

Marshall Memo 32

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
April 5, 2004

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Quotes of the Week

"We wish our leaders to be some mythical combination of folk heroes, in which they have the insight of Lao-tzu, the courage of a New York firefighter, and the work ethic of Paul Bunyan."

Douglas Reeves, *Educational Leadership* (see item #1)

"Walk into any principal's office in virtually any school as the day ends, and you may well catch the principal scratching his or her head, exclaiming, 'Where did the day go?'"

Bradley Portin, *Educational Leadership* (see item #4)

"Understanding and delivering what the school needs is the principal's core job."

Bradley Portin (*ibid.*)

"[I]t's a terrible thing to work under a leader who's wishy-washy. People are just hungry for strong leadership... the clock is ticking on our children's lives."

Lorraine Monroe, *Educational Leadership*, April 2004 (p. 72)

"Nice people. Can't cope."

A veteran teacher on a new principal and assistant principal (see item # 5)

"I do think teachers need some level of protection, but what they have now is just insane."

A superintendent on union protections against unjust firing (see item #8a)

"Retention and social promotion are the educational equivalent of Dr. Doolittle's two-headed llama, "Pushmi-pullyu," going nowhere and wasting a lot of energy in the process. Neither one works, both do more harm than good (particularly to very young children), and yet school districts can't seem to resist either."

John Merrow, *Education Week* (see item 6)

1. A New Rubric for Evaluating School Leaders

Doug Reeves, a Massachusetts-based writer and consultant, believes that the evaluation of principals and other school leaders is a mess. Drawing on a recent study, he says that most instruments are poorly-constructed, ambiguous, demoralizing, and destructive and give principals little or no help in improving their performance. Most evaluation systems, according to Reeves, “tolerate mediocrity, fail to recognize excellence, turn a blind eye to abuses, accept incompetence, and systematically demoralize courageous and committed leaders.” Reeves is particularly critical of rating scales (“outstanding”, “meets standards”, “superior”, “average”, “exceeds expectations”, etc.). “Without specification,” he says, “the leader’s rating on these performance levels depends on the idiosyncratic judgment of the evaluator. However wise and insightful an individual evaluator may be, these judgments are doomed to be inconsistent and practically useless for coaching.”

But Reeves has an answer: the Multidimensional Leadership Assessment – a rubric with specific descriptions of four levels of performance (Exemplary, Proficient, Progressing, Not Meeting Standards) for scoring principals on each subcategory of ten dimensions of leadership (a sample rubric for three categories is reprinted in the article):

- *Resilience* – Constructive reaction to disappointment and failure, willingness to admit error and learn from it; constructive management of disagreement and dissent...
- *Personal behavior* – Integrity, emotional self-control, legal compliance, tolerance of different viewpoints within the boundaries of the values and mission or the organization, organization;
- *Student achievement* – Actual student results, reporting them to parents and others, understanding and using formative and summative results...
- *Decision making* – Factual basis for decisions, clarity on the type of decision-making process being used, links to vision, mission, and strategic plan...
- *Communication* – Two-way communication with students, staff, parents, and community;
- *Faculty development* – Understanding faculty proficiencies and areas that need development; links to vision, mission, and strategic plan; recognition and rewards; involvement of staff in planning; feedback to colleagues;
- *Leadership development* – Distributing leadership, developing future leaders;

- *Time/task/project management* – Maintaining a daily prioritized task list; doing first things first; clear objectives and coherent plans for complex projects...
- *Technology* – Using technology to improve teaching and learning; personal proficiency with electronic communication; managing technology resources;
- *Learning* – understanding research trends, personal growth and learning.

Reeves believes that the rubric should be used on a regular basis to give principals detailed feedback and multiple opportunities for continuous improvement.

“Evaluating Administrators” by Douglas Reeves, *Educational Leadership*, April 2004 (Vol. 61, #7, p. 52-58), no e-link available.

2. Succeeding With Adaptive (vs. Technical) Leadership Challenges

The kinds of changes that need to be made in schools these days are tough. Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky, two Harvard leadership consultants, make a distinction between *technical* challenges (those that can be solved by expert knowledge, like setting a broken arm) and *adaptive* challenges (those where the solutions lie not in technical answers but in people’s beliefs and practices – like persuading your son not to rollerblade without elbow pads). Heifetz and Linsky believe that the challenges in our schools are mostly adaptive. “Policymakers are demanding performance accountability measures for students and educators that bring into question deeply held notions of good teaching, good learning, and success in the classroom; these accountability measure also force us to face our long-standing acceptance of the wide gaps in achievement between rich and poor students and white and minority students.” They offer the following advice for survival and success in the world of schools, where adaptive challenges abound and basic “political” skills are essential:

- *Find partners; don’t do it alone.* There are lots of reasons to be a loner in schools. Working with others involves risks, takes time, and might dilute your visibility. But teamwork strengthens you and your agenda, and your ideas get stronger when you test them out with others. It’s a mistake to go it alone.

- *Keep the opposition close.* “To exercise leadership, you must work as closely with your opponents as you do with your supporters.” This helps you diagnose the situation, both substantively and politically.

- *Acknowledge their loss.* “Remember that when you ask people to participate in adaptive change, you are asking a lot... To tell a teacher that she has to be measuring her success by how well she raises student test scores or teaches the ‘unteachable’ student may challenge a great deal of what she was taught about her

job... People need to know that you realize that the change you are asking them to make is difficult and that what you are asking them to give up has real value to them..."

- *Accept casualties.* Meaningful change in a school is going to hurt some people who were committed to the status quo. "If you signal your unwillingness to sustain casualties, you invite people to ignore your goals... Your ability to accept the harsh reality of losses sends a clear message about your courage and commitment to seeing through the adaptive challenge."

- *Accept responsibility for your piece of the mess.* "If you have been in a senior role for a while, you almost certainly had some part in creating any existing problem and in failing to address that problem in the past. Even if you are new, or outside the organization, you need to identify the behaviors you practice or values you embody that could stifle the very change you want to advance. You need to identify and accept responsibility for your contributions to the current situation even as you try to move others to a different, better place."

"When Leadership Spells Danger" by Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Educational Leadership*, April 2004 (Vol. 61, #7, p. 33-37), no e-link available.

3. How a Principal Can Get Traction in a School

In this summary of a forthcoming Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) study of instructional leadership, three researchers affirm that school leadership has a major impact on student achievement and that the most effective leadership practices can be empirically defined. From a host of studies, they zeroed in on 21 areas of responsibility for school leaders, all of them correlated with higher levels of student achievement:

- *Culture* – Fosters shared beliefs and a sense of community and cooperation;
- *Order* – Establishes a set of standard operating procedures and routines;
- *Discipline* – Protects teachers from issues and influences that would detract from their teaching time or focus;
- *Resources* – Provides teachers with the materials and professional development necessary for the successful execution of their jobs;
- *Curriculum, instruction, and assessment* – Is directly involved in the design and implementation of practices in all three areas;
- *Knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment* – Is knowledgeable about current practices;

- *Focus* – Establishes clear goals and keeps these goals at the forefront of the school’s attention;
- *Visibility* – Has high-quality contact and interactions with teachers and students;
- *Contingent rewards* – Recognizes and rewards individual accomplishments;
- *Communication* – Establishes strong lines of communication with teachers and students;
- *Outreach* – Is an advocate and spokesperson for the school to all stakeholders;
- *Input* – Involves teachers in the design and implementation of important decisions and policies;
- *Affirmation* – Recognizes and celebrates school accomplishments and acknowledges failures;
- *Relationship* – Demonstrates empathy with teachers and staff on a personal level;
- *Change agent role* – Is willing and prepared to actively challenge the status quo;
- *Optimizer role* – Inspires and leads new and challenging innovations;
- *Ideals and beliefs* – Communicates and operates from strong ideals and beliefs about schooling;
- *Monitoring and evaluation* – Monitors the effectiveness of school practices and their impact on school learning;
- *Flexibility* – Adapts his or her leadership behavior to the needs of the current situation and is comfortable with dissent;
- *Situational awareness* – Is aware of the details and undercurrents in the running of the school and uses this information to address current and potential problems;
- *Intellectual stimulation* – Ensures that faculty and staff are aware of the most current theories and practices in education and makes the discussion of these practices integral to the school’s culture.

Having compiled this list of the correlates of school leadership, Waters, Marzano, and McNulty found that there were two additional variables that determined how much *traction* a principal got in terms of student achievement. The first was the *focus of change*: principals had to know the right thing to do based on a correct diagnosis of the school’s needs. “Leaders can act like effective leaders,” the researchers say, “but if they fail to guide their schools toward making the correct changes, these changes are

likely to have a diminished or negative impact on student achievement.” Previous studies have found that these “right things to do” are:

- a guaranteed and viable schoolwide curriculum;
- challenging student achievement goals and effective feedback on them;
- parent and community involvement;
- a safe and orderly environment;
- collegiality and professionalism;
- effective teacher instructional strategies;
- classroom management;
- classroom curriculum design;
- positive home environment for students;
- learned intelligence and background knowledge;
- student motivation.

The second enabling, traction-producing variable is understanding the *order or change* being attempted. Not all changes are of the same order of magnitude. First-order changes (similar to Heifetz’s *technical* challenges) tinker at the edges and don’t seek to change the core values, beliefs, or structures of a school. Second-order changes (Heifetz’s *adaptive* challenges) dramatically break with the past and challenge existing models, norms, and values. For example, a school being asked to implement a high-stakes testing program that requires disaggregating student achievement data by race and economic status might pose a serious challenge to teachers and parents who are used to a sink-or-swim philosophy and see the purpose of education as sorting and selecting students according to innate ability. These folks may have serious questions about devoting resources to helping struggling students improve their achievement – and may question whether doing so will make any difference.

A principal who misjudges the order of change (and fails to lead the staff through the necessary process of soul-searching and change) could work very hard and do a lot of the right things on the 21 items listed above and get no student achievement gains.

“Leadership That Sparks Learning” by Timothy Waters, Robert Marzano, and Brian McNulty , *Educational Leadership*, April 2004 (Vol. 61, #7, p. 48-51), no e-link available.

4. The Seven Roles of Effective Principals

Being an effective school leader is all-consuming. What are the component parts of the job? A study by researchers from the University of Washington attempted

to catalogue seven common leadership functions. All were important in all types of schools; no principal could afford to neglect any of them. Most administrative training programs do a terrible job preparing principals to play these roles; most are learned on the job.

These are the seven leadership roles:

- *Instructional leadership* – Ensuring quality on instruction, modeling teaching practices, supervising curriculum, and ensuring quality of teaching resources.
- *Cultural leadership* – Tending to the symbolic resources of the school: traditions, climate, and history;
- *Managerial leadership* – Overseeing the operations of the school: budget, schedule, facilities, safety and security, and transportation;
- *Human resources leadership* – Recruiting, hiring, firing, inducting, and mentoring teachers and administrators; developing leadership capacity and professional development opportunities;
- *Strategic leadership* – Promoting vision, mission, and goals – and developing a means to reach them.
- *External development leadership* – Representing the school in the community, developing capital, tending to public relations, recruiting students, buffering and mediating external interests, and advocating for the school's interests.
- *Micropolitical leadership* – Buffering and mediating internal interests while maximizing resource (financial and human).

The study highlighted one overarching skill: being a master diagnostician. The skill of “reading” a school – scoping out strengths, weaknesses, needs, resources, and possible solutions – is absolutely essential to being an effective leader. Diagnostic skill includes “the ability to use and understand multiple forms of data and the ability to see the connection between multilayered challenges.”

The study found that principals in different types of schools had varying success in playing all seven roles successfully. Large bureaucratic school districts made it difficult for principals to distribute leadership, both by under-budgeting support staff and inundating them with e-mail and other demands from “downtown.” Regular public school principals struggled to play all seven roles by themselves – and were beleaguered as a result. Leaders in other types of schools were more successful in distributing leadership, acting more like the leader of a jazz combo: “the leader lays down the basic melody line and encourages individual ‘band members’ to improvise around the theme.” The key was delegating without abdicating responsibility –

distributing leadership while still keeping a finger on the pulse of each of the seven core leadership functions. Even if the principal was not the main instructional leader, he or she “nevertheless articulated a set of criteria defining effective instruction.”

“The Roles That Principals Play” by Bradley Portin, *Educational Leadership*, April 2004 (Vol. 61, #7, p. 14-18), no e-link available. More information on this study is available at <http://www.crpe.org>

5. Leadership That Will Last After a Principal’s Departure

There are plenty of stories of charismatic principals “turning around” troubled schools, only to have things fall apart soon after they move on. What can school leaders do to increase the chances that their work will survive them? In this lead article in the current *Educational Leadership*, two researchers propose seven principles:

- *Focus on deep change, not quick fixes* – “Sustainable leadership goes beyond temporary gains in achievement scores to create lasting, meaningful improvements in learning,” the authors write. They tell the story of two schools: one concentrated on boosting the test scores of students who looked like they would fall just below the passing grade; the other worked on improving literacy for all students by looking at data, training teachers, and involving parents and the community. The first school’s scores went up more the first year, but from then on, the second school had far more impressive results.

- *Prepare for succession* – A leader who wants lasting results should begin grooming teachers and other administrators from Day One. Districts should also leave successful leaders in place for a period of years, lest teachers cynically decide to “wait out” short-serving innovators.

- *Distribute leadership* – Principals should delegate and spread key leadership functions widely through the school so others can carry the torch when they leave. Staff should come to believe that “we are all administrators.”

- *Be a good neighbor* – Resist the temptation to strip nearby schools of talented staff and avoid stirring up envy and resentment among regional colleagues.

- *Build a nurturing community* – Principals should organize intrinsic and extrinsic rewards that attract and retain talented staff. This includes time to network, learn from and support one another, and coach and support successors. “Sustainable leadership is thrifty without being cheap. It carefully husbands its resources in developing the talents of all its educators rather than lavishing rewards on a few proven stars. Sustainable leadership systems take care of their leaders and encourage

leaders to take care of themselves.” Smart principals also avoid burning out key staff members with too many bureaucratic demands.

- *Don't over-standardize* – Maintain diverse ways of teaching, even under the pressure of high-stakes testing and mandated curriculums.
- *Assert your values* – The authors urge principals to be activists for their school mission. Schools need to keep what is unique in their character and not become homogenized by outside pressures.

“The Seven Principles of Sustainable Leadership” by Andy Hargreaves and Dean Fink, *Educational Leadership*, April 2004 (Vol. 61, #7, p. 8-13)
http://ascd.org/cms/objectlib/ascdframeset/index.cfm?publication=http://www.ascd.org/publications/ed_lead/index.html

6. Is there a Middle Ground Between Social Promotion and Retention?

In this trenchant commentary piece on the back of the current *Education Week*, John Merrow asserts that “[s]ocial promotion and retention are failed policies that should be abandoned. They’re the equivalent of a coin flip in which both sides are losers.” He traces the pendulum swings from social promotion to gung-ho retention and back again, roughly every 7-8 years. New York City’s recently-introduced get-tough policy on Grade 3 retention is a reprise of a previous effort in the 1980’s, when Big Apple schools embraced retention and poured extra resources into summer school and smaller classes. The policy had little affect on student achievement, was expensive, and was abandoned within a few years.

The research evidence against retention is solid: keeping students back seems to result in lower attendance, increasing discipline problems, sinking self-esteem (“It’s idiotic to stigmatize 5-year-olds as failures!” writes Merrow), no improvement in academic achievement, and a 20-30 percent increase in the likelihood of dropping out. But Merrow says that social promotion doesn’t work either; by passing students along without the requisite skills and knowledge, we guarantee that many will drop out of high school or graduate unable to hold a decent job.

Merrow’s notes that savvy educators have tried in-between solutions: tutoring, smaller classes for struggling students, longer class periods, caring relationships, “looping” (the same teacher keeping students for two or more years), and grouping children of different ages in a single classroom. Merrow likes this last solution the best: he makes the case for finessing retention by having students move through a series of multi-age groupings and “graduating” from each one when they attain the agreed-upon exit standards:

- Pre-kindergarten, Kindergarten, Grade 1, and Grade 2
- Grade 3, 4, and 5
- Grade 6 and 7
- Single grades after that

Merrow believes that by avoiding “age segregation” through middle school and challenging students within each cluster to strive for the exit standard of proficiency (reading at second grade level by the end of the primary cluster, for example), students would be inspired to work hard, could be grouped within the classroom by achievement, not age, would not worry about who was in which reading or math group, and would not experience the failure of being kept back. From eighth grade on, Merrow thinks that retention should be an option because by then, most students would have learned what they needed to be successful.

“Get Rid of Retention *And* Social Promotion” by John Merrow in *Education Week*, March 31, 2004 (Vol. XXIII, #29, p. 48, 38)

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=29merrow.h23>

7. Do Women Lack Ambition?

This hard-hitting *Harvard Business Review* article traces the way in which girls’ ambitions and dreams (just as grand and unapologetic as boys’ at the beginning of their lives) become muted or abandoned in the face of subtle but intense socialization in preschool, grammar school, college, graduate school, first jobs, and careers. “For boys and men, ambition is considered a necessary and desirable part of life. Most girls and women, however, associate ambition with egotism, self-aggrandizement, or manipulation.”

Fear of being branded in this way leads girls and women to act demure when they are praised for accomplishments. Women are more open in seeking and competing for affirmation when they are with other women, but they behave differently when competing with men. “The underlying problem has to do with cultural ideals of femininity. Women face the reality that to appear feminine, they must provide or relinquish scarce resources to others – and recognition is indeed a scarce resource.” Things get especially difficult when it comes to starting a family.

The author has five pieces of advice to girls and women as they navigate these difficult waters:

- *Organize* – “Women will be able to fully share in the satisfaction that ambitions can provide only when they are confident that their children are well cared

for.” This means forming a political constituency and advocating for supports for mothers in the workforce and mothers who choose to stay at home with their children.

- *Don't expect things to fall into place* – Today's young women have multiple expectations thrust on them: to be an “innovative professional, devoted mother, competent employee, sexually attractive babe, supportive wife, talented homemaker, and independent wage earner.” And yet nothing is mapped out; there are no roles unquestioningly accepted for women in our society. “It falls nearly entirely on the individual woman to carve out a life for herself with adequate meaning and satisfaction – not an easy task for anyone, let alone an impressionable young person. For each woman, life must be a creation of sorts and also an assertion of values, priorities, and identity...”

- *Provide for structures of recognition* – “To sustain their ambitions, women must formulate life plans that include potential for receiving earned recognition – and that recognition must primarily be based on talent, skill, or work, rather than on appearance, sexual availability, or subservience.” If conventional work settings are not providing enough recognition, women need to seek out other venues when they can get it. “Otherwise, the situation is not only a dead end but one that will engender painful and unnecessary self-doubt.”

- *Blow your own horn* – Unfortunately, high-caliber work by itself will not produce the proper recognition for many women. Women need to get past the fear of seeming “pushy” and develop relationships with people who can advance their careers.

- *Realize it's never too late* – Is there a point when we no longer need affirmation and recognition? No. “To an astonishing extent, opportunity for mastery and recognition continually reshapes our ambitions and modulates the effort we expend on them. Powerful mentors, opportunities for learning new skills, promotions, admiring peers who provide collegial support, institutional recognition, and broad cultural trends all continuously mold ambitions.”

“Do Women Lack Ambition?” by Anna Fels, *Harvard Business Review*, April 2004 (Vol. 82, #4, p. 50-60).

8. Short Items:

- *A school leader's wish list* – A 2003 survey by Public Agenda found principals and superintendents surprisingly optimistic (most think a troubled school

can be turned around by a single individual). But those surveyed felt strongly on a number of specific changes are needed for their jobs to become more manageable:

- *Not enough money* – Budget shortfalls have gotten worse in recent years.
- *Fewer mandates, less red tape* – There has been an enormous increase in responsibilities and mandates without the resources to cope with them.
- *Relief on special education* – While supporting the intent of special education mandates, leaders felt they were spending a disproportionate amount of money and other resources on this part of their schools and the volume and complexity of regulations – and the fear of getting sued – are getting out of control.
- *Midcourse corrections in No Child Left Behind* – While accepting the need for standards, testing, and accountability, school leaders felt strongly that there are not enough resources behind the legislation and it needs fine-tuning to be effective.
- *Better ways to remove failing teachers* – There was strong sentiment that streamlining the process for firing ineffective teachers would be a major boon to school leadership (see quote above).
- *More good teachers* – A major concern is that new teachers who are not well trained in classroom management. Since this requires on-the-job internship training, it will not be solved by the No Child Left Behind mandates on “highly qualified teachers.”

“What School Leaders Want” by Jean Johnson, *Educational Leadership*, April 2004 (Vol. 61, #7, p. 24-27), no e-link available.

- *Middle school essay contest on great teachers* – The second annual “My Teacher is the Best” essay contest is off and running. Public school students in Grades 6-8 can submit a short essay about their favorite middle-school teacher and win two laptop computers – one for the teacher they write about and one for themselves. Essays should be no longer than 250 words and the deadline is May 31st. For more details, go to <http://www.givekidsgoodschools.com/goodteachers/essay.html>.

Spotted in *PEN Weekly NewsBlast*, April 1, 2004

- *Just give me that real-time information* – Ken McGee, a Connecticut business consultant, has asked dozens of corporate executives the following question: “Is there information that would help you run your company far better if you had it in real time, and, if so, what is it?” Without exception, business leaders said they wanted more real-time information and were able to rattle off a wish-list of the data they

wanted. A similar question could be asked of school leaders. What would be on your real-time data wish-list? Wouldn't it be amazing to have prompt student achievement data on quarterly assessments? Data on current student reading proficiency levels on an A-Z Fountas-Pinnell scale? The percent of students proficient and above on regular writing assessments? Data on the two or three math skills currently giving students the most trouble? The names of all students with worrisome attendance rates? If you have other ideas, send me an e-mail and I'll print them in the next Marshall Memo.

"Give Me That Real-Time Information" by Ken McGee, *Harvard Business Review*, April 2004 (Vol. 82, #4, p. 26)

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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, teachers, 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 your “designated reader,” searching through a wide range of publications the week they come out, zeroing in on the articles that are most relevant and useful to improving teaching and learning at the school level, 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; supervision and evaluation of teachers; time management.
- *Effective teaching* – Key variables associated with high student achievement; 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 in reading, writing, and math.
- *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; parent involvement; and community partnerships.
- *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
American School Board Journal
ASCD SmartBrief
Atlantic Monthly
Bay State Banner
Boston Globe
Commonwealth Magazine
Curriculum/ Education Update (ASCD)
Ed. Magazine (Harvard School of Education)
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Elementary School Journal
Harpers
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Education Review
Middle School Journal
New York Times
New Yorker
Newsweek
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal Magazine
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Review of Educational Research
Teachers College Record
Teacher Magazine

E-links will be provided whenever possible to give access to the full article. If you would like to suggest additional publications, please be in touch.

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