Marshall Memo 309

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
November 9, 2009

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1. The difference between strategic planning and having a strategy
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Quotes of the Week

"The sheer number of goals, strategies, and initiatives proposed in most strategic plans actually detracts from the district's ability to focus, and it is often unclear how implementation will lead to improved outcomes for students."
Rachel Curtis and Elizabeth City (see item #1)

"No school system's vision can be attained without fixing serious problems. At the same time, the way problems are solved can help build the capacity needed to realize the vision."
Rachel Curtis and Elizabeth City (*ibid*.)

"What my school is learning, and what current research suggests, is that teachers don't improve by listening to someone tell them how to do something newer or better in their classrooms. They learn by working together to address problems they themselves identify in their schools and classrooms."
Ross Hunefeld (see item #3)

"A new teacher willing to work and learn with colleagues will quickly surpass a more experienced colleague who is not interested in collaborating."
Ross Hunefeld (*ibid*.)

"Good teaching occurs when educators on teams are involved in a cycle in which they analyze data, determine student and adult learning goals based on that analysis, design joint lessons that use evidence-based strategies, have access to coaches for support in improving their classroom instruction, and then assess how their learning and teamwork affect student achievement."
Stephanie Hirsch, "A New Definition", *Journal of Staff Development*, Fall 2009, p. 10

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1. The Difference Between Strategic Planning and Having a Strategy

"Schools and school systems are noisy places," say Rachel Curtis and Elizabeth City in this *Harvard Education Letter* article. "Crises, big and small, come one after another… Many systems live in a persistently reactive mode to these external stimuli… Improvement efforts are fractured, disconnected, incompletely implemented, and never assessed." Strategic planning is supposed to counteract these forces and provide focus and direction, but the process more often consists of school people going through the motions to comply with mandates from the central office.

True, the strategic planning *process* can help build community within a school, but the result is usually a plan that is "broad, shallow, and not very useful," say Curtis and City. "The sheer number of goals, strategies, and initiatives proposed in most strategic plans actually detracts from the district's ability to focus, and it is often unclear how implementation will lead to improved outcomes for students. As a result, most systems are unable to be precise, agile, and intentional about giving students what they most need to succeed."

"Strategy is about filtering this noise," continue the authors. It's about asking probing questions and making informed choices. A strategy should be a few carefully chosen ideas on how people, activities, and resources work to accomplish the organization's purpose. Ideally these ideas are "aligned, coherent, mutually reinforcing, and add up to a whole that is greater than the sum of its individual parts." Here are the three headings of a school's strategy:

- Improving instruction;
- Developing a student assessment system;
- Creating a comprehensive student-support system.

A good strategy "provides a focus based on data and beliefs about what will be most effective in helping students learn. By committing to and pursuing a strategy, we have a calm center from which to act clearly and deliberately."

Curtis and City are not suggesting that schools abandon strategic planning, but they believe three questions need to be answered clearly before the process can be worthwhile:

• *What are we doing?* Most school districts take on far too many things and improvement efforts are fragmented, poorly aligned, and ineffective. The trick is to carefully choose high-quality initiatives that fit together and then think through how to operationalize them and train people for execution.

• *Why are we doing it?* Leaders need to choose the initiatives that will have the greatest impact on student learning and communicate the rationale for their choices to all stakeholders.

• *How are we doing it?* "In systems that are improving results for all students," say the authors, "everyone works hard, but more importantly, they work smart." In these systems, people are strategic, intentional, weigh trade-offs, check on results, and constantly adapt.

Curtis and City draw the following comparisons between strategic planning and effective strategy work:

- A strategic plan focuses on the status quo; a strategy pursues new ways to accelerate improvement.
- A strategic plan addresses an external audience; a strategy addresses an internal audience.
- A strategic plan takes a broad, incremental approach; a strategy focuses on doing a few things well.
- A strategic plan includes discrete, unrelated initiatives; a strategy integrates a few key initiatives.
- A strategic plan fits within the current structure and culture; a strategy requires people to work together in new ways.
- A strategic plan is rarely revised based on new information; a strategy is continually reconsidered and adapted.

Bearing all this in mind, the authors suggest that school improvement efforts should be judged by whether they have four characteristics:

• *Addressing the instructional core* – Are all efforts, central-office and school-based, focused on improving the quality of teaching and student learning?

• *Focused, coherent and synergistic* – Do all elements of the strategy complement and mutually reinforce each other ?

• *Visionary and practical* – "No school system's vision can be attained without fixing serious problems," say Curtis and City. "At the same time, the way problems are solved can help build the capacity needed to realize the vision." For example, one district attacked the problem of disappointing third-grade literacy test scores by providing pullout remediation for low-performing students. Another district addressed the same problem by designing interventions starting in kindergarten aimed at solving reading problems, getting students reading more, and developing their love of reading. The second district was more forward-looking, addressing the problem with a larger vision of the sort of readers it wants to produce.

• *Ownership and involvement* – People at all levels of the district should be able to describe the strategy and tell their part in it.

"The *Real* Race to the Top: To Win, Your District Needs a Strategy – Not Just a Strategic Plan" by Rachel Curtis and Elizabeth City in *Harvard Education Letter*, November/December 2009 (Vol. 25, #6, p. 8, 6-7) http://www.hepg.org/hel/article/428

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2. Using Improv Theater in English Language Learning Classrooms

In this article in *Essential Teacher*, Colorado Heights University professor and long-time improvisational actor Jon Wilkerson enthusiastically recommends using improv

techniques in English language learning classrooms. “The transformation in the classroom is quick and dramatic,” he says. “I have seen rooms full of bored and lackluster students suddenly start ringing with laughter and delight. I have seen hostile and fearful faces start smiling and leading the charge. And it’s almost a cliché that the shyest person in the room becomes a chest-thumping hero. What’s more, I have heard English spoken. I have seen students open their mouths and heard English pour out of them – lovely, confident, creative English… The principles of improv can help students make the leap from the classroom into their dreams. By giving students the tools to be creative and confident in conversations, we are stoking the engine of their success.”

Here are some of the improv games Wilkerson suggests, each lasting between one and four minutes:

• *Paper slips* – Scatter around the “stage” slips of paper with vocabulary words students have been studying and ask two or three students to come up. They get a suggestion from the audience and begin their improvisational skit, occasionally picking up one of the slips and working the word into the next line of dialogue so it makes sense.

• *Emotional switch* – Have students generate a list of emotions or characteristics (e.g., nosey, sad, delighted). Then have 2-3 students come up, get a suggestion, and start an improv scene. Every 30 seconds, a student calls out one of the words, and all the characters on stage must act out that word as strongly as possible, so it makes sense in the scene.

• *Slide show* – Have two students (the “experts”) sit in chairs on one side of the stage. Have two other students (the “slides”) stand on the other side. The class throws out a suggestion for a topic and the slides have to freeze in an interesting pose, creating a picture. The experts then describe what is going on in the picture and what it has to do with the topic. When the experts say, “Next slide,” the slides change their pose.

• *No exit* – Two or three students come up, are given a location (e.g., restaurant, elevator), and establish their characters and the environment. The teacher then says, “Go” and the students must try to leave as quickly as possible, giving a plausible reason (e.g., “I have to go to the bathroom”). Other students try to block their exit with by saying something that would prevent the students from leaving (e.g., “My brother is in the bathroom”). The winner is the first student who manages to leave the scene.

Wilkerson believes that leading improv activities takes no special talent, but he suggests some general principles:

- Offer unconditional positive regard. “Love your students,” he says. “Make them feel that they are liked and appreciated, and that you are on their side.”
- Always be the first to play a game, and model the kind of commitment and zaniness you want to see.
- Failure is okay. “Laugh at the gaffes,” says Wilkerson. “Mistakes are opportunities to exercise creative problem-solving skills.”
- Start small and watch students gradually gain confidence and take bigger risks.

- Explain and demonstrate clearly. "Take your time explaining the games," advises Wilkerson. "Put them together one element at a time; it's harder to fix things when you're in the middle of an activity."

For students "on stage", the essence of improv is commitment (throwing oneself completely into the role), listening (really paying attention to what's going on), acceptance (going with the flow), support (helping fellow actors succeed), spontaneity (trusting one's instincts), and fun ("If you're not having fun doing improv, then your audience won't either," says Wilkerson).

"Improv Meets English Language Learning" by Jon Wilkerson in *Essential Teacher*, October 2009 (Vol. 6, #3-4, p. 24-26), no e-link available

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3. Collaborative Professional Learning in a Chicago School

"What my school is learning, and what current research suggests, is that teachers don't improve by listening to someone tell them how to do something newer or better in their classrooms," says Chicago school administrator Ross Hunefeld in this *Education Week* article. Why doesn't conventional PD work?

- In any captive audience of teachers, there are large variations in experience, proficiency, interests, and needs.
- This makes it virtually impossible for a presenter to be relevant and helpful to most teachers.
- Even if teachers are attentive, research shows that there's little carry-over to classroom practice – the dreaded knowing/doing gap.
- Outside experts are expensive, and those funds could be put to better use.

"Rather than hiring external presenters," says Hunefeld, "schools can see much better results by putting the responsibility for, and control of, professional growth in the hands of their own teachers. There are few problems teachers can't solve, and few techniques they can't master, given adequate time and resources."

The key ingredients are time, support, and access to the Internet. Given these, teams can find answers in articles and studies from around the world – and can share their own ideas outside their school. The empowered team approach takes advantage of in-building expertise, gives veteran teachers a chance to be leaders, allows teams to respond to their own students' needs and proceed at their own pace, and empowers them to find answers to questions they can't answer immediately. "Experimentation with new teaching methods happens in a classroom-as-laboratory setting," says Hunefeld, "so the implementation is virtually automatic."

At Hunefeld's school in Chicago, teacher teams began by looking at test results from the previous year and setting measurable learning targets for student achievement. Then teachers researched key areas and chose a strategy, among them:

- Math teachers decided to improve the level of questioning in classes;
- English teachers worked on vertical alignment of their planning;

- Science and elective teachers began implementing reading strategies.
- Reading teachers worked on pre-, during-, and post-reading strategies that would more effectively reach their students.

As they implemented their strategies, teachers looked at interim assessment results to measure progress and tweak the strategy. At the end of each semester, the school held a "share fair" in which teams shared what they had learned. The results were impressive – the highest student achievement in the school's 10-year history.

Implementing the new approach was not without problems. Hunefeld has suggestions for schools thinking about taking this approach:

- Try to provide the right amount of structure for teacher teams – not too much and not too little.
- Take the time to do team-building activities and establish group norms up front.
- Carve out enough time during the work day for team meetings.
- Find efficient, informative ways of measuring student progress.
- Continuously adjust the process based on feedback and results.

Hunefeld believes this approach to PD would change the role of outside consultants. "These experts are certainly important," he says, "but in the new plan they would have to change how they presented their material. Increasingly, experts would respond over long distances, in individualized ways, to targeted groups of teachers. Rather than having a reading expert address an entire school staff, for instance, groups of teachers working on content-area reading strategies in various schools around the country could interact with and learn from a university-based expert via conference call, webinar, e-mail, or video."

This PD approach also has implications for teacher hiring. "A new teacher willing to work and learn with colleagues will quickly surpass a more experienced colleague who is not interested in collaborating," says Hunefeld. "Principals should take this into account as they look for new members to add to their teams."

Finally, this professional development model suggests that schools of education should train aspiring teachers in action research and strive to produce teachers who are ready to direct their own PD. "Our teachers need to be as adept as our scientists at working in teams to uncover current knowledge in their field and pushing themselves to new learning," says Hunefeld.

"When Teachers Are the Experts: How Schools Can Improve Professional Development" by Ross Hunefeld in *Education Week*, Nov. 4, 2009 (Vol. 29, #10, p. 24-25), http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2009/11/04/10hunefeld.h29.html

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4. A Balanced Assessment System

(Originally titled "The Quest for Quality")

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Educational Testing Service assessment experts Stephen Chappuis, Jan Chappuis, and Rick Stiggins present five keys to high-quality

assessments. "Only assessments that satisfy these standards," they say, "…will be capable of informing sound decisions." They are:

• *Clear purpose* – Teachers should know exactly why they are using an assessment – to inform students of their progress, to help improve teaching, or for a final grade?

• *Specific learning targets* – "If we don't begin with clear statements of the intended learning," say the authors, "– clear and understandable to everyone, including students – we won't end up with sound assessments." These include expectations for knowledge mastery, reasoning proficiency, skills, and students' ability to create products.

• *Sound design* – Assessments must yield accurate results, which means deciding whether multiple-choice, extended written response, performance assessment, or personal communication is the best format, and minimizing possible bias.

• *Effective communication of results* – This includes timeliness, informative presentation, and clarity on next steps.

• *Student involvement* – "Students learn best when they monitor and take responsibility for their own learning," say the authors. Students need to be clear about learning targets and involved in self-assessing, setting goals for themselves, and tracking their progress.

Chappuis, Chappuis, and Stiggins close with four questions that teachers and administrators should consider as they put together their assessment plan:

- *What decisions will the assessment inform?* On-the-spot assessments help teachers make immediate instructional decisions; interim assessments identify where students are having difficulty and suggest instructional interventions; and end-of-year summative tests suggest how teachers can improve instruction the following year.
- *Who is the decision-maker?* With on-the-spot assessments, it's students and their teachers; with interim assessments it's building leaders, teacher teams, and individual teachers; and with summative assessments it's district curriculum administrators and community leaders.
- *What information do decision-makers need?* With on-the-spot assessments, teachers need to know where students are on a learning continuum and where they are struggling; with interim assessments, teacher teams need to know how well students are mastering each standard; and with summative tests, everyone wants to know the percent of students scoring proficient or above.
- *What conditions are essential?* For on-the-spot assessments, teachers need clear curriculum maps for each standard, a way of getting feedback from students, and data that point clearly toward next steps; for interim assessments, teachers need results that show the level of mastery of standards of all their students; for summative tests, everyone needs to know how each student did on each standard, and how all students did.

"In such an intentionally designed and comprehensive system," conclude the authors, "a wealth of data emerges."

"The Quest for Quality" by Stephen Chappuis, Jan Chappuis, and Rick Stiggins in *Educational Leadership*, November 2009 (Vol. 67, #3, p. 14-19); this article can be purchased at

http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership.aspx. The first two authors can be reached at schappuis@ets.org and jchapuis@ets.org.

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5. Effective Use of During-the-Year Assessments in Vermont

In this *Journal of Staff Development* article, Educational Testing Service researcher Teresa Egan and Vermont principal Marion Anastasia and professional development coordinator Beth Cobb describe the ETS-developed process for getting teacher teams to work collaboratively to improve teaching and learning. Here is a summary of the key components of the process:

• The big idea: Students and teachers using evidence of learning to adapt teaching and learning to meet immediate learning needs minute by minute and day by day.

• Step 1: Clarifying and sharing learning intentions, including:
- Success criteria
- Key word posters
- Exemplars of student work
- Student-developed rubrics

• Step 2: Orchestrating effective classroom discussions, questioning, and learning activities and eliciting evidence of student learning through these on-the-spot assessments:
- ABCD cards
- Whiteboards
- No hands up; popsicle sticks
- Exit tickets
- Diagnostic questions

• Step 3: Providing feedback that moves learners forward, including:
- Find and correct errors
- Two stars and a wish
- Reach for the next level
- Strategy cards
- Comment-only marking

• Step 4: Activating students as the owners of their own learning through:
- Stop/slow signals
- Concept list
- Question strips
- Pre-flight checklist
- Traffic lighting set

• Step 5: Activating students as instructional resources for one another, including:
- Think/pair/share
- Carousel
- Homework help board
- Evaluation with rubrics

- Jigsaw

Anastasia and Cobb have found that using this process, supported by training and time for team meetings, has created a much improved level of trust level within teacher teams. Teachers are willing to admit when they have tried something in their classrooms and it didn't work, and they are much more ready to dive into difficult discussions about results. "It's great to share what is most effective," said one teacher, "but maybe it's more important to share what's not working, because you can get help from other people."

"Think Time: Formative Assessment Empowers Teachers to Try New Practices" by Teresa Egan, Beth Cobb, and Marion Anastasia in *Journal of Staff Development*, Fall 2009 (Vol. 30, #4, p. 40-45), no e-link available; the authors can be reached at tegan@ets.org, bcobb@stjsd.org, and manastasia@stjsd.org.

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6. The Pros and Cons of Elementary Departmentalization

In this *Harvard Education Letter* article, freelance writer Lucy Hood reports on a trend toward departmentalizing (or "platooning") in the elementary grades, with about 20 percent of classrooms adopting it (up from 5 percent a few years ago). The belief driving this shift is that the required curriculum has become so demanding and high-stakes tests so daunting that elementary teachers can no longer afford to be all-subject generalists. Among the subject-area splits: ELA/social studies and math/science; ELA and math/science/social studies; and reading/social studies, writing/grammar, and math/science.

There's considerable variation on how young to start departmentalization – Memphis is considering fifth grade, Palm Beach County is moving to third grade and younger, and Denver schools are taking departmentalization down to first grade. Districts introducing departmentalization for the first time encounter teacher resistance, but Hood reports anecdotal evidence that once teachers take the plunge, they don't want to go back to self-contained classes. Here are the arguments on both sides of this issue:

• *Advantages of departmentalized classes* – Better teacher content-area knowledge; more variety (and less tedium) for students during each day; being exposed to different teaching styles; science and social studies getting their due (teachers sometimes skimp on them in their intense focus on reading and math in self-contained classes); positive and purposeful physical movement for students between classes; students with special needs may benefit from the specific focus within each classroom; several teachers can share insights about how each student can be successful and team up in parent conferences to give different viewpoints.

• *Advantages of self-contained elementary classrooms* – They build deeper relationships between students and their teacher; they allow teachers to make connections between different subjects throughout the day and week; teachers have greater flexibility scheduling different subjects during the day. "In the hierarchy of priorities, keeping the kids together with one teacher is way up there," says Molly McCloskey of the ASCD's Whole Child Program. "The more we focus on that as a critical variable in every decision we make, the more we are thinking through the eyes of the children." Katherine Boles of Harvard's

Graduate School of Education agrees: "The danger of departmentalization is the creation of silos," she says. "We have to teach [students] to be critical thinkers across subject areas and [to think] deeply about American history and the connection to literacy and science, instead of isolating it…"

What does the research say? A few schools and districts using departmentalization report improved test scores, but rigorous studies comparing the two different configurations are few and far between. "In no area do we have solid research that would tell us that the use of something called a 'specialist' improves kids' learning," says Deborah Ball, dean of the University of Michigan's School of Education. Nevertheless, she calls the idea promising because it's a cost-neutral way of addressing the perennial issue of many elementary teachers' uneven content expertise when they teach five subjects. There are real advantages to teachers specializing, advocates say, especially if they have a passion for certain subjects.

"'Platooning' Instruction: Districts Weigh Pros and Cons of Departmentalizing Elementary Schools" by Lucy Hood in *Harvard Education Letter*, November/December 2009 (Vol. 25, #6, p. 1-3) http://www.hepg.org/hel/article/426

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7. Variations in Instructional Practices from Classroom to Classroom

"One of the best-kept secrets in educational research, it seems, is the fact that differences in the quality of instruction from classroom to classroom *within* schools are greater than differences in instructional quality *between* schools," says Robert Rothman in the *Harvard Education Letter*.

This is the conclusion of the just-released University of Michigan Study of Instructional Improvement: the amount of time students in different classrooms spend on higher-level thinking skills and content varies dramatically from classroom to classroom in the 112 schools studied – this despite the fact that the schools were involved in comprehensive school-reform models (Accelerated Schools, America's Choice, or Success for All) that supposedly required teachers to follow quite prescriptive procedures. The study "reinforces the notion that what matters most is the teacher you get in school, not the school you go to," says Richard Correnti, one of the authors.

The same was true in Katherine Merseth's 2009 book on high-performing Massachusetts charter schools. "In every other aspect, these schools were astonishingly coherent," she says. "But they were loose inside the 'black box' of instruction… We can't agree on what good teaching looks like."

Are these teachers tailoring skills and content to their students' varying needs? Apparently not; variations seemed to be based on teachers' personal preferences and what they believe will work for their students. Variation also occurs when some teachers shy away from topics with which they're not comfortable, which happens most frequently in math. Harvard professor Richard Elmore advocates teachers observing each others' classrooms more and working collaboratively to raise the quality of instruction across the board. "The kind of

variability that's good is variability from a high bar," he says. "The problem is, the base is too low."

The Michigan study produced another interesting finding. Researchers compared teachers who taught higher-order, medium-challenging, and low-level reading and writing skills and found that the middle group of teachers got the best student achievement gains. Why? Because the higher-order teachers taught an average of 13 instructional items per lesson – a mile wide and an inch deep – while the medium-order teachers taught only 6 or 7 items. Teaching somewhat less challenging material in more depth produced better results.

"Behind the Classroom Door" by Robert Rothman in *Harvard Education Letter*, November/December 2009 (Vol. 25, #6, p. 4-6) http://www.hepg.org/hel/article/427

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

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and others very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 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).

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Publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
<u>ASCD, CEC SmartBriefs, Daily EdNews</u>
Catalyst Chicago
Changing Schools (McREL)
Ed. Magazine
EDge
Education Digest
<u>Education Gadfly</u>
Education Next
<u>Education Week</u>
<u>Educational Leadership</u>
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
<u>Essential Teacher (TESOL)</u>
Harvard Business Review
<u>Harvard Education Letter</u>
Harvard Educational Review
JESPAR
<u>Journal of Staff Development</u>
Language Learner (NABE)
Middle Ground
Middle School Journal
<u>New York Times</u>
<u>Newsweek</u>
<u>PEN Weekly NewsBlast</u>
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 Atlantic Monthly
The Language Educator
<u>The New Yorker</u>
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Tools for Schools/The Learning Principal