

Marshall Memo 43

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
June 21, 2004

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Quotes of the Week

“Schools that resort to the ‘if only’ strategy spend their time looking out the window for the solutions to their problems. Schools that commit to the can-do strategy spend their time looking in the mirror. Which way are you looking?”

Richard DuFour (see item #1)

“The unfortunate reality of the classroom is that educators have traditionally worked as efficiently, as thoughtfully, and as determinedly as they chose to. If a teacher’s child is sick and he rushes through grading a stack of essays, the students won’t know, and the principal won’t know, and the parents won’t know. If a math teacher plans poorly and, at the end of the year, winds up rushing through the most challenging units, the students can’t tell, and no one else will know. In other lines of work, like journalism or engineering or law, professionals know that their work will be assessed. Historically, teachers have been largely left to their own devices, with the future of every child left utterly dependent on our unverified faith in each teacher’s professionalism.”

Frederick Hess in *Ed. Magazine*, Spring 2004, p. 16

“The declining value of a high-school diploma has made it clear that *all* students must now excel at expert thinking and complex communication – not just the students aiming for competitive colleges. What we teach, how we empower our teachers, and how we assess our students will determine who participates in the new economy.”

Richard Murnane in *Ed. Magazine*, Spring 2004, p. 24

“We looked at how well these tests measure what matters to colleges and employers, and concluded that none of these tests is overly demanding.”

Matthew Gandal on a study of high-school exit exams (see #5)

“We’ll take success any way we can get it.”

Houston elementary school principal on using Teach for America teachers (see item #6)

1. The “If Only...” and the “Can Do” Approach to School Improvement

Working with a school staff in California recently, consultant and former principal Richard DuFour asked teachers to brainstorm ways of raising their students' achievement. They generated this wish list:

- More financial support from the state;
- Smaller class sizes;
- More teacher aides, counselors, social workers, etc. to help students;
- Fewer preparations for teachers;
- More supportive parents;
- Abolishing state testing;
- Higher teacher salaries to attract people to the profession;
- More planning time for teachers;
- Fewer initiatives from the central office;
- Financial support for professional workshops and graduate courses;
- Better academic preparation for students in middle schools;
- Better facilities;
- More access to technology for staff and students;
- A stronger work ethic among students; less of a sense of entitlement;
- More current textbooks and instructional materials.

DuFour agreed that all the items on this list were valid and would improve conditions in the school, but noted that all of them required someone *other than the staff* to take action. He then presented an alternative list of interventions to improve student achievement:

- Academic goals for every student are so clear, focused, and widely understood that students taking the same course from different teachers get the same essential curriculum.
- Common assessments monitor each student's learning at intervals during the year and identify problems that the class and individual students are having.

- There is a systematic plan to give extra time and support to students who are having initial difficulty learning.
- The school builds strong partnerships with parents based on frequent two-way communication.
- Each teacher gets meaningful and timely data on how well his or her students are meeting learning goals compared to students in other classes.
- Teacher teams work together to analyze student achievement on common assessments, develop strategies to improve the current level of achievement, and help each other build on their strengths and address their weaknesses.
- Teachers act on the assumption that all students can and should learn at high levels and that it is the school's job to see to it that students learn (rather than merely be taught).
- The school is safe and orderly: it has clear parameters for student behavior, consistent enforcement of those parameters, and an overarching stipulation that members of the school community treat each other with mutual respect.

The difference in the second list is that all the items are within the staff's sphere of influence: teachers and administrators have the autonomy to implement every one of them. In addition, the items on the second list have a much more powerful impact on student achievement than those on the wish list; when schools create these eight conditions, there is a significant positive effect on student learning.

The items on the first list are all valid and people should advocate for them. Class size, better materials, higher teacher salaries, etc. are important. "But it is equally clear" argues DuDour, "that these changes are not absolute prerequisites for helping more students learn at higher levels. Ultimately, educators must make a choice between two school improvement strategies. The first strategy, which I call the 'if only' approach, bases hopes for school improvement on others: 'if only the school board would reduce class sizes, if only the parents were more supportive, if only the students were better prepared and more motivated.' The focus is outward as we look for others to solve our problems. The other strategy is to focus on the conditions that lie within our sphere of influence. This can-do strategy shifts the focus inward as we begin to ask, 'What can we do to monitor each student's learning on a timely basis, to respond with more time and support when a student struggles, to create time within the school day to work collaboratively?' Schools that resort to the 'if only' strategy spend their time looking out the window for the solutions to their problems. Schools

that commit to the can-do strategy spend their time looking in the mirror. Which way are you looking?"

"Leading Edge: Are You Looking Out the Window or in a Mirror?" by Richard DuFour, *Journal of Staff Development*, Summer 2004 (Vol. 25, #3)
<http://www.nsd.org/library/publications/jsd/dufour253.cfm>

2. The Efficacy of Quarterly Assessments and Teacher Teamwork

Harvard-trained social psychologist Jeff Howard begins his four-day "Efficacy" seminars by describing an all-too-typical inner-city classroom – kids wreak havoc, lessons give way to power struggles, homework is a joke. Howard then asks participants if they have ever seen "Room 206" – a classroom where disadvantaged kids are quiet and well-behaved, study hard, and achieve proficiency on state tests. In every seminar, no matter how small, at least one example of Room 206 is identified, and Howard makes that the pivot of his training: "If it can be done, then we have to ask ourselves the question: is it moral for the rest of us *not* to do it?"

Howard believes that the American belief in innate ability (unevenly distributed among groups within society) hampers the achievement of many low-performing students: "Once you convey to children – whether consciously or not – that they are too 'dumb' to learn, they will almost always prove you right." Students do that by not committing effort to their school work and seeking self-esteem and fulfillment in other arenas. The goal of Efficacy seminars, honed over the last 30 years, is to teach people that sustained, effective effort, rather than innate ability, can bring virtually all kids to the proficient level on rigorous state tests. Once students have confronted their core beliefs about intelligence, they are free to commit to their studies and can learn how to work smart.

This philosophy captivated Pamela Mason, a principal in Milton, MA. "Our teachers could not have been working any harder," she said. "They have created all sorts of interventions – after-school programs, summer programs – everything you could possibly imagine. But the scores weren't going up and the gaps just got larger. We needed a new approach."

The heart of Efficacy's attack on this kind of achievement gap is the "Self-Directed Improvement System." Teachers set clear proficiency targets for each grade (aligned with state standards), write common year-end assessments, and then create quarterly assessments to give feedback on students' progress every nine weeks. Teacher teams meet to look at students' performance on each quarterly assessment,

analyze what they mean, and plan strategies for improving their teaching and getting extra help to students who are struggling. “It is the same concept as a videogame,” says Howard. “In an arcade, every kid comes in knowing exactly what the target is... getting the gold, or taking the castle. In our case, it’s mastering long division or writing an essay.” Video games have an excellent “feedback delivery device,” and Howard aims to install a similar feedback loop in schools. He wants teachers and students to view the natural difficulties they face as feedback, not failure.

Quarterly assessments come in various forms: standardized tests, essays, or portfolio projects. A key Efficacy tenet is that these assessments must be iterations of the year-end test (not unit tests). This takes some getting used to. In the first week of school in Carol Gruber’s Palm Springs, Florida first-grade class, her students sat down and took a reading and math test that assessed what they needed to know by the *end* of the year. Students found it hard and needed to be reassured (and some of them needed to have their tears dried) to help them understand why they were taking a test that was so difficult. As Gruber explained it, “I make sure to tell them it’s not about how smart they are. It’s about what I’ve taught them.” She asks her students: “Have we learned any of these concepts yet?” Kids shake their heads and begin to relax, and she goes on: “This test will tell you – and me – where we need to work hard. By the year’s end, you will know this. We will work together to make sure of it.”

All the students at each grade level will take versions of year-end tests three more times during the year. Teachers help students track their progress on individual charts (for their eyes only) and on a wall charts that show the whole class’s progress. “This way,” Gruber says, “students can see themselves learning and improving, and as teachers we can see the areas that still need work.”

Howard maintains that the key to getting the most from quarterly assessments is for teachers to meet regularly to analyze the results and find new strategies for getting all students to proficiency. “Teachers must share lesson plans, problem-solving approaches, and class work, adapting the most successful strategies for their own students’ individual needs. Then they must meet with their students, so that each child knows the kind of effort that is required – and most importantly, that teachers believe they can reach the goal.”

Is this super-careful alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment really necessary? Kati Haycock of the Education Trust believes that in high-poverty schools, it most certainly is. “In well-to-do communities,” she says, “learning is in the oxygen. If teachers are not methodical, it doesn’t make much of a difference – kids will

get support elsewhere. But poorer children who do little academic learning outside of the classroom need teacher who are systematic in teaching critical skills. Otherwise, it's simply not going to happen."

Efficacy has many devoted followers among the 30,000 educators in 50 school districts where the seminars have been given. A number of schools in Washington, D.C., Tacoma (WA), Palm Beach (FL), and elsewhere have made significant gains in student achievement. But Efficacy has yet to sweep a whole district, and the reason is often the high turnover in district leadership. Consistent application over a period of years is essential to success, says Rose Backhus, the Efficacy coordinator in Palm Springs. "Six-year-olds can't get there unless teachers tell them they can." Teachers can't get there if principals don't give them support. Principals can't get there if the district isn't behind them. "And no one," Backhus adds, "gets anywhere if the framework isn't constantly maintained."

"The Possible Dream: A Nation of Proficient Schoolchildren" by Cara Feinberg in *Ed. Magazine*, Spring 2004 (Vol. XLVIII, #1, p. 18-23), no e-link available. Full disclosure: I am on the board of the Efficacy Institute.

3. Linda Darling-Hammond on the Pitfalls of Accountability Systems

In this thoughtful article, Stanford professor Linda Darling-Hammond worries that testing and accountability systems that rely too heavily on rewards and sanctions may end up hurting the very students they were designed to help. She argues that tests are *information* for an accountability system, not the system itself. The most successful states and districts have focused on three key ingredients:

- *Building professional capacity* – Ensuring that teachers have deep knowledge of their subject matter and the advanced skills they need to teach to the standards. This means careful recruiting, hiring, and support of teachers. It also includes "restructuring school time and staffing patterns to allow teachers time to work and learn together."

- *Structuring schools to support high-quality student and teacher learning* – This includes looping (in most high-achieving European and Asian countries, students stay with the same teacher for at least two years, sometime for three or more) and also rethinking staffing patterns. In American schools, only 43% of total education staff are classroom teachers, as compared to 60-80% in many European and Japanese schools. This difference explains why U.S. teachers have only 3-5 hours a week for class preparation versus 15-20 hours a week for joint planning and learning in Europe and

Japan. Darling-Hammond writes, "Creating time for teachers to work together often means reducing the number of nonteaching staff, pullout teachers, and specialists and reassigning them to teaching teams to increase person power for classroom teaching."

- *Ensuring opportunities to learn* – Darling-Hammond believes that districts should develop opportunity-to-learn standards – standards for delivery systems and standards of practice – to identify how well schools are doing in providing students with the conditions they need to achieve and trigger corrective actions from the state and district. She argues for a more limited and appropriate role for test data: "Assessment data are helpful for creating more accountable systems to the extent that they provide relevant, valid, timely, and useful information about how individual students are doing and how schools are serving them... Accountability occurs only when a useful set of processes exists for interpreting and acting on the information in educationally productive ways."

Darling-Hammond concludes: "Test-based grade retention and denial of diplomas as the major solutions to low achievement are merely a symbol of the failure of the system to teach successfully... Genuine accountability requires instead both high standards and greater supports for student, teacher, and school learning."

"Standards, Accountability, and School Reform" by Linda Darling-Hammond in *Teachers College Record*, June 2004 (Vol. 106, #6, p. 1047-1085), no e-link yet; try in a few weeks at <http://www.tcrecord.org>.

4. Will High Stakes Tests Make the Rich Richer and the Poor Poorer?

In this troubling article, two midwestern researchers describe how educators in a small sample of Chicago Public Schools responded to high-stakes accountability. Schools that were under the gun because their students were performing poorly responded by focusing on improving the performance only of "pushable" student (those close to meeting standards), only in the tested grades, and only in the tested subjects, making heavy use of "test prep" materials. These struggling schools focused on getting off probation by "managing the impressions of external stakeholders." Their efforts to convince outsiders that the school was engaged in change efforts perverted the intention of accountability, emphasizing "the trappings of instructional innovation rather than substantive change."

Higher-performing schools, on the other hand, responded to high-stakes testing by working to enhance the performance of all students in all grades and all subject areas. School leaders used external pressures to encourage teachers to improve

and reward them for their accomplishments by “creatively pushing for continued improvement.”

The researchers noted that the probationary schools had many more minority and low-SES students. This means that in this small sample of schools, accountability policies had the effect of helping the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

“High-Stakes Accountability in Urban Elementary Schools: Challenging or Reproducing Inequality?” by John Diamond and James Spillane in *Teachers College Record*, June 2004 (Vol. 106, #6, p. 1145-1176), no e-link yet; try in a few weeks at <http://www.tcrecord.org>

5. Are High-School Exit Exams Tough Enough?

An Achieve, Inc. study of high-school exit exams in six states found that the level of difficulty is well within the grasp of most students; if anything, the tests are on the easy side. The study focused Florida, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Ohio, and Texas and found that exit tests measure skills that are usually taught in middle school or the freshman year of high school. Compared to international curriculum standards, U.S. tests are even easier: to pass the math tests, students need to answer questions on material that usually appears in 7th and 8th grades worldwide. Math exit tests mostly cover routine procedures or recall of facts, and the “algebra” questions are in fact pre-algebra. Half of the points on the English tests come from questions of basic comprehension and only 3 percent for critical reading (e.g., telling fact from opinion). Two of the states (Florida and Ohio) don’t even require students to write, and two other states (Maryland and Texas) rely heavily on multiple-choice items rather than on-demand writing.

“We looked at how well these tests measure what matters to colleges and employers,” said Matthew Gandal, the study’s director, “and concluded that none of these tests is overly demanding.” They only measure a fraction of what is needed for success beyond high school. Achieve urged states to stick with their exams and even increase the difficulty level over time, and also to work with school districts to find ways to assess important skills that do not lend themselves to mass assessment, e.g., oral presentations and doing research.

“High School Exit Exams Not All That Tough, Study Concludes” by Bess Keller in *Education Week*, June 16, 2004 (Vol. XXIII, #40, p. 15)
<http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=40Achieve.h23> The Achieve report is available at <http://www.achieve.org>.

6. Teach for America Scores Well

An independent evaluation of the effectiveness of Teach for America found that students taught by TFA teachers did better in mathematics than students taught by teachers hired through traditional means (and much better than kids taught by other novice teachers). Literacy achievement of TFA-taught students was comparable with that of students taught by other teachers. One researcher (in the Mathematica group, which conducted the study) said that the gains were comparable to what might be expected from reducing class size, and noted that hiring TFA teachers might be more cost-effective than hiring more teachers to cut down class size.

Since 1990, Teach for America has placed more than 10,000 recent liberal arts college graduates in high-poverty schools with teacher shortages – schools where principals frequently rely on emergency hires, long-term substitutes, and alternatively trained or certified teachers. The Mathematica study found that TFA teachers were much more likely to be graduates of highly-selective colleges (70 percent versus 3 percent), were quite likely to have earned a master’s degree in education after two years (25 percent versus 33 percent of other novice teachers), and had rates of student absenteeism and disciplinary incidents similar to those of other teachers (although TFA teachers were more likely to rate tardiness and fights as serious problems). Reflecting on the TFA teachers who have been at her Houston school since the early 1990’s, the principal said, “What they bring to the school is a sense that ‘if I can do it, anybody can do it,’ and that becomes part of the school culture. We’ll take success any way we can get it.”

“Study Finds Benefits in Teach for America” by Debra Viadero in *Education Week*, June 16, 2004 (Vol. XXIII, #40, p. 1, 26)

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=40TFA.h23> . The full study, *Effects of Teach for America on Students: Findings from a National Evaluation*, is available at <http://www.mathematica-mpr.com> .

7. Short Items:

a. What should we look for in a literacy coach? The reading specialist of days gone by has morphed into today’s reading coach or literacy coach, and the new position is ubiquitous in many districts. The International Reading Association recently came up with a statement on the roles and qualifications of the new position, and has taken the position that that only people who meet these five criteria should be literacy coaches:

- They should be excellent classroom teachers themselves.

- They should have deep knowledge of reading processes, acquisition, assessment, and instruction.
- They must have experience working with teachers to improve their practice.
- They should be experienced presenters and familiar with presenting to teacher groups in schools and at professional conferences.
- They must have training that will enable them to master the complexities of observing in classrooms and providing feedback to teachers.

“Spotlight on Reading Coaches: Position Statement Outlines Roles and Qualifications” in *Reading Today*, June/July 2004 (Vol. 21, #6, p. 1, 3). The full text will be available in early July at <http://www.reading.org>.

b. Book recommendations – Children’s, teachers’, and young adult book choices (in short list and fully annotated form) are available from the website of the International Reading Association. Check out <http://www.reading.org/choices/>.

c. Vision screening for preschool children – Only 22 percent of preschool children receive some type of vision screening, according to the National Eye Institute, an arm of the National Institutes of Health – this despite the fact that vision disorders are the fourth most prevalent disability in the U.S. and the most common disability among children. Most school districts rely on primary-care physicians to spot vision problems, but doctors miss a lot – lazy eye, crossed eyes, and other vision problems – because they almost always use the chart-on-the-wall test for distance vision. Kentucky is the only state that requires comprehensive eye exams for children before they enter kindergarten. The National Eye Institute thinks there should be universal, comprehensive vision screening and early intervention for children with problems that will interfere with school achievement.

“Vision Screening” by Darcia Harris Bowman in *Education Week*, June 16, 2004 (Vol. XXIII, #40, p. 18) <http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=40Health.h23>

d. The effect of state tests on students’ computer writing skills – This national study by two Boston College researchers looked at whether teachers are cutting back on the amount of computer writing they ask their students to do because state writing tests have students use handwriting. The answer: yes, teachers are limiting writing on computers as a direct result of paper-based state tests. In addition, the study found that teachers were doing less to develop students’ computer skills in urban and poor-

performing schools than in suburban schools. “The combined effect,” the researchers say, “is that those students who most need opportunities to develop skills in using computers for writing in schools may not be acquiring those opportunities as a result of teachers’ responses to paper-based state tests.”

This led the authors to make a strong recommendation that state tests begin to allow (or require) students to use computers on writing tests. “To do anything less,” they argue, “will likely lead more teachers and schools to decrease the use of computers for writing and consequently further exacerbate the technology-use gap between urban and suburban students. Continued decreases in the instructional use of computers for writing... will perpetuate an educational process that underprepares many students for the workplace that is increasingly dependent on technology oriented skills.” If states begin to require computer use on writing tests, it would spur teachers to use computers much more extensively in school, which would narrow the urban-suburban gap.

“Instructional Uses of Computers for Writing: The Effect of State Testing Programs” by Michael Russell and Lisa Abrams in *Teachers College Record*, June 2004 (Vol. 106, #6, p. 1332-1357), no e-link yet; try in a few weeks at <http://www.tcrecord.org>

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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 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
Journal of Staff Development
Middle School Journal
NAASP Bulletin
New York Times
New Yorker
Newsweek
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal Magazine
Principal Leadership
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Review of Educational Research
Teachers College Record
Teacher Magazine

E-links will be provided whenever possible.

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