

# Marshall Memo 89

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education  
May 30, 2005

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## Quotes of the Week

“If you walk into a classroom and sit down next to a student, ask him what he is doing and why, and you don’t get a clear answer, it is highly unlikely that any powerful learning is taking place.”

Richard Elmore (see item #1)

“My son was bringing home practice tests every day, and that’s not real education.”

Enrique Aleman on his son’s Texas school becoming a “testing factory”  
*New York Times*, May 27, 2005 (p. 1, A20)

“What we need now is a revolution in writing instruction, not just another test prep exercise.”

Brent Staples, *New York Times* columnist (see item #2)

“The middle grades have long been viewed as the Bermuda Triangle of education. A common explanation is that there is simply no cure for puberty.”

David Herszenhorn in *New York Times*, May 26, 2005 on NYC test scores

“It’s not a matter of what the teacher taught; it’s a matter of what the students learned.”

Evelyn Chidsey, California consultant (see item #3)

“We want to make sure it’s not a mystery how to achieve proficiency. The kids need to know these things up front.”

Diane Mead, Beverly Hills teacher (*ibid.*)

“Dialogue is all about suspending assumptions, listening to another person’s point of view, and having a group explore together.”

Lew Smith, Fordham University Professor (see item #6)

“Once upon a time, America sheltered an Einstein, went to the moon, and gave the world the laser, the electronic computer, nylons, television, and the cure to polio. Today, we are in the process, albeit unwittingly, of abandoning this leadership role.”

Leon Lederman (see item #7a)

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## 1. Richard Elmore Looks at Two “Failing” Schools

In this *American Educator* article, Harvard professor Richard Elmore describes his visits to two high-poverty schools that are quite well resourced, have strong principals, appear to be doing a lot of the right things instructionally, and have made initial gains in state test scores – but then see their student achievement flatten out. Both schools are headed inexorably toward being labeled failing under No Child Left Behind provisions, and Elmore is called in by district administrators to offer suggestions. Here are his descriptions and comments on each school, followed by his theory of the stages of school improvement:

- *Thornton Elementary School* – The school has a veteran staff and all teachers and assistants are working hard. Students are highly engaged and extra adults are working with struggling students. The school has no major discipline problems and classrooms and hallways are orderly. Thornton has recently implemented a balanced literacy program and provided staff with plenty of professional development. Teachers are enthusiastic about the program, saying uniformly that this is the best teaching they have done.

Elmore observes several classrooms during the 90-minute literacy block. In a second-grade class, he sees a teacher rotating groups of eight students through guided reading (in which the leveled group reads and discusses a common text with the teacher) while the remaining 16 students engage in other literacy activities: reading specialists are working individually with two students on phonics and word identification; a classroom aide supervises a group of students who are filling out worksheets; and some students are reading independently and writing in their journals. The overall tone of the classroom (and in others around the school) is orderly, focused, and purposeful.

The mystery: why hasn't all this focused and seemingly effective effort produced better student achievement on the state reading and writing tests? Teachers and administrators at this school are baffled and discouraged.

Elmore offers the following diagnosis: when students are not working directly with their teacher in a guided reading group, they are not engaged in literacy activities that are sufficiently focused and purposeful to move achievement forward. (Elmore ascertained this by sitting down next to several students and asking them what they were doing, what its purpose was, and how they would know when they were successful; he found that students were unable to answer.) He believes that

Thornton's teachers are so focused on doing a good job with their guided reading groups that they are not managing the work of the rest of the class in a way that will contribute to the end goal. No wonder students' literacy achievement has hit a plateau, says Elmore: "Clearly, the next increment in performance will come from increasing the level of intensity, cognitive demand, and coherence for all students, whether they're in guided reading or not. This will require the teacher to pay much more attention to the orchestration of activities in the classroom and to have much more clarity and agreement with students and support staff around the purpose of the work." Elmore believes that what this school needs is more agreement and clarity around "what the work is" – what he calls *internal accountability*.

- *Clemente Middle School* – Touring this large grade 6-9 school, Elmore finds it a "vibrant and exciting place visually" with lots of excellent artwork on display. An assistant principal takes care of each of the four grades and administrators are constantly in and out of classrooms supervising instruction and organizing professional development. Visiting classrooms, Elmore sees active teaching, attentive and engaged students, and curriculum explicitly targeted at material that is important to students' lives and aligned with the state's reading and writing tests. Veteran and novice teachers (some of whom are from Teach for America) are working hard, but they (like the teachers at Thornton) are discouraged by the threat of their school being labeled "failing."

Elmore has a surprising diagnosis of this underperforming school: the teachers are working *too* hard! Novice and veteran teachers, Elmore says, are focused on a conventional notion of "good teaching" – it "keeps students amused, interested, and seemingly engaged... eyes forward, paying attention, not causing any discipline problems, and responding in a timely way to the teacher's questions." The result is that teachers are doing virtually all the work and students are doing very little. Elmore says that teachers keep students engaged by asking almost entirely low-level questions that can be answered by pulling information straight out of the text in front of them. "When teachers did ask questions that required higher levels of cognitive demand – interpretation, argument, analysis – the overall pace of previous questions meant that waiting even a short period of time for a student response seemed like ages, so the teacher quickly moved to the next question before the students could fully engage in the previous one." Elmore finds that students' written work is similarly low-level, consisting of rapid-fire short-answer responses even though they are supposedly preparing for a state test that involves open-ended writing prompts.

Elmore sums up: “[T]eachers were doing what they thought they should do – working hard, being enthusiastic, demonstrating that they can hold the attention of the students – without much thought for the actual work that students were doing... [T]eachers were generally doing what they know how to do, rather than doing what was necessary to produce the result they were trying to produce. In the absence of specific guidance that what they were doing wasn’t going to get them where they wanted to be, they would, other things being equal, continue to do what they – and many others – regarded as ‘good teaching.’”

Elmore sketches the stages that he believes underperforming schools go through as they improve:

- *Addressing the problem* – The school recognizes that it has a problem by paying attention to evidence of low student achievement (usually test scores).

- *Setting a goal* – The school chooses a performance target (e.g., improving reading scores) and begins to work on improving its capacity to meet the target.

- *Plucking the low-hanging fruit* – The school makes some basic changes, such as mandating a certain number of minutes for literacy instruction and aligning curriculum with the state test. These changes usually produce a modest bounce in scores.

- *Beginning to establish internal accountability* – The school makes a collective commitment to doing better – the first stage of developing internal accountability.

- *Importing a program* – At this stage, the school needs outside help, usually in the form of a program like Balanced Literacy or Core Knowledge, accompanied by materials and teacher training.

- *Fine-tuning* – This is the stage that Thornton and Clemente needed to take when Elmore visited: they had to increase the cognitive demand of the program and/or figure out why it was working for some students and not for others. Elmore says that most schools need outside help at this stage.

- *The “impossible work” stage* – At this point, says Elmore, “the challenges to existing instructional practices and existing organizational norms become more direct and difficult” and educators frequently become discouraged. Outside demands (such as AYP targets) seem out of reach, and schools need lots of outside help to keep their momentum going until student achievement shows real gains.

- *Self-managing* – Very few schools reach this stage: the school “collectively takes over the management of its own improvement process, teachers and students internalize the values of managing and monitoring their own learning, administrators

model their own learning for teachers and students, and individuals are empowered to ask for the help they need.”

“Schools don’t suddenly ‘get better’ and meet their performance targets,” concludes Elmore. “Improvement is a process, not an event. Schools build capacity by generating internal accountability – greater agreement and coherence on expectations for teachers and students – and then by working their way through problems of instructional practice at ever-increasing levels of complexity and demand... Building capacity in failing schools is going to require a lot of feet on the ground – people who know something about school improvement and who know what they don’t know.”

[I don’t often do this, but I’m going to add a comment here because I believe Elmore is missing something very important in his analysis of the two schools and his theory of improvement. What Thornton and Clemente need to implement, it seems to me, is a set of interim assessments geared to external standards. If teacher teams begin to have regular, honest discussions of student performance on rigorous interim assessments, they would have access to a constant stream of ideas on what is working and what isn’t working in classrooms. Grade-level teams discussing assessment data might very well have the same insights that Elmore had (most students spinning their wheels during Thornton’s guided reading times and Clemente’s teachers doing all the work). Effective use of interim assessments, once installed in a school, can become the “engine of improvement,” helping teachers discard ineffective practices, capitalize on effective practices, reach outside the school for new ideas, and move to the next level of student achievement. Mike Schmoker, Douglas Reeves, Jeffrey Howard, Richard DuFour, and others have written about this process. James Stigler and James Hiebert believe that lesson study, a similar approach to teacher collaboration, is the reason for the slow, incremental improvement of classroom practice in Japan. It’s not easy to get “professional learning communities” started, but once the engine is running, a school is much less dependent on outside help because the ideas needed to move forward are generated from within.]

“Building New Knowledge: School Improvement Requires New Knowledge, Not Just Good Will” by Richard Elmore in *American Educator*, Spring 2005 (Vol. 29, #1, p. 20-27) [http://www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american\\_educator/issues/spring05/elmore.htm](http://www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/spring05/elmore.htm)

## **2. Writing: A Ticket to Work... or a Ticket Out**

In this editorial-page column, *New York Times* writer Brent Staples wades into the controversy over the new 25-minute SAT writing section, flatly disagreeing with

those who think that a timed writing test is a change in the wrong direction. He cites the common complaints from colleges and the business world about how poorly many American students write, and says that the SAT's new mandate to "get it down on paper fast" should be a good spur on teachers K-12 to do a better job teaching writing.

A recent critique of the new SAT writing test by the National Council of Teachers of English said that students should be evaluated on long-term writing assignments that students have had a chance to rewrite and edit over longer periods of time. "On the contrary," says Staples, "substantive writing on demand for reports, correspondence and even e-mail is now a common feature of corporate life." He goes on to question the competence of many teachers to judge what good writing is – or even produce it themselves. "The blame lies not with the teachers," he says, "but with an American educational system that fails at every level to produce the fluent writers required by the new economy... The time devoted to writing instruction in kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade needs to be more skillfully used and doubled, at the very least."

Staples concludes: "The English teachers are right when they note that we live in a test-obsessed culture that puts far too much weight on the SAT... But the test developers have performed an important service by bringing writing to the top of the national agenda. What we need now is a revolution in writing instruction, not just another test prep exercise."

"The Fine Art of Getting It Down on Paper, Fast" by Brent Staples in *New York Times*, May 15, 2005; this article can be purchased for \$2.95 at <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F10A17FD35540C768DDDAC0894DD404482&incamp=archive:search>

### **3. Steps to Take *Before* Redesigning an Elementary Report Card**

From their trial-and-error experience revising elementary report cards and putting them into an electronic format this year, educators in the Beverly Hills Unified School District in California have some recommendations on the best sequence to follow:

- First, "unwrap" the state and district learning expectations and reduce them to a manageable number of "power standards" – those that are most important for life, for the next grade, and for the state tests.

- Then align the classroom curriculum with the standards; it's difficult for teachers to report student progress vis-à-vis standards if daily instruction isn't focused on them.
- Work with teachers on making the shift to thinking in terms of student learning results. "It's not a matter of what the teacher taught," said Evelyn Chidsey, a consultant who worked with the district. "It's a matter of what the students learned."
- Have teachers backwards-plan curriculum units and use common assessments so they are speaking the same language on what students should be learning and how it's assessed.
- Have teachers create and use common rubrics for assessing students' writing and open-ended responses.
- Provide training and support to teachers in analyzing student work and making the transition from traditional grading to proficiency levels.
- Make the criteria for proficiency transparent to students and parents. "We want to make sure it's not a mystery how to achieve proficiency," said Diane Mead, a teacher on special assignment to work on revising the district's report card. "The kids need to know these things up front."
- Create a common pacing guide so teachers are moving through the curriculum at more or less the same rate and can share ideas and insights.
- Solve computer issues so that teachers can work on report cards at home as well as at school, and provide training and support for computer-shy teachers.
- Streamline report card grading categories so that the card is time-efficient for teachers to fill out and readily understandable by parents and students.

"Creating a Report Card That Reflects the Teaching in Beverly Hills" in *Center for Performance Assessment Monthly E-Mail Newsletter*, May 2005  
[http://www.makingstandardswork.com/Clients/best\\_practices.htm](http://www.makingstandardswork.com/Clients/best_practices.htm)

#### **4. Improving Student Punctuality**

Lincoln Heights Elementary School in Ohio has taken the following steps to cut down on student tardiness, reportedly with good results so far this year:

- Chronically tardy students have to attend a workshop on the importance of punctuality, its impact on their learning and the learning of their classmates, and ways to achieve it.
- Each student is given an alarm clock and directions for using it.

- Tardy students check in with a designated staff member every morning.
- Students who are on time for two full weeks get positive reinforcements.
- The attendance officer meets with each chronically tardy student bi-weekly to monitor progress.
- If a student continues to have a problem being on time, parents are involved.
- If the problem continues, parents are referred to the attendance officer.
- Students who successfully complete the program are invited to an award ceremony and pizza party.

“Why Some Students Are Late and What Lincoln Heights Is Doing About It” by Mike White and Curtis Smith in *Center for Performance Assessment Monthly E-Mail Newsletter*, May 2005

## 5. Applying Knowledge in a Real-World Situation

On December 26, 2004, Tilly Smith, a 10-year old British girl, was playing on the Maikhoa beach in Phuket, Thailand with her family and scores of other tourists. Suddenly, the tide rushed out, leaving an expanse of sand with fish flopping helplessly in the open air. Everyone’s inclination was to walk out onto the exposed sand to explore, but Tilly remembered something she had learned just two weeks before in a geography class back in England. “Mummy, we must get off the beach NOW!” she shouted. “I think there is going to be a tsunami!” Tilly’s teacher, Andrew Kearney, had taught his students how tsunamis begin with underwater earthquakes and showed a videotape of a tsunami in Hawaii that mentioned that the water recedes a few minutes before a tsunami strikes. Tilly and other students copied this information and Mr. Kearney’s blackboard drawings of tsunamis into their exercise books.

Tilly’s parents decided that she knew what she was talking about, alerted others on the beach, ran to their hotel, and got up to the second floor. Hotel officials evacuated the beach and moments later the tsunami struck, surging over the beach and demolishing everything in its path. Because of Tilly’s warning, not a single person was killed or seriously injured on Maikhoa Beach.

So let’s hear it for rigorous curriculum content, the ability to apply classroom lessons in real-world situations, a brave 10-year-old – and incredibly good luck!

“Content Matters” by Duncan Larcombe in *The Sun*, January 1, 2005 (spotted in *American Educator*, Spring 2005 (Vol. 29, #1, p. 42-43), no e-link available

## 6. A Call for Dialogue on Principal Preparation

In this thoughtful commentary article in *Education Week*, Fordham University professor Lew Smith responds to recent criticisms of traditional principal preparation programs. It happens that Smith is married to Jann Coles, a top staffer in New Leaders for New Schools, a non-profit that takes a radically different approach [and for which I work as a leadership coach], so Smith has first-hand knowledge of the competition to university-based administrator training. He points out the strengths and weaknesses of each approach, and calls for the two sides to talk: "Dialogue is all about suspending assumptions, listening to another person's point of view, and having a group explore together complex issues," he writes. "What issue could be more complex and more important than leadership and our desire to develop it? It's time for us to talk. It's time for a real dialogue. And it's time to change what we do."

"Sleeping With the Enemy: One Family, Two Sides of the Debate Over Preparing School Leaders" by Lew Smith in *Education Week*, May 25, 2005 (Vol. 24, #38, p. 30-31)  
<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2005/05/25/38smith.h24.html>

## 7. Short Items:

*a. Neglecting the gifted?* Two articles in the current *Education Week* bemoan what the authors believe is America's increasing neglect of gifted students. One article closes by quoting Leon Lederman, a Nobel Prize-winning physicist, who warned in 1990: "Once upon a time, America sheltered an Einstein, went to the moon, and gave the world the laser, the electronic computer, nylons, television, and the cure to polio. Today, we are in the process, albeit unwittingly, of abandoning this leadership role."

"Neglecting Creativity: National Security and Educational Excellence" by James Gallagher in *Education Week*, May 25, 2005 (Vol. 24, #38, p. 40, 32)  
<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2005/05/25/38gallagher.h24.html>

"Neglecting Creativity: A Quiet Crisis Clouding the Future of R&D" by Joseph Renzulli in *Education Week*, May 25, 2005 (Vol. 24, #38, p. 40, 32)  
<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2005/05/25/38renzulli.h24.html>

*b. Insect photographs websites* – Here are two amazing websites for photographs of insects that would be great resources for science teachers:

- Living Jewels: <http://www.living-jewels.com/>
- Microangela: <http://www.pbrc.hawaii.edu/bemf/microangela/>

Spotted in *ASCD Daily NewsBrief*, May 25, 2005 from *Christian Science Monitor*, May 24, 2005

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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](mailto: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 best practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 35 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 39 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through scores of 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, provide e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the memo to subscribers every Monday (with occasional breaks; there were 50 issues in 2003-04).

## ***Subscriptions:***

Individual subscriptions are \$50 for the school year (\$25 for a half-year, beginning late January). Rates decline steeply for multiple readers within the same organization. See the website for these rates and information on paying by check or credit card.

## ***Website:***

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- Focus topics
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- What readers say
- About Kim Marshall
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Subscribers have access to the Members' Area of the website, which has:

- The current issue (in PDF or Word format)
- All back issues (also in PDF or Word)
- A database of all articles to date, searchable by topic, article headline, source, article title, author, and level
- How to change access e-mail or password

## ***Publications covered:***

(those read this week are underlined)

American Educational Research Journal  
American Educator  
American School Board Journal  
ASCD SmartBrief  
Atlantic Monthly  
Bay State Banner  
Boston Globe  
CommonWealth Magazine  
District Administration  
Ed. Magazine (Harvard School of Education)  
Education Digest  
Education Gadfly  
Education Next  
Education Update (ASCD)  
Education Week  
Educational Leadership  
Educational Researcher  
Edutopia  
Elementary School Journal  
Harper's  
Harvard Business Review  
Harvard Education Letter  
Harvard Educational Review  
Journal of Staff Development  
Middle School Journal  
NASSP Bulletin  
New York Times  
New Yorker  
Newsweek  
PEN Weekly NewsBlast  
Phi Delta Kappan  
Principal Magazine  
Principal Leadership  
Psychology Today  
Reading Research Quarterly  
Reading Today  
Rethinking Schools  
Review of Educational Research  
Teachers College Record  
Teacher Magazine

E-links will be provided whenever possible.