

## Early Research on *Leading Together*

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There is an old parable about a confused man looking beneath a lamppost for his keys. Along comes a kind person who offers to help. After a few minutes of looking together, the kind person asks, "Are you sure that you lost your keys here?" The confused man says, "No, I lost them over there in the park," to which the kind person says, "Well, then why are you looking for your keys here?" The confused man answers, "I'm looking here because this is where the light is!"

As we reflect upon education policy and programs in the U.S. over the past 15 years, we see some similarities to this parable. National and state efforts to improve the quality of schools tend to focus on issues that are easy to count, easy to measure and (relatively) easy to regulate. Consider the focus on implementing specific math or reading curricula, establishing new systems for measuring teacher effectiveness, or making time in the school schedule for remediating students who are below grade level. These are, indeed, critical initiatives. Student achievement, as measured by test scores, represents one important outcome of schooling. However, such strong emphasis on achievement sidelines the importance of other school and classroom experiences. Ultimately, when we think about the goals of schooling in the U.S., we do not simply want students to emerge from their schooling experience as skilled in math, competent at reading, well versed in social studies and science but lacking in all other skills. We strive to educate students so that they can solve problems effectively, adapt to new situations, manage their own free time, and work effectively with others toward shared goals. Our goal is to prepare students fully for the varied challenges of adult life.

The "search beneath the light," as described in the old parable, has distracted educators from attending to the most essential element present in high quality schools—the quality of social relationships within those schools. Creating an effective school is a collaborative enterprise. Schools are only as effective as the quality of the interactions among the people within them. One recent study found that 78% of the variation in student achievement stemmed from the presence of students' trust in their teachers; parents' trust in the school; and faculty trust in their principal, colleagues, and families (Tschannen-Moran, 2014a). Other research inside classrooms shows that teachers who create positive, emotionally-supportive classroom environments help students engage in learning and achieve at higher levels (Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, White & Salovey, 2012; Rimm-Kaufman, Baroody, Curby, Larsen & Abry, 2015). These are just a few examples of how high quality social relationships produce high quality school environments.

Several decades of theory and research in education point to the importance of positive, productive relationships in bolstering student achievement and social and emotional skills (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Bryk et al., 2010; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt & Oort, 2011). This reality exposes some important gaps between research and current policy and practice. Why aren't policy-makers discussing these important school relationships? Why are there so few programs designed to improve relationships? Even in the presence of a growing number of social and emotional learning programs, why do most programs focus on improving *student* social and emotional skills

without addressing the social and emotional health of the adults providing the instruction? There are various plausible explanations for the absence of focus on relationships in schools. For instance, measuring high versus low quality relationships is complicated. Regulating high quality relationships is difficult, if not impossible. We seem to hold an implicit assumption that the adults in schools are already capable of interacting effectively with one another and do not need specialized programs to support effective collaboration about student learning.

Effective collaboration in the adult community can help the school improve and help students achieve at higher levels. However, much of what passes for collaboration in schools falls short of its intended purpose. True collaboration occurs when professionals have the same goals for the school and/or students, and they believe that they need each other and need to rely on each other to accomplish their goals. This type of collaboration can only occur under conditions of high levels of relational trust within a school.

### **Relational Trust**

At the most basic level, schools consist of a group of individuals organized around the common purpose of educating students. Each adult in a school holds a distinct role and adults are mutually dependent on each other in relation to those roles. For instance, teachers depend on principals to keep the school functioning smoothly. In turn, principals depend on teachers to be able to communicate effectively with students to enhance learning. Adults in various roles in schools interact with each other regularly through in-person conversations, email, or other means.

The nature and quality of these interactions form the basis for relational trust. For instance, imagine a typical day at school. A teacher may glimpse a principal interacting with a student in the cafeteria. A teacher and principal may have a five-minute conversation about a challenging student. A principal may walk into a teacher's classroom to observe their teaching. Both the principal and teacher engage in a process of *discernment* in each of these interactions. Each individual is discerning the intention of the other person. For example, the teacher may use the quality of the interaction to determine whether the principal respects her (or not) or whether the principal is competent (or incompetent) in the way that she fulfills her role as the school leader. The principal may consider the interaction to understand whether the teacher has personal integrity and truly "walks the walk" not only "talks the talk" of good teaching. If the social interaction itself does not convey a positive or negative meaning, then the teacher or principal may discern the intent and quality of the interaction based on past interactions with the same individual, what others have said, or some outward attributes of the individual (e.g., gender, ethnicity, rank). These day-to-day social interactions form the basis for relational trust (or distrust). Over the course of a single school year, the quality of relational trust grows, diminishes, and/or changes depending on the ongoing quality of social interactions and the information each participant discerns from those interactions.

The concept of relational trust in schools has been studied by Anthony Bryk and colleagues in their research in the Chicago Public Schools (Bryk et al., 2010). The definition of relational trust involves four components: *social respect*, *interpersonal regard*, *integrity*, and *competence* of the other person (Bryk et al.). *Social respect* refers to inferences about whether the other person recognizes

the important role each person plays (e.g., recognizing mutual dependencies among principals, teachers and other staff; valuing others' opinions). *Interpersonal regard* refers to acting in a way that reduces the other person's sense of vulnerability (e.g., showing that you care for the person as an individual, not just a cog in the machine; actively listening to one another). *Integrity* refers to a person acting in a way that aligns with their spoken goals (e.g., doing what you say you will do). *Competence* involves the perception that the other person has the ability to achieve desired outcomes (e.g., doing their job well).

Relational trust is dynamic and can change over time as expectations are, or are not, fulfilled among the adults within schools (Tschannen-Moran, 2014b). Because relational trust can change, it is possible to create and implement programs targeted specifically at enhancing the components of relational trust (i.e. regard, respect, integrity, competence) between administrators, teachers and other adults in schools. Despite the malleability of relational trust, to our knowledge, there are no readily available programs aimed specifically at building relational trust among adults in school communities. *Leading Together* appears to be the first and only available program designed explicitly to enhance relational trust in schools.

Pamela Seigle, Chip Wood, and Lisa Sankowski at the Center for Courage & Renewal developed *Leading Together* based upon the work of Parker Palmer. *Leading Together* is a multi-year professional development experience for leadership teams in K-12 schools. It was designed to build the capacity of teachers and their principal (called the *Leading Together* team) to facilitate positive, trusting relationships among all the adults in the school community so that they are more capable of collaborating, communicating, and working together to improve student outcomes. *Leading Together* merits attention of the researchers, administrators and policy-makers given the importance of relational trust for facilitating positive school change and the uniqueness of this new program.

### **Early Research on *Leading Together***

In 2012, our research team at the University of Virginia initiated a collaboration with Pamela Seigle, Chip Wood and Lisa Sankowski at the Center for Courage & Renewal as partners in program development. We began our work together by articulating the Theory of Change for *Leading Together*. A theory of change provides a representation of how program developers believe a change will occur if their program is implemented properly (Knowlton & Phillips, 2012). At its most basic level, a theory of change states, "If you *do* this, you will *get* that." Articulating a theory of change is a critical step for creating a program because it requires program developers to explain important components and lay out the anticipated sequence of changes to expect when a new program is used as intended. Once a team has developed a theory of change, they communicate the theory of change using a visual representation called a logic model. Figure 1 provides a logic model that describes the theory of change, including program components and our shared expectation for how *Leading Together* is likely to contribute to program outcomes.

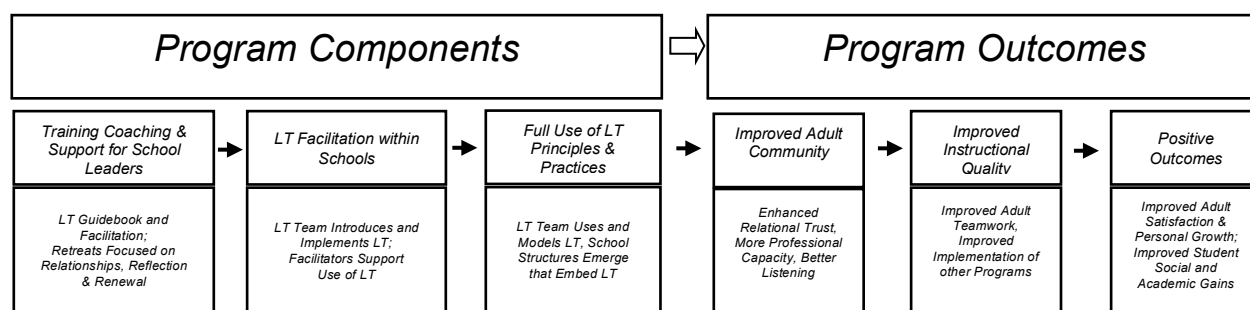


Figure 1. Simple logic model representing the theory of change for *Leading Together*.

The theory of change for *Leading Together* involves training, coaching and support for school leaders. The *Leading Together* team receives a guidebook and expert facilitation in retreats focused on relationships, reflection and renewal. Then, the *Leading Together* team returns to their school and facilitates *Leading Together* principles and practices at their school. They introduce the *Leading Together* principles and practices to the adult community and receive support from *Leading Together* facilitators to adapt and stabilize its use in their school. This process leads to full use of *Leading Together* principles and practices; for instance, the *Leading Together* team models *Leading Together* and the *Leading Together* principles and practices become integrated into the school structures and typical social interactions at the school. If conducted well, use of *Leading Together* in the schools will lead to improvements to the adult community including enhanced relational trust, more professional capacity among the adults in the school and better listening and awareness of one another. In turn, we expect improvements in the adult community will translate into improved instructional quality evident because of improved teamwork and better implementation of other programs adopted by the school. Ultimately, these outcomes will impact both the adults and students in schools. We expect adults will experience enhanced career satisfaction and personal growth and that the students will experience better classroom environments resulting in improved social and academic skills.

After working together to develop the theory of change, our UVa research team began to conduct research on *Leading Together*. Establishing the scientific basis for a program like *Leading Together* is a slow, methodical process that can take a decade or more. High quality research on a new program occurs gradually. The first steps involve small, scale-studies using a variety of quantitative and qualitative data with a small group of schools. Early research usually focuses on intermediate steps in the theory of change (rather than jumping right to measuring student achievement outcomes or student social skills as indicators of program success). Then, after initial lessons emanate from early research, the program is ready for larger, more rigorous studies of 30 or more schools involving random assignment of schools to intervention or comparison groups. Such larger studies measure intermediate components of the theory of change as well as the ultimate goals targeted by the program.

The research that we conducted on *Leading Together* exemplified early-stage research. In fact, it is rare for program developers to be willing to bring on a research team at such an early phase in the

development process. In this specific example, it shows the risk that Pamela Seigle, Chip Wood and Lisa Sankowski were willing to take in having *Leading Together* subject to evaluation and scrutiny right from the start. Working with Seigle, Wood and Sankowski, we established two goals for the work: first, to gather data to inform the development of *Leading Together*, and second, to evaluate early signs of efficacy of *Leading Together*.

Eight schools participated in this initial study of *Leading Together*. All eight schools were located in the Northeast of the U.S. Of the eight schools, seven were public and one was a charter school; seven were elementary and one was a middle school. The schools ranged in financial need among students, with a mean percent of students eligible for free and reduced priced lunch at 30% and a range from 4 to 98%. On average, the student composition was 36% ethnic minority, but the range was considerable (from 7% to 94%).

Our research team observed and participated in the *Leading Together* retreats and cohort days. The implementation of *Leading Together* involved one 4-day initial retreat and two day-long retreats each year, plus two on-site coaching visits each year by facilitators (Seigle, Wood) at each school. Each principal attended the retreats and chose the other members of the school staff to attend the retreat and form the *Leading Together* team. Teams ranged from three to five members in the first year and expanded to five or more members per school in the second year.

We gathered data from stakeholders involved in the two-year program. Data collection consisted of interviewing and surveying *Leading Together* team members in *Leading Together* work (45 participants including 8 principals). In addition, we garnered information from three teachers at each school who did not participate in the *Leading Together* retreats and were not part of the *Leading Together* team (24 study participants). We also interviewed Pamela Seigle and Chip Wood in relation to their role as *Leading Together* facilitators. Upon completion of our data collection, we coded, analyzed and synthesized all we learned, produced a final report (Rimm-Kaufman, Leis & Paxton, 2014). In addition, we produced three papers that we presented (or will be presenting) at conferences. Each paper has been submitted to peer-reviewed journals for publication (Leis & Rimm-Kaufman, under review; Leis, Rimm-Kaufman, Paxton & Sandilos, under review; Paxton, Leis & Rimm-Kaufman, under review). (These manuscripts are available upon request.)

Our evaluation of the early efficacy of *Leading Together* showed promising results. The specific research questions focused on one part of the theory of change that links the program components to improvement in the adult community. Specifically, we wanted to know if use of *Leading Together* shifted principals' and teachers' perception of relational trust and professional capacity. We focused on two research questions. Does using *Leading Together* enhance relational trust? Does using *Leading Together* improve principals' and teachers' perception of their capacity to motivate and teach students?

The first set of findings measured the contribution of *Leading Together* on relational trust. We found that trust between teachers and their colleagues improved by over half of a standard deviation in schools that had successfully implemented *Leading Together*. Trust between teachers

and their principal improved by almost a quarter of a standard deviation in schools that had successfully implemented *Leading Together* (Leis, Rimm-Kaufman, Paxton & Sandilos, under review). The second set of findings focused in on one aspect of professional capacity called group competence. Group competence refers to principals and teachers' evaluation of their collective ability to meet student needs, motivate students, and reach difficult students (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2004). (For instance, a teacher high on group competence would endorse statements such as, "Teachers in this school are able to get through to difficult students." and "Teachers here are confident that they will be able to motivate their students." Findings here showed that over a two-year period, the *Leading Together* schools showed a .23 standard deviation gain in group competence. For those schools who reported positive experiences with *Leading Together*, used *Leading Together* protocols to facilitate relationship growth, and wove *Leading Together* into their existing school structures, the boost in group competence was even greater—comparable to .53 standard deviation gains over two years (Paxton, Leis & Rimm-Kaufman, under review). We also identified a relationship between relational trust and group competence, meaning that in schools where teachers' felt more trust in other teachers and principals, teachers reported feeling more confidence that teachers at their school were able to motivate difficult students and teach effectively (Paxton et al.). Taken together, these are sizeable gains. The gains are particularly noteworthy for a new program that is still undergoing development.

Educators may wonder—what did involvement in *Leading Together* actually look like? We observed the retreats and cohort days and were fortunate enough to be included in some of the school *Leading Together* team conversations. On day 1 of the first retreat, we saw exhaustion. Principals, teachers and other adults in schools work hard and seldom have opportunities to be together without piles of work to do. Simply gathering for the sole purpose of enhancing trust and improving relationships was so novel that it took some time for the schools to shift gears and start a new type of work together. Then, over time, we observed relief, curiosity, engagement, laughter and challenging conversations. We noticed listening, self-awareness, questioning of habits, empathy, and then, more listening. Over time, we saw the creation of shared goals, planning, sharing, stretching, personal growth, and envisioning. The *Leading Together* teams learned from those within their group and also, from members of the *Leading Together* teams at the other schools. By the end of the two years, those schools that showed full engagement and commitment to *Leading Together* showed personal growth, enhanced relational trust, and improved capacity to share leadership and reach students in their schools.

**Implications of *Leading Together* Research for Administrators and Teachers: Looking Ahead** *Leading Together* is on a promising path. Trust-building programs are necessary if teachers and principals are going to collaborate effectively to enhance student learning. The principles and practices embodied in *Leading Together* resonated well with principals and teachers and produced change in schools when they were implemented well. Even in its earliest years of development, we have noticed a growing base of supporters including foundations, university research teams, and other organizations. *Leading Together* appears to meet an important need by placing effective communication, listening, and relationships in the foreground in schools. Although there is a need for additional scientific evidence on the power of *Leading Together* to produce change, the early signs from our research look very promising.

Schools constantly find themselves in the midst of school improvement efforts—they may be implementing new curricula linked to Common Core Standards or adopting new social and emotional learning programs. Research on school improvement efforts shows that relational trust among adults in schools facilitates the collaboration needed to produce successful change and creates a school climate that encourages continuous learning (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Kensler, Caskie, Barber, & White, 2009; Tschannen-Moran, 2001). Research also tells us that simply introducing a new program at a school is not enough to make it work effectively. School leaders and teachers need to buy-in to the new program and use the program as designed (with fidelity) to produce its intended effect (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Wanless, Patton, Rimm-Kaufman & Deutsch, 2013). Future research on *Leading Together* is needed to understand the ways in which using *Leading Together* facilitates schools' efforts to implement new programs successfully. *Leading Together* may be particularly useful to facilitate uptake of SEL programs because adults are developing, enhancing, and modeling the social and emotional skills that they teach to students in their classrooms.

We close with a final observation about the timeliness of *Leading Together*. There are a few important synergies between *Leading Together* and a few cultural and demographic trends in schools. U.S. schools are paying increased attention to Social and Emotional Learning, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, “Non-cognitive” skills and Mindfulness—all of which require adults in schools to model effective self-awareness, social-awareness and relationship skills to students. School leadership will turn over to a new generation. The Millennial Generation, individuals born between 1980 and 2000, may be more accustomed to collaborative approaches and horizontal leadership exemplified by the *Leading Together* Teams. Taken together, *Leading Together* is unique and forward-thinking. *Leading Together* is the only existing program that brings principals, teachers and other school staff together to pause, reflect, learn skills, and then, return to their school to produce change. We look forward to the next phase in the development of *Leading Together*.

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