Marshall Memo 197

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
August 20, 2007

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"If the principal is the agent of bureaucracy in the school, then you have a model that will never survive."

Joel Klein, New York City Schools Chancellor (*New York Times*, May 18, 2007)

"The cornerstone of any attempt to meet the needs of diverse learners is to find out what they are interested in, how they learn best, and what they already know."

Susan Rakow (see item #8)

"Most test-taking strategies are simply good reading strategies."

Amy Greene and Glennon Doyle Melton (see item #7)

"The test makes me think of my soccer team. At the beginning of the season, I used to cry before games because I didn't know the rules or how to play. That's how I felt about the SOL [Virginia Standards of Learning test] last year, too. I cried before I came to school. But this year, it feels different. I'm not scared because I know what it's going to be like, and I know what the words mean. I also know what to do if I get stuck. I feel excited instead of scared."

Sindi, a Fairfax, Virginia student (*ibid.*)

"When the release of a book – a children's book no less – is the pop culture event of the summer, something magical is happening."

From *Reading Today's* article on the latest Harry Potter book (August/September 2007)

"Students who understand that the hard work they engage in while in school will lead to greater opportunities after graduation are more likely to complete their assignments, even if they regard them as little more than busy work, and are more likely to tolerate teachers even if they view them as boring."

Pedro Noguera (see item #3)

1. Key Questions to Guide School Improvement

In this article in *Education Week*, Harvard leadership specialist Tony Wagner says that many educators fall into the trap of becoming reactive to countless over-the-transom crises, compliant to various faddish initiatives from their central office, and isolated from their colleagues. When confronted by difficult problems, he says, they ask "safe" questions and give "warm" feedback. He suggests asking the following questions to get to the heart of the matter:

• What is the problem we are trying to solve, or the obstacle we are trying to overcome, and what does it have to do with improving teaching and learning?

• What's our "theory of action" – our strategy for solving this problem and the reason it will bring about the desired outcome?

• Who needs to understand what? How can teachers, parents, students, and the community "own the problem" and support the strategies we're implementing?

• Who is accountable for what? For this strategy to be successful, what do these key people need to be successful?

• What data (observable changes in short-term outcomes or behaviors) will we track to tell us whether our strategies are working?

"Leading for Change: Five 'Habits of Mind' That Count" by Tony Wagner in *Education Week*, August 15, 2007 (Vol. 26, #45, p. 29, 32)
http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2007/08/15/45wagner.h26.html

2. Five Success Principles for African-American Male Students

In this article in *Theory Into Practice*, Vanderbilt professor Richard Milner IV reviews the depressing statistics on the underachievement of African-American males and suggests five promising principles for turning the situation around:

• *Student and teachers must envision life beyond their present situation*. "Black males need to understand that their future situations can be brighter than their current situations," writes Milner. Teachers must be keenly aware of the consequences of failure and see over the horizon to more positive outcomes. And they must use classroom practices that have proved effective in successful schools, including high expectations, giving students multiple opportunities to complete assignments, providing alternative assessments, and refusing to let students fail.

• *Teachers and students must come to know themselves in relation to others*. For teachers, this means coming to terms with their own perspectives, privileges, beliefs, and life

experiences – empathizing with but not pitying their students. The problems that students face must become the problems that teachers and students face and solve together.

• *Teachers and students must speak possibility and not destruction*. "Black male students hear people talk about them in deficit terms," says Milner. "They hear the media classify them as *at risk*. They understand that they are not *supposed* to be successful." For African-American males, talk is not cheap; it hurts. Teachers must constantly show their students what can be accomplished through effective effort. Teachers need to exert their authority in the classroom while demonstrating respect for all students. "You know this information. Take a minute and tell me the answer, son." This is the warm/strict way in which Milner suggests teachers speak to their students.

• *Teachers and students must show that they care*. Saying that you care is one thing, says Milner. Demonstrating that you care is much more important. Caring teacher actions include: setting high standards and pushing students to reach them; allowing students who are in danger of failing to do make-up work and extra-credit work; volunteering to serve as a sponsor or advisor to after-school clubs and organizations; attending after-school activities and athletic events (one student boasted that his teachers "never missed" his basketball games); and complimenting students on what they are wearing. Milner calls this *other mothering* and *other fathering* and says that "teachers should want for their Black male students the same kinds of opportunities and lifestyles that they aspire for their own biological children."

• *Teachers and students must change their thinking to change their actions*. Teachers must lead the way to transforming the deficit thinking about African-American male students, says Milner. This means challenging negative attitudes among colleagues and helping students escape from widely-held self-perceptions. "Many Black males have been what I called kidnapped into believing that they are inferior and unable to succeed in school," he writes. "The time has come to end the excuses; we must teach, empower, and educate Black male students and take education to the next level."

"African American Males in Urban Schools: No Excuses – Teach and Empower" by Richard Milner IV in *Theory Into Practice*, Summer 2007 (Vol. 46, #3, p. 239-246), no e-link available, but the author can be reached at rich.milner@vanderbilt.edu.

3. From the Mouths of Babes

In this *Theory Into Practice* article, New York University professor Pedro Noguera shares the suggestions that 150 sophomores from Boston high schools made for improving their schools. Noguera highly recommends that schools convene groups of students to discuss problems and suggest changes, being sure to invite some less-than-angelic students to participate (since they often have the keenest insights) and listen carefully to what students have to say. Here are some of the ideas put forward by the Boston students:

• Teachers should be organized and well prepared for the classes they teach.

• Teachers should have a strong command of the material and a passion for the subjects they teach so that they can get students to be excited about learning.

• Teachers should be patient and ask students if they understand the material. If students don't get it, the teacher should explain the material in a different way.

• Schools should prepare students for success in life, not merely for high-stakes tests, and there should be less focus on test preparation (although some students said the Massachusetts tests were forcing schools to make sure all students were learning).

• Teachers should show respect to students in the same way they expect to receive respect.

• Teachers should be firm and not allow students to get away with preventing other students from learning.

• Students who disrupt a class should be required to do extra academic work, and students who cut classes should attend Saturday school.

• When students fight, the adults should find out why they fought before punishing them. If suspensions are not warranted, the students who fought should be required to work together to do something to improve the school.

• Administrators should observe teachers who have frequent disruptions in their classes to help them get better at managing students.

• Schools should ask parents and adults from the community to volunteer as hall monitors.

• Students who are rude and disrespectful toward teachers should be required to write apologies and do community service, including helping to clean the school.

• School administrators should create a panel of students to serve as a jury for students who break school rules, training them on how to hear discipline cases and the kinds of punishments that can be assigned.

Noguera's study also found that it makes a big difference if students have plans and goals for the future. "Students who understand that the hard work they engage in while in school will lead to greater opportunities after graduation are more likely to complete their assignments," he writes, "even if they regard them as little more than busy work, and more likely to tolerate teachers even if they view them as boring." But few students make plans and set goals on their own; they need help and encouragement from an adult – a teacher, counselor, parent, or relative – to do that.

"How Listening to Students Can Help Schools to Improve" by Pedro Noguera in *Theory Into Practice*, Summer 2007 (Vol. 46, #3, p. 205-211), no e-link available

4. A California Middle School's Full-Court Press on Student Failure

In this article in *Middle Ground*, California assistant principal John Albert describes how his school created an elaborate tutorial program with voluntary before-school, lunch time, and after-school sessions – and failed to reach the students who needed it. Only high-achieving students attended and struggling students stayed away in droves. "We patted ourselves on the back for solving all our school's problems," he writes, "but quickly discovered that success by invitation does not work." Albert and his colleagues ruefully acknowledged that the message

they were sending students was, "If you are failing, support is available. If you do not want to go, that is OK with us."

The school changed its approach, making attendance in tutoring sessions mandatory and refusing to allow any student to "choose to fail." By dint of a determined, systematic approach, the school boosted its standardized test scores 51 points, reaching the top 5% of middle schools in California. Here's what the school did:

• The master schedule was tweaked to include intervention classes during the school day for at-risk students. Kids who missed physical education because of these extra-help classes were able to take "zero-period PE" before school.

• Funds were allocated to pay teachers to tutor struggling students before school, at lunch, or after school; there were options to accommodate every student's and family's schedule.

• The school repeatedly communicated to students and parents that the tutoring program was supportive, not punitive.

• The referral process was automated so it was easier for teachers to refer students and for the office to respond.

• Teachers agreed to use a single, school-wide electronic grading program and, every four weeks, (a) update grades, (b) send grades to an online parent portal, and(c) submit electronic referrals for students at risk.

• The principal, assistant principal, and counselor each took responsibility for one grade level and met individually with students who were not responding to interventions. With input from teachers and parents, they crafted intervention plans with components like a double block of math, a strategic reading class, an AVID class, or a peer mentor.

• Every Monday, administrators checked on struggling students to make sure they were attending the required interventions; every four weeks they set aside a full day to meet with these students.

• The seventh-grade language arts/social studies team identified the skills necessary to master state standards in a unit, identified the students who had gaps in those areas, and held weekly after-school workshops to re-teach those skills.

"When Students Aren't Learning: How Learning Communities Respond" by John Albert in *Middle Ground*, August 2007 (Vol. 11, #1, p. 15), no e-link available

5. Three Ways to Get Students Reading

In her president's message in the International Reading Association's *Reading Today*, Clemson education professor Linda Gambrell recalls how her grandmother, an avid reader, snuggled with her on a moss-green sofa and made her into a reader. Gambrell encourages teachers to embody the same enthusiasm and modeling:

• *Teachers of reading should read themselves.* This needs to go beyond letting students "see" you reading at your desk, she says. Teachers should talk about what they read, share

good passages, show their fascination and enthusiasm. Gambrell tells how she read portions of *The Right Stuff* by Tom Wolfe with her third graders many years ago.

• *Teachers of reading should mentor students into the reading community*. This can happen in one-on-one conversations, in small groups over lunch, in notes and written dialogues – any way in which teachers can show their genuine interest in students as people and coax them into the habit of lifelong reading.

• *Teachers should make sure students read a lot*. This means scheduling time for pleasure reading during the school day, which shows students that the school values reading for enjoyment – in any genre, including fiction, non-fiction, poetry, magazines, newspapers, and electronic formats. Teachers should also help students find reading matter that interests them and expand their horizons through well-chosen read-alouds.

"Promoting Pleasure Reading: The Role of Models, Mentors, and Motivators" by Linda Gambrell in *Reading Today*, August/September 2007 (Vol. 25, #1, p. 16), no e-link available

6. Sure-Fire Read-Alouds for the Elementary and Middle Grades

In this *Reading Today* feature, two veteran educators, David Richardson and Susan Dove Lempke, recommend their favorite read-aloud books:

• *Edwurd Fudwupper Fibbed Big* by Berkley Breathed (2005), ages 6 and up – An illustrated story about a boy's lie that goes horribly wrong.

• *Parts* by Tedd Arnold (2000), ages 4 and up – A simple, humorous story about a boy who believes he is coming apart – and why he thinks that.

• *Time Stops for No Mouse* by Michael Hoeye (2003), ages 10 and up – This book about a watchmaker mouse, his pet ladybug, and a beautiful, adventurous aviatrix has short chapters with cliffhanger endings.

• *Old Turtle* by Douglas Wood (2001), ages 8 and up – A timeless story about peace, understanding, the acceptance of all religions, and living together in harmony.

• *Too Much Noise* by Ann McGovern (1992), ages 3-10 – A farmer thinks his house is too noisy and asks a wise man for advice. This book lends itself to audience participation!

• *The Green Book* by Jill Paton Walsh (1986), ages 10 and up – This short novel tells about a young girl and her father who must leave Earth for another planet. They discover that they were ill-prepared for the journey.

• *Say What?* by Margaret Peterson Haddix (2005), ages 8-12 – The parents of three children begin speaking strangely – because they're using a "new age" form of discipline. The children decide to turn the tables, and then things really go haywire.

• *When a Monster is Born* by Sean Taylor (2007), ages 5-8 – In this circular picture book, the end loops back around to the beginning, but at every step there are two possibilities where the story could turn in one direction or another.

• *Toys Go Out: Being the Adventures of a Knowledgeable Stingray, a Toughy Little Buffalo, and Someone Called Plastic* by Emily Jenkins (2006), ages 7-10 – This humorous

chapter book tells the adventures of three toys, with lots of dialogue and cues for how to say things.

• *Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle* by Betty MacDonald (1947), ages 7-10 – In this classic book, the ingenious Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle devises clever solutions for the desperate parents of naughty children in her upside-down house.

• *Jack Plank Tells Tales* by Natalie Babbitt (2007), ages 8-12 – A retired pirate tells his mysterious stories of life at sea, featuring a mummy's hand, a mermaid's comb, and a pirate who won't cut off his beard even though a crab gets tangled in it.

• *Redwall* by Brian Jacques (1987), ages 9-12 – This vivid adventure story was originally written for blind children. It's vivid and action-packed, and although the book is long, the first few chapters may hook readers.

• *The Bad Beginning (A Series of Unfortunate Events #1)* by Lemony Snicket (1999), ages 9-14 – This is the first in a 13-book series filled with wordplay and a tongue-in-cheek manner.

• *Little House on the Prairie* by Laura Ingalls Wilder (1953), ages 8-11 – This gripping adventure story about the American West can appeal to boys as well as girls. The mother's attitudes about Indians can be a teachable moment to discuss the history of Native Americans.

"Loud and Clear: Close Your Eyes, Open Your Ears, Use Your Imagination" by David Richardson and Susan Dove Lempke in *Reading Today*, August/September 2007 (Vol. 25, #1, p. 27), no e-link available

Reading Today also mentions a recently published book of recommended read-alouds: *What Should I Read Aloud? A Guide to 200 Best-Selling Picture Books* by Nancy Anderson (IRA) http://www.reading.org/publications/bbv/books/bk679/index.html

7. A Virginia School Changes Its Approach to Test Preparation

In this *Education Week* article, Amy Greene and Glennon Doyle Melton share the lessons they learned when their Fairfax, Virginia school failed to make AYP and got serious about improving test scores. "We decided it was our duty to do everything we could to help our students beat this test," they write, "everything, that is, except give up powerful, purposeful instruction." Teachers and administrators studied released items, took previous versions of the state test themselves, and reached the following conclusions:

• *Successful test-takers must first be smart readers.* "Most test-taking strategies are simply good reading strategies," they write. This insight led the school to stop using separate test-prep activities and instead weave test preparation into regular units and lessons, treating tests like another genre. Teachers showed students how to "read" tests the same way they taught them how to look for clues in a mystery and visualize when they read a poem.

• *Successful test-takers must be able to translate the unique language of the test.* Students will have difficulty doing well on standardized tests if they aren't familiar with "test talk." For example, students may know how to find the main idea but have difficulty with questions like: "This passage is mainly about…" or "What is the best summary of this passage?" Similarly, students may know how to ascertain the author's intent but not be able to

show their stuff when asked, "The author of this passage included paragraph 3 in order to…" These genre-specific terms need to be explicitly taught.

• *Learning to be a successful test-taker doesn't have to be drudgery*. "We know that there are visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners in our classrooms," write Greene and Melton, "but when it comes to teaching test-taking, many of us abandon everything we know about children as learners and ask students to sit silently at their desks while they read passage after passage and answer question after question. What happened to higher-level thinking? What happened to inquiry? What happened to dialogue? What happened to fun?"

Taking this approach to test preparation resulted in significant improvements in student achievement on the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL) tests and got the school off the "watch" list. The gains were sustained for several years (with a dip in one grade level), and students came to see the state tests as a reading challenge for which they were well prepared. "The test makes me think of my soccer team," said Sindi, a student at the school. "At the beginning of the season, I used to cry before games because I didn't know the rules or how to play. That's how I felt about the SOL last year, too. I cried before I came to school. But this year, it feels different. I'm not scared because I know what it's going to be like, and I know what the words mean. I also know what to do if I get stuck. I feel excited instead of scared."

"Teaching With the Test, Not To the Test" by Amy Greene and Glennon Doyle Melton in *Education Week*, August 15, 2007 (Vol. 26, #45, p. 30)
http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2007/08/15/45greene.h26.html

8. Supporting High Achievers in Heterogeneous Middle-School Classrooms

In this article in *Middle Ground*, Cleveland State University professor Susan Rakow suggests ways that teachers can meet the needs of all their students, including high flyers, in mixed-achievement classrooms:

• *Pre-assessment: who knows what?* "The cornerstone of any attempt to meet the needs of diverse learners," says Rakow, "is to find out what they are interested in, how they learn best, and what they already know." She recommends gathering the following information at the beginning of the year to learn about students' starting points: reading and writing levels, subject areas in which students are strong and weak, sports and musical instruments they play, whether they prefer to work alone or in a group, what they enjoy learning about, what they do with their free time, and how each one would attack the task of putting together a desk that came disassembled (e.g., follow the directions, ask for help, figure it out, etc.).

Rakow also recommends doing a pre-assessment at least two weeks before each curriculum unit – a short, written, ungraded quiz on the key information, concepts, and skills that will be covered. Rakow is not a fan of the K-W-L approach, in which the class brainstorms What do we Know? What do we Want to know? What have we Learned? "While it is a great way to engage students' interest in a topic," she says, "it is not an effective pre-assessment. The students who know the most stop talking after they offer two or three answers, even if they know more (it's socially 'uncool' and teachers ask 'Can we hear from anyone else') while students who don't know anything about the topic say 'he took my answer' or remain silent.

Teachers get a false 'read' of the class's knowledge base. In addition, doing this activity on the first day of an already-planned unit gives them no time to adjust for individual learners' needs."

• *Tiered assessments* – Teachers can assess the same content at varying levels of sophistication and depth by using differentiated journal prompts and comprehension questions at different levels on Bloom's taxonomy. For example, a class studying the Gettysburg Address might have two sets of questions, one on remembering, understanding, and applying, the second on analyzing, evaluating, and creating.

• *Menus of activities* – Teachers can give assignments with different levels of sophistication, with points assigned according to the level of cognitive complexity. For example, students could choose between doing a basic map of Europe for 5 points or a map of contemporary Europe contrasting the borders that existed in 1900 for 20 points.

• *Independent study* – Rakow emphasizes that differentiation is not the same as individualization, but she says there are situations where high-achieving students can benefit from doing solo projects. In a unit on folk tales, fairy tales, and myths, for example, a student with a lot of background knowledge might do a project analyzing Rafe Martin's book, *Birdwing* (2007), which extends Grimm's fairy tale, *The Six Swans*.

• *Using the Web* – Advanced learners can stretch their learning by getting involved with Web quests, podcasts, and video lectures with high-school or even college teachers.

• *Using "cluster grouping"* – Schools might consider creating a critical mass of 4-8 high achievers in a homeroom without special-needs students. Rakow says this creates a climate where high-achieving students feel more comfortable doing advanced work and the teacher is more willing to provide it.

"All Means All: Classrooms That Work for Advanced Learners" by Susan Rakow in *Middle Ground*, August 2007 (Vol. 11, #1, p. 10-12), no e-link available

9. Steps to Effective Discipline

In this article in *Principal* Magazine, veteran Oklahoma City administrator Jan Borelli describes the steps she has taken as a middle and elementary principal to drastically reduce discipline referrals – allowing her to focus mainly on curriculum, instruction, and effective classroom practices. Her guiding principles are (a) getting teachers to accept responsibility for trivial student misbehavior; (b) getting counselors to intervene early with discipline problems that are caused by abuse and neglect; (c) using peer counseling; and (d) keeping parents informed every step of the way. Borelli believes that the process is as important as the rules. Here are her suggestions:

• *Organize a faculty advisory committee for discipline and give it time to meet.* Committee members should represent the discipline concerns of their colleagues and be prepared to devote a significant amount of time during the year.

• *Learn and share best practices.* The principal and advisory committee members should get up to speed on the latest ideas on discipline.

• *Develop a vision.* It's important for teachers to see beyond the fatalism that comes from day-in-day-out struggles with seemingly intractable discipline issues and form a clear picture of what they want: well-behaved children eager to learn.

• *Define classroom rules*. Teachers should come up with no more than 4-5 rules for their own classrooms; it's easier to enforce a handful of rules that everyone knows than to have lots of rules that no one can remember.

• *Define schoolwide rules*. The advisory committee should develop rules and policies that address potential behavior problems in the halls, bathrooms, playground, and cafeteria.

• *Define positive consequences*. This can include enticing activities like a quarterly academic pep rally where excellent behavior is recognized with prizes and fun activities.

• *Define intolerable behavior*. It should be clear to teachers that they do not have to tolerate student fighting, harassment, use of drugs, etc. These major offenses need to be immediately referred to the principal for stern action.

• *Outline teachers' responsibilities*. It's vital to spell out what teachers are responsible for doing before they refer a student to the office (with the exception of the serious offenses just above):

- Have a private conference with the student to discuss the problem.
- Contact a parent or guardian to discuss the problem.
- If the student has a significant problem that needs attention, refer the student to a guidance counselor and inform the parent.
- Impose a consequence (e.g., detention or an in-school suspension).
- When all else fails, refer the student to the office with documentation of the occurrence and the progressive timeline of steps already taken.

"A Discipline Plan That Works" by Jan Borelli in *Principal*, September/October 2007 (Vol. 87, #1, p. 38), no e-link available

10. Short Items:

a. Questions for a student in trouble – In this article in *Middle Ground*, middle-school educator Rick Wormeli suggests asking the following questions to a student who has broken an important school rule:

• What did you do?

• How did that work for you?

• How will you rebuild our trust in you?

"The Courage It Takes" by Rick Wormeli in *Middle Ground*, August 2007 (Vol. 11, #1, p. 41-43), no e-link available

b. Rapid tobacco addiction – Young people can feel the tug of addiction within two days of inhaling their first cigarette – and they don't have to be daily smokers to become tobacco dependent. So says a National Institute of Drug Abuse report just published in the *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*. Half of kids who reported that they felt

addicted to tobacco smoked only about seven cigarettes a month. The report is available at http://archpedi.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/full/161/7/704.

Spotted in "Report Roundup" in *Education Week*, August 15, 2007 (Vol. 26, #45, p. 12)

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

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 37 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 about 50 issues a year).

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Publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educator
American School Board Journal
ASCD, CEC SmartBriefs
Atlantic Monthly
Catalyst Chicago
Chronicle of Higher Education
CommonWealth Magazine
Daily EdNews
Ed. Magazine
EDge
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
Essential Teacher (TESOL)
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Educational Review
JESPAR
Journal of Staff Development
Language Learner (NABE)
Middle Ground
Middle School Journal
NASSP Bulletin
New York Times
New Yorker
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
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