

# SCHOOL CLIMATE AND TEACHER ATTITUDES TOWARD UPWARD COMMUNICATION IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

## AUTHOR

---

TIMOTHY J. RAFFERTY is Assistant Professor in the Educational Leadership Department of Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio.

## ABSTRACT

---

*The purpose of this study was to describe the relationship between school climate and teacher attitudes toward upward communication of information to the principal. Research literature in organizational climate, school climate, and organizational communication was reviewed. A survey questionnaire assessed the perceptions of educators in a population of twenty-six high schools. Research questions were developed to determine if teachers in open climate schools differed from teachers in closed climate schools in their perceptions and attitudes regarding upward communication with their principal. Statistically significant differences were found in teacher perceptions relative to communication in the teacher-principal dyad. Findings suggest that the open upward flow of relevant information from teacher to principal in secondary schools more prevalent in open school climates.*

Educational leaders are facing many barriers to educational effectiveness. These barriers transcend the traditional challenges presented by changing student demographics, resource reductions, increased operating costs, and the urgency to produce immediate achievement gains while providing quality learning experiences for students. Concealed within and throughout the observable and measurable barriers to edu-

cational effectiveness may be the more subtle presence of fear or distrust in working relationships. Fear and distrust in this context (i. e., at the school level) are organizational phenomena that negatively affect the commitment, motivation, confidence, and perceptions of teachers at work. A common manifestation of fear or distrust is a reluctance of organizational members to speak out about problems, needed changes/improvements, or other work-related issues (Ryan & Oestreich, 1991). Conversely, trust in relationships, particularly in the teacher-principal dyad, positively affects teachers' willingness to speak out about important work-related issues.

The goal of this study is to begin to describe the relationship between school climate and communication. More specifically it describes teachers' willingness to upwardly communicate about school-related issues and concerns in relation to school climate.

Fundamental to this inquiry is the assumption that school improvement, reform, and excellence are directly related to what teachers do and think. Their importance to the organization and the effectiveness of schools cannot be overstated. Sirotnik (1989) reminded us that, ". . . it must not be forgotten where the ultimate power to change is and always has been – in the heads, hands, and hearts of the educators who work in our schools" (p.109). Further, it is the interaction patterns existing among teachers and administrators that largely determine the effectiveness of a school (Barth, 1990; Johnson & Johnson, 1989). Important to this investigation is Barth's claim that the extent to which teacher-principal interactions are generally supportive and trusting, or adversarial and suspicious, is reflected in most other relationships in the school (p. 19).

While research in the field of organizational communication has flourished for several decades, little inquiry has been devoted to organizational communication in schools or, more specifically, to the upward communication between teacher and principal. To examine upward communication, it is important to have some degree of appreciation for the paradox that organizations present: that "people create, maintain, and control organizations, yet organizations attain a life of their own and often overshadow, constrain, and manipulate their members" (Poole & McPhee, 1983, p.195).

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Barnard (1968) defined an organization as "a system of consciously coordinated activities or forces of two or more persons" (p. 73). Similarly, Weick (1979) suggested that most "things" in organizations are actually relationships and that events or outcomes are "dependent on the strength of the ties, the direction of influence, the time it takes for information in the form of differences to move around circuits" (p. 88).

This review is designed to provide a systems perspective of people interacting through communication in organizations. First, an overview of organizational/school climate serves to describe the nature and measurement of school climate and to emphasize the paramount role and importance of the climate construct in the school. Next, upward communication between superior and subordinate (i. e., principal and teacher in this study) and upward communication distortion is reviewed within the context of organizational communication and climate.

## ORGANIZATIONAL/SCHOOL CLIMATE

The environment has long been recognized as a powerful influence on the perceptions and, therefore, behaviors of individuals (Downey, Hellreigel, & Slocum, 1975; Pritchard & Karasick, 1973; Shadur, Kienzle, & Rodwell, 1999). In organizations, the quality of the internal environment as experienced by organizational members is generally referred to as organizational climate. Staw (1975) suggested that climate perceptions represent the apprehension of meaningful order in a perceiver's world and that perceived meaningfulness based on cues in that world is the basis for behavior. Others proposed that climate is dependent upon organizational structure attributes such as locus of decision-making rules, hierarchical organization structure, size of organization, one's position in the hierarchy, leadership style, etc. (Litwin & Stringer, 1968; Hall & Lawler, 1969; Schneider & Hall, 1972). Climate in this sense is generally assessed through organizational members' perceptions and descriptions of situational practices and procedures. For example, Stimson and LaBelle (1971), using the *Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire* (OCDQ), found that highly bureaucratic educational systems are more likely to be per-

ceived by teachers as "closed" climates than less bureaucratic organizations.

School climate is organizational climate with context specificity. It embraces the milieu of personalities, the principal and teachers, interacting within the sociological and psychological framework present in all schools. According to Norton (1984), a school's climate plays a direct and critical role in determining what the school is and what it might become. The climate sets the tone for the school's approach to resolving problems, trust and mutual respect, attitudes, and generating new ideas. Poole and McPhee (1983) argued that the focus of school climate research must be on interaction processes, because climate is a function of the day-to-day practices in organizations and, simultaneously, a structure for interpreting or understanding specific events within the organization.

Attempts to address the climate construct in schools are largely attributable to the pioneering efforts of Halpin and Croft (1963). They describe organizational climate in general terms as teachers' perceptions of their school environment. Their OCDQ is the best known instrument developed for assessing school climate. By focusing on principal-teacher and teacher-teacher relationships, the questionnaire identifies whether the overall school climate is open or closed. However, the original OCDQ was designed specifically for the elementary school setting and has been criticized for not being well suited for the study of secondary schools (Carver & Sergiovanni, 1969). Secondary schools are different from elementary schools in a number of important ways, not the least of which is their size, potential for specialization, and culture.

In response to this criticism, Hoy, Tarter, and Kottkamp (1990) developed the Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire for Secondary Schools (OCDQ-RS) to discover patterns of teacher and administrator behaviors in secondary schools. The five dimensions of school climate represented in the OCDQ-RS fall into two categories: principal behavior; and teacher behavior related to interactions and relationships with students, colleagues, and the principal. Hoy et al. recognized that a considerable degree of the value of the OCDQ-RS lies in its ability to describe interaction patterns in a school. An essential vehicle for interaction, as well as an essential feature of interaction systems, is the communication network found in organizations and

the observable relationships and practices that it involves (Hoy et al.; Poole & McPhee).

In his landmark research, Andrews (1965) noted a positive correlation between principal personality and leadership style and the overall openness or "closedness" of school climate. That is, open climate schools tended to have confident, cheerful, sociable, and resourceful principals, while principals in closed climate schools tended to be evasive, traditional, worried, and frustrated. Conceptually then, school climate could be described as the perceived state of the organization, which is an outcome of superior-subordinate (i. e., principal-teacher) interaction as organization members seek to fulfill their prescribed duties and satisfy their individual needs.

## COMMUNICATION

It is generally accepted that effective communication is at the heart of effective management. Weick claimed that the words, symbols, and actions of human actors construct and sustain their social realities. Meaning, therefore, does not reside in organizational messages, events, or communication channels. Instead, meaning resides in people and evolves through their daily discourse and social interactions. Communication, then, is not simply an event that takes place inside an organization where people transmit oral and written messages; rather, it is a continual process of creating and/or reaffirming the social reality that makes the organization (Birk & Burk, 2000).

Theorists and researchers in organizational communication, organizational development, and educational leadership have stressed the role of communication and climate as a primary mechanism for effective organizational adaptivity and improvement (Schlechty, 1990; Senge, 1990; Sergiovanni, 1990; Weick).

Information is relevant data gained from the meanings that people create through shared interpretive schemes (Putnam, 1986) and is an essential component of organizing. Openness in communication (that is, the free flow of information) then, is essential in creating and maintaining the effective school. Yet, "because information fed up the line is often utilized for control purposes" (Katz & Kahn, 1978, p. 447), it is often the victim of decreased accuracy.

Perrow (1990) argued that traditional arrangements in organizational hierarchies promote hesitance or fear of " . . . passing bad news

up the ladder or of suggesting change" (p. 29) and Sweetland (2001) reported that bureaucratic structures are pervasive in the organizational life of schools. When relevant information may reflect unfavorably upon the sender, it can be systematically omitted or altered. As messages are sent to superiors (e. g., the principal), information is filtered and negative information may be altered or omitted resulting in constrained, limited, or poor quality upward communication. This is the problem, and to the extent that it is true, the quantity and accuracy of teacher-to-principal communication affects the quality of schools.

Clearly, the seminal research related to organizational climate and communication occurred during the 1970s. Most follow-up inquiry has been limited to clarifying and contextualizing this seminal work. The literature provides an interpretation of school climate and communication as a function of the organization members' perceptions. This study offers an interactive interpretation of the relationship between teacher perceptions and school climate as evidenced by communication patterns that develop, and suggests that each informs and shapes the other. Given the literature base related to school climate and communication distortion, further examination of this interactive relationship seems warranted, especially given the lack of more recent inquiry on the subject.

## METHOD

### *THE SURVEY INSTRUMENT*

The literature is replete with evidence that supports the influence of the principal on the school environment and with instruments designed to assess school climate that focus on principal-teacher relationships. Two surveys were combined and used in this study, the *Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire for Secondary Schools* (OCDQ-RS) (Hoy et al.) and the *Communication Climate Inventory* (CCI) (Dennis, 1975). In addition, a list of *strategic and work-related school issues* served as a framework.

Hoy et al. developed the OCDQ-RS to discover and describe patterns of teacher and administrator behaviors in secondary schools. They recognized that a considerable degree of the value of the OCDQ-RS lies in its ability to describe interaction patterns in a school. Five specific subtests or aspects of school climate represented in the OCDQ-RS fall into two primary categories: principal behaviors,

and teacher behaviors (as they relate to interactions and relationships with students, colleagues, and the principal). The OCDQ-RS was used to measure teacher perception of school climate. Refer to Hoy et al. (p. 54) for information related to the development, as well as validity and reliability measures of the five subtests. The authors summarized each of the five subtests as follows:

- *Supportive principal behavior* is directed toward both the social needs and task achievement of the faculty. The principal is helpful, genuinely concerned with teachers, and attempts to motivate them by using constructive criticism and by setting an example through hard work.
- *Directive principal behavior* is rigid and domineering controlling. The principal maintains close and constant monitoring of all teachers and school activities down to the smallest detail.
- *Engaged teacher behavior* reflects a faculty in which teachers are proud of their school, enjoy working with each other, are supportive of their colleagues, and committed to the success of their students.
- *Frustrated teacher behavior* depicts a faculty that feels itself burdened with routine duties, administrative paperwork, and excessive assignment unrelated to teaching.
- *Intimate teacher behavior* reflects a strong and cohesive network of social relations among the faculty. (p. 54)

Two subtests from Dennis's *Communication Climate Inventory* (CCI) were adapted to the high school context and employed to describe teachers' perceptions of their (1) opportunities for upward communication and (2) the principal's communication supportiveness. Items comprising the five subtests of the OCDQ-RS and the two subtests of the CCI were combined creating one section of the survey instrument. For this section, a four-point Likert-type scale was used to represent the extent to which each item was perceived to be present, from Little Extent (value = 1) to Very Great Extent (value = 4).

A second section of the instrument consisted of a list of twenty-seven specific school issues identified by panels of experts (i. e., master teachers) as commonly experienced by educators. The specific school issues were categorized as either *strategic* or *work-related*. The *strategic school issues* category contained items that relate to personnel management functions and administrative policy in a

school, while the *work-related school issues* were items pertaining to who will perform the work that gets done in schools and how those tasks will be performed (Jablin, 1980). Again, a four-point Likert-type scale was used to represent each respondent's *willingness* or *hesitance* to communicate about each item to his/her principal. Response opportunities ranged from Very Hesitant (value = 1) to Very Willing (value = 4).

### THE POPULATION

Forty-one secondary schools located in thirteen counties in the western portion of Ohio were systematically targeted as the population. The targeted schools represented the entire population of secondary schools meeting the selection criteria in identified counties. The investigation ultimately involved 26 of the 41 (63.4%) schools and collectively represented 780 teachers, counselors, and library-media specialists. The participating schools represented an in-depth, systematic sampling of a specific stratum of county schools in the state. The selection criteria required that participating schools:

- be comprised of twenty-two to forty certificated teachers, counselors, and library-media specialists in grades nine through twelve (according to the *Ohio Department of Education's Education Directory, 1999-2000*),
- be comprehensive (i.e., not specialized such as in a vocational school, magnet school, alternative school, and the like) in curriculum,
- be under the jurisdiction or service provision of an educational service center or county office of education (i. e., a school within a county local school district),
- be free of special influences that may have posed threats to internal validity by inordinately affecting teachers' perceptions of school and/or communication climate (e. g., teacher association-administration contract negotiation impasse, recent student or faculty member death, recent relocation to a new or different facility, or recent participation in similar research), and
- have the principal's consent to participate and have teachers respond within the established timeline.

This population of schools was selected because of its homogeneous demographics. The targeted schools were believed to be com-



parable in terms of:

- *School size.* In the targeted secondary schools (grades 9 – 12), faculty size ranged from 22 to 40 while K – 12 student populations ranged from 600 to 1200.
- *Socio-economic environment.* The schools included are located in small town and rural school districts in primarily agricultural settings.
- *Diversity.* Generally diverse in community religious affiliation rather than showing racial or ethnic diversity within the sampled population.
- *Funding.* School district funding is based on the Ohio funding formula and the willingness and capacity of the local community to support educational programs.
- *Organizational structure and administration.* Secondary schools in this population are characterized by traditional departmental organization. A principal, and occasionally an assistant principal, serve as administrators. Support (e. g., speech and hearing therapists, special education teachers, curriculum and instruction supervision, etc.) is provided by county offices or educational service centers.

The over-representation of this type of school district in the state (as well as in the Midwest), accessibility by the researcher, and the researcher's theoretical sensitivity to this context of inquiry were other selection factors.

## ANALYSIS

Of the 821 survey instruments sent to 26 principals for distribution in their school buildings, 503 teachers, counselors, and library-media specialists (62.3%) completed and returned questionnaires. The average return per school was 19.4 with schools ranging in faculty size from twenty-two to forty.

Study-wide mean scores and standard deviations were computed for each of the survey items. Mean scores for each of the five subtests of the OCDQ-RS were then aggregated at the school level to (1) calculate school-level means for each aspect of school climate (Hoy et al., pp. 176-179) and (2) determine the "openness index" for each school. Participating schools were then identified, based on their overall openness indices, on a continuum ranging from the most open

**Table 1**  
**Twenty-six participating high schools arranged by**  
**"Openness Index" on an open/closed climate continuum**

| School | Responses |      | Openness Index |
|--------|-----------|------|----------------|
|        | n         | %    |                |
| A      | 21        | 70.0 | 608.0          |
| B      | 18        | 66.7 | 604.1          |
| C      | 14        | 63.6 | 577.1          |
| D      | 13        | 40.6 | 567.4          |
| E      | 15        | 50.0 | 566.6          |
| F      | 19        | 51.4 | 563.1          |
| G      | 19        | 57.6 | 558.5          |
| H      | 20        | 80.0 | 549.3          |
| I      | 20        | 66.7 | 547.3          |
| J      | 16        | 50.0 | 536.9          |
| K      | 29        | 80.6 | 531.1          |
| L      | 16        | 66.7 | 506.2          |
| M      | 22        | 64.7 | 503.7          |
| N      | 17        | 60.7 | 480.7          |
| O      | 18        | 62.1 | 468.7          |
| P      | 26        | 65.0 | 462.6          |
| Q      | 25        | 62.5 | 450.3          |
| R      | 19        | 70.4 | 449.1          |
| S      | 27        | 69.2 | 438.8          |
| T      | 18        | 81.8 | 437.4          |
| U      | 21        | 52.5 | 428.8          |
| V      | 17        | 51.5 | 393.1          |
| W      | 16        | 57.0 | 392.6          |
| X      | 27        | 73.0 | 364.7          |
| Y      | 20        | 50.0 | 362.5          |
| Z      | 10        | 38.5 | 313.8          |

climate school to most closed climate school (see Table 1).

The six schools with the highest standardized indices for openness (i. e., schools A through F in Table 1) were operationally defined as the "open" climate school category. The six schools with the lowest standardized indices for openness (i. e., schools U through Z) were defined as the "closed" climate school category.

Interpretation of the standardized openness score is based on a mean of 500 and a standard deviation of 100 (Hoy et al.). In this study, the mean score for openness in the open climate school subcategory was 581.1 in contrast to 375.9 in the closed climate school subcategory. The difference in openness mean scores between the identified open climate schools and closed climate schools is 2.05 standard deviations, suggesting the climates are measurably different.

## RESULTS

For each research question posed in this study, a two-tailed t-test for independent means was used to analyze the differences between mean scores on four aspects of communication as measured by the

**Table 2**  
**Mean openness scores and averages on four factors related to the total population, open climate schools, schools between open and closed, and closed climate schools**

| School Climate Category              | n   | Average Faculty Size | Average Response Rate | Mean Openness Score |
|--------------------------------------|-----|----------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| Total Population (26 schools)        | 503 | 31.6                 | 61.3%                 | 483.8               |
| Open Climate Schools (6 schools)     | 100 | 29.6                 | 57.1%                 | 581.1               |
| Between Open and Closed (14 schools) | 292 | 31.4                 | 66.5%                 | 494.3               |
| Closed Climate Schools (6 schools)   | 111 | 34.0                 | 53.8%                 | 375.9               |

two subtests from the CCI and the school issues survey items (strategic and work-related) relative to open and closed climate schools. Analyses of data for the communication survey items are presented as they relate to the four research questions.

Is there a significant difference in perceived upward communication supportiveness of the principal by teachers in open climate schools in contrast to teachers in closed climate schools? A principal supportive of upward communication encourages open communication from subordinates even when it involves "bad news" (Dennis). The results of the t-test for independent means on the mean score of the 12 survey questions related to communication supportiveness demonstrated a statistically significant difference ( $p < .05$ ) between teachers' perceptions in open climate schools in contrast to teachers' perceptions in closed climate schools for this aspect of communication.

Chi square calculations were computed for each of the 12 survey questions related to communication supportiveness. The greatest differences disclosed (see Table 4) involved teachers' perceptions of the extent to which principals made it easy for them to do their best work, how free they felt to talk with the principal, how encouraging the principal was regarding their upward communication of new information (including bad news), and the extent to which they felt the principal actually understood them. On each of these four issues, teachers in open climate schools reported that it characterized their school to a much greater extent than did teachers in closed climate schools.

**Table 3**  
**Communication subtest: Upward communication supportiveness of the principal. Two-tailed t-test for independent means**

| School Climate | df  | M      | SD    | t - ratio | P > t |
|----------------|-----|--------|-------|-----------|-------|
| Open           | 97  | 35.428 | 6.765 | 8.6291    | .0001 |
| Closed         | 109 | 25.954 | 9.012 |           |       |

**Table 4**  
**Communication subtest: Upward communication supportiveness**  
**by principal**

| Item # | Item Description   | $\chi^2$ | $P > \chi^2$ |
|--------|--|----------|--------------|
| 2.     | Your principal makes you feel free to talk with him/her.   | 55.676*  | <0.001       |
| 6.     | Your principal encourages you to let him/her know when things are not going well on the job.                     | 38.830*  | <0.001       |
| 8.     | Your principal makes it easy for you to do your best work.   | 66.260*  | <0.001       |
| 9.     | Your principal encourages you to bring new information to his/her attention, even when it may be bad news.       | 55.676*  | <0.001       |
| 12.    | Your principal makes you feel that things you tell him/her are really important.                                 | 38.809*  | <0.001       |
| 17.    | Your principal listens to you when you tell him/her about things that are bothering you.                         | 42.258*  | <0.001       |
| 23.    | It is safe to say what you are really thinking to your principal.  | 40.018*  | <0.001       |
| 24.    | You can "sound off" about job frustration to your principal.   | 36.004*  | <0.001       |
| 29.    | You can tell your principal about the way you feel he/she administers your department, grade level, school, etc. | 33.862*  | <0.001       |
| 30.    | You are free to tell your principal that you disagree with him/her.  | 23.208*  | <0.001       |
| 39.    | You think that your principal believes he/she really understands you.  | 38.621*  | <0.001       |
| 40.    | Your principal really does understand you.   | 48.112*  | <0.001       |

\* Chi Square ( $\chi^2$ ) table value at 3 *df* and .05 level of significance = 7.815

Is there a significant difference in perceived upward communication opportunities and degree of influence by teachers in open climate schools in contrast to teachers in closed climate schools? This characteristic was included to assess teacher perception of the opportunities for upward communication and the influence that information communicated by the teacher to the principal has on the operation of the school (Dennis). The four survey questions targeting this characteristic (Table 5) demonstrated a statistically significant difference ( $p \leq .05$ )

| <b>Table 5</b><br><b>Communication subtest: Upward communication opportunities and influence. Two-tailed t-test for Independent means</b> |     |        |       |           |       |
|---|-----|--------|-------|-----------|-------|
| School Climate  | df  | M      | SD    | t - ratio | P > t |
| Open  | 99  | 10.960 | 2.265 | 7.5815    | .0001 |
| Closed  | 109 | 8.400  | 2.596 |           |       |

between teachers' perceptions in open climate schools in contrast to teachers' perceptions in closed climate schools .

According to the chi square analysis, all four items comprising this characteristic exhibited significant differences in open climate, as contrasted with closed climate, schools (see Table 6). The greatest difference in open climate and closed climate response frequencies related to the extent to which teachers felt their opinions made a difference in the day-to-day decisions that affect their work. Teachers in closed climate schools reported that this characterized their schools to

| <b>Table 6</b><br><b>Communication subtest: Upward communication opportunities and influence</b> |  |                |                    |  |
|--|--|----------------|--------------------|--|
| Item #   | Item Description   | X <sup>2</sup> | P > X <sup>2</sup> |  |
| 42.  | Your opinions make a difference in the day-to-day decisions that affect your work. | 44.779*        | <0.001             |  |
| 44.  | Your principal lets you participate in the planning of your work.                  | 26.946*        | <0.001             |  |
| 46.  | You believe your views have real influence in your school.                         | 26.276*        | <0.001             |  |
| 48.  | You expect that recommendations you make will be heard and seriously considered.   | 37.528*        | <0.001             |  |

\* Chi Square (X<sup>2</sup>) table value at 3 df and .05 level of significance = 7.815

“little extent,” and suggested that they seldom have opportunities for input and feel that they have little influence on the daily educational processes in which they are involved.

Is there a significant difference in the willingness of teachers to upwardly communicate information pertaining to strategic school issues in open climate schools in contrast to teachers' willingness to upwardly communicate about the same issues in closed climate schools? This characteristic assesses teachers' perceptions of their opportunities to upwardly communicate about and influence strategic school decisions. Strategic school issues relate to personnel management functions and administrative actions and policies (Jablin). A t-test analysis of the mean score of the eleven items comprising this characteristic revealed a significant difference ( $p < .05$ ) in the willingness of teachers to upwardly communicate about strategic school issues in open climate as contrasted with teacher willingness in closed climate schools (see Table 7).

Chi square analysis of each of the items disclosed particular issues on which the most significant open climate and closed climate differences were present (see Table 8). Teachers in open climate schools were found to be more willing to communicate with their principal about student evaluation or assessment policy, suspicion of child abuse, and their teacher performance evaluation, than were teachers in closed climate schools.

Personal leave, budget allocations, current teaching assignment and schedule, and student attendance policy were revealed as those

**Table 7**  
**Strategic school issues**  
**Two-tailed t-test for independent means**

| School Climate | df  | M      | SD    | t - ratio | P > t |
|----------------|-----|--------|-------|-----------|-------|
| Open           | 92  | 37.881 | 4.980 | 4.4948    | .0001 |
| Closed         | 109 | 33.882 | 7.601 |           |       |

**Table 8**  
**Strategic school issues**

| Item # | Item Description                                       | $\chi^2$ | $P > \chi^2$ |
|--------|--|----------|--------------|
| 1.     | Personal leave   | 7.177    | 0.066        |
| 2.     | Budget allocations                                     | 5.094    | 0.165        |
| 4.     | School discipline policy                               | 12.271*  | 0.007        |
| 5.     | Suspicion of child abuse                               | 15.866*  | 0.001        |
| 7.     | Your current teaching assignment (courses, etc.)       | 1.807    | 0.613        |
| 8.     | Your current teaching schedule (i. e., daily schedule) | 1.965    | 0.580        |
| 9.     | Student attendance policy                              | 3.091    | 0.378        |
| 13.    | Your teacher performance evaluation                    | 13.100*  | 0.004        |
| 16.    | Your non teaching assignments during the work day      | 8.221    | 0.042        |
| 19.    | Student evaluation/assessment policy                   | 15.971*  | <0.001       |
| 22.    | Administrative selection of departmental leadership    | 10.954*  | 0.014        |

\* Chi Square ( $\chi^2$ ) table value at 3 df and .05 level of significance = 7.815

strategic school issues on which there were no significant differences in open climate and closed climate schools. Unsolicited comments by teachers on the survey instrument indicated that many schools in the targeted population were small, with no curriculum departmentalization. Even so, most teachers in both open and closed climate schools reported they would be somewhat or very willing to speak out to their principal about his/her selection of departmental leadership.

Is there a significant difference in the willingness of teachers to upwardly communicate information pertaining to work-related school issues in open climate schools in contrast to teachers' willingness to upwardly communicate about the same issues in closed climate schools? Work-related school issues pertain to questions of who will perform specific tasks in the organization and how those tasks will be performed (Jablin). This characteristic assesses teacher perception of the degree of influence he/she has on these work-related school decisions.

Table 9 presents the results of the t-test for independent means for the mean rating of the thirteen items targeting work-related school



**Table 9**  
**Work-related school issues**  
**Two-tailed t-test for independent means**

| School Climate | df  | M      | SD     | t - ratio | P > t |
|----------------|-----|--------|--------|-----------|-------|
| Open           | 97  | 54.918 | 6.974  | 5.008     | .0001 |
| Closed         | 107 | 48.187 | 11.817 |           |       |

issues. A statistically significant difference was found ( $p \leq .05$ ) between teachers' perceived willingness to upwardly communicate about work-related school issues in open climate schools in contrast to teachers' perceptions in closed climate schools.

A chi square analysis of the 13 work-related school issues (see Table 10) revealed only two issues on which teachers in open and

**Table 10**  
**Work-related school issues**

| Item # | Item Description                          | X <sup>2</sup> | P > X <sup>2</sup> |
|--------|---|----------------|--------------------|
| 3.     | Safety concerns in the classroom          | 3.958          | 0.266              |
| 6.     | Concerns regarding school climate         | 16.514*        | 0.001              |
| 10.    | Low student achievement in your classes   | 12.603*        | 0.006              |
| 11.    | Involvement in staff development planning | 13.013*        | 0.005              |
| 12.    | Curriculum design concerns                | 14.913*        | 0.002              |
| 14.    | Innovative instructional delivery ideas   | 20.436*        | <0.001             |
| 15.    | Classroom discipline problems             | 18.083*        | <0.001             |
| 17.    | A parent/teacher disagreement             | 18.351*        | <0.001             |
| 18.    | The social-emotional needs of students    | 23.346*        | <0.001             |
| 20.    | External disruptions to classroom routine | 9.566*         | 0.023              |
| 21.    | Concerns regarding adopted textbooks      | 14.097*        | 0.003              |
| 23.    | Classroom management problems             | 18.928*        | <0.001             |
| 24.    | Student grades (in your classes)          | 18.111*        | <0.001             |

\* Chi Square (X<sup>2</sup>) table value at 3 df and .05 level of significance = 7.815

closed climate schools did not significantly differ in response frequencies. These two work-related school issues, "Safety concerns in the classroom" and "Excessive reports and paperwork," appear to be issues about which all teachers are very willing to speak to their principal. The most significant differences in teacher response frequencies involved upward communication to the principal that concerned the social-emotional needs of students, classroom management problems, and innovative instructional delivery ideas. Teachers in open climate schools reported they were much more willing to talk to their principals regarding these issues than did their counterparts in closed climate schools.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The significance of this study lies in two basic premises. First, the communication that occurs within schools is crucial in shaping the social reality that teachers experience. Second, teachers' perceptions about their schools heavily influence their attitudes and, in turn, their behaviors. Because school excellence is directly related to what teachers think and do, effective communication is at the heart of creating and maintaining the effective school.

Previous research has shown that, under certain conditions, as messages are sent from organization members to organization leaders, information is filtered, and negative information may be altered or entirely omitted. To the extent that upward communication contains distorted or irrelevant information, communication between the teacher and principal adversely affects the quality and effectiveness of schools. This study is, therefore, significant because it sheds light on the conditions under which teachers are willing to communicate with principals.

This study describes the relationship between school climate and teacher willingness to upwardly communicate in the teacher-principal dyad. Some assumptions that are fundamental to this study include: 1) that teachers' behaviors in schools make school organizations what they are, 2) that a teacher's behavior is a function of his/her attitude, 3) that a teacher's attitude is heavily influenced by his/her perceptions. In other words, school improvement and school excellence is directly related to what teachers do and think.

Research in the field of organizational communication has flour-

ished for several decades and findings are conclusive: there is substantial evidence that indicates a direct and positive correlation between overall organizational climate and communication as perceived by organization members in their workplace. There has been, however, little research dedicated to the study of communication patterns as they relate to organizational climate in schools. Given the fundamental importance of open communications and the flow of quality information in schools, the results of this study have profound implications.

If distrust is prevalent between organization members, their commitment, motivation, confidence, and perceptions at work may be negatively affected. Open climate schools, however, tend to be comprised of teachers and administrators who trust one another. Trust deeply influences individual member behavior and therefore work-group and organizational dynamics. Both teachers and principals experience less risk and less defensiveness when communicating with one another in open climate environments. The likely impact of trust in the teacher-principal relationship is portrayed in the following causal loop:

- The more trust perceived in relationships between teacher and principal, the less risk is perceived when interpersonally communicating about professional issues (which are essential to school effectiveness, as well as to the efficacy of both teacher and principal);
- Less risk perceived in communication encourages teachers to participate in the continual improvement of the school's processes and systems;
- Active participation in school improvement connects the individual teacher and principal in a collaborative contribution to a cause much greater than his or her own;
- Sharing meanings and purposes through open discourse and interaction instills a sense of community and synergy begins to naturally develop;
- Increased individual commitment and growing interdependencies between organization members lead to desired outcomes (i. e., both process and content outcomes) and those members involved experience higher levels of work satisfaction;
- Greater work satisfaction and stronger personal/professional

interdependencies lead to more trust and open communication in work relationships.

By virtue of their position as managers of educational systems, educational leaders are inextricably linked with the potential for affecting the quality of work perceived by those who work in schools (Johnson & Fauske, 2000). Effective school leadership then, requires an acceptance of this responsibility. Effective leaders also need an operational understanding of the relationship between the quality of work life experienced by teachers and principals and the quality of learning and school life experienced by students.

This study suggests that the open flow of vertical as well as horizontal communication in schools can be seen as both the medium for and the outcome of organizational action and effectiveness. Educational practices characterizing many schools are often the result of evolutionary processes that avoid critical questioning, rather than embrace healthy discrediting of traditional and possibly outdated practices and policies. The presence of trust and open communication between the teacher and the principal permits the ongoing and constructive questioning of existing assumptions and beliefs that serve as the foundation of day-to-day operations and instructional practices in schools.

A critical implication of this understanding is that communication structures and patterns found to be characteristic of open climate schools are more conducive to a free flow of relevant information. From a systems point of view, schools characterized by open upward communication are continually more capable of interpreting and adapting to the ecological equivocality and uncertainty inherent in the informational inputs to them as systems. In sum, the open upward flow of relevant information is essential to school improvement and effectiveness.

The findings of this study clearly demonstrate the positive relationship between school climate and upward communication patterns, and suggest that school climate can be improved by increasing upward communication opportunities to influence the day-to-day aspects of school life.

## REFERENCES

- Andrews, J. H. M. (1965). School organizational climate: Some validity studies. *Canadian Education and Research Digest*, 5, 317-334.

- Barnard, C. I. (1968). *The functions of the executive*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Barth, R. S. (1990). *Improving schools from within*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Birk, T. A., & Burk, J. E. (2000). Communication and environmental design: analyzing organizational culture to improve human performance. *Performance Improvement Quarterly*, 13, 137-152.
- Carver, F., & Sergiovanni, T. J. (1969). Notes on the OCDQ. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 7, 71-81.
- Dennis, H. S., III (1975). *The construction of a managerial "Communication Climate" inventory for use in complex organizations*. Paper delivered at the Annual Convention of the International Communication Association, Chicago.
- Downey, H., Hellreigel, D., & Slocum, J. W. (1975). Organizational climate and job satisfaction: A comparative analysis. *Journal of Business Research*, 2, 233-248.
- Hall, D., & Lawler III, E. E., (1969). Unused potential in research development organizations. *Research Management*, 12, 339-354.
- Halpin, A. W., & Croft, D. B. (1963). *The organizational climate of schools*. Danville, Ill.: Midwest Administration Center, University of Chicago.
- Hoy, W. K., Tarter, C. J., & Kottkamp, R. B. (1991) *Open schools/healthy schools: Measuring organizational climate*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Jablin, F. M. (1980). Superior's upward influence, satisfaction, and openness in superior-subordinate communication: A reexamination of the "Pelz Effect." *Human Communication Research*, 6, 210-219.
- Johnson, B. L., & Fauske, K. S. (2000). Principals and the political economy of environmental enactment. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 35, 707-750.
- Johnson, D., & Johnson, R. (1989). *Leading the cooperative school*. Edina: Interaction.
- Katz, D., & Kahn, R. (1978). *The social psychology of organizations (2nd ed.)*. New York: Wiley and Sons.
- Litwin, G., & Stringer, R. (1968). *Motivation and organizational climate*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School, Division of Research.
- Norton, M. (1984). What's so important about school climate? *Contemporary Education*, 56, 43-45.
- Perrow, C. (1990). Why bureaucracy? In S. Corman, C. Bantz, & M. Mayer (Eds.), *Foundations of organizational communications*. New York: Longman.
- Poole, M. S., & McPhee, R. D. (1983). A structural theory of organizational climate. In L. Putnam & M. Pacanowski (Eds.), *Communication and organizations: An interpretive approach*. (pp. 195-219). Beverly Hills: Sage.
- Pritchard, R., & Karasick, B. (1973). The effect of organizational climate on managerial job performance and job satisfaction. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, 9, 126-146.
- Putnam, L. L. (1986). Contradictions and paradoxes in organizations. In L. Thayer (Ed.), *Organization communication: Emerging perspectives I* (pp. 151-167).

- Norwood, N. J.: Alex.
- Ryan, K. D., & Oestreich, D. K. (1991). *Driving fear out of the workplace*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Senge, P. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. New York: Doubleday/Currency.
- Sergiovanni, T. J. (1990). *Value-added leadership: How to get extraordinary performance in schools*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich
- Schlechty, P. (1990). *Schools for the 21st century: Leadership imperatives for educational reform*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Schneider, B., & Hall, D. (1972). Toward specifying the concept of work climate: A study of Roman Catholic Diocesan priests. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 56, 447-456.
- Shadur, M. A., Kienzle, R., & Rodwell, J. J. (1999). The relationship between organizational climate and employee perceptions of involvement. *Group and Organization Management*, 24, 479-503.
- Sirotnik, K. A. (1989). The school as the center of change. In T. J. Sergiovanni, & J. H. Moore, (Eds.), *Schooling for tomorrow: Directing reforms to issues that count*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, pp.89-113.
- Staw, B. M. (1975). Attribution of the "causes" of performances: A general alternative interpretation of cross-sectional research on organizations. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, 13, 414-432.
- Stimson, J., & LaBelle, T. (1971). The organizational climate of Paraguayan elementary schools: Rural-urban differentiation. *Education and Urban Society*, 3, 333-349.
- Sweetland, S. R. (2001). Authority and sense of power in enabling school structures: An empirical analysis. *Education*, 121, 581-588.
- Weick, K. (1979). *The social psychology of organizing (2nd ed.)*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

A vertical bar on the left side of the page, consisting of a series of yellow and orange rectangular segments, with a small red diamond at the top.

COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: School Climate and Teacher Attitudes Toward Upward  
Communication in Secondary Schools

SOURCE: Am Second Educ 31 no2 Spr 2003

WN: 0310504584005

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited.

Copyright 1982-2003 The H.W. Wilson Company. All rights reserved.