



AGENCY AND TRUST: WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE IN ACTION

At Astra, we believe that strong relationships—what we call Radically Reimagined Relationships—are the foundation of a healthy school culture, engagement, and achievement. In schools that put Radically Reimagined Relationships at the center, we see evidence of five indicators: Culture of Belonging and Well-Being; Dispositions of Humility, Care, and Curiosity; Commitment to Equity and Justice; Shared Purpose and Responsibility; and Agency and Trust.

WHY AGENCY AND TRUST?

When learning is driven by student agency—students’ ability to express their interests and opinions, and make choices about what and how they will learn—their motivation, engagement, and self-assurance all increase. What’s more, when school staff members have real agency to design learning experiences that address their students’ needs and interests and the ability to drive their own professional learning, their engagement increases as well. Mike Chalupa, director of the City Neighbors Foundation, which operates three public charter schools in Baltimore, MD, says, “I don’t know how you have engagement-based learning for kids without engagement-based teaching for adults. I don’t think you can.”

In schools where agency is prioritized, students and teachers have real responsibility, make important decisions, experiment, take risks, and return home each day knowing that they engaged in meaningful work.

Agency enables each member of the school community to leverage their unique skills and strengths for their own benefit and for the greater good. This requires a high degree of trust and respect as well as a common understanding of the school’s shared goals and norms. Teachers trust students to act with a greater degree of autonomy, in keeping with their age and abilities, and the teacher’s role shifts to emphasize instructional design, coaching, and facilitation. School leaders trust teachers’ professional judgment and skill.

Research shows that trust in schools among staff and students correlates positively with student performance. When students trust their teachers and principals, they’re also less likely to have behavior issues. These findings hold true regardless of students’ socioeconomic status or school size.¹

The benefits are collective and individual. Ruben is a senior at Blackstone Academy Public Charter School in Pawtucket, RI, which serves 356 high school students. He told us that Blackstone has prepared him for life after high school because it’s taught him personal accountability, with so many

1 See Romero, L.S. (2015). Trust, behavior, and high school outcomes. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 53(2), 215-236. Also Handford, V. (2011). Why teachers trust school leaders. (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation). University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada.

supports in place, he explains, students run out of excuses when they fail to succeed. “I’ve learned how to advocate and look for resources on my own, instead of finding an external reason for things that go wrong.”

WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE IN ACTION?

At Harvest Collegiate High School, a public high school in New York City, the school’s 457 students can choose from a variety of offerings that satisfy core course requirements. Social studies teacher Steve Lazar told us, “There isn’t a 9th grade English class. We have five different lower house English classes. And by the time you’re a senior, you’re picking your entire schedule.” What’s more, students at the school, not their teachers, determine whether they want to challenge themselves with honors courses. Each class has the opportunity for honors work, and, when students indicate that they want additional challenge, teachers respond by sharing work and opportunities that then can be appropriately scaffolded for each student.

At Parker Charter Essential School in Devens, MA, students drive their own progression through grade levels. The school uses mastery-based progression to move its 395 students from Division 1 (roughly grades 7 and 8) through Division 3 (roughly grades 11-12). In Parker’s performance-based promotion system, students usually take four semesters per division, but students can move at a pace that’s appropriate to them, sometimes advancing more quickly in certain subjects (for example, math/science/technology) and more slowly in others. Gateway portfolios “make the case” for promotion to the next level and are featured at public exhibitions of the student’s work. Portfolios typically include multiple examples of high-quality student work products, accompanying feedback and rubrics, and a reflective cover letter. Matt, a senior at the school, praised the system because “every student has control over their own learning. I can take as much time to master the curriculum as I need.”

“Agency” for school staff is often equated with teacher leadership, in which some select number of teachers are empowered to take on hybrid roles related to instructional coaching, professional learning, social-emotional learning, or other functions. This is one way to think about agency, but many of the schools we visited are taking a broader and deeper approach by creating a culture that gives all teachers agency, encourages collaboration, and trusts all teachers to take on different kinds of leadership roles. Research suggests that this approach correlates positively to collective efficacy and trust within a school.

At Harvest Collegiate, teachers take on a number of hybrid roles within the school, including professional learning community leaders, health and wellness leaders, and curriculum developers. The school has built in release time

and compensation structures to enable these teachers to work with their colleagues. The teacher workspace at the school accommodates this as well: all teacher desks are housed together in one big workroom so that teachers can troubleshoot issues and share ideas.

This workroom is often where individual teachers create new courses and solicit feedback on those course ideas from their colleagues; teachers at Harvest Collegiate are encouraged to develop courses that reflect their passions and expertise as well as interests voiced by their students. Social studies teacher Steve Lazar noted, “We ask teachers, ‘What’s the most successful unit you’ve ever taught?’ and then we say, ‘Great, make that a course. Turn that into a semester class.’ Because we’re building on teacher strength and teacher’s past experiences, that leads to teachers doing things that work for students.” Additionally, teachers who want to pursue advanced degrees and other career development opportunities are released from school to be able to do that.

We also saw teacher agency at Fall Creek Middle School, a public school of 187 students in Fall Creek, WI. When teachers there approached their principal and superintendent about implementing project-based learning (PBL), they had the administrators’ full support—including adjustments to the school schedule to accommodate it. “I can’t think of a time when I took a risk and wish I hadn’t,” said sixth grade teacher Toby Jacobson.

Jacobson and his colleague David Ross received encouragement from Brad LaPoint, their principal, to make PBL the focus of their professional learning through a district-wide system that encourages teachers’ individual goal setting. Other teachers identified professional learning goals related to growth mindset, reading strategies, special education connection with families, and more; the program culminates in a “Goal Day” street fair where teachers share what they’ve learned. Jacobson reflected, “This culture really took off in the last three years. In the first couple years, there was more focus from the staff on getting through the process. Now it’s more like people take it on themselves, asking ‘How am I going to get better this year?’”



Students at Fall Creek Middle School explore winter survival skills in a project-based learning unit.

Principals and other school leaders are key players in establishing and maintaining a culture of agency and trust. Principals new to a school may encounter an existing culture of mistrust, poor relationships with principals in the past, and challenges related to cultural and racial differences with teachers. Improvement requires frequent collaboration with teachers, remaining approachable and involved in the life of the school, open communication, and a public and sustained commitment to creating a culture of trust.² Jim Jensen, principal at the East Lee Campus, an alternative public school serving 103 students in Wyoming, MI, observes, “My personal take--and it’s changed through the years--is that people don’t remember what you did for them but how you affect them. My staff believes that. When I hear people’s stories, that connects me to them. I’ve worked hard on effective communication, verbal and nonverbal.

QUICK TIPS

1. As a school staff, identify shared needs and create roles that address those needs. Ensure that staff members have protected time, physical space, and other necessary resources to carry out these roles, working individually and collaboratively.
2. Make sure your school’s performance evaluation process is closely tied to professional development planning. Facilitate teachers’ ability to pursue professional learning that addresses identified, individual areas for growth and matches their professional interests.
3. Identify ways to give students more control over what they’re learning, how they’re learning it, and how they’re demonstrating mastery and moving through the system.

RESOURCES

Jane Madoono: [The Trust Factor](#). Article from EL’s Lifting School Leaders, May 2017.

Emily Kaplan: [Trust Teachers—They’re the Experts](#). Edutopia Interview with Ted Dintersmith, March 2019.

Heather Wolpert-Gawron: [What Giving Students Choice Looks Like in the Classroom](#). Article from MindShift, November 2018.

For additional resources, please visit our [Resource Library](#).

² Kutsyruba, B., Walker, K., & Noonan, B. (2010). The ecology of trust in the principalship. *Journal of Educational Administration and Foundations*, 21(1), 23-47.

ABOUT ASTRA CENTER FOR INNOVATIVE EDUCATION

The Astra Center for Innovative Education affirms the critical role that relationships play in learning environments. We promote educational models that demonstrate Radically Reimagined Relationships - a commitment to creating and sustaining genuine, thoughtful, and meaningful connections between and among students, staff, and families in an environment of equity and racial justice. Our work centers around researching schools and school models, reporting on the impact of relationship-building, engaging schools and like-minded organizations that share this philosophy, and working directly with schools to build capacity. Learn more about our work at www.astrafoundation.org/center-for-innovative-education.

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On the cover: A student at Blackstone Academy Charter School in Pawtucket, RI, gets a chance to explore careers through internships, job shadowing, and community partnerships. Photo courtesy of BACS, one of the schools featured in Astra's Radically Reimagined Relationships report.

