Marshall Memo 12

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
November 10, 2003

In this Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"What the hell was that?" The reaction of a Japanese educator watching a videotape of an American lesson when a P.A. announcement is heard in the background. More than 30 percent of U.S. lessons on the TIMSS videotapes were interrupted by such announcements; it did not happen once during Japanese lessons. Gerald Bracey in "Teachers Around the World", *Phi Delta Kappan*, November 2003 (Vol. 85, #3, p. 253-4)

"Collaboration does not occur when there is competitive teaching. If one is trying to outdo the other, you're not going to share anything. What are you going to share? Nothing." A North Carolina teacher quoted in *Elementary School Journal* (see #1)

"Teachers get together for many reasons over the course of a school year, but rarely are they invited to look closely together at evidence of student learning…[I]f teachers are to engage together in the tough work of instructional improvement, the school must organize for it." Judith Warren Little et al. in Phi Delta Kappan (see #4)

"Parents care about equity and fairness for all students, but first and foremost they care about their own child's progress. How is my child doing? How does he or she compare with others? Does he or she like his or her teachers? Do his or her teachers like my child? Are those teachers effective? They want to know with clarity what their children should be learning at each grade, and what they can do to help. Some districts provide clear answers. Most don't." Adam Kernan-Schloss and Andy Plattner in *Education Week*, November 5, 2003 (Vol. XXIII, #10, p. 41)

"School systems don't change because they see the light. They change because they feel the heat." A successful school superintendent quoted in "Tipping Toward Parents" in *Education Week* November 5, 2003 (Vol. XXIII #10, pg. 41)

1. The Road to High Student Achievement in Three Schools

A fascinating study in the new *Elementary School Journal* describes the change dynamics in three high-poverty North Carolina elementary schools that produced dramatic gains in student achievement (the average percent of students at or above grade level in state reading and math tests rose from 46.2% in 1997 and 75.6% in 2002). The schools were transformed "from places where failure was often expected to places where everyone now expects to achieve." Each school's path to success was somewhat different, but watch for the common themes:

• Archer Elementary School started with character education and then moved into literacy. In the first year of the change process, staff met and agreed on four shared values: integrity, respect, discipline, and excellence. This "collective stance toward learning" came to be called "Archer Pride", and the staff spent a year inculcating it in students, parents, and colleagues. As time went by, it became a schoolwide mantra, with students chanting in some classrooms, "Do your best. Have you done your best? Is this your best work?"

The next year, the staff began to focus on implementing balanced literacy in all classrooms, including:

- Guided reading – small-group instruction of students at similar reading levels with a focus on students understanding and explaining what is read;
- Writing – writing for pleasure and in all content areas
- Word study – sounding out unfamiliar words and expanding vocabulary;
- Self-selected reading – getting students reading books they could read independently and promoting interested and reading for pleasure.

This approach to teaching reading was new to many teachers and it was rolled out and developed in weekly grade-level meetings. In these meetings, teachers reviewed student progress on a range of assessments and discussed teaching strategies. Using data as a basis for dialogue become part of the culture. There were also periodic big-picture, how's-it-going meetings. In one summer meeting, the staff looked at year-end test data and collectively decided that students had not built up the stamina to be successful on long reading tests. The school developed strategies to help students build their stamina through extensive independent reading the next year.

• At Hunter Elementary School, the staff started the change process by implementing a balanced literacy program called ELLI (Early Literacy Learning Initiative, now Literacy Collaborative) aimed at developing strong independent readers and writers. They used the same program consistently for a period of years

and had a curriculum facilitator to help keep them organized and focused. Hunter School also adopted schoolwide norms of differentiated instruction and "focused instruction." The latter consisted of:

- Weekly team meetings to plan instruction and share ideas;
- Quarterly curriculum mapping in which grade-level teams set benchmark goals and review progress;
- Posted daily schedules that mapped out a sequence for guided reading groups;
- "Focus cards" that expressed lesson objectives in 'kid talk' (each teacher, assistant, student intern, community helper, or tutor was expected to begin with a focus card to let kids know exactly what they were expected to learn by the end of the lesson);
- Agenda books that helped students keep track of assignments.

Hunter School also came up with a slogan to express beliefs about working hard to meet standards: "Together we can." The school's three key values were: relationships, responsibility, and results-oriented efficacy.

• North Elementary School started the change process by implementing the CIERA (Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement) literacy program. It involved:

- Whole-class instruction of word study and high-level questions;
- Integrating reading into math, science, and social studies;
- Running records to measure students' progress on a regular basis;
- Guided reading – organizing small-group lessons based on reading levels;
- Self-selected reading – promoting independent, sustained reading, stocking classroom libraries with Lexile-leveled books, encouraging reading for pleasure;
- Questioning skills – promoting higher levels of reasoning;
- Literature circles and cooperative group instruction.

Teachers met weekly in grade-level teams and in monthly study groups to reinforce their collective norms and use multiple forms of student achievement data to drive improvement.

Looked at together, these three case studies begin to capture the dynamics of school improvement. Some key factors:

- All three schools developed a "cultural stance" – a moral purpose and ethical obligation that guided the work of teachers and administrators. This became

part of the personality of the school and communicated expectations and values to new teachers and new students.

- All three schools had a strong literacy program with common elements, including guided reading in leveled groups and an emphasis on independent reading.
- All three schools used weekly grade-level team meetings to identify needs, develop strategies for improving student performance, and link school-based staff development to daily practice.
- In all three schools, the reform spiral was fueled by "data-directed dialogue": teachers used formal and informal interim assessments of student learning to fine-tune instruction and identify students in need of extra help. "This continuous dialogue helped to cultivate collective efficacy at each school and provided a renewable source of energy for participants."
- All three schools carefully developed a collegial atmosphere in which teachers knew that when they were unsure of how to meet students' needs, they could count on their colleagues for suggestions and support..

The author of this study believes that these three success stories validate a theory of how a failing school can change through a "recurring spiral":

- Teachers and principal identify priorities for school improvement;
- They target specific areas for instructional improvement;
- They implement shared instructional strategies;
- This boosts student achievement;
- This in turn strengthens the professional learning community;
- As a result, teachers develop more supportive relationships with students;
- The school culture grows more collaborative;
- Teachers develop a stronger sense of collective efficacy;
- Student achievement reaches very high levels.

"Promoting a Collaborative Professional Culture in Three Elementary Schools That Have Beaten the Odds" by David Strahan, *Elementary School Journal*, November 2003 (Vol. 104, #2, p. 127-146). Sorry, no e-link for this article.

2. Improving Teaching versus Teachers

In this important article, James Hiebert et al. draw a key distinction between improving *teaching* and improving *teachers*. Their view is that Americans have been hung up on superstar teachers such as Jaime Escalante as the model for improving

student performance. "Classroom teaching in the United States has been viewed as a personal skill, invented and refined by each teacher during his or her career. Good teaching is considered to be the result of each teacher's doing his or her job behind the classroom door. Good teaching is believed to be idiosyncratic, depending on individual style and personality. To improve teaching, many say, the profession must find better teachers."

But this has not been an effective way of improving teaching and schools, and teaching had not changed that much over the last century. Why? "Because the average classroom is not affected much by what the few celebrity teachers do. To make a dent in the learning experiences for most students, educators must find a way to improve the quality of instruction in the average classroom. Even slight improvements in the average classroom, accumulated over time, would have a more profound effect on student around the country than recruiting a hundred more Escalantes into the classroom." In the medical profession, what has improved over the last century has not been the quality of people becoming doctors but *standard practice*. Education needs a similar improvement of standard practice – what works best to get results.

This means focusing on the quality of teaching versus the quality of teachers. This happens when we "analyze the details of ordinary classroom instruction, with all its warts and foibles, and then learn to see more effective ways of teaching." And to do this, we need to have groups of teachers analyze videotapes of day-to-day lessons – no special preparation, no special materials. "This will move us away from a view of teaching as a solitary activity, owned personally by each teacher. It moves us toward a view of teaching as a professional activity open to collective observations, study, and improvement. It invites ordinary teachers to recognize and accept the responsibility for improving not only their own practice, but the shared practice of the professional…Petty nitpicking and *ad hominem* criticism of typical classroom lessons must give way to serious professional analysis for the purposes of improving everyone's teaching."

The authors applaud teachers who have the guts to make their everyday teaching available for this kind of analysis, calling them the new heroes of teaching.

"The New Heroes of Teaching: Opening Classroom Doors for the Good of the Profession" by James Hiebert, Ronald Gallimore, and James W. Stigler in *Education Week*, November 5, 2003 (Vol. XXIII, #10, p. 56, 42)
http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=10hiebert.h23

3. How Can We Keep New Teachers from Leaving in Droves?

About 2,200,000 new teachers will be needed to fill the classrooms of those who are retiring or leaving the profession in the next decade; low-income communities will be especially hard hit by teacher turnover. What programs and conditions increase the chances of good teachers staying? Several perennial factors continue to make teachers ambivalent about hanging in there (low pay and prestige, inadequate resources, isolating work, subordinate status, and limited career opportunities) and some recent factors make some teachers even more uncertain about a long-term career in education (unprecedented new career options, especially for women, and increasing scrutiny of teachers' work).

But a study by Susan Moore Johnson and Sarah Burkeland found that "in deciding whether to stay in their schools, transfer to new schools, or leave public school teaching, the teachers weighed, more than anything else, whether they could be effective with their students." Teachers cared most about "the many ways in which the working conditions in their schools – teaching assignments, collegial interaction, curriculum, administration, discipline – either supported or stymied them in that search for success." The immediate challenge for new teachers, after all, is to succeed with students day by day. For that to happen, and for the hemorrhaging of new teachers to cease, certain conditions need to be in place:

- Principals need to hire only teachers who are well matched to the school and resist the tendency to rush to fill positions with plausible, available candidates.
- Principals and teachers need to run a stable school and create an orderly work environment for new teachers.
- The school needs to have clear goals and a focus on learning.
- New teachers should get an appropriate assignment and a manageable workload, which may mean a reduced teaching load and fewer administrative duties.
- New teachers need to get regular feedback on their teaching, high-quality, targeted professional development, and clear expectations for improvement.
- New teachers should be assigned mentors who give them personal encouragement, assistance in curriculum development, advice about lesson plans, and feedback on their teaching (few current mentor plans do this).
- New teachers need sufficient resources with which to teach.
- Regular teacher team meetings and planning times need to be scheduled in.

- Collegial meetings should mix teachers of different levels of experience (as contrasted with "veteran-oriented professional cultures" geared to experienced teachers, with norms of privacy and professional autonomy, and "notice-oriented professional cultures" dominated by new teacher, featuring youth, idealism, and inexperience – but giving new teachers little professional guidance).
- New teachers should be able to count on their colleagues for advice and support.

Johnson and Birkeland conclude with this warning: "Unless schools and local and state policies pay careful attention to the needs and wants of the next generation of teachers, the pool of recruits will be small the rate of retention unimpressive. Daily and over the next decades, students will pay the price in their classrooms."

"Pursuing a "Sense of Success": New Teachers Explain Their Career Decisions" by Susan Moore Johnson and Sarah E. Birkeland in *American Educational Research Journal*, Fall 2003 (Vol. 40, #3, p. 581-617) Sorry, no e-link.

4. Looking at Student Work: Strong Potential, Significant Barriers

When groups of teachers look at student work together (as opposed to evaluating student work alone, which teachers have always done), there are potential benefits for teaching and learning. But the research so far had not provided many specifics or given clear evidence of the impact on learning. Judith Warren Little and her colleagues looked at three approaches to looking at student work and found that:

• Regular meetings whose primary agenda is to talk about student learning and teaching practice will not happen by themselves. Getting together to look closely together at evidence of student learning is quite rare in schools, and it needs to be deliberately organized and scheduled if it is going to happen.

• The tendency in teacher meetings is for *teachers'* work to be on the table (e.g., lesson plans and instructional materials). Putting actual student work and data on the table and making it the center of discussion is quite new and takes strong leadership.

• Protocols (procedural steps and guidelines) are essential to structure the conversation in looking at student work sessions. Protocols are needed to slow down teachers' usual responses to student work (evaluate it, grade it, and move on) and get an open-minded conversation going about student understanding and teaching practice. Protocols remind teachers to refrain from making judgments and help them concentrate on describing what they saw in the student work and on posing

questions. Protocols also structure meetings in a way that may not come naturally (e.g., timed phases devoted to describing the work non-judgmentally, then interpreting the work, asking clarifying questions, etc.). A good protocol "creates a structure that makes it safe to ask challenging questions of each other" (for example, the Tuning Protocol provides for both "cool" and "warm" feedback). Protocols help people get beyond being too polite and nice to each other and begin to take on the hard issues. This sometimes takes months of skillful facilitation, repeatedly bringing people back to the basic purpose of raising student achievement.

There are three barriers to making looking at student work happen and making it an effective tool in enhancing student learning: (a) concern for personal comfort and collegial relationships (all student work is also, in a sense, a teacher's work); (b) scarce time and competing interests (for example, a teacher who wants to talk about the achievement of her whole class, not just a few pieces of work); (c) uncertainty about what student work to bring to a meeting and what to stay about it in the time allotted. All this takes time and training to work out.

The article concludeps by noting that looking at student work is a good way to "bring *students* more consistently and explicitly into deliberations among teachers. Looking at student work has the potential to expand teachers' opportunity to learn, to cultivate a professional community that his both willing and able to inquire into practice, and to focus school-based teacher conversations directly on the improvement of teaching and learning. These are benefits worth pursing…They also suggest that a slogan is but a starting point."

"Looking at Student Work for Teacher Learning, Teacher Community, and School Reform" by Judith Warren Little, Maryl Gearhart, Marnie Curry, and Judith Kafka in *Phi Delta Kappan*, November 2003 (Vol. 85, #3, p. 185-192). No e-link available.

5. Short Items:

• ***High-performing cultures*** – In his weekly (paid) column in *Education Week*, Dennis Sparks of the National Staff Development Council has this to say on the role of principals in fostering a professional learning community:

"A widely-held view of instructional improvement is that good teaching is primarily an individual affair and that principals as instructional leaders will interact one-on-one with each teacher to strengthen his or her efforts in the classroom. The principal is like the hub of a wheel with teachers at the end of each spoke…

"NSCD's view, on the other hand, is that some of the most important forms of professional learning occur in daily interactions among teachers in which they assist one another in improving lessons, deepening understanding of the content they teach, analyzing student work, examining various types of data on student performance, and solving the myriad of problems they face each day. From this perspective, sustained teacher-to-teacher communication about teaching and learning is one of the most powerful and underused sources of professional learning and instructional improvement. While the Council's view does not negate the value of principals' expertise and direct engagement in the improvement of instruction and student learning, it recognizes that it cannot be the exclusive or even the primary form of learning-oriented interactions among teachers. Consequently, one of the most important responsibilities of principals is the development of a high-performance culture in which productive relationships can thrive… The creation of such a culture means establishing norms and practices that lead to trust and mutual respect, continuous improvement, team-focused collaboration, clarity of thought, the candid expression of views, and interpersonal accountability for the fulfillment of commitments."

"Leaders as Creators of High-Performance Cultures" by Dennis Sparks in *Education Week*, November 5, 2003 (Vol. XXIII, #10, p. 25). No e-link available.

• ***Key kindergarten reading skills*** – A study of 102 children from kindergarten through second grade found that proficiency in four skills was highly correlated with reading success in first and second grade:

- Alphabet recognition;
- Concept of word in text;
- Spelling with beginning and ending consonants;
- Word recognition

Proficiency in these skills was such a powerful predictor of success that teachers could tell half-way through kindergarten which students would have difficulty in first and second grade. But these students' failure can be headed off at the pass: if teachers use assessments starting in kindergarten to identify students weak in these areas, they can intervene with extra attention and help and students can improve.

"Kindergarten Predictors of First- and Second-Grade Reading Achievement" by Darrell Morris, Janet Bloodgood, and Jan Perney, *Elementary School Journal*, November 2003 (Vol. 104, #2, p. 93-105). No e-link available.

• ***Hey, what about Boston?*** – A letter to *Education Week* said that New York City is not the only major city – and not the only one – to implement supposedly risky and cutting-edge literacy and math curriculum approaches. Boston Public Schools, the letter-writer said, has been doing both for years.

"Boston Has Had Its Own 'Maverick' Curricula" in *Education Week*, Nov. 5, 2003 (Vol. XXIII, #10, p. 42) http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=10Letter.h23

• ***The five E's of teaching*** – At the beginning of his teaching career in the 1970's, Jim Mahoney had the unique experience of looping with the same group of rural Ohio middle-school students for three years. He recently had a 25th reunion that he and almost all his students attended, and they reflected on the qualities of his teaching that students remembered best:

- *Enthusiasm* – "You can't fake it with students. They know – and what's more, remember – whether you like or don't like what you do. Either way it rubs of."
- *Engagement* – Students remembered hands-on learning experiences the most.
- Equality – Students cared passionately about being treated fairly and equally.
- *Expectations* – "Expecting without supporting is like asking someone to fly by jumping off a building. Asking it – even demanding it – without support, guidance, and modeling doesn't work. Those supportive actions are what students remember."
- *Encouragement* – "There are no insignificant acts of kindness, no forgotten words of encouragement, no meaningless hugs of congratulations. Long after students have forgotten day-to-day lessons, they remember who you are, what you stood for, and how you treated them."

"What Matters: A Classroom Odyssey" by Jim Mahoney in *Phi Delta Kappan*, November 2003 (Vol. 85, #3, p. 235-238). No e-link available.

• ***Quiz yourself on religion in the classroom*** – Take this quiz to check on your legal savvy on the boundaries of religious teaching in schools. Which of these activities are OK? Answers next week.

1. A Jewish teacher lectures on the Five Pillars of Wisdom.
2. During a class discussion on the U.S. role in the Middle East, two students claim that the U.S. is obligated to "protect the Holy Land because America is a Christian nation."

3. During a unit on the American civil rights movement, a teacher assigns a group of students to research the role of the church in African American life.
4. A student brings a Bible to class every day and reads it silently during free reading time.
5. A student wears a T-shirt to class that reads, "Hell will keep you warm" on the front and "Are you saved?" on the back.
6. In response to an essay prompt asking students to write about the most influential person in their lives, a number of students write about Jesus.
7. In response to a speech prompt that asks students to give a seven-minute speech about the most influential person in their lives, one student talks about the Dalai Lama and Buddhist teaching.
8. A Muslim girl wears a head covering (*hijab*) to class.
9. A teacher tells his class that he is fasting for Ramadan.
10. A teacher has a calendar on her desk with Bible verses on each page.
11. After polling her class and finding that all the students identify themselves as Christian, a teacher holds a party on the last day of school before winter break and plays Christmas music.
12. A teacher tells students who are being rude to one another that they have a moral obligation to be good and kind to one another.

"Religion and Education: Walking the Line in Public Schools" by Joanne M. Marshall in *Phi Delta Kappan*, November 2003 (Vol. 85, #3, p. 239-242). No e-link available.

• ***Grandma is watching*** – *Education Week* reported on a 1,600-student high school in Vermont that is trying to curb student misbehavior by posting photographs of a 90-year old grandmother from the community who knowingly smiles and points a finger at passing students. The school was having problems with profanity and public displays of affection in the hallways and stairways and decided this was the way to curb it. "This is just behavior you wouldn't do at a family reunion or in front of your grandmother," suggested a committee member, and the idea was born. No data yet on whether grandma is making a difference.

"Watchful Gaze" by Olivia Doherty in *Education Week*, November 5, 2003 (Vol. XXIII, #10, p. 3) http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=10Take.h23

• ***Moderate computer use*** – A new study suggests that moderate home computer use (less than eight hours a week) may be helpful to student achievement:

students in this category did better on letter-word recognition, reading comprehension, and math than students who did not use computers at home. But students who used computers excessively (more than eight hours a week) did not score better on reading and math tests and weighed an average of 12 pounds more!

"Children's Home Computer Use Linked to Learning and Weight" by Rhea Borja, in *Education Week*, November 5, 2003 (Vol. XXIII, #10, p. 14). http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=10Tech.h23. The full study is available at www.gc.cuny.edu/studies/studies_index.htm.

• ***FDA advisory on anti-depressants*** – The Food and Drug Administration is advising doctors to be cautious prescribing anti-depressants to young people. Twenty recent studies suggested that there was more suicidal behavior and thinking among patients who were assigned several of the antidepressants, including citalopram, fluoxetine (Prozac), mirtazapine, nefazodone, paroxetine, sertraline, and venlafaxine. "The agency is not saying they have proof that antidepressants cause children to commit suicide," said Stephen Brock, a California psychology professor. "What we should all do is continue to be vigilant in watching for suicidal behavior and ideation in individuals who suffer from major depressive disorder."

"FDA Cautions Doctors That Antidepressants May Pose Youth Risks" by Darcia Harris Bowman, *Education Week*, November 5, 2003 (Vol. XXIII, #10, p. 13) http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=10Health.h23

Do you have feedback? Is anything missing?

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

kim.marshall8@verizon.net

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

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

• *School leadership* – Building a professional learning community; effective teamwork; effective schools practices; time management.

• *Effective teaching* – Key variables associated with high student achievement; supervision and evaluation of teachers; professional development of teachers; teacher leadership and career ladders; multiple intelligences and brain research.

• *Curriculum* – Alignment and planning with the end in sight; teaching for understanding; new ideas 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
Atlantic Monthly
Bay State Banner
Boston Globe
Commonwealth Magazine
Curriculum Update (ASCD)
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Elementary School Journal
Harpers
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Education Review
Harvard School of Education Ed. Magazine
New York Times
New Yorker
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal Magazine
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Review of Educational Research
Rethinking Schools
Teachers College Record
Teacher Magazine
and occasional books, lectures, and websites.

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