

Marshall Memo 8

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
October 13, 2003

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Quote of the Week

“The core theme of K-12 education in this century should be straightforward: high standards with an unwavering commitment to individuality.” Mel Levine (see #1)

1. Reaching Diverse Minds

A distraught mother recently sent this e-mail to pediatrician Mel Levine: “Every morning I send Michael off to school, I feel as if I’m sending him to jail. He can’t spell, he forgets his math facts even after we study them together, his handwriting is hard to decipher, and he is hopelessly absent-minded. The other kids see his papers and say that he “writes like a mental case.” All day, he faces nonstop criticism from his teacher. She scolds him in front of his classmates for not trying. And you know, the teacher’s right. He’s not trying – he’s scared to try. He’s decided that if you’re going to fail, it’s better to fail without trying.

He can fix absolutely anything that’s broken and he is brilliant when he plays with his Legos. I can’t believe that complicated things he makes. He is convinced that he is hopelessly dumb, and he worries about school all the time. A lot of nights, Michael cries himself to sleep. We are losing this darling boy and he is such a beautiful child, such a decent kid. Please help us.”

Levine (the author of best-selling *A Mind at a Time*), feels that for schools to reach students like Michael, there must be robust action on three fronts:

1. *Broaden student assessment* – School assessments usually focus on exposing and fixing deficits and often ignore talents (like Michael’s mechanical gifts and spatial creativity). Schools tend to apply vague labels to struggling students and “pessimistically imply a relatively permanent pathological condition” – a self-fulfilling prophecy. School assessments need to look for students’ strengths, give teachers pointers on how to support diverse students in their classrooms, and help those students develop specific strategies for the areas in which they are challenged. Schools need to use tests and quizzes that allow different kinds of minds to show what they know in different ways – avoiding the tendency to tap only rote memory, straight regurgitation of skills and knowledge, and a steady diet of multiple-choice questions. “Levine notes that students with dysfunctions in certain skill areas often have trouble with time-pressured multiple-choice tests. He recommends letting students use notes and limiting the length of answers rather than testing time, telling students, for example, “You can’t write more than two pages, but you can take as long as you want to do so.”
2. *Reexamine the curriculum* – Traditional classrooms have too often failed to provide opportunities for learners like Michael and do not prepare them for a successful life. Levine says that diverse learners need “diverging pathways that lead to their success. Such roads should maintain rigorous performance standards, while permitting innovation and creativity in curriculum choices and allowing early, highly specialized minds to envision and prepare for productive adulthood.”
3. *Improve professional development* – Most teacher training has not caught up with recent insights from brain research and most educators don’t understand how to support students like Michael. Levine says that if teachers are well-trained in recent knowledge in neuroscience, they “are in an excellent position to observe, interpret, and celebrate all kinds of minds on a daily basis... Classroom teachers enjoy exclusive screenings – if they pay attention and know what to look for.”

Summing up, Levine says “I am advocating neurodevelopmental pluralism in our schools – the celebration of all kinds of minds. Such an ethos will be the most effective and humane way of realizing our commitment to leave no child behind.”

“Celebrating Diverse Minds” by Mel Levine, *Educational Leadership*, Oct. 2003 (Vol. 61, #2, p. 12-18) You can’t get the full article from this link, but you can buy it: http://www.ascd.org/cms/objectlib/ascdframeset/index.cfm?publication=http://www.ascd.org/publications/ed_lead/index.html

2. Inclusion: A Matter of Social Justice

A true story: John, a 12-year-old with Down syndrome, goes through the cafeteria line in his middle school at noon. As he puts his tray down on a table, one of the boys sitting there says, “Go away.” John tries another table, but the students there say, “Get out of here.” John walks away and puts his tray on a third table, realizes he’s forgotten to get a straw, and goes back to the lunch line to get one. When he returns, his tray is gone.

John ended up being excluded from this school. The author of this powerful article concludes: “John’s story is a telling indication that inclusion is not about disability, nor is it only about school. Inclusion is about social justice. Inclusion demands that we ask, What kind of world do we want to create and how should we educate students for that world? What kinds of skills and commitments do people need to thrive in a diverse society? Removing John from his middle school will not teach his classmates understanding, generosity of spirit, or any of the skills that they will need to successfully work, play, and interact with the wide range of people they will encounter in their lives.”

The author lays out key steps on the road to inclusive schools:

- *Challenge exclusion* – The culture of exclusion supports the isolation of people who are different. “Exclusion is not about difference; it is about our responses to difference.” Teachers need to explicitly address students’ tendency to shy away from those who are not like them.
- *Deal with teasing and bullying* – Teachers need to respond to public insults or injuries with an explicitly educational and public response, for example, “What you said is harassment on the basis of race/sexual orientation/physical appearance, and here at Woodrow High School, we treat all students with respect.”
- *Try other perspectives* – Teachers need to push students to consider what it’s like to be in another person’s shoes. For example, in the book *Hey, Little Ant* (Hoose & Hoose, 1998) a boy who is about to squash an ant has the tables turned – he is tiny and an enormous ant towers over him.

- *Foster courage, challenge oppression* – Teachers need to seize teachable moments (off-color remarks by students, for example) to drive home messages about fairness and justice.

How will we know when we've arrived? When students ask, "What do we have to think about on this field trip to make sure that it's physically accessible for all the kids in our class?" or "How shall we plan for the class party so that everyone has something to eat, given allergies and religious dietary limitations?"

"Inclusion: A Matter of Social Justice" by Mara Sapon-Shevin, *Educational Leadership*, October 2003 (Vol. 65, #2, p. 25-28); see abstract, option to purchase http://www.ascd.org/cms/objectlib/ascdframeset/index.cfm?publication=http://www.ascd.org/publications/ed_lead/index.html

3. Are Standards a Principal's Best Friend?

Looking back on his 15 years as a Boston elementary principal, Kim Marshall describes his struggle to overcome ten notorious barriers to high student achievement (all of which tend to widen the achievement gap):

1. *Teacher isolation* – A lack of schoolwide purpose with teachers doing their own thing behind closed classroom doors;
2. *Lack of teamwork* – Difficulty getting grade-level teams to focus on data and student work to improve instruction;
3. *Curriculum anarchy* – Ragged skill and content "hand-offs" from grade to grade and great reticence about addressing philosophical differences;
4. *Weak alignment* – Classroom curriculum not aligning well with external tests, and nobody providing well-matched curriculum and assessments;
5. *Low expectations* – Staff had never seen a highly-successful urban school and were pessimistic about getting their students to high levels of achievement;
6. *Negativism* – Strong personalities were able to dominate the staff, silencing positive teachers and posing a difficult leadership challenge;
7. *HSPS (Hyperactive Superficial Principal Syndrome)* – The tug of a myriad daily events pulled the principal away from being an instructional leader;
8. *Not focusing on outcomes* – There was inadequate attention to what students actually learned (teach, test, and move on to the next unit);
9. *Mystery grading criteria* – What it took to get an A was often a secret locked up in the teacher's head;

10. *No schoolwide plan* – The staff could not agree on a single approach to school change, and the principal and staff floundered for years trying to grow their own.

While the school made significant gains in many areas, it did not begin to move toward high student achievement until the late 1990's, when Massachusetts introduced rigorous statewide curriculum expectations backed up by high-stakes testing. Marshall feels that the advent of strong external standards helped him to gain leadership traction in all ten areas. Rigorous state proficiency standards:

- helped foster a sense of schoolwide purpose and combat teacher isolation;
- gave teacher teams substantive data to sink their teeth into;
- greatly reduced curriculum anarchy and alignment problems;
- confronted low expectations and negativism (teachers saw state standards as challenging but reasonable and began to work for positive change);
- gave the principal a much clearer focus in dealing with the daily torrent of non-instructional events;
- put the focus squarely on student learning outcomes;
- helped clarify what proficiency looked like in terms that students and parents could understand;
- helped get consensus on a straightforward schoolwide plan.

Marshall contends that external standards are a principal's friend. If they are handled well, they can help galvanize major improvements in school climate and student achievement. But they must be accompanied by a skillfully-orchestrated in-school effort, especially the use of quarterly assessment data by teacher teams to fine-tune instruction and get help to struggling students.

"A Principal Looks Back: Standards Matter" by Kim Marshall, *Phi Delta Kappan*, October 2003 (Vol. 85, #2, p. 104-113)

4. It's Alignment, Silly!

The pattern is familiar: teachers work hard but student achievement levels off and some students continue to fail. Puzzled and frustrated, teachers blame factors outside their control: "You gave me the wrong class," or "I don't get enough support from my principal," or "My teaching partners aren't working together."

Andrew Porter of Vanderbilt University is leading a research effort to unravel this problem. His working hypothesis is that a lot of what's taught is not well aligned with state curriculum expectations and tests. "Regardless of what a state policy

requires or what a district curriculum spells out,” Porter says, “the classroom teacher ultimately decides how much time to allocate to particular school subjects, what topics to cover, when and in what order, to what standards of achievement, and to which students.”

The issue is whether students have equal access to learning opportunities. In a previous study in eleven states, Porter found that instruction is not adequately aligned with state assessments and standards. He believes that teachers who get the highest student achievement are those who have aligned their instruction to the standards. “What gets taught is the strongest single predictor of gains in student achievement,” says Porter. “We developed this model as a research tool, but now it can be used to improve practice.”

“Teachers Picking Up Tools to Map Instructional Practices” by Kathleen Kennedy Manzo, *Education Week*, Oct. 8, 2003 (Vol. XXIII, #6, p. 8)
<http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=06Curric.h23>

5. Learning to Read in Kindergarten

The prevailing assumption has been that a formal reading curriculum is inappropriate for kindergartners. But teachers and district staff in Northern Lights, Alberta taught virtually all their kindergarten students to read – and they conducted an action research project to document the key elements of their program.

The Canadian educators started with a strong value position: “Building greater literacy is a matter of considerable importance, and not damaging our students is of even greater importance.” They also believed that “Not to challenge students cognitively might be an even larger mistake than challenging them.” So they proceeded carefully, tracking children’s responses, and were prepared to back off or change their approach if a student appeared to be stressed.

Another driving belief was that “learning to read should be a delightful experience... If the work of childhood is play, we imagined the students playfully working their way into literacy.” So there were no workbooks, alphabet flash cards, and letter-by-letter phonics drills. Instead, students read words, sentences, and longer texts that they had created, examined simple books in a relaxed atmosphere, and began to write with scribbling and simple illustrations; students were read to regularly, and comprehension strategies were modeled for them through the reading and study of charming fiction and nonfiction books.

Gleaned from extensive research, these were the foundations of the Northern Lights program:

- The development of sight vocabulary from the students' listening/speaking vocabulary and the study of words encountered through reading;
- Wide reading at the developed level;
- The regular study of word patterns, including spelling;
- Regular (several times daily) writing and the study of writing;
- The study of comprehension strategies;
- The study, by both teacher and students, of weekly and monthly progress, including the levels of books the students could read, sight words learned, phonetic and structural analysis skills, information learned, and fluency in writing.

Students progressed well through the program, moving from recognition of letters of the alphabet to acquisition of sight vocabulary to retention of words to classification of words to reading books of increasing levels of complexity. Students and parents were surveyed in May on how things were going, and virtually all felt good about the process (although a few parents wondered if a more phonics-based approach might have worked even better). By the end of the year, virtually all the students knew how to read, and a follow-up study a year later found that the student average reading level was 5.0 (typical exit level for fourth graders), with only 10% of students scoring below the average for exiting second graders.

"Learning to Read in Kindergarten: Has Curriculum Development Bypassed the controversies?" by Bruce Joyce, Marilyn Hrycauk, and Emily Calhoun, with the Northern Lights Kindergarten Teachers, *Phi Delta Kappan*, October 2003 (Vol. 85, #2, p. 126-132).

6. Quick Items

• *Watch what you say!* – Here are some leadership pointers from the business world that apply equally to the world of school administrators:

- *There's no such thing as a private conversation* – Assume that everything you say will circulate to the people who are most affected by it.
- *There's no such thing as a casual conversation* – Your colleagues will read deep meaning into what you think are innocuous comments and movements.
- *People sometimes hear what they most fear* – Some people will immediately jump to the most paranoid, negative interpretation of what you say and do.

- *Trauma has a long half-life* – You may have to apologize for misdeeds you didn't commit and events that happened before you arrived.
- *No good deed goes unpunished* – Even if your intentions are pure and your implementation is skillful, someone will object.
- *Newton's third law doesn't always apply* – You may take a small, seemingly harmless step that has a huge, negative impact. Or you may make what you consider a dramatic, deeply meaningful change, only to hear people say, "Okay, good. Now, what's for lunch?"

"The Enemies of Trust" by Robert Galford and Anne Seibold Drapeau, *Harvard Business Review*, February 2003 (p. 89-95)

- ***Bully Box*** – Franklin Middle School near Buffalo, New York has set up a locked mailbox into which students can drop reports of bullying – from dirty looks to physical abuse. The box is part of a broader effort to deal with a growing bullying problem. Assistant principal Richard Jetter, who introduced the idea, said that 38 complaints had been dropped in the box by September 30th, and most were dealt with the same day: an administrator talked with the student who submitted the complaint, the alleged bully, and the victims.

"Saying No to Bullying" by Darcia Harris Bowman, *Education Week*, Oct. 8, 2003 (Vol. XXIII, #6, p.3) <http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=06Take.h23>

- ***Asking the right questions*** – A teacher who had been working in a program for gifted students decided to try a regular fifth-grade classroom. She wanted to see if she could apply the same strategies and curriculum to a much more diverse group of learners. She made a number of adaptations and worked much harder with individual students, but the basic core of her program remained the same. An observer noted the way she framed questions:

- She did not ask, What labels do my students have? Rather she asked, What are their particular interests and needs?
- She did not ask, What are my students' deficits? Instead, she asked, What are their strengths?
- She did not ask, How do I remediate students? Instead she asked, What can I do to ensure that each student works at the highest level of thought and production possible?
- She did not ask, How can I motivate these students? Instead she wondered, What releases the motivation born in all humans?

- She did not ask, What do I do if a student cannot accomplish my agenda?
Instead she asked, How might I adapt the agenda to work for the student?

“Deciding to Teach Them All” by Carol Ann Tomlinson, *Educational Leadership*, October 2003 (Vol. 61, #2, p. 6-11)

http://www.ascd.org/cms/objectlib/ascdframeset/index.cfm?publication=http://www.ascd.org/publications/ed_lead/index.html

- **Cambridge school testing changes** – The newly-appointed superintendent of schools in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Thomas Fowler-Finn, has made three important moves in his opening weeks on the job. First, he dropped the Stanford 9 (a norm-referenced test). Second, he began quarterly student assessments. Third, he used the \$45,000 saved from the Stanford for staff development.

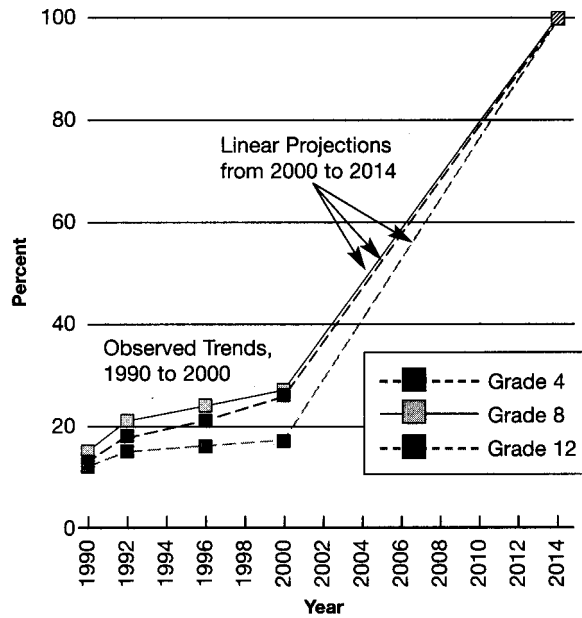
“New Schools Chief Emphasizes Accountability” by Mary Hurley, *Boston Sunday Globe*, October 12, 2003 (City Weekly section, p. 13)

- **Funding Equity in Cincinnati** – A blow-by-blow account tells how reformers changed Cincinnati’s school funding system, which had been driven by “mathematical formulas, political influence, history, or the special interest of a district administrator or school board member.” The key decision was to “fund children rather than staff members, and children with greater needs would be funded at a higher level.” For example, the cost of educating an orthopedically handicapped student is 236% more than the cost of educating the typical student, so the weight for such a student was $1.0 + 2.36 = 3.36$. This money follows the student to any district school he or she attends. It took three years (1998-2001) to phase in this system, but it is apparently up and running now.

“Leveling the Playing Field: Creating Funding Equity Through Student-Based Budgeting” by Karen Hawley Miles, Kathleen Ware, and Marguerite Roza, *Phi Delta Kappan*, October 2003 (Vol. 85, #2, p. 114-119).

- **Trend line** – In his annual report on the conditions of public education, Gerald Bracey casts a skeptical eye on the trend in NAEP scores that will be necessary to meet the No Child Left Behind target by the year 2014. This is what the projections look like for mathematics:

FIGURE 1.
NAEP Mathematics Trends with
Projections to 2014
 (Percentage Proficient or Above)



“The 13th Bracey Report on The Condition of Public Education” by Gerald W. Bracey, *Phi Delta Kappan*, October 2003, (Vol. 85, #2, p. 148-164)

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Do you have feedback? Is anything missing?

If you have comments or suggestions, or if you saw an article or web item in the last week that you think should be covered, please e-mail: kim.marshall8@verizon.net

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo aims to keep busy principals and other educators very well-informed on important research, ideas, and developments in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, a former Boston teacher and administrator, is the “designated reader”, searching through a wide range of publications as soon as they come out, zeroing in on the articles that are most relevant and useful to improving teaching and learning, and summarizing them in a brief e-mail. Target topics include the following:

- *School leadership* – Building a professional learning community; effective teamwork; effective schools practices; time management.
- *Effective teaching* – Key variables associated with high student achievement; supervision and evaluation of teachers; professional development of teachers; teacher leadership and career ladders; multiple intelligences and brain research.
- *Curriculum* – Alignment and planning with the end in sight; teaching for understanding; new ideas for teaching reading, writing, and math; parent involvement.
- *Assessment* – Aligned formative and summative assessments; using data and student work for continuous improvement; graphic display of student achievement data; standardized testing and the debate on standards.
- *Closing the gap* – Effective strategies to close the racial/economic achievement gap; the innate-ability/intelligence/effective effort debate; safety-net programs.
- *Positive school culture* – Student discipline; social-emotional learning; moral development.
- *And...* – New areas of research; upcoming television and radio programs on education.

Publications covered:

(those read this week are underlined)

American Education Research Journal
American Educator
Atlantic Monthly
Bay State Banner
Boston Globe
Commonwealth Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Update (ASCD)
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Elementary School Journal
Harpers
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Education Review
Harvard School of Education Ed. Magazine
New York Times
New Yorker
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal Magazine
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Review of Educational Research
Rethinking Schools
Teacher Magazine
and occasional books, lectures, and websites.

If one of the summaries is of particular interest, subscribers are encouraged to read the full article. E-links will be provided whenever possible. If you would like to suggest additional publications, please be in touch.

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The Marshall Memo is published weekly (with occasional breaks), usually on Monday. Major support from Research for Better Teaching and New Leaders for New Schools makes it possible to offer individual subscriptions at \$50 a year. To subscribe, please contact Kim Marshall at kim.marshall8@verizon.net or at 222 Clark Road, Brookline, MA 02445 (617-566-4353).