Marshall Memo 54

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
September 20, 2004

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Thousands and thousands of kids enter the world as lost souls."

> Harry Spence, Massachusetts Commissioner, Department of Social Services, quoted in Sam Allis's column in *The Boston Globe* Sept. 5, 2004, p. A-2

"[A]nyone who has spent time in classrooms that vibrate with enthusiasm needs to keep such memories alive in all their specificity to serve as so many yardsticks against which to measure what we've lost: 6-year-olds listening to a story, rapt and breathless; teenagers so immersed in an activity that they forget to worry about appearing cool; those little explosions of delight attendant on figuring something out."

> Alfie Kohn in *Education Week*, Sept. 15, 2004, p. 36

"For the first time in the history of American education… bad things happen to school leaders who don't improve student performance and good things happen to those who do."

> Marc Tucker (see item #1)

"There are times when you feel like a pingpong ball."

> Fredi Buffmire, Arizona principal (see item 2)

"It absorbs the time like a great and horrible sponge."

> John Cromshow, Los Angeles kindergarten teacher, on the Open Court reading program (see item #3)

1. Can the Principalship Be Made Less Impossible?

The pressure on principals is increasing. Research is telling us that effective instructional leadership is critical to student achievement (its impact second only to that of teaching), and accountability keeps raising the stakes. "For the first time in the history of American education," says Marc Tucker of the National Center on Education and the Economy, "…bad things happen to school leaders who don't improve student performance and good things happen to those who do."

But most principals are consumed by discipline problems, parent complaints, maintenance problems, and paperwork, and their days are so chopped up that they find it very, very difficult to focus on instruction. What is to be done about this ulcer-producing dilemma? *Education Week* profiled three districts that have made structural changes to address principals' fragmentation and overload:

- Talbot Country, Maryland has decided to hire a "school manager" in each building to help principals be instructional leaders. The manager handles maintenance, field trips, the cafeteria, buses, and most discipline problems while the principal visits classrooms, analyzes test scores, and plans professional development activities.
- The Mansfield, Massachusetts schools have started appointing two principals in each elementary school with a division of labor similar to Talbot County.
- Long Beach, California now has "co-principals" in six regular high schools, dividing leadership tasks to make them more manageable.

This job-splitting is considered a godsend by most principals, but it hasn't worked in every school. Talbot County lost two of its building managers after a year because the job was so overwhelming, and some principals in these districts said they preferred to handle the non-instructional stuff themselves.

This last perspective reflects some principals' inadequate preparation for the role of instructional leader. "The quality of leadership and management training in our schools of education is, on the whole, terrible," says Marc Tucker. A number of districts have established "grow your own" principal preparation programs, and New Leaders for New Schools, a non-profit company based in New York, is recruiting and training principals in five cities. There are also efforts to upgrade the skills of existing principals. In San Diego, instructional specialists take principals on "walk-throughs" in their own buildings to help them sharpen their understanding of effective teaching. "If you don't know how to analyze instruction in a pretty sophisticated way," says

Ann Van Sickle, director of San Diego's Leadership Academy, "then I don't believe you can plan for change in a school."

But the problem for many principals is not their lack of training; it's their own districts' bureaucratic requirements, and maverick principals are forced to work around the system to be successful. William Ouchi (author of *Making Schools Work: A Revolutionary Plan to Get Your Children the Education They Need*) is one of a number of researchers and advocates of who favor shifting decision-making to the school level – accompanied by accountability for results. Seattle, Houston, Edmonton (Canada), and Memphis have adopted this approach.

But the time management challenge is still a daily reality for thousands of principals – which points to the critical importance of distributing leadership and delegation. "It's about principals," says Memphis Superintendent Carol Johnson, "but it's also about empowering the school site so that teachers and others own the results and the decisions around the changes."

"Tackling an Impossible Job" by Jeff Archer in *Education Week*, Sept. 15, 2004 (Vol. XXIV, #3, p. S3-S7) http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=03Overview.h24

2. An Embattled Arizona Principal Fights the Good Fight

"There are times when you feel like a pingpong ball," says Fredi Buffmire, an elementary principal in Mesa, Arizona who somehow handles an 824-student building without an assistant principal. When an *Education Week* reporter visited recently, Buffmire was dealing with a rash of "pantsing" incidents (students sneaking up behind a victim and jerking down his trousers) along with everything else. Every day, Buffmire deals with a slew of discipline problems, fights her way through mountains of paperwork, struggles to hire teachers, and spends an hour doing lunch duty (the article has a color photo of Buffmire wiping down a cafeteria table). She hand-delivers teachers' paychecks every two weeks as an excuse for getting into classrooms, does in-depth teacher evaluations only once a year, and admits to spending precious little time on instruction. Professional development of teachers is largely catch-as-catch-can: "I believe I've got a vision of where I want to go," says Buffmire. "You watch for a window to open that will help you get there."

Occasionally there are other opportunities: she meets regularly with her team leaders, and they occasionally go beyond housekeeping details to institute programs to address deep-seated problems, including an intervention program providing small classes for struggling students. Buffmire works long hours, is respected by her staff,

and gets credit for creating a trusting atmosphere in the school. But she is a walking case study on the need to restructure the principalship.

"Putting Out Fires" by Jeff Archer in *Education Week*, Sept. 15, 2004 (Vol. XXIV, #3, p. S8-S10) http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=03Buffmire.h24

3. Does the Open Court Reading Program Work?

Los Angeles recently mandated Open Court, a highly scripted, phonics-oriented reading program, for all but a few of its elementary schools. District officials and some principals and teachers praise the program's structure and say it is getting results, but others have found Open Court to be an inflexible, one-size-fits-all package that dominates the school day. "It absorbs the time like a great and horrible sponge," said John Cromshow, a veteran L.A. kindergarten teacher.

Is Open Court working? The reading achievement for students using the program rises in the primary grades but levels off or drops in the upper elementary grades where more sophisticated reading skills are required. This may be attributable to the program's emphasis on isolated skills versus reading comprehension. Critics of Open Court say it allows little time for reading trade books, prevents teachers from addressing individual students' needs or using their own judgment in the classroom, and makes it impossible for them to teach other subjects. "There were a lot of songs that we did in the past that children liked," said Cromshow. "We'd do finger plays, art, playing with blocks, cutting and pasting. Now, it's hard to squeeze anything in."

But Los Angeles officials insist that the program is working and have taken a hard line, mandating Open Court for all but the highest-achieving schools and hiring hundreds of literacy coaches to monitor compliance (coaches have been dubbed the "Open Court police"). Some argue that schools need to implement the program in its entirety: "Open Court is like a soufflé," said one principal. "You don't know if it's a good recipe until you follow it precisely." But others take a different view. "It's not the Bible," said a maverick principal. "It doesn't rule what we do. We have to modify and adjust to meet the needs of our kids."

McGraw Hill, which publishes Open Court, touts the program's track record in a number of districts and says that it complies with No Child Left Behind requirements for scientifically-based reading programs [see the next article], and some federal education officials have given direct or indirect endorsements. But independent researchers say that achievement, after a modest rise in the primary grades, is not impressive. *The Los Angeles Times*, which supported citywide adoption

of Open Court a year ago, now questions whether the program is working. "This year's results show that not only are students generally not moving up, but poor, black, and Latino students are as far behind their more affluent white and Asian peers as they were before the reforms were instituted," said an August 19, 2004 editorial. "Open Court, the highly scripted phonics program that was going to teach all students to read, helped some but didn't come close to creating a literate crop of students."

"L.A. Students Get Reading by the Book" by Kathleen Kennedy Manzo in *Education Week*, September 15, 2004 (Vol. XXIV, #3, p. 1, 16-18)
http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=03Scripted.h24

4. Are the Top-Selling Reading Programs Research-Based?

Despite their sales pitches, and despite the U.S. Department of Education's direct and indirect endorsements, none of the top-settling reading programs (Open Court, Houghton Mifflin, Harcourt, Scott Foresman, and Macmillan-McGraw-Hill) meet the "gold standard" of research: (a) they don't use randomized studies comparing their programs to other methods or materials; (b) studies of the programs haven't been published in scholarly, peer-reviewed journals; and (c) the companies' studies have not documented improvements in student achievement across the full range of schools and students.

The Department of Education's Reading First criteria for "scientifically-based" reading programs are considerably less stringent, and critics say that they are skewed toward phonics-based programs. The stakes are high, since Reading First funds will not go to programs that do not meet Washington's criteria. New York City, for example, had to make a mid-course change in its primary-grade reading program when a federal official hinted that the program it initially selected did not meet the Reading First criteria.

Robert Slavin, a professor at John Hopkins, is distressed that the program he helped create, Success for All, has lost steam since the federal criteria were instituted. *Bona fide* research is crucial to developing and improving reading programs, he says, but the research done by textbook companies is not impartial: "[T]here's a huge difference between marketing research and genuine research," says Slavin. Yet the approval process for Reading First depends on research studies sponsored by the publishing companies themselves. There isn't a credible, authoritative *Consumer Reports* on reading textbooks.

"Leading Commercial Series Don't Satisfy 'Gold Standard'" by Kathleen Kennedy Manzo in *Education Week*, September 15, 2004 (Vol. XXIV, #3, p. 16-17)
http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=03research.h24

5. Meeting the Needs of Struggling Teenage Readers

The lion's share of literacy research and money has been directed toward the primary grades, based on the belief that if we teach students early, the problem will be fixed. But studies in the U.S. and abroad show that, while elementary reading achievement is improving, high-school students' reading skills are getting worse. This strongly suggests that we need to pay more attention to the needs of teenage readers.

Some student start to run into trouble around fourth grade, when school reading shifts from fiction toward non-fiction, when vocabulary and background knowledge become more important, and when teachers' reading expertise begins to tapers off. By middle and high school, about 10-15 percent of students are having trouble understanding classroom materials; most of these students can make out individual words but have trouble grasping the overall meaning. Catherine Snow, a literacy expert at Harvard, says that the upper-elemenary achievement gap has roots in the way reading is taught in the lower grades: "Low-income kids and non-English-speaking kids are most likely to suffer in a regime of reading as code-breaking. They have big deficits in the domains of vocabulary and world knowledge in English.

For adolescents to develop their reading skills, the first thing they need to do is *read*. But motivation is a big problem; many teenagers avoid the kind of reading they are asked to do in school and as a result, they don't develop the kind of fluency they need to enjoy what they read, do a lot of reading, and get something out of it.

Here are several effective strategies to help students who are stuck in this rut:

• Allow students to choose their own topics and books as often as possible. Students are usually more willing to attempt difficult reading if they're interested in the topic and/or chose the book.

• Use "cultural modeling," which involves using rap lyrics and other unconventional works to teach comprehension skills such as irony and satire. When students understand concepts encountered in a genre they like, they can often transfer the knowledge to books or poems in the literary canon and understand what would otherwise seem foreign to them. "What cultural modeling does is make the academic game explicit for students," says Carol Lee of Northwestern University. "We have

found that students with histories of low achievement in reading become intensely engaged in literary analysis."

• Assign books that are easier to read so students feel more comfortable with vocabulary and syntax and develop fluency and confidence – which will encourage them to read more.

• Explicitly teach the strategies that proficient readers use without thinking. It's a mistake to assume that all students already know how to ask questions as they read, make predictions, draw conclusions, etc.

• Teachers should meet with colleagues who teach the same students or courses to share information on students who are struggling in different classes, discuss literacy strategies, and talk openly about successes and failures.

• Make good use of literacy coaches to help content-area teachers get past their belief that "I'm not a reading teacher" and learn the skills they need to reach students.

"Adolescent Literacy: Are We Overlooking the Struggling Teenage Reader?" by Robert Rothman, *Harvard Education Letter*, September/October 2004 (Vol. 20, #5, p. 1-3), no e-link available.

6. Dealing with the "N-word" in Classrooms and Corridors

Project ASSERT, a five-year study drawing on the insights of Boston-area high-school teachers, has focused on the discomfort felt by many teachers when African-American students address each other as "nigger." Some teachers draw the line within their own classrooms but do not feel they can do so in the corridors. (One teacher was advised to "pick your battles" when she reprimanded students for using the N-word outside her room.) While black and Latino teachers usually intervene immediately when students use the word, many white teachers have internal conflicts and uncertainties. As one put it, "How much do I really know about this thing? Am I equipped to be someone who can give a [black] child wisdom about this?" Another white teacher confessed, "I don't correct students. I mean, I don't call students on that when I hear them calling each other 'nigger,' depending on the intention certainly. But I have not heard it used maliciously in the school, and I'm sort of in conflict with this… It's so complicated. I feel like it's not my… (long pause) – I don't feel like I'm in a position to tell them whether or not they can use that word."

The researchers offer a rejoinder. "Learning how to negotiate one's authority as a white teacher in relation to racially diverse students is an evitable part of teaching. That white teachers might worry about correcting or 'passing judgment' on students'

language use… is part of a larger debate about the role of culture and power in education." They cite Lisa Delpit (author of *Other People's Children*): teachers need to help students understand the "codes of power" – the vocabulary and language skills they need for academic and life success. "When students use the n-word," say the researchers, "Delpit would regard judicious and respectful intervention not as an option, but as a responsibility and an obligation if teachers are to serve their students of color in the most effective way."

But this is not easy. The ASSERT researchers believe that many white teachers need support from school administrators and colleagues. They need help with their sense of alienation from kids they feel they don't know, with their anxieties about not feeling equipped to provide wisdom to black children about their culture, and with their uncertainties about being empowered to influence students' lives. They need to become comfortable being white authority figures, which is sometimes tricky. For example, one black student complained when his white teacher constantly corrected his English in class. The teacher took the feedback and began to correct only isolated grammatical errors in class and talk to the student privately about chronic issues in his speech and writing.

The ASSERT leaders feel that many white teachers need a professional growth curriculum that contains the following elements:

• Spelling out the expectations and aspirations they have for their racially diverse students;

• Becoming aware of the authority they claim (or abdicate) for themselves in the racial socialization of their students;

• Surfacing, rather than covering over, their conflicts about being white that emerge in daily interactions (such as when students use the "n-word") and the role these emotions play in the decisions they make as teachers and authority figures.

Finally, the researchers wonder what it would take for teachers to extend their authority beyond their own classrooms to the corridors and public spaces of schools, moving from "This is me and my space, and you will do what I say," to "This is how we are going to create a respectful, cross-racial community, and we both have a stake in – and share responsibility for – doing so."

"The 'N-word' and the Racial Dynamics of Teaching" by Wendy Luttrell and Janie Ward in *Harvard Education Letter*, September/October 2004 (Vol. 20, #5, p. 4-6), no e-link available.

7. Arkansas Identifies Its Chubby Kids; Now What?

In an extraordinary statewide inventory conducted last year, the state of Arkansas gathered the body-mass index readings of 345,000 schoolchildren. The study showed that 38 percent are overweight or at risk of becoming overweight, and letters were mailed to parents over the summer with their children's body-mass index. "No area of the state has been spared from the epidemic of childhood obesity," said Joseph Thompson of the Arkansas Center for Health Improvement. "This study clearly indicates that children of every age, gender, economic status, and ethnic group across the state are vulnerable." This was true, but rates were higher for certain populations: 44 percent of African-American girls and 49 percent for Hispanic boys were overweight or at risk of being overweight.

The study had its critics, who worried that children might be embarrassed if screenings were done in a gym or other public area and that parents might be confused by the statistics. They also noted an important caveat: highly-conditioned athletes have high body-mass index readings because of their greater muscle density.

Dr. Peter LePort, a California obesity expert, applauded the initiative but cautioned that giving families a child's body-mass index and urging overweight children to watch less TV, exercise more, and cut down on snacks and junk food was not enough. Many children and adolescents are bored, lack values, and have no sense that they need to achieve – and fill the void by eating too much or finding some other addiction. Dr. LePort advocates giving the usual messages to children and their families and also getting at the deeper problems of alienation and anomie.

"Arkansas Pupils' Body Weights Add Up" by Marianne Hurst in *Education Week*, September 15, 2004 (Vol. XXIV, #3, p. 1, 22)
http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=03BMI.h24

8. Short Items:

a. Engaging disengaged students – Between 40 and 60 percent of students are "chronically disengaged" in school. This includes students in urban, suburban, and rural schools, and doesn't count those who have dropped out. This startling statistic comes from a statement released by Robert Blum and the Wingspread Group – twenty national education and health leaders convened by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention last summer. The group believes that building emotional connections with school helps students commit to education and increases their ability to resist risky behaviors. "We have a culture of detachment in our nation's schools,"

said Blum. "Essentially, we're telling kids they're on their own, and while many of them succeed, many don't. This is unacceptable."

Spotted in *PEN Weekly NewsBlast* Sept. 14, 2004. The original article is available at http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/opinion/2002034444_raspberry14.html

b. A "teachability" index – To what extent do factors outside school – poverty, joblessness, dysfunctional families, crime, etc. – determine academic achievement? A bold Manhattan Institute study by Jay Greene and Greg Forster set out to quantify "teachability" – the advantages and disadvantages with which children enter school – and measure the extent to which these factors affect how well kids do in school. The researchers took 16 factors (e.g., time in preschool, language barriers, parents' educational level, family poverty, and health) and rank-ordered states by overall "teachability." (The District of Columbia ranked last, closely followed by New Mexico, Arizona, Texas, and Louisiana; top-ranked were Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and South Dakota.) Greene and Forster then compared these figures with each state's NAEP scores, and concluded that outside-school factors were only part of the equation. True, D.C. students were also last in achievement, but fourth highest in achievement was low-"teachability" Texas. (Montana was first, followed by Colorado, Kansas, and North Carolina.) The moral of the story: there is a lot that schools can do to overcome the disadvantages with which many children enter school.

The study was immediately criticized by Larry Mishel of the Economic Policy Institute, who doubted its findings. "Teachability" is "something that should be studied," he said, "but I don't think [they've] done the job.'

"Study Finds Out-of-School Factors Less of Hindrance" by Sean Cavanagh in *Education Week*, September 15, 2004 (Vol. XXIV, #3, p. 6) http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=03index.h24 . For a link to "The Teachability Index," go to http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/ewp_06.htm

c. Preparing students for college writing – A freshman from California went to her first expository writing class at Harvard. When the instructor assigned a paper that was to be "five to eight," the young woman asked, "Paragraphs?" and everyone, including the instructor, laughed at her. Her situation is hardly unique. A 2002 study showed that most American high schools have stopped assigning research papers, mostly asking students to produce diary entries, creative writing, and personal essays that require no reading or research. In a clarion call for rigorous non-fiction writing

assignments in American high schools, Will Fitzhugh, editor of *The Concord Review*, says, "[I]f we don't ask our students to read nonfiction and to write academic research papers before they leave school, we not only dumb down their opportunities, but also deprive our society of the kind of clear, thoughtful writing it needs to maintain a democracy, power an economy, and enhance the daily lives of its citizens."

"Romantic Fiction: What Passes Today for Student Academic Writing" by Will Fitzhugh in *Education Week*, September 15, 2004 (Vol. XXIV, #3, p. 35)
http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=03fitzhugh.h24

d. Nightmares about failure – Joel Klein, Chancellor of the New York City schools, still has this nightmare: he walks into a high-school classroom for a final exam and it's over! While he was off sleeping or studying, all the other kids took the test and he completely missed it! Samuel Freedman, in his weekly *New York Times* education column, calls dreams like this "the meritocrat's nightmare" because they express the deepest fears of someone who is progressing through life on hard work and smarts and is tripped up by a stupid mistake. What runs through the person's mind at moments like this is "I can't do it, I'm not prepared, and it's my fault."

"How does dreaming about not showing up for a test affect our survival?" wonders Freedman. "The answer, I would think, is that education is absolutely critical to how far you advance in life… The dream is helping you to have enough anxiety to stay on track."

[The key is the attribution: missing the test is *your fault*, you're *responsible*, and while it's a terrible screw-up, it's just a dream and in real life there's something you can do about it.]

"Dreamed You Never Studied? Be Proud" by Samuel Freedman, *The New York Times*, September 8, 2004

e. Learning times tables in England – How children learn multiplication tables has been a subject of debate in England over the last 20 years. Rote memorization of tables went out of favor a while ago in favor of hands-on methods and *understanding* the concepts of multiplication. However, many U.K. teachers were unconvinced and continued to drill times tables behind closed classroom doors. A new study by Sylvia Steel of Royal Holloway University seems to confirm these teachers' instincts: it comes down on the side of auditory rote memorization of times tables. But the study also stresses the importance of students understanding how multiplication works.

Researchers found that counting, hands-on, and calculation methods of learning tables didn't give students the all-important ability to automatically and quickly retrieve number facts when solving problems. Students who used blocks or fingers to work out problems were slower and less accurate. "If I had my way," said Steel, "children would know their tables, but it is important children should understand what they are doing rather than just chanting."

"Call for More Times Tables Charts" on BBC News, U.K. Edition September 8, 2004

f. What does it take for a teacher to grow? – According to Carl Glickman in his book *Leadership for Learning* (ASCD 2002):

If, as a teacher:

- I present the same lessons in the same manner that I have used in the past;
- I seek no feedback from my students;
- I do not analyze and evaluate their work in a manner that changes my own emphasis, repertoire, and timing;
- I do not visit or observe other adults as they teach;
- I do not share the work of my students with colleagues for feedback, suggestions, and critiques;
- I do not visit other schools or attend particular workshops or seminars or read professional literature on aspects of my teaching;
- I do not welcome visitors with experience and expertise to observe and provide feedback to me on my classroom practice;
- I have no yearly individualized professional development plan focused on classroom changes to improve student learning;
- I have no systemic evaluation of my teaching tied to individual, grade/department, or schoolwide goals,

Then I have absolutely no way to become better as a teacher.

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 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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(those read this week are underlined)

American Education Research Journal
American Educator
American School Board Journal
ASCD SmartBrief
Atlantic Monthly
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CommonWealth Magazine
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