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The Relationship Between the Nature of Perceived Communication, Student Achievement and District Size

Rick Molitor
George Fox University

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE NATURE OF PERCEIVED
COMMUNICATION, STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT AND DISTRICT SIZE

By

RICK MOLITOR

FACULTY RESEARCH COMMITTEE:

Chair: Terry Huffman, Ph.D.

Members: Gary Tiffin, Ph.D., Ken Badley, Ph.D. and Scot Headley, Ph.D.

Presented to the Educational Foundations and Leadership Department

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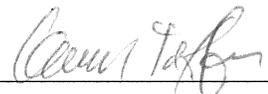
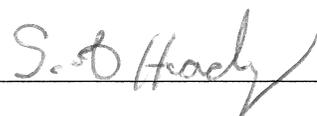
Doctor of Education

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“THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE NATURE OF PERCEIVED COMMUNICATION,
STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT AND DISTRICT SIZE,” a Doctoral research project prepared by
RICK MOLITOR in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Education degree
in the Educational Foundations and Leadership Department.

This dissertation has been approved and accepted by:

<u>11/26/13</u>		Committee Chair
Date	Terry Huffman, PhD	Professor of Education
<u>11/26/13</u>		Associate Professor of Education
Date	Gary Tiffin, PhD	Associate Professor of Education
<u>11/26/13</u>		Professor of Education
Date	Scot Headley, PhD	Professor of Education

ABSTRACT

This study examines the role communication plays in relationship to student achievement levels and the student enrollment of school districts. The following primary research question was examined: What is the relationship between high schools' staff's perception of positive communication between the district office and schools and levels of students meeting state reading/language arts and math assessment standards? The foundation of this study is based on the hypotheses that an increase in a staff's positive perception of two-way communication between their school and the central office will be associated with an increase in student achievement. Existing survey data ($N = 3132$) over a three-year period for all high schools ($N = 19$) of each of the analyzed districts ($N = 14$) were used. The research results of this study show that an increase in the staff's perception of positive communication was associated with an increase in the number of students meeting or exceeding state achievement levels. The results of the primary question had a very strong statistical significance of 0.001 ($p = 0.001$) with a weak positive correlation ($r = 0.06$). The results of this research counteract educational literature and the researcher's current practice, thereby providing an opportunity for improvements in district-wide communication and ultimately increased student achievement.

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Finally, I want to thank all the students I have been fortunate enough to teach and lead throughout my educational career. They are the reason why I continue my pursuit of life-long learning. This program is another stepping stone in my educational journey and I am excited about what tomorrow will bring.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation and my doctoral work to my best friend, my buddy and my rabbit. They know who they are!

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

According to a report published by Harvard University's Program on Education Policy and Governance, complacency in education will lead to the degradation of our nation as a whole (Peterson, Woessmann, Hanushek, & Lastra-Anadon, 2011). Along similar lines, a 2011 *Washington Post* article encourages readers to take action to force change in America's schools to ensure that our children will be able to live at the same standard of living as their parents (Miller, 2011). Several recent studies critical of our system of public education connect the need for higher standards with civil rights and point out that children of different ethnic groups have different levels of achievement (Orfield & Kornhaber, 2001; Finnigan & Stewart, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 2010a). Legend (2010) mentions that many observers consider the efforts to reform public education to be the latest civil rights movement. Standerfer (2006) points out that critics have been decrying the dismal state of American education since the 1980's largely as a result of the highly influential report issued by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk* (U.S. Department of Education, 1983).

A Nation at Risk prompted the second federal reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. This second reauthorization, commonly known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), has placed increasing pressure on schools and districts to meet the standards of the legislation or face higher levels of sanctions (Mintrop & Trujillo, 2005). These attempts to bring about improvement are not new and the level of public concern is rising. Legislators across the country have responded by giving schools an ultimatum: increase achievement or step aside and let someone else do

it (Miller, 2011). In Oregon, for example, the state legislature in 2011 generated 14 education bills that affected public education across the state (OSBA, 2011). The passage of these bills indicated to Oregon's public education system that its attempts to bring about reform had fallen short. Idaho's legislature passed laws in 2011 requiring that at least half of the standard evaluation for teachers and administrators be based on their students' levels of achievement (Cavanagh, 2011). Many other states also introduced education-related legislation in 2011. In addition, budget shortfalls forced many states to make changes and many went so far as to enact laws with respect to voucher-based schooling, charter schools, higher academic standards, teacher certification, and collective bargaining (Cavanagh, 2011). Educators apparently believe that they must concentrate as never before on improving teaching and learning which puts schools under increasing pressure to perform to the current standard. According to Tyack (1991), the longstanding consensus on the need for educational reform is simply a manifestation of a broader desire for the reformation of American society as a whole.

Small wonder, then, that President Obama is also a strong proponent of school reform. In his opening remarks for the reauthorization of the ESEA, he stated that we, as a nation, must give priority to raising our expectations of both our students and our schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2010a). However, these statements seem to have fallen on deaf ears as far as the actual implementation of educational policy and legislative action is concerned. The splintering of educational authority at the federal, state, and local levels has made it difficult to translate policy into true educational reform (Weiss & Gruber, 1987). In his book, *The Human Side of School Change* (1996), Robert Evans relates change to the mythological Proteus and the implementation of such change to Sisyphus. That is, educational leaders and change agents have been rolling the

proverbial boulder of school reform uphill only to see it roll back down. Indeed, the multitudes of attempts to bring about educational reform in response to the outcry for higher standards and improved systems (Brady, 2003; Duke, 2007; Mintrop & Trujillo, 2005; Wang & Manning, 2000) have largely failed to bring about consistent improvement (Finnigan & Stewart, 2009). This discouraging outcome, in combination with the increasing focuses on standards and expectations (Tyack, 1991), has caused many teachers and administrators to feel fearful and threatened (Daly, Der-Martirosian, Ong-Dean, Park, & Wishard-Guerra, 2011).

Research has shown that school leaders have played a key role in successful efforts at reform (Cotton, 2003; Fullan, 2008; Kelley, Heneman, & Milanowski, 2000; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom). Some researchers have also examined the role district central office leadership has played in efforts to bring about reform (Copeland & Honig, 2010; Larson, 2008; Marzano & Waters, 2010). Their findings have underscored the unique ability of school leaders and central office staff to understand the responsibilities of each player and the actions needed to ensure the best possible outcome. The reformation of the school system will take time because it demands that teachers and administrators change their embedded attitudes, beliefs, and systems (Rutherford & Ahlgren, 1990). One study even goes so far as to claim that efforts at reform will fail if the agents of change fail to pay sufficient attention to professional relationships (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010).

According to Eck and Goodwin (2010), for reform to succeed school district leaders will need to set clear, non-negotiable goals while at the same time providing defined autonomy to individual schools. Shannon and Bylsma (2007) have noted that effective leaders monitor the actions of both students and teachers with respect to district goals.

The above-mentioned elements of reform have played an essential part in the district-mandated improvements that many schools have implemented over the last decade (Copeland & Honig, 2010; Eck & Goodwin, 2010; Marzano & Waters, 2010; Shannon & Bylsma, 2007).

Of course, district and school administrators must communicate effectively with their staff if they expect their attempts at change to succeed (Daly & Finnigan, 2010; Evans, 1996; Marzano & Waters, 2010). In their book, *District Leadership that Works: Striking the Right Balance*, Marzano and Waters (2010) claim that school district administrators will have to confront the perception, on the part of their staff, that efforts to improve academic achievement through systemic change will invariably result in a breakdown in communication and a disruption in the current culture of cooperation. Effective communication becomes all the more important in light of this perceived loss of control on the part of staff. This simple yet essential aspect of introducing change will be the subject of this study.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between the academic achievement of the students in a particular school district and their staffs' perception of the effectiveness of communication between their schools and the administrators in the district central office. I will use existing data to examine this relationship. In so doing I hope to gain a clearer understanding of the vital link between the character of organizational communication and the academic success of students.

Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between high schools' staffs' perception of communication between the district office and schools and levels of students meeting state reading/language arts and math assessment standards?
2. What is the relationship between the perception of communication and the enrollment size of a given district?

Definition of Key Terms

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). A federally mandated benchmark establishing annual goals for districts and schools.

Center for Educational Effectiveness (CEE). A service, consulting, and research organization based in Bellevue, Washington established in 2003 to help K-12 schools improve their students' academic performance.

Educational Effectiveness Survey (EES). A research-based survey tool designed by the Center for Educational Effectiveness to promote conversations about the factors that contribute to excellence in education.

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Legislation for the purpose of increasing the involvement of the federal government in public education (Standerfer, 2006). It became law in 1965.

High School Proficiency Exam (HSPE). The Washington State Department of Education's state-wide instrument for the assessment of the academic achievement of 10th grade high school students. It was first administered in the spring of 2010.

Idaho Standards Achievement Test (ISAT). The Idaho State Department of Education's state-wide assessment of student achievement. It was inaugurated in 2007 (Idaho State Department of Education, 2011).

Improving America's Schools Act (IASA). Federal reauthorization (1994) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (Jorgensen & Hoffman, 2003).

In Need of Improvement (INI). The U. S. Department of education gives this designation to schools that have not made Adequate Yearly Progress according to the standards of the No Child Left Behind Act.

Measurement of Student Program (MSP). Washington State Department of Education's state-wide assessment of student achievement for grades 3-8. It was first implemented in the spring of 2010.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The federal reauthorization (2001) of the ESEA; legislation intended to raise educational standards and increase the accountability of schools and districts across the nation.

Oregon Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (OAKS). The Oregon State Department of Education's state-wide assessment of student achievement. It was inaugurated in 2001 (Oregon Department of Education, 2011).

Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL). The Washington State Department of Education's state-wide assessment of student achievement. It was used from 1996 to 2009.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations of this study have to do with the data I have collected with respect to student achievement. I have defined student achievement, for the purpose of this study,

as the percentage of students who meet pre-established academic standards (Griffith, 2004) as set forth in one or more of the following state measurement tools: the Idaho Standards Achievement Test (ISAT), the Oregon Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (OAKS), the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL), the Measurement of Student Progress (MSP), and the High School Proficiency Exam (HSPE). A further limitation has to do with the relative consistency of the data from the state of Washington, since Washington inaugurated a new testing system during the 2009-2010 school year—the Measurements of Student Progress (MSP), for grades 3-8, and the High School Proficiency Exam (HSPE) for grades 10-12.

The delimitations of this study involve the size of the school districts in the sample. I selected districts with total enrollments of between 200 and 22,000 students, and further restricted the sample to only those districts that required high school teachers to participate in the Center for Educational Effectiveness' Educational Effectiveness Staff Survey from the 2008-09 school year to the 2010-11 school year. I have used two of the CEE's survey questions concerning staff perception of communication to answer my two research questions. I have limited student achievement data to the percentage of high school students meeting or exceeding the reading/language arts and math standards of the three states' assessment systems.

The applicability of this study is also delimited by the fact that I have collected data only from three northwestern states: Idaho, Oregon, and Washington. Furthermore, I have restricted my sample to those districts that have used the Center for Educational Effectiveness to conduct the Educational Effectiveness Survey, Staff Edition for at least three years between 2008 and 2011.

Summary

This study focuses on the relationship of communication between district central offices and the schools in their jurisdiction to the relative success of the efforts of these districts and schools to improve their students' academic achievement. To understand this relationship I undertook a quantitative study analyzing three years of existing staff survey data and comparing it to existing student achievement data. I have assembled these data, which cover the period 2008-2011, from various school districts in Idaho, Oregon, and Washington. To collect the staff survey data, districts have used the Educational Effectiveness Survey (EES), Staff Edition developed by the Center for Educational Effectiveness (CEE). The corresponding student achievement data comes from each state's assessment system: the ISAT for Idaho; the OAKS for Oregon; and the WASL, MSP, and HSPE for Washington.

I hope that districts will use my findings to support district-wide efforts to improve the performance of their students and to improve their understanding of the role that perceptions of the effectiveness of communication play in such efforts. I have tried to design my research in such a way as to provide appropriate data for a precise analysis of the primary research question. The findings of this study have the potential for significant applicability to current reform practices. I will explore these implications in chapter 5. It is also my desire that the results of my study will stimulate additional research with respect to school-wide communication, improving academic performance, and the role of the central office.

CHAPTER 2

Review of the Literature

Introduction

To reiterate, the primary research question of this study has to do with the relationship to student achievement (as measured by the percentage of students meeting the standards of their state's assessment instrument(s)) of teachers' perception of the effectiveness of the two-way communication between their schools and the district central office. This research question addresses the need for leaders of educational reform and educators to improve their understanding of the role that communication plays in bringing about reform. The question takes into account past attempts to improve students' academic performance and the challenges educational leaders face in attempting to meet ever-stricter standards and ever-increasing expectations.

Since the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) took effect in 1956, educational research has been drawing attention to the level of sophistication required of educational reformers and practitioners (Standerfer, 2006). That is, each reauthorization of the ESEA has led to greater involvement on the part of the federal government, which in turn has led to an increase in the number of goals and expectations vis-à-vis student academic achievement (Jorgensen & Hoffman, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 1983, 1996a, 2010a). As standards rise and expectations increase, educational leaders must make the appropriate adjustments and refinements to their practices. Moreover, as Fullan (2001) has indicated, the pace at which change is occurring requires leaders to become more sophisticated in their efforts. However, because of the complex nature of

educational reform, its proponents lack sufficient research-based understanding of how to go about improving systems and revitalizing organizations (Murphy, 2008). Bearing in mind this complexity, along with the long history of educational reform (Good, Burross & McCaslin, 2005), I will, for the purposes of this study, confine myself to one aspect of educational leadership.

Background and Historical Context of Federal Involvement in Education

Mandates and expectations have always been a part of American public education. As early as the 1840s, Horace Mann advocated a common school system (Tyack, 1991). Since then the American public has continually sought to improve the school system. At first, the responsibility for the success of both schools and students rested solely on the shoulders of local communities since the federal government had granted authority over education to the states (McColl, 2005). More than a century ago the states institutionalized local control of education by creating the board of governance model which is still in effect today (Land, 2002). This move resulted in an individualized system in which local interests determined educational goals. The local educational authorities addressed problems or concerns by creating policies, conducting workshops, or changing the organizational structure of the school or district. This decentralized model did not contribute to the formulation or effectuation of educational improvements at the state and national level (Land, 2002; Tyack, 1991).

The federal government did not involve itself to any great extent in public education until after World War II. Until then, it concerned itself primarily with providing land or funding for small, individual programs and did not interfere with the states' rights to operate their schools (Standerfer, 2006). However, in 1965 the Lyndon

B. Johnson administration, as part of its War on Poverty (OSPI, 2011), passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which led to the injection of a substantial amount of federal funding and thereby increased the involvement of the federal government in public education (Popham, 2009; Standerfer, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 1996a). Upon signing the bill, President Johnson blamed politics for retarding the educational reform needed to improve the lot of America's underprivileged children (Johnson, 1965). Accordingly, the federal government began to provide funds to states and districts that had large numbers of disadvantaged students. The intention of this restriction was to ensure that the new legislation would not negatively affect the school system as a whole which had been doing well without federal involvement (Standerfer, 2006). However, the net result of the legislation was to increase the involvement of the federal government in public education (Popham, 2009; Standerfer, 2006).

Congress has amended and revised the ESEA eight times since its inception (U.S. Department of Education, 1996a). Over almost half a century the original ESEA programs have evolved into a complex and comprehensive array of federal supports for underrepresented student populations. Initially, the implementation of the ESEA concentrated on disadvantaged students. However, significant changes began to occur during the Reagan administration. To begin with, the *A Nation at Risk* report of 1983, which contradicted many of President Reagan's policies on education, stimulated Americans to consider increasing their expectations of the public school system and finding ways to increase the academic achievement of its students (U.S. Department of Education, 1983; Verstegen, 1990). *A Nation at Risk* declared that the mediocrity of the current system threatened the future of the nation (U.S. Department of Education, 1983).

The authors challenged the public to accept their recommendations and to act swiftly to ensure the realization of the needed reforms at the elementary, secondary, college, and university levels (U.S. Department of Education, 1983). The report's criticisms of the status quo opened the door to even more intervention on the part of the federal government in the education of America's children. The most significant responses occurred at the level of policy in the form of two reauthorizations of the ESEA. The first was the Reagan administration's *Improving America's Schools Act* (IASA) of 1994; the second was the George W. Bush administration's *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) of 2002 (Jorgenson & Hoffman, 2003). On the practical level, the increasing role of the federal government in public education can be seen in the expansion and evolution of the Department of Education's Title programs.

The various refinements of the ESEA have preserved the initiative's original intention, namely, the improvement of academic achievement on the part of disadvantaged students. Because the federal government has made equality of outcome a high priority, it has begun to involve itself in a comprehensive way in public education. As a result, the administrative bureaucracy of the federal Department of Education has dramatically increased in size (Popham, 2009; Standerfer, 2006).

The expansion of Federal Title programs has increased annual federal spending on education from approximately \$9.5 billion in 1965 (U.S. Department of Education, 1996a) to \$50.7 billion in 2010 (U.S. Department of Education, 2010b). As Standerfer (2006) notes, this increase in funding brought increased expectations with respect to accountability for both state departments of education and school systems.

Some detractors have argued that the federal government has overstepped its bounds since the U.S. Constitution clearly states that the primary responsibility for

providing education rests with the states (Boaz, 2006). Ann McColl (2005) goes so far as to claim that a conservative Supreme Court could potentially rule that the NCLB legislation goes beyond the constitutional rights of the federal government. Indeed, the ESEA has come to play a significant role in U.S. public education by way of increased federal funding and sanctions; and the failure on the part of both the public and the states to address the constitutionality of the federal government's involvement has only facilitated this development. Recent statements by officials of the federal government indicate that it intends to extend its control even further. For example, in his preamble to "A Blueprint for Reform," the most recent reauthorization of the ESEA, President Obama stated that the government has a moral obligation to provide every child in the United States with a world-class education. He went on to claim that an improved educational system will help to create an equal, fair, and just society (U.S. Department of Education, 2010a). More recently, Arne Duncan, the current Secretary of Education, declared that public education reform is an urgent issue that needs immediate attention (Shannon, 2011).

Efforts Toward School Reform

Americans have been trying to reform their system of public education for generations (Paguch, Blanton, & Correa, 2011) and they will continue to seek such change as a way to bring about the reformation of American society as a whole (Tyack, 1991). After the inception of the ESEA in the 1960's, educators tried to implement such innovations as a national curriculum, open schools, and individualized experiential learning, but their attempts rarely produced the sustained change demanded by the ESEA (Fullan, 1993). Educational researchers who examined these initiatives found that they

had not been consistently implemented (Daly et al., 2011; Mintrop & Sunderman, 2009; Sunderman, Kim, & Orfield, 2004). This criticism is not surprising in light of the fact that many attempted solutions were developed locally by school and district staff members. Some schools and districts also used models that had been developed externally, such as Success for All, Coalition of Essential Schools, and Core Knowledge. Both approaches have met with intermittent local success (Myers, 2007).

Darling-Hammond's (2001) book on school reform, *The Right to Learn*, featured one highly-touted model that regards professional development as the key to educational reform. The group of teachers and administrators who developed this approach worked in alternative schools in New York City. They focused their efforts on improving teacher training, using assessments to guide decisions, and setting high standards. The program was considered a success because elementary students in the participating schools were being accepted into select high schools and because the students in the participating high schools had high rates of both graduation and college attendance (Darling-Hammond, 2001).

Another study examined decade-long reform efforts in schools in the state of Louisiana. Like their counterparts in New York City, these schools stressed academic achievement, had high expectations of their students, and trained their teachers to set clear expectations. They expected their students to study specific curricula, and they redirected time and resources to their efforts at reform (Good, Legg-Burross & McCaslin, 2005).

Many schools and districts took the initiative to start reform efforts prior to NCLB, thanks largely to the federal government's relative lack of control over state education systems at the time. Consulting and organizational firms began to influence

reformers after researchers demonstrated that one could determine the characteristics differentiating effective from ineffective schools (even when student demographics were similar) (Good, Legg-Burross & McCaslin, 2005; Rosenholtz, 1989). This development came in conjunction with the multiple reauthorizations to the original ESEA in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as the federal government began exerting more authority with respect to standards and accountability. As schools and districts started implementing their own reform efforts based on the initial ESEA legislation, new systems of reform started to emerge. Reformers also began to seek external consultants from the education departments of universities and from the for-profit and nonprofit educational consulting firms that had sprung up to meet their needs (Myers, 2007). All three groups created programs and reports to assist schools and districts in meeting federal standards and in obtaining federal funding (MacIver, 2004).

The enactment of Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) as part of the NCLB (2001) accelerated the usage of outside resources by public schools. That is, CSR initiated a discussion on the need to base models of reform on scientific research (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Of the many approaches to reform that developed as a result of CSR, most emphasized systemic change, high expectations vis-à-vis students' performance and preventative measures (Myers, 2007). Although the CSR model began as a relatively minor aspect of the ESEA, it has become a solid foundation for school reform across the nation (MacIver, 2004).

Educational theorists continue to question the sustainability and effectiveness of reform efforts such as CSR (Sundermand, Kim, & Orfield, 2004). One study found that more than 30% of schools that had implemented CSR stopped using it after three years (Taylor, 2006). The success of CSR depends largely on the ability of the school in

question to sustain it; and a review of more than 300 case studies concluded that reform efforts are likely to be successful when teachers and educational administrators work together over the long term (Datnow & Stringfield, 2000). This collaboration to ensure sustainability has assumed increasing importance in light of the growing number of ESEA-related federal sanctions.

As was mentioned above, the involvement of the federal government in the public school system has steadily increased in the almost fifty years since the enactment of the ESEA. The results of this intervention have changed the character of public education in the United States. *No Child Left Behind*, the most recent ESEA-related act, has built on past educational policies to create a more comprehensive system of accountability (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). This accountability system, known as Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), requires all public schools to meet increasingly strict academic standards. Furthermore, the AYP requires that states impose sanctions on schools that fail to meet achievement standards based on NCLB and AYP or face the loss of federal funds (“Adequate Yearly Progress,” 2011). According to a recent study, the number of schools failing to meet the standards has increased by approximately 50% since the introduction of AYP in 2002; and 9,000 schools have been designated as being In Need of Improvement (INI) (Daly & Finnigan, 2010). This trend has led to a massive effort on the part of educators in the public system to develop programs to enable students to meet the federal government’s standards for academic achievement.

The intentions and policies of NCLB did not, by themselves, succeed in bringing about the legislation’s intended outcomes. A recent report by the Civil Rights Project of Harvard University on the principles underlying NCLB has examined school reform as it relates to the “first, do no harm” standard of the Hippocratic Oath. Recent attempts to

meet NCLB standards have harmed students, according to the findings of the Harvard study (Sunderland, Kim, & Orfield, 2004). Indeed, as was just mentioned, an increasing number of schools and districts has fallen short of the targets of NCLB and, thus, of AYP. A full 28% of schools fell short in 2007, and the proportion increased to 38% in 2010 (“Adequate Yearly Progress,” 2011). In fact, more than 50% of the schools in 12 states and the District of Columbia did not meet AYP goals in 2010. Compounding the problem is the fact that not all states use the same measurement tools. This has contributed to a variation in results. Indeed, the percentage of schools falling short of AYP ranged from a low of 5% to a high of 91% (Usher, 2011). The test results from the three states I will be examining in this study, namely, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington, illustrate this inconsistency. Table 1 shows the trend related to the percentage of schools in these states that did not make AYP from 2006 to 2010 according to state-created assessment targets (Usher, 2011). Table 2 presents information on the percentage and number of Idaho, Oregon, and Washington schools not making AYP in 2010.

Table 1: Five-Year Trend of Schools in ID, OR, and WA Not Making AYP

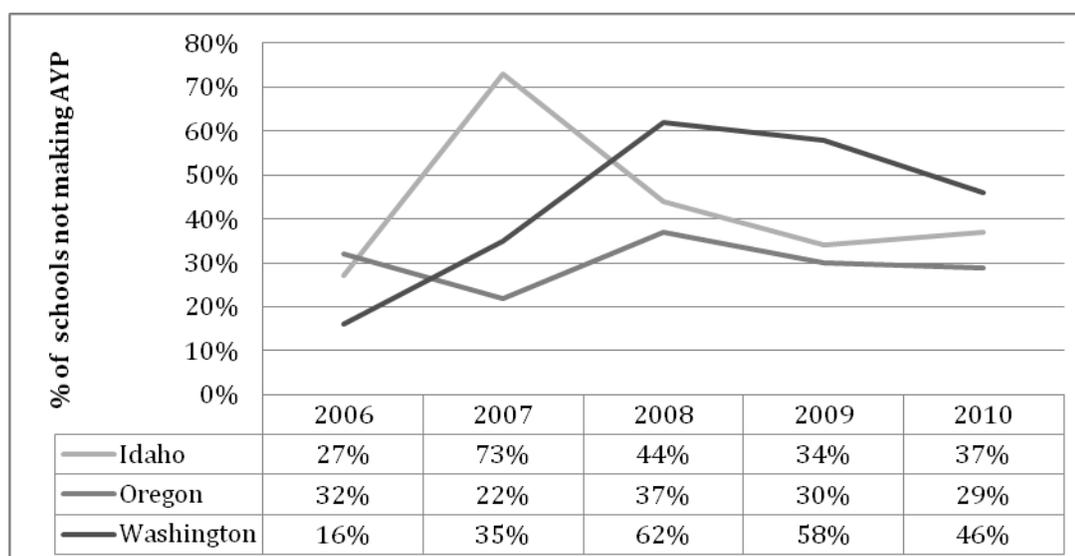


Table 2: Schools in ID, OR, and WA not Making AYP

State	Percentage of Schools Not Making AYP in 2010	Number of Schools Not Making AYP in 2010
Idaho	37%	247
Oregon	29%	357
Washington	46%	968

The main goal of NCLB was that 100% of students would meet the federal standards by 2014. The Department of Education gave the states a directive to create a system of accountability and goals that would document increasing movement toward the 100% goal. It uses these standards of measurement as a basis for determining the progress of individual districts and schools. Those schools or districts that do not meet the AYP standards are designated In Need of Improvement (INI). Once the Department places a school or district on the INI list it imposes sanctions on it to regulate its actions. These sanctions range from the negative stigma of being labeled as INI to the ultimate threat of reconstitution, restructuring, or complete takeover by the state. These actions stem from the belief that educational systems will change when they are threatened with sanctions (Orfield, Kim, Sunderman, & Greer, 2004).

Unfortunately, this negative approach to the problem fails to take into consideration the fact that NCLB does not, in and of itself, have the power to bring about its preferred outcomes. Moreover, none of the available evidence suggests that any of the NCLB's sanctions can bring about an increase in the academic achievement of students in the affected school (Brady, 2003). Indeed, research has shown that the threat of the

consequences of not meeting federally imposed standards runs counter to the overall intentions of the legislation and could in fact harm those schools that are in greatest need (Daly et al., 2011). Tyack (1991) has discovered, moreover, that few schools had attempted to bring about fundamental pedagogical change and that those that had were likely to fail. If NCLB ultimately harms the very schools it was designed to help, then one wonders why the federal government does not simply rescind it.

Change, Threat, and the Pressure of School Reform

Many well-known educational theorists, among them Alan Daly, Michael Fullan, Douglas Reeves, and Robert Evans, have written articles and books on educational change. Michael Fullan alone has written 10 books on education that include the word “*change*” in the title. With such an abundance of resources at their disposal educators should, on the face of it, be able both to understand change and to implement it with a minimum of difficulty. However, many of the aforementioned experts contend that change is hard to understand and even harder to manage and that it is nearly impossible to predict outcomes (Evans, 1996; Fullan, 2001; Reeves, 2009).

The influence of the federal government’s expectation for change is evident throughout the nation’s public schools and its increasing demands for improvement lie behind the sanctions included in the 2001 NCLB standards (Connolly & James, 2011; Olsen & Sexton, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, 2002). These demands for improvement, coupled with the controversy surrounding the advisability of altering the role of federal, state, and district administrators in order to force change at the local level, have increased the pressure on public school employees (Connolly & James, 2011; Griffith, 2004; Sundermand, et al., 2004). Although NCLB gives individual states

flexibility, as far as assessment and deadlines for the implementation of reforms are concerned, the dismal results of schools' recent attempts to enable 100% of their students to meet federal standards have made both educators and the general public apprehensive (Adequate Yearly Progress, 2011). Moreover, the freedom NCLB grants to individual states to create their own assessments and deadlines for compliance serves to pit one state against another (as far as federal funding is concerned) and thereby increases the stress on the nation's public education systems (Popham, 2009).

Meeting federal targets and avoiding the negative consequences of falling short of AYP targets have become the primary focus of public schools (Griffith, 2004; Shannon, 2011; Popham, 2009). As we have already seen, the threat of these consequences runs counter to the overall intentions of the legislation and could be harming those schools in greatest need (Daly et al., 2011). This harm takes the form of stress that reduces the ability of individuals or organizations to increase capacity. Ironically, the first stressor is the trickle-down effect of the urgent tone with which presidents of the United States have declared their expectations with respect to educational reform. President Johnson, for example, declared that he was signing the ESEA legislation into law on a Sunday because he did not want to delay action that would strengthen the nation's schools. He hoped his sense of urgency would send a clear message to everyone responsible for working towards the goals set forth in the ESEA (Johnson, 1965). In 2010, President Obama stated that his government's new blueprint for educational reform must raise expectations and become a national priority (U.S. Department of Education, 2010a). This top-down approach has also created a threatening environment for public educators in that national leaders are expecting the continual improvement of an educational system that is, by nature, conservative (Fullan, 1993). The increasing involvement of the federal

government, coupled with its increasingly rigorous standards and expectations, forces public educators to live under the threat of losing their jobs unless they bring about an increase in the academic achievement of their students by a specified deadline (Miller, 2011).

Several researchers have studied schools' responses to the imposition of sanctions and the results of their efforts to address the concerns that led to their being penalized in this way (Connolly & James, 2011; Conley & Goldman, 2000; Griffith, 2004; Latham & Pinder, 2005; Olsen & Sexton, 2007). Federal and state agencies impose sanctions so that schools and districts will take educational standards seriously and to provide an incentive for the restructuring of school systems (Mintrop & Sunderland, 2009). Prior to NCLB, many states and large jurisdictions already had systems of accountability, including sanctions, in place. However, the results of these initiatives have been inconclusive at best. NCLB attempts to bring about change through fear of sanctions because no lower-level educational organization has yet developed effective systems of support for educational reform (Mintrop & Trujillo, 2005). Nevertheless, some highly placed governmental officials have been openly critical of NCLB. For example, in 2010 Diane Ravitch, former Assistant Secretary of Education, expressed her distrust of the Act and her doubts about the ability of its punitive approach to effect positive change (Shannon, 2011).

Sanctions have worked, however, when schools and districts are confident that they are based on proven results and submit to them voluntarily (Daly et al., 2011; Evans, 1996; Pellicer, 2003). On the other hand, sanctions are likely to fail when they are not backed up by research findings, and when those on the front lines of reform do not have confidence in them (Fullan, 2001; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Mintrop & Sunderman,

2009; Olsen & Sexton, 2009). NCLB has not only failed to gain the confidence of most teachers, principals, and district administrators but has also caused them much frustration and confusion. Public support for public education has declined as a result (Shannon, 2011). The principal reason for the ineffectiveness of NCLB in increasing students' academic achievement and in gaining support from the educational rank and file lies in the failure of its proponents to link their theories to proven research strategies (Mintrop & Sunderman, 2009). Indeed, district employees and administrators are oftentimes at odds on how to proceed (Daly et al., 2011; Evans, 1996). This situation has created distrust among many school and district personnel. I believe that threat-rigidity theory offers a helpful understanding of the underlying causes of this response.

Threat-Rigid Response Theory and the Role of Organizational Trust

Since NCLB places such store in the threat of the imposition of sanctions, educational leaders would do well to try to understand this threat from the perspective of threat-rigidity theory. The threat-rigidity thesis originated in a study on corporate failures. Staw, Sundelands, and Dutton (1981) examined the inability of an employee or a group of employees to make rational and effective decisions when faced with a real or perceived threat. As one might expect, employees faced with such circumstances are less able to make decisions that lead to increased efficiencies and output. Threat-rigidity theory proposes that the introduction of a threat into the work environment alters two critical system-wide processes: information and control. Threat will limit an organization's flexibility of response and may lead to unstable reactions on the part of individuals within it. Moreover, threat at the organizational level may lead not only to

faulty decision-making, but to a perception that the organization is failing, and even to actual failure.

As far as the implications of the theory for educational systems are concerned, one study found that schools with higher populations of socioeconomically-disadvantaged students experienced higher levels of stress on campus (Griffith, 2004). Another study concluded that schools that had INI status and were operating under NCLB sanctions were experiencing stress that would likely lead to a threat-rigid response (Daly et al., 2011). Since the ESEA was designed to help under-performing students, and since schools with large populations of such students are likely to be INI, it should come as no surprise those schools operating under sanctions experience higher levels of stress. Griffith (2004) has suggested that schools experiencing a high degree of stress have less control over their internal processes. Since the success of reform-oriented initiatives depends to a great extent on the affected schools' ability to control their decision-making processes, the neediest schools are often hindered by the very system that was created to assist them.

School communities tend to respond to stress according to the severity of the threat their school is experiencing. In the initial stages, staff and students tend to support their leadership. However, if the threat persists, they start to blame their leaders and eventually call for their replacement (Griffith, 2004). Although leaders cannot ignore or eliminate threat-rigidity, they can negate some of its negative consequences through a deeper understanding of the process. One study reported that organizations experiencing threat-rigidity tend to rely on past experience and that they either undervalue outside resources or ignore them altogether (Shimizu, 2007). Leaders of threat-rigid systems must understand this and must consider using outside resources before moving forward

with internal solutions. In order to meet the current demands of reform efforts, school and districts must determine those aspects of the organization over which they need to exert greater control and those aspects that will require less oversight (Orton & Weick, 1999).

Reform-minded school leaders must also pay close attention to the perceptions of staff since threat-rigidity tends to cause reform efforts to collapse, especially in schools that have the greatest needs. Olsen and Sexton (2009) conducted a study on the relation between teachers' perceptions of threat-rigidity and the success of school reform efforts. Although they limited their sample to six teachers in one school, Olson and Sexton's findings nevertheless have important implications for the work of educational leaders and policymakers. The six staff members they interviewed suggested that their school's administrators were feeling such pressure to perform that they were unable to lead the school effectively. The six also thought that their superiors were restricting feedback while emphasizing administrative control, teacher conformity, and closed decision-making. This perception caused the teachers to feel hostile to and separated from their administrators. Olsen and Sexton concluded that dealing effectively with threat-rigidity plays such a critical role in successful reform efforts that law makers should take threat-rigidity into account in developing educational legislation.

Daly (2009) has examined the concept of trust in relationship to threat-rigidity. He discovered that trust plays a significant role in the reduction of both threat-rigidity and stress. As their level of stress diminishes, school personnel are better able to deal with the consequences of threat-rigidity. Several studies have examined the role trust plays in bringing about reform (Cosner, 2009; Daly, 2009; Datnow et al., 2006; Evans, 1996; Fullan 2001, 2003; Park, Henkin & Egle, 2005; Van Maele & Van Houtte, 2009). Most of these studies report that staff members become more involved in reform efforts when

both staff and administrators trust one another (Daly, 2009). Trust, from the perspective of building-level staff, has also had a positive impact on school reform efforts (Cosner, 2009). Administrators at the central office serve as critical conduits of this trust (Daly & Finnigan, 2010). Heuser, (2005), describes trust as the glue that holds a society together and empowers economic activity. That is, “[i]t allows people to combine their talents, ideas, assets, and other resources into a bank of human capital” (2005, p. 10). Because trust is so critical to the success of efforts to improve students’ academic performance, the various groups within the school system need to recognize its value and cultivate it.

Trust and the ability to respond appropriately to threat-rigidity are both critical to the success of school reform and so the leaders of school districts must understand the role that each plays in their initiatives (Fullan, 2001, 2003; Miller, Devin & Shoop, 2007; Reeves, 2009; Rosenblatt & Nord, 1999). Through cultivating trust and respect school leaders can expect gains in overall productivity and some relief from the threat of NCLB sanctions or those of future legislative renditions of ESEA (Miller, Devin, & Shoop, 2007).

The Role of the Central Office

When district leaders promote distributive leadership and build leaders’ capacity they affirm the important role that leadership plays in increasing students’ academic achievement (Lambert, 2003; Spillane, 2006). Their ability to exercise centralized control and accountability, while at the same time allowing local leaders sufficient autonomy to implement improvements at the local level, plays a crucial role in district-wide reform (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010). Researchers have recently begun to investigate the role of the central office in school improvement initiatives (Marzano &

Waters, 2010). School systems have started to move from individual autonomy toward a system of collective responsibility. Despite the discomfort that invariably accompanies such a change, all parties are coming to understand that the central office must play a greater role in efforts towards reform (Darling-Hammond et al., 2003).

Marzano and Waters (2007) have shown that the central office plays a statistically significant role in fostering students' academic achievement. Their more recent meta-analysis (Marzano & Waters, 2010) found a positive correlation between the central office administration, and especially the superintendent, and student achievement. However, this study also found that the superintendent cannot do the work alone but must share the leadership load with the school board and district administrators. Marzano and Waters (2010) found statistically significant correlations among five such district-level responsibilities: goal-setting, maintaining non-negotiable goals, aligning board and district responsibilities, maintaining a monitoring system for goals, and targeting resources for the accomplishment of goals. Indeed, the ability of the central office to set direction has a greater impact on a district's success in attaining its goals than any other aspect of its role (Leithwood, Aitken, & Jantzi, 2006). Successful direction-setting includes providing staff with an understanding of the purpose of their overall work, developing consensus around district goals and priorities, and encouraging staff to be effective participants in decision-making.

Educational theorists have also studied the relationship between district-level leadership and students' academic achievement and have found a correlation between high achievement and a high degree of school autonomy (Adamowski & Petrilli, 2007; Eck & Goodwin 2010; Marzano & Waters, 2010). Central office administrators need to provide schools with enough autonomy to respond creatively to specific district-defined

goals and expectations. Autonomy also involves developing clear goals and expectations at the school level vis-à-vis academic achievement, developing a plan for sustaining adequate levels of achievement, and setting high standards for staff performance (Eck & Goodwin, 2010). District leaders, for their part, must ensure that expectations are high, support is sufficient, and autonomy is clearly defined. The distinction between a school's autonomy and its accountability to the district plays a statistically significant role with respect to the district-wide level of student achievement (Marzano & Waters, 2010). Finding the right balance between autonomy and accountability is difficult, but district leaders and superintendents must rise to the challenge. Attempting to shield the organization from problems and ignoring or bypassing conflict will lead to failure (Miller, Devin, & Shoop, 2007).

Central-office administrators' day-to-day challenges and responsibilities differ markedly from those of their school-level counterparts, even though both groups will be evaluated in the same way and will likely have had similar professional development and training (Novak, Reilly, & Williams, 2010). Because central-office administrators have likely not had training specific to their roles, their supervisors must pay special attention to their professional development needs. One district attempted to address these deficiencies by concentrating on communication skills, such as listening, questioning, feedback, and differentiated mentoring (Novak, Reilly, & Williams, 2010). Its leaders realized that communication engenders system-wide trust which plays a critical role in the success of any attempt at reforming schools and improving academic performance (Chrispeels et al., 2008).

Researchers and practitioners need to understand the nature of the relationship between the central office and the schools under its jurisdiction. Johnson and Chrispeels

(2010) conducted a qualitative study of this relationship and found that it made a substantial contribution to the success of reform-related initiatives; hence the need for the central office to do an effective job of balancing oversight, accountability, and autonomy. Johnson and Chrispeels also discovered that district leaders need to foster district-wide relational and ideological connections if they expect to encourage commitment, accountability, instructional focus, and learning throughout the system. The central office must therefore tailor its policies and procedures to ensure that all participants in the organization can make these relational and ideological connections.

The Role of Communication in Reform Efforts

Reformers cannot ignore the fact that school administrators and their staff feel threatened by federal mandates and sanctions. To overcome this fear the central office must provide adequate support to the schools in its district and do all it can to foster trust. Sustaining this trust will require effective communication strategies. The literature both in and outside of the field of education confirms that communication plays an essential role in any organization's attempt at self-improvement (Bartol & Zhang, 2007; Fullan, 2003; Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010; Patterson et al., 2002; Robinson, 2002; Tobias & Tobias, 2003). Indeed, one study found that the most important element in an effective strategy for school district reform is open and honest communication among members of the organization (Rusch, 2005).

School leaders must also learn to communicate effectively if they expect to meet the ever-increasing challenges facing public education (Miller, Devin, & Shoop, 2007). To do so they will need to ensure that both they and their audience feel safe and respect one another (Copland & Knapp, 2006). District leaders, too, should see to it that they

create an environment in which communication can flourish. Copeland and Knapp (2006) found that leaders who can communicate effectively and who know how to develop systems to enable effective communication between schools and the central office are more likely to be successful. Without systems of supportive communication, school and district level administrators will have to contend with toxic workplaces characterized by threat-rigid responses, stress, and poor morale (Olsen & Sexton, 2009). Alan Daly et al. (2011) discovered that when district office administrators responded to a threat-rigid environment brought on by NCLB or other outside influences the communication between the central office and schools deteriorated, information exchange slowed to a trickle, and collaboration ground to a halt. By contrast, districts that reported positive communication systems had high levels of trust and collaboration and minimal levels of stress (Chhuon et al., 2008). Agullard and Goughnour (2006) have described the role of communication in school reform efforts as a best friend or worst enemy. Good communication invariably leads to the development of a well-articulated strategy for reform; poor communication can derail the entire process (Chhuon et al., 2008).

Additional studies have shown that open and effective communication systems allow an organization to grow, enrich its environment, and foster positive change. For example, Johnson and Chrispeels (2010) examined patterns of communication between the central office and schools in the context of school reform and discovered that districts need to proclaim a precise and unified message that supports reform-related initiatives and meets the expectations of the district community. They also found that principals, as communicators, serve as both the conduit of the district's messages to the schools and the voice of the teachers to the district. By taking advantage of such diverse media as email,

newsletters, and podcasts principals help to facilitate two-way communication. Johnson and Chrispeels (2010) also concluded that face-to-face communication, in the form of central office site visits, collaborative professional development, and open administrative meetings, contributes to the development of strong district-wide dialogue.

Conclusion

Many times the dream of educational reform overshadows the practical realities associated with its realization. All participants in the educational system will always yearn to increase efficiency, improve systems, and increase their students' learning. Educational leaders must therefore take a practical approach and resist the desire for change for change's sake that lies at the heart of many proposals for reform (Tyack, 2006). Educators will always try to fulfill their moral obligation to do the best for all students, and so, as Marzano and Waters (2010) have argued, district leaders must be held responsible for leading the charge, for navigating around the many obstacles that all participants will invariably encounter so that reform efforts will ultimately bear the fruit of student success. To this end, central office administrators, including superintendents, will have to rely on past practice and research for answers, suggestions, and guidance.

I have not discovered any research dealing with educational leaders' perceptions of the effectiveness of the communication between central office staff and schools, much less how such perceptions might be related to the success of reform efforts. One thing is certain, however: every person wants to be understood, affirmed, validated, and appreciated (Irmsher, 1998). This truth applies both to school superintendents and to principals faced with the demands of school reform mandates.

CHAPTER 3

Method

Introduction

The primary purpose of this study is to use existing data to examine the relationship between high school staffs' perception of the effectiveness of the two-way communication between their district and its schools and the percentage of students meeting state achievement standards in their district. A secondary purpose of this study is to explore any potential correlation between the size of the school district and staffs' perception of communication between the district and school. To investigate these questions, I used the data collected from the Educational Effectiveness Survey, Staff Edition, by the Center for Educational Effectiveness.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to investigate perceptions of organizational communication and their connection to student achievement by means of the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between high schools' staffs' perception of communication between the district office and schools and levels of students meeting state reading/language arts and math assessment standards?
2. What is the relationship between the perception of communication and the enrollment size of the district?

Setting and Participants

The participants in this study were teachers in 19 public high schools from 14 school districts throughout Idaho, Washington, and Oregon. The districts in the sample could be categorized as being small to fairly large, that is, they have student populations of between 200 and 22,000. Each district contains between one and five high schools. The participants were given the opportunity to participate in the anonymous survey by a district supported survey through the Center for Educational Effectiveness. The survey data is drawn from the 3,132 individual surveys (out of a total of 4,098 that were completed over a three-year period covering the 2008-09 through 2010-11 school years) that turned out to be valid for the purpose of this research. The student and staff demographic data of the participating districts is presented in chapter 4.

Role of the Researcher

One of my roles as researcher was to ensure that the confidentiality of the data followed the Information Sharing and Confidentiality Agreement set forth in the guidelines of the Center for Educational Effectiveness. To this end I have maintained the strictest confidence with respect to the staff survey data and have ensured that I did not indicate which schools or districts generated a particular set of data. In addition, after having matched a particular district's survey data with state-level achievement data, I replaced the names of the corresponding districts and schools with non-specific identifiers. I currently serve as acting superintendent in one of the districts in the study.

In addition, I am submitting this study to George Fox University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education. With these limitations in mind, I will use the understanding of the principles of ethical research that I

have gained through my studies at George Fox University to ensure that my role will not influence the results of this study.

Research Design and Procedures

In this quantitative study I have collected the answers to two of the questions on the Staff Survey of the Center for Educational Effectiveness (CEE) that pertain to teachers' perceptions of the communication between their schools and the district office, namely, "*There is effective, two-way communication between the district and our school*" and "*Collaboration between district and schools is based on trust and respect*". I then compared the resulting data with the combined results on state standard achievement tests in reading/language arts and math of students from the participating schools. By means of this comparison I have assessed the success of efforts to improve the academic performance of students in the schools in question.

According to the instructions provided with the survey, respondents had to answer each question using an ordinal scale corresponding to the following opinions: *almost always true, often true, sometimes true, seldom true, almost never true, and no opinion*. For the purposes of this study I have considered the responses *almost always true* and *often true* to indicate effective communication. I have represented student achievement by means of a mean score based on the percentage of students meeting or exceeding the reading/language arts and mathematics benchmarks of a given state. I have then analyzed both sets of data to detect any correlation between student achievement and teachers' perception of the communication between the district and their school. Finally, I have analyzed the same sets of results to determine whether there is any relationship, in a

given district, between the level of the teachers' perceptions, enrollment, and student achievement.

Instrumentation/Materials

I reviewed the previous documented reliability and validity tests of both the CEE Staff Survey and state assessments. These evaluations have determined both tools to be reliable and valid. The CEE's survey is based on a year-long meta-analysis of 20 years of research (Center for Educational Effectiveness, 2011). This meta-analysis identified nine characteristics of high-performing schools: clear and shared focus, high standards and expectations, effective leadership, high levels of collaboration and communication, high levels of community involvement, supportive learning environment, frequent monitoring of teaching and learning, focused professional development, and high quality curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

I restricted my data collection to the section of the survey dealing with the characteristic "high levels of collaboration and communication," and, within this section, to the question, "Is there effective, two-way communication between the district and our school?" I measured the reliability of the survey using the internal consistency method along with the Cronbach's alpha co-efficient method. According to these tools the threshold of 0.70 and above is an acceptable norm. The Cronbach's alpha internal factor for reliability for the collaboration and communication sections of the Educational Effectiveness Survey, V9.0 and V9.1, was 0.88 with an $n = 38,213$. My confirmation of the reliability of the survey supports the CEE's claim that measuring the actions of school district employees and the way in which they accomplish their work is the best way to determine the effectiveness of a particular school or district. The Center for Educational

Effectiveness Staff Survey V9.1 *Getting the Most from your EES Supplemental Information* is a useful resource and was used in the analysis of data for this research project.

As I mentioned above, I measured student achievement as an overall percentage of students who meet pre-established academic standards (Griffith, 2004) in reading/language arts and math. The individual state instruments are the Idaho Standards Achievement Test (ISAT), the Oregon Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (OAKS), and the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL), Measurement of Student Progress (MSP), and the High School Proficiency Exam (HSPE). Multiple investigations, using various kinds of evidence, have examined content, concurrent, and criterion validation and have found all state tests in reading and mathematics to be valid (ISAT, 2010; ODE, 2007; OSPI, 2011 & 2010). The reliability standards also established the validity of all three states' tests. The Washington assessments had a reliability range of from 0.81 to 0.91 (OSPI, 2011); the Idaho assessments had a reliability range of from 0.87 to 0.91 (ISAT, 2010); and the Oregon assessments had a reliability range of from 0.84 to 0.99 (ODE, 2007).

Data Analysis

My working hypothesis for this study is that an increase in teachers' positive perception of two-way communication between their school and the central office will be associated with an increase in student achievement. I used the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 21) to perform a descriptive analysis to provide univariate statistics that I have used to generate initial information concerning the data. Frequency

distributions and measures of central tendency show the mean, variance, and standard deviation for the variables used in this study.

I also performed a bivariate analysis, using zero-order correlation, also known as Pearson's correlation (Muijs, 2004), of the relationship between student achievement and a particular staff's perception of the effectiveness of the two-way communication between their school and the central office. I have use the standard threshold of <0.05 to determine statistical significance for the purpose of this study's primary question.

The secondary research question presupposes that the size of a school district will correlate to a given staff's positive perception of communication between the school and district. I conducted the requisite analysis by means of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 21). This descriptive analysis yielded the univariate statistics that I have used in providing interpretational and informational data.

Research Ethics

I have maintained the strictest confidence in connection with the survey data collected for this study. I have, for example, kept confidential all participant information or consent information and have stored it in a locked filing cabinet. I have also followed to the letter all of the guidelines set forth in the Center for Educational Effectiveness Information Sharing Agreement.

CHAPTER 4

Results

Introduction

This chapter examines the relationship between district wide communication, student performance, and the number of students enrolled in a given district. I have used three years of survey data (2008 to 2011, N = 4,098) from the Center for Educational Effectiveness Educational Effectiveness Survey in this analysis. I compared these data to the combination of state reading/language arts and math assessment results for all high schools (N = 19) in each of the analyzed districts (N = 14). Finally, I compared the survey data to the corresponding three-year average combined student enrollment of the districts in the sample.

This study is based on the hypothesis that an increase in a staff's perception of positive two-way communication between their school and the central office will be associated with an increase in student achievement. To test this hypothesis, I conducted a further analysis comparing the size of the districts' student enrollment with the staffs' positive perception of communication between their school and the central office. Additionally, by means of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 21) I performed a descriptive analysis to generate univariate statistics that I used to provide interpretational and informational data.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to investigate perceptions of organizational communication and their connection to student achievement. My objective is that this

research will provide a clearer understanding of the link between the effectiveness of organizational communication and students' academic success. To these ends I attempted to answer the following research questions:

Primary Research Question

What is the relationship between high school staffs' perception of communication between the district office and their schools and the degree to which students in the schools concerned meet state reading/language arts and math assessment standards?

Secondary Research Question

What is the relationship between the perception of communication and the enrollment size of the district?

Operationalization and Measurement of Variables

I have set forth below my operational definitions and measurement indicators of the independent and dependent variables.

Independent Variables

I gathered data on the independent variable, namely, staffs' perception of communication between their schools and the central office using the Center for Educational Effectiveness' Educational Effectiveness Staff Survey (CEE V 9.0 and V 9.1) which was distributed manually at each school. The raw data were then sent to the Center for Educational Effectiveness to be tabulated. Over a three-year period (2008 - 2011), copies of the survey were used for the purpose of this study's sample group, which included districts (N=14), high schools (N = 19), and staff (N = 4,098) in Idaho, Oregon, and Washington. I examined two survey questions: "Collaboration between district and schools is based on trust and respect"; and "There is effective, two-way communication

between the district and our school” to construct the independent variable. To analyze the reliability of combining these two survey questions into a scale measurement I used Cronbach’s Coefficient Alpha Reliability test. The Cronbach’s Coefficient Alpha indicated a reliability of .823 (Table 3). This indicates an optimal reliability ($\alpha > .8$) of the independent variable.

Table 3. Reliability Statistics for Independent Variable: Staff Survey

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.823	2

Dependent Variables

The two dependent variables used in this study were the average percentage of students passing both the literacy and the math state assessments in a given district during each of the three years of the study and the three year average district-wide student population over the same three year period.

Primary Research Question Dependent Variables

To analyze the primary research question, I calculated the average percentage of students who met or exceeded the reading/language arts and math state assessments in each of the three years. To analyze the reliability of combining these two 2008-2009 assessment items into a scale measure I conducted Cronbach’s Coefficient Alpha

reliability. The 2008-2009 assessment data had a Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha reliability of .858. This indicates an optimal reliability ($\alpha > .8$) of the dependent variable (see Table 4).

Table 4. Reliability Statistics for Dependent Variable: 2008-09 Assessment Results

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.858	2

The 2009-2010 assessment data yielded a Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha reliability of .873. This indicates an optimal reliability ($\alpha > .8$) of the dependent variable (see Table 5).

Table 5. Reliability Statistics for Dependent Variable: 2009-10 Assessment Results

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.873	2

The 2010-2011 assessment data yielded a Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha reliability of .819. This indicates an optimal reliability ($\alpha > .8$) of the dependent variable (see Table 6).

Table 6. Reliability Statistics for Dependent Variable: 2010-11 Assessment Results

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.819	2

Secondary Research Questions Dependent Variables

To analyze the secondary research question I calculated the average enrollment in a given district over the three-year period (the 2008-09 school year to the 2010-11 school year). I then used the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 21) to run a descriptive data analysis (see Table 7). Of the 14 districts analyzed, seven were in Washington, six in Idaho, and one in Oregon. The smallest district had an enrollment of 234 and the largest district had an enrollment of 21,932. The mean district student enrollment over the three-year period was 4,555 with a standard deviation of 5,716.

Table 7. Descriptive Statistics for District Enrollment

	2008-09 Enrollment	2009-10 Enrollment	2010-11 Enrollment	3-Year Ave. Enrollment
N Valid	14	14	14	14
Missing	0	0	0	0
Mean	4566.21	4549.86	4547.57	4554.54
Median	3111.00	3097.50	3103.50	3091.33
Std. Deviation	5696.920	5724.499	5725.346	5715.37
Range	21752	21932	21926	21870.00
Minimum	268	235	234	245.66
Maximum	22020	22167	22160	22115.66

Findings

This section presents the findings to the primary research question and the secondary research questions.

Correlation of Primary Research Question

In the course of the study I analyzed staff survey and student achievement data from 19 public high schools in Idaho, Oregon and Washington over the course of three consecutive school years, from the fall of 2008 to the spring of 2011. All schools in this study participated in the Educational Effectiveness Survey over the three-year period described above.

Using the results of two questions from the Educational Effectiveness Survey of Staff from the Center for Educational Effectiveness (V 9.0 and V9.1), namely, “Collaboration between district and schools is based upon trust and respect”; and “There

is effective two-way communication between the district and our school,” I performed a bivariate correlational analysis of the relationship between a staff’s positive perception of communication between their school and the central office and the percentage of students meeting or exceeding state assessment standards in both reading/language arts and math. Specifically, to analyze this relationship I used a zero-order correlation, also known as Pearson’s correlation (Muijs, 2004). I have used the standard threshold of <0.01 to determine statistical significance for the data collected in connection with the primary research question.

Table 8 represents the zero-order correlations among the variables. There is a statistically significant, positive correlation between a staff’s positive perception of communication and the level of achievement on state assessments, $r = .06, p < .001$.

Table 8. Correlation of State Assessment to Staff Communication

		State Assessment	Positive Communication
State Assessment	Pearson Correlation	1.00	.060**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
	N	3865	3132
Combined Communication	Pearson Correlation	.060**	1.00
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	
	N	3132	3132

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

Correlation of Secondary Research Question

I also used the Pearson's correlation to analyze the bivariate correlational analysis on the data related to the relationship between a staff's perception of positive communication between their school and the central office and the number of students enrolled in the district. I used the standard threshold of <0.01 to determine statistical significance for the data collected.

Table 9 represents the zero-order correlations among the variables. There is a statistically significant, negative correlation between a staff's perception of positive communication and student enrollment, $r = -.109$, $p < .000$.

Table 9. Correlation of District Enrollment to Positive Communications

		District Enrollment	Positive Communication
District Enrollment	Pearson Correlation	1	-.109**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	3865	3132
Positive Communication	Pearson Correlation	-.109**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	3132	3132

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Summary

The findings provide evidence that a staff's perception of positive communication between their school and the central office is associated with better performance on the part of that district's students (i.e., the students meet or exceed state assessed reading/language arts and math standards). However, the findings also show a negative correlation between a given staff's perception of positive communication between their school and the central office and the enrollment size of the school district in question. I also discovered that the large sample ($N = 4,098$) plays a role in the validity of the correlation analysis. Further research into district, school, and state data is needed before this finding can be generalized and used as a means of informing communication within school districts and attempts to increase student achievement in standardized tests. In chapter 5 I will discuss the findings of this study, draw conclusions, make recommendations, and explore the potential for future research.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion and Conclusions

Introduction

In this chapter I will formalize my interpretation of the results of my research into the primary and secondary research questions. I will interpret the results as set forth in chapter 4 and will analyze the shortcomings of this study. I will then conclude by presenting the implications of my research on scholarship and current practice, and by discussing the impact that the perception of positive communication between schools and their districts' central offices has on students' achievement. In addition, I will set forth the implications of my study for future research.

Interpretation of Results

My research has established a positive correlation between high school staffs' perception of positive communication between their districts' offices and their schools and the degree to which their students meet state reading/language arts and math standards. That is, as the staff members' ($N = 3132$) perceptions became more positive, the number of students meeting or exceeding state established performance requirements increased. These results had a statistical significance of 0.001 ($p = 0.001$). Although the direction of the correlation is positive, the strength of this positive correlation is weak ($r = 0.06$). These results contradict the findings of the current educational literature (Marzano & Waters, 2010) that led me to the original postulation of why I started this study.

I found a negative correlation between a given staff's perception of two-way communication and the enrollment size of the district in question. That is, as the size of the district enrollment increased while the staff's perception of positive communication decreased. These results have a strong statistical significance of 0.001 ($p = 0.001$). Although the correlation is negative, the strength of this negative correlation too is weak ($r = -0.109$). This result concurs with the findings of the current educational literature (Bartol & Zhang, 2007; Fullan, 2003; Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010; Patterson et al., 2002; Robinson, 2002; Tobias & Tobias, 2003) along with common notion of district size and its ability to have positive and productive communication among and between staff.

Shortcomings of the Research

Although the results of both research questions are statistically significant, the correlations of these results are weak. As far as staff perceptions are concerned, this study does not adequately take into account the multiplicity of perception related factors that likely came into play during the three years of the study. Another shortcoming has to do with the rather imprecise definition of the term "positive communication". Further research will require a clearer and more precise working definition, which should be included in the survey questions given to staff participants. Additional questions with respect to communication between the central office and a given district's schools would also improve the survey and central focus on this study's research inquiry.

Future researchers should also consider including in the survey all 12 questions on collaboration and communication in the "High Levels of Collaboration and Communication" section of the Center for Educational Effectiveness Survey, even though ten of these questions have to do with school-based communication. In my

research I used only two questions that deal with communication between the central office and the schools of a given district. Studying the relationship over all communication and collaboration would help to strengthen this exploration.

Another shortcoming of the study concerns the difficulty of measuring student achievement. Studies have shown that variables such as student achievement and educational perceptions are hard to define (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2012). To be more specific, the mean score of the results of performance in multiple subject areas could skew the definition of student achievement. Qualitative research could overcome this deficiency by taking into consideration the curricular foci of a given district. For example, a district might focus its efforts and staff training on a single subject. Such a narrow focus could yield high results in one academic area but an overall level of achievement that is lower than the priority focus of the school district.

Future researchers should also attempt to refine and improve this study's methodology by 1) including in the sample a greater number of districts with similar enrollments; 2) controlling for staff related factors in connection with the survey, such as digression from the topic, time constraints, and the percentage of staff completing the survey; 3) considering the roles and responsibilities of the school and central office staff; and 4) broadening the sample to include schools and districts in states other than Idaho, Oregon, and Washington that utilize the Center for Educational Effectiveness Staff Survey.

Implications for Scholarship

The premise of this study was based on my assessment of current practices in my own district along with my review of the work by Marzano and Waters (2010). For the

purpose of this section, I will associate this study's outcomes to implications for further scholarship.

As mentioned in Chapter One, Marzano and Waters (2010) indicate that district leaders should expect a decrease in the positive perception of communication whenever administrators initiate district-wide programs to improve instruction. To be specific, district office staff is sometimes under such pressure to make changes that collaboration and communication are forced to take a back seat. This pressure takes the form of guidelines and legislation that the federal government passes on to the states. The states, in turn, pass these requirements down to school districts, which pass them down to schools and ultimately to teachers. In such circumstances one can hardly expect teachers to perceive the communication between their schools and their district offices as being positive. Teachers, building administrators, central office staff, and even state level staff often ask, "Where is my voice?" I have asked many educators in the public system, from the school to the state level, about their perception of the communication between the various levels of the educational hierarchy, and they have reported that it is neither effective nor positive, because it so often comes from the top down in the form of a mandate. The increased pressure on our nation's public schools has come about partially due to the forced changes required through federal and state mandates (Connolly & James, 2011; Griffith, 2004; Sundermand, et al., 2004). Although most educationally focused legislative action is formed to support and help schools, it in fact creates a stress filled public educational setting that is counterproductive to the reasoning behind the legislative action (Griffith, 2004; Shannon, 2011; Popham, 2009). This increased pressure and ensuing stress are a byproduct of educationally based legislation and have been an impediment in public schools' ability to bring about wide spread effective

systems of support for educational reform (Mintrop & Trujillo, 2005). These toxic and stress-filled environments often create an atmosphere of distrust and puts staff and administrators at odds (Daly et al., 2011; Evans, 1996). Because of this, it is easy to see why district administrators, in line with Marzano and Waters (2010), find themselves faced with declining perceptions of positive communication.

In spite of the fact that the results of this study challenges Marzano and Waters (2010) assumptions, educators cannot overlook the role communication plays in overall educational reform efforts. Marzano and Waters (2010) challenge educators and educational leaders to look at the role communication plays in reform efforts.

Although the premise of this study was based on my interpretation of the work of Marzano and Waters (2010) as detailed above, additional studies, of which were investigated in chapter 2, help to substantiate and support the findings of this research. One specific area of research I found to help me better understand the role communication plays in reform efforts came via the threat-rigidity theory (Staw, et al., 1981). This original study on threat rigidity suggested that threat, real or perceived, limits employee's ability to make rational and effective decisions. The presence of threat in school reform efforts are directly associated with stress levels of students and staff. Additional studies show those schools with higher populations of socioeconomically-disadvantaged students and those schools under greater federal and state oversight experience greater levels of stress (Daly et al., 2011; Griffith, 2004; Olsen and Sexton, 2009; Orton & Weick, 1999). With the presence of stress in our schools, there is no surprise that further research has revealed that trust becomes as a limiting factor for many central office staff (Cosner, 2009; Daly, 2009; Datnow et al., 2006; Evans, 1996; Fullan 2001, 2003; Park, Henkin & Egley, 2005; Van Maele & Van Houtte, 2009). Griffith

(2004) reported that persistent levels of threat create an atmosphere of blame ultimately residing on the shoulders of administrators (Griffith, 2004). Since threat is related to stress, and stress limits our ability to make rational decision and bring about positive changes, how can we expect positive change to occur when educators are under the constraints of mandates and top-down reform efforts? Central office administrators must serve as positive agents of change to include trust and positive communications as a way to achieve desired end results (Daly & Finnigan, 2010).

If we, as educational leaders, understand the role threat plays in our ability to effectively secure positive educational results, then threat-rigidity must be a focus to help improve positive communications among the key educational partners, namely the central office administrators and school staff. This study provides hope that a focus on positive communication in school districts will bring about the favorable learning and working environments we expect and the academic achievement results we seek to find.

Implications for Educational Practice

The results of this study have implications that are directly related to the work of instructional improvement in which schools and districts across our nation are currently engaged. Superintendents, central office administrators and staff, and instructional leaders need to regard instructional improvement as their *raison d'être*, and they must take advantage of every possible means of bringing about progress. The growing demand for improvement puts pressure on educational organizations to change their current efforts to find more efficient and effective ways to increase the academic success of their students (Bartol & Zhang, 2007; Fullan, 2003; Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010; Patterson et al., 2002; Robinson, 2002; Tobias & Tobias, 2003). Sometimes these efforts appear to

come at the expense of collaboration and communication. As I have mentioned above, the findings of the primary research question contradicted the findings of the research that formed the basis for my study. I currently work as a school district superintendent, and my analysis of the staff survey and student achievement results in my district, coupled with my study of the relevant literature, have led me to believe that positive student performance need not come at the expense of positive perceptions about communication on the part of staff. Nevertheless, in reviewing the staff survey data of my school district, I noticed that perceptions of positive communication were decreasing at the same time as students' performance on standardized tests was improving. Of course, I appreciated the improvement in students' performance, since this is the primary focus of school districts. However, I was discouraged at my staff's increasingly negative perception of the communication between schools and the district office. Much of my distress stemmed from my belief, as an educator, in the notion that the personal connection is a foundation of both learning and responsible citizenship. I therefore felt an obligation to find the connection between positive communication and academic achievement. However, as I read *District Leadership that Works* (Marzano & Waters, 2010) I found some consolation in the authors' contention that districts should expect staff to believe communication has broken down when districts implement initiatives to improve achievement. Initially, I took this as confirmation that I should accept my staff's perceptions as being inevitable. However, I eventually found this increasing negativity to be unacceptable and foreign to the kind of working relationships that I wanted to characterize my district. As time passed, the negative correlation between students' achievement and my staff's perceptions of communication continued. Then, on reviewing Waters and Marzano's (2010) statement about decreased perceptions of positive

communication, I discovered that the statement lacked empirical support. I therefore determined to find such confirmation even though I believed that the negative correlation should not be the invariable outcome of a district's efforts at instructional reform.

Fortunately, the findings of my research indicate the opposite of what Waters and Marzano assert. Instead, they tend to confirm my intuition that positive communication, rather than the heavy hammer of directives ought to characterize educators' collaborations towards the improvement of public education. Indeed, those seeking to improve public education need to understand and take into consideration the impact positive communication have on the improvement of instruction.

As far as the secondary research question is concerned, the findings of this study indicate a negative correlation between the size of a district's enrollment and the staff's positive perception of the communication between the central office and their school. The results are statistically significant; and although the relationship is weak, it is still negative. One should not be surprised that as the size of a district increases so do the challenges of maintaining the connection between each school and the district office.

The smallest of the K-12 school districts in the sample has an average enrollment of less than 250 students and consists of a single school. The superintendent of such a small district typically wears many hats and serves as the only central office administrator. The district office in such cases is usually situated in the same building as the school and the superintendent is either a building level administrator or part of the teaching staff or both. Such a situation facilitates direct daily communication with the staff and communication becomes such a natural part of the system that staff would be hard-pressed to perceive it negatively.

In the largest school district in the sample, which has five high schools and an average K-12 enrollment of more than 22,000 students, maintaining effective communication between the district office and the schools is more challenging. This is likely due to the potential for less direct communication between the central office and the staff. This reduction in direct communication could easily lead to a less personalized communication model. Staff may consider this type of communication to be neutral and may also score it lower when asked whether it was positive. The results of this study support this notion. However, this does not mean that positive communication cannot take place in larger school districts. It does, however, mean that larger school districts, superintendents, and central office staff must take pains to implement positive communication strategies

Suggestions for Future Research

Additional questions germane to future research on this topic could include: 1) What is the relationship between perceptions vis-à-vis communication and students' achievement at the elementary and junior high/middle school level? 2) What is the relationship between the school level, perceptions of communication, and student achievement? 3) In the event that higher authorities demand improvement at the district level, can the participants in the study provide examples of staff perceiving the positive communication between schools and their district offices? 4) What is the relationship between perceptions with respect to communication and superintendents' longevity of tenure? 5) What is the relationship between improved academic performance and students' perception of communication?

Little research has so far been done into whether a direct correlation exists

between positive or negative perceptions of district-wide communication and student achievement. Investigators will also need to consider longitudinal connections between a particular district's student achievement results and the perception of that district's staff vis-à-vis communication between the district office and the schools in the district. Finally, future research will need to discover whether a particular school district can create an environment of positive communication while increasing academic success. If the findings of such research are positive, then they would reinforce one of the implications of the results of the present study, namely, that school districts can and should recognize that positive communication will help them find ways of improving their students' performance on standardized achievement tests.

Conclusion

As an acting superintendent and (I hope) an instructional leader, I found the results of this study to be a surprise, albeit a welcome one. Although the general findings in connection with the primary research question have greater implications for current practice in K-12 education, both research questions address important aspects of our public education system. To sum up, school districts, superintendents, central office staff, and instructional leaders need to create systems in which the participants not only consider positive communication to be an essential component of their work environment but regard it as an essential tool in the work of increasing student achievement.

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