

Marshall Memo 142

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education

June 26, 2006

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1. Six conditions that foster organizational learning in schools
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Quotes of the Week

“All adolescents, especially young men, are much more likely to become readers if they are given choices.”

Mark Federman (see item #4)

“In many schools, teachers' innovations and insights travel no further than their own classrooms.”

Vivienne Collinson, Tanya Fedoruk Cook, and Sharon Conley (see item #1)

“If you're not in change mode, you're not serving kids.”

A principal in a research study (see item #2)

“Best results occur in schools where principals are strong leaders who also facilitate leadership by teachers; that is, principals are active in instructional matters in concert with teachers whom they regard as professionals and full partners.”

Susan Printy and Helen Marks (see item #2)

“It's changed my life.”

Masaki Chiba, a Japanese high-school student, on the after-lunch nap program his school has begun (see item #7)

1. Six Conditions That Foster Organizational Learning in Schools

In this thoughtful article in *Theory Into Practice*, researchers Vivienne Collinson, Tanya Fedoruk Cook, and Sharon Conley decry the ineffectiveness of various “silver bullets” for raising student achievement. “One of the worst legacies of silver bullet thinking,” they write, “is that anything can be fixed once and for all.” Quite the contrary, they argue, improvement is a long, slow process and schools have to renew themselves *from the inside out*, paying attention to six interrelated conditions that boost “organizational learning”:

- *Fostering adult learning* – “Research indicates that the greater teachers’ opportunities for learning, the more their students tend to learn,” say the authors (quoting Rosenholtz). Collective learning by all personnel (not just teachers) is fostered whenever adults have a chance to examine their assumptions, mistakes, and practices and come up with ways to improve. Principals can promote adult learning by creating opportunities for professional dialogue, working in teams, analysis of and feedback on performance, and external feedback from surveys and consultants.

- *Disseminating ideas* – “In many schools, teachers’ innovations and insights travel no further than their own classrooms,” say the authors (citing Judith Warren Little). Few schools, they say, have “strong mechanisms for disseminating individuals’ learning to other levels or for new members or generations to rethink and reevaluate assumptions and routines.” For a school to reach its full potential, it’s essential that ideas percolate throughout the building. Principals can make this happen by scheduling common planning time; promoting regular dialogue on instruction and school goals; encouraging teachers to share their ideas in workshops, staff meetings, and conferences; orchestrating collaborative work through team teaching; and creating an ethos of continuous improvement – versus blaming external factors (parents or society) for lack of student learning.

- *Attending to relationships* – Open communication and sharing won’t happen unless the relationships among staff members are positive and supportive. This depends “more on nonverbal and interpersonal skills than on verbal, intellectual ability,” say Collinson, Cook, and Conley. Principals need to help staff members develop their skills in communication, conflict resolution, consultation, and group process. Schools with positive staff relationships reap four benefits:

- Teachers become more confident about their knowledge, which makes them more likely to support colleagues’ strengths and accommodate and help improve their weaknesses.

- Innovations can happen that would be impossible in a school in which teachers are working in isolation.
- Teacher turnover is reduced because newcomers are socialized and get help.
- New teachers' knowledge, enthusiasm, and ideas are more readily incorporated.

• *Fostering a cycle of inquiry* – Research shows the value of teachers engaging in action research – systematic, intentional, and self-critical study of their work with students. The usual cycle includes identifying a problem, collecting data, analyzing and interpreting it, taking action, and evaluating the results. This kind of work is sparked by – and encourages – the following qualities: curiosity, open-mindedness, respect for evidence, critical thinking, a willingness to suspend judgment, thoroughness, and consideration for the consequences of an innovation. In schools where action research occurs, teachers gain self-confidence and are more likely to continue innovating in ways that are helpful to their students.

• *Using democratic governance* – Innovation and school improvement, argue Collinson, Cook, and Conley, are less likely to happen under authoritarian leadership. “Effective leadership in a democratic model,” they write, “serves others, is ethical, is educative, values humans’ well being, and helps others envision possibilities.” Democratic principals share decision-making, disperse power, are open to criticism and questioning, tolerate diverse views, empower their staffs, and learn to lead from different strengths and in different ways.

• *Providing for staff members’ self-fulfillment* – A school will continue to grow as an organization and improve student achievement, say the authors, if teachers and administrators are personally fulfilled. They cite research on several ways that a principal can foster this kind of development:

- Communicate meaningful values and goals to all staff.
- Nurture staff members’ personal aspirations for growth by providing professional learning opportunities and challenges, including opportunities to develop special abilities, assume various roles, work together, and share decisions.
- Pay careful attention to recruitment criteria and hiring practices.
- Nurture and move staff members to positions where they can do their best.
- Share colleagues’ beliefs and insights with others.

It takes time to develop these six areas, conclude the authors, and the path to improvement is different in every school. A good first step is to assess where one’s school stands with respect to each area and focus on one area that needs improvement and would be likely to yield a “quick win.” This creates momentum to move on to other areas for improvement. The good news is that the six conditions are interrelated and one change quickly leads to others.

“Organizational Learning in Schools and School Systems: Improving Learning, Teaching, and Leading” by Vivienne Collinson, Tanya Fedoruk Cook, and Sharon Conley in *Theory Into Practice*, Spring 2006 (Vol. 45, #2, p. 107-116), no e-link available

2. The Yin and Yang of Shared Instructional Leadership

In this article in *Theory Into Practice*, education professors Susan Printy and Helen Marks summarize insights from high-achieving schools. Their research leads them to conclude that “principals alone cannot provide sufficient leadership influence to systematically improve the quality of instruction or the level of student achievement. Nor can teachers, even collectively, supply the required leadership to improve teaching and learning. Best results occur in schools where principals are strong leaders who also facilitate leadership by teachers; that is, principals are active in instructional matters in concert with teachers whom they regard as professionals and full partners.”

“In effective schools,” they continue, “teaching is a social practice, not an individual one, and interaction with school colleagues is a primary source of teacher learning... [T]eachers interact regularly with their colleagues: their teaching team, grade level team, members of their subject department, or the entire school faculty and administrative staff.”

A key to successful team meetings is teachers taking on a leadership role. “These informal teacher leaders help their colleagues to clarify values, frame problems, set goals, argue respectfully, construct and test theories, reach agreement, and design documents that guide their work,” write Printy and Marx. “Skilled participation in such sense-making discussions makes leaders out of teachers.”

The role of the principal is also crucial to the effectiveness of teacher teams, say the authors. Effective principals set a clear and simple vision, even if it is somewhat brief or ambiguous. “All students can learn and teachers are responsible for helping them learn,” was the mantra in one school. “Make success an everyday occurrence for all students,” was the slogan in another. Even imperfect vision statements have the potential to guide a staff. “The moral component of a vision,” write Printy and Marks, “might be an explanatory factor in whether or not a principal is able to motivate teachers to engage in the difficult work that leadership for learning entails.”

Effective principals also exercise leadership by orchestrating teaching schedules and common planning times, suggesting group processes, and signaling what happens when a group reaches an impasse. One of the case study principals refused to make a decision for a group that was stuck, turning it back for more discussion. Another principal asked a series of questions when a teacher team proposed an innovation: Will the kids learn? How acceptable is it to parents? How will you inform the parents and the district? How will you be accountable?

One of the most important components of teacher teamwork, spurred on by the principal’s leadership, is agreement on the “what” of instruction (what students need to know and be able to do), while leaving the “how to” up to individual teachers. The “what” includes course content, the pacing of instruction, and the level of rigor or intellectual challenge. “These norms serve as a stabilizing force,” say Printy and Marks, “as they persist across academic years.”

One way of getting consistent, state-aligned content in key courses like Algebra I is drafting common end-of-year exams and regularly monitoring students’ progress during the year. This was part of the ethos in both of the case-study schools: “Slack is not tolerated,”

report Printy and Marks, “and nonconforming teachers are largely ignored or pressured to leave.” Common assessments are used to pressure these teachers into meeting agreed-upon standards, and teachers hold each other accountable to the “social contract” that emerges among them. “By working together to ensure that the quality of teaching and learning remains at the standard that has been agreed on (even if informally),” write the authors, “teachers and principals who share leadership ensure coherence and stability of the instructional program.”

An interesting insight is that when teachers meet only with colleagues at the same grade level or course, the team tends to maintain the status quo and continue to use approaches that have worked for its members in the past. Instructional improvement is more likely, say Printy and Marks, when teachers meet occasionally with teachers from other grade levels and subjects.

Teachers’ willingness to try new approaches in their classrooms depends a lot on the principal’s attitude. One teacher reported that the message she got from her principal was, “If you’re not in change mode, you’re not serving kids.” Another teacher said the principal wanted teachers to take risks, and it was okay to fail if you were trying to find better ways. Without clear support from the principal for innovation, teachers are likely to shy away from taking risks.

Printy and Marks end their article with a commentary on the “leadership paradox” they see in schools. There would seem to be an inherent tension within each of these pairs:

- Teachers’ desire for coherence and stability;
- The constant push for innovation and improvement;

- Principals’ faith in teachers’ competence and instructional expertise;
- Extensive supervision of teachers and monitoring of interim assessment results;

- Teachers’ desire for autonomy to teach as they see fit;
- State standards and tests;

- Teachers’ desire to work as “independent artisans”;
- The mandate that teachers work in grade level and department teams;

But rather than working against each other or canceling each other out, say Printy and Marks, these seeming contradictory forces support and complement each other. “In essence,” they write, “principals and teachers find a way of balancing these opposites, drawing a unified whole from the contradictory tendencies toward stability and change.”

The vision statements of the two case-study schools suggest an essential value that might unify a staff, the authors continue. “Simply stated, it is that every teacher should give every student the best education possible every day. With teachers and principals unified in this belief, the schools do not undertake innovation purely for the sake of change. Nor do they rest on current practice.” This creates a climate in which teachers steadily improve their practice. If

they share the belief that they can and must educate every student – and when professional relationships are respectful and open – they learn to be better teachers.”

The effect, conclude Printy and Marks, is “incremental improvement, steady and sure, rather than unquestioned abandonment of current practice and quick embrace of extensive change. When instructional improvement moves steadily in an upward direction, student learning is likely to follow a parallel path.”

“Shared Leadership for Teacher and Student Learning” by Susan Printy and Helen Marks in *Theory Into Practice*, Spring 2006 (Vol. 45, #2, p. 125-132), no e-link available

3. A Comparison of Writers’ Workshop With a More Structured Model

This lengthy study in the *American Educational Research Journal* compares the Writers’ Workshop approach to teaching writing with the Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) model, which was designed by two of the authors 10 years ago to develop students’ strategies, knowledge, and motivation as they learn to write. The study was conducted with struggling second graders in a high-poverty urban school. Students in the SRSD and comparison (Writers’ Workshop) classes were assessed before and after six months of instruction by having them write to prompts in four different genres: story, persuasive, narrative, and informative. (Instruction in the SRSD classes was only on the first two genres: story and persuasive.)

The SRSD model focuses on having students plan their writing in advance and gain proficiency in the following elements:

- Selecting a topic to write about;
- Organizing possible ideas into a writing plan;
- Using and upgrading their plan as they write;
- Learning genre-specific planning strategies;
- When writing stories, asking themselves a series of questions, including:
 - o Who are the main characters?
 - o What do they want to do?
- When writing a persuasive piece, responding to different prompts:
 - o Tell what I believe!
 - o Why do I believe this?
 - o Do I have good reasons?
- In both genres, students brainstorm “million-dollar words” to enhance vocabulary and ideation; they also work on transition words.
- Students learn about the basic parts and the purpose of stories and persuasive essays.
- They learn about the importance of using words that make a paper more interesting.
- Students are taught to apply the target strategies when they are working by themselves.
- They learn “self-talk” that facilitates their performance.
- Students get a mental model of the characteristics of a well-constructed paper in each genre, both through discussion and reading model papers.

- Students are taught how to set goals for writing complete papers (i.e., papers that include all the basic elements as well as “million-dollar” words).
- Students are taught how to monitor and graph their progress before, during, and after instruction.
- Students are taught to credit their success to effort, not innate ability.

The study also explored whether adding a peer support component – students working in pairs and periodically meeting with a teacher to monitor their use of the strategies – would help their writing.

Here are the results of the study:

- SRSD students spent more time than Writers’ Workshop students planning their writing.
- For persuasive writing, the SRSD students wrote longer and higher-quality papers than the Writers’ Workshop students (effect sizes were greater than 1.45).
- For the other three genres – story, narrative, and informative – there were no significant differences in the length and quality of the writing by SRSD and Writers’ Workshop students.
- The superior performance of SRSD students in persuasive writing carried over to their regular classrooms when they were asked to produce a persuasive essay.
- SRSD students knew more than the Writers’ Workshop students about how to plan a paper and the characteristics of good stories and persuasive essays.
- There was no difference between SRSD and Writers’ Workshop students in terms of effort, intrinsic motivation, or sense of efficacy about writing (as estimated by their regular teachers).
- The subgroup of SRSD students who worked in pairs with other students and checked in periodically with a teacher did markedly better in the length and quality of their writing in all four areas: story writing, persuasive essay writing, narrative writing, and informational writing. In addition, their higher-quality writing transferred to the regular classroom setting.

The authors conclude by noting that that studies of the SRSD program with third graders and middle-school students produced more positive results. They wonder whether Writers’ Workshop might benefit from the introduction of more explicit strategy instruction along the lines of SRSD. They also criticize educators who downplay writing instruction to focus on low-level skills for high-stakes tests.

“Improving the Writing, Knowledge, and Motivation of Struggling Young Writers: Effects of Self-Regulatory Strategy Development With and Without Peer Support” by Karen Harris, Steve Graham, and Linda Mason in *American Educational Research Journal*, Summer 2006 (Vol. 43, #2, p. 295-340), no e-link available

4. Responses to the David Brooks Column on Different Books for Boys

Several *New York Times* readers responded to David Brooks’s June 11, 2006 Op Ed column advocating different reading lists for boys and girls (see Marshall Memo 141, #4).

- Mark Federman, a New York City high-school principal, writes that teachers assigning more Hemingway, Tolstoy, Homer, and Twain to boys is not the answer, especially for struggling students. “The answer,” he says, “is stocking our classrooms and school libraries with a variety of books that have characters, topics and issues that our young men can relate to, and then giving them time to choose the books they want to read and time in school to read them. All adolescents, especially young men, are much more likely to become readers if they are given choices... Mr. Brooks is right that the brain research shows that gender matters. The literacy research shows that choice matters.”

- Diane Matza, an English professor at Utica College, writes, “[P]lease, let’s not make that old mistake of assuming that what’s appealing to one sex is not appealing to another... after all, most boys and girls can enjoy Mark Twain... Beyond this, we need to think about other ways to inspire young readers. Why aren’t kindergarten and first-grade students reciting poetry and folk tales on a regular basis? Why aren’t they performing short plays? What happened to mythology, all those great tales and adventures? Plenty of materials exist that will teach kids a love of language and energize their imaginations.”

- Alexandra Siy, a children’s book author who teaches in an elementary school in Alaska, says that the reason for the plummeting percentage of boys who read is that many of them are hooked on video games. “When these boys, whose brains become addicted to video imagery, are old enough to read ‘Hemingway, Tolstoy, Homer and Twain,’” she writes, “they will reach for their joysticks rather than for those great novels...”

New York Times letters, June 14, 2006

5. A Rejoinder to E. D. Hirsch on Strategies for Teaching Reading

Two Pennsylvania high-school reading specialists, Joan Kanavy and Fran Carothers, wrote to *Education Week* in response to E. D. Hirsch’s April 26, 2006 article (see Marshall Memo 134, #3). “Without a doubt,” they say, “the amount of background knowledge a reader brings to the page determines the level of understanding that results. If a reader cannot connect new information to an existing knowledge base of content ideas and conceptual terms, accurate word recognition and strategic-reading skills are of little benefit for extracting meaningful understanding.”

But Kanavy and Carothers don’t agree with Hirsch that teaching reading skills is a waste of time. Reading strategies, they write, “should be taught in every academic subject, every day, at every level. If students are to learn adequately, consistently building an optimum level of personal background knowledge, they must be taught how to read and think effectively about content knowledge. The most qualified person to teach critical, content-area reading strategies is the content-area teacher – the expert in the discipline.” The key, they say, is building instruction in core knowledge and vocabulary into science, social studies, math, and literature classes, consistently reinforcing the strategies from one class to another, and nurturing independent learners whose high achievement shows up in good test scores.

Education Week letter June 21, 2006 (Vol. 25, #41, p. 44), no free e-link available

6. What New Teachers Need

In this article in *Theory Into Practice*, Maureen Killeavy, director of the University of Dublin's National Pilot Project on Teacher Induction, summarizes what newly qualified teachers wish their schools and colleagues would give them:

- Professional development opportunities;
- Information on common patterns of experience among newly qualified teachers (e.g., feelings of fatigue and decline in about the third month of the first year);
- Advice for dealing with special needs students;
- Advice for dealing with behavior management and discipline problems;
- The major curricular concepts in their subject area(s) or grade level;
- Strategies for differentiating instruction (e.g., for heterogeneous classes);
- Exposure to colleagues beyond the assigned mentor, especially to provide feedback and help develop networks;
- Accurate, supported feedback based on classroom observations and discussion of potential ways to improve;
- Time to plan with and observe other teachers;
- Advice for dealing with parents;
- Advice on staff relationships;
- A school or system orientation, including policies and procedures;
- Dealing with paperwork and organizational issues that take time away from planning.

“Induction: A Collective Endeavor of Learning, Teaching, and Leading” by Maureen Killeavy in *Theory Into Practice*, Spring 2006 (Vol. 45, #2, p. 168-176), no e-link available

7. Power Naps After Lunch?

This *Washington Post* article reports that in several high schools in Japan, teachers are dimming the lights, putting on soft classical music, and encouraging their students to take a 15-minute nap right after lunch. These schools are picking up on a new phenomenon in Japanese workplaces, where the chronic sleep deprivation of workaholic employees and a recent flurry of books, studies, and news reports on sleep deprivation have led many employers to allow short mid-day naps to promote mental alertness and increase productivity. The Tokyo office of Toyota actively encourages lunchtime naps and turns off office lights to save power and make it easier to doze off. Department stores and catalogues are selling “desk pillows” to make mid-day naps more comfortable.

At Meizen High School, where administrators pioneered the napping program two years ago, test scores have risen significantly and teachers report that fewer students are dozing off during classes. Masaki Chiba, a 15-year-old freshman who chose Meizen specifically because of its napping option, and who, like many of his classmates, sleeps only five or six hours a night, said, “It’s changed my life.”

“Nation of Workaholics Sleeps on the Job” by Anthony Faiola in the *Washington Post*, June 21, 2006 (p. A01 – spotted in *PEN Weekly NewsBlast*, June 22, 2006)
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/20/AR2006062001603.html>

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Do you have feedback? Is anything missing?

If you have comments or suggestions, if you saw an article or web item in the last week that you think should have been summarized, or if you would like to suggest additional publications that should be covered by the Marshall Memo, please e-mail: kim.marshall8@verizon.net

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and others very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 36 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, and writer, lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 44 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through scores of articles each week, and selects 5-10 that have the greatest potential to improve teaching, leadership, and learning. He then writes a brief summary of each article, pulls out several striking quotes, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the memo to subscribers every Monday (with occasional breaks; there were 50 issues in 2004-05).

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- About Kim Marshall (including links to articles)
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- The current issue (in PDF or Word format)
- All back issues (also in PDF or Word)
- A database of all articles to date, searchable by topic, title, author, source, level, etc.
- How to change access e-mail or password

Publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educator
American School Board Journal
ASCD SmartBrief
Atlantic Monthly
Boston Globe
CommonWealth Magazine
District Administration
Ed. Magazine
EDge
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Update
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Educational Review
JESPAR
Jimmy Kilpatrick
Journal of Staff Development
Language Learner
Middle Ground
Middle School Journal
NASSP Bulletin
New York Times
New Yorker
Newsweek
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
Teacher Magazine
Teachers College Record
Theory Into Practice
Times Educational Supplement