



Power of Trust

Research project finds building trust plays a central role in research use

Deb Gurke, WASB director of Governance and Leadership Development, presented findings from a two-year project conducted in collaboration with researchers from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The project, known as REDD (Research on Education, Deliberation, and Decision-Making), was funded by the William T. Grant Foundation, which supports research to improve the lives of young people.

In the first year of the project, the research team attended a total of 160 school board meetings at three medium-sized school districts.

The second year, they interviewed 30 board members and administrative staff that were central to those meetings.

Initial analysis revealed that school board members use six different types of evidence in their deliberations – examples, experience, data, testimony, research, and law and policy. Examples and experience were the most used types of evidence and Gurke said, “That makes sense. School board members would think that’s important because you need to consider the perceptions of your community if you want to keep your board seat.” So, research is more likely to be taken up when it aligns with what school board members

Session Details

TITLE Research on Education, Deliberation, and Decision-Making

PRESENTER Deb Gurke, director, WASB Governance and Leadership Development

learn from other types of evidence, primarily examples and experience.

One of the most revealing findings of the REDD project is that it greatly matters who is sharing the research. Factors such as educational training and presentation style of the person presenting the research affect the receptivity of the audience.

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— Deb Gurke

"A presentation can be data-rich, but if the speaker doesn't connect with the audience, it doesn't matter how much research he has have to back up his position," Gurke said.

Similarly, the context in which school boards use research affects how it is received. A group of educators presenting a new program to the board are more likely to use data and research to make their case, based on their professional status than community members who will bring a wider array of evidence types to a discussion. This can make it difficult for the board to make decisions as there will be less agreement on what counts as evidence in the public arena.

Importance of Trust

Ultimately, if an audience doesn't trust the person communicating the research, the quality of the research doesn't matter. Therefore, Gurke said, building trust is one of the most important things a school board can do.

"When you build trust, you get social capital and social capital, unlike financial capital, is infinite," Gurke said. "You can keep building it and building it."

Gurke shared some enlightening statistics. In his book, *The Speed of Trust*, author Stephen Covey cited research that showed companies with high levels of trust have a return to shareholders three times higher than

companies with low levels of trust. Trust matters in schools as well. It was found that schools with high trust have a 50 percent chance of closing the achievement gap. Schools with low trust have only a 14 percent chance. So, trust is more than just a nice thing to have, it actually breeds results.

While we are used to advocating for our positions, trying to prove our points with reams of evidence, we may get farther working to build social capital. "At the end of the day, its may be more important to work to prove you are trustworthy than to prove you are right," Gurke said. ■

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