

# Marshall Memo 2

## A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education

September 1, 2003

### In this Issue:

1. New York City places a parent coordinator in every school.
2. A study says schools may be missing LD problems in upper elementary grades.
3. A de-tracked ninth-grade program wrestles with academic and social diversity.
4. Classroom innovation seems to be absent in charter school classrooms.
5. Houston schools under-count dropouts and over-count students going to college.

### Quote of the Week

"It's just like Pepsi-Cola!" – Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze after sampling Coca-Cola at the opening of a new Coke bottling plant in Tbilisi (see #4)

### 1. New York City Rolls the Dice on Parent Involvement

In a bold attempt to get parents more involved in their children's education, New York City schools are spending \$43 million in a tight budget year to hire a parent coordinator for every single school. The coordinators, who will work 35 hours a week (including some evenings and weekends), will be paid \$30,000 to \$39,000 for a 12-month work year. They will act as an ombudsman for parent and school concerns, stay in touch with community organizations, and create "a welcoming environment" for parents. They will report to the principal and have no authority over teachers and other school staff.

An investment this sweeping has never been tried before, and was praised by parent involvement expert Joyce Epstein of Johns Hopkins University. "We know from decades of studies that students who happen to have parents who become involved tend to do better in schools. The new agenda says we are not satisfied with leaving that to chance." New York Chancellor Joel I. Klein said, "The question of how much increased parental involvement there will be is a variable that is very hard for me as chancellor. What I can do is create the opportunities. And that's what I think we have done."

Two complaints so far: (a) schools that already have strong parent involvement would rather spend the 30K to hire an extra classroom aide or teacher; and (b) some parents are

concerned that the coordinator will be another obstacle to talking with the person who has the real power – the principal.

“In Gamble, New York Schools Pay to Get Parents Involved” by Elissa Gootman, *New York Times*, August 30, 2003

## **2. Are We Missing Learning Disabilities in Older Students?**

A new study suggests that teachers and parents may be missing learning problems in upper-elementary students because they are not expecting to find them at that age level. The study found that less than a third of the 31 fourth and fifth graders suffering from late-emerging reading problems had been identified by their schools. “It’s unexpected,” said Hollis Scarborough, a senior research scientist at Haskins Laboratories and a co-author of the study. “No one’s looking for it.”

“When Older Kids Struggle to Read” by Thomas Sexton in *Psychology Today*, September 2003

## **3. Challenges with High-School De-Tracking**

In this one-year study of a de-tracked ninth-grade program in a diverse urban high school, Beth Rubin vividly documents the collision between the teachers’ egalitarian goals and the deep inequalities with which students entered the school. To her dismay, Rubin found that the progressive teaching practices being used in the de-tracked classes (student-centered, active-learning) seemed to be *reinforcing* students’ inequalities. “The educational problems that created the need for de-tracking are rooted in systemic inequalities along race and class lines, which de-tracking reform alone cannot fully address. This study suggests that teachers can, in some cases, conflate a commitment to progressive pedagogy with the desire to combat educational inequalities, to the detriment of the latter.”

Rubin concluded that “...struggling students need more than the assistance of their peers to raise their academic skills.” The progressive classroom pedagogies, she says, “often miss the mark by failing to provide the concrete instructional support [explicit academic skills instruction and coaching] that struggling students need to meet the higher academic expectations of de-tracked classrooms.”

Noting the social chasm between different groups of students, Rubin says, “De-tracking reform depends on diverse students’ harmonious social interactions for its success and thus may call for a more conscious form of adult intervention in students’ social worlds.” In addition to more focused academic interventions, she suggests creating smaller schools-within-schools and examining the way hallways and lunchrooms tend to encourage “defensive huddling rather than friendly mingling.”

For those who are trying to implement de-tracking in a high school setting, this is a thoughtful and sobering piece – must reading!

“Unpacking Detracking: When Progressive Pedagogy Meets Students’ Social Worlds” by Beth C. Rubin in *American Educational Research Journal*, Summer 2003

#### **4. Are Charter School Classrooms Innovating?**

In a sweeping national study, Christopher Lubienski concludes they are not. “Across charter schools in various states, research demonstrates virtually no innovations in curriculum or instructional strategies... schools use their new-found autonomy to emulate established practice found in successful schools.” According to this study, innovations are happening at the organizational level in charter schools, but classroom strategies “tend toward the familiar.” Why? Because charter schools have to compete for students in an open market and most parents have a conventional view of what good schools look like.

“Innovation in Education Markets: Theory and Evidence on the Impact of Competition and Choice in Charter Schools” by Christopher Lubienski, *American Educational Research Journal*, Summer 2003

#### **5. Texas-Size Trouble for Houston**

In two related *New York Times* stories last week, the problems of Houston, Texas high schools continued to get national publicity. First, the much-touted college placement rates of most high schools have been revealed to be hugely inflated. Worthing High School, for example, claimed that 95 percent of its 1999 graduates planned to attend college, but a check with the state revealed that only 143 of Worthing’s 305 graduates actually ended up in public colleges and universities. Many Houston high-school students had not taken the kind of

coursework needed to succeed in college. One anonymous principal was quoted as saying that that most of the supposedly college-bound students “couldn’t spell college, let alone attend.”

The inflated college figures reportedly came from school administrators in hopes of attracting the children of active, involved parents. The inflation also seems to have been the product of Houston’s penchant for judging school performance by statistics, which puts pressure on school administrators to exaggerate their students’ performance.

In another *New York Times* article two days later, it was reported that a former Houston principal and a computer technician had been disciplined (both maintained their innocence). State Representative Rick Noriega was quoted as saying that the scandal raises questions about the “Texas miracle” on which George W. Bush and Rod Paige built the No Child Left Behind legislation. Noriega suggested that the lying stemmed from Houston’s practice of hiring principals with one-year contracts, putting pressure on them to produce good statistics, dangling performance bonuses of up to \$5,000 if they do, and threatening to fire them if they don’t. With 15 of 16 Houston high schools accused of inflating their dropout statistics, the question has been raised of whether the principals and superintendents (who can receive up to \$10,000 extra) should be made to return their bonuses.

“For Houston Schools, College Claims Exceed Reality” by Diana Jean Schemo, *New York Times*, August 28, 2003

“Houston Punishes Former Principal in Undercount of Dropouts” by Diana Jean Schemo, *New York Times*, August 30, 2003

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***Feedback? Anything missing?***

*If you have comments or suggestions, or if you saw an article or web item in the last week that you think should be covered, please e-mail!*

## About the Marshall Memo

### **Mission and focus:**

The Marshall Memo aims to keep busy educators very well-informed on important research, ideas, and developments in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, a former Boston teacher and administrator, will act as “designated reader”, looking through a wide range of publications as soon as they come out and sending a brief weekly e-mail summarizing a few select articles. These will be chosen based on relevance and usefulness to improving teaching and learning.

Target topics include:

- School leadership (and leadership in general)
- Time management for school leaders
- Effective teamwork within schools; building a professional learning community
- Effective teaching practices; what produces high levels of student achievement
- Professional development of teachers
- Supervision and evaluation of teachers
- Teacher leadership and career ladders
- Curriculum alignment and planning with the end in sight
- Teaching for understanding
- New ideas for teaching reading, writing, and math
- Effective assessments, both formative and summative
- Standardized testing and the debate on standards
- Using data and student work for continuous improvement
- Graphic display of student achievement data
- Effective schools (especially urban schools)
- The achievement gap (racial and economic)
- The innate-ability / intelligence / effective effort debate
- Building positive school culture
- Student discipline, social-emotional learning, and moral development
- Parent involvement: effective practices
- Multiple intelligences and brain research
- Other new areas of research
- Upcoming television and radio programs on education

If one of the summaries is of particular interest, subscribers are encouraged to read the full article. E-links will be provided whenever possible.

**Publications covered** (those read for this issue are boldfaced):

**American Education Research Journal**, American Educator, Atlantic Monthly, Bay State Banner, Boston Globe, Commonwealth Magazine, Education Digest, Education Gadfly, Education Update (ASCD), Education Week, Educational Leadership, Elementary School Journal, Harpers, Harvard Education Letter, Harvard Education Review, Harvard Graduate School of Education Ed. Magazine, **New York Times**, New Yorker, Phi Delta Kappan, Principal Magazine, **Psychology Today**, Review of Educational Research, Rethinking Schools, Teacher Magazine, and occasional books, lectures, conferences, and websites. If you would like to suggest additional publications, please let me know.

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