Marshall Memo 21

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
January 19, 2004

In this Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Students do not assume responsibility for their own learning behavior overnight."
Amber Hammon and Carol Hess, *Middle School Journal* (see item #2)

"Staff development can be judged as successful when it alters school culture in a way that benefits all members of the school community."
Marshall George, *Middle School Journal* (see item #4)

"The way to get ready to do hours of homework in 9th grade is not to do hours of homework in kindergarten."
Marilou Hyson, *Education Week* (see item #6)

"School data is always, always messier than you think it is."
Jeffrey Wayman, *Education Week* (see item #7)

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1. Two Genocide Survivors Join Hands to Fight Hatred

David Gewirtzman, now 75, survived the Nazi Holocaust by hiding with his family for almost two years in a trench under a pigsty in Poland. Jacqueline Murekatete, now 19, survived a massacre of her village in Rwanda in 1994 in which her entire family was tortured and hacked to pieces. Together they hold audiences of school children spellbound as they tell about their experiences.

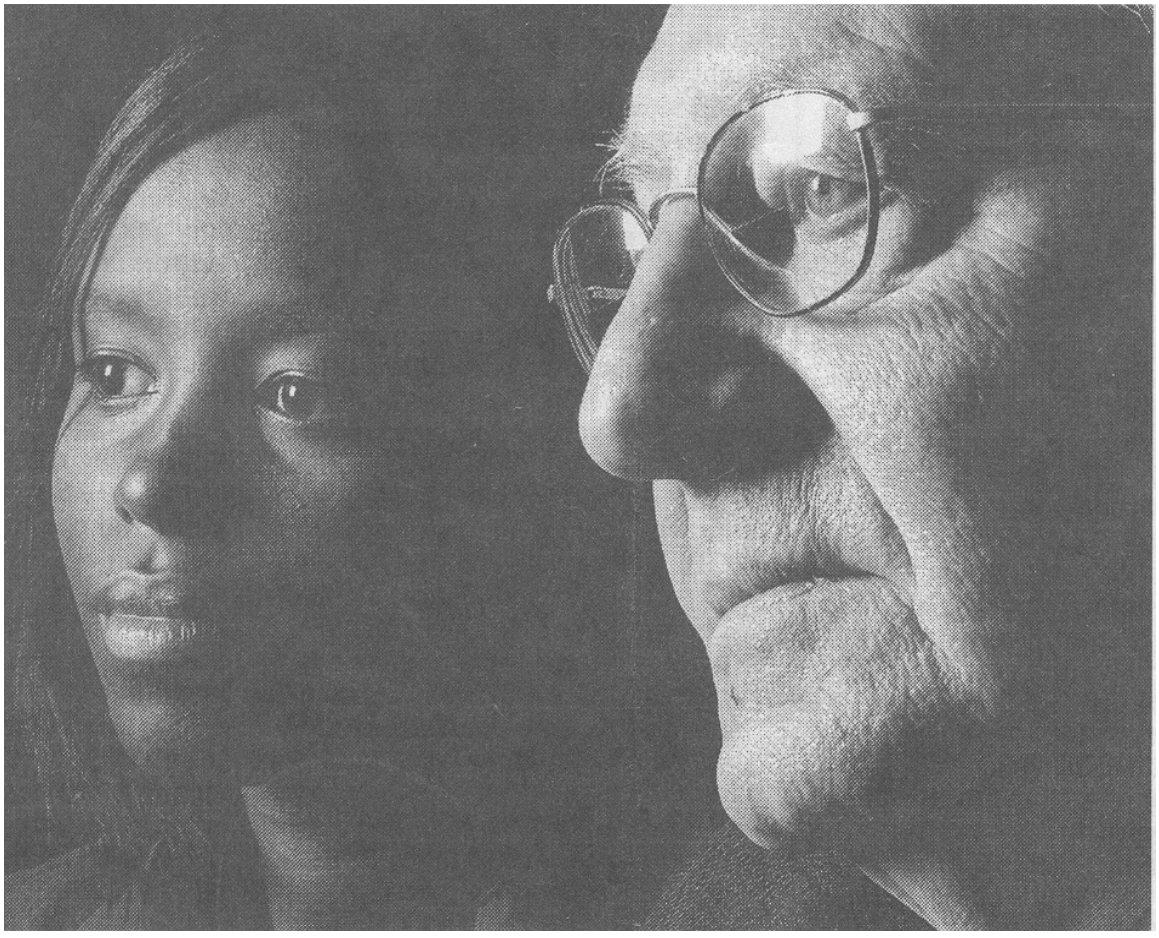
"We are as different as can be," he told one school group. "She's black. I'm white; she's young, I'm old; she's African and Christian and I'm a Jew from Poland. Yet we're like brother and sister, because we're bound by the common trauma of our experience and a common history of pain and suffering and persecution."

"Our kids read theories about racism and genocide in books," she said. "But when they hear similar real-life stories from a white European man and a black African teenager 55 years apart in age, who lived through events 50 years apart in history, it's not a theory any more. It's alive."

"We both went through a traumatic experience," he said, "but instead of remaining bitter and angry and seeking revenge, we both resolved to spend the anger in a positive manner, to prevent this from ever happening again… It transcends race and ethnicity. People are still being taught hatred and it is hatred that we are fighting."

She said, "Sometimes, students ask if they can help, and I say, The best thing you can do for me is to educate yourselves so this doesn't continue to happen."

"Fighting Hate, Across Cultures and Generations" by Corey Kilgannon, *N.Y. Times*, Jan. 14, 2004 http://www.nytimes.com/2004/01/14/nyregion/14genocide.html



2. Balanced Literacy in a Middle School Classroom

As a beginning teacher, Amber Hammon was stuck using a literacy program that isolated her sixth graders and continued their elementary-school-induced hatred of reading. Her school's basal program wrongly assumed that students were independent readers and needed very little encouragement to read, and Hammon spend most of her time dealing with disruptive students and students who refused to read and write. Report cards showed a dismal record of failure.

Inspired by the writing of Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell (*Guided Reading* and *Guiding Readers and Writers Grades 3-6*), Hammon decided to go in a new direction. Her guiding principles were:

1. All children can learn to read and write.
2. Children learn best in a print-rich environment.
3. Learning is a social process.
4. Learning is a constructive process.
5. Learning happens best in an organized environment.
6. Powerful demonstrations are key to learning.
7. Children learn best when responsible for their own learning.

Hammon also believed that developmentally, middle-school students needed:

- the opportunity to work in groups;
- ways of connecting what they already knew with new material;
- success in school to build their confidence;
- gradual movement from concrete to abstract reasoning;
- a chance to move around and change activities;
- motivation to learn from stuff that piqued their curiosity.

Following these principles, Hammon reorganized her classroom (see diagram below), made a wide variety of books readily accessible to students, and restructured the weekly schedule to allow for a flow between whole-class, small-group, and independent activities:

Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday:

15-20 minutes: *Whole-group: teacher readaloud, book talks, mini-lessons*

20-25 minutes: *Small-group work*

5-10 minutes: *Whole-class reflection*

Thursday and Friday:

5-10 minutes: *Whole-group "status check"*

20-25 minutes: *Independent reading, journal writing, projects*

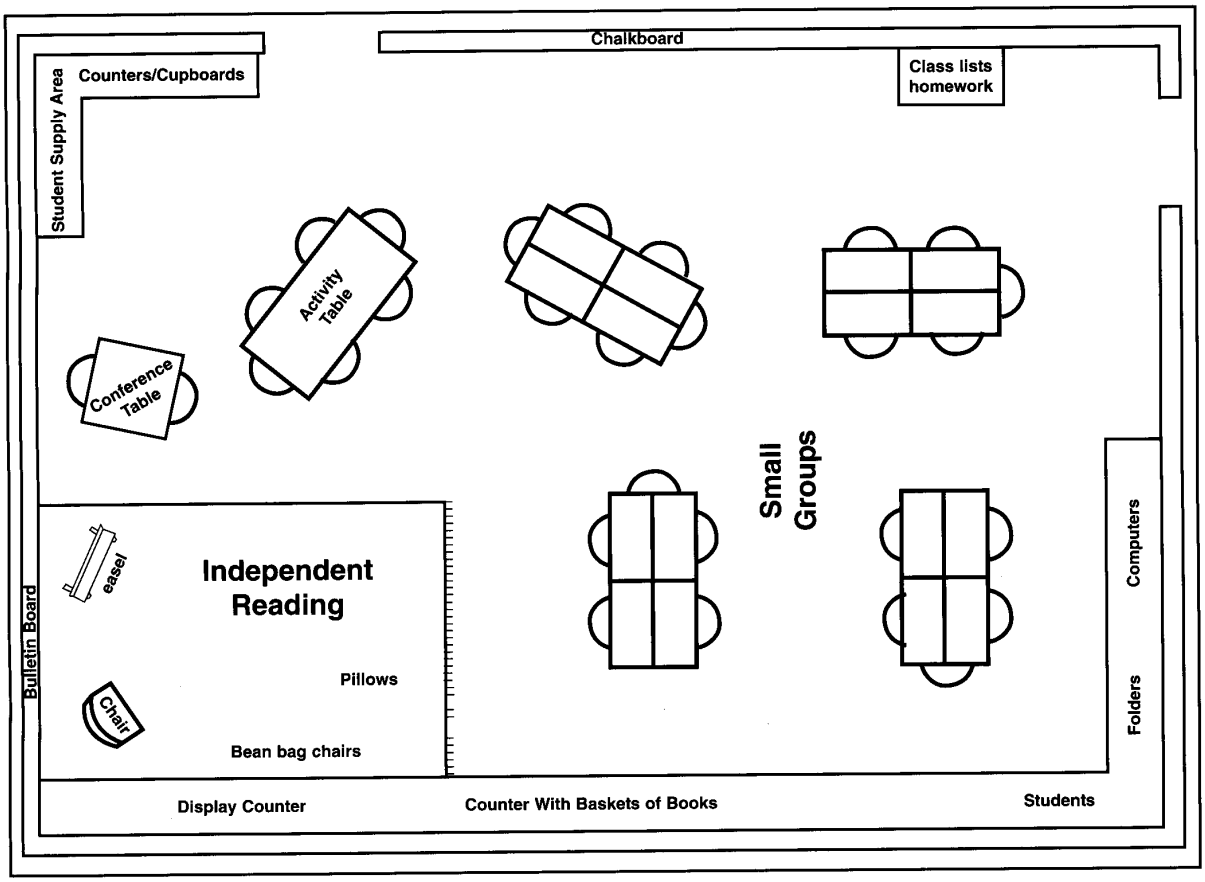
20-25 minutes: *Sharing and evaluating*

Right from the start, Hammon drilled students in the new routines. "One very important element in making any change successful," she writes, "is to take time in the beginning to teach, model, and practice all expectations. Students do not assume responsibility for their own learning behavior overnight. I found it very helpful to take time to practice such things as how to enter the room, move between groups, take turns, respond both orally and in writing, and use tools such as webs and story maps."

Hammon began to read books aloud to the whole class, got them independently reading books of their own choosing, had them write in response journals, provided focused instruction in leveled guided reading groups and literature circles, and urged parents to provide quiet, uninterrupted reading time at home.

This article is one teacher's account with no data on student achievement results. But it comports with the research on effective programs and rings true. One mother said the change in her daughter was remarkable: before, it had been difficult to get her to pick up a book, but now she seldom puts one down.

"Actively Encouraging Middle School Readers: One Teacher's Story" by Amber Hammon and Carol Hess, *Middle School Journal*, January 2004 (Vol. 35, #3, p. 5-12) http://www.nmsa.org/, go to Site Map, Services/Resources, Middle School Journal, January 2004.



3. Improving "Lite" Science Tests

In this biting *Education Week* commentary article, three science educators report on their highly-critical analysis of the science assessments from 39 states. High-quality assessments are especially important with the looming NCLB requirement that all states test students in science once in each of these grade spans: 3-5, 6-9, and 10-12. The researchers' major findings:

• *Many states do not challenge students to learn science deeply*. High-school tests seemed to test middle-school content and middle-school tests assessed elementary content. One high-school graduation exam contained the following item:

> As a football play begins, a lineman from one team pushes the opposing lineman backward. This is an example of:
>
> A. a balanced force
> B. the force of gravity
> C. an unbalanced force
> D. the force of friction

Standards need to be appropriate to the level and detailed enough to yield a 4-3-2-1 performance level for each student.

• *Standards are unclear*. The culprit in the item just above was a vague content standard: "The student will understand concepts of force and motion… Relate Newton's three laws of motion to real-world situation." Another example: "Describe common ecological relationships among species." Does this mean that cats chase rats, or something deeper? "Teaching science, writing science textbooks, and designing science tests based on vague standards can lead to instructional roulette, where figuring out what students must learn becomes a game of chance," write the authors.

• *Some items don't require science knowledge*. This relieves teachers of having to teach anything specific, making student achievement a matter of home background.

• *Science items are sometimes background*. Some test items avoid testing science knowledge directly, trying instead to see whether students can "relate and use knowledge." An example: a 5th-grade item asks students to measure the length of a caterpillar in a picture. And here is a writing prompt from an 8th-grade science assessment:

> Your school's Academic Team has chosen Archimedes as its mascot, and for the team shirt you have created a new symbol to represent Archimedes and his discoveries. The team members have asked you to attend their next meeting to inform them about your symbol. Write a speech to read to the team members, which describes and explains your symbol and tells why it is appropriate for the team.

• *Some items give the answer away*. Defective test items give students hints or make the answer obvious, for example, by repeating vocabulary only in the correct response, providing implausible choices in the distracters, or using "right-sounding" writing style in the correct answer. Here is an example:

> After Nita connected a copper wire from one terminal of a battery to the other, the wire became very hot. Why did the wire get hot?
>
> A. The circuit was not complete.
> B. Air around the circuit became electrified.
> C. Chemical energy in the battery produced vibrations.
> D. Electrical energy was changed into heat energy.

The authors of this study have these recommendations for state to improve the quality of science assessments:

- States should sharpen up their science standards and learning objectives. Test writers can only write decent items if they have detailed guidance.
- State should demand higher standards of technical quality from testing contractors and assessment writers.
- State assessments should measure elementary knowledge and skills at the elementary level, middle school knowledge and skills at the middle school level, and significantly increase expectations in high school. "Policymakers need to be willing to test students with many items that are difficult, and to set a high standard for achievement."

"Avoiding Science 'Lite'" by Stan Metzenberg, Sam Miller, and Douglas Carnine in *Education Week*, January 14, 2004 (Vol. XXIII, #18, p. 44, 30, 31)
http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=18Carnine.h23

4. The Impact of Faculty-Student Book Clubs

In this article, a Fordham University professor describes starting lunch-time book clubs in two middle schools in New York City. Starting with volunteers among teachers and students, the clubs have gradually expanded over the last three years. George had the following observations on the impact of the program:

• More teachers are reading and talking about what they are reading with each other.

• Teachers and students share their "independent reading lives" with one another in and out of classrooms, creating a "culture of literacy" in the schools.

• Teachers began reading and incorporating more adolescent literature into the curriculum.

• Teachers seemed more empathetic to the issues facing adolescents, and students began to recognize the humanness of their teachers.

• More teachers began using book clubs as an instructional strategy in their classrooms.

• Administration and staff developers modified the faculty-student book club model and extended it to the entire faculty as they read and discussed professional literature during professional development days.

• Conversations about literature became increasingly common in the halls of both middle schools, even among non-book club participants.

George judged the book club idea a splendid success in improving the culture of both schools and benefiting all members of each school community.

"Faculty-Student Book Clubs Create Communities of Readers in Two Urban Middle Schools" by Marshall George in *Middle School Journal*, January 2004 (Vol. 35, #3, p. 21-26), no e-link available.

5. Paying Teachers for Results in Denver

For the last few years, the Denver schools have been experimenting with paying teachers extra for producing learning gains. The pilot program rewards teachers who spell out and then meet two principal-approved objectives related to student achievement. For each goal met, teachers receive a bonus of $750 a year. For example, an algebra teacher could set a goal of having 70 percent of her class show 40 percent growth from a pre-test to a post-test.

A report just released by the Community Training and Assistance Center (a Boston nonprofit that has studied the project for the last four years) says the results were impressive at the classroom and district level: "The pilot has demonstrated that the focus on student achievement and a teacher's contribution to such achievement can be a major trigger for change… [The initiative] can provide a basis for improving the entire school system by trying district activities to core classroom needs." The Denver school board will vote later this month on expanding pay-for-performance, and the teachers' union (an NEA affiliate) will vote on the issue in March.

The CTAC study found that the students of teachers who took part in the pay-for-performance program had higher achievement, and students whose teachers had the most ambitious, well-crafted objectives did the best. Teachers attributed the gains to establishing growth expectations, focusing earlier on students who needed extra help, having greater access to student-achievement data, and using it more effectively.

The program seems to have changed Denver's curriculum and instruction practices for the better. "The changes required to identify, strengthen, and reward individual student growth and individual teacher contributions under pay-for-performance have the added effect of stimulating other parts of the school system to improve the quality of support and service," the report said. Communication between colleagues improved, district goals were more clearly articulated, and more effective strategies were implemented.

Before implementing such a program successfully, the CTAC report says that other districts need to align their standards, curriculum content, instructional delivery, and supervisory and human resources, provide detailed data so teachers can assess their students, and provide training in data analysis. And none of this is cheap. Denver raised $4 million from philanthropies, which partially covered the costs of the program.

"Denver Performance-Pay Plan Yields Student Progress" by Julie Blair, Edu*cation Week*, January 14, 2004 (Vol. XXIII, #18, p. 10)
http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=18Denver.h23
The full report, "Catalyst for Change: Pay for Performance in Denver," is available at
http://www.ctacusa.com/publications.html

6. Overdoing Homework in Kindergarten

A front-page *Education Week* article chronicles the increasingly stiff homework assignments given to kindergarten students in many schools. Teachers in one Los Angeles-area district routinely send home a packet of worksheets to be completed by Friday, defending it as good practice in responsibility and routines and reinforcement of what was covered during the day.

Experts are not so sure that copious worksheets are the way to go. Marilou Hyson of the National Association for the Education of Young Children said that reading to a child each night should be considered homework, and may have much greater value in boosting literacy and school achievement. Hyson said that homework activities can be fun and engaging and still reinforce academic concepts. For example, an assignment might ask students to find things at home that are shaped like a triangle, or draw pictures of things that begin with the letter S. Kim Hughes, a North Carolina kindergarten teacher, suggests having kids help their parents make scrambled eggs, figuring out how many eggs would be needed for a certain number of family members. Lenora Akhibi, a retired Chicago kindergarten teacher, told of

sending her students home for "mystery nights," pretending to be detectives looking for clues around their houses to solve problems.

Hyson also stressed that children need to have time to interact with other family members after school. "Homework that is isolating the child is not giving them opportunities to help prepare dinner or maybe take a walk in the neighborhood after school." In other words, kids need to have a life, and homework should not be overdone. Hyson says she understands the pressure teachers are under to help students meet state and district standards. But in kindergarten, it's important that children are enthusiastic, engaged, and curious. "The way to get ready to do hours of homework in 9th grade," she said, "is not to do hours of homework in kindergarten."

"Little Ones' Homework Burden Rises" by Linda Jacobson, *Education Week*, January 14, 2004 (Vol. XXIII, #18, p. 1, 12)
http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=18Homework.h23

7. Reviews of Data-Analysis Software

Three researchers have published a preliminary analysis of 13 commercial software packages designed to help schools analyze and make use of student achievement data. They deliberately did not review software that was could only be used by central office personnel, zeroing in on packages that were teacher-accessible. "To improve achievement, we're going to need to get data down to the classroom level, and we feel that means getting data into the hands of teachers," said Jeffrey Wayman of Johns Hopkins University (one of the authors). "These things are user-friendly. If you can order a book off of amazon.com, you can look at your student data."

The authors describe three good district-generated initiatives (Broward Country, Cleveland, and Houston), but they believe that most districts should get commercial software rather than trying to grow their own in-house. "School data is always, always messier than you think it is," said Mr. Wayman. Unless a district has exceptional in-house expertise, he thinks it's better to bring in an outside vendor.

The researchers used these criteria to evaluate the software: it needs to be user-friendly, have a relatively rapid response time, offer query tools for less sophisticated users, enable users to "drill down" to the level of individual grades, classrooms, and students, allow staff to access the software from home or the workplace, and have the information available through a variety of means (quick snapshots, query tools, and pre-formatted reports).

The full report ("Software Enabling School Improvement Through Analysis of Student Data" http://www.csos.jhu.edu/crespar/techReports/Report67.pdf) analyzes these commercial programs:

- Account (Schoolnet)
- Data Miner (Chancery)
- Data Point (NSSE)
- Ease-e (TetraData)
- Edsmart
- eScholar
- QP (CRESST)
- Sagebrush Analytics (Swiftknowledge)
- SAMS (Executive Intelligence)
- Scholarsuite (SCHOLARinc)
- Socrates Data System (Center for Resource Management)
- STARS (SchoolCity)
- Virtual EDucation (Edmin)

The researchers advise districts to call schools that are using the software and visit if possible before making a decision.

[While this report gives a thorough run-down on each of the 13 programs, it does not provide a critical review or rank-order them à la *Consumer Reports*. This leaves districts with the job of researching and comparing all thirteen programs.]

"Researchers Sort Out Data-Analysis Software" by Lynn Olson, *Education Week*, Jan. 14, 2004 (Vol. XXIII, #18, p. 6)
http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=18Software.h23
The researchers' website is http://www.csos.jhu.edu/systemics/datause.htm

8. It Takes More Than Subject-Area Knowledge

Dorothy Rich, a Washington, D.C. area educator, says that it's not enough to have good content-area knowledge to be a good teacher. She wishes that all "highly qualified" teachers could learn the lessons she's picked up over the years:

• *Teaching and learning are mysterious*. The "internals" can override even the best lesson plan. Internals for teachers include common sense, intelligence, and enthusiasm. For students they include taking responsibility and making an effort.

• *Learning is not linear: I teach, they learn*. Rather, it's "a slow, messy, zigzag process." Student may look like they're listening and be a million miles away, but when they're engaged they can do a lot more than we sometimes think they can.

• *School is only a small fraction of children's learning time*. At best, students go to school half the days of the year and one quarter of each of those days. We need to support the learning that takes place "at the kitchen sink and while driving in the car."

• *Motivation is key*. Teaching well is important, but students have to want to learn. You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink. Teachers need to encourage, motivate, respond positively, and impart real praise based on achievement, not empty, perfunctory words.

• *Learning is connected, secretive, and miraculous*. The mind, the heart, the brain, and the spirit all play a part in learning. Teachers need to know their subject, but they also need to be able to tap into this deeper level.

• *Teachers also need encouragement*. Good support and training and essential. In short, teachers need to go beyond "book learning" and apply these lessons on a daily basis for children to learn at high levels.

"Learning Curve" by Dorothy Rich, *Washington Post*, January 11, 2004 (p.B07)
http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A4927-2004Jan9.html
(spotted in *PEN Weekly Newsblast*, January 16, 2004)

9. Short Items:

• ***The ups and downs of Blogs*** – This *Education Week* report describes the trouble one New York City teacher got into by waxing overly candid on her weblog (her principal called her in to assess her emotional state after reading a blog entry in which the teacher said "I have no idea how to teach these kids, and I'm not sure I ever will.") and goes on to describe the value of blogs for idea sharing and networking.

"'Blogs' Help Educators Share Ideas, Air Frustrations" by Mark Toner, *Education Week*, January 14, 2004 (Vol. XXIII, #18, p. 8)
http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=18Blogs.h23

• ***Classroom video observation*** – In a letter responding to the *Education Week* piece, "New Heroes of Teaching" (see Marshall Memo #12, item 2), three educators tell of an approach they are using at the King Center Charter School in Buffalo, New York. Four primary-grade classrooms have corner-mounted cameras and teachers wear microphone-tracking devices that allow the cameras to follow their daily routines. Student teachers from a local college are able to watch the live videos from these classrooms without being physically present. When the teacher has a break, he or she can attend a "collaboratory" in the distance education room, videoconferencing with the student teachers and a professor about what happened in the class.

"Videotaping Project Aids Teachers-to-Be" by Marion Fox Barnett, Julie Jacobs Henry,

and Judit Szente in *Education Week*, Jan. 14, 2004 (Vol. XXIII, #18, p. 31, 32)
http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=18Letter.h23

- ***No name-calling week*** – The week of March 1-5 is No Name-Calling Week. "No Sticks. No Stones. No Dissing." There's a lesson plan contest for educators and other activities. See http://www.nonamecallingweek.org

Do you have feedback? Is 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: kim.marshall8@verizon.net

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo aims to keep busy principals, teachers, and other educators very well-informed on important research, ideas, and developments in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, a former Boston teacher and administrator, is your "designated reader," searching through a wide range of publications the week they come out, zeroing in on the articles that are most relevant and useful to improving teaching and learning at the school level, and summarizing them in a brief e-mail. Target topics include the following:

• *School leadership* – Building a professional learning community; effective teamwork; effective schools practices; supervision and evaluation of teachers; time management.

• *Effective teaching* – Key variables associated with high student achievement; professional development of teachers; teacher leadership and career ladders; multiple intelligences and brain research.

• *Curriculum* – Alignment and planning with the end in sight; teaching for understanding; new ideas in reading, writing, and math.

• *Assessment* – Aligned formative and summative assessments; using data and student work for continuous improvement; graphic display of student achievement data; standardized testing and the debate on standards.

• *Closing the gap* – Effective strategies to close the racial/economic achievement gap; the innate-ability/intelligence/effective effort debate; safety-net programs.

• *Positive school culture* – Student discipline; social-emotional learning; moral development; parent involvement; and community partnerships.

• *And…* – New areas of research; upcoming television and radio programs on education.

Publications covered:

(those read this week are underlined)

American Education Research Journal
American Educator
ASCD SmartBrief
Atlantic Monthly
Bay State Banner
Boston Globe
Commonwealth Magazine
Curriculum/Education Update (ASCD)
Ed. Magazine (Harvard School of Education)
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Elementary School Journal
Harpers
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Education Review
Middle School Journal
New York Times
New Yorker
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal Magazine
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Review of Educational Research
Teachers College Record
Teacher Magazine
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