

# Strengths-Based Focus Improves School Climate

Robert K. Tschannen-Moran  
*LifeTrek Coaching International*  
[coach@lifetrekcoaching.com](mailto:coach@lifetrekcoaching.com)

Megan Tschannen-Moran  
*College of William and Mary*  
[mxtsch@wm.edu](mailto:mxtsch@wm.edu)

Correspondence should be sent to:

Robert K. Tschannen-Moran, President  
LifeTrek Coaching International  
121 Will Scarlet Lane  
Williamsburg, VA 23185-5043  
Voice: 757-345-3452  
Fax: 772-382-3258  
Email: [coach@lifetrekcoaching.com](mailto:coach@lifetrekcoaching.com)

The manuscript is a work in progress.  
Please do not cite without the permission of the authors.

# Strengths-Based Focus Improves School Climate

## **Appreciative Inquiry: Background, Principles, and Process**

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a philosophy as well as an approach for motivating change that focuses on exploring and amplifying strengths. Although developed initially as a research methodology for studying organizations, by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) at Case Western Reserve University's Weatherhead School of Management, AI has since evolved into a strengths-based change process that has been linked to many other disciplines including positive psychology, sociology, and professional coaching (Bushe, 2007). These linkages are increasingly documented online at the worldwide AI portal hosted by Case Western Reserve University (<http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu>).

The basic idea behind AI is fairly simple. Instead of getting people to correct weaknesses and fix problems, it gets people to acknowledge strengths and imagine possibilities. In so doing, AI enables people to rise above and to outgrow their problems. Jung, a 20<sup>th</sup> century psychiatrist and founder of analytical psychology, describes the process this way:

The greatest and most important problems of life are all in a certain sense insoluble.... They can never be solved, but only outgrown.... This 'outgrowing', as I formerly called it, on further experience was seen to consist in a new level of consciousness. Some higher or wider interest arose on the person's horizon, and through this widening of view, the insoluble problem lost its urgency. It was not solved logically in its own terms, but faded out when confronted with a new and stronger life-tendency (1962, p. 93).

Appreciative Inquiry has built upon Jung's insight in the development of five principles that undergird its practice. The image of a pyramid (Figure 1) can be used to illustrate how these principles are related to each other and work together. "How do we get that?" is the operative question as we move from the top to the bottom of the pyramid. This syntax can be understood as follows:

### ***The Positive Principle***

People and organizations want to take positive actions and enjoy positive outcomes in life and work. How do we get that? The Positive Principle asserts that positive actions and outcomes stem from the unbalanced force generated by positive energy and emotion. Newton's first law of motion states that objects at rest tend to stay at rest while objects in motion tend to stay in motion unless acted upon by an unbalanced force. Applying this law to human systems, the Positive Principle holds that the energy and emotion associated with identifying, analyzing, and correcting weaknesses lacks sufficient force to transform systems and to get them moving in new directions. At best, such reform efforts will correct the problems. At worst, they will cause the problems to spiral downward.

Positive energy and emotion, on the other hand, disrupt downward spirals and build the inherent aspirations of people into a dynamic force for transformational change. By identifying, appreciating, and amplifying strengths, people go beyond problem solving to bold shifts forward.

Demonstrating “why it’s good to feel good,” their actions and outcomes become positively charged and profoundly evocative (Frederickson, 2003). Positive energy and emotion broaden thinking, expand awareness, increase abilities, build resiliency, bolster initiative, offset negatives, and create an upward spiral of learning and growth. They generate new possibilities and identities for both individuals and organizations alike.

### ***The Constructionist Principle***

If positive energy and emotion hold so much potential for good, how do we get that? The Constructionist Principle asserts that positive energy and emotion are constructed through positive conversations and interactions with other people. Inner work and self-talk alone are not sufficient. The Constructionist Principle takes a holistic view of how people elevate both energy and emotion. AI is no “bootstrap,” self-help philosophy. It takes a socially constructed view of all things human, including energy and emotion. Through our conversations and interactions with other people we don’t just interpret and understand the world of experience, we create the reality in which we live. “Words create worlds” is the motto of AI in general and the Constructionist Principle in particular. It explains why positive conversations and interactions generate the positive energy and emotion that lead to positive actions and outcomes.

More than any of the other five principles, the Constructionist Principle makes clear the importance of the social context and other environments in creating the present moment and in changing future moments. Different environments generate different truths and different possibilities. They even generate different dimensions of individual experience, because individuality exists only in relationship to others. Words do not create worlds until they are shared with others. As Zander and Zander (2000) summarize the Constructionist Principle: “It’s all invented! So we might as well invent a story or framework of meaning that enhances our quality of life and the life of those around us.” We invent those stories and frameworks together, in conversation with others.

### ***The Simultaneity Principle***

If positive conversations and interactions are able to create positive worlds, how do we get that? The Simultaneity Principle flows from the following observation: conversations and interactions become positive the instant we ask a positive question, tell a positive story, or share a positive reflection. Adams (2004) put this principle to work, titling her book: *Change Your Questions, Change Your Life*. Positive questions and reflections change everything. They are in many respects the change we seek to make. They don’t just begin a process that leads to a positive future; they simultaneously create a positive present by shifting our conversations and interactions in a positive direction. They are not just a prelude to change; they are change. They create the conversations that create the worlds in which we live and work.

Our questions and reflections are fateful. “There are no ‘neutral’ questions,” writes Kelm (2005). “Every inquiry takes us somewhere, even if it is back to what we originally believed. Inhabiting this spirit of wonder can transform our lives, and the unconditional positive question is one of the greatest tools we have to this end.” Such questions blend continuity and novelty in order to evoke transformational change at the speed of imagination.

### ***The Anticipatory Principle***

If positive questions and reflections are of such critical importance to the tenor and substance of our conversations, how do we get that? The Anticipatory Principle asserts that our questions and reflections flow from the outlook we hold. In the absence of hope, it's hard to seek out much less to celebrate the positive. When we anticipate a positive future, however, everything tilts in that direction. Equipped with a glimpse of what things look like at their very best, we become more creative, resourceful, and resilient in looking for ways to make it so. Positive anticipation of the future is a proleptic force that perfects the present.

The word prolepsis literally means a forward look, and that's how the Anticipatory Principle works. It takes more than just a vague confidence that everything will be all right; it takes a specific, positive image of the future in order to impact the dynamics of the present moment. The more concrete and real the image, the more yearning and movement it creates. "Vision," to quote Bennis and Nanus, "is a target that beckons" (1985, p. 89). Wheatley describes vision as a field (1999, pp. 53). As such, it is "a power, not a place, an influence, not a destination." It is best served, then, by imbuing the present with "visionary messages matched by visionary behaviors." Anticipation becomes the hallmark and herald of change.

### ***The Poetic Principle***

If positive anticipation of the future sets the stage for positive questions and reflections, how do we get that? Forming the base of the pyramid, upon which all the other principles are built, the Poetic Principle connects hope with mindfulness, intention with attention. The more we attend to the positive dimensions of the present moment, the more positive will be our intentions for future moments. Becoming mindful of what adds richness, texture, depth, beauty, significance, and energy to life awakens us to life's magnificent potential. It's as though life becomes a work of great poetry, filled with hopeful meter, movement, and meaning.

By seeing and attending to life's poetry, we become inspired. It's not that problems disappear, but other things become more important. That's because we get more of what we focus on. When we focus on problems, we get more problems. When we focus on possibilities, we get more possibilities. Life's poetry resolves into a spiral of positive imagination. Whyte (1997) captures the heart of this Principle in his poem, "Loaves and Fishes":

This is not the age of information.  
This is *not* the age of information.  
Forget the news and the radio and the blurred screen.  
This is the time of loaves and fishes.  
People are hungry, and one good word is bread for a thousand.

The illustration in Figure 1 depicts how the five principles of AI build on each other to generate positive actions and outcomes:

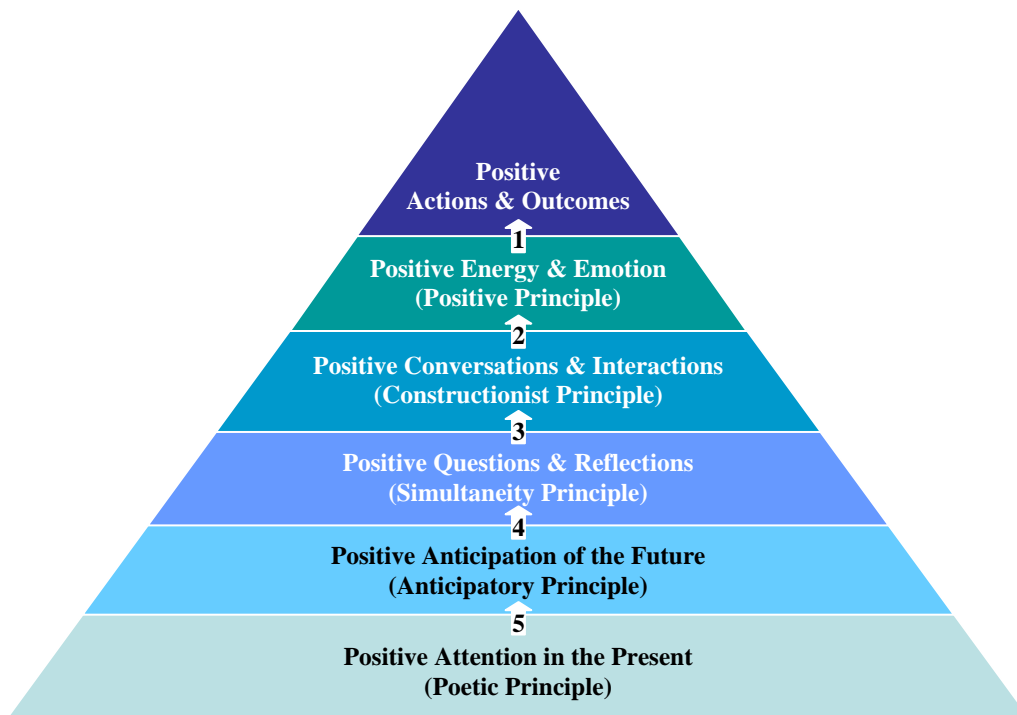


Figure 1. *The Five Principles of Appreciative Inquiry*

### **The Five-D Cycle of Appreciative Inquiry**

The five principles of Appreciative Inquiry have resulted in the development of a transformational change process that works as well with large groups as with individual persons. Although the process has been described in various ways, the 5-D Cycle (Figure 2) is one of the more common and easily remembered:

**Define.** The process starts by clarifying and securing agreements on what the system participants want to learn (topic choice) and how to learn it (method choice). The effectiveness of the AI process depends upon an affirmative focus that identifies what people want (e.g., effective and supportive communication) rather than what they don't want (e.g., sniping or backbiting). It also depends upon the willingness of the participants to forego traditional problem-solving in favor of strengths-based approaches that generate new conversations, interests, and opportunities.

**Discover.** Once the learning agreement is clear, AI uses inquiry to discover nascent examples of those desired outcomes in the past and present. AI makes the assumption that in every situation some things are always working. They may be hidden under a veneer of problems and woe, but life-giving examples, images, and stories that support the learning agreement can always be discovered. To facilitate the discovery process, AI has developed a protocol for paired

interviews. As many stakeholders as possible, both internal and external to the organization, pair up and interview each other using tailor-made versions of the following four questions:

- **Best Experience.** Tell me about your best experience with this organization, a time when you felt most alive and engaged. What made it so exciting? Who was there? Describe the experience in detail.
- **Core Values.** Tell me about the things you value most deeply, things about yourself, your relationships, and your work. Without being modest, who are you when you are at your best?
- **Generative Conditions.** Tell me about the core, life-giving factors in your experience. What are the key ingredients, both internal and external, that enable you to be at your best and to have fun?
- **Three Wishes.** Tell me about your hopes and dreams for the future. If you were to be granted three wishes for this organization, what would they be?

The purpose of these discoveries is to strengthen the energy and self-efficacy of people through the vivid reconnaissance of mastery experiences (Bandura, 1997). The more direct, personal, and relevant the mastery experiences the greater their impact on motivation and openness to change. It is important to not rush people through the discovery process. The Simultaneity Principle makes clear that the appreciative interview is not a prelude to strategy; it is part and parcel of strategy. Inquiry into what happens when organizations function at their best is transformational in and of itself. It not only forms the basis for change, it is the change we seek.

**Dream.** Once organizations have appreciated the best of what is, it is time to envision the best of what might be. This moves beyond the level of three magical wishes to the level of grounded and yet provocative propositions about the future. It uses the discoveries of the last phase to create a dream that is anchored in the client's history even as it expands the client's potential. When the discovery phase is done right, the dream will be larger than the client would otherwise have imagined.

Several considerations impact the dream-making process. The first is the question of calling: What is the world calling the members of this group to be and do? The second is the question of energy: What possibilities generate excitement for this collective? The third is the question of support: What is the positive core that supports the work of this group? In the dream-making process, AI encourages the use of both left-brain and right-brain activities. The Poetic Principle reveals the limitations of information and analysis; it takes stories, narratives, metaphors, dramatizations, and images to make dreams come alive. When the dream becomes a target that beckons, when it becomes an anticipatory field that generates palpable energy in the organizations, it is time to move on to design.

**Design.** Once organizations have envisioned the best of what might be, it is time to generate the strategies for what should be. The design phase of the AI process co-constructs the strategies for aligning the system with the dream. Those strategies are what give the dreams legs. People are asked to brainstorm multiple proposals and questions as to how the dream would manifest itself in terms of changed procedures, systems, technology, habits, roles, resources, relationships, finances, structures, and stakeholders. What would shift if the infrastructure fully

supported the dream? Imagining and describing those shifts in detail is a fundamental work of the design phase.

Brainstorming is an important part of the design phase. It keeps the process playful and encourages out-of-the box thinking. For brainstorming to work, judgment is suspended and creativity is encouraged. The more ideas the better when it comes to brainstorming. All ideas are welcome, including those that build, combine, or expand upon the ideas of others. This often requires a specific time designated for brainstorming, with a specific process as to how the ideas will be generated, and a specific goal as to the minimum number of ideas desired.

Once enough ideas are generated, individuals and groups can gravitate to the ideas that most interest and energize them. It is not so much a process of evaluating ideas as “good” or “bad”; it is more a process of discerning the ideas that give life to the participants and the organization. Those are the ideas that people will implement and innovate in the destiny phase of the process.

It is important to get very and specific and personal when it comes the steps that people want to take to realize their dreams. Who will do what, when? It is not just other people who have to shift and align with the dream. Encouraging people to make their own commitments, offers, and requests with a time-specific horizon is relevant to both this and the final phase of the process.

- Commitments represent actions that people promise to take;
- Offers represent actions that people volunteer to give, while;
- Requests represent actions that people want from others in order to successfully implement the design.

***Destiny.*** Once organizations have generated the strategies for what should be, it’s time to innovate those strategies into being. Destiny in an AI organization is not about implementing designs as though they were top-down mandates; destiny is about empowering people to experiment with and improve on their strategies with situation-specific, real-time adjustments that celebrate and bolster what works. When the destiny of AI is fully realized in an organization, people work with appreciative eyes. They celebrate and build on strengths, going beyond their original designs in order to deliver and fulfill their destiny. They become the subjects, rather than the objects, of change in order to create a learning organization.

That is the cultural shift and orientation made possible by Appreciative Inquiry. As people become oriented around the positive, as they exercise their power to notice, celebrate, and build on the positive, they generate the positive actions and outcomes that become self-reinforcing. Personal and collective efficacy increase exponentially and, often, “at the speed of imagination” (Watkins and Mohr, 2001). The change curve becomes a possibility curve that knows no bounds (Jones, 2001).

The diagram in Figure 2 depicts how the 5-D Cycle of AI generates a spiral dynamic of transformational change around a positive core:



Figure 2. *The Five-D Cycle of Appreciative Inquiry*

### **Fostoria City Schools: A Case Study in Appreciative Inquiry**

The educators in Fostoria, Ohio, a small city in the northwest portion of the State, were feeling understandably beleaguered and discouraged in the winter of 2005. Caught in the confluence of a 25-year decline in the manufacturing base and the ramping up of expectations through No Child Left Behind and the school-accountability movement, they had suffered a barrage of negative publicity over school performance resulting in an erosion of morale and trust. Recognizing a lack of sufficient progress with traditional problem-solving techniques but still hopeful in their capacity to improve, the Fostoria City Schools (FCS) decided to bring AI into the system to see if focusing on the life-giving dimensions of their work and relationships would shift things in a positive direction.

#### ***Background***

The Ohio Department of Education Local School Report Cards, first introduced for the 1998-1999 school year, have both documented the need and created the urgency for change. At the beginning, FCS earned the lowest possible rating: Academic Emergency. By 2005, FCS had moved up two notches, including three years in Academic Watch and two years in Continuous Improvement. Increased efforts at curriculum alignment, electronic monitoring of performance indicators, and improved instruction had not yielded sufficient gains for the District to achieve the rating of Effective. As a result, FCS was becoming vulnerable to corrective action by the State. They had landed squarely in the fishbowl.

Working hard without seeing desired results is discouraging and stressful, and it was especially so at FCS in the early years of State accountability. No one likes to be told they are doing a poor job. Antagonistic relationships, a lack of cooperation, and a watch-your-back mentality became the norm for many FCS employees. Headlines proclaiming Fostoria as having the “worst scores among area districts” (*Findlay Courier*, August 17, 2005) and other negative media coverage created a highly charged atmosphere in the search for blame. Scapegoating and finger pointing became widespread. Some blamed the teachers, others the administration, the Board of Education, the parents, the students, the community, the economy, or the school-accountability movement itself. Others adopted a hunker-down mentality, doing the best they knew how to do with the challenges they faced.

Along with the search for blame came a breakdown in morale and trust. Both relationships and task performance suffered. Failure, frustration, and fear led to a downward spiral and a self-fulfilling prophecy. A district-wide online survey, telephone and face-to-face interviews, as well as the norm-referenced school climate and trust surveys reported on in this article documented how people were feeling in early 2005. Climate and trust scores at three of the five schools in the district were well below the mean of schools in the comparison sample. A common refrain among teachers was that school just wasn't fun anymore, either for the students or for themselves.

They were a people in need of a fresh approach to change, one that would renew trust, hope, energy, and vitality in the whole system. Appreciative Inquiry was just such an approach.

### ***Turning Towards Strengths***

As a hub of rail lines in northwest Ohio, Fostoria is proud of its railway tradition. Picking up on this tradition, FCS made “Get On Board the Celebration Express!” their theme for the AI process and their rallying cry for turning towards strengths. This theme pointed to the positive energy they sought to unleash.

In February 2006, 11 introductory sessions were held to acquaint people in FCS and the community at large with the AI philosophy and process. Sessions were held with the Board of Education, community leaders, business leaders, school administrators, parents and community members, as well as sessions that included teachers and students at all five school buildings. At these sessions, participants interviewed one another about their best experiences with and wishes for FCS. They gathered in small groups to share their stories and to look for underlying themes. Through these sessions, people were introduced to the AI Summit process (Watkins & Mohr, 2001, Ludema, et. al., 2003) and were invited to serve on an AI Summit Planning Committee.

One month later, 30 volunteers met to plan the Summit. Small groups were given sets of the 141 themes that had emerged from the introductory sessions and were asked to sort them into larger, unifying themes that would guide the AI process in FCS. When the small groups reported back to the committee as a whole, convergence emerged around three themes:

- Student Achievement and Success
- Trust and Respect
- Community Pride and Involvement

Having identified the Summit themes, the Planning Committee met two more times to develop and test an appreciative interview protocol, to plan the publicity and logistics of the Summit, and to further steep themselves in Appreciative Inquiry.

The Summit was held only days after the end of the 2005-2006 school year, a less than auspicious time for weary educators. Many of the people who showed up did so grudgingly, planning to fulfill whatever duty seemed to demand, and then to beg off with excuses of other commitments. Others, having had their curiosity piqued through the introductory sessions, came to see if this new method would live up to its promises. The idea that a three-day planning event could be fun and rewarding, much less productive, seemed to be too much to hope for among the discouraged educators and citizens of this small city.

But fun it was, and productive as well! New stories and wishes were shared around the three Summit themes. Provocative propositions were developed by small groups that described FCS at its very best. Creative presentations of those propositions served as powerful metaphors to the gathered community, communicated through the use of songs, dances, and skits. Inspiring plans for implementing these propositions were then developed by six, self-organized innovation teams (two for each of the Summit themes). The teams shared their plans with the whole group by writing them onto to “box cars” and explaining their plans while placing the “box cars” along a five-year, train-track timeline. Offers, requests, and commitments made by members of each innovation team to bring the plans into being were recorded on planning documents.

After the Summit, the innovation teams met over the summer to refine and implement their plans. A video presentation of the Summit (viewable online at [www.CelebrateSchools.com](http://www.CelebrateSchools.com)) was shared with the entire staff of the district during the opening convocation for the 2006-2007 school year, as were reports from each of the innovation teams. These reports highlighted how enjoyable, meaningful, and valuable the Summit experience proved to be. To support the outcomes of the Summit, FCS has sought to infuse AI throughout the district. Administrators and teacher leaders were trained on appreciative approaches to supervision and conflict resolution. Telephone coaching was made available to all Board of Education members, administrators, union representatives, and innovation team leaders. The innovation work continued through the 2007-2008 school year.

Each of the three themes identified by FCS is fundamental to the work of schools and theoretically amenable to AI. That’s because the underlying dynamics of the three FCS themes can be traced back to the affinities, attitudes, and approaches of the people themselves.

### ***FCS Theme One: Student Achievement and Success***

As schools respond to the pressures of the accountability movement to improve, there is a growing recognition that schools need assistance to develop their capacity to engage in significant reform efforts. A significant aspect of this capacity is attention to the quality of the interpersonal relationship in the schools. These are assessed as variables of school climate, including *academic press* and *teacher professionalism* (Hoy, Hannum & Tschannen-Moran, 1998; Tschannen-Moran, Parish, & DiPaola, 2006), as well as *organizational citizenship* (DiPaola, & Tschannen-Moran, 2001).

***Academic press.*** The first of these dimensions, *Academic Press* refers to a school-wide tone that is serious, orderly, and focused on academics. Schools with a high level of academic press are driven by a quest for excellence. In these schools, students who do well academically are respected by their peers and honored by the school community. Teachers set high goals and the principal assists in achieving these goals. Students respond positively to the challenge of these goals and they work hard to achieve them. Schools in which the learning environment is orderly and serious and in which teachers and students set high standards for academic

performance tend to have higher student achievement. Empirical evidence suggests that where teachers and administrators work together to establish an environment in which *academic press* is strong, the school goal of fostering student achievement is more likely to be met (Tschannen-Moran, Parish, & DiPaola, 2006).

***Teacher professionalism.*** The second factor, *teacher professionalism*, refers to the connections that teachers have with one another. Teacher professionalism refers to behavior that shows that teachers are committed to their work and willing to work cooperatively with one another. In schools with a high degree of teacher professionalism, teachers are clearly committed to students and engaged in the teaching process. They take their work seriously and respect the competence and expertise of their colleagues. These teachers go beyond minimum expectations to meet the needs of students and typically display warmth and friendliness as they work with students and other members of the school community. It seems obvious that teachers who are serious about their work and committed to their students produce high levels of student learning, and indeed, *teacher professionalism* was correlated to student achievement (Tschannen-Moran, Parish, & DiPaola, 2006). Where teachers are committed to students, respect the competence of their colleagues, and like one another, other aspects of school climate are also likely to be strong, thus contributing to an environment that is conducive to student learning.

***Organizational citizenship.*** A culture that supports employees often going beyond their formal job responsibilities, performing non-mandatory tasks with no expectation of recognition or compensation, is essential to organizational effectiveness. These altruistic acts are neither prescribed nor required, yet they contribute to the smooth functioning of the organization. Organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) is defined as “performance that supports the social and psychological environment in which task performance takes place” (Organ, 1997, p. 95). OCBs can be said to “lubricate the social machinery of the organization” (Bateman & Organ, 1983, p. 588). The willingness of participants to go beyond the formal requirements of their positions has long been recognized as an essential component of effective organizations. OCBs are generally considered extra-role behaviors; those neither required nor prescribed, yet critical to the smooth functioning and efficiency of the organization. Katz and Kahn (1978) pointed to extra-role behaviors that do not directly conform to the usual notion of job performance and how those behaviors improve the effectiveness of organizations. They argued that any organization in which cooperation is limited, so that individuals only perform prescribed duties, is doomed to failure. More recently, Borman and Motowidlo (1993) proposed that individuals contribute to organizational effectiveness by doing things that are not main task functions but are important because they shape the organizational and social context that supports task activities. Although OCBs are not accounted for, or monitored, by the organization’s reward system, they provide the organization with the adaptation and innovation necessary for long-term survival and growth (Graham, 1986; Katz, 1964).

Organizational charts, employment agreements, and job descriptions fail to address all the contingencies that arise in schools (Stewart, 1985). They generally can do no more than specify minimum performance requirements. Teachers in well-functioning schools consistently go well beyond the minimum expectations of formal job descriptions and contracts. School organizations count on teachers doing so and could not achieve their goals if teachers limited their contributions to those specified in their job descriptions. In fact, “working to rule” is a tactic employed by teacher unions to punish school districts when contracts have expired or when contract negotiations are at an impasse. This is viewed as an extreme measure and generally

brings a quick response because it demonstrates how crucial goodwill and working beyond minimum specifications are to the smooth functioning and efficiency of school organizations. Because the work in schools is such that it cannot be comprehensively prescribed in teachers' job descriptions or contracts, it is important to learn more about organizational citizenship behaviors and their antecedents in school settings as these behaviors are likely to be important in promoting student success (DiPaola, & Tschannen-Moran, 2001).

### ***FCS Theme Two: Trust and Respect***

Trust is foundational to learning across all stages of the lifespan. Whether the focus is on student learning of new academic or social skills, or teachers as they experiment with new instructional techniques, learning is enhanced when the learner feels safe enough to take the risks that learning entails. In the absence of trust, learning is impaired as self-protection becomes Job One. Energy is diverted away from the learning task when people are either watching their back or plotting revenge. It was an awareness of the fundamental importance of trust to learning and to high-functioning organizations that led FCS to make the cultivation of trust and respect one of their themes of inquiry. They sought to discover instances where trust was high, and to propagate those instances throughout the district. They wanted to enhance trust in all of their working relationships, whether adult-to-adult, adult-to-student, or student-to-student.

We define trust as the “willingness to be vulnerable to another based on the confidence that the other is benevolent, honest, open, reliable, and competent” (Tschannen-Moran, M., 2004). This definition packs a lot into a single sentence.

***Vulnerability.*** Trust matters most in situations of interdependence, where people need to work together in order to get things done. In organizations such as schools, where people must depend upon one another to achieve desired outcomes, trust is essential.

***Benevolence.*** Trust cannot be cultivated without a sense of caring or benevolence. We do not trust people who we do not believe have our best interest at heart or who do not care about the common project that binds together our efforts. Benevolence cannot be faked. It needs to be genuine in order to build trust.

***Honesty.*** Trust is also based on the judgment that the trusted persons have integrity, will tell the truth, and demonstrate authenticity. Honesty is, perhaps, the most fundamental facet of trust. In the absence of honesty, learning is compromised and progress toward desired goals is short-changed.

***Openness.*** Trust can be broken unwittingly, especially in the absence of openness. When people are not sufficiently transparent as to their intentions and actions, others become suspicious, wary, and concerned about hidden agendas. The appropriate disclosure of facts, alternatives, judgments, intentions, feelings, and needs is essential for creating trustworthy relationships.

***Reliability.*** Trust is not built all at once, but is deepened and strengthened through consistent follow through on promises. Dependability in the hour of need is what people look for in a trusted colleague or friend. When people say one thing and do another, trust is broken. When people are good to their word, trust is built.

***Competence.*** Trust takes more than good intentions. It also takes the ability to perform tasks as expected, according to appropriate standards. In some situations, that ability may be narrowly focused. In leadership situations, that ability involves effectively handling a broad

range of responsibilities and relationships. Trustworthy leaders strike a balance between challenging and supporting their people.

When trust breaks down, it usually involves one or more of these factors. People become suspicious and self-protective when they lose confidence in the benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, and competence of others. This can happen abruptly, through betrayal, or gradually, as small violations and disappointments build up to undermine trust. Once broken, trust repair takes both time and effort. There are no guarantees when it comes to restoring trust; but if both parties are sufficiently motivated to do the necessary work, it is possible. It requires constructive attitudes and actions, good communication, meticulous reliability, persuasion rather than coercion, clear boundaries, and credible promises.

**Referents of trust.** There are a number of important constituents in schools for which trust is an important resource. Research on trust in schools has focused primarily on four of these referent groups: the principal, teachers, students, and parents. Faculty trust in these referent groups has enjoyed the greatest attention of educational researchers (Tschannen-Moran, 2004).

**Respect.** An aspect of school climate that embodies the notion of respect is *collegial leadership*. This construct assesses the quality of interpersonal relations between the principal and teachers. *Collegial leadership* refers to behaviors of the principal that are supportive and collegial, and are not perceived to be overly directive or restrictive. Such principals seek to balance the needs of the faculty with the goals of the school. Principals who demonstrate *collegial leadership* are considerate, helpful, and genuinely concerned about the welfare of teachers. They are open to exploring all sides of topics and willing to make changes. During meetings, they accept questions without appearing to snub teachers, and admit that divergent opinions exist. Finally, these principals are careful to take an interest in classroom issues that are important to teachers. Although principals do not play a direct role in the delivery of instruction, they articulate a set of expectations and set the tone for the school.

Although *collegial leadership* has often been found to have no direct influence on student achievement, since the principal is not involved in the delivery of instruction in the classroom (Hallinger & Heck, 1996), there is evidence of its indirect influence. *Collegial leadership* has been positively related to the overall school climate score of a school, which is in turn related to student achievement (Tschannen-Moran, Parish, & DiPaola, 2006). The principal plays a role in promoting student learning through the creation of a climate that is conducive to achievement. Teachers may perceive greater *teacher professionalism*, resulting in a stronger sense of commitment to students if the principal is successful in articulating a compelling vision for the school. *Academic press* may be enhanced if the principal organizes events that celebrate the academic achievements of students and takes the lead in setting a tone that is orderly and serious. When the principal fosters stronger *community engagement*, parents may be more apt to work with the school in an environment that is warm, welcoming, and friendly.

### **Theme Three: Community Pride and Involvement**

One of the things that was clear to the participants planning the AI process in Fostoria was that it would be difficult for the schools to improve without significant improvement in the level of community support for and engagement in the schools. There was also a recognition of low pride in the schools that was inhibiting a robust level of community involvement.

**Community engagement.** Another important dimension of the School Climate Index is

*community engagement*, which is the extent to which the school has fostered a constructive relationship with its community. This measure describes the degree to which the school can count on involvement and support from parents and community members, and the extent to which the school provides the community with information about its accomplishments. A school with strong community engagement is responsive to the needs and concerns of parents and community members and as a result, should be able to marshal community support when needed. Tschannen-Moran, Parish, & DiPaola (2006) found that middle school students may be more successful on state assessments when teachers feel that parents and community members are working with their schools to ensure student success. In light of these findings, school leaders may do well to find new ways to include or engage their communities in their school improvement efforts. Schools in which parents and community members actively participate in school programs and respond to the needs of schools are more likely to produce higher achieving students. By engaging their communities in positive ways, educational administrators and teachers are likely to experience favorable results for their students.

### **Purpose & Method**

The purpose of this study was to learn whether focusing on strengths through Appreciative Inquiry would be related to measurable changes in school climate and trust within a small urban school district.

### ***Study Design***

A longitudinal study was conducted over two years, with data being collected both 12 months before and 12 months after a district-wide, Appreciative Inquiry planning process. That process, which revolved around a 3-Day Summit gathering of interested stakeholders, generated three themes and areas of inquiry: Student Achievement and Success, Trust and Respect, as well as Community Pride and Involvement. The school was the level of analysis. The climate measures and the trust measures were assessed on separate surveys with about half the faculty of each school responding to each. The results were aggregated to the building and district levels.

### ***Participants***

The participants of this study were the faculty and other staff members of the school district under study. In 2005, these included 147 teachers (56 high school, 28 middle school, 63 elementary) who completed school climate and trust surveys at a faculty meeting in their building with outside consultants distributing the surveys, giving directions, and collecting them back. In 2007, the participants included 124 teachers (33 high school, 32 middle school, 59 elementary) who completed the same surveys without outside consultants on site at the time of administration.

### ***Measures***

Because the items asked teachers about their perceptions of the organization as a whole, data were aggregated initially to the building level for analysis. The building results were standardized against a norming sample at each level of schooling on a scale with a mean of 500 and a standard deviation of 100. The norming samples consisted of 97 high schools in Ohio, 82 middle schools in Virginia, and 143 elementary schools in Ohio. For purposes of reporting the

district-wide changes over a two-year period, these building-level scores were aggregated to the district level.

**School Climate Index.** The School Climate Index (SCI) is a 28-item measure of school climate comprised of four subscales: *Academic Press* (6 items), *Teacher Professionalism* (8 items), *Collegial Leadership* (7 items), and *Community Engagement* (7 items) (Tschannen-Moran, Parish, & DiPaola, 2006). Respondents were asked to assess how frequently they perceived each statement to be true of his or her school, along a five-point scale with anchors at 1 - never, 2 - rarely, 3 - sometimes, 4 - often, 5 - very frequently. Although these responses were categorical in nature and lack a precise underlying metric, we followed the common practice of analyzing them as numerical data. Sample items representing each of the respective subscales include:

- Students respect others who get good grades.
- Teachers are committed to helping students.
- The principal is friendly and approachable.
- Community members are responsive to requests for participation.

**Organizational Citizenship Behaviors.** Organizational citizenship behaviors were measured with an instrument developed specifically to capture OCBs in schools (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2001). The measure was adapted from a measure used by Smith, Organ, and Near (1983) for OCBs in private sector organizations. The measure consisted of 9 items assessed on a five-point scale with the following anchors: 1 - *never*, 2 - *rarely*, 3 - *sometimes*, 4 - *often*, 5 - *very frequently*.

Sample items:

- Teachers voluntarily help new teachers.
- Teachers schedule personal appointments at times other than during the school day.
- Teachers make innovative suggestions to improve the overall quality of our school.

**Faculty Trust Scales.** The *Faculty Trust Scales* capture teacher trust in four important consistencies within the school: the principal, colleagues, students, and parents. Statistical analysis, however, demonstrated that teachers' perceptions of trust in students were statistically indistinguishable from their trust in parents so these two subscales were collapsed into one, which was labeled *Trust in Clients* (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 2003). The *Faculty Trust Scales* (FTS) consist of 26 items divided between these three subscales. The response set was a six-point Likert scale anchored at "strongly disagree" and "strongly agree".

The first, *Faculty Trust in the Principal*, includes 8 items. In the current sample, the alpha coefficient of reliability for this subscale was .98. Sample items include:

- The principal of this school typically acts with the best interest of the teachers in mind.
- Teachers in this school can rely on the principal.

*Faculty Trust in Colleagues* also includes 8 items. In the current sample, the alpha coefficient of reliability for this subscale was .87. Sample items include:

- Teachers in this school have faith in the integrity of their colleagues.
- Even in difficult situations, teachers in this school can depend on each other.

*Faculty Trust in Clients* (students and parents) includes 10 items. In the current sample, the alpha coefficient of reliability for this subscale was .93. Sample items include:

- Teachers in this school are suspicious of students (reverse-scored).
- Teachers can count on parental support.

Factor analytic studies of the Faculty Trust Scales support the construct validity of the measure (Hoy, & Tschannen-Moran, 2003). The Faculty Trust Scales are available online at <http://mxtsch.people.wm.edu>.

## **Initiatives and Results**

### ***Student Achievement and Success***

In the wake of the AI summit, a number of initiatives were added to those already underway in the district to improve student achievement and success. One such an initiative involved training in Instructional Supervision from a Strengths-Based approach. In this approach, supervision is structured as an inquiry, guided by the teacher's curiosity about their own practice, using objective data collected on a set of Classroom Observation Tools. A second initiative involved offering Leadership Coaching to all of the administrators in the district, as well as to the union leadership, to assist people as they attempted to implement this new, more positive orientation to leadership. Over a three year period, this initiative logged 533 coaching sessions with 37 district leaders.

Underlying an interest in improving school climate is the growing body of literature that links school climate to important student outcomes, including student achievement (Hoy, Hannum, & Tschannen-Moran, 1998; Tschannen-Moran, Parish, & DiPaola, 2006). Several of the school climate variables showed measurable improvement over the two years of this study. *Academic press*, an important variable because of its strong correlation with student achievement, improved from a full standard deviation below the mean ( $M = 403$ ) to close to the mean for schools in the comparison sample ( $M = 487$ ). *Teacher Professionalism* began at close to the mean for the schools in the comparison sample ( $M = 505$ ). Two years later, this had strengthened nearly half of a standard deviation to a mean of 550. *Organizational Citizenship* showed an even more dramatic improvement, leaping from a mean of 450, half a standard deviation below the mean to a 604, a full standard deviation above the mean, placing these schools in the top 16% of the schools in the comparison sample. There was improvement in the number of state indicators that were successfully met. Although there is still room for growth, this is an indication of a school climate much more conducive to student achievement. See Figure 3.

### ***Trust and Respect***

Another initiative involved training district employees and the Board of Education in Nonviolent Communication (NVC), a communication process designed to facilitate the respectful understanding of people's feelings, needs, and desires. Developed over the past 45 years by Marshall Rosenberg (2005, 2006), NVC gives people tools for honest expression and empathic reception even when confronted with hard-to-hear messages. The process is useful in virtually any setting, and has been specifically applied to both school classroom and building

environments. In preparation for a district-wide training in this process, four small-group sessions were held involving more than 50 people, including teacher-leaders, administrators, and the Board of Education. This was followed by a one day in-service involving all of the district employees. This training led to a follow-up Board workshop, training for the Freshman Learning Community, student initiatives, and a practice group seminar.

Trust and respect were selected as one of the three areas of inquiry for the AI process because many of the participants in the early planning initiatives suggested that this was an area of needed growth. Indeed, in 2005 the mean scores for all of the trust variables were below the mean of the schools in the norming sample. *Faculty Trust in the Principal* was nearly a half a standard deviation below the mean ( $M = 462$ ), as were teacher perceptions of the *Collegial Leadership* of their principal, that is, the degree to which the principal was open to suggestions from the faculty and that these suggestions were put into action ( $M = 449$ ). The mean scores for *Faculty Trust in Colleagues* similarly fell below the mean ( $M = 475$ ). There was measureable improvement in the level of teachers' trust in other adults they worked with over the two years of the study, with close to a standard deviation of improvement in all three of these variables. Faculty trust in the principal improved to a mean of 539, teacher perceptions of collegial leadership improved to 561, and faculty trust in colleagues improved to 563. See Figure 3.

An important dimension of trust that did not show much improvement was *Faculty Trust in Students and Parents*. The mean improved only slightly from 394 to 419, still nearly a full standard deviation below the mean. This would indicate scores falling within the bottom 20% of schools in the comparison sample. These results are of concern as trust in students has been closely linked to student achievement (Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001; Tschannen-Moran, 2004b).

### ***Community Pride and Involvement***

Several new initiatives to engage parents and the community at-large grew out of the AI Summit. These included:

- the founding of a Grandparents Association, that has begun to play an active service role within the schools and at school events,
- the founding of a district-wide Parent-Teacher Organization to facilitate communication and to support parental involvement across schools and school levels,
- the use of the school-district website to circulate electronic copies of building newsletters,
- the creation of a new staff position and the hiring of a person to serve as school-community liaison,
- the hosting of a Town Meeting by the Board of Education, using the AI paired-interview process, to celebrate and plan for the arts programs in the schools.

These and other initiatives enabled the district to pass an important operating levy with area voters in the spring of 2007. The perceptions of teachers in the district schools, however, did not evidence much change over the two year period of this study. The perceptions of *Community Engagement* were raised only slightly from a mean of 454 to 468. See Figure 3.

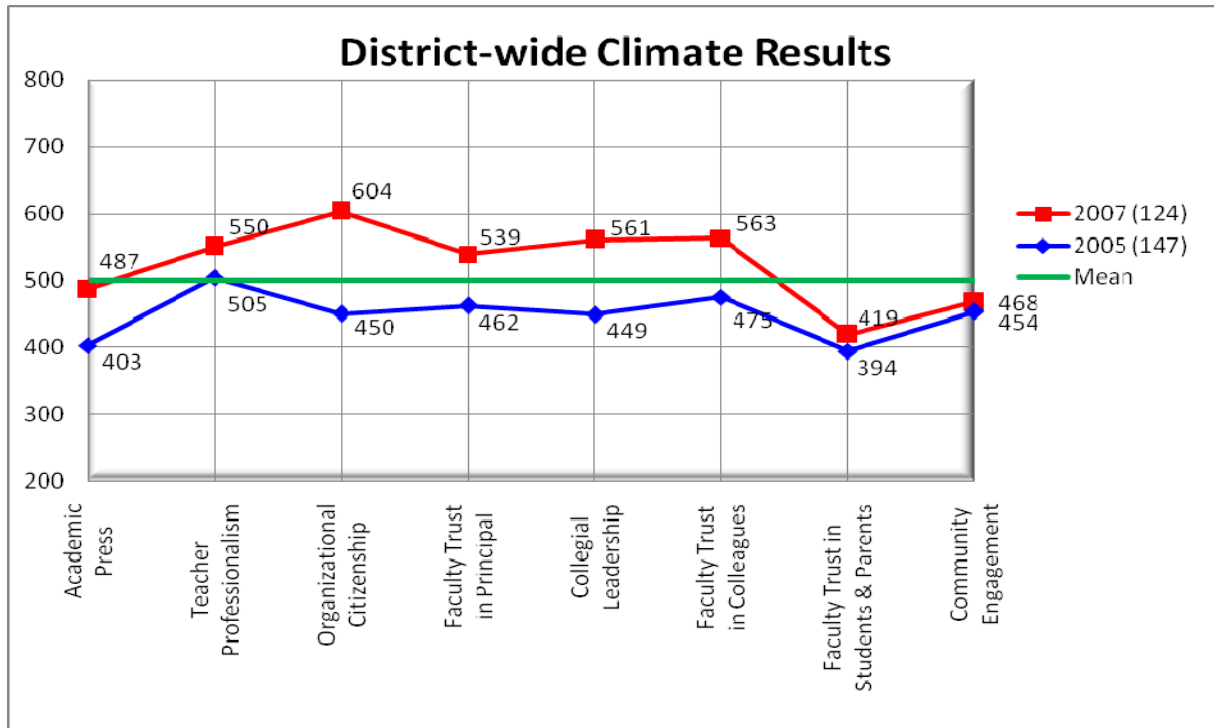


Figure 3. *District-wide Climate Results*

Although every building in the district showed improvements at various points, one elementary-school building showed substantial improvements in every area, at points moving from the lowest 16% of tested schools to the highest 16% (in *Organizational Citizenship* and *Faculty Trust in Principal*). See Figure 4. The high scores in all areas except *Faculty Trust in Students & Parents* as well as *Community Engagement* were validated by interviews with teachers, staff, and administrators throughout the district. Everyone noticed that this building had turned around in the space of two short years, with the appointment of a new principal shortly after the 2005 survey was taken.

It is perhaps no coincidence that this new principal was the most receptive and active of all building principals in the various strengths-based initiatives reported on in this paper: Appreciative Inquiry, Leadership Coaching, and Nonviolent Communication. Her willingness to engage personally in the process gave others permission to participate as well. This led to a “one-for-all and all-for-one” school climate that was evident in the disappointment expressed by teachers and staff when the Local School Report Card did not evidence as much progress at the building level as people expected during the 2006-2007 academic year. There was a sense of letting down not only the students but also each other and the principal; as a result multiple staff members at the building level stated the determination to make even more innovations during the 2007-2008 academic year in order to achieve the mandated Adequate Yearly Progress (or AYP) and to serve their students more fully. Time will tell if and when their destiny will be fulfilled.

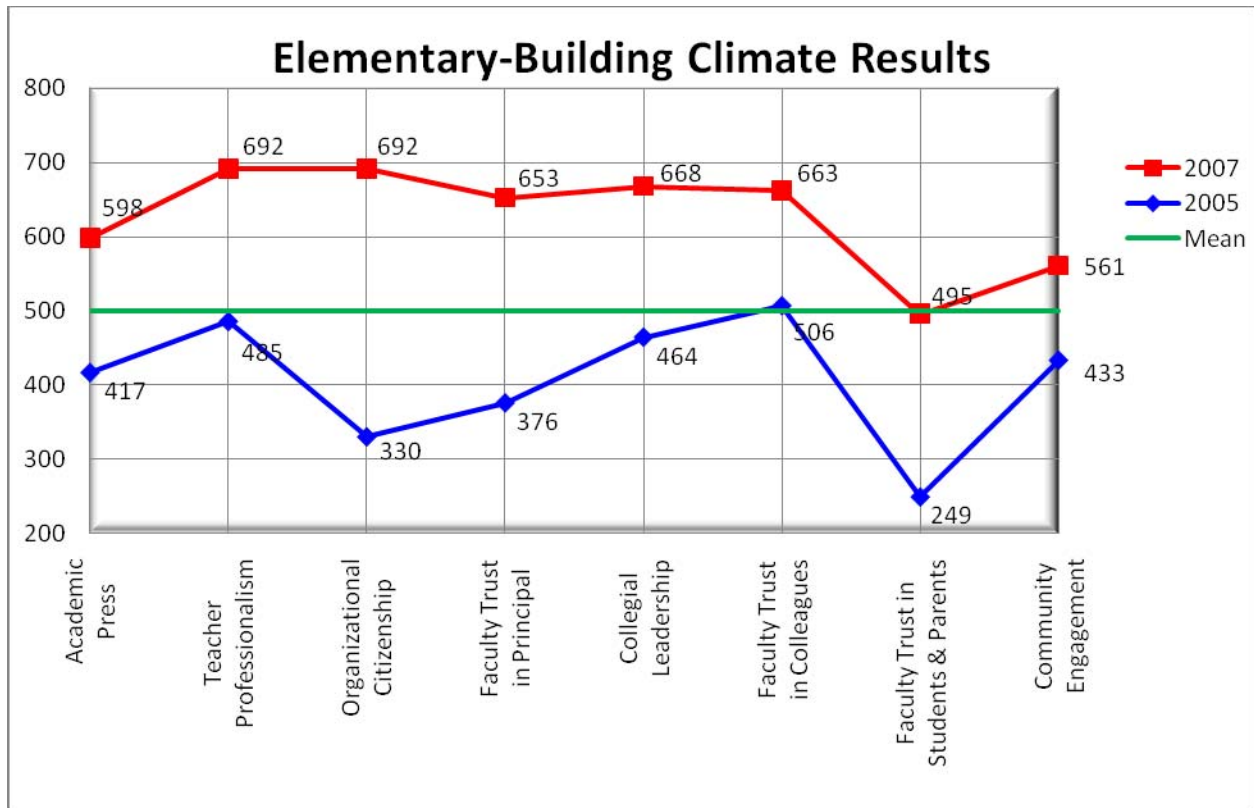


Figure 4. *Elementary-Building Climate Results*

## Implications

Appreciative Inquiry works, in part, because it aligns with and amplifies the things that make for positive change. By getting people to focus on their strengths, AI changes the conversations from complaining to celebrating. By noticing and amplifying the good things that are going on, AI turns the tables on old conversation patterns about what is wrong and who is to blame. Absent the search for scapegoats, people become more open, forthcoming, and confident.

AI fosters these qualities and conditions. Even people who do not trust each other can have honest conversations with each other about their best experiences, core values, generative conditions, and heartfelt wishes. It is disarming to see how this works. There is no reason to play games with such stories, principles, and aspirations. As the conversations change, a new social reality is constructed. The cycle of positive energy builds as people encourage one another to live from their values and do their best. As the search for scapegoats subsides, the safety required for innovation, risk-taking, and learning grows as well.

By getting people to have open, honest, and benevolent conversations with each other, AI often proves to be transformational. The generation of provocative propositions reconnects people with their passion and, in the process, shifts attention away from the wounds of the past to the possibilities for a desired future. It awakens hope. It quickens the imagination and ignites the possibility of working together for the common good. In the small city of Fostoria, Ohio, it gave a downtrodden school system and community new reason to look up, to reach out to one another,

to celebrate the best of the present, and to dream even brighter dreams for the future. It created a culture of learning that continues to spiral upward and evoke positive change.

## References

- Adams, M. (2004). *Change your questions, change your life: 7 powerful tools for life and work*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York: W.H. Freeman & Co.
- Bateman, T.S., & Organ, D.W. (1983). Job satisfaction and the good soldier: The relationship between affect and employee citizenship. *Academy of Management Journal*, 26, 587-595.
- Bennis, W. & Nanus, B. (1985). *Leaders: The strategies for taking charge*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Borman, W.C., & Motowidlo, S.J. (1993). Expanding the criterion domain to include elements of contextual performance. In Schmitt, N. & Borman, W.C. (Eds.), *Personality Selection* (pp.71 – 98). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bushe, G.R. (2007). Appreciative inquiry is not (just) about the positive. *Organization Development Practitioner*, In Press.
- Cooperrider, D. L., & Srivastva, S. (1987). Appreciative inquiry in organizational life. In W. A. Pasmore & R. W. Woodman (eds.), *Research in Organizational Change and Development, Vol. 1 (129-169)*. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- DiPaola, M., & Tschannen-Moran, M. (2001). Organizational citizenship behavior in schools and its relationship to school climate. *Journal of School Leadership*, 11, 424-447.
- Findlay Courier* (2005, August 17). *Fostoria has the worst scores among area districts*.
- Fredrickson, B. L. (2003). The value of positive emotions. *American Scientist*, 91, 330-335.
- Goddard, R. D., Tschannen-Moran, M. & Hoy, W. K. (2001). A multilevel examination of the distribution and effects of teacher trust in students and parents in urban elementary schools. *Elementary School Journal*, 102 (1), 3-17.
- Graham, J.W. (1986). *Organizational citizenship informed by political theory*. Paper presented at Academy of Management meeting, Chicago, IL.
- Hallinger, P., & Heck, R., I. (1996). Reassessing the principal's role in school effectiveness: A review of empirical research, 1980-1995. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 32, 5 - 44.
- Hoy, W., Hannum, J., & Tschannen-Moran, M. (1998). Organizational climate and student achievement: A parsimonious view and longitudinal view. *Journal of School Leadership*, 8, 336-359.
- Hoy, W. K. & Tschannen-Moran, M. (2003). The conceptualization and measurement of faculty trust in schools: The omnibus T-Scale. In W.K. Hoy & C.G. Miskel, *Studies in Leading and Organizing Schools* (pp. 181-208). Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.

- Jones, D. (2001). Celebrate what's right with the world (DVD). St. Paul, MN: Star Thrower Distribution, Inc., [www.starthrower.com](http://www.starthrower.com),
- Jung, C.G. in Wilhelm, R. (1962) *The secret of the golden flower: A Chinese book of life*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Harvest Books.
- Katz, D. (1964). The motivational bases of organizational behavior. *Behavioral Science*, 9, 131-133.
- Katz, D., & Kahn, R. L. (1978). *The social psychology of organizations* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York: Wiley.
- Kelm, J. B. (2005) *Appreciative living: The principles of appreciative inquiry in personal life*. Wake Forest, NC: Venet Publishers.
- Ludema, J.D., Whitney, D., Mohr, B.J., & Griffin, T.J. (2003). *The appreciative inquiry summit: A practitioner's guide for leading large-group change*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Organ, D.W. (1997). Organizational citizenship behavior: It's construct clean-up time. *Human Performance*, 10 (2), 85-97.
- Rosenberg, M.S. (2005). *Nonviolent communication: A language of life*. Encinitas, CA: PuddleDancer Press.
- Rosenberg, M.S. (2006). *The nonviolent communication training course: home study course*. Louisville, CO: Sound True.
- Smith, C.A., Organ, D.W., & Near, J.P. (1983). Organizational citizenship behavior: Its nature and antecedents. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 68, 653-663.
- Stewart, R. (1985). *The reality of management*. London: Heinemann.
- Tschannen-Moran, M. (2004). *Trust matters: Leadership for successful schools*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Tschannen-Moran, M. (2004b, Nov.). *What's trust got to do with it? The role of faculty and principal trust in fostering student achievement*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the University Council for Educational Administration, Kansas City, MO.
- Tschannen-Moran, M., Parish, J., & DiPaola, M. F. (2006). School climate: The interplay between interpersonal relationships and student achievement. *Journal of School Leadership*, 16, 386 – 415.
- Watkins, J.M. & Mohr, B.J. (2001). *Appreciative inquiry: Change at the speed of imagination*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Wheatley, M. J. (1999). *Leadership and the new science* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Whyte, D. (1997). *The house of belonging*. Langley, WA: Many Rivers Press.
- Zander, R. S. & Zander, B. (2000). *The art of possibility*. New York: Penguin Books.