

Marshall Memo 304

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

October 5, 2009

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Quotes of the Week

“When teachers can’t cover everything deeply enough, students pass through the grades in an endless cycle of review and catch-up... We will not prepare young people for the unpredictable economy of the future by driving them through an endless list of disconnected topics.”

Vicki Phillips on the need for lean, common standards in “More Is Not Better”,
Education Week, Sept. 30, 2009 (Vol. 29, #5, p. 28)

http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2009/09/30/05phillips_ep.h29.html

“Principals who need to raise achievement are driving with the brakes on unless they build cultural norms that support faculty working together.”

Barbara Kohm and Beverly Nance in “Creating Collaborative Cultures” in *Educational Leadership*, October 2009 (Vol. 67, #2, p. 67-72)

http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership/current_issue.aspx

“The mistaken idea that reading is a skill – learn to crack the code, practice comprehension strategies and you can read anything – may be the single biggest factor holding back reading achievement in the country.”

Daniel Willingham in a *Washington Post* guest column, Sept. 28, 2009

<http://voices.washingtonpost.com/answer-sheet/daniel-willingham/willingham-reading-is-not-a-sk.html>

“Once you get labeled as gifted or talented, there is little you can do to unstitch it from your sleeve.”

Claire Chafee (see item #1)

“Once you get off the express train of mathematical progression, whether at the station of fractions, or decimals, or the quiet towns of Sine and Cosine, there is no local to catch.”

Claire Chafee (*ibid.*)

1. Brilliant, Eccentric Teachers Who Hook Students

In this poignant *ED Magazine* article, San Francisco area playwright/teacher Claire Chafee remembers her adolescent difficulties in school, particularly the bind of having been identified as “gifted” and yet feeling confused in many of her classes and getting mediocre grades. “Do you see this?” demanded her algebra teacher, rapping the knuckle of her engagement ring finger under X in the upper part of an equation. “Do you see what I am looking at?” But Chafee didn’t get what was so obvious to the teacher and describes her mind “traveling slowly down an escalator.” The consequences were scary. “Once you get off the express train of mathematical progression, whether at the station of fractions, or decimals, or the quiet towns of Sine and Cosine, there is no local to catch,” writes Chafee. “I got off at algebra without my luggage and had no answer for this Y or this X , or any other problem that included a variable.”

“Once you get labeled as gifted or talented,” she writes, “there is little you can do to unstitch it from your sleeve: they believe their own assessments, whatever the glaring evidence to the contrary. My teachers called me into meetings to praise my potential. They had approaches, they were armed with concern, they saw my reluctance, but somehow missed my confusion... They thought, it seemed to me, that I was taunting them with my lack of urgency in mathematics, or history, or English. They wrote ‘extend this’ and ‘apply this to theme’ in red ballpoint pen, pressed hard in the margin. I don’t suppose it ever occurred to my teachers that there was too much traffic in my mind, and I had no intention of adding to it.”

Chafee knew she had to conquer algebra to get into college and escape a claustrophobic and unhappy home. “I started sending away for college catalogues with a quiet fierceness,” she says. Oberlin accepted her and was a good fit, “tranquil and liberal, the intellectual equivalent of corduroy.” In her junior year, Chafee studied drama in London and had an epiphany when Colin, a director with the Royal Shakespeare Company, harangued her with profanity-laced instructions on the emotions she should display in a particular scene in Chekov’s *Three Sisters*. “Use it! Use it!” he screamed. “I realized,” says Chafee, “there and for the first time, that what I had buried – rage, humor, presence of mind, fear – were somehow useful, that characters in plays buried these things, too. And when they could no longer carry them, they came unfurled. How Colin knew I had such things inside me, I do not know. Only that maybe he wasn’t doing it just for the money.”

That moment, says Chafee, is what got her into education. “Such displays as Colin’s would, seen through any lens, embedded in any pedagogy, seem like abusive rant,” she writes.

“But I came to teaching to continue the conversation of ideas with people who were so passionate about them, that they appear to list to one side, fix their eyeglasses with a Band-Aid, wear strange trousers, and exhibit a relationship to their subject that to an untrained eye is identical to the person talking things over with themselves on a subway. In short, I found my best teachers to be misfits; somewhat ill-equipped for life on the outside, but wonderful guides to the art of cutting a hole in the ice, baiting a hook, and lowering it into the dark unknown. They were embarrassing, magnificent tutors for the rigors of selfhood. I would not have dared to bring as much of my strangeness or my buried love along with me, had I not had their example... bridging the world of mistake and the world where no mistake is worthless.”

“The Algebra of Buried Things” by Claire Chafee in *ED Magazine*, Fall 2009 (Vol. LIII, #1, p. 10-11), no e-link available

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2. Robert Marzano on Maximizing Student Learning of New Information

(Originally titled “Helping Students Process Information”)

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Robert Marzano spells out a strategy that helps students learn essential content. “When executed well,” he says, “this process dramatically increases students’ understanding of new information across content areas and at every grade level...”

- *Chunking* – Present new information in small, digestible bites, pausing after each to allow students to process.

- *Scaffolding* – Present the content in a logical sequence so that each sets up the next. This is the “keystone”, says Marzano. “If the content of the chunks does not follow a logical progression to a clear goal, the rest of the process is not as effective...”

- *Interacting* – Have groups summarize the content of each chunk, identify confusions, work to clear them up, and predict what’s next. Every student should actively participate, says Marzano. “By the time a class period ends, all students should have responded to multiple questions or been asked to explain their summaries of the content.”

- *Pacing* – *Not too fast and not too slow*, always tuned to students’ understanding.

- *Monitoring* – Frequently check for class-wide understanding (not just calling on students who raise their hands), figuring out why material isn’t getting through and reteaching.

“Helping Students Process Information” by Robert Marzano in *Educational Leadership*, October 2009 (Vol. 67, #2, p. 86-87); article can be purchased at:

http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership/current_issue.aspx

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3. Key Characteristics of High-Performing Schools

(Originally titled “Tough Questions for Tough Times”)

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Boise State professors William Parrett and Kathleen Budge say that high-performing low-SES schools do three things well: building the

necessary leadership capacity; focusing the staff's core work on learning; and creating a safe, healthy, and supportive environment. Here are the most important factors in each area:

- Leadership capacity
 - A data system that guides decisions by classroom teachers and school leaders, including measurable goals and aggressive timelines to meet them.
 - Eliminating policies and practices that lead to low achievement, including inequitable funding, retention, tracking, low expectations, and inappropriate assignment to special education.
 - Extending learning time for struggling students, including before- and after-school tutoring, weekend and vacation catch-up sessions, summer school, sheltered classroom support, and full-day kindergarten.
 - Reorganizing time to better support professional learning, including common planning time for teacher teams, banked time for professional development, and funding for regular released time.
- Focus on learning
 - Adopting a curriculum framework that guides teaching, assessment, and student climate – for example, the Core Knowledge sequence.
 - Using common interim assessments to regularly check student learning, and training staff on how to analyze and follow up on them effectively. Assessments can be tests, portfolios, public presentations, reflective revisions, and student-led conferences.
 - Ensuring that all students are proficient readers, which includes assessing individual students' needs and researching state-of-the-art methods for improving literacy.
 - Providing targeted interventions, including using assessment data to identify students who need extra support before, during, and after school, whether it's tutoring, homework help, self-paced computer work, academic advising, homework support, or additional assessment.
- Learning environment
 - Ensuring school safety, including staff regularly patrolling bathrooms (notorious trouble spots), holding students accountable for their actions, and changing the culture of the school so that informing adults about problems is no longer considered “ratting out” peers.
 - Holding high expectations for all students, which includes refuting the belief that people living in poverty share a common set of beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors (poor work ethic, alcohol and drug abuse, apathy toward school) and removing economic barriers to participation in extracurricular activities.
 - Fostering a bond between students and their school, including advisory programs that build adult-student and student-student relationships and carefully monitor students' progress.
 - Building positive and productive relationships with parents, families, and the community, including access to recreational facilities, social workers, and medical services.

“Tough Questions for Tough Times” by William Parrett and Kathleen Budge in *Educational Leadership*, October 2009 (Vol. 67, #2, p. 22-27); article is available at http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership/current_issue.aspx. Parrett can be reached at wparret@boisestate.edu.

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4. Using Integrated Literacy Circles in Middle-School Content Classes

In this *Middle School Journal* article, researchers Karen Wood, Paola Pilonieta, and William Blanton address a perennial challenge for middle- and high-school teachers: infusing reading skills into content-area lessons. The authors present a transcript of an ineffective approach to teaching the meaning of the word *subsistence* in a social studies textbook passage:

Teacher: We are going to read about the farm villages in South Asia. There is a word in the first paragraph you probably don't know. It is *subsistence* and it means a way of supporting life; a living or livelihood. Read the paragraph to yourself.

More than three-fourths of South Asians live on small farms less than two acres, compared to the average U.S. farm which is more than 400 acres. The families living on these small plots of land are subsistence farmers who grow food only for family use. They are often too poor to have fertilizers, insecticides and modern farm equipment. Women still carry pots of water on their hips as they walk through the village. Most of the farmers use traditional carts and wagons to transport their crops.

Teacher: What is the size of most South Asian farms?

Student: Two acres

Teacher: What is the size of most U.S. farms?

Student: More than 400 acres

Teacher: What do they use to transport crops?

Student: Carts and wagons

Teacher: Who do they grow the crops for?

Student: Their families.

Teacher: So, we have learned that their farms are only two acres, they transport crops by carts and wagons, and they grown these crops for family use.

Wood, Pilonieta, and Blanton then describe a better approach to presenting a similar but longer body of content – integrated literacy circles – aimed at helping students learn, apply, organize, and coordinate the skills and strategies they need to be proficient readers. A teacher using this approach divides the class into groups of 5-8 students and moves through these steps:

- *Exploration* – The teacher elicits and probes students' prior knowledge about the material they are about to read, including the meta-skill of knowing what to do when they encounter a word they don't know.

- *Explication* – The teacher explains what the task is, how students will complete it (including what they must know to get started), and how students will be able to use what they are about to learn. At this point, the teacher might give students helpful material, for example, in a lesson on cause and effect, a handout explaining four strategies: look for stated cause-and-effect relationships, unstated relationships, signal words, and effects that are also causes.

- *Translation* – The teacher asks students to explain the task in their own words to check for understanding.

- *Modeling* – The teacher “thinks aloud” how to complete the task, walking through and making explicit the thinking processes needed to be successful. In the cause-and-effect lesson, the teacher might describe step by step how to insert the words *if* and *then* into several examples showing the causal relationship.

- *Guided practice* – Students work in pairs to apply and practice what they’ve just learned in actual examples. The teacher monitors their work, correcting where necessary.

- *Application* – Now students work independently to apply what they’ve learned using new (but similar) material.

- *Closure* – Students summarize what they’ve learned about the literacy skill and the content material, including insights on how they could do better next time.

“Teaching Content and Skills through Integrated Literacy Circles” by Karen Wood, Paola Pilonieta, and William Blanton in *Middle School Journal*, September 2009 (Vol. 41, #1, p. 56-62); Wood can be reached at kwood@uncc.edu.

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5. E.D. Hirsch on the History and Importance of Core Knowledge

In this article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, core knowledge advocate E.D. Hirsch comments that during the heated town hall meetings on health care last summer, many Americans weren’t heard from – the “mute, unseen people off-screen who cannot wield the conventions of knowledge and language needed to participate in the American public sphere.” Given how unevenly the mastery of language and core knowledge is distributed economically and racially, says Hirsch, it “represents more than a civic disability that prevents full participation in a democracy. It also represents a bar to general prosperity and social justice.”

Hirsch believes that American schools have done quite a good job narrowing the racial and economic gap in early reading – the technical skills of decoding taught in the primary grades. But the higher skills of reading comprehension essential to success in the upper grades, college, and the world of work have not followed. That’s because schools have focused on skills like “finding the main idea,” says Hirsch, and not on teaching background knowledge and the rich vocabulary that accompanies it. “Full membership in any speech community and in any democracy involves mastery not just of grammar and pronunciation,” he says, “but also of commonly shared knowledge – often unspoken and unwritten – that is equally essential to communication... We cannot assume that such needed knowledge will come to everyone through the pores. Demonstrably, it has not done so.”

Why has the U.S. been so slow to adopt a common K-8 knowledge curriculum? Hirsch

believes it's because of two beliefs that pervade schools of education: that skills matter more than knowledge, and that it's wrong to impose a one-size-fits-all curriculum on students. These ideas, he says, "form an ideological double whammy against a coherent, knowledge-based curriculum in elementary schools – against, that is, the thing most needed to enhance language ability and overcome the language-comprehension gap."

Hirsch traces this ambivalence back to the Founding Fathers' belief in two competing ideas: national unity *and* the protection of the private and local. He sees commonality as a prime function of elementary schools, and doesn't believe the job needs to take the whole school day. "The task of enabling our students to participate in the public sphere – the tradition and primary duty of American elementary schools – is a task that need not take up more than half of classroom time," says Hirsch. "But if we want to bring all our students out of the linguistic shadows, we shall need to teach this enabling knowledge systematically, through a limited but common core curriculum in the early grades."

"How Schools Fail Democracy" by E.D. Hirsch, Jr. in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Oct. 2, 2009 (Vol. LVI, #6, p. B10-11), no e-link available

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6. Total Student Load: A Key Factor in Student Achievement

In this *Education Week* article, Debra Viadero reports on a new book by management expert William Ouchi, *The Secret of TSL* (Simon & Schuster, 2009), in which he argues that the key to successful schools is reducing *total student load* – the number of students that teachers come in contact with each term and the number of papers they grade. Ouchi's ideal number is 80. "When you reduce TSL," he says, "you increase by far the likelihood that a student will encounter a teacher in a hallway or an office and have a one-on-one conversation that will motivate the student to keep going." Ouchi says lower ratios correlate with higher student achievement: cutting a school's TSL from 115 students (the national average) to 80 is associated with a 16 percentage-point increase in the number of students scoring proficient or above on state tests.

Ouchi and his team of researchers linked lower total student loads to schools that have more autonomy. They found that empowered principals (such as those in the Autonomy Zone in New York City, who control 85 percent of their budget, compared to an average of 6.1 percent nationwide) tend to reduce total student load by hiring more teachers, eliminating non-teaching positions (such as registrars and front-office attendants), and rolling social studies and English into integrated humanities courses.

Speaking at a recent forum on Ouchi's book, Chester Finn of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute supported the idea of reducing total student load but had a caveat: "I wonder if Bill tends to overvalue management and underemphasize content and pedagogy."

"Management Guru Says 'Student Load' Key to Achievement" by Debra Viadero in *Education Week*, Sept. 30, 2009 (Vol. 29, #5, p. 8-9)

http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2009/09/30/05management_ep.h29.html

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7. Principals Learning to Listen, Collaborate, and Lead

(Originally titled “What Makes or Breaks a Principal”)

In this *Educational Leadership* article, University of Maine/Orono professors Gordon Donaldson, George Marnik, Sarah Mackenzie, and Richard Ackerman describe how they work with groups of principals to think through everyday problems and clarify values. The authors believe that one of the best ways to do this is getting groups of principals off site to reflect on actual situations in their schools and get honest feedback from insightful, caring, and trusted colleagues. This helps principals wrestle with the most difficult challenge of their jobs – the tension between caring relationships with teachers and getting things done.

“To foster improved teaching and learning,” say the authors, “principals... need to listen to staff, students, and parents and help them translate their concerns about student learning into actionable strategies.” This requires that principals have a decent understanding of pedagogy and curriculum and good “consulting” skills – a combination of active listening, problem solving, and support.

School leaders constantly face the challenge of processing lots of new professional information while meeting the daily demands of their jobs. “The solution is for principals to learn along with their faculties,” say the authors. They need to sit with teachers as they analyze assessments, engage in professional development, and plan instruction. “Rather than being ‘the expert,’ the principal needs to help others examine and reframe their own challenges and develop strategies for action.” This takes practice and is only mastered over time.

Another important consulting skill is supporting and facilitating teacher teams and coaching colleagues to facilitate their own teams – which involves getting better at dealing with the inevitable conflicts, something many teacher leaders and principals haven’t had enough experience with. The authors have found that role-plays among principals, complete with videotaping, are very helpful in thinking through the best way to resolve conflicts and helping teachers reach consensus.

Values are a final set of relational leadership qualities. “The most effective principals operate from a value system that places a high priority on people and relationships,” say the authors. “This orientation communicates itself both subtly and powerfully to staff, students, and the public, sending the message that everyone’s voice counts and everyone’s feelings are important. The principal’s person-to-person relationships reverberate throughout the culture of the school.” Is this value-set hard-wired, or can it be learned? The authors believe that principals to whom this doesn’t come naturally can get better at valuing relationships and learn to behave in ways that communicate that belief. All this is part of developing their own personal leadership platform – a process the authors call “philosophical orienteering.”

“What Makes or Breaks a Principal” by Gordon Donaldson, George Marnik, Sarah Mackenzie, and Richard Ackerman in *Educational Leadership*, October 2009 (Vol. 67, #2, p. 8-14); article can be purchased: http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership/current_issue.aspx Donaldson is available at Gordon_Donaldson@umit.maine.edu.

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8. *Carpe Diem*, Says Frederick Hess

(Originally titled “Cages of Their Own Design”)

In this *Educational Leadership* article, American Enterprise Institute education director Frederick Hess suggests that principals and superintendents aren’t nearly as hamstrung by contracts, policies, and regulations as the conventional wisdom suggests. In fact, he believes that many school leaders are afflicted by “debilitating timidity” that makes them “tepid agents of change.” Principals and superintendents should boldly take advantage of the power they have, says Hess, specifically:

- *Push the envelope.* “Scrutinize the contract and related policies, asking whether there is anything explicitly prohibiting an action,” he says. Hess also suggests consulting with leaders and books in fields other than education to see how they address similar challenges.

- *Shine a spotlight.* Publicize laws, regulations, and labor agreements that make it more difficult to improve teaching and learning. Hess believes that when the New Teacher Project raised a hue and cry over seniority-based “bumping” in New York City schools, it led to improved teacher assignment policies.

- *Get the law on your side.* Make the law a tool for reform. Work with smart, creative, tough-minded lawyers to “make ambiguity and uncertainty work for, rather than against, a leader’s school improvement efforts.”

- *Welcome nontraditional thinking.* Educational leaders from nontraditional backgrounds are more likely to say the emperor has no clothes and ask, *Why do we do it this way?* Tapping into unconventional skills, insights, and ways of thinking will move the ball downfield.

- *Provide cover.* Superintendents should encourage and support their principals to take risks in service of improving schools, says Hess – even if some ideas don’t pan out.

Improving failing schools inevitably involves “creating some hard feelings, upending familiar routines, and overcoming established procedures,” concludes Hess. “Geniality is a good thing, but there is a time for consensus and a time for conflict. Principals and superintendents intent on radically improving schools and systems need to accept and be prepared for a good bit of turbulence.”

“Cages of Their Own Design” by Frederick Hess in *Educational Leadership*, October 2009 (Vol. 67, #2, p. 28-33); article is available for purchase at http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership/current_issue.aspx. Hess can be reached at rhess@aei.org.

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9. A Simplified College Financial Aid Form Makes a Big Difference

In this *Education Week* article, Catherine Gewertz reports on a new study showing that high-school seniors who used a simplified federal application form for financial aid – and had help filling it out – were 30 percent more likely to enroll in college the next fall than their peers. The form in question is FAFSA – Free Application for Federal Student Aid.

“Easier Aid Form Linked to Higher College-Going Rates” by Catherine Gewertz in *Education Week*, Sept. 30, 2009 (Vol. 29, #5, p. 11)

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2009/09/23/05fafsa.h29.html>. The full study, “The Role of Simplification and Information in College Decisions: Results from the H&R Block FAFSA Experiment”, is available at http://www.edweek.org/media/fafsa_report.pdf

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10. Short Item:

Math and science portal – This website has resources, forums, discussions, online events, and connections for math and science teaching: <http://www.msteacher2.org>.

Spotted in *Middle School Journal*, September 2009 (Vol. 41, #1, p. 63)

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Do you have feedback? Is anything missing?

If you have comments or suggestions, if you saw an article or web item in the last week that you think should have been summarized, or if you would like to suggest additional publications that should be covered by the Marshall Memo, please e-mail: kim.marshall8@verizon.net

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and others very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 37 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, and writer, lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 44 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through more than a hundred articles each week, and selects 5-10 that have the greatest potential to improve teaching, leadership, and learning. He then writes a brief summary of each article, pulls out several striking quotes, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the Memo to subscribers every Monday evening (with occasional breaks; there are about 50 issues a year).

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- A database of all articles to date, searchable by topic, title, author, source, level, etc.
- How to change access e-mail or password

Publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
ASCD, CEC SmartBriefs, Daily EdNews
Catalyst Chicago
Changing Schools (McREL)
Ed. Magazine
EDge
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
Essential Teacher (TESOL)
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Educational Review
JESPAR
Journal of Staff Development
Language Learner (NABE)
Middle Ground
Middle School Journal
New York Times
Newsweek
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
Teacher Magazine (online)
Teachers College Record
The Atlantic Monthly
The Language Educator
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Tools for Schools/The Learning Principal