Marshall Memo 64

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
November 29, 2004

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"We have to find the means to make reading not simply attractive, but irresistible."
Irma DeFord (see item #4)

"Schools that drop history and science from their curriculum to 'make room' for more reading instruction – or who fail to incorporate strong content in their core reading program – do so at the expense of their students' long-term reading comprehension."
The editors of *American Educator*, Fall 2004, p. 5

"Teachers thrive when expectations are clear and when they have immediate access to data about their students' progress."
Tim DeRoche (see item #5)

"Principals are rarely hired to maintain the status quo; your legacy will not be based on how the school was functioning when you arrived, but on how it is operating when you leave."
Jody Capelluti and Ken Nye (see item #9)

"Accountability policies that are accompanied by significant investments in building teachers' capacity and skills will likely meet with the greatest success."
by Robin Tepper Jacob and Susan Stone (see item #10)

"Teachers cannot change what happens to a student outside school, but they can change their [own] belief system, practice effective teaching methods, express sincere high expectations for every student, and provide a rigorous curriculum and progressive classroom environment."
Curtis Linton (see item #7)

1. The Nasty Downward Spiral of Reading Failure

Several powerful articles in the current *American Educator* make the case that *teaching reading right the first time* is the key to closing our widening literacy achievement gap. This means applying the lessons of recent research, assessing all students at the beginning of kindergarten, and using proven teaching strategies and interventions to bring virtually all students up to reading proficiency by third grade.

The editors' introduction scoffs at the continuing debate between reading skills and reading for content and enjoyment: "Kids need both," say the authors:

- "Fluent decoding is not the entirety of reading instruction. But, without it, all else falters."
- "Schools that drop history and science from their curriculum to 'make room' for more reading instruction – or who fail to incorporate strong content in their core reading program – do so at the expense of their students' long-term reading comprehension."

In the lead article, Florida reading expert Joseph Torgesen traces the origins of the literacy gap in the first days of primary school. "Children who are destined to be poor readers in fourth grade almost invariably have difficulties in kindergarten and first grade," he writes. According to Torgesen, children who have difficulty learning to read in the early grades fall into two broad categories: (a) those who enter school with phonological weaknesses and have trouble reading words accurately and fluently; (b) children who have phonological weaknesses *and* have smaller vocabularies, less experience with complicated syntax, and less general background knowledge (these are mostly low-SES and minority children). Here is how early deficits spiral out of control:

- Some children enter kindergarten not knowing letter names, unable to match sound to print, and lacking phonemic awareness (they can't hear, distinguish, and blend individual sounds).
- These children find it difficult to decode words they don't know.
- Because of this, they find it difficult, even unpleasant, to read independently.
- Without lots of practice reading high-frequency words, they don't develop a large sight-word vocabulary and continue to struggle to decode most words.
- Without a large sight-word vocabulary, they can't read fluently and get little enjoyment and reinforcement from the limited reading they do.
- This leads them to read even less on their own.
- They do not form accurate memory of spelling patterns;

- They do not develop a strong vocabulary;
- They do not develop comprehension strategies;
- All this results in their having very little chance of *ever* becoming fluent readers.

This is the bad news. The good news, says Torgesen, is that "we now have tools to reliably identify the children who are likely destined for this early reading failure… [I]f we intervene early, intensively, and appropriately, we can provide these children with the early reading skills that can prevent almost all of them from ever entering the nasty downward spiral…" The key goal in the early grades is to maintain the word-reading skills of at-risk children within the average range so they can read independently and accurately and with enjoyment. If they do, says Torgesen, they will "be able to maintain more nearly average levels of reading fluency as they progress through the elementary school years."

To achieve this goal, Torgesen recommends a four-part strategy:

1. Reading instruction from K-3 must be a skillfully-delivered balance of word-level skills (phonemic awareness, decoding, etc.) and reading comprehension (including building extensive content knowledge).

2. We must have procedures in place to accurately identify children who are falling behind in kindergarten and first grade.

3. These children must get immediate, explicit, intensive, supportive small-group instruction so they can catch up. "Immediate" means at the beginning of kindergarten. "Explicit" means leaving nothing to chance and nothing unsaid in terms of letter-sound connections and background knowledge required for struggling readers to understand. "Intensive" means small-group work with highly-trained teachers who give struggling students more teaching/learning opportunities per day than other children. "Supportive" means scaffolding students' learning and leading them to discover information and strategies, versus just giving them the answers.

4. While this small-group work is going on, students who read more proficiently should be working independently on academically engaging literacy activities. Coming up with meaningful activities and managing the different activities going on in the classroom is a real challenge for teachers. The use of peer tutoring and additional staff (including special education teachers "pushing in") are viable options.

What does Torgesen recommend for upper-elementary students who are behind in reading? He thinks that intensive, supportive instruction aimed at word reading skills and increasing positive reading time can bring about significant gains –

but fluency is the toughest nut to crack. So far, studies show that upper-grade students getting intensive remediation make progress in all areas but this one.

"Avoiding the Devastating Downward Spiral" by Joseph Torgesen in *American Educator*, Fall 2004 (Vol. 28, #3, p. 6-9, 12-13, 17-19, 45-47) http://65.110.81.56/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/fall04/reading.htm

Researchers at the University of Oregon have developed a website with reviews of early literacy assessments for different grades, skills, and purposes. The site is at: http://idea.uoregon.edu/assessment/

2. Wishful Thinking Doesn't Work in Reading; Intervene Early!

Over the years, some educators and parents have subscribed to the theory that some children are "late bloomers" and shouldn't be pressured to start reading in kindergarten and first grade; they'll catch up with their peers when they "bloom." This "developmental lag" theory provided a rationale for putting off the diagnosis of reading problems.

Recent research has completely debunked this theory. Reading experts now believe that virtually all children who lag behind their peers in reading have a *skill deficit*. For these children, waiting won't work. They won't learn what they're missing unless the skills are taught directly and intensively in kindergarten and first grade. In fact, waiting is harmful, because without early intervention, these children will fall further and further behind. Help later in elementary school may result in some progress, but students who start behind and get late remediation tend to plateau in upper elementary school at a much lower level than their peers.

"Waiting Rarely Works: 'Late Bloomers' Usually Just Wilt" by the editors in *American Educator*, Fall 2004 (Vol. 28, #3, p. 10-11), http://65.110.81.56/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/fall04/latebloomers.htm

3. One District's Early Prevention Program

In this article, journalist Catherine Paglin describes an Oregon school district's early intervention program for at-risk readers. "The results district-wide have been stunning," write Paglin. Before the initiative, 15 percent of students left first grade unable to read and second-grade special education referrals reached 17 percent. Tracing the problem backwards, the district found that reading problems were not being diagnosed in kindergarten; in fact, the district's half-day kindergarten was mainly a social readiness program. Children were simply not receiving the instruction they needed to head off failure later on. The district put the following pieces in place:

- Establishing measurable learning goals for each grade level;
- Doing regular and frequent assessment and monitoring;
- Buying research-based reading programs with direct, explicit, and systematic instruction;
- Carving out protected time for reading instruction;
- Doing substantial amounts of teaching in small groups at each child's level;
- Giving principals a leadership role;
- Training all teachers and educational assistants in using the reading programs and assessments.

Teachers found that kindergarten assessments divided students into three levels:

• *Benchmark*, i.e., on track to meet district goals and eventually state standards. These students got the district's core reading program in whole-group instruction and small groups.

• *Strategic*, i.e., progressing but behind. These students got Early Reading Intervention (ERI), an intensive and heavily-staffed program involving skill-grouped instruction and hands-on materials.

• *Intensive*, i.e., at risk of failing to meet goals. These students got the core and ERI programs and, starting in October of their kindergarten year, an extra 30 minutes a day of reading instruction a day. They also had their progress monitored with the DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) assessment) twice a month. The extra reading time was not pullout but add-on, squeezed in between the two kindergarten sessions.

If a student failed to make progress despite these intensive academic interventions, a series of checks in other areas was done: Has the student been absent a lot? Does the student have health problems? Has vision been checked? Hearing? Going down this checklist usually rooted out the problem. In one case, a kindergarten boy whose progress had been stalled had a bead and a twisted piece of aluminum foil in his ears!

When it was first introduced in 1999, the district's initiatives met stiff resistance from kindergarten teachers. They complained strenuously about what they saw as excessive academic pressure and developmentally inappropriate expectations. But when teachers started to see improvements half-way through the first year, they quickly changed their minds. "It was like a flip of a switch," said one. Teachers were also impressed – and swayed – by the level of financial and staffing support the district was giving to early intervention.

The results have been impressive: for the first cohort of students who came through from kindergarten with the new assessments and interventions, second-grade special education referral rates fell to 4-6 percent and most referred students had severe, hard-to-remedy reading difficulties. The proportion of third graders meeting state standards increased from 79 percent in 1999 to 92 percent in 2004, despite a substantial increase in the percent of students living in poverty. There was also a drop in discipline problems. "Previously, kids were starting to misbehave because they were having difficulty with skills," said district reading coordinator Ronda Wolter. "By putting them in a small group, by getting them right where their skill level is, we alleviate some of those problems. They start feeling good about themselves, and they don't have to act out."

"Practicing Prevention" by Catherine Paglin in *American Educator*, Fall 2004 (Vol. 28, #3, p. 20-23, 44) http://65.110.81.56/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/fall04/prevention.htm

4. Making Reading Irresistible

In this passionate article, retired New York City junior high school teacher Irma DeFord issues a plea for more rigor and engagement in the study of literature in public schools. "A fierce desire to learn has been passed down through our genes as a condition of survival," she says. "That is what we, as teachers, have going for us and for our students. It is our heritage from evolution, the outward expression of the drive to organize what we experience as the chaos of the environment into more coherent and understandable patterns and motifs."

DeFord observes that many students resist reading, perhaps because teachers don't give them enough to sink their teeth into and don't give them enough of a payoff to their efforts. "Their resistance is a warning that what we've been doing so far is simply not good enough," says DeFord. "We have to find the means to make reading not simply attractive, but irresistible. We must teach students a rigorous, coherent, transparent, and portable methodology they can carry in their brains to the next work they read. We have to make it possible for them to have such a good time, as they struggle to figure out what's going on in the text, that we won't be able to *prevent* them from reading."

"Why Students Resist Reading" by Irma DeFord in *American School Board Journal*, December 2004 (Vol. 191, #12, p. 18-19), no e-link available

5. What Happens When Teachers Embrace Standards

In this *Education Week* commentary article, consultant Tim DeRoche confesses that until very recently, he regarded standards and accountability as necessary evils. But when he visited five high-performing school districts* as part of a team to choose the winner for this year's Broad Prize for Urban Education, he had an epiphany. In school after school, he saw that standards were clarifying teachers' sense of mission and boosting their morale. "Teachers thrive when expectations are clear and when they have immediate access to data about their students' progress," he says. "[Standards and testing] have the potential to spark an extraordinary revolution in the teaching profession." DeRoche heard teachers in all the districts say that focusing on results has made their jobs more rigorous and rewarding because:

- *It fosters more teacher collaboration* – Because all teachers at the same grade level are now responsible for the same content, there's every reason for teacher teams to work together to save time to share teaching ideas. For teachers who escaped their customary isolation, says DeRoche, "[t]eaching is no longer a lonely profession."
- *It channels their creativity* – DeRoche says that the vast majority of teachers he saw were able to continue to teach creatively as they implemented uniform standards.
- *It creates clear job expectations for teachers* – Standards clarify exactly what is expected: "This takes much of the guesswork and fear out of the evaluation process."
- *It raises expectations for all students* – The new standards, says DeRoche, have "implicitly challenged teachers to raise their expectations for poor and minority students." He describes one teacher moving from believing that her students couldn't master difficult material to hoping that state standards would one day become even more demanding.
- *Success provides inspiration* – "When test scores come back indicating that even the poorest students can meet the standards," writes DeRoche, "teachers feel that they are making a difference. Their morale improves and they are willing to work even harder to improve student achievement."

DeRoche's only concern is that standards have led some schools to push aside the arts and physical education. "As standards evolve," he writes, "states will have to ensure that they provide for the education of the whole child."

"Not Just a Necessary Evil: When Teachers Embrace Standards and Testing" by Tim DeRoche in *Education Week*, November 24, 2004 (Vol. 24, #4, p. 37)
http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2004/11/24/13deroche.h24.html
* The districts visited were: Garden Grove Unified School District, CA (the eventual winner), Aldine, TX, Boston, MA, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, NC, and Norfolk, VA.

6. Developing Workplace Skills in School

In another in a series of excerpts from his book *Class and Schools* (2004), Richard Rothstein (formerly *New York Times* education columnist) discusses the importance of non-academic skills to life success. He stresses how critical it is that schools help students *unlearn* any dishonest, cruel, non-cooperative, violent, and disobedient behaviors they have learned and adopt a set of personal characteristics that will serve them well in the workplace. Below is a composite of what nine different studies over the last 21 years have found about the skills that employers value most:

- At least a B average;
- Reasoning and problem-solving skills;
- Communication skills;
- Interpersonal/social skills;
- The ability to work in a team;
- Respect for the rights of others;
- An acceptable work attitude;
- Character;
- Honesty and integrity;
- Punctuality and reliability;
- Self-discipline;
- Ability to accept responsibility;
- Enthusiasm;
- Pride;
- Adaptability to change;
- Appearance;
- A work ethic;
- Perseverance;
- Self-confidence.

How do people gain self-confidence? One study examined the widely-reported phenomenon that tall men tend to earn higher salaries than shorter men. The study found that tall men who gained their extra height at the end of adolescence had no earnings advantage later on. The height advantage went only to those who were tall in high school. What was the mechanism for this? Employers couldn't be discriminating in favor of these late bloomers because a boss would have no way of knowing a person's height in high school. So the advantage must be something that was picked up in high school. Researchers theorized that being taller during adolescence helps boys develop greater self-confidence because taller boys tend to be more popular and are more likely to participate in athletics.

Rothstein thinks that the immediate implication of this study for schools is that they need to have well-balanced programs: "Schools cannot do much to make short boys more popular, but they can encourage all children to take part in team activities and ensure that participation is acknowledged and rewarded. Programs such as

debate teams, drama clubs, school newspapers, band, and orchestra can build similar confidence and discipline for students who don't participate in sports."

"Beyond Academics" by Richard Rothstein in *American School Board Journal*, December 2004 (Vol. 191, #12, p. 20-24), no e-link available

7. Talking Back to Richard Rothstein

In the last few months, passages from Richard Rothstein's book, *Class and Schools* (2004), have appeared in a number of publications. Unlike the passage summarized immediately above, most of these excerpts have hammered home the message that class-based factors outside schools determine children's academic achievement. Responding to Rothstein's piece in the October 2004 *American School Board Journal*, Utah educator Curtis Linton has this to say about the role of schools in closing achievement gaps in American schools:

"There is no question that substantial and valid reasons outside the school's control lead to these gaps. However, so much time has been spent investigating and blaming these beyond-school reasons that educators have not identified what a teacher can actually do in the classroom. Schools that I have observed that are closing these gaps have made a conscious effort to move beyond an analysis of blame and into a recognition of responsibility. Teachers cannot change what happens to a student outside schools, but they can change their [own] belief system, practice effective teaching methods, express sincere high expectations for every student, and provide a rigorous curriculum and progressive classroom environment. These are the keys to student success, no matter the socioeconomic status or race of the student. As educators, we need to take personal responsibility for those areas of our work that we do have control over. May we become more effective at analyzing our own beliefs, expectations, teaching methods, and biases. Our students' future depends on this."

Letter to *American School Board Journal* by Curtis Linton, December 2004 (Vol. 191, #12, p. 5), no e-link available

8. Promoting the Success of Male Students of Color in AP Classes

In this article, three educators from a high school in Arlington, Virginia describe their school's program to support the success of male African American and Hispanic students in Advanced Placement classes. After identifying and studying the substantial achievement gap in their school, the school decided to start this program and model it after athletic teams. Pursuing this analogy, the school hired faculty

"coaches" (a resource teacher for the gifted, a school counselor, and a school social worker) who had the following qualities:

- A passion for "the game" itself;
- A joint vision of what they were trying to teach and develop in students;
- A willingness to commit time and effort;
- A willingness to make adjustments to the game plan;
- Knowing that "sometimes what actually happens during a game is incredibly beyond all the time-consuming preparation and seemingly endless practice leading up to it. There is a certain magic that coaches and their players often experience in athletics."

The program started with 9th graders; to be admitted, students' grades for the quarter could not be lower than C. The cohort began meeting once a month after school, but the staff quickly decided that both the frequency and the time were wrong. They shifted to weekly meetings at lunchtime (with free pizza supplied by the program). Close relationships were quickly established, all manner of subjects were discussed (race, the mind-set that "it isn't cool to look too smart," problems in class, how to self-advocate with a teacher, dating, studying strategies, etc.), and the program began to make a difference.

At the outset, there was a firm policy that if any member got a grade below a C, he could not attend the weekly lunch meeting. A student challenged this: "You know," he said, "we don't need this group so much when things are going right. We need each other the most when we are struggling." Others agreed, and the policy was changed on the spot.

The program added a new cohort of students every year, raised funds, brought in role models, organized college visits, and branched out into other activities. The first cohort graduated last spring, and all 20 members went off to college, all but one of them to four-year colleges.

"Making the Team" by Alan Beitler, Delores Bushong, and Al Reid in *Principal Leadership*, December 2004 (Vol. 5, #4, p. 16-21), no e-link available

9. New Principals: Carpe Diem!

Two former Maine principals describe the bind that many new principals encounter: "If a new principal doesn't do anything new or different until after he or she has established relationships in the school community, people will be disappointed that the new principal isn't doing anything. However, if a new principal

attempts to tackle the major problems of the school without having established positive working relationships with members of the school community, people will ask, 'Who does this person think he is?' Either way, it seems that you can't win."

But the authors don't think this is an insoluble problem. They describe two cases where new principals seized the initiative and quickly won support for their actions. They advise new principals to move rapidly to build trust and get things done: "Whether or not you have a clear mandate from the school committee, it is important that early in your tenure you are perceived as someone who is going to make a difference. Principals are rarely hired to maintain the status quo; your legacy will not be based on how the school was functioning when you arrived, but on how it is operating when you leave. Let the school community know early on that you are someone who is not satisfied with the status quo."

"The New-Principal Paradox" by Jody Capelluti and Ken Nye in *Principal Leadership*, December 2004 (Vol. 5, #4, p. 8), no e-link available

10. What Chicago Educators and Parents Think About Retention

The current issue of *Education Next* has a thoughtful article on the Chicago Public Schools' policy to retain third, sixth, and eighth graders who do not meet certain standards on norm-referenced tests. The authors found that, despite research indicating that retention doesn't work, parents, teachers, and principals are quite supportive of the policy. Respondents said that tough standards:

- Made teachers more sensitive to individual student needs and problems;
- Made teachers feel extra responsibility to help students meet standards;
- Made parents more concerned about students' progress;
- Made students work harder.

Principals agreed with much of this, but were concerned that:

- Short-term fixes (e.g., test prep materials) were emphasized at the expense of carefully-planned strategies to address student learning problems;
- Resources were diverted to the third, sixth, and eighth grades at the expense of other grades;
- Other student education needs were neglected.

The authors argue that high-quality teacher professional development needs to accompany retention programs: "Such policies do help focus teachers' energy and attention on the appropriate content, but teachers may need help in learning to change

their instructional practice. Accountability policies that are accompanied by significant investments in building teachers' capacity and skills will likely meet with the greatest success."

"Educators and Students Speak: Those Closest to the Action Like the Retention Policy" by Robin Tepper Jacob and Susan Stone in *Education Next*, Winter 2005 (Vol. 5, #1, p. 49-53), http://www.educationnext.org/unabridged/20051/

11. Key Critical Thinking Skills

Consultant Susan Black is critical of what passes for critical thinking in many schools. What's missing in teachers' muddled attempts to get students to "stop and think" and "take a moment to think about…" is a solid set of critical thinking skills and enough time set aside to teach them systematically. According to Richard Paul and Linda Elder of the National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking, too many students are allowed to get away with random and undisciplined thought. They need to be pushed to "take thinking apart" – to analyze their own thinking according to standards of clarity, accuracy, relevance, logic, and fairness. Their classroom precepts [which sound a lot like the "accountable talk" espoused by Lauren Resnick] are:

- Summarize what others have said.
- Elaborate on concepts and ideas.
- Relate topics to their own knowledge and experience.
- Give examples to clarify and support ideas.
- Make connections between related concepts.

"Habits of Thought" by Susan Black in *American School Board Journal*, December 2004 (Vol. 191, #12, p. 52-54), no e-link available

12. Short Items:

a. Using common rubrics across high-school grades – This month's "Question from the real world" to Doug Reeves comes from a secondary-school department head whose school has embarked on a writing initiative in which teachers across subject areas are planning to ask students to write to prompts in specific areas at each grade level:

- 8th grade – Compare/contrast
- 9th grade – Expository
- 10th grade – Persuasive
- 11th grade – Analysis
- 12th grade – Synthesis

The teacher asked if they should use the same rubric across grades and subjects or allow teachers to vary their emphasis on organization, language use, ideas, etc.

Reeves said that teachers should use a common rubric: "That sends a consistent message to students and helps all teachers agree on what 'proficient' writing really means." Reeves did suggest that perhaps non-language arts teachers might use an abbreviated rubric covering just writing conventions and organization. He felt it was important that all teachers insist that students write in complete sentences with a beginning, middle, and end and use appropriate punctuation, capitalization, and grammar, but math teachers might be less concerned with "voice" in students' writing.

"Questions and Answers from the Real World" by Doug Reeves in *Center for Performance Assessment Monthly E-Mail Newsletter*, November 2004

b. Urban debaters – Debate teams, most often found in affluent public and private schools, boost students' critical thinking and academic research skills, their ability to communicate well and solve problems creatively, and their self-confidence. Students who take part in debate programs usually read a great deal, study critical issues in depth, and learn how to express their views effectively and respond cogently to arguments with which they disagree. The Urban Debate Leagues bring rigorous interscholastic debating to inner-city schools, teaching advocacy skills so that students are "empowered to be the architects of their own lives."

http://www.urbandebate.org/impact_education (spotted in *PEN Weekly NewsBlast*, November 24, 2004)

c. Should good teachers be paid more? – Merit pay is not usually covered in the Marshall Memo (it's more at the policy end of the spectrum), but for those who are interested, here is a link to a thoughtful article in the current *Education Next*.

http://www.educationnext.org/unabridged/20051/

"Dollars and Sense" by Thomas Dee and Benjamin Keys in *Education Next*, Winter 2005 (Vol. 5, #1, p. 60-67)

The same issue of *Education Next* has three other articles on merit pay without links:
- "The Uniform Salary Schedule: A Progressive Leader Proposes Differential Pay" by Brad Jupp
- "All Teachers Are Not the Same: A Multiple Approach to Teacher Compensation" by Julia Koppich
- "Recognizing Differences: Let's Reward Good Teachers" by Lewis Solomon

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo aims to keep busy principals and other educators very well-informed on important research and ideas in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 35 years of experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, coach of principals, and writer, acts as "designated reader." Kim searches through 39 publications the week they come out, chooses the articles that are most relevant and useful to improving teaching and learning, and summarizes them in a brief e-mail. Some ideas will be familiar, reinforcing what readers already know; others will be new and genuinely thought-provoking.

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Publications covered:

(those read this week are underlined)

American Education Research Journal
American Educator
American School Board Journal
ASCD SmartBrief
Atlantic Monthly
Bay State Banner
Boston Globe
CommonWealth Magazine
Curriculum Update (ASCD)
Ed. Magazine (Harvard School of Education)
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Update (ASCD)
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Reading Today
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
Teachers College Record
Teacher Magazine

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