Black  White  Hispanic/Latino  Asian/Pacific Islander  Native American  Mixed/Other

6. Education Level: Please check the highest degree that you have obtained:

    High School  Bachelor’s  Master’s  Doctoral
Appendix E: Demographic Background Data Form – Superintendent

**Pseudonym:** (Pre-selected or Name Yourself) ________________

1. Gender: ______________

2. Age in years span:

   21-29   30-39   40-49   50-59   60-69   70-79   80+

3. Number of Years of Service as Superintendent of this District: __________
   Number of Years Remaining on Approved Contract: __________
   Anticipated Year of Retirement, if applicable: __________

4. Appointed to Position Unanimously? __ Internal or External Candidate? ______

5. Prior Leadership Roles in Education or in this District if applicable:
   ___________________________________________________________________

6. Ethnicity: (circle one)

   Black  White  Hispanic/Latino  Asian/Pacific Islander  Native American  Mixed/Other

7. **Education Level:** Please circle the highest degree that you have obtained:
   High School  Bachelor’s  Master’s  Doctoral: Focus of Study: ______________
Appendix F: Interview Protocol for School Board Members (former, current, successor)

Time of Interview: ____________

Date: ____________

Place: ____________

Interviewer: Kelly Bowers

Interviewee: ____________

Position of Interviewee: ________________

I. Background Questions:

• How long have you been /were you a school board member?
• If no longer on the board, why did you leave service?
• Have you ever worked as a school administrator or as superintendent in this or any other school district? If so, provide summary details, (title, number of years). If so, describe how that role differs from your board member role.
• Why did you initially decide to run for a position on the board? Did you have a specific agenda or platform during your campaign? If so, please explain.
• In this era of public accountability, board members must answer to their constituents and the superintendent must answer to the board. What does accountability mean to you? As a board member, how do you see your role as an elected official in “holding the superintendent accountable”?
• Please describe any power dynamic or power struggle associated with interactions on the board.
• What specific expertise or unique perspectives and skills do you think you bring to your role as a board member?
II. Interview Questions:

A. Board and Superintendent Relations

• Are you or have you served as an officer of the board? (President, Vice President, Clerk), and if so, how do you think that position affects or changes your relationship with your fellow board members and/or the superintendent?
• Do you have agreed upon norms and values under which you operate? What are they? How were these established? Do you and other board members adhere to them? What action is taken if someone does not adhere to them? Please provide a specific example.
• How would you describe or rate the current board and superintendent relations in terms of healthiness, functionality, confidence, transparency, etc.? Please give me an example to illustrate.
• How does the current status of relations compare to that of previous superintendents/boards?
• Please describe any change or improvement in overall governance team relations over time. To what do you attribute the change? Please provide specific examples of how it is different or to demonstrate how the relationships have improved.

B. Superintendent Selection: Desired Skills, Political/Organizational Context

• I’m interested in your role in selecting or hiring the current Superintendent. Were you part of that process? If so, please describe the recruitment and selection process you went through prior to hiring. What type of criteria or process did you use? Were there any specific interpersonal qualities you felt were important? (e.g., integrity, trustworthiness, etc.) Were there any qualities that you were seeking that may have been lacking under previous leadership?
• Were there any political forces or considerations (internal or external) that influenced the hiring process and selection? Was gender or race a factor during the selection process? Please explain.
• Were there any political issues that were challenging that the current superintendent inherited? Have they been addressed or resolved, and if so, how?
• In the age of accountability, school boards and superintendents are often under intense public scrutiny or “under the microscope.” Topics of concern are often test scores and student achievement, closing the achievement gap, equity, fiscal or legal issues, transparency, teacher evaluation and dismissal, or pensions. Are there any watchdog groups in your community or individuals who have been skeptical or mistrustful of the district’s direction under past or current leadership? How are these situations handled or mitigated? What has been the superintendent’s role or response?
• Were there any unique organizational conditions or challenges that the current superintendent inherited that he was expected to resolve? (unions, quality of staff, efficiencies, etc.) What was the general culture or climate in terms of morale, collaboration, openness to change, communication, and transparency? Has there been improvement in these areas, and if so, please describe the transformation and the Superintendent’s role in the change.
C. Preparation and Training

- Prior to serving on the board, what training, experience or preparation did you have that prepared you for public governance and working with fellow Board members and the Superintendent?
- What supports did you have / need / wish you had to support your collective work?
- What type of training (formal or informal) have you since received to support your role as a board member and support your relationship building with the superintendent? In what ways have you noticed improvement, if any? In what areas would you benefit from additional support or training?

D. Governance Team Dynamics

- How were you oriented into this governance team? Please describe.
- What are some interactions with this or a prior superintendent or other board members that you have had as a board member that are memorable? What makes them memorable?
- I’d like to hear about a particularly challenging, politically controversial or complex issue in which you have had to deal with the superintendent (prior or current). How did you ultimately handle this? Describe the process and outcome.
- Have there ever been issues of control, power struggles, mini-alliances or voting blocs within your governance team? Please provide concrete examples.
- Do you generally vote for the current superintendent’s recommendations? Explain your rationale and considerations.
- Have you ever voted against a superintendent’s recommendation? (prior or current) Tell me about it.
- Tell me about a time when you think you mistrusted or doubted the superintendent? (prior or current) What were the circumstances? How did you handle it? How did he respond? What might you have done differently now, in hindsight?
- As a board member, sometimes you are expected to cast a vote when 100% of the facts aren't available. Tell me about a time when you were faced with that type of situation. Did you involve the superintendent? How did you approach it? Were you able to access necessary information to make an informed decision? What role did the superintendent play? How did you finally cast a vote?
- Many superintendents are concerned that board members tend to “micro manage.” What does board micro-managing mean to you or look like in practice, and when might it be warranted?
- Often board members mention the importance of “confidence” or “trust” relative to decision-making, specifically “trust” in the superintendent, senior staff, and/or the validity of the data presented. Please explain what “trust” or confidence means to you in your role.

E. Relational Trust

- What are the specific skills and traits needed by a leader/superintendent to establish trust with the board, constituents, etc.?
- How often do you interact with or communicate directly with the superintendent? (frequency, number of hours per week). Please breakdown and estimate the percentage of this time spent (one-on-one/face to face, phone, board meetings,
study sessions, small group/pairs, email). Please indicate if it is daily, weekly, bi-weekly, as needed, and whether or not it is formal or informal. Please describe purpose, tone and tenor of interactions and communications.

- Do you socialize or interact outside of work or your formal roles with the superintendent or other board members? Please explain. Why or why not?
- In what ways and areas does the superintendent demonstrate competence in his multi-faceted role? Give some examples where you have faith and confidence in his ability to carry out his duties and responsibilities and when you may have had some doubt.
- As CEO, the superintendent is responsible for overseeing all divisions, e.g., curriculum and educational services, fiscal services, facilities, maintenance and operations, human resources, technology, special education, etc. How might a superintendent show competence in multiple areas?
- What does respect mean to you? What would /does that look like in a superintendent?
- What does integrity mean to you? What would / does that look like in a superintendent?
- What does personal regard or benevolence mean to you? What would /does that look like in a superintendent? (For example, caring about you as a person and about your opinion, contribution and role, showing kindness, care or empathy, as well as for others?)
- Are there any cultural or ethnic differences between board members or the superintendent or the superintendent and the community at-large, which needed to be overcome to establish and build trust? Please elaborate.
- Has there ever been a breach of trust among the governance team during your tenure (prior or current)? Please describe the instance, the severity (minor, major), and how it was repaired, or not.
- What role does transparency play in superintendent/board relations? Explain.
- Looking back, please describe any upward change in trust levels that has occurred during your tenure as a board member. To what do you attribute this change? What actions, specifically, has the superintendent taken to help bring about this change? Is there anything you wish or think he could or should have done differently to accelerate the change or make it more permanent?

F. Trust-Enhancing Actions

- Research suggests that trust can be enhanced in organizational contexts by certain actions of a leader. What do you think the superintendent has done to enhance trust within the organization, with the board and/or with community stakeholders (students, parents, staff)? Tell me about a time when the superintendent acted in such a way:
  - He was open
  - He shared influence
  - He delegated responsibility
  - He managed mutual expectations
- In your opinion, what is the secret to this superintendent’s success? What makes
this superintendent trustworthy? How has he earned and sustained your trust and confidence over the years?

G. Closing Reflection

• Given your respective roles and responsibilities, please describe the ideal relationship and dynamics between a board and superintendent.
• What analogy or metaphor would you use to describe the relationship and dynamics of your current board and your board / superintendent relationship. (When we are together, we are like a. ........And the superintendent is like…) Please elaborate if possible.
• Based on your experiences, do you have any advice or other board members or superintendents who may be struggling to cultivate relational trust and improve governance team relations?
• We have covered quite a bit of information and I appreciate your candor and reflection. Is there anything else that you would like to say, clarify, share, or add to any of the topics we covered?
Appendix G: Interview Protocol for Superintendents (former, current, successor)

Time of Interview: ___________________

Date: ______________________________

Place: _____________________________

Interviewer:  Kelly Bowers

Interviewee: ________________________

Position of Interviewee: _____________

I. Background Questions:
   • How long have you been/were you a superintendent in this district?
   • Why did you choose this profession? What appealed to you about this district?
   • Have you ever worked as superintendent in any other school district? If so, what prompted you to leave that position? Please provide summary details. Please describe how that role or responsibility differs from current role.
   • Why did you initially decide to accept this position? Did you have a specific agenda or goals which you or the board set out for you to accomplish? If so, please explain.
   • In this era of public accountability, board members must answer to their constituents and the superintendent must answer to the board. What does accountability mean to you? As a superintendent, how do you hold yourself and others accountable for carrying out the district’s mission?
   • Describe the balance of power or power dynamic within the governance team.
   • What specific expertise or unique perspectives and skills do you think you bring to your role as a superintendent?
II. Interview Questions:

A. Board and Superintendent Relations
   - Describe your relationship with your current board members as individuals. Describe if or how the relationship differs with those who hold office (President, Vice President),
   - Do you have agreed upon norms and values under which you operate? What are they? How were these established? Do you and your board members adhere to them? What action is taken if someone does not adhere to them? Please provide a specific example.
   - How would you describe or rate the current superintendent/board relationship in terms of healthiness, functionality, confidence, transparency, etc.? Please give me an example to illustrate.
   - In your experience or understanding, how does the current status of relations compare to that of previous superintendents/boards? Other superintendents/boards in surrounding districts or in your prior professional experience?
   - Please describe any change or improvement in overall governance team relations during your tenure. To what do you attribute the change? Please provide specific examples of how it is different or to demonstrate how the relationships have improved.
   - Please describe any change or improvement in overall governance team relations over time. To what do you attribute the change? Please provide specific examples of how it is different or to demonstrate how the relationships have improved.
   - What specific role did you play in any change?

B. Desired Skills, Inherited Political & Organizational Context
   - I’m interested in the type of district and political context you inherited when you were hired. What type of superintendent was the board and community seeking? What interpersonal skills or professional expertise were valued?
   - Please describe the recruitment and selection process you went through prior to being hired. Were you aware of any specific challenges or areas of concern that you would be expected to address as superintendent?
   - In your opinion, were there any political forces or considerations (internal or external) that influenced the hiring process and selection? Was gender or race a factor during the selection process? How involved were others beyond the board in the process? Please explain.
   - Were there any political issues that were particularly challenging that you inherited? Have they been addressed or resolved, and if so, how? What political issues are brewing currently in your district and how do they manifest?
   - In the age of accountability, superintendents and school boards are often under intense public scrutiny or “under the microscope.” Topics of concern are often test scores and student achievement, closing the achievement gap, equity, fiscal or legal issues, transparency, teacher evaluation and dismissal, or pensions. Are there any watchdog groups in your community or individuals who have been skeptical or mistrustful of the district’s direction under prior or your leadership? How have you handled or mitigated these situations? What has been your role and response?
• Were there any unique organizational conditions or challenges you inherited that you have been expected to resolve? (unions, quality of staff, efficiencies, etc.) What was the general culture or climate in terms of morale, collaboration, openness to change, communication, and transparency when you first were hired? Has there been improvement in these areas, and if so, please describe the transformation and your specific role in any changes. Please describe any setbacks or remaining concerns in these areas.

C. Preparation and Training
• Prior to serving as superintendent, what informal or formal training, experience or preparation did you have that prepared you initially for this role and for working amicably with your school board?
• What supports did you have / need / wish you had to support your collective work and relationship building?
• What types of training (formal or informal) have you since received to support your role as superintendent and support your relationship building with the board? In what ways have you noticed improvement, if any? In what areas would you or they benefit from additional support or training?

C. Governance Team Dynamics
• How were you oriented into this governance team? Please describe.
• What are some interactions with this board as a whole, or with individual board members that you have had as superintendent that are memorable? What makes them memorable?
• Have you ever experienced “boundary” issues with your board? If so, please explain.
• I’d like to hear about a particularly challenging, politically controversial or complex issue in which you have had to deal with the board (prior or current). How did you ultimately handle this? Describe the process and outcome.
• Have there ever been issues of control, power struggles, mini-alliances or voting blocs within your governance team? Please provide some concrete examples.
• As a matter of protocol, does your board always expect you to make a recommendation prior to board action or vote? Does your board generally vote in favor of your superintendent’s recommendations? Why or why not? To what do you attribute their approval or their denial?
• Tell me about a split vote, a controversial vote, or a vote against your Superintendent’s recommendation? Were you surprised? How did you respond? Were there any lasting ramifications?
• Have you ever felt blindsided by your board? Explain and provide an example, if possible.
• Can you tell me about a time when you think the board may have mistrusted or doubted the prior superintendent or yourself/staff? What were the circumstances? How did you handle it? How did they respond? What might you have done differently now, in hindsight?
• What protocols do you have in place provide the board with necessary information so that they can make informed decisions? What is your role in providing information?
• Many superintendents are concerned that board members tend to “micromanage.”
What does board micromanaging mean to you or look like in practice, and how do
you prevent it?
• Many board members mention the importance of “confidence” or “trust” relative
to decision-making, specifically “trust” in the superintendent, senior staff, and/or
the validity of the data presented. Please explain what “trust” or confidence means
to you in your role.

E. Relational Trust
• In your opinion, what are the specific skills and traits that you need and draw upon
as a leader/superintendent to establish trust with the board, constituents, etc.?
• How often do you interact with or communicate directly with your board members?
(frequency, number of hours per week). Please breakdown and estimate the
percentage of this time spent (one-on-one/face to face, phone, board meetings,
study sessions, small group/pairs, email). Please indicate if it is daily, weekly, bi-
weekly, as needed, and whether or not it is formal or informal. Please describe the
purpose, tone and tenor of these interactions and communications.
• Do you socialize or interact outside of work or your formal roles with the Board
members? Please explain. Why or why not?
• What does competence in one’s professional role mean to you? How does it affect
your opinion of someone? Do you think there is a difference between “intention”
and “execution” when it comes to competence? Explain your thinking.
• How do you demonstrate competence in your multi-faceted role? Give some
examples where, even if first doubted, you have instilled faith and confidence in
your ability to carry out his duties and responsibilities.
• As CEO, the superintendent is responsible for overseeing all divisions, e.g.,
curriculum and educational services, fiscal services, facilities, maintenance and
operations, human resources, technology, special education, etc. Are there some
areas where you have more expertise or confidence? Please describe those areas. In
areas outside of your specialty, how do you compensate for or convince the board
of your ability to oversee all facets of the organization?
• What does respect mean to you? What steps or strategies have you taken as
superintendent to earn and establish respect with the board and others? Please
elaborate with specific instances, if possible.
• What does integrity mean to you? In your day to day, how do you demonstrate that
you are a person of integrity (aligning words and actions, consistently doing what
you say you will do)? Be specific with examples, if possible.
• What does personal regard or benevolence mean to you? How do you exhibit
personal regard for the board (showing kindness, care or empathy), as well as for
others? Please provide specific examples.
• Were there any cultural or ethnic differences between you and your board members
and the community at-large, which needed to be overcome to establish and build
trust? Please elaborate.
• Has there ever been a breach of trust between the board and you? (prior or current).
Please describe the instance, the severity (minor, major), and how it was repaired,
or not.
• In your opinion, are you transparent about processes, decisions, issues, and results? What areas of your job do you not share with the board publicly, or at all? Explain.
• Looking back, please describe any upward change in trust levels that has occurred during your tenure as superintendent. To what do you attribute this change? What actions, specifically, have you taken to help bring about this change? In hindsight, is there anything you wish or think you could or should have done differently to accelerate the change or make it more permanent?

F. Trust-Enhancing Actions
• Research suggests that trust can be enhanced in organizational contexts by certain actions of a leader. What do you think you have done to enhance trust within the organization, with your board and/or with community stakeholders (students, parents, staff)? Tell me about a time when you:
  o Were open
  o Shared influence
  o Delegated responsibility
  o Managed mutual expectations
• In your opinion, what is the secret to your success? Do you think your board has confidence and trust in you? Why or why not? How have you strived to earn and sustain trust and confidence over the years?

G. Closing Reflection
• Given your respective roles and responsibilities, please describe the ideal relationship and dynamics between a superintendent and the board.
• What analogy or metaphor would you use to describe the relationship and dynamics of your current board and your superintendent/board relationship? (When we are together, we are like a. ……..And my role is like…) Please elaborate if possible.
• Based on your experiences, do you have any advice for other superintendents or board members who may be struggling to cultivate relational trust and improve governance team relations?
• We have covered quite a bit of information and I appreciate your candor and reflection. Is there anything else that you would like to say, clarify, share, or add to any of the topics we covered?
Appendix H: Interview Protocol for Key Community Members

Time of Interview: ____________
Date: ____________
Place: ____________

Interviewer: Kelly Bowers
Interviewee: ____________

Position of Interviewee: ____________

II. Background Questions:

• How long have you been part of the community serviced by this school district?
• Describe the nature of your affiliation with and your level of involvement with school district happenings over the years.
• What unique perspectives or biases do you think you have as a longtime community member?
II. Interview Questions:

A. Board and Superintendent Relations

• How often have you attended board meetings in this district? Describe the tone and tenor of the interactions between the board and superintendent(s) that you have witnessed in the public board arena.
• How would you describe or rate the current board and superintendent relations in terms of healthiness, functionality, confidence, transparency, etc.? Please give me an example to illustrate.
• How does the current status of relations compare to that of previous superintendents/boards?
• Please describe any change or improvement in overall governance team relations over time. To what do you attribute the change? Please provide specific examples of how it is different or to demonstrate how the relationships have improved.

B. Historical/Political/Organizational Context

• I'm interested in hearing about a few critical and key historical community issues or district-related decisions that are especially memorable. What makes them memorable? Explain.
• Please describe any politically hot-button issues that the board and superintendent have grappled with in recent years.
• If you know of any major organizational challenges faced by this district and district leadership over the years, please describe and provide details.
• Describe the support or constituent power base within the community, of the different governance team members.

C. Relational Trust

• What are the specific skills and traits needed by a leader/superintendent to establish trust with the board, community constituents, etc.?
• What does professional competence mean to you? How might a superintendent show competence in multiple areas?
• What does respect mean to you? What would /does that look like in a Superintendent?
• What does integrity mean to you? What would / does that look like in a Superintendent?
• What does personal regard or benevolence mean to you? What would /does that look like in a Superintendent?
• Are you aware of any cultural or ethnic differences between board members or the superintendent or the superintendent and the community at-large, which needed to be overcome to establish and build trust? Please elaborate.
• Do you know of any breach of trust among the governance team? Please describe the instance, the severity (minor, major), and how it was repaired, or not.
• What role does transparency play in superintendent/board relations? Explain.
• Looking back, please describe any change in trust levels over the years with this governance team. To what do you attribute this change? Where there any key turning points or critical events?
G. Closing Reflection

- Given your experiences in observing this governance team and board/superintendent interactions, please describe the ideal relationship and dynamics between a board and superintendent.

- What analogy or metaphor would you use to describe the relationship and dynamics of the board and the board/superintendent relationship? (When they are together, they are like a … and the superintendent is like….) Please elaborate if possible.

- We have covered quite a bit of information and I appreciate your candor and reflection. Is there anything else that you would like to say, clarify, share, or add to any of the topics we covered?
**Appendix I: Low-Inference Observation Protocol Specific Agenda Item / Decision**

**Specific Agenda Item / Decision:** __________________________________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decision Focus Area</th>
<th>Decision Category</th>
<th>Source Who Introduces &amp; Presents</th>
<th>Method of Intro &amp; Presentation</th>
<th>Board Decision Making Process</th>
<th>Input / Influence (Tally)</th>
<th>Outcome of decision</th>
<th>Tenor of discussion</th>
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<td>Supt.</td>
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<td>Agree w/ Supt.</td>
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**Appendix J: Structured Observation Protocol Instrument**

**Specific Agenda Item / Decision:** ________________________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements Comments, Questions</th>
<th>Observations: body language, tone, facial expression</th>
<th>Indicator of Competence, Respect, Integrity, Personal Regard</th>
<th>Reflection Analysis</th>
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<td>Board Member A, V</td>
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<td>Board Member B, W</td>
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Appendix K: Matrix to Record Trust Enhancing or Trust Detracting Factors

How do different factors influence or affect the governance team dynamics (interactions, behaviors, relationship, and voting outcomes?) Increase or decrease trust (+ or -)

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<th>Evidence</th>
<th>Evidence</th>
<th>Evidence</th>
<th>Evidence</th>
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<td>Influences (External)</td>
<td>Speaker, Public</td>
<td>Correspondence, Audience, Political/ Organizational/ Interpersonal</td>
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<td>Staff, Superintendent, Board, Political/ Organizational/</td>
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<td>Requests/Needs (data, info, impact, goal; confidence; trust)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Processes (weigh pros/ cons; Supt. or staff Recommendation; debate, lobby, research; discuss)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Role concept (mediate; challenge; monitor; micromanage; innovator; hold accountable; public conscience; community advocate)</td>
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<td>Actions (?, !) (Ask questions; make motions; protocol; advocate; lobby)</td>
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<td>Support Supt., No, Other</td>
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Appendix L: Diagram of Board Meeting Room
Appendix M: Follow-up to Interview / Member Check (Sample)

Dear Board Member/Superintendent:

Thank you again for participating in my research project and interview on Superintendent and Board Relations and Trust-Building. I have accumulated a very rich set of data through observation, interview and document analysis.

As a follow-up, I have a few additional questions regarding topics that were touched upon by you and/or other interviewees that will help me to further develop my conceptual understanding of how relational trust has been cultivated and maintained, and how the Superintendent may have influenced that change. Please respond over the next few days via email, if convenient; or if you prefer, we could discuss on the phone.

Please respond only if you are comfortable doing so. Your responses will be kept in the strictest confidence and you will not be identified by name or district in my final write-up or dissertation.

Thank you for your time and insight.

Regards,

Kelly Bowers
Superintendent of Schools
Livermore Valley Joint Unified School District