EDUCATIONAL DISTRUST IS EVERYWHERE. HERE'S WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT

We live in distrustful times. These are times in which school shooting victims are accused of being "crisis actors" who "faked" their tragedy for political gain, in which people with different political opinions believe entirely different sets of "facts." Like nearly every societal trend, this one has spilled over into the school system. In her new book, *Distrust and Educational Change*, NEPC Fellow Katherine Schultz examines how our mutual skepticism erects barriers to meaningful, just, and lasting improvements to our nation's schools. Schultz is the Dean of the School of Education at the University of Colorado Boulder, and the book draws upon her experiences as a scholar, a teacher, and an activist. It explores the relational, structural, and historic dimensions of distrust.

Distrust often generates more distrust, such as when policymakers who distrust local educators' ability to judge student progress introduce high-stakes tests that, in turn, generate more distrust from the teachers and students who prepare and sit for the exams. Other undesirable outcomes of distrust include relational distrust that generates leadership churn in high-poverty school districts, or top-down reform efforts that fall short because of the lack of buy-in from the people who experience them and carry them out.

All of this sounds very grim. And it is. Yet Schultz concludes on an optimistic note by recommending ways that policymakers and educators can attain better outcomes by working to restore educational trust:

1. **Trust Teacher Expertise**: Shultz describes the Philadelphia Teachers Learning Cooperative, a group of educators who have met weekly at each other's houses since the 1970s, using inquiry-based practices to deepen their understanding of their students by delving into children's strengths and interests. Unlike much top-down professional development, groups created for and by teachers foster the development of trust,

whether they focus on teaching or learning or policy or activism.

2. **Trust the Community**: Schultz juxtaposes the reform narratives in two New Jersey cities: Newark and nearby Union City. In Newark, chaos was the outcome of efforts led by then-mayor, now-Senator (and presidential candidate) Cory Booker and bank-rolled by a $100 million donation from Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg. As leaders imposed top-down changes that did not work for the community, they frittered away money on external consultants with little knowledge of the city. By contrast, Union City's slower, bottom-up reforms built on the community's needs and strengths, investing in programs like preschool and native-language instruction. The district met the original objective of the reform's catalyst—the threat of state takeover—as Newark spent decades under state control.

3. **Trust the Dignity and Capabilities of Students**: Trust accrues when schools build on students' strengths rather than focusing on their deficits. For example, during the Civil Rights Movement, Freedom Schools empowered African Americans by teaching strategies such as resistance and protest. In their current iteration, these summer schools build on students' strengths by providing high-quality academic enrichment, family engagement, opportunities for social/civic engagement, intergenerational leadership development, and health education, all in a culturally relevant manner. Similarly, the evidence-based community schools model builds trust by honoring students' experiences and strengths with approaches such as student-led walks through the community.

Click here for NEPC's podcast interview with Dr. Schultz about *Distrust in Educational Change*.

NEPC Resources on School Reform and Restructuring