

Marshall Memo 18

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
December 23, 2003

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Quotes of the Week

“Transmitting our own love of learning and inquiry to the next generation is the core of our mission as educators.”

John Bishop, Marcia Bishop, and Michael Bishop (see item 7)

“By middle school, children who read well can read at least 10 million words during the school year, while children with reading difficulties read less than 100,000 words during the same period.”

Reid Lyon in *Principal Magazine* (see item 3)

“[B]elow-level readers are routinely given far too many worksheets, boring stories, and difficult texts. They are required to sit still and listen passively for long periods. Such demands make learning to read unnecessarily difficult.”

Marie Carbo in *Principal Magazine* (see item 4)

“[I]f we want children to improve their vocabulary and reading fluency, we must get them to log many hours on printed pages.

Anne Cunningham and Keith Stanovich, *Principal Magazine* (see item 2)

“Pay no attention and talk. Don’t listen to the teacher and tell jokes all day... Yeah, really not pay attention and goof around.”

William, a middle school student, on what it takes to avoid being vilified and harassed as a “nerd” (Mertens, 1996 – see item 7)

“The struggle over popularity and whose norms will dominate student culture begins on the first day of middle school and is settled very quickly.”

John Bishop, Marcia Bishop, and Michael Bishop (see item 7)

“Schools seeking to improve the academic performance of their students cannot ignore the role that health, school safety, caring relationships in the school, low rates of alcohol and drug use, nutrition, and exercise play in their overall efforts.”

WestEd study (see item 9a)

1. Think You Can, Read a Lot, Get Smart!

In this intriguing article, two researchers contend that the amount of print children are exposed to has profound cognitive consequences. “[C]hildren who crack the spelling-to-sound code early appear to enter something like a positive feedback loop, a reciprocal effect in which reading *increases* their ability to read. This may explain the Matthew Effect seen so often in literacy development, a rich-get-richer and poor-get-poorer phenomenon that has early and efficient acquisition of reading skill yielding faster rates of growth not only in reading achievement but other cognitive skills as well.” As children establish their individual pattern of independent reading, the disparities between voracious readers and reluctant readers get wider and wider. By fifth grade, the amount of outside-school reading done by a child at the upper end of the spectrum is more than an *entire year’s* reading by a lower-end child.

5th-Grade Independent Reading Each Day		
<i>Percentile rank</i>	<i>Book reading</i>	<i>All reading</i>
98 th	65 minutes	91 minutes
90 th	21 minutes	40 minutes
50 th	5 minutes	13 minutes
10 th	.1 minutes	2 minutes
2 nd	0 minutes	.2 minutes

A critical area is vocabulary development, which is one of the most important factors in fluent and easy reading. “Children with limited vocabulary stumble over unfamiliar words in trying to read a sentence and can’t keep the thread of an idea – a sure formula for difficulty and dislike of reading.” The most effective way to develop vocabulary is not direct instruction or listening but the *volume of reading* that students do. To expand vocabulary, kids need to be exposed to words that are relatively rare, and print is the main way this happens. It turns out that children’s books are one of the richest sources of new, unfamiliar words: they contain 50 percent more rare words than adult prime-time television or the conversation of college graduates. (Interestingly, comic books have even more unfamiliar words than children’s books – in fact, slightly more than adult books – and TV cartoon shows have vastly more unfamiliar words than Mr. Rogers and Sesame Street.)

Number of Unfamiliar Words per 1,000 Words

Printed texts:

Abstracts of scientific articles	128
Newspapers	68
Popular magazines	66
Adult books	53
Comic books	54
Children's books	31
Preschool books	16

Television:

Popular prime-time adult shows	23
Popular prime-time children's shows	20
Cartoon shows	31
Mr. Rogers and Sesame Street	2

Adult speech:

Expert witness testimony	28
College graduates, friends, spouses	17

Adapted from Hayes and Ahrens (1998)

Studies show that doing a lot of reading is effective regardless of the child's cognitive and reading level. "We do not have to wait for 'prerequisite' abilities to be in place before encouraging students' free reading. Even the student with limited reading and comprehension skills will build vocabulary and thinking skills through reading."

"Reading Can Make You Smarter!" by Anne Cunningham and Keith Stanovich, *Principal Magazine*, November/December 2003 (Vol. 83, #2, p. 34-39). No link available.

2. Early intervention to Prevent Reading Failure

By the end of first grade, children who are having difficulty learning to read are already beginning to lose some of the eagerness and confidence with which they entered school. By middle school, the chasm between proficient and non-proficient readers is enormous. Early identification, prevention, and intervention are essential to preventing this achievement gap from opening up.

Children who enter school without stimulating oral language and literacy experiences at home are at a distinct disadvantage. The average middle-class child is exposed to about 500,000 words by kindergarten, while an economically disadvantaged child has experienced half that many or less. Disadvantaged children “approach the reading of words and text in a laborious manner, demonstrating difficulties linking sounds to letters and letter patterns. Their reading is hesitant and characterized by frequent starts, stops, and mispronunciation. Comprehension of the material being read is usually extremely poor because it takes them far too long to read words, leaving little energy for remembering and comprehending what was read.” Without effective intervention, more than three-quarters of these children will continue to have reading problems into adulthood. Many will also be branded as special education students, when in fact they are “curriculum casualties.”

For the children of poverty, school is often the only ticket to catching up. As many as 95 percent can become proficient readers – “but only if they are identified early and provided with systematic, explicit, and intensive instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, reading fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension strategies.” Missing skills and experiences need to be systematically and explicitly taught, including the “alphabetic principle” (the association of sounds of speech with the letters of the alphabet) and experience with high-quality children’s literature. The goal is to develop fluency, automaticity, and the ability to apply comprehension strategies to what they are reading. Only after this kind of systematic effort can students who truly need special education be identified and appropriately served.

The article closes with this exhortation: “Our challenge now is to close the gap between what we know works from research and the ineffective instruction still being provided in most of our nation’s classrooms. The question is, do we have the will and the courage to do so?”

“What Principals Need to Know About Reading” by G. Reid Lyon, *Principal Magazine*, November/December 2003 (Vol. 83, #2, p. 14-18). The National Association of Elementary School Principals resource guide, *What Principals Need to Know About Reading*, is available online at <http://www.naesp.org>.

3. Matching Reading Instruction to Individual Learning Styles

Marie Carbo, an advocate of teaching reading by tuning in to individual learning styles, says that this approach is the key to boosting the achievement of struggling students. She feels that students who are having difficulty learning to read

are often perceived in terms of their *disabilities*, and this is a major reason that the achievement gap gets wider every year. She believes that when these students are taught their reading styles – their strongest learning pathways – they learn better.

The predominant reading styles of struggling readers, Carbo says, are global, tactile, and kinesthetic. Global learners are emotional, intuitive, and spontaneous and need to be interested in what they are reading. Tactile and kinesthetic learners learn more easily when they touch, move, and experience. Struggling readers usually prefer to work in groups and find it easier to concentrate with soft light and comfortable furniture. The ideal reading lesson has a minimum of frontal teaching and as much modeling (choral reading, echo reading, and recording), hands-on games, and role-playing as possible – as well as a maximum of actual reading time. It's important that struggling readers have a range of reading matter available with plenty of mystery, adventure, surprise, humor, and action.

These are Carbo's specific recommendations for principals:

- *Help students become familiar with rich, well-written language* by making sure that teachers read a variety of literature aloud two or three times a day.
- *Help students associate reading with pleasure* by providing cozy reading areas with lots of high-interest books, soft furniture, rugs, and pillows.
- *Develop a library of specially-recorded books* (slower pace, special phrasing, small amounts on each side of the tape). Have struggling readers listen to these audiotapes and follow along with the text a few times before reading aloud.
- *Provide recorded textbooks* and a tape dubber in the media center. Blank tapes should be available for students to record and take home textbook chapters.
- *Use a variety of reading methods*. If one approach isn't working, teachers should be able to try something different.
- *Encourage teachers to give students choices*, for example, allowing students to decide with whom they wish to read and accepting different kinds of book reports (dioramas, raps, games).
- *Make skill practice fun* by letting students work with peers and using hands-on games.

"Achieving with Struggling Readers" by Marie Carbo, *Principal Magazine*, November/December 2003 (Vol. 83, #2, p. 20-24). No link available for the article. Marie Carbo's National Reading Styles Institute is at <http://www.nirsi.com>

4. Making Good Use of Interim Reading Assessments

In the past, norm-referenced tests answered only questions such as: How did our third graders score compared to third graders nationally? But increasingly, schools are giving more frequent, diagnostic assessments that provide real-time data on students' reading progress, and this information can be powerfully useful in the classroom. Frequent assessment is a key for quickly identifying and addressing students' specific reading needs – and for improving the quality of instruction. Here are some criteria for effective formative assessments:

- Assessment is embedded in instruction.
- Students are told the purpose of assessments and how they will be used.
- Assessments give early warning if learning is not taking place.
- Assessments are more than pencil-and-paper; they include interviews, journals, and observations.

Mini-assessments, often informal, can give teachers information every four to six weeks on whether particular skills and objectives have been mastered. They also let teachers know *which students are not meeting standards*, which is more important than knowing how many students are meeting standards. Good assessments should answer these questions:

- How often did students demonstrate a particular skill?
- How well did they demonstrate it?
- Which students or teams did better than others?
- Where were the gaps?
- Which teaching strategies worked and which didn't?
- What resources can be used to address specific issues?

“Using Assessment to Support Reading Instruction: by Elizabeth Shellard, *Principal Magazine*, November/December 2003 (Vol. 83, #2, p. 40-43). No e-link available.

5. Parent Involvement: Ten Common Mistakes

John Wherry, president of The Parent Institute in Fairfax, Virginia, thinks that principals often fall into the same pitfalls as they try to increase parent involvement:

- *Writing off parents as uninterested if they don't show up at school after repeated invitations.* Principals need to work with staff to convince parents that their participation is truly valued, that parents really can make a difference, and that the school respects them.

- *Thinking of yourself as the main parent involvement person in the school.* Principals can't do it alone, and all staff, from teachers to custodians, need to pitch in.

- *Measuring involvement by the number of parents who show up at school activities.* Getting parents into the school is important, but what parents do with their children at home is even more important. Parents need to be given a good mix of ways they can be involved in their children's education.

- *Making overly general requests of parents.* Be specific. For example, instead of telling parents to encourage their children to read, ask them to spend at least ten minutes reading with each child every single day.

- *Undervaluing the knowledge parents have about their children.* Parents usually know far more about their children than school staff. Give parents a chance to share their insights (for example, that their child knows the batting averages of major-league baseball players or learns best from real-life examples).

- *Waiting until a problem is nearly out of control before contacting parents.* Push teachers to make positive contacts with all parents early in the year. Bad news is much easier to hear when it has been preceded by genuinely good news and when a positive relationship has been established.

- *Failing to reach all family members who have responsibility for the child.* The term "parents" has much broader meaning nowadays. Find ways to include grandparents, uncles or aunts, parents who do not live with the child, and others who are meaningful caretakers.

- *Always scheduling school events during school hours.* Many working parents can't make these times. Vary the schedule to accommodate as many parents as possible, and send home notes on all events so those who cannot attend will feel included.

- *Asking parents for input but not really expecting to get it or act on it.* Parents get the message on whether their input is truly valued and used based on your actions.

- *Using only print media to communicate with parents.* It's possible that e-mail, electronic newsletters, web sites, and cell phone messages may be a better way to reach many parents.

"The 10 Biggest Mistakes in Parent Involvement" by John Wherry, *Principal Magazine*, November/December 2003 (Vol. 83, #2, p. 6). For additional information, contact <http://www.parent-institute.com>

6. Alternatives to Social Promotion and Retention

This article starts with the assertion that in most cases, neither social promotion nor retention are the best way to help struggling students succeed. “What’s needed,” writes Key Woelfel, a South Carolina education professor, “is a strategy designed to help all students succeed through high expectations, early identification of learning problems, and timely, effective, and individualized help.” She presents two models for approaching the challenge. Both programs have this in common: a focus on effective teaching practices, high expectations, family involvement, mentoring, staff professional development, differentiated instruction, regular grading systems, periodic assessment during the year, standards-based curriculum, and proven instructional strategies in reading, writing, and math.

- *Teachers Assistance Team (TAT)* – This team is composed of classroom and special education teachers, counselors, and administrators and incorporates the kind of intervention strategies used in special education. Its goal is to radically shorten the time lag for assistance to at-risk students by identifying their needs and acting quickly without going through the more formal and time-consuming special education process. Interventions recommended by the TAT might include doing homework at school under a teacher’s supervision (rather than at home in an unsupervised setting), mentoring, cross-age grouping, extra time for completing assignments, word processing programs to enhance writing skills, and calculators to check math problems.

- *The Half-Grade Approach* – A pilot of this approach in St. Paul, Minnesota promoted at-risk students in third, fifth, and eighth grades to grades 3.5, 5.5, and 8.5. These students were required to attend summer school after being identified, followed by a full school year and then another mandatory summer school session. The focus was on math, reading, and writing, and the goal was to make a one-and-a-half-year academic gain and catch up with their peers. If students succeed and rejoin their peers, they get follow-up safety-net support. Some half-grade students are placed in homogeneous groups while others are in heterogeneous groups. All have an Academic Improvement Plan (AIP) and are expected to attend class, show effort, and actively participate in the program. Specially-trained teachers move students through the curriculum at a faster pace and use methods designed to motivate and accelerate.

“Alternatives to Social Promotion or Retention” by Kay Woelfel, *Principal Magazine*, November/December 2003 (Vol. 83, #2, p. 50-52). No e-link is available.

7. Not Being a Nerd in Middle School

In the eyes of middle-school students who are not part of the popular crowd, it may seem that you're a "nerd" if you trust teachers, pay attention in class, and work hard. In many schools, a powerful peer culture pulls students away from "baby stuff" (see quote above). Schools may unwittingly contribute to this negative view of academic success in two ways:

- *Norm-referenced grading* – If students believe that there are a fixed number of good grades in a zero-sum world, they may conclude that if someone else works hard and gets a good grade, they themselves are less likely to get an A or B. Indeed, an Educational Excellence Alliance survey found that students who believed that "it is harder for me to get good grades... if others study hard" were three times more likely to have friends who make fun of those who try to do well in school than those who disagree. They are also three times more likely to describe their friends as thinking "it's not cool to study really hard before tests" and five times more likely to report, "I didn't try as hard as I could because I worried about what my friends might think." In schools where students see school as a competition for a small number of honors grades, an anti-academic peer culture can flourish, with those who want to learn being verbally and physically harassed and made to feel unsafe in school.

- *Fudging on academic standards* – If students see classroom expectations as negotiable (they are lowered when most students don't meet them), there is little incentive to work hard, and students who do their homework and actively take part in classroom discussions can be seen as making life more difficult for everyone else. Negotiable standards feed harassment of the "good" students and pull the classroom culture in the direction of entertainment.

The authors of this article believe that schools can counteract the anti-achievement peer culture in several ways:

1. *Help students create positive norms.* If teachers and administrators do not take the initiative, peer culture will take on a strong anti-learning tone (see quote above). Schools need to actively create opportunities for students who work hard and enjoy learning to become visible and prominent, e.g., by being selected as tutors, reporters for the school newspaper, or participants in schoolwide events.
2. *Raise the profile of academic competitions.* Athletics, cheerleading, band, choir, and theater bring visibility and popularity to many students within the school and in the community. There should be equal visibility for students

who are involved in debate teams, science projects, stock market games, etc., including pep rallies, awards ceremonies, trophy displays, exhibits of student work, and articles in school and local newspapers.

3. *Establish a no pass, no play policy.* Student athletes, often the most popular (and the most anti-intellectual) students in secondary schools, should be required to meet academic standards in order to participate in sports.
4. *Use college aspirations as motivators.* Most middle-school students want to go to college, but many are naïve about what it will take to get there. Schools should take students on college tours and be very explicit about the kind of coursework and achievement that will be necessary to be admitted.

“Making It Cool to Succeed in Middle School” by John Bishop, Marcia Bishop, and Michael Bishop, *Principal Magazine*, November/December 2003 (Vol. 83, #2, p. 60-61). No e-link is available, but the Collaborative for the Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning study is available at <http://www.casel.org>

8. Boston Charter School Shines

Last Wednesday, the *New York Times* ran a glowing article on Codman Academy, a small inner-city Boston charter high school. Among the features highlighted in the article:

- *Teen-age hours* – Codman opens at 9:00 a.m. and goes until 5:00 p.m. It is also open Saturday morning.
- *Nutrition and exercise* – Meg Campbell, the principal, has banned French fries and fast food and constantly urges students to eat fresh fruit and veggie burgers. Students are required to play tennis, and often walk ten miles a day.
- *Small classes* – Students study in classes of 15 and most teachers are responsible for a much smaller number of students than regular high schools.
- *College orientation* – Many students entered without any thought of going to college, but at Codman, the expectation is relentless. Students study Shakespeare, James Joyce, and Chinua Achebe, make frequent visits to a Boston theater and the Museum of Fine Arts, study physics at a local college in their junior year, and are taken on monthly college tours. After visiting Harvard, where his father works in the kitchen, Socrates Cribb began to dream of attending. “That school,” he said of Codman, “It changed my whole view of life.”
- *High expectations* – No credit is earned for grades below C-. Meg Campbell, 51, acts like a pushy mother who doesn’t want her children to miss any opportunity

for intellectual growth. “Middle- and upper-middle class kids are in a river that carries them along to college,” says Campbell. “We’re trying to create a river for these kids.” One student complained to her grandmother that Meg was always on her back. “The reason she’s on your back,” her grandmother replied, “is that she knows what you can do. She can see things in yourself you don’t see.” Campbell often quotes Emily Dickinson: “Dwell in possibility.”

- *Family involvement* – Parents are considered part of the school. In the initial school interview, parents are asked, “What is your dream for your child?”

- *Caring teachers* – Campbell and teachers give students their cell phone numbers and are constantly available to give extra help or talk. Kim Parker, a sophomore humanities teacher, calls each of her 24 students every Sunday “just to check in.” One student said, “The teachers here care about you. I don’t know why, but they do.” Another student advised incoming ninth graders: “This place is no joke. If you’re one of those people who doesn’t do any work, I advise you to change your ways. These teachers will hound you and ride your back until whatever you need to turn in to pass is turned in.”

- *Results* – Last May, all 25 of Codman’s sophomores passed the 10th-grade MCAS (the rigorous Massachusetts must-pass graduation exam).

“A Small-Scale Attack on Urban Despair” by Sara Rimer, New York Times, December 17, 2003. <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/12/17/nyregion/17BOST.html>

9. Short Items:

- *More than academics* – A study by WestEd shows that focusing on academics is not enough: schools that want to foster high achievement need to pay attention to the overall health and well-being of their students. This includes helping kids steer clear of risky sexual behavior, violence, substance abuse, junk food, obesity, and lack of exercise. Schools also need to strive to promote close and caring relationships and high expectations. PEN Weekly NewsBlast December 19, 2003. The study is available at http://www.wested.org/cs/wew/view/rs_press/22

- *Frequent assessment is key* – A new study of thirty-two K-8 schools by the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative found that the schools that were more successful in closing the racial achievement gap did many things differently, most notably, teachers diagnosed students’ needs a few times each week and then changed

how they worked with students based on what the data revealed. PEN Weekly NewsBlast December 19, 2003. The study is available at <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/chronicle/archive/2003/12/18/BAG1N3PD7D23.DTL>

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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
Elementary School Journal
Harpers
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Education Review
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
and occasional books, lectures, and websites.

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