

Marshall Memo 1

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
August 25, 2003

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1. A Consumer Guide to Comprehensive School Reform Programs

The authors of a sweeping analysis of the 29 most widely-used school improvement programs say they used a process similar to what the Food and Drug Administration does to approve a new drug. They scrutinized the quality of the research on each program and its effects on student achievement and found that overall the effects of such programs was positive: the average school implementing a comprehensive school reform program outperformed 55% of schools without a program. Here are the most highly-rated programs:

Strong evidence of effectiveness:

- Direct Instruction
- Comer's School Development Program
- Success for all

Highly Promising Evidence of Effectiveness:

- Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound
- Modern Red Schoolhouse
- Roots and Wings

Promising Evidence of Effectiveness

- Accelerated Schools
- America's Choice
- ATLAS Communities
- Montessori
- Paideia
- The Learning Network

Without branding the remaining programs as ineffective, the authors say they had the "greatest need for additional research."

The long appendix of the study has a very helpful run-down on each program, listing its originators, purpose, key distinguishing features, cost, and program office address.

"Comprehensive School Reform and Achievement: A Meta-Analysis" by Geoffrey Borman et al. in *Review of Educational Research*, Summer 2003, vol. 73 #2

2. Making Parent/Teacher Conferences Work

In a short interview in *Teacher Magazine*, Harvard education professor Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot talks about her new book, *The Essential Conversation: What Parents and Teachers Can Learn from Each Other* (Random House). The author bemoans the fact that "teachers and schools too often still see parents as enemies" and that "most teacher training neglects family-school relationships." Her recommendations:

- "Teachers should be prepared to listen to parents more." She suggests a "listening conference" at the beginning of the year, asking "What is your child good at? What is your child really like?"
- "...parent-teacher conferences will never be – and are not meant to be – relaxed, casual conversations. Teachers need to understand the advocacy and passion that parents bring and realize that conferences can be fiery and tempestuous." Teachers should not take this personally and respond professionally.
- Teachers should "avoid the generalized, platitudinous statement... and present to parents the very specific kind of evidence you find in portfolios, anecdotes, well-described experiences."
- Children should sit in on parent-teacher conferences. "Parents find it perplexing and disturbing when the child being described is not the child they know. That's why

children of all ages should participate in these conferences. They are the only ones who know how things are at both home and school, who can interpret both of these cultures.

“Conference Calls” by David Ruenzel in *Teacher Magazine*, August/September 2003

3. Using Test Data

In an in-depth, nitty-gritty article, elementary teacher Rebecca Wisniewski describes how she and her colleagues in Lowell, Massachusetts responded to disappointing scores on the MCAS (the Massachusetts high-stakes test). They identified the areas of the curriculum in which their students were struggling and used the test data reports to sharpen their curriculum focus and improve classroom instruction. She found that by converting the data tables into Excel graphs, the data became far more useful. The school succeeded in boosting its scores by expanding writing instruction, devising a writing conference sheet based on the state scoring rubric, and teaching paragraphing in lower grades.

“Making the Most of Standardized Test Data” by Rebecca Wisniewski, *Harvard Education Letter*, July / August 2003

4. It’s Alignment, Stupid!

The Montgomery County (Maryland) Public Schools have been cited as one of the best in the nation in the area of curriculum and assessment. In an interview, Matthew Gandal of Achieve (a national organization that assesses states’ curriculum and tests) lays out the key lessons he draws from this district:

- Align your curriculum frameworks with state standards and assessments.
- Set clear curriculum goals. They “can’t be vague or general... They have to be focused and manageable.
- Curriculum has to “clearly progress from grade to grade, rather than repeat the same concepts over and over again with no progression.”
- Don’t use commercial, norm-referenced tests like the Iowa; they are not well-aligned.
- Write well-aligned end-of-course tests that really measure curriculum learning.
- Write during-the-year tests to give teachers and students feedback to improve (small districts should appeal to their states for help or pool their resources)

“Aligning District Tests and Curricula with State Requirements: Lessons of a ‘Model’ Program”, *Harvard Education Letter*, July / August 2003

5. New Formative Assessments in New York City Schools

In mid-July, New York City’s school leaders announced that students in Grade 3-8 will be required to take three standardized tests a year (October, December, and February) in Math and English as part of “a new data-driven effort to quickly identify students who are failing to grasp basic skills or teachers who are not effectively conveying the material.”

Designed by Princeton Review (part of a three-year, \$8.2 million contract that includes training), each test will have 20 questions and be geared to the city and state curriculum and tests. Results will be available within 24 hours. School administrators and math and reading coaches will be trained “in how to interpret the data as a guide for teachers who could then adjust their lessons or give students extra attention.”

Randi Weingarten, the president of the teachers’ union, angrily criticized the tests for putting too much emphasis on testing and being a thinly-veiled teacher evaluation tool. Lashing out at NYC administrators, she said: “They are in danger of becoming the Department of Testing rather than the Department of Education. It’s all about the test prep and the scores and that’s how teachers will view this.” Central administrators expressed dismay at this reaction and defended the use of formative test data to improve student achievement.

“City Plans to Add 6 Standardized Tests in Math and English” by David Herszenhorn, *New York Times*, July 17, 2003

6. New York City’s New Curriculum Criticized

In a stinging New York Times article in August, James Traub faulted the leadership of the New York City Public Schools for opting for “balanced literacy” and a math curriculum (Everyday Math) that he says emphasizes understanding concepts rather than mastery of basic operations. In the article, he states flatly (and erroneously) that “reading experts have coalesced around the principle that step-by-step phonics instruction works best, especially with children at risk of failure”, and his argument flows from there.

Traub suggests that school chancellor Joel Klein is going against Mayor Bloomberg's back-to-basics wishes and falling in with the system's "progressive-ed old guard." Diana Lam, Klein's curriculum deputy, is quoted staunchly defending the new programs and criticizing more scripted programs as insulting to teachers' intelligence. "There would have been a bloodbath if we had mandated Open Court," says another New York administrator. Traub observed a summer teacher training session on the literacy curriculum and criticized the presenters (especially Lucy Calkins) for never once using the words "vocabulary," "knowledge" or "analysis" and failing to focus on explicit language instruction.

Traub wraps up with this comment: "...they have imposed a curriculum that scants content knowledge for personal experience and direct instruction for self-directed learning. With almost half of the city's fourth graders and two-thirds of its eighth graders reading below grade level, is this the direction they should go?"

"New York's New Approach" by James Traub, Sunday *New York Times* Education Life section, August 3, 2003

7. Who's Afraid of High-Stakes Tests?

A study by the National Board on Educational Testing and Public Policy (based at Boston College) found that high-stakes tests are having a profound impact on classroom curriculum, activities, and assessments. Tests have led teachers to narrow the curriculum, especially in the 19 states where high-school graduation depends on test scores or there are consequences for low-scoring schools. Many of the teachers surveyed felt that high-stakes tests were forcing them to "teach in ways that contradict their own ideas of good educational practice." Teachers reported that many students were nervous about the tests, that state-mandated tests do not motivate previously unmotivated students to learn, and that the tests were not worth the money.

But a second study done at the University of Arkansas found that students didn't mind the tests that much ("we have less homework and less instruction in the class"). It's *teachers* who have the greatest anxiety about standardized tests: a majority "reported feeling anxious about how their students' test scores would affect their own evaluations, reputations, and job security." Of the stakeholders interviewed in this study (students, parents, teachers, principals, and counselors) it was only teachers who had negative perceptions about standardized testing.

“Teaching and Learning in a High-Stakes Environment” by David Gordon, *Harvard Education Letter*, July / August 2003

8. A Plan to Fix Urban Schools

Matthew Miller, a consultant and syndicated columnist, offers a radical plan to improve the performance of struggling American schools. The main challenge in underperforming schools, he says, is improving teacher quality: “Research shows that much of the achievement gap facing poor and minority students comes not from poverty or family conditions but from systemic differences in teacher quality; thus recruiting better teachers for poor schools is not only the biggest issue in education but the next great frontier for social justice.”

Miller proposes a “grand bargain” between unions and conservatives: “Make more money available for teachers’ salaries in exchange for flexibility in how it is spent.” The federal government should raise the salary of every teacher in a poor school by at least 50 percent (to \$60,000 in Los Angeles, for example) – contingent on two fundamental reforms: (a) abandon lockstep pay schedules so that top-performing teachers are paid significantly more (up to \$90,000 a year); and (b) shorten the dismissal process for poor-performing teachers to 4-6 months.

How would teacher quality be judged? By a value-added analysis on student learning results combined with evaluations by principals. While Miller acknowledges that the state of the art is not there on value added and notes that “many teachers think principals don’t know the first thing about good teaching,” he is optimistic that these problems can be worked out. He says that his scheme has won the approval of a number of education gurus and teacher union leaders and proposes that the President take it on as a national crusade for better schools.

“A New Deal for Teachers” by Matthew Miller in *The Atlantic Monthly*, July / August 2003. This article is drawn from Miller’s forthcoming book, *The Two Percent Solution: Fixing America’s Problems in Ways Liberals and Conservatives Can Love* (Public Affairs, September 2003)

9. Virtual Frog Dissection

There have been major advances in the quality of computer software for dissecting frogs, fetal pigs, and other animals in biology classes, which helps teachers dealing with

squeamish students and the objections of some parents and religious groups to dissecting real animals. The pros and cons of virtual dissection are briefly debated in this article, with a decided tilt toward the advantages. The program described was Digital Frog 2, the companies mentioned were NEOTEK and Science Works.

“The Cutting Edge” by Blair Campbell, *Teacher Magazine*, August/September 2003

10. Kiss and Tell Memoirs

Massachusetts high-school teacher Brendan Halpin is pictured on the cover of the current *Teacher Magazine* and a long article inside describes the book he just published on his first nine years of teaching (*Losing My Faculties*, Villard/Random House) and Halpin’s current teaching job in suburban Brookline, Massachusetts. One memorable quote: “Teaching is a really hard job to do well and a really easy job to do badly.”

Halpin’s book will stir up considerable controversy because of his fatalistic view of teaching, his descriptions of racial conflicts, his stream of profanity, and his negative, often nasty comments on the schools in which he taught and many of the people he worked with. Halpin is especially tough on the Boston charter school where he taught for three years and the Efficacy Institute (which he calls the “Buzzword Institute”).

I was asked to review this book for the *Boston Globe*. If you are interested, I would be happy to send you my review.

“A Really Great Gig” by Rich Shea, *Teacher Magazine*, August/September 2003

11. News Flash: Schools Are Boring!

In a long article in *Harpers*, John Gatto, an award-winning New York teacher who recently retired after 30 years, asserts that students are bored to tears because schools are “virtual factories of childishness.” He says that we could “encourage the best qualities of youthfulness – curiosity, adventure, resilience, the capacity for surprising insight – simply by being more flexible about time, texts, and tests, by introducing kids to truly competent adults, and by giving each student what autonomy he or she needs in order to take a risk every now and then.”

He accuses Americans of adopting “one of the very worst aspects of Prussian culture: an educational system deliberately designed to produce mediocre intellects, to hamstring the inner life, to deny students appreciable leadership skills, and to ensure docile and incomplete citizens – all in order to render the populace “manageable.”” He says that “Mandatory education serves children only incidentally; its real purpose is to turn them into servants.”

“Against School: How Public Education Cripples Our Kids, and Why” by John Taylor Gatto in *Harpers Magazine*, September 2003

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

The Marshall Memo aims to keep busy educators extremely well-informed on important research, ideas, and developments in K-12 education with the minimum investment of time. Kim Marshall will read a wide range of publications as soon as they come out and send a weekly e-mail summarizing the most relevant and useful articles on the following topics:

- School leadership (and leadership in general)
- Time management for leaders
- Effective teamwork within schools; building a professional learning community
- Effective teaching practices
- 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 and social competency
- Emotional intelligence and moral development
- Multiple intelligences and brain research
- Other new areas of research
- Upcoming television and radio programs on these topics

Publications covered:

American Education Research Journal, American Educator, Atlantic Monthly, Bay State Banner, Boston Globe, Commonwealth Magazine, Education Digest, Education Gadfly, 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, websites, and conferences.

Subscriptions:

The Marshall Memo is published weekly (with occasional breaks), usually on Mondays. Individual subscriptions are \$50 a year. Rates for institutional clients depend on the number of people within an organization who will receive the memo. To subscribe, please contact Kim Marshall at kim.marshall8@verizon.net or at 222 Clark Road, Brookline, MA 02445 (617-566-4353).