Marshall Memo 449

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
August 27, 2012

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"If I were given one hour to save the planet, I would spend 59 minutes defining the problem and one minute resolving it."
Albert Einstein (quoted in item #4)

"We live on a sphere, turning in the light of a star."
Mark Vanhoenacker (see item #3)

"Science homework is a must; it is not a choice that you have."
A science teacher (see item #2)

"[F]rom now on, if you cannot do it, then you need to write me a note of explanation. And the only reason I'll tell you that you cannot do your homework is that you are dead – and you won't be here then."
Another science teacher (*ibid*.)

"Evaluators need to believe that they are growth agents. They need a developmental mindset that tells them the purpose of the feedback is not to judge or be the end of a conversation… Without high-quality feedback, people will stagnate."
Laura Lipton (quoted in item #6)

"You want kids to behave appropriately because they understand that there are rewards for everyone in a civil classroom."
Nancy Flanagan on classroom rules (see item #1)

1. Classroom Rules 101

In this thoughtful *Teacher* blog, teacher Nancy Flanagan questions the time-honored practice of having students formulate classroom rules at the beginning of the year. Yes, it models the democratic process and should increase student "buy-in", but does it result in improved rule-following for the rest of the year? Not in Flanagan's experience. And she has other concerns. Students come up with the same rules every year: *Keep your hands to yourself. Don't hit. Don't swear. Raise your hand.* It seems like an exercise in remembering rules from previous classrooms. "It never felt as if we were wrestling with the really important issues," she says: "Building a functioning community. Safety. Personal dignity. Kindness. Order. Academic integrity. Democracy."

And speaking of democracy, how democratic should things get? "What happens when the students approve rules that the teacher doesn't like?" Flanagan wonders. "Who determines what happens when rules are broken – does that get turned over to students? Even the criminal justice system provides judicial flexibility in sentencing."

She's learned her lesson, and suggests the following seven ideas for creating more helpful, durable classroom rules:

• *Aim for influence, not control.* Nothing that teachers do works perfectly, especially rules on the wall. Flanagan's Big Idea: "You want kids to behave appropriately because they understand that there are rewards for everyone in a civil classroom."

• *Modeling matters more than anything.* "Behave the way you want kids to behave," she says. "Ignore minor, brainless bids for attention. Make eye contact with speakers. Don't be an attention hog – your stories aren't more important than theirs. Don't be rude to kids. Apologize publicly when you're wrong. Remember that you're the adult in the room. It's your calm presence that institutes order, not rules."

• *Don't restate the obvious. No cheating* and *Bring a pencil to class* are not helpful rules, says Flanagan. "Any rule that begins with 'don't' is a challenge to the rebels in every class." Respect is the big idea that needs little elaboration.

• *Use common sense.* If it becomes obvious that a rule is dysfunctional or unhelpful, drop it.

• *Give clear instructions about what students don't know.* Tornado procedures. What to do in a lockdown. Where the used pencils are kept. How to feed the guinea pig. How to check out a book. Big idea: "Order facilitates learning and makes the class a pleasant place to be."

• *Integrity helps build community.* "The most important directives in democratic classrooms are around ethical practices," says Flanagan – for example, what constitutes

cheating in the digital age; why substandard work is never okay; why trust and personal best are more important than winning.

• *Carrots and sticks are, at best, temporary nudges and ultimately destructive*. Flanagan hates the idea of "catching students being good" – it leads to phony good behavior, not real goodness. In her classroom, she's looking for decent (and yet self-interested) behavior based on a real understanding of her bedrock principle: "We want kids to behave appropriately because they understand that there are rewards for everyone in a civil, well-managed school."

"Who Makes the Rules in a Classroom? Seven Ideas About Rule-Making" by Nancy Flanagan in *Teacher*, Aug. 14, 2012, http://bit.ly/SkL2Oi

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2. How Effective Science Teachers Handle Homework

In this *Teachers College Record* article, Jianzhong Xu and Linda Coats (Mississippi State University) and Mary Davidson (Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science) report on their study of how successful science teachers deal with homework. The authors start with research findings indicating that science homework is a crucial factor in students' science achievement, especially at the secondary level, and, done right, has the potential to help narrow the racial achievement gap. They also note that science is one of the more difficult subjects for low-income black students, especially when it is presented "in a rational, technical, distant, and depersonalized form."

The authors explored two theories about effective instruction for African-American students. The first is that black students do better when teachers are tuned in to what Boykin has called an "Afro-cultural ethos." It has nine dimensions:

- Spirituality – emphasizing the spiritual instead of the physical world;
- Harmony – emphasizing the whole rather than the parts that constitute the whole;
- Movement – valuing physical motion that is distinguished by a noticeable rhythm;
- Verve – valuing variability and intensity in activities;
- Affect – valuing interest and emotion;
- Expressive individualism – valuing a person's uniqueness and creativity;
- Communalism – valuing the importance of the group over the significance of the individual;
- Orality – valuing oral and aural communication;
- Social perspective of time – valuing social interaction and the building of relationships.

The second theory is that African-American students do best with teachers who are "warm demanders" – that is, personable, caring, and responsive while simultaneously acting as authority figures fully in control of their classes and holding students accountable for meeting high and rigorous academic standards. For example, one science teacher said this to her class after only half of them handed in homework: "I do not give you homework every day, but when I do it's a practice skill that needs to be done. It's something that you need: it's not just something for you to do… And I expect you to do it. Now from now on, if you cannot do it,

then you need to write me a note of explanation. And the only reason I'll tell you that you cannot do your homework is that you are dead – and you won't be here then… We are not here to play, I'm getting you ready for middle school."

Xu, Coats, and Davidson chose eight African-American grade 3-6 science teachers who had distinguished themselves by winning awards (including the Milken Family Foundation National Teacher Award), had earned National Board Certification, were nominated by administrators, colleagues, or former students, and had a track record of getting high achievement with their students. The authors conducted several in-depth interviews and focus groups and found that the teachers had remarkably similar teaching styles. Here were the common characteristics:

• *Frequency* – The teachers in the study assigned homework 2-3 times a week and expected students to take 20-30 minutes on each assignment.

• *Urgency* – "Science homework is a must; it is not a choice that you have," said one teacher. The teachers in the study believe that African-American students need to be twice as prepared as their white classmates to achieve in school.

• *Critical thinking* – These teachers believed science homework was an arena in which students could learn to think critically about science content and stretch their thinking.

• *Scaffolding* – The teachers made special provisions to ensure that students had the materials, literacy support, and computer access needed to succeed with their science homework.

• *Relevance* – The teachers were at pains to link science concepts to students' everyday lives, for example, having them interview family members about inherited diseases.

• *Choice* – The teachers gave students some autonomy with homework, thus building their interest and buy-in.

• *Hands-on* – The teachers had students construct their own ecosystems, collect different kinds of leaves and insects, make a solar system model, or record the weather for a week.

• *Family involvement* – Teachers placed homework in the context of students' everyday lives, asking them to share problems and questions with family members.

• *Afro-cultural ethos* – The authors found that teachers incorporated six of Boykin's nine elements in their science homework assignments: expressive individualism, affect, verve, harmony, communalism, and orality.

• *Warm demanding* – The teachers in the study fit this profile to a T: they set high expectations for student performance on science homework, made personal connections to help students succeed, provided students with the necessary scaffolding to succeed, and insisted that students take homework seriously and put forth effort to perform at the required level.

"Making Science Homework Work: The Perspectives of Exemplary African-American Science Teachers" by Jianzhong Xu, Linda Coats, and Mary Davidson in *Teachers College Record*, July 2012 (Vol. 114, #7, p. 1-32),

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3. The Beauty – and Importance – of the Globe

"We live on a sphere, turning in the light of a star," says airline pilot/author Mark Vanhoenacker in this charming *New York Times* article. He believes that the globe is the best way to envision humans' position in the universe, and bemoans the fact that fewer and fewer classrooms and living rooms have one. In classrooms, this may be a result of budget cuts and the de-emphasis of geography compared to reading and math. In people's homes, it may have something to do with the hubris of globalization and the ready availability of online maps.

We lose a lot without a real globe, says Vanhoenacker. "The view of a Roman street on Google Maps is wonderful – but only after a globe has shown you Italy." In addition, any flat map has major inadequacies – the Mercator, the Equidistant conic, the Sinusoidal equal area. "Only a globe is both simple and right," he says, "– simple because it's right. Globes show why maps are imperfect – but also what maps even are."

And they are the best hands-on tools for demonstrating concepts like the seasons and the length of days at different times of year. "Every kid deserves a globe to ponder (and touch)… [N]othing so easily and beautifully conjures our small place in a big scheme. After all, we live not in but on a world, one so achingly beautiful that we can hardly imagine we are free to gaze or sit down upon it anytime we like."

"The World Is Flat, Again" by Mark Vanhoenacker in *The New York Times*, Aug. 19, 2012, http://nyti.ms/Pnw50p

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4. Defining a Problem Before Jumping to Solutions

In this *Harvard Business Review* article, entrepreneur Dwayne Spradlin quotes Albert Einstein: "If I were given one hour to save the planet, I would spend 59 minutes defining the problem and one minute resolving it." Spradlin believes most organizations don't follow this maxim, and presents a truly systematic way of thinking a problem through before implementing the best solution. This process was applied to the problem of 1.1 billion people not having access to clean drinking water, but it could also be applied to the challenge of helping all students within a school district become proficient readers and writers.

• *Establish the need for a solution*. What is the basic need? What is the desired outcome? Who stands to benefit and why?

• *Justify the need*. Is the effort aligned with our strategy? What are the desired benefits for the organization, and how will we measure them? How will we ensure that a solution is implemented?

• *Contextualize the problem*. What approaches have we tried? What have others tried? What are the internal and external constraints on implementing a solution?

• *Write the problem statement*. Is the problem actually many problems? What requirements must a solution meet? Which problem solvers should we engage? What information and language should the problem statement include? What do solvers need to submit? What incentives do solvers need? How will solutions be evaluated and success measured?

"Are You Solving the Right Problem?" by Dwayne Spradlin in *Harvard Business Review*, September 2012 (Vol. 90, #9, p. 84-93), no e-link available

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5. The Role of Parent Expectations on Post-School Outcomes

In this article in *Exceptional Children*, Bonnie Doren (University of Wisconsin/Madison), Jeff Gau (Oregon Research Institute), and Lauren Lindstrom (University of Oregon/Eugene) report on their study of how parent expectations affect the post-school outcomes of adolescents with disabilities. The authors confirmed that parents' expectations are important, but found that teenagers' sense of autonomy also matters. "Autonomy development is theorized not as a process of detachment or separation from parents but as a process that involves a 'reciprocal interaction between higher levels of connectedness with parents and higher levels of personal individuation,'" say the authors (quoting Soenens and Vansteenkiste, 2005).

Doren, Gau, and Lindstrom found that parents' expectations are dynamic, malleable, and influenced by three factors: (a) parents' own school outcomes, (b) parents' perception of how their child is doing at any particular point, and (c) teacher expectations. From their findings, the authors draw the following conclusions:

• School and community agency staff should help parents disentangle their expectations for their children from their own school experiences.

• School and agency staff should let parents know about the supports, accommodations, and services available to their children and how to take full advantage of them. This should boost parents' expectations for their teens' success after high school.

• School and agency staff should work with parents to help them build their teens' sense of autonomy.

• In cases where parents have low expectations or are not available to support their teens, school and agency staff should step up: "Prior research indicates the important and positive influence of adult role models and mentors such as teachers or adults in the community and their unique contribution to adolescent and young adult outcomes," conclude the authors.

"The Relationship Between Parent Expectations and Post-School Outcomes of Adolescents with Disabilities" by Bonnie Doren, Jeff Gau, and Lauren Lindstrom in *Exceptional Children*, Fall 2012 (Vol. 79, #1, p. 7-23); Doren can be reached at bdoren@wisc.edu.

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6. Observing Teachers for Feedback and Evaluation

In this article in *The Learning System*, Anthony Armstrong quotes a Philadelphia principal's thoughts after some of his initial classroom observations: "I would give teachers feedback about their practice, and they might value it or they might not. Sometimes they would flatly disagree with what were best practices or what was getting results with students." To

avoid this kind of disconnect, says Armstrong, principals and teachers need a shared understanding of good teaching and the supervision process.

A perennial question is whether supervision and evaluation need to be separated – nonjudgmental feedback versus summative judgments. Laura Lipton, co-author of a forthcoming book on teacher supervision, believes it's possible for administrators to do both simultaneously: "You can be an evaluator and still have a learning-focused conversation that produces greater learning, forward movement, and problem solving," she says. "It is a matter of clarity of purpose and skillful communication… Evaluators need to believe that they are growth agents. They need a developmental mindset that tells them the purpose of the feedback is not to judge or be the end of a conversation. Feedback is just the beginning of a conversation that explores and improves practice."

Lipton believes that the way principals frame questions after classroom observations can open or close dialogue – for example:

- "Can you think of…" suggests that the principal doubts that the teacher will come up with something. "What might be some ways to…" invites exploration of the topic and implies that the teacher will contribute to the solution.
- "What might be the cause of…" implies that there's one right answer. "What might be some causes of…" leaves open multiple possibilities.

Lipton says administrators need to constantly hone their skills in giving thoughtful comments after classroom visits. "Without high-quality feedback, people will stagnate," she says. "There will be no growth. When people engage in rich conversations, it changes the culture to one of collective efficacy."

"The Art of Feedback: Support Observers with a System That Ensures Learning-Focused Conversations" by Anthony Armstrong in *The Learning System*, Summer 2012 (Vol. 7, #4, p. 1, 4-5); the author can be reached at anthony.armstrong@learningforward.org.

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7. Should High Schools Do Without Substitute Teachers?

In this thought-provoking *Education Week* article, retired superintendent John Fitzsimons questions the value of using short-term substitute teachers at the high-school level. "Knowing that untrained subs will provide little instructional continuity for the students, why do high schools hire them?" he asks. The cost can run as high as $100,000 a year for a hundred teachers (assuming an annual absence rate of 5 percent), and handling substitutes is an ongoing headache for administrators.

The three reasons usually given for using substitutes are: (a) not trusting adolescents to make good decisions without adult supervision; (b) fear of legal consequences if anything goes wrong when students are unsupervised; and (c) lack of viable alternatives.

But there *are* alternatives, says Fitzsimons. For starters, he questions whether high-school students are really that untrustworthy. Many have been responsible for babysitting and supervising younger siblings for years, and when they go to college or begin holding down

jobs, they will often be in situations where they must manage their time with little or no supervision (how many colleges hire substitutes when professors are absent?).

"We can provide [students] with sound educational options, rather than allow them to be baby-sat by a substitute who knows little about the subject and less about the students," says Fitzsimons. He suggests forming a problem-solving committee to define the problem, brainstorm solutions, and try out ideas. Here's what he did as superintendent of schools in Tenafly, NJ, and Lawrence, NY:

- Teachers met with their classes at the beginning of the year, discussed options for possible absences, and made a plan.
- Many teachers organized their students into study groups that met in the cafeteria, library, or auditorium – areas designated as supervised for students not in a class.
- Some teachers arranged for students to audit other classes, work on art projects, practice music, or engage in club activities (with prior approval from the affected teachers).
- Both Tenafly and Lawrence had open campus policies, and students could leave the campus with parent approval.

"Allowing students opportunities to manage their time affords them a real understanding of the consequences of good and poor time management," says Fitzsimons. "… It is a responsibility that comes with growing up. What better time to begin learning this valuable skill than while in high school?"

"Don't Hire Substitute Teachers in High School" by John Fitzsimons in *Education Week*, Aug. 22, 2012 (Vol. 32, #1, p. 30),
http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/08/22/01fitzsimons.h32.html

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8. Standards-Based Report Cards

"Standards-based grading," says Kyle Spencer in this *Harvard Education Letter* article, "derives from the idea that teachers ought to have clearly defined academic goals for their students, be able to determine if they've met them, and then communicate that to students and parents." Sounds easy, but designing report cards that can do all that is a challenge. Here's a sample high-school science report card designed by Thomas Guskey and his colleagues, working with principals in Kentucky:

Academic Achievement: A
Basis of scientific inquiry: 4
Physical, chemical, and cellular basis of life: 3
Continuity of life and the changes of organisms over time: 2
Unity and diversity of life: 3
Ecological relationships among organisms: 4
Process Goals
Participation: +
Homework: ++

Cooperation: +
Punctuality: –

Notice the overall academic grade (A), the breakdown of five academic strands, and the separation of process grades, which use a different grading scale and are not factored into the academic grade.

The challenge with standards-based report cards is keeping them jargon-free and as simple as possible. In 2005, Montgomery County (MD) rolled out a new report card with 13 math subcategories and dozens of indicators. Parents complained that they were overwhelmed with detail and the district went back to the drawing board.

At their best, however, the new generation of report cards should help students and parents focus on learning problems and improve performance. Says Douglas Reeves, "Standards-based grading makes people more honest."

"Standards-Based Grading: New Report Cards Aim to Make Mastery Clear" by Kyle Spencer in *Harvard Education Letter*, September/October 2012 (Vol. 28, #5, p. 3-5), www.edletter.org

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9. Short Items:

a. Free online reading software – In this *Teaching Exceptional Children* article, Nancy Stockall, Lindsay Dennis, and Melinda Miller (Sam Houston State University) recommend the following programs that incorporate the principles of universal design:

• http://udltechtoolkit.wikispaces.com/Home - learning tools to enhance learning for all children;

• http://bookbuilder.cast.org - enables users to create, share, publish, and read digital books for young readers;

• http://www.bookshare.org - accessible books and periodicals for readers with print disabilities;

• http://www.signedstories.com/index.cfm - books that readers can view in sign language and with subtitles, also in audio;

• http://www.mothergooseclub.com/index.php - nursery rhymes with child actors who animate the poems;

• http://www.carnegielibrary.org/kids/storymaker/storymaker.swf - for creating, sharing, and publishing digital books for repeated readings; includes prompts to help children begin;

• http://www.wordtalk.org/uk/About - a text-to-speech plug-in for MS Word.

"Right from the Start: Universal Design for Preschool" by Nancy Stockall, Lindsay Dennis, and Melinda Miller in *Teaching Exceptional Children*, September/October 2012 (Vol. 45, #1, p. 10-17)

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b. Online balanced literary resources for students with disabilities – In this *Teaching Exceptional Children* article, Christina Carnahan (University of Cincinnati), Pamela Williamson (University of North Carolina/Greensboro), Aleksandra Hollingshead (University of Cincinnati), and Maya Israel (University of Illinois/Urbana Champaign) recommend these websites (among others):

- The Four Blocks Model – http://www.wfu.edu/education/fourblocks
- About Four Blocks and Building Blocks – http://www.cherylsigmon.com/about.asp
- Tar Heel Reading – http://tarheelreader.org
- Public Broadcasting Service stories – http://pbskids.org/lions/stories
- Children's digital library – http://www.storyplace.org
- Famous actors reading books – http://www.storylineonline.net
- Tactile books: http://www.med.unc.edu/ahs/clds/resources/tactual-book-kit-directions
- Solo Literacy Suite – http://www.donjohnston.com/products/solo
- Route 66 – http://www.route66literacy.org/index.shtml

"Using Technology to Support Balanced Literacy for Students with Significant Disabilities" by Christina Carnahan, Pamela Williamson, Aleksandra Hollingshead, and Maya Israel in *Teaching Exceptional Children*, September/October 2012 (Vol. 45, #1, p. 20-29)

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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.marshall48@gmail.com

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 43 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 50 issues a year).

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Publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
ASCD, CEC SmartBriefs, Daily EdNews
Better Evidence-Based Education
EDge
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Elementary School Journal
Essential Teacher (TESOL)
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Educational Review
JESPAR
Journal of Staff Development
Kappa Delta Pi Record
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
Teachers College Record
Teaching Children Mathematics
The Atlantic Monthly
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Language Educator
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
The School Administrator
Theory Into Practice