

# Marshall Memo 247

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education  
August 18, 2008

## In This Issue:

1. [A veteran high-school teacher on discipline \(an oldie but goodie article\)](#)
2. [Going beyond “sweating the small stuff”](#)
3. [Homophobia, harassment, and murder in a California junior high school](#)
4. [Giving elementary students a vision of college in their future](#)
5. [Two different kinds of school leader](#)

## Quotes of the Week

“People remember what they want to, the way they want to, and call it history.”

Christopher Dickey in “Southern Discomfort” in *Newsweek*, Aug. 11, 2008  
<http://www.newsweek.com/id/150576>

“No one is born knowing how to control 125 adolescents for five hours a day and teach the curriculum at the same time. Learning to discipline takes years. Mostly it’s trial and error. Nothing works all the time, and what works well in one class has no effect on another.”

Margaret Metzger (see item #1)

“If you lie about such a small item, you need to have a talk with yourself about how cheaply you will sell your integrity.”

Margaret Metzger on her students’ responses when asked if they did homework (*ibid.*)

“You need to be wrong sometimes, or you are not taking enough risks. I prefer that you be daringly wrong rather than timidly right.”

*Ibid.*

“They feel part of a place that strives for excellence in seemingly small things, and they respond accordingly in the big things.”

David Hill on his Memphis students (see item #2)

“If you don’t know who you are as an individual, and if you’re not centered, you will crumble in this position.”

A principal commenting on inner-city school leadership (see item #5)

---

## 1. A Veteran High-School Teacher on Discipline (an Oldie but Goodie)

In this meaty and helpful *Kappan* article, Brookline, Massachusetts teacher Margaret Metzger shares her wisdom on classroom management with new teachers. “No one is born knowing how to control 125 adolescents for five hours a day and teach the curriculum at the same time,” she says. “Learning to discipline takes years. Mostly it’s trial and error. Nothing works all the time, and what works well in one class has no effect on another. However, over time, our repertoire of responses grows; we learn what we can tolerate; we gain a sense of timing; we make alliances within a school. Trust me, you will improve.”

Metzger describes the mistakes she made as a rookie teacher. “I hated disciplining adolescents,” she writes. “Kids attacked my most vulnerable character flaws, and they could undo my self-esteem in a matter of minutes... I ricocheted between being a drill sergeant and Mary Poppins... One critical comment could haunt me for days... I kept making the same mistakes over and over... I thought everything was my fault.”

Metzger’s mother, an accomplished teacher, told her to quit wallowing in failure and learn from classes that went badly. “You need a theory for each problem,” her mother said. “Why is it a problem? What do you bring to the situation? What could you have done differently? What other lens could you use to understand the situation? What does the student think happened?” She urged Metzger to keep track of the number of classes a week that were true melt-downs, and sure enough, the number was smaller than Metzger imagined. Having righted the ship, Metzger began to internalize a few beginning “anchoring principles.”

### Early Lessons

- *Don’t escalate, de-escalate.* Metzger realized that she was escalating bad situations with knee-jerk, self-righteous anger. “I never liked this trait in myself,” she says, “and the kids ridiculed it.” She found that if she consciously de-escalated her annoyance with students’ foolishness, she could deal with the behavior. She emulated calm teachers, even if she didn’t feel calm. “Teachers, like parents, need to use a light touch,” she says. “Let go of some infractions. Whisper instead of yell. Use humor. Change locations. Divide and conquer. Talk to students privately. Make a tiny hand movement. Call kids by name. Smile a lot. Listen. Listen. Listen.”

- *Let students save face.* Metzger discovered that certain lines allowed her to deftly avoid no-win confrontations:

- “It’s a good thing I like you.”
- “Here’s the deal: I’ll pretend I didn’t see that, and you never do it again.”

- “That’s inappropriate.”
- “Consider yourself scolded.”
- “Can you solve that? Or do you need me to intervene?”
- “Am I driving you over the edge?”

These allowed her to keep the lesson going, and allowed malefactors to back down without embarrassment.

- *Insist on the right to sanity.* “[I]t took two years before I completely understood that, as an occupant of the room, I had rights too,” says Metzger. She made a long list of “awful behaviors” and rank-ordered them by how much they bothered her: Cheating, ridiculing, shouting, insults, back talk, eyeball rolling, throwing things, gum chewing, tardiness, etc., etc. Then she started working her way down the list, knowing that if she didn’t solve the ones at the top, she would leave teaching. Unlike other teachers she admired, Metzger found she couldn’t start classes crisply and was therefore less concerned with students being a minute or two late. “On the other hand,” she says, “when I ask for student attention, I expect it within three seconds.”

- *Get help.* “For the first several years, I felt too humiliated by my failures to ask for help,” says Metzger. “By the second year, I began to make alliances. I learned which guidance counselors really helped, which administrators trusted my judgment, and whether to trust the truant officer. I learned which teachers made good witnesses in difficult meetings. I began to feel not so alone.”

- *Get out of the limelight.* “Stand-up teaching made me an easy target,” she writes. Plus, beginning teachers “don’t have the energy, resources, or ideas that would enable you to teach actively all the time.” So Metzger got students doing most of the work – student presentations, seatwork, in-class reading, critiques of movies, quizzes, and group work.

### More Mature Lessons

In her middle years of teaching, Metzger felt calmer and more confident, and her discipline methods were closely linked to how she taught. Some principles from this era:

- *Ask questions.* Teachers sometimes assume they have all the information they need, but if they ask students questions, they learn more. Throughout one year, Metzger lost sleep over a class that seemed perpetually angry and blamed herself for the problem. On the last day of school, she asked students what was up. “Four people here have parents getting divorced this semester,” came the reply, “so when we came in and yelled at you, we were really yelling at them.” It would have been nice to know this earlier in the year, she says.

- *Suck it up.* “Sometimes you feel you have already spent too much time on the disruptive students,” says Metzger. “Frankly, you don’t want to talk to them. Too bad. Do it. Not during class time, and not always in the hall. If you don’t trust yourself or them in a conversation, use notes.”

- *Give adult feedback.* Students need feedback, sometimes on sensitive cultural and interpersonal issues, but too often, educators withhold that information. Here are some examples of things Metzger said to students:

- “In the United States, it’s considered a sign of disrespect not to look someone in the eyes when they’re speaking to you. So, when I speak to you, you should look directly at me. If you don’t, I’ll point to the bridge of my nose to remind you.”
- “I know that in your culture, modesty is the highest value. But in school you need to assert yourself. I’ll try to help you.”
- “Your posture, your mumbling under your breath, and your tardiness all show disrespect. If you hate this class, you should talk to me about it. If you like this class, you should know that you are giving misleading signals.”
- “You have complained about everything we have done for the past two months. I now see you as a constant whiner. You probably don’t want to give this impression, and it’s getting on my nerves. So, for the next two months, let’s have a moratorium on complaining. You can start whining again in January. Does this seem fair?”

- *Respect the rights of the whole class.* “Some students take much more than their fair share of the psychic space in the room,” says Metzger. “Try not to focus only on the difficult students; quiet, earnest students are waiting for your attention too.”

- *Ask the students to do more.* “If the work seems authentic and interesting, students usually behave well,” she writes. “If I up the intellectual ante, if I make the work more compelling, if I focus more on how students learn than on how I teach, I do not need to coerce them.”

- *Remember which rules are important.* Metzger tells how her own son, when he was in ninth grade, carefully hatched an elaborate plan to cut a class so he could get the autograph of his favorite author. He figured out which class he could afford to miss and when he would be back, but when he asked his mother to sign him out, she loudly refused. “Oh yeah,” he said sarcastically, “I forgot the rule – take responsibility for what you do.” Metzger ruefully thought, “That *was* the real rule. No cutting was a minor rule.” She says she admires the way her school breaks minor rules to help students stay in school. Teachers have to decide all the time which rules they will enforce and which they are willing to break for a greater good.

- *Bypass or solve perennial problems.* Teachers go nuts when students don’t bring pencils or pens to class or keep forgetting their books. We can get ulcers fighting these battles day after day, says Metzger, or we can keep a supply of pencils and a few extra copies of key books. With books, though, it’s important to demand collateral, since students who forget their own book often fail to return a borrowed book. “Ask for something students won’t leave the classroom without,” she advises: “a watch, an earring, a shoe. Some days I have a collection of shoes and watches on my desk, but every student has a book.”

### The Bigger Picture

Metzger concludes her article by noting that bad discipline situations are composed of what students bring to the table, but also the school context and adults’ baggage. We tend to focus only on what students bring, forgetting the other two. Her pointers:

- *The school context* – “When discipline deteriorates in a classroom,” she writes, “we need to remember to ask questions of the whole institution”:

- Do we explain the school culture and expectations adequately?
- Did a student get assigned to the wrong class to keep class sizes equal?
- Should certain students be getting help from a specialist?
- Should the supervisor be giving more help to the teacher?
- Do we support new teachers adequately?
- Do new teachers have a chance to watch experienced teachers in action?
- Are administrators being asked to do so much that they can't provide timely help?

And the biggest question: Are teachers, parents, and administrators all working together efficiently and sanely to produce the results we want?

• *The personal context* – The hardest part of classroom discipline is coming to grips with what *we* bring to the situation, says Metzger. Here are some questions she asks herself:

- Am I tired, grouchy, or distracted?
- What else is going on in my life?
- Has the student hit a raw nerve in me?
- Does this interaction remind me of another one?
- What from my background is being triggered?
- Why am I threatened by this behavior?
- Why do I lack resilience on this matter?
- Does race or gender influence my response?
- Is this problem mine or the student's?
- Am I being inflexible? Am I being authoritative or authoritarian?
- Who is watching?

Metzger says that she has been in some first-rate disciplinary meetings in which everyone has benefited: the student, the school, and the teacher. That's a triple-win, she says.

### A Memo to Students

Metzger closes by talking about prevention – the art of managing the classroom so most discipline problems seldom arise. She shares a memo that she gives to students at the beginning of each year titled “Expectations, procedures, rules, quirks, and policies”, which lays out everything students need to know about how the ship will be run. Her bottom-line expectation: that her high-school students behave *like adults*. Here are some highlights:

- If I am late, you can assume I am trying to get here and you should begin the class without me.
- If you know in advance that you will be absent, please tell me. I will do the same.
- If I don't dismiss the class on time because I am too engrossed, please speak up.
- I will assume you can handle mature and controversial topics. I hope to challenge you to think about some of your beliefs and assumptions. If this class is sometimes disturbing, you should take it as a compliment that I think you can handle discord and ambiguity. If you are bothered by what I say in class, I hope you will tell me directly.
- This class is not a Metzger song-and-dance routine. You should move toward a sense of ownership in this class. You are responsible for what happens here.

- You should come to class prepared to take over. You should start to form opinions by yourself and with other students before the class begins. I hope to hear you talking in the cafeteria, halls, and homerooms about the assignments in this class.
- Each homework assignment ends up counting about 1/32 of your grade. Depending on the time available, I will collect homework, glance at it briefly, give pop quizzes, or just ask you whether your homework is done. If you lie about such a small item, you need to have a talk with yourself about how cheaply you will sell your integrity.
- I want this class to be a community of learners. In addition to academics, you must learn to work with other people. Here, you can move away from your established friendships, meet people whom you might not socialize with, talk with them about important issues, and learn that they are thoughtful, sensitive, and interesting people.
- You must treat each other with respect. I should warn you that, if you ridicule each other, I will be quite angry. I will not tolerate anyone making fun of a less able student. Remember that all of us have academic weak spots. Frequently, the bravest person in the room is the student who must work hardest to comprehend the material.
- I am tyrannical about cheating. If I catch you cheating, I will put a description of the incident in your permanent file. If you are a senior, I may call the colleges you've applied to. I do not accept the excuse that someone is under a lot of pressure.
- You need a study buddy, someone to call if you are absent and need an assignment.
- You always have the right, even the obligation, to know why we are doing something. I will try to remember to explain the rationale for everything we do – but if I forget, ask.
- You know that some students get ignored in school. Sometimes I design the lesson for those people. So if a class isn't wonderful for you on a particular day, have patience. Don't complain too fast. You'll get on my nerves.
- I take careful attendance and will call your parents or guardians if you are missing class or homework. Students do not cut my class (even if they are cutting school).
- There will be no written homework on vacations or long weekends. I count Saturday and Sunday for homework time; I don't expect you to work on Friday night. I don't work then.
- Your homework grade will be a straight percentage of homework completed on days you were in attendance. In other words, if you are absent, you don't need to see me about make-up work for daily homework. If you don't miss more than 10 percent of homework, you will get an A for "daily work", which counts as much as a full paper. However, you must keep up with the reading and all major papers.
- You will do monthly independent reading, but it's an honor system – there won't be papers on this reading. On the first day of each month, we will go outside for a Walk-Talk: we will all walk around the reservoir in pairs and talk about the books. As with the daily work grade, the Walk-Talk grade will count as a full paper. Freshmen, who have difficulty talking about a book for a full hour, have a different deal: a small quiz on their independent reading. If you read a book each month, you will receive an A for outside reading.

- If you are not turning in a paper or an assignment, write a note explaining why not. Use a full sheet of paper. Your explanation of missed work helps me with record keeping. Also, I'll know whether to worry about you. If you didn't do the homework because you didn't understand the directions, that is a teaching problem for me. It is not the same as if you didn't do the homework because you had a fight with your best friend.
- You should actively participate in this class. It isn't enough to sit politely and absorb other people's thinking. You must contribute to this class. Everyone will read papers aloud. Almost everyone dreads it.
- If you think of yourself as shy, you should practice speaking in a safe environment, like this one. You'll be grateful for the practice when you get to college.
- Sometimes students complain that I am intimidating at first because I occasionally respond to a student's remark by bluntly stating, "No, that's wrong." Students are horrified. But I don't think being wrong is so terrible. You need to be wrong sometimes, or you are not taking enough risks. I prefer that you be daringly wrong rather than timidly right. Take intellectual risks in this class – and in all your classes.
- I can try my best to set up educational experiences for you, but in the end you must decide whether you will take responsibility for your own education. You are not in school for your parents or your grades. You are here to become an educated person. Your attitude toward education will transform when you understand that you are doing this for yourself.
- This class is one of those situations where everyone is equal but some are more equal than others. While I will assume you can act like adults, I still retain the teacher's role. I still set the academic standards, decide on the grades, report to the parents, and set the pace for the class. I just wanted you to know that I am not ambivalent about that role.

I look forward to learning from you.

“Learning to Discipline” by Margaret Metzger in *Phi Delta Kappan*, September 2002 (Vol. 84, #1, p. 77-84)

[\*Back to page one\*](#)

## **2. Going Beyond “Sweating the Small Stuff”**

In this *Education Week* article, Memphis educator David Hill points out the limits of the broken-window theory of school discipline. Yes, jumping on minor infractions like wearing hats and chewing gum often prevents students from engaging in more flagrant misbehavior, he says, but “we should aim higher than this.” How can school leaders do this? By creating “stained-glass windows” – symbols of excellence that inspire students to give their very best. “This is altogether more desirable than simply keeping the worst in young people at bay,” says Hill. Here are four ideas from his Memphis middle school:

- *Use every minute.* Allowing idle chitchat in class wastes valuable instructional time, says Hill. All class time should be used for academic instruction and productive student work.

Taking it a step further, students who eat breakfast at school should use part of that time for independent reading.

- *Insist on full attention.* It's not enough for students to have their eyes open in class, says Hill. Teachers should insist that students are on task, sit properly, and maintain eye contact with the teacher or the person who is speaking.

- *Have students use standard English.* It's not enough for students to avoid profanity in school, says Hill. "We ask that they express themselves by speaking clearly, in complete sentences, with correct grammar, and without the use of slang," he says.

- *Insist on proper garb.* Wearing uniforms isn't enough, says Hill. His school had students tuck in their shirts and wear their pants at the waist, both on campus and before and after school.

"It is a pleasure to see students embrace these lessons," concludes Hill. "With a confident self-awareness, they tuck in shirttails before crossing the campus edge, and pause to order their thoughts before speaking. They feel part of a place that strives for excellence in seemingly small things, and they respond accordingly in the big things."

"The 'Stained-Glass Window' Theory" by David Hill in *Education Week*, Aug. 13, 2008 (Vol. 27, #45, p. 24-25), <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2008/08/13/45hill.h27.html>

[Back to page one](#)

### **3. Homophobia, Harassment, and Murder in a California Junior High**

In this deeply troubling *Newsweek* cover story, reporter Ramin Setoodeh explores the murder of Larry King, 15, in a blue-collar California junior high school classroom in February, 2008, allegedly by Brandon McInerney, one of his classmates.

Larry King had a troubled upbringing. His mother was a drug user and his father was out of the picture. Larry was placed in a foster home at the age of two, developed a speech impediment, and was retained in first grade because of reading difficulties. He acted out in school and at home, shoplifted, was diagnosed with reactive attachment disorder, and was prescribed ADHD medication. At 10, Larry told other students that he was gay, and they started using slurs and avoiding him at recess. One Halloween, a smoke bomb was thrown into his house, almost killing the family's dog. One of his sixth-grade classmates began a "Burn Book" about Larry, with other students scribbling insults and a threat. This led Larry's foster parents to transfer him to another elementary school. When he moved up to junior high school, Larry was accepted by a group of girls but was pushed around by some boys in the locker room and teased and taunted in the cafeteria. "It's OK," Larry said to one of his female friends. "One day, they'll regret it. One day, I'll be famous."

Home life continued to be rough. At the age of 12, Larry was put on probation for vandalizing a tractor. When he was 14, Larry said his foster father was hitting him and was moved to a nearby group home and treatment center, where he seemed happier.

In January 2008, Larry began to come to school with hot-pink fingernails, make-up, and stiletto heels. He asked a teacher to call him Leticia, saying he was half African-American.

“Larry, I’m not calling you Leticia,” said the teacher firmly, and Larry didn’t ask again. The school was uncertain how to balance Larry’s right to self-expression with potential disruption. The California Attorney General’s office said the school couldn’t prevent Larry from dressing like a girl because of a hate-crime law that prohibits gender discrimination.

Then Larry began to act out in other ways. He would approach the popular boys’ table at lunch and say in a high-pitched voice, “Mind if I sit here?” He taunted boys in the halls, saying, “I know you want me.” When a teacher asked why, Larry said, “It’s fun to watch them squirm.” The boys Larry taunted were teased by other boys about being gay. Larry’s 12-year-old brother, Rocky, who also attended the school, complained to an assistant principal, “The kids are saying since Larry is gay, I must be gay too, because I’m his brother.” In the locker room, boys frequently ridiculed Larry. He began saying, “You look hot!” as they changed (according to the mother of a student). When Larry complained that one boy wouldn’t stop looking at him, the school transferred Larry out of PE classes as a “preventative measure.”

Larry continued to wrestle with his sexuality. At one point, he told his foster father that he might be bisexual; later, he told his foster mother that he wanted to have a sex-change operation; later still, he told a teacher that he’d never kissed anyone, male or female. Research indicates that adolescents are coming out younger and younger. One study found that the average age for gay self-identification is now 13.4, with parents finding out a year later. “What you might call ‘the shrinking closet’ is arguably a major factor in Larry’s death,” writes Setoodeh. “Even as homosexuality has become more accepted, the prospect of being openly gay in middle school raises a troubling set of issues. Kids may want to express who they are, but they are playing grown-up without fully knowing what that means. At the same time, teachers and parents are often uncomfortable dealing with sexual issues in children so young.” Teacher training is often lacking in the middle grades, and while many high schools have gay-straight alliances to foster acceptance of gay and lesbian students, very few grade 6-8 schools do. Often students find out (or think they find out) about a gay or lesbian student before staff members do.

Among the teachers at Larry’s school, there were strong feelings about his behavior, with some expressing amazement that he was allowed to get away with attire that they believed violated the school’s dress code (which forbids articles of clothing considered distracting). Girls took photos of Larry with their camera phones and speculated about what he would do next. “My class was in a frenzy every day with Larry stories,” said one teacher who didn’t have Larry as a student. When Larry wore a Playboy-bunny necklace, a teacher told him to take it off because it was offensive to women. He did so, but continued to wear the stiletto shoes. When Larry wore lipstick and eyeliner to school for the first time, a teacher told him to wash it off and he complied. But the next day he wore even more make-up and claimed that Joy Epstein, one of the assistant principals, had told him it was his right. Epstein, who is open about being a lesbian to her colleagues but not to students, talked regularly with Larry and was suspected by some staff members of encouraging his flamboyance. Some teachers said they had complained to the principal and assistant principal about Larry’s disruptive behavior and

were told that nothing could be done. The school's administrators would not comment for the *Newsweek* article because of the upcoming murder trial.

In late January of 2008, every teacher in the school received an e-mail headlined STUDENT RIGHTS from one of the assistant principals. It read, "We have a student on campus who has chosen to express his sexuality by wearing make-up. It is his right to do so. Some kids are finding it amusing, others are bothered by it. As long as it does not cause classroom disruptions he is within his rights. We are asking that you talk to your students about being civil and non-judgmental. They don't have to like it but they need to give him his space. We are also asking you to watch for possible problems. If you wish to talk further about it please see me or Ms. Epstein."

At one point, Larry started paying special attention to Brandon McInerney. Larry told friends he really liked Brandon and would often walk up close to him and stare. Larry told one friend that he and Brandon had dated but broken up (this was probably a fabrication, said one teacher), and threatened to tell the whole school about them if Brandon wasn't nicer to him. Brandon also had a troubled home life. His parents had a tempestuous relationship, with his father at one point drunkenly shooting his mother in the arm with a .45 handgun. They split up when Brandon was 6, but there was another violent incident that sent the father to jail for ten days. Drugs were allegedly present in the mother's household, and Brandon went to live with his father. In eighth grade, Brandon became fascinated with Adolf Hitler, and memorized details about the Nuremberg trials and Hitler's deputies. His grades fell and he was transferred out of his English honors class into a class with Larry.

Just before Valentine's Day, 2008, students were abuzz with the story of Larry daring his girlfriends to go up to the boys they liked and asking them to be their Valentine. "When it was Larry's turn," writes Setoodeh, "he named Brandon, who happened to be playing basketball nearby. Larry walked right on to the court in the middle of the game and asked Brandon to be his Valentine. Brandon's friends were there and started joking that he and Larry were going to make 'gay babies' together."

Shortly after this, Brandon passed one of Larry's friends in the hallway and told her to say goodbye to Larry, because she wouldn't see him again. This student thought the comment was a joke and didn't report it. School staff seemed unaware of rumors of a fight between Larry and Brandon the next day. The day of the murder, Larry came to school wearing regular clothing. When he was asked about it, he lied and said he was out of make-up. He seemed fearful, looking over his shoulder as he walked between classes, and glancing back at Brandon in class. Shortly before the shooting, Larry was called out of class by a school counselor to talk about his grades and the danger that he might not graduate from eighth grade. Larry apparently said nothing about his fear. A few minutes later, when Larry returned to class, Brandon allegedly shot him twice in the head, dropped the gun, and left the school. He was arrested a few blocks away. As Larry fought for his life in the hospital, scores of students and teachers sent cards and letters wishing him well. Some students apologized for harassing him. Two days later, Larry died.

The community is divided about the shooting. Asked whether it could have been prevented, school superintendent Jerry Dannenberg said, “Absolutely. Why do we have youngsters that have access to guns? Why don’t we have adequate funding to pay for social workers at the school to make sure students have resources? We have societal issues.” Others blame rampant homophobia and fault Larry’s schools for not doing a better job educating students about diversity and tolerance. And others fault the school for political correctness, missing the warning signs, and not intervening sooner. “We failed Brandon,” said one teacher. “We didn’t know the bullying was coming from the other side.” Larry’s foster father, while expressing no sympathy for Brandon, said his son sexually harassed Brandon. Brandon’s father said, “He was being stalked almost, to the degree of the school should have never let this happen.”

Elaine Garber, 81, who has served on the community’s school board for almost five decades, said, “If we’re going to be absolutely sure this isn’t going to happen again, this has got to be discussed some more.”

“Young, Gay and Murdered” by Ramin Setoodeh in *Newsweek*, July 28, 2008 (p. 41-46), <http://www.newsweek.com/id/147790>

[Back to page one](#)

#### **4. Giving Elementary Students a Vision of College in Their Future**

In this article in *Principal*, Los Angeles assistant principal Brenda Cortez writes about how we can educate elementary-school students so they grow up to be “problem-solving, critical-thinking, technology-driven, globally connected, productive members” of society. One key, she says, is instilling the expectation that students will attend college. Reflecting on her upbringing as a young Latina, Cortez remembers her fifth- and sixth-grade teacher, who told students they could achieve anything they set out to do, expected them to go to college, and took the class on two field trips to UCLA. Here are her suggestions for elementary school leaders:

- *Focus the mission on college.* Cortez suggests revising the school’s vision and mission statements if they don’t already include explicit language about creating a “college-going environment,” and asking teachers to make this one of their personal goals for the year.
- *Display college degrees.* When teachers talk about and post a copy of their college diploma and other credentials, says Cortez, it lets students know that their teachers are resources and role models for college aspirations.
- *Use college names.* Cortez suggests naming school buildings, grade levels, classrooms, and groups within classrooms after colleges and universities.
- *Make college-going a theme.* Bulletin boards can trumpet the importance of college, with students as early as first grade posting affirmations associating achievement with being on track to college (“I know I’m on my way to college because I do well on my spelling tests!”).
- *Hold college spirit days.* Regular college/university “pep rallies” can keep the focus alive, with students wearing clothing that supports their favorite university.

- *Talk up college in career days.* Guest speakers should bring their diplomas and emphasize the importance of college to their jobs.
- *Bring in college students.* Cortez suggests reaching out to stakeholders and getting current post-secondary students to adopt upper-grade homerooms and take part in appropriate classroom activities, with students preparing questions for them.
- *Emphasize literacy.* College students can also read their favorite books and talk about how important reading and writing are in college.
- *Visit local colleges.* It's very helpful for students to experience first-hand what in-session college campuses look like and see that students who look like them are thriving there.
- *Push the message all year long.* College should be a constant theme, says Cortez, with a college or university student as the keynote speaker on the last day of the school year to send the message to students and families about how they use the summer months.

“Creating a University-Going Environment at the Elementary Level” by Brenda Cortez in *Principal*, Sept./Oct. 2008 (Vol. 88, #1, p. 52-53), no e-link available; the author can be reached at [bac6016@lausd.net](mailto:bac6016@lausd.net).

[Back to page one](#)

## 5. Two Different Kinds of School Leader

In this thoughtful *Education Week* article, Public Agenda vice president Jean Johnson reports on the findings of a series of focus-group discussions with principals from high-need schools. Johnson and her colleagues found that principals quickly fell into two distinct groups:

- *Copers* – These principals meant well and worked hard, but they couldn't get beyond the day-to-day crises. They said things like, “I find myself wearing so many hats... it's unbelievable. I just cannot free myself up.” Problems beset them from all sides: arson attacks on their buildings, teachers' cars being stolen, parents intimidating them when a child was suspended. “These principals were struggling themselves, and yet their job was to transform a struggling school,” says Johnson.

- *Transformers* – These principals had an explicit vision of what they wanted their school to be like – a “mission of the heart”, says Johnson, accompanied by “zeal, confidence, clarity, persistence.” Transformers had goals and strategies for this year, next year, and the year after that – for example, a new reading curriculum this year, a math instructional coach next year. They had identified teachers who needed to go and had thought through how to proceed – *This year A and B, next year C*. They knew what the score was: “This is my plan; this is where I am with it; this is what's going well; this is where I need help.” Johnson says that transformers were more like small business people than corporate executives: “They were putting heart and soul into their own small endeavor. It was the realization of a vision that almost possessed them.”

Johnson wonders whether Transformers are born or made, and leans more toward the nature end of the spectrum, quoting one principal: “If you don't know who you are as an individual, and if you're not centered, you will crumble in this position.” Courage was a theme

in the focus groups. One principal said, “Sometimes you have to have the courage to say to a teacher, ‘Perhaps this is not the vocation for you.’”

But Johnson notes that Transformers got support from their districts, and says that perhaps with the proper support, some Copers could become Transformers. All principals, she says, need the ability to choose a key lieutenant who could take care of administrative tasks, a degree of autonomy, the ability to select and train staff members and make key decisions.

Finally, Johnson worries about whether Transformers can sustain the pace. “While we were conducting this research,” she says, “we saw astonishing human beings working extremely long hours with a passion and single-mindedness that was truly admirable. But how long can we expect these principals to keep up this pace? Are we asking them to make sacrifices in their personal lives that are simply unsustainable? Can anyone, even with enormous commitment, really keep up this level of energy and sparkle year after year after year?”

“‘Copers’ and ‘Transformers’ – Which Kind of Principal Do We Want for Our Struggling Schools?” by Jean Johnson in *Education Week*, Aug. 13, 2008 (Vol. 27, #45, p. 32, 26), [http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2008/08/13/45johnson\\_ep.h27.html](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2008/08/13/45johnson_ep.h27.html)

[Back to page one](#)

© Copyright 2008 Marshall Memo LLC

***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](mailto: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 37 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 more than a hundred 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 evening (with occasional breaks; there are about 50 issues a year).

## ***Subscriptions:***

Individual subscriptions are \$50 for the school year. Rates decline steeply for multiple readers within the same organization. See the website for these rates and information on paying by check or credit card.

## ***Website:***

If you go to <http://www.marshallmemo.com> you will find detailed information on:

- How to subscribe or renew
- A detailed rationale for the Marshall Memo
- Publications (with a count of articles from each)
- Article selection criteria
- Topics (with a count of articles from each)
- Headlines for all issues
- What readers say
- About Kim Marshall (including links to articles)
- A free sample issue

Marshall Memo subscribers have access to the Members' Area of the website, which has:

- 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, CEC SmartBriefs, Daily EdNews  
Atlantic Monthly  
Catalyst Chicago  
Changing Schools (McREL)  
Commonwealth Magazine  
Ed. Magazine  
EDge  
Education Digest  
Education Gadfly  
Education Next  
Education Week  
Educational Leadership  
Educational Researcher  
Edutopia  
Elementary School Journal  
Essential Teacher (TESOL)  
Harvard Business Review  
Harvard Education Letter  
Harvard Educational Review  
JESPAR  
Journal of Staff Development  
Language Learner (NABE)  
Middle Ground  
Middle School Journal  
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 (online)  
Teachers College Record  
The Language Educator  
The Reading Teacher  
Theory Into Practice  
Tools for Schools/The Learning Principal