Marshall Memo 395

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
July 18, 2011

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"If it's not clear, you might as well not write it. You might as well stay in bed."
William Zinsser (see item #3)

"The hard part of writing isn't the writing; it's the thinking. You can solve most of your writing problems if you stop after every sentence and ask: What does the reader need to know next?"
William Zinsser (*ibid*.)

"Unfortunately, in most organizations, managers spend an inordinate amount of time working around their worst people, counseling their aggrieved co-workers, and rearranging work to accommodate their incompetence."
Jack and Suzy Welch (see item #1)

"The biggest problem I see in schools in America, especially urban schools, is the unwillingness to accept responsibility for outcomes. And anything that gets in the way of my being able to have a conversation with a person in a school about their actionable items and their results gets in the way of the work for me."
Andrés Alonso, Baltimore City superintendent, in "Driving Change in Baltimore City Public Schools," an interview conducted by Garrett Smith, in *District Management Journal*, Spring 2011 (Vol. 7, p. 4-11), http://www.dmcouncil.org/library/download/dmj/The-District-Management-Journal-Spring-2011/

"My conversations are always about the following: How are you doing? What are your goals? How can I support you to get results? How are you engaging the community so that you are not doing it on your own?"
Andrés Alonso (*ibid*.)

1. Five Principles of Good Writing

This article in *The American Scholar* is from a wonderful talk that author William Zinsser gave to incoming international students at the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism on how to write effectively in English. Our language, says Zinsser, is not "as musical as Spanish, or Italian, or French, or as ornamental as Arabic, or as vibrant as some of your native languages. But I'm hopelessly in love with English because it's plain and it's strong. It has a huge vocabulary of words that have precise shades of meaning; there's no subject, however technical or complex, that can't be made clear to any reader in good English – if it's used right."

English comes from two sources, he continues: Latin, "the florid language of ancient Rome," and Anglo-Saxon, from the plain languages of England and northern Europe. "The words derived from Latin are the enemy," says Zinsser. "They will strangle and suffocate everything you write. The Anglo-Saxon words will set you free." Latin words tend to be long, pompous nouns like *implementation, maximization, communication, development, fulfillment*, he says – words that are frequently used by people in authority in American government, business, education, social work, and health care. "They think those long Latin words make them sound important," says Zinsser, and cites a letter he received from a private New York club: "Dear Member: The board of governors has spent the past year considering proactive efforts that will continue to professionalize the club and to introduce efficiencies that we will be implementing throughout 2009." Translation: They're going to try to make the club run better.

In contrast to the bad, Latin-derived nouns, says Zinsser, are the good Anglo-Saxon nouns: *house, home, child, chair, bread, milk, sea, sky, earth, field, grass, road*. "When you use those words, you make contact – consciously and also *sub*consciously – with the deepest emotions and memories of your readers."

Even better than these nouns, says Zinsser, are short, plain, *active* Anglo-Saxon verbs: "Active verbs give momentum to a sentence and push it forward. So fall in love with active verbs. They are your best friends."

He then shares his five principles for writing good English: clarity, simplicity, brevity, humanity, and logic:

• *Clarity* – "If it's not clear, you might as well not write it," he says. "You might as well stay in bed." And no more than one thought per sentence. "Readers only process one thought at a time. So give them time to digest the first set of facts you want them to know. Then give

them the next piece of information they need to know, which further explains the first fact. Be grateful for the period. Writing is so hard that all of us, once launched, tend to ramble. Instead of a period we use a comma, followed by a transitional word (*and, while*), and soon we have strayed into a wilderness that seems to have no road back out. Let the humble period be your savior."

• *Simplicity* – "Simple is good," says Zinsser. "Writing is not something you have to embroider with fancy stitches to make yourself look smart." This isn't appreciated by many foreigners trying to impress people with their English. One Nigerian woman said that if she wrote simple sentences, people would think she was stupid. Stupid like Thoreau, was Zinsser's retort. Or like E.B. White. Or Abraham Lincoln. Or Barack Obama. "There's no sentence too short to be acceptable in the eyes of God," he says.

• *Brevity* – "Short sentences are better than long sentences," he continues. "Short words are better than long words. Don't say *currently* if you can say *now*. Don't say *assistance* if you can say *help*. Don't say *numerous* if you can say *many*. Don't say *facilitate* if you can say *ease*. Don't call someone an *individual* [five syllables!]; that's a person, or a man or a woman. Don't implement or prioritize. Don't say anything in writing that you wouldn't comfortably say in conversation. Writing is talking to someone else on paper or on a screen."

• *Humanity* – "Be yourself," advises Zinsser. "Never try in your writing to be someone you're not. Your product, finally, is you. Don't lose that person by putting on airs, trying to sound superior." To become a better writer, look for models of good writing. Find writers who are direct and authentic and read their prose (*The New Yorker* is an excellent place to start, he says). "Study their articles clinically," he urges. "Try to figure out how they put their words and sentences together. That's how I learned to write, not from a writing course."

Does this advice apply in the new age of digital media? Absolutely, says Zinsser. Video scripts and audio scripts and websites and all the prose for the new media must be "lean and tight and coherent," he avers, "plain nouns and verbs pushing your story forward so that the rest of us always know what's happening."

• *Logic* – "Sentence B must follow from Sentence A," says Zinsser, "and Sentence C must follow Sentence B, and eventually you get to Sentence Z. The hard part of writing isn't the writing; it's the thinking. You can solve most of your writing problems if you stop after every sentence and ask: What does the reader need to know next?"

"Writing English as a Second Language" by William Zinsser in *The American Scholar*, Winter 2010, http://www.theamericanscholar.org/writing-english-as-a-second-language/

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2. Advice from the Business World on Leading Winning Teams

In this *Newsweek* article, former General Electric CEO Jack Welch and his author/consultant wife, Suzy Welch, say the secret to success – in sports, business, and other fields – is getting the best players and coaching them in ways that make the sum greater than the parts. This sounds simple, they say, but in fact, it's complicated, and depends on four key leadership skills:

• *Let people know where they stand*. "Sure, leaders evaluate their people all the time," say the Welches, "but they too seldom share those observations with the team members themselves. In the silence, stars become disaffected and leave seeking more appreciation, either in the soul or the wallet, or both. Meanwhile, the solid center wanders around in undirected ignorance, and the real underperformers drive their teammates crazy because others must carry their load (and no one upstairs ever seems to do anything about it)."

Leaders need to lavish love on top performers ("Yes, love," say the Welches), building their self-confidence so they'll take on even greater challenges and holding them up as role models for others. Leaders also need to spend serious time coaching middling performers so they get better. And as for poor performers: "Unfortunately, in most organizations, managers spend an inordinate amount of time working around their worst people, counseling their aggrieved co-workers, and rearranging work to accommodate their incompetence. They also spend a lot of hours fretting over how they can possibly break it to their underperformers that they're terrible at their jobs without hurting their feelings." The kindest thing that a leader can do for these people, they say, is to show them the door.

• *Have a clear, simple game plan and make sure everyone knows it*. "There's never been a Super Bowl team that charged the field thinking, We'll figure this out as it goes along and see what happens," say the Welches. They're not fans of elaborate, expensive strategic plans that end up gathering dust on a shelf. Instead, they advocate articulating a clear, general direction "and executing like hell… Clarity. Direction. Outcome. Ready, forward, charge."

• *Be honest*. "On every single winning team," say the Welches, "you will discover that the leader is candid; he rewards everyone else who is candid, and outs the people who aren't candid… Because when people don't say what they mean, play politics, or withhold their ideas, everything gets screwed up. Resentments accumulate. Cliques form. Good people leave. Work slows down."

By contrast, candor breeds trust and a willingness to take risks. "And when a team is infused with trust, people play to their better angels," say the Welches. "They share their ideas freely. They help their colleagues when they're stuck and need an insight. What they do every day then becomes about the group's success, not their own."

• *Celebrate successes*. "Teams that… whoop it up every time something good happens create a delicious dynamic," conclude the Welches. "They teach people what it feels like to win, which is, well, a very good feeling."

"How to Build a Winning Team" by Jack and Suzy Welch in *Newsweek*, July 18, 2011 (p. 50-51), http://www.newsweek.com/2011/07/10/how-to-build-a-winning-team.html

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3. Is RTI Working to Prevent or to Identify?

"RTI offers us an important opportunity to reduce the number of children becoming disabled in literacy," says CUNY/Albany professor Peter Johnston in this important *Elementary School Journal* article, "but there is a real danger that its potential will not be realized."

"How should we understand a child's limited progress in acquiring literacy?" he asks. There are a number of reasons educators might believe a student has a specific learning disability (SLD) and needs to be shunted into special education: genetic history, brain scans, cognitive assessments, entering school way behind in language and literacy, or having difficulty processing language in school. "But we should not lose sight of some important facts," says Johnston:

- "Just as with measures of height or weight, or intelligence, there is no clear line of demarcation between SLD students and others."
- With appropriate instruction, even students who have serious limitations can be taught to read.
- As these children learn to read, he says, "the measures of cognitive processing on which they previously appeared deficient improve as well and no longer look as disabling."
- A small number of students (1-2 percent) will still have difficulty learning to read, even after various interventions, but three-quarters of these students can be brought up to par with their peers by fine-tuning their instruction.

In other words, we currently know how to prevent almost all children from becoming disabled in literacy.

This is the aspiration of Response to Intervention (RTI), a provision in the 2004 revision of the federal special-education law (IDEA). But Johnston believes that the way RTI is being implemented in many schools doesn't fully support that aspiration. Too often, he says, RTI focuses on identifying students with disabilities rather than reducing the need for such identification, "emphasizing measurement at the expense of instruction."

In practice, says Johnston, the only way to tell if a person has a specific learning disability is to eliminate all the other possibilities. Years ago, if there was a discrepancy between IQ and reading performance, and no other impediment could be found, educators concluded there must be an SLD. But the IQ-achievement disparity approach fell out of favor for a number of reasons: assessment issues, the burgeoning number of students classified as SLD, the expense of special education, the overrepresentation of minority-group students in special education, and the documented effectiveness of early-intervention programs that reduced the need for special education. In 2004, RTI emerged as a better alternative. Schools were asked not to classify children as SLD until they were sure the problem was not with regular-education instruction.

RTI represents "a major shift in institutional priorities," says Johnston. But in the process, it creates three "awkward tensions":

• A major focus of RTI is improving regular-education teaching, and 15% of special-education budgets can be devoted to this. But "the RTI funding stream, intended to reduce the need for special education, is in the special education budget," says Johnston. "If states and schools productively and aggressively take up the RTI option, it will reduce the funding and the need for special education teachers."

• Previously, school psychologists were spending about 75 percent of their time on IQ testing (key to identifying students as SLD under the discrepancy model). Under RTI, they need to gain expertise in literacy teaching and learning. "The majority of school psychologists, however, report little knowledge of reading assessment and interventions," says Johnston, "let alone literacy more broadly defined." And he believes that in most cases, this deficit is not being remedied.

• Because RTI is part of the IDEA law, it's seen as being about children with disabilities and therefore within the school psychologist's and special educator's beat. It's therefore not surprising that so far, most of the books and articles about RTI have been written by people from those fields. On the whole, says Johnston, "both professional groups appear to share a belief in the permanence of SLDs, a behaviorist view of literacy teaching and learning that emphasizes the speed and accuracy of reading words, a belief that it is reasonable to assess literacy development as if it were linear, a central concern for psychometrics, and a positivistic view of science." All of this, he believes, is problematic.

The 2004 RTI language can be read in two quite different ways. RTI can be seen as a *measurement* initiative – frequent assessments that prove a student needs special education – or an *instructional* initiative – intervening successfully so the student never needs special education. "Although identifying an SLD and preventing one (i.e., identifying, instead, how to improve instruction) might be viewed as different parts of the same process," says Johnston, "they are different activities requiring different tools and strategies and different discourses and relationships. Although it is not a simple dichotomy, these differences along with limits on time and other resources mean that emphasizing one means limiting the other." Some details:

• *RTI as identification: it's mainly about measurement* – For those who see RTI as primarily about identifying which students have and don't have SLD, the focus is on psychometrics and measurement – finding a standardized procedure to replace the IQ-discrepancy model. Standardization is important, including the use of a "scientific, research-based" reading program, making sure it is implemented with fidelity, increasing the intensity of interventions after a certain time period (Tier 2 and Tier 3), and deciding when special education is necessary. Students are often assessed twice a week on the number of words read correctly in a minute. Johnston says that this approach contains a number of assumptions:

- A standardized intervention will work in different settings regardless of teacher experience, expertise, context, instructional history, age of students, etc.
- An approach that works with most students will work with each child having difficulty with reading. "If the child's reading improves, it is assumed that the instructional package worked," says Johnston. "If not, the child is framed as the problem… The instructional package remains 'scientific and research based.'"
- The problem is a fixed trait in the child.
- The program, rather than a responsive teacher, is what's working.
- Increasing the "dosage" will increase the effect.

- It assumes "a narrow, behaviorist view of literacy, focusing centrally on accurate and rapid identification of words rather than on a broader definition of literacy," which is harder to measure.

All of these assumptions, says Johnston, are problematic: "In a measurement frame, the valued expertise is not the teacher's ability to adapt instruction but the design and selection of tests and packaged programs… The measurement frame represents a serious underestimation of the significance of human interaction and expertise in literacy teaching and learning and a problematic view of social science." He points out that the most effective RTI-related reading interventions are Reading Recovery and the Interactive Strategies Approach (ISA), neither of which is scripted and both of which rely on teacher judgment and expertise (within a clearly defined structure) as students work to solve their reading difficulties.

Of course monitoring of student progress is essential, says Johnston, but it must be balanced: "Monitoring needs to determine whether a child is responding to instruction and whether instruction is responding appropriately to the child."

• *RTI as prevention: it's mainly about teaching* – Another way of looking at RTI is optimizing instruction to prevent the need to classify students as needing special education, and there is language in the legislation that supports this view. "If the emphasis is put on instruction," says Johnston, "then evidence that the child is not learning adequately is primarily evidence that instruction is not yet appropriate and needs to be further optimized. It is evidence of a need for greater instructional expertise and perhaps a reduced teacher-student ratio… Assessment practices would capitalize on and extend teachers' expertise, particularly their ability to optimize instruction for individual students."

Teacher expertise is the key to student learning, says Johnston, especially for students having difficulty. This calls into question having instructional assistants working with struggling students, or having failing students sent to special educators who are not strong in literacy. The emphasis should be on improving the literacy expertise of regular-education and special-education teachers through expert coaching. "Most current models of RTI do not address this," says Johnston, "in part because of their emphasis on standard protocol intervention packages rather than on teacher expertise, and in part because of the logic of research-based instruction, which commonly renders the program valid regardless of the lack of effect on an individual."

"In the instruction frame," Johnston continues, "assessment that informs instruction is key, and teacher assessment expertise is central. A core dimension of teacher expertise is the teacher's ability to notice and respond to what children can and cannot do. A teacher who does not notice that a child is not yet able to analyze their speech into phonemes will not know to teach that skill. A teacher who does not recognize that a child already has a skill may go ahead and waste time teaching it anyway, particularly if using a packaged program. Similarly, a teacher who notices that a child makes many reading errors and attributes it to the child's inability rather than to the text's difficulty will keep the child in an unproductive learning situation… In other words, teachers who do not understand the children they are teaching will be more likely to decide that a child is learning disabled. Their understanding of children's

learning has a lot to do with what they know about children's literacy acquisition and how to organize and make literate behaviors noticeable and respond to them productively, which is exactly the point of RTI."

Assessments are key components, and they need to be sensitive and specific in what they tell teachers is needed in their classrooms, says Johnston. For example, a simple test of alphabet knowledge in kindergarten is an excellent predictor of future learning difficulties, and the results suggest specific classroom interventions to prevent that fate. For other students, the Observation Survey is ideal for figuring out the learning problem and intervening effectively. Johnston is concerned that many RTI programs focus on much less sophisticated assessments – reading speed and ability to decode nonsense words – which contribute nothing to instruction.

Far more helpful and effective are measures of students' reading levels, which make it possible for teachers to get students working in materials at the right level of challenge, and students' self-corrections, which help teachers understand what kinds of interventions are needed. "Records of children's reading behaviors, because they are process focused, are more likely to lead to strategy-focused instruction that will turn attention away from trait-oriented interpretations of performance and build resilience," says Johnston. The best questions for teachers to ask: "Is instruction taking place in appropriately difficult materials? Is the child building a meaning-directed system? Is the child taking control of monitoring and problem solving in reading? How is the child using strategies and resources in the process of making meaning? How is the child's literacy changing?"

"If we want to capitalize on the promise of RTI," concludes Johnston, "we must focus on prevention-instruction models, recognizing the complexity of literacy, its teaching and its learning, and centralizing the ongoing development of teacher expertise. None of this can be purchased in canned packages."

"Response to Intervention in Literacy: Problems and Possibilities" by Peter Johnston in *Elementary School Journal*, June 2011 (Vol. 111, #4, p. 511-534); available for purchase ($9.00) at http://www.jstor.org/pss/10.1086/659030; Johnston can be reached at johnstonnz@aol.com.

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4. Improving Preschoolers' Vocabularies

In this *Reading Research Quarterly* article, Susan Neuman (University of Michigan), Ellen Newman (IE University, Segovia, Spain), and Julie Dwyer (Boston University) start with some statistics about children's vocabularies:

- Knowledge of words and their meanings is essential to reading proficiency.
- A large and rich vocabulary is strongly correlated with reading comprehension in elementary school and comprehension and fluency in high school.
- Low-SES children enter school with less-extensive vocabularies than their middle-class counterparts.
- By second grade, middle-class students have learned about 6,000 root word meanings, compared to 4,000 by their lowest-quartile classmates, a two-grade gap.

- The chasm may be even worse than this because more-fortunate students know more *academic* words – for example, the mathematical meanings of *operation* and *sign*. This kind of word poses a special challenge to children who don't have the Velcro of a rich network of words in their heads.
- The bottom line: differences in vocabulary are an important factor in the widening achievement gap.
- Nevertheless, systematic vocabulary instruction gets very little attention in most schools. One study of 23 upper-elementary classrooms found that teachers "did much mentioning and assigning but little actual teaching of new vocabulary," say the authors, and other studies have found the same pattern in preschools.
- Most instructional materials in current use give teachers very little guidance on how to teach vocabulary well.

"The question then becomes, How do we effectively intervene with very young students who need more intensive vocabulary instruction?" ask Neuman, Newman, and Dwyer.

They start with the ways preschoolers acquire new vocabulary. Everyday words come mostly from oral interaction – mealtime conversations, daily activities and chores, and play. Hearing books read aloud exposes children to academic vocabulary – for example, books like *Over the Meadow* by Ezra Jack Keats use words like "basked in the sun." But a number of studies have cast doubt on how much new vocabulary children – especially those who are economically disadvantaged – learn from hearing books read aloud. Something more systematic is required.

In this study, Neuman, Newman, and Dwyer tested the hypothesis that teaching new vocabulary in conceptual clusters would help students process words more deeply and remember them better. The authors wondered whether learning words in taxonomic groupings would "bootstrap word learning by linking word labels to existing knowledge through inductive processes." For example, would linking the new word *katydid* to other insects help a student infer properties about a katydid based on prior knowledge about insects? The authors' three assumptions:

- Words should be carefully selected to enrich students' Tier 2 academic word banks.
- Words should be grouped in ways that formed thematic links – for example, teaching *ball* and *bat* together, under the heading of *baseball*.
- Embedded multimedia – video, audio, and pictures – would help students form more vivid memories of clusters of words.

These are the design principles of a supplementary preschool vocabulary program called World of Words (WOW). Neuman, Newman, and Dwyer tested the program in 14 Head Start classrooms for a full school year, comparing students' vocabulary acquisition with a control group of 14 classes that had a different supplementary program using storybooks and activities focusing on vocabulary, print knowledge, and phonological awareness.

The WOW program takes 12-15 minutes a day on top of the regular core literacy program. The curriculum is organized into topics – health, science, and mathematics – with words chosen from those that students know already and those that many students don't know.

In each eight-day cycle, words are introduced, then illustrated by a video and followed up with discussion and reference to a information book. Each day, new words are introduced, previous words reviewed, students are asked challenge questions (for example, *Is a bat an insect?*), and student scribble-write and draw in their journals. Here are some of the WOW word groups:

• *Emotions* – Five concepts are introduced (e.g., emotions are things you feel inside), then the words: happy, happiness, cheerful, sad, sadness, lonely, loneliness, frustrated, frustration, loving, love, angry, anger, mad, afraid, scared, tall, short, curly hair, straight hair, hungry, tired, feelings, feel, smile, laugh, fun, cry, bad, better, nobody around, alone, company, bother, interrupted, hug, hit, push, safe, comfortable.

• *Healthy foods* – Six concepts (e.g., some healthy foods help make your bones and muscles strong), then: vegetable, carrot, broccoli, celery, lettuce, tomato, fruit, apple, banana, strawberry, dairy, milk, yogurt, cheese, protein, meat, chicken, fish, eggs, grains, bread, rice, pasta, cookie, candy, ice cream, French fries, pizza, cereal, energy, good for you, edible, diet, colors, green, orange, delicious, sweet, nutritious, red, yellow, bones, muscles, snack, sugar, oily, greasy, junk food, balanced.

• *Pets* – Five concepts (e.g., pets eat special food, and good pet food makes them healthy), then: dog, puppy, rabbit, cat, kitten, bird, hamster, goldfish, lizard, elephant, giraffe, tiger, bear, horse, snake, pig, feed, food, water, play, love, take care of, tame, petting, exercise.

• *Wild animals* – Four concepts (e.g., wild animals take care of themselves), then: polar bear, coyote, giraffe, leopard, rhinoceros, elephant, zebra, gorilla, deer, tiger, seal, monkey, alligator, lion, cat, cow, hamster, rooster, bird, horse, snake, zoo animals, takes care of itself, finds food, outside, ice, Arctic, fish/fishing, hunt/hunting, desert, ferocious, tame, grasslands, big, plants, survive, carnivore, herbivore, jungle, woods, habitat, river.

• *Geometric shapes* – Five concepts (e.g., each geometric shape has a different number of sides), then: triangle, rectangle, circle, square, pentagon, hexagon, octagon, semicircle, cone, sphere, ice cream cone, house, squiggle, cloud, three, sides, corners, points, lines, connected, sail, four, door, ruler, narrow, wide, curved, round, wheel, equal, pizza box, stop sign, solid, party hat, ball.

• *Numbers* – Seven concepts (e.g., when we count, we say one number for each thing that we are counting), then: number words, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten; group, patterns, multiply, subtract, addition, measure, calculate, guess, calendar, clock, count, forward, backward, before, after, add, more, take away, less, more than, less than, nothing, none.

What did the study find? Students who were in the WOW treatment group consistently outperformed those in the control group in vocabulary knowledge, applying that knowledge in novel situations, and understanding the relationships between words and their groups. This was true not only right after the program, but also six months later. Neuman, Newman, and Dwyer believe that "by encouraging students to think in categories early on, teachers may be developing students' ability to comprehend, reason, and think on their own" – the "bootstrapping" effect they were hoping to find. The authors believe that with more classroom

time, the WOW curriculum would have an even greater impact on vocabulary knowledge and application.

"Educational Effects of a Vocabulary Intervention on Preschoolers' Word Knowledge and Conceptual Development: A Cluster-Randomized Trial" by Susan Neuman, Ellen Newman, and Julie Dwyer in *Reading Research Quarterly*, July/August/September 2011 (Vol. 46, #3, p. 249-272), http://www.reading.org/Publish.aspx?page=/publications/journals/rrq/v46/i3/abstracts/rrq-46-3-neuman.html&mode=redirect; the authors can be reached at sbneuman@umich.edu, eehamilt@gmail.com, and dwyerj@bu.edu.

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5. Getting Middle-School Students Tracking Their Own Data

In this article in The Center for Public Education's website, Susan Stafford reports on a rural Arizona school's effort to help students understand their own achievement results and plan for improvement. Back in 2005, teachers and administrators at Verrado Middle School realized that everyone in the school was looking at student data – except for students. Now, each student receives a personalized Student Data Portfolio (SDP) at the beginning of the year with his or her state test scores and sheets for goals, journal entries, and graphs. Sixth graders carry the portfolio with them through graduation, with a new worksheet added each year.

Every week during the advisor/advisee homeroom period, teachers walk students through a 20-minute segment in which students chart the previous week's grades, attendance, and behavior in all classes, diagnose problems and write reflections, ask "What could I do to achieve a better result?", and set goals for the week ahead. Students also set goals for district benchmark assessments in reading, math, writing, and science, and at the end of the year, celebrate successes and identify challenges.

Teachers push students to make the goals meaningful. "It's not enough for a student to say, 'I want to do better in math,'" says Bernadette Fain, a language-arts teacher who coordinates the SDP program. "An acceptable goal would be: 'I want to raise my grade by a letter by the end of the year…'", accompanied by specific strategies such as spending additional study time, getting tutoring, or paying attention in class. Teachers are encouraged to be creative in these weekly lessons; some have shown videos, had students perform skits, related goals to eighth graders' desire to get a driver's license, and hung up archery targets with updates on progress toward goals.

To prepare for the weekly SDP classes, teachers share lesson plans, e-mail each other materials and ideas, discuss strategies in team meetings, model lessons for each other, confer with the principal, and conduct an end-of-year survey to track progress. The principal also makes a point of visiting classrooms during the advisor/advisee period to get a sense of how the SDP dynamics are going.

What have been the results? The school recently moved to the state's highest-performing category, and staff and students speak positively about SDP, with 85 percent of students giving it high marks. "When students feel like school isn't just something that happens

to them, but is something over which they have some control, it creates motivation for them to do better," says Heather Cruz, the principal who launched the program.

Here are the lessons the school learned as it gradually introduced and tweaked the program over several years:

- *Introduce the program slowly*. SDP was voluntary at first, but then spread to all classes.
- *Make it easy for teachers to implement*. The most important part was preparing good lesson plans for the advisor/advisee classes.
- *Form a dedicated team to sustain the project*. Several point people are essential to keeping up the energy and taking care of details.
- *Reward the point people*. Career-ladder points were part of the system at Verrado.
- *Get the administration on board*. The principal's visits to classrooms during the weekly SDP periods were vital to success.
- *Be organized and don't underestimate the logistical support required*. "This is a project that needs to be frontloaded," says Cruz. This means having SDP folders, test scores, and other materials ready to give to teachers and students during the first week of school – the busiest week of the year.
- *Be flexible*. Unexpected problems will crop up, and staff need to be ready to roll with the punches.

"AZ: Students Tracking Their Own Data Make Gains" by Susan Stafford in The Center for Public Education's website, July 2011, http://tinyurl.com/6fz33p3, spotted in *PEN Weekly NewsBlast*, July 15, 2011

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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

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 41 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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- All back issues (also in PDF or Word)
- A database of all articles to date, searchable by topic, title, author, source, level, etc.
- How to change access e-mail or log-in

Publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
ASCD, CEC SmartBriefs, 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
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
The Atlantic Monthly
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Language Educator
The Learning Principal
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
The School Administrator
Theory Into Practice
Tools for Schools