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We also offer special thanks to Brian Osborne, Lehigh University, with assistance from Kenneth Mitchell, Manhattanville University, in selecting the articles that comprise this professional education journal and lending sound editorial comments to each volume.

The unique relationship between research and practice is appreciated, recognizing the mutual benefit to those educators who conduct the research and seek out evidence-based practice and those educators whose responsibility is to carry out the mission of school districts in the education of children.

Without the support of AASA, Brian Osborne and Kenneth Mitchell, the *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* would not be possible.



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## Transitions

Brian G. Osborne, EdD  
Editor  
*AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice*  
Summer 2025

It is an honor to be the new editor of the *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice*. I commend Ken Mitchell for elevating the Journal to a high standard of relevant research that informs leadership practice. Ken's leadership as superintendent was a model for me some years ago when I was a new superintendent, and it is with gratitude that I now follow him as editor of a journal that aims to support effective district leadership.

After 27 years in public education, including twelve as a superintendent, I shifted my personal and professional mission. As a superintendent, I was committed to providing effective, change-oriented leadership that improved opportunities and outcomes for all students. The adjustment away from providing district leadership directly was difficult for me. I missed the agency, the pressure, and knowing that my daily actions were moving the districts I led closer to the systems that our students truly need.

Over time, I settled into my professorial role and developed my current personal and professional mission: to identify, prepare, and support leaders who can be positive change agents for all students in the often-challenging arena of public education. Through teaching aspiring leaders, supervising internships, and

providing executive coaching, I have found a new calling as a nurturer of aspiring leaders and a thought partner to current leaders.

At Lehigh, I serve as a professor of practice, a faculty position created to recognize the potential contributions of practitioners with a career record in educational leadership to the work of higher education. I am surrounded by colleagues who are research faculty, whose contributions lie in their acumen for examining evidence and using scientific methods to make meaning out of the observed data and phenomena that occur in schools and the outcomes that result. Lehigh is designated as "R1" according to the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, which means that it produces the highest level of research output, so, as you can imagine, these colleagues approach their work with an impressive level of seriousness and dedication.

As I reflect on the stages of my career in light of my new mission and circumstances, one of the major lessons I have learned is informed by the approach of the research faculty. My earlier doctoral-level training at Harvard's Urban Superintendents Program prepared me well for the demands of the multi-faceted position and solidified my sense of purpose and urgency. It also taught me about the importance of data-

based decision-making and the use of scientific evidence.

In the job itself, however, the leadership imperative often means making difficult decisions in real-time without having complete information. I valued being led by my moral commitments and accrued experience. I wonder now, though, to what extent did my leadership decisions align with the best available evidence? Would a rigorous research study have validated my leadership moves or cast them in some doubt? What would my leadership and decision-making process have looked like if I had invested more time immersing myself in the latest research findings (and where would that time have come from?) or partnered closely with a research institution? High-quality research over the past couple of years suggests that there may have been better approaches to some of the core work in the districts that I led.

These reflections align closely with my current personal and professional mission because part of preparing and supporting leaders to be the positive change agents that our nation's children need them to be includes arming those leaders with the knowledge and skills to be effective users of research. The *AASA Journal*

*of Scholarship and Practice* is a tool for doing just that. As an educational leadership community, it provides us with the opportunity to sift through emerging research and determine together what will be most accessible and immediately practical to those who are leading schools and school districts. The Journal is disseminated widely and regularly in a readable quarterly publication intended for us, those who have chosen to dedicate our professional lives to strengthening public schools and expanding opportunities for our students.

There is a role for you in this endeavor to ensure that the best research informs our collective leadership. Read the Journal! Share it with a colleague or a particular article with those on your team. Encourage the researchers you know to submit their articles. Consider becoming a reviewer to contribute to the vital work of shaping what research reaches our practitioner colleagues.

My gratitude to you for your work and commitment to our nation's great kids and to the vital role of public education in our shared and valued democracy. And thank you for reading the Journal!

## **Why Go to College? School Counselor Perceptions of the Benefits of College Attendance**

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### **Abstract**

School counselors have critical roles in enhancing college readiness, providing college admissions counseling, and fostering a college going culture in their schools. In fulfilling these roles, school counselors must answer the “Why go to college” question. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine school counselors’ beliefs about the major benefits associated with college attendance. Study findings indicated school counselors focused on students’ individual benefits rather than broader societal impacts associated with college attendance. Participants identified four salient categories of benefits associated with college attendance, including career preparation, financial gains, knowledge expansion, and personal growth and development.

### **Key Words**

college admissions counseling, benefits of college attendance, impact of college

## Introduction

High school students, today, are struggling with the decision to go to college since the Covid-19 Pandemic began (Conley & Massa, 2022).

Rising college costs and the economic downturn experienced by many are expected to have significant impacts on the education pipeline (Bransberger, Falkenstern, & Lane, 2020).

Despite the increasing national high school graduation rate (Bransberger, Falkenstern, & Lane, 2020; Robertson, Smith, & Rinka, 2016), fewer students are attending post-secondary institutions, and the coming decline in birth rates will only exacerbate declining college enrollments (Bransberger, Falkenstern, & Lane, 2020).

Generation Z students, or those born between 1995-2010, make up nearly a third of the world's population (Seemiller & Grace, 2016).

School counselors are charged with providing quality college and career counseling to a generation of students who were born in the digital age and require instant information and communication (Rothman, 2016), are financially-minded, and are more socially aware (Singh & Dangmei, 2016). Meaning, these students want to solve societal ailments and environmental issues.

Research does exist on the benefits of attending college; however, a paucity of research exists on the school counselors perceived notions of the benefits of college attendance.

Additionally, a scarcity of research exists on the college counseling of Generation Z students. School counselors are responsible for college and career counseling and conveying the opportunities that are afforded a student who attends college. The purpose of

this research is to examine the perception of college attendance benefits. Specifically, this qualitative study will investigate and answer the research question: how do school counselors describe the nature and major benefits of college attendance?

## Literature Review

College attendance produces many benefits that may fall in two categories: societal and individual. Even though many benefits can be traced back to the individual, higher education produces impacts that also benefit the society as a whole (Book, 2021; Cunningham, 2006; Murray, 2009; Skrbinjek, 2020). Those with more education beyond a high school diploma tend to have jobs that provide health insurance with access to preventative care, which reduces the costs of government in social programs such as Medicare and Medicaid (Ma et al., 2019).

Additionally, college graduates are statistically more apt to have healthy children and less likely to have illegitimate births, thus reducing social programs such as welfare and food programs (Cutler & Lleras-Muney, 2010). Incarceration rates are also lower for those with college degrees, which reduces government spending on prison costs as well (Baum et al., 2013). Lastly, college graduates are also more likely to get involved in community services, voting, and other forms of community engagement (Barrow, & Malamud, 2015) not to mention that college graduates pay more taxes (Carroll & Erkut, 2009).

Individual benefits of a college degree include an increased annual and life-time income (Carnevale et al., 2020; Carnevale et al., 2011) that affords additional opportunities such as higher job satisfaction (Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2011) and lower unemployment rates (Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013). In fact, unemployment rates for those with a college

degree are 3.5% fewer than those without a degree. Additionally, those with a college degree typically find jobs with access to retirement plans (Ma, et al., 2019) so they are not solely reliant on a social program such as Social Security. Lastly, a college degree typically allows for the provision of better opportunities for the children of graduates (Chetty et al., 2017) as parents with college degrees are more likely to become involved in a child's education (Attewell, & Lavin, 2007).

Considering the benefits of a college education is only one factor in college and career counseling. School counselors must also consider the students they are to counsel. Today's youth who are ready for that next step are labeled Gen Z - born between 1997-2013. These youths have grown up in a culture of safety that presents challenges for college and the workforce (Rickes, 2016; Schroth, 2019).

For example, some researchers suggest that Gen Z grew up with overprotective parents that may have interfered with their social, emotional, and intellectual development, which makes it more difficult for these students to navigate challenges independently (Rodriguez, et al., 2019; Schroth, 2019). Additionally, Gen Z have grown up with technology, and as a result, expect communication to be instantaneous (Pichler et al., 2021; Schwieger & Ladwig, 2018; Szymkowiak, et al., 2021). Gen Z are also considered by some to be the most success-driven generation (Rickes, 2016; Schroth, 2019) who are embroiled in social justice movements as a result of being raised in a society with the 9/11 attacks, school shootings, and climate change (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Maloni, Hiatt, & Campbell, 2019; Sladek & Grabinger, 2014). Despite being success-driven, there is research that Gen Z have more diagnoses of depression and anxiety (Sandra, 2019; Schroth, 2019).

Considering both the benefits of college attendance and generational characteristics should be viewed in a social theory framework, such as Anthony Giddens' structuration theory (1984). Giddens claims that an individual's independence is influenced by societal structures, which are patterned social appointments that are derived from the actions of individuals.

For example, family is a social structure that influences an individual's independence, just as the law is a social structure that does the same. This social structure is then impacted and maintained through the exercise of agency, or the ability of individuals to reach maximum potential (Giddens, 1984).

Looking through the lens of structuration, college attendance is a social structure that interacts with a student's agency. School counselors are responsible for not only understanding the full potential and challenges of Gen Z students, but also understanding the rules that may limit students within the social structure of college: finances, travel, majors, and the like. Only through the interface of social structures and agency can effective counseling occur, and one of the three domains in which school counselors are responsible to deliver programs is career development (The American School Counselor Association, 2017).

Not only is it important for counselors to understand Gen Z expectations and challenges pertaining to college, it is also important for counselors to highlight and differentiate the societal and individual benefits of college to Gen Z students so the value of a post-secondary education can be realized. If only the individual benefits are discussed, Gen Z students may not be as motivated to incur the costs.

However, if societal benefits of college attendance are also discussed in the counseling process, then Gen Z students are more apt to work beyond the rules that limit agency in the social construct of college.

## Methodology

A multitude of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methodology research designs have been utilized to investigate the individual and societal benefits associated with college attendance. However, few research studies have focused on school counselors' beliefs about the benefits of college attendance.

The complexity of college admissions counseling, as well as the myriad of challenges associated with fostering a college-going school culture, necessitate a thoughtful construction of the research design (Leavy, 2017). For these reasons, this study employs a basic qualitative research design, including qualitative semi-structured interviews to better understand school counselors' beliefs about the benefits associated with students attending college.

A basic qualitative design was utilized in this research study because the research questions focused on school counselors' perceptions about the benefits associated with college attendance. Leavy (2017) asserts that utilizing a basic qualitative research strategy with semi-structured interviews helps generate a more holistic view of participants' perceptions.

This research strategy enabled school counselors' rich personal reflections on their college admissions counseling experiences and the beliefs they hold about college attendance to be compared with other study participants (Creswell, 2018; Strauss & Corbin, 2015; Leavy, 2017).

The interviews utilized four semi-structured questions that aligned to the study's overarching research question and utilized an open-ended question structure to encourage research participants to elaborate on their own perceptions of the benefits associated with college attendance.

By purposefully constructing the interview questions to be open-ended, informed by research literature, and aligned with the study's overarching research question, the researchers ensured the interview questions were relevant and appropriate (Strauss & Corbin, 2015). Each interview was recorded and transcribed to further increase data trustworthiness (Creswell, 2018). The research interviews were conducted utilizing video conferencing software over two weeks.

## Research participants

School counselors in a southeastern state in the United States were invited to participate in the research interviews. Eleven school counselors agreed to participate in the study. Percy, Kostere, and Kostere (2015) assert that even a research sample that is small may provide great insight and information on the research topic.

The research participants shared one critical characteristic which met the inclusion criteria for the research study—employment as a school counselor. The participants in this study were diverse in years of school counseling experience, school counseling grade level, gender, and race and ethnicity, increasing the likelihood of the representativeness of the sample.

Additionally, the interview participants were geographically located throughout the state. Interview participant pseudonyms and demographics are provided in Table 1. Pseudonyms are used throughout the article to refer to the research participants.

Table 1

*Participant Demographic Characteristics*

Participants (n=11)	School Counseling Experience	Gender	Race
1. Brenda	10 Years, High School	Female	Caucasian
2. Amy	20 Years, High School	Female	Caucasian
3. Blake	15 Years, High School	Male	Caucasian
4. Emily	22 Years, High School	Female	African American
5. Hanna	17 Years, High School	Female	African American
6. Sabrina	28 Years, High School	Female	Caucasian
7. Sofia	1 Year, High School	Female	African American
8. Sally	25 Years, Elementary School	Female	Caucasian
9. Sam	8 Years, Middle School	Male	Caucasian
10. Scott	2 Years, High School	Male	African American
11. Wendy	20 Years, High School	Female	Caucasian

**Data analysis**

Creswell (2018) states, “The process of data analysis involves making sense out of text and image data. It involves preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data” (p. 183).

Following the conclusion of the first research interview, the researchers utilized a thematic, constant-comparison analysis (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Using a thematic analytic strategy, the researchers engaged in multiple stages of coding, clustering, and classifying words to ensure saturation was reached and to gain insight about developing themes, categories, and trends associated with school counselors’ beliefs about the benefits associated with college attendance (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This inductive analysis led to four themes emerging from the data that

answered the study’s overarching research question.

The analysis of published research literature was also a key component of the analytic process. Previous research literature on the individual and societal benefits associated with college attendance assisted in better understanding and recognizing emerging themes, categories, and patterns in the study’s data and helped in contextualizing the research findings.

**Results**

School counselors participating in this study answered a variety of interview questions designed to generate insight about the following overarching research question: *How do school counselors describe the major benefits associated with college attendance?* Research participant responses were similar despite differences in years of experience, gender, race and ethnicity. School counselors identified four major benefits associated with

college attendance, including career preparation, financial gains, knowledge

expansion, and personal growth and development.

### Career preparation

The overwhelming majority of school counselors participating in this study (73%) described the benefits associated with college attendance as career preparation and occupational attainment.

For example, Sofia, a first-year high school counselor described the benefit of attending college as “having the opportunity to get in a career that they desire.”

Similarly, Brenda, a high school counselor with over 10 years of experience stated, “statistically, I guess the majority of the jobs require some sort of education after high school. I think that is important. It may not necessarily be a four-year college, but we do know the importance of students attending some sort of program after high school is vital for job and labor market information.”

Wendy, an experienced high school counselor with over 20 years of experience confided, “For some of my students, it allows them to get out of this area, to start working on a career ... obviously the academic piece is needed depending on the career field.”

Two counselors participating in the study noted expansion of career options as a benefit of college attendance. For example, Emily, a high school counselor with 22 years of experience shared, “I think it gives them more career options long-term. I don't believe that the promotion of colleges is the end all, be all either. When we are promoting students' post-secondary success, it's important to look at each individual student. And for some students that might be being hired into the youth apprenticeship programs and then getting out and having a career and being able to support themselves. For some students, getting that associates degree and getting out, having that career, going straight into the workforce.”

### Financial gains

Most research participants (55%) also described financial gains as a major benefit of college attendance.

For example, when asked about the benefits of attending college, Sam, a middle school counselor with over eight years of experience stated, “financial, obviously. I think the farther we go with education typically, hopefully, we can earn more money.”

Likewise, Hanna, a high school counselor with 17 years of experience highlighted, “We do know research has proven the more education you get, the higher your salary can be.”

Similarly, Emily, a high school counselor with 22 years of experience shared, “I do feel like in the majority of cases, those who go on to four-year schools over a longer period of time are going to have greater benefits in terms of healthcare insurance and in terms of income.

Blake, a high school counselor with 15 years of experience reinforced the importance of economic returns in the following statement, “To me, the economics piece is huge. It depends

on what you want to do, right? If I want to be a welder and I can make good money welding, that's great. If I know I want to be a doctor or nurse, or something that's going to require a degree, I think the financial benefits are great. It's an investment in yourself, right? I'm investing in myself, even if that means I have to take out some loans. We say to kids, 'Do you want to have an apartment? Do you want to live by yourself? Do you want a refrigerator in there? Do you want air conditioning?' All those things help them to think practically about if they are going to get the return on investment they want."

### **Knowledge expansion**

Four of the school counselors in this study (36%) identified the acquisition or expansion of knowledge as a major benefit of college attendance.

For example, when asked about the benefits of college attendance, Sam, a middle school counselor with over eight years of experience stated, "furthering your education and critical thinking."

This sentiment was further illustrated by Sabrina, a veteran high school counselor with over 28 years of experience who shared, "Seeing a world outside of your own. Meeting people that are not from your area. It is just being around people that think differently and that are different and learning that fact. Because I don't think that a lot of our kids get that."

Likewise, Amy, a high school counselor with over 20 years of experience shared, "Just the expansion of their knowledge. They're going to learn more than they had the opportunity to learn in high school."

Similarly, Scott, a second-year high school counselor also highlighted the value of learning opportunities from college attendance in the following reflection, "Just opportunity. Educational opportunity to be able to learn, and be a lifelong learner, and get that opportunity and that experience with college."

### **Growth and development**

Three of the research participants (27%) identified students' growth and development as an influential benefit of college attendance.

For example, Amy, a high school counselor with over 20 years of experience shared, "I think that [college] is a huge social, emotional development time for students at 18 to 20 years old to have the ability to be able to be with other 18- to 20-year-olds. And if you have moved out of your house and you're on campus, that's a huge developmental step that students need to take if they can. Just being able to learn how to be on their own."

Wendy, an experienced high school counselor with over 20 years of experience suggested, "Encourage them to find something to do to grow and that's when they mature. I think the social piece is good for some kids. I think the social piece can also be the downfall of some kids. But we want them to learn how to survive and go out on their own and kind of figure things out."

Similarly, Sally, an elementary school counselor with over 25 years of experience shared, “I think just keeping those doors open. I think it's a good growth experience for them, but also it just opens doors to different areas. It's not necessarily about that degree that you get, but the ability to learn and to continue growing and kind of just keeping doors open. Don't limit yourself. And I think they need to see you don't have to go. But if it's something that you want, it's keeping one more door open and if you don't go to college, how are you going to keep the doors open?”

## Discussion

School counselors play critical roles in enhancing college readiness, providing college admissions counseling, and fostering a college going culture in their schools. In fulfilling these roles, school counselors must answer the “Why go to college” question. Since school counselors’ beliefs likely influence how they answer this question, this study was designed to examine school counselors’ perceptions about the major benefits associated with college attendance.

Study findings indicated school counselors focused on students’ individual benefits rather than broader societal impacts associated with college attendance. For example, participants identified four major types of benefits associated with college attendance, including career preparation, financial gains, knowledge expansion, and personal growth and development. Of these four types of benefits, school counselors were far more likely to identify career preparation and income growth as key outcomes from attending college.

Clearly, the individual benefits associated with college attendance, such as occupational attainment and income differentials between high school and college graduates, are important for school counselors to convey to students. This information is critical to making informed decisions about the return on investment from college attendance. It can also serve as a powerful extrinsic motivator for college attendance, especially for

Generation Z students who are financially-minded (Singh & Dangmei, 2016) and see college as a pathway to increase their earning power. In fact, college freshmen reported their reasons for attending college were to gain a better job (83.5%) and make more money (73.2%) in a recent nation-wide survey by UCLA’s Higher Education Research Center (Stolzenberg et al., 2020).

However, findings from this research study suggest school counselors may be missing a valuable opportunity to communicate the many societal benefits associated with college attendance that are also important to Generation Z.

Generation Z students are also highly intrinsically motivated and more socially conscious (Singh & Dangmei, 2016), seeing college as an opportunity to make a difference in the world and improve the lives of others.

In addition to seeing college as an occupational and financial pathway to success, college freshmen also report their reasons for attending college were gaining an appreciation of ideas (75%), helping others in need (80%), improving their understanding of other countries and cultures (62%), and developing a meaningful philosophy of life (50%) (Stolzenberg et al., 2020).

The results from this study underscore the importance of incorporating information on both the individual and societal benefits

associated with college attendance into college admissions counseling. Consistent with the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) College Admissions Specialist competencies of fostering a college-going culture, integrating current research evidence on the benefits of college attendance helps to convey a holistic picture of the potential return on investment for students. It is critically important to consider how administrators can support school counselors in meeting the college counseling needs of Generation Z students and foster a college going culture. Potential implications for practice include:

- Meaningfully reducing school counselor-to-student case load sizes to provide more opportunity for time-intensive college admissions counseling work with students.
- Investing in continuing professional development and learning opportunities in college admissions counseling. Providing professional development and the opportunity to explore new research and data about the benefits associated with college attendance will enhance school counselors' ability to share compelling evidence with students.
- Facilitating collaborative community discussions on Generation Z students' expectations and future aspirations as well as the implications of these aspirations on their college admissions counseling needs.
- Providing time for collaboration with colleges and universities as well as other school counselors to share best practices in college admissions counseling and answering the "Why go to college" question.

### **Study limitations and future research recommendations**

While this study found strong consistency in school counselors' beliefs about the benefits associated with college attendance, an analysis of the study's methodology indicates several potential limitations and recommendations for future research. The study was conducted within one southeastern state using a basic qualitative approach which may limit the extent to which the results can be generalized. Future research studies incorporating multiple states, a larger and more diverse sample of school counselors, and different methodological techniques may improve the generalizability of the findings.

### **Conclusion**

Findings from this study provide helpful insights on school counselors' beliefs about the benefits associated with college attendance. Participants identified four salient categories of benefits, including career preparation, financial gains, knowledge expansion, and personal growth and development. Providing professional development on the societal benefits associated with college attendance may enhance school counselors' ability to effectively counsel students on college attendance, aid in expanding college access, and produce a stronger college-going culture.

### Author Biographies

Tara Hornor currently serves as professor and coordinator in the Zucker Family School of Education's Higher Education Leadership Program at The Citadel. She has more than 20 years of higher education leadership experience and previously served as The Citadel's Associate Provost for Planning, Assessment, and Evaluation and Dean of Enrollment Management. She holds a PhD in higher education administration from the University of Arizona and master's degrees in school counseling, instructional design, and human resource management. E-mail: tara.hornor@citadel.edu

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## **“Low Trust” and “High Trust” Accountability in England and U.S.: Part of the Problem or Part of the Solution?**

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### **Abstract**

Participants in the Global Education Policy Leadership Program (GEPLP) in the U.S. collaborated with the Schools, Students and Teachers Network (SSAT) in England in 2023 to conduct a study of three high performing schools that are members in the SSAT Leading Edge Network. This article describes U.K. and U.S. educational accountability systems as based on trust level; shares observations of two voluntary accountability initiatives from low trust counties; and reviews two specific school effectiveness frameworks. Results from three schools in the UK revealed that there were several consistent themes related to the school improvement literature, such as leadership style, evidence-based continuous improvement, student engagement, community involvement and addressing equity challenges. Implications for strengthening instructional cultures are identified.

### **Key Words**

instructional cultures, school improvement policy, trust, external reviews, accountability

## Introduction

*“Trust. Noun. 1. Faith or confidence in the loyalty, strength, veracity, etc. of a person or thing.”  
Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, Sixth Edition (2007), Vol. 2, p.3363.*

How do you strengthen an instructional culture for professional growth? Let’s begin by stating the obvious: schools are people-oriented, social organizations held together by the trust that members have in each other. The amount of trust perceived among members influences their morale and motivation to work together for the common good (Six, 2017). We also know that the morale of teachers and principals influences teaching, learning, and assessment. Finally, schools operate within the cultural norms of the communities and countries within which they are situated. If the public reports low levels of confidence of teachers and principals, then trust in them will be low. If state and local governments establish education policies that reflect a low level of trust in public education, evidence from these schools in these two “low trust” countries can lower educators’ confidence in themselves and lower their morale.

In this article, we intend to:

- 1) Describe the U.K. and U.S. educational accountability systems as based on either the “high trust” or “low trust” the public has of government;
- 2) Share observations of two voluntary accountability initiatives from low trust counties where school leaders and teachers have strengthened the instructional culture; and
- 3) Share two specific school effectiveness frameworks used by these consortia to improve morale and strengthen their instructional cultures.

### Perceptions of High Trust and Low Trust in Government

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2019, 2021, 2022, 2024) and the Pew Research Center (2018) have conducted large scale surveys of the general public in OECD countries to determine the level of trust citizens place in their governmental institutions. These studies have reported respondents’ perceptions of “low trust” and “high trust” in their public education systems. In sum, these studies characterize countries as either “low trust” (e.g., the United States and England) or “high trust” (e.g., Finland, Iceland, New Zealand and Norway). The U.S., while an OECD member, has not

participated in the annual OECD *Drivers of Trust Survey* for several years. The 2018 Pew Research Center conducted a similar survey to describe U.S. public attitudes about government.

### Establishing Consortia of Schools to Improve Instructional Cultures

Data shared in this article were collected by the authors who were members of a 2022-23 Global Education Policy Leadership Program offered through the College of Education at Michigan State University. The authors spent five days visiting English schools, talking with teachers, students and head teachers as well as Ofsted school inspectors. Individual interviews

and classroom observations in England and telephone conversations informed this analysis.

### **An English Improvement Consortia and its Framework**

In June of 2023, participants in the Global Education Policy Leadership Program (GEPLP) collaborated with the Schools, Students and Teachers (SSAT, 2025) Network, based in London, to conduct a study of three high performing member private schools. To identify lessons learned, we asked about how

SSAT Reviews and Ofsted Reviews were used for school improvement.

SSAT is a professional development and improvement network of schools across the United Kingdom and Western Europe. They use the Framework for Exceptional Education (FfEE) to guide much of their work that strengthens a constructive instructional culture among teachers and school heads. Table 1 provides an overview of the twelve components of this framework.

Table 1

#### *SSAT Framework for Exceptional Education*

<b>TEACHING AND LEARNING</b>			
Climate for learning	Culture of reflection	Effective learning behaviors	Variety of teaching approaches
<b>PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE</b>			
Engagement with key stakeholders	Engaging with evidence and research	Principled assessment	Principled curriculum design
<b>LEADERSHIP</b>			
Leadership through moral purpose	Professional learning	Quality assurance	Wellbeing

The following are brief definitions of each of these 12 components.

### **Teaching and Learning**

***Climate for learning** focuses on relationships between teachers and learners, environment for learning, and classroom management.*

***Culture of Reflection** entails teacher self-reflection and planning for development.*

***Effective Learning Behaviors** include awareness of skills and attributes of effective learners, explicitly practicing and developing these skills and attributes, and applying them in new settings.*

***Variety of Teaching Approaches** involve being open to new approaches, understanding what is effective, selecting appropriate strategies/activities, use of assessment, and questioning to deepen understanding.*

### **Professional Practice**

***Engagement with Key Stakeholders** involves identification of opportunities for engagement with stakeholders in multiple ways.*

***Engaging with Evidence and Research** means that teachers understand its importance.*

***Principled Assessment** is a recognition that assessment systems provide data and evidence.*

***Principled Curriculum Design** not only meets statutory requirements, but there is also a whole school approach to it, it is clearly articulated, it goes beyond the classroom.*

### **Leadership**

***Leadership through Moral Purpose** entails translating the vision for the school into action and communicating that vision, which is collaboratively formed.*

***Professional Learning** provides opportunities to staff, is comprehensive, collaborative and results in joint practice, sharing beyond the school is part of the collaborative joint practice.*

***Quality Assurance** reviews a set of school policies that cover all key areas, to ensure that those priorities are evident at all levels.*

***Wellbeing** starts with safeguarding students and strategically promoting positive wellbeing of students. It is widely promoted and is a collective responsibility.*

Learning about how the SSAT Framework was used by three high performing SSAT member schools for improvement has the potential to inform school improvement policy. These review processes, tailored to the context of each site, inform school leaders about directions that improvement may take. The use of the SSAT Framework is entirely voluntary and guides a faculty's discussion about development priorities each year. SSAT provides professional development opportunities in the use of the Framework as well as providing a cadre of SSAT coaches to visit the school and provide feedback.

Ofsted is the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills created by Parliament in the 1990's and is independent from the Ministry of Education. It is legally charged with periodically evaluating all schools in England. Ofsted has a published list of criteria for effective teaching and learning (*School Inspection Handbook, 2024*). Based on an announced (i.e. 24 hours prior to arrival) site visit by an Ofsted inspector and government accountability test scores, each school is characterized as either "outstanding, good, requires improvement, or inadequate" and placed in a "league table" that is published in the media. The Ofsted review process is perceived by the school staff we interviewed as a low trust accountability system due to its overall impersonal one-word evaluation descriptor.

In June of 2023, the GEPLP researchers spoke to 5 administrators, 3 lead teachers and 6 student leaders at three schools that belong to SSAT and use the FfEE Framework for school development. The sites were recruited by SSAT from the Leading Edge Network of high performing schools.

Interviews were conducted through the ZOOM conferencing platform. Our team conducted semi-structured interviews to

determine interviewees' perceptions of the SSAT and Ofsted criteria and processes. We were interested in how results from SSAT reviews were used by sites for school improvement, who was involved, and asked about awareness and use of Ofsted review reports. Ultimately, we were interested in how reactions to these reviews could inform similar efforts in the United States.

As expected, many of the findings related to our common understanding of correlates for school effectiveness, such as a clear vision, focus on student engagement, teacher-student relations, differentiated instruction, high expectations, use of evidence-based practices, and a focus on continuous improvement (Hopkins, et. al, 2014). All three sites were very positive about their work with the SSAT Framework and used it to guide their school improvement efforts.

When asked about how their schools get good and stay good, responses included a focus on simplicity and consistency in an environment where everyone "really trusts each other." When such trust exists, they explain that they can be "restless in trying to improve things" and trying new things to continuously improve becomes part of the culture. In addition, in lieu of pressure to improve, it is reinforced among the teachers that it is "cool to do your best", fostering a shift in culture.

We were surprised by the finding that students were directly engaged in meaningful ways about the operation of the school. As an example, staff regularly solicited and acted upon student opinions about instruction and how it could be improved. Student participants in the interviews had significant leadership roles and served in ambassador-like roles in the schools. An environment has been fostered which keeps the students "future focused" and they foster the belief that "is students perform well, teachers perform well", which reflects

equal accountability among students and teachers creating a more communal atmosphere.

The lack of utility of Ofsted reports for informing improvement efforts at the schools was unexpected. The process was described as punitive and unfair by some interviewees. The information was rarely used to inform school improvement efforts and wasn't always shared with staff. Interview comments reflected issues with these "snapshot evaluations" since Ofsted often did not provide advanced notice of their evaluative visits and rated the school efforts based on this unexpected and non-collaborative visit. Oftentimes this resulted in the fostering of tense school environments where leaders led in anticipation of judgment. At times this even led to mental health crises among the school leadership, infecting the school climate. Several school staff even viewed some of the practices as "unethical" due to the system's approach of laying perceived low-performing schools out as public examples of ineffectiveness. This public

humiliation made leading with moral purpose almost impossible in the face of looming Ofsted visits.

### **The Tri-State Consortium (Connecticut, New Jersey & New York)**

In 1993, thirty-six suburban public school districts in Connecticut, New Jersey and New York created a consortium to develop an alternative to the regional accrediting process required by state laws. Teachers, principals and professional development staff from the current 57 member districts agreed upon a set of indicators of systemic school effectiveness and a consultancy process whereby member districts could visit each other to gather data about essential questions identified by the host school faculty.

A required professional development program was designed to prepare teachers and principals in serve as critical friends in the consultancy process. Table 2 contains the current list of eight indicators (Tri-State Consortium, 2025).

Table 2

#### *Tri-State Consortium Indicators*

<b>STUDENT PERFORMANCE</b>		
Performance-Based Assessment	Student Metacognition	Metrics of Student Performance
<b>INTERNAL SUPPORT</b>		
Curriculum & Instruction	Professional Learning, Supervision & Evaluation	Equitable Support for Student Needs
<b>EXTERNAL SUPPORT</b>		
	Shared Vision & Environment for Change	

Following are brief definitions of each indicator:

### **Student performance**

**Indicator #1: Performance-Based Assessment.** Educators utilize performance-based assessments to capture the extent to which students can construct, apply, and transfer knowledge.

**Indicator #2: Student Metacognition.** Educators design and provide a learning environment that asks students to reflect on what they have learned and how they have learned.

**Indicator #3: Metrics of Student Performance.** Assessment practices, including norm-referenced and criterion-referenced assessments, provide data and evidence of student knowledge and higher-level thinking.

### **Internal support**

**Indicator #4: Curriculum & Instruction.** Teachers and administrators collaborate to develop an articulated and aligned curriculum and instructional decisions grounded in current research.

**Indicator #5: Professional Learning, Supervision, and Evaluation.** Embedded, collaborative and reflective district professional learning plans based on current student and teacher needs linked to district goals and is attentive to teacher voice.

**Indicator #6: Equitable Support for Student Needs.** Identification of and addressing students' academic and non-academic needs in challenging ways that are nondiscriminatory and are evidence-based.

**Indicator #7: Shared Vision & Environment for Change.** Shared vision and goals developed with staff and community that includes a process to review student and teacher work and learn from experimentation.

### **External support**

**Indicator #8: Parent & Community Support.** Active district involvement of parents and community constituent groups, supported by budgeting and community resources to advance student learning.

Like SSAT, the Tri-State consultancy process and indicators are voluntary initiatives of member districts. In 2024, fifty-seven suburban public school districts belong to the Tri-State Consortium (A. Selesnick, personal communication, August 2024). All three state departments of education have adopted provisions to exempt Tri-State districts from the New England and Middle States accrediting processes.

### **Implications for Strengthening Instructional Cultures**

Three important implications emerged from our work as part of our interviews in the United Kingdom and Tri-State Consortium.

**#1 Low trust accountability systems function as “sea anchors” slowing the improvement work of schools.** While taxpayers have the right to know that their money is being well-spent in schools, efforts to hold schools and districts accountable can be punitive, demoralizing and even unreliable. Low trust accountability systems can negatively impact instructional cultures.

Rather than take information from Ofsted site reviews and use it to inform improvement, schools and districts found ways to discount or bury the findings in the hopes of mitigating damage to the instructional culture.

**#2 High trust accountability systems, even when developed by consortia within low trust national or state policy mandates,**

**function as accelerants or force multipliers to the work of member schools.** Instructional frameworks developed within a high trust environment motivate leaders to join collaborative cultures. These frameworks are then used for internal self-reflection about the presence of evidence of optimal learning by children and adults. We observed evidence of a shift in perceptive paradigms from “fixing something” to “building something”.

**#3 Both challenges and opportunities of leading in a low trust culture exist.** As noted, accountability systems developed in a low trust culture negatively influence the instructional culture and can lead to distrust of external reviews and even freezing or reversing improvement efforts. However, external reviews in a low trust climate can be useful if they are processed appropriately by the recipients and can strengthen professional growth. Efforts to ensure reliability and validity of external reviews are essential. It is important that these reviews are not politicized. It is challenging to process information from critical external reviews in ways that do not negatively impact instructional cultures if they are not credible. External reviews implemented effectively with authenticity and collaboratively, as was evidenced in England and in the Tri-State Consortium, provide fresh insights to districts and schools. When external reviews in a high trust culture are used for improvement, great things can happen for students.

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