Marshall Memo 373

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
February 14, 2011

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Student failure is often not a result of a disabling condition, but rather a function of student indifference to school, unwillingness to do the work, or a host of personal problems that interfere with a student's ability to do what is necessary to be successful in school."

Richard DuFour (see item #4)

"The old philosophy, 'I taught it, and they just didn't learn it,' must be replaced with the question, 'Now what?'"

Jeffrey Erickson (see item #1)

"'Work harder' becomes 'work harder on understanding the causes of World War II' and 'pay more attention in class' becomes 'you need to be able to discuss the steps of photosynthesis.' These changes foster an environment of assistance and learning, rather than resentment and frustration."

Andy Fleenor, Sarah Lamb, Jennifer Anton, Todd Stinson, Tony Donen (see item #2)

"No one wants to fail, but no one wants to guess as to how to pass."

Andy Fleenor, Sarah Lamb, Jennifer Anton, Todd Stinson, Tony Donen (*ibid*.)

"Good – and bad – teachers don't walk through the schoolhouse door fully formed. To a large extent, they are created by the environment in which they work."

Chris Affleck (see item #6)

"Educators who are close to kid culture have to be the ones to help untangle this sticky web of value-confusion; to help separate reality from fantasy; artistic expression from vulgarity; and the socially acceptable from the reprehensible."

Floyd Beachum on using hip-hop culture in schools (see item #9)

1. Minnetonka Keeps Working on Its Grading Policies

In this thoughtful *Principal Leadership* article, Minnetonka (MN) assistant principal Jeffrey Erickson bemoans the fact that high-school grades are often seen by students and teachers as little more than an exercise in accumulating points for graduation – not indications of mastering knowledge and skills. He suggests that as schools plan for the coming year, they might ask themselves three questions:

- Do our grading practices focus on learning?
- Do our grades provide meaningful feedback?
- Do our grading practices allow students to make mistakes and still recover?

Minnetonka is now four years into a revised grading system (see Erickson's earlier article on grading in Marshall Memo 329, #1). Here are the most recent developments:

• *Late work* – Many teachers routinely give zeroes for late work, reasoning that this prepares students for the real world. In the *real* real world, says Erickson, "Failure to complete a task rarely results in not needing to complete the task." People who are late filing their tax returns with the IRS aren't told, "Forget that money you owe us." They have to submit the original amount and a penalty fee! In schools, says Erickson, the consequence for not doing work should be *doing* it. Zeroes don't motivate students and cause many to give up. Secondary students in Minnetonka who are late with assignments get one more chance to submit the work by a drop-dead date a few days after the deadline – for a 10 percent reduction in their grade. Major summative assessments are accepted up to the last day of the quarter.

• *Cheating* – Rather than punishing this with a zero, Minnetonka has the student complete the assignment honestly, lose privileges, do community service, and/or take an ethics course. The focus is on finding the root cause of the cheating, making sure the student understands why it was cheating (especially in the case of plagiarism), working with parents, teachers and administrators, drawing lessons from the mistake, and making sure it doesn't happen again.

• *Homework* – After noticing that homework grades had become meaningless in terms of measuring student mastery (it was all about getting it done and getting checked off), Minnetonka decided that formative assessments (which include homework) would count for no more than 15 percent of students' grades. This put much more emphasis on summative assessments. At first, teachers were concerned that students wouldn't do their homework and class assignments because they counted for such a small portion of grades, but the district was able change the mindset. Everyone realized that formative assessments contained vital, real-

time information on student learning and began to use them to improve performance on summative assessments. Most important, teachers made sure that daily assignments and homework supported the learning goals of each curriculum unit.

• *Summative assessments* – With at least 85 percent of students' grades riding on unit and quarterly assessments, teacher teams focused on improving the quality of these assessments – alignment with standards, performance tasks, writing, and questions that pushed students to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate. To ensure that students' grades aren't based on just one test, Minnetonka requires students to complete at least four summative assessments every nine weeks, with one being something other than a traditional paper-and-pencil test.

• *Students who fail* – "What happens when all of the formative assessments and the final summative assessments are well constructed and reveal that the student still doesn't get it?" asks Erickson. Worse still, what happens if the student says, "I just can't get it." The school must respond with a firm, *They haven't gotten it yet*. "The old philosophy, 'I taught it, and they just didn't learn it' must be replaced with the question, 'Now what?'" says Erickson.

But retaking tests is a futile exercise if students have given up, haven't studied, or haven't been taught in a more effective way. Minnetonka requires that before retaking an assessment, students must take part in additional instruction and practice. "Students are not permitted to simply show up for a retake and hope for the best," says Erickson. The district also has a policy that if the student earns a higher grade on a retake, that's the grade they get. "If grades are intended to accurately reflect what a student knows and is able to do," he says, "recording anything other than the precise score that a student earns is inappropriate."

Do Minnetonka's grading practices mean more work for teachers? Erickson says it's not more work – it's *different* work, "and it is the right work to help students succeed."

"A Call to Action: Transforming Grading Practices" by Jeffrey Erickson in *Principal Leadership*, February 2011 (Vol. 11, #6, p. 42-46), no e-link available; Erickson can be reached at jeffrey.erickson@minnetonka.k12.mn.us.

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2. Making the Shift to Learning-Based Gradebooks

In this *Principal Leadership* article, Tennessee high-school educators Andy Fleenor, Sarah Lamb, Jennifer Anton, Todd Stinson, and Tony Donen describe a typical parent/teacher/student meeting in which a female student, who had a failing grade report, was exhorted to work harder. This approach was ineffective. "Instead of a 'work harder' treatment," say the authors, "she needed a 'come in for extra help on solving equations' treatment. When told to focus on specific areas, students will succeed at a much higher rate than when they are offered overly general and nonspecific feedback, such as 'You need to pay more attention in class.'"

The best way to get teachers and students focused on specific areas that need improvement is a learning-based gradebook. Conventional gradebooks provide information that's almost entirely behavior-based, for example:

- Doesn't do homework (behavior)

- Cheats on homework (behavior)
- Doesn't study (behavior)
- Misses a lot of school (behavior)

"Students should be assessed on what they know and can use rather than on their behavior," say the authors. A simple way to accomplish this is to make the gradebook reflect students' proficiency on each domain of the curriculum.

Let's consider two students, Tommy and Mary, both of whom currently have a 78% in their Honors Precalculus course. Mary's teacher uses a conventional gradebook that lists chapter test grades, chapter quiz grades, and homework grades. Mary scored poorly on the Chapter 1 test and the Chapter 4 homework assignment. Tommy's teacher uses a learning-based gradebook that lists grades on class assignments on Functions and 1-to-1, Inverse, Domain and Range, Transformations, Asymptotes, and ten other areas of the curriculum. Tommy scored poorly on Domain and Range and Graphing Trig Functions. Clearly, we know a great deal more about Tommy's performance than Mary's. If Tommy wanted to bring his grade up, he'd know exactly where to apply effort, whereas Mary would be in the dark.

The authors contend that creating learning-based gradebooks is quite easy. Teachers just need to replace the tests, quizzes, and homework lines with curriculum units and knowledge and skill goals. "This simple modification creates radical changes in and out of the classroom," they say. Outside the classroom, conversations become more specific and detailed, pointing to areas in which the student can work. "'Work harder' becomes 'work harder on understanding the causes of World War II' and 'pay more attention in class' becomes 'you need to be able to discuss the steps of photosynthesis.' These changes foster an environment of assistance and learning, rather than resentment and frustration. No one wants to fail, but no one wants to guess as to how to pass."

Inside the classroom, modified gradebooks require teachers to look at their assignments and grades. "If an assignment is to graded, it must be categorized according to learning," say the authors. "If the assignment cannot be properly categorized, the teacher must reconfigure the assignment so that it can. This change in thinking is subtle but dramatic. Over time, teachers learn to think about individual questions on individual assessments and what category each should be recorded in… Under the new system, one assessment might have several individual grades because the test covers topics in multiple categories."

"The Grades Game" by Andy Fleenor, Sarah Lamb, Jennifer Anton, Todd Stinson, and Tony Donen in *Principal Leadership*, February 2011 (Vol. 11, #6, p. 48-52), no e-link available; Fleenor is available at andyfleenor@thegradesgame.com.

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3. Getting Students To Do Good Metacognitive Work

In this *Principal Leadership* article, Seattle Pacific University professors John Bond and Arthur Ellis and Redmond (WA) principal Laurynn Evans suggest "reflective assessments" as a way of involving students in thinking about their learning in real time – and providing teachers with valuable information on what students are taking in. Three examples:

• *"I learned" statements* – Three minutes before the end of a class, students are asked to write "I learned…" on a sheet of paper and complete the sentence, telling what skills and knowledge they gained in the lesson. The teacher collects the "I learned" statements as students leave the classroom, reviews them to get feedback on how successful the lesson was, and returns them to students the next day with a quick comment, a plus mark, a smiley face, or some other acknowledgement. The teacher might use a document camera to share one or more of the statements with the class to provide a model for "I learned" statements as well as to review previous content and set up the next lesson.

• *Clear and unclear windows* – Three to five minutes before the end of a class, students draw a line down the middle of a sheet of paper and write *Clear* at the top of the left-hand "window" and *Unclear* on the right. Under *Clear*, they jot down what they are really confident they learned that day, answering the question, "What from today's lesson would you be able to teach to another class?" Under *Unclear*, they jot things they don't understand or are confused about – questions on particular concepts, terms that didn't make sense, missing pieces of the puzzle. These reflections help students by making explicit their learning challenges and help teachers see what worked and what didn't so they can improve in subsequent lessons.

• *The unit in review* – At the end of a chunk of instruction, the teacher asks students to reflect on the most significant ideas and concepts they learned. Students do this solo and then in a small group so every student has a chance to have input. Each group then jots down its ideas and gives them to the teacher, providing excellent feedback on what was learned – and good material for review and launching a subsequent unit.

"Reflective Assessment" by John Bond, Laurynn Evans, and Arthur Ellis in *Principal Leadership*, February 2011 (Vol. 11, #6, p. 32-34), no e-link available; the authors can be reached at bondj@spu.edu, levans@lwsd.org, and aellis@spu.edu.

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4. A Seamless Intervention System for Struggling Students

In this paid column in *Education Week*, author/consultant Richard DuFour addresses the common tendency to refer struggling students to special education as a first response rather than a last resort. "Student failure is often not a result of a disabling condition," says DuFour, "but rather a function of student indifference to school, unwillingness to do the work, or a host of personal problems that interfere with a student's ability to do what is necessary to be successful in school. If a school was able to identify every student who truly required special education services and did a wonderful job of providing those services, it would continue to face the harsh, cold reality that a number of its students were still not being successful."

What's the alternative? A multi-step intervention process that kicks in as soon as students experience failure, says DuFour: "If timely, directive, and systematic interventions are in place in a school, a student can be shifted from one level of support to another within minutes." An effective safety-net system helps students learn what they're supposed to be learning and weans them from support as soon as possible.

Response to Intervention, says DuFour, is all about educators taking responsibility for student learning: "RTI, like the pyramid of interventions we have advocated for years, operates under the assumption that whenever any student is having difficulty, it is a 'school problem.' Rather than designating students as at risk, which defines the problem as the student, the staff views the student as 'under-supported,' which puts the onus on the school."

Special education is vital to a school's success, concludes DuFour, but it can't operate in isolation. "Rather than separating students into general education versus special education, or 'my kids' versus 'your kids,' professional learning communities create collaborative cultures and effective systems of interventions to convey the message that every student is considered 'our student' and should have access to all of our available resources (including human resources) to resolve the problem."

"Intervention or Special Education?" by Richard DuFour in *Education Week*, Feb. 9, 2011 (Vol. 30, #20, p. C11), no e-link available

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5. Surprising Findings about Social-Emotional Learning

In this *Education Week* article, Sarah Sparks reports on a meta-analysis of 213 school-based studies that was just published in *Child Development*. Researchers found that students who took part in during-the-school-day social-skills programs made robust academic gains – 11 percentile point gains on standardized tests – as well as gains in social-emotional areas. "There can be a payoff academically for these kids that compares to a lot of straightforward academic interventions," says University of Chicago professor Joseph Durlak, the lead author, "which is really sort of amazing."

How can non-academic programs produce academic gains? Probably because teachers find it easier to work with students who are calmer and better behaved. The students who took part in the social-skills programs were more cooperative and helpful, experienced less emotional distress, and had more positive attitudes and fewer conduct problems (e.g., bullying and suspensions) – and these gains were sustained six months later.

Durlak and his colleagues found that the most effective programs had the following characteristics (which make the acronym SAFE):

- Sequenced – Instruction proceeds step by step through an organized curriculum.
- Active – Role-playing and other hands-on techniques are used.
- Focused – Enough time is allotted to each goal.
- Explicit – Goals are clear to teachers and students.

Corinne Gregory of the Seattle-based SocialSmarts program agrees with the Chicago researchers' decision to study programs aimed at a broad range of behaviors rather than just bullying (a recent trend). "We focus all our efforts on that nasty endpoint of the social-emotional continuum, bullying, rather than preventing all the other problems that lead up to that," she says, mentioning disrespect and cheating. "By then, it's almost too late in the game."

The Chicago meta-analysis's most surprising finding is that classroom-based, teacher-led programs were far more effective at improving social skills and academic achievement than elaborate schoolwide programs featuring assemblies and parent outreach. This echoes a recent Institute of Education Sciences study that found disappointing results from a number of popular schoolwide character-education programs (see Marshall Memo 358, #10). "The more-comprehensive and broader programs tended to have more implementation problems," says Durlak. "Trying to do more in the schools tends to be harder, takes more coordination, involves more people – they're a lot harder to pull off."

"Study Finds Academic Payoffs in Teaching Students Social Skills" by Sarah Sparks in *Education Week*, Feb. 9, 2011 (Vol. 30, #20, p. 8), http://www.edweek.org. The full study is "The Impact of Enhancing Students' Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions" by Joseph Durlak et al. in *Child Development*, Feb. 4, 2011, http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01564.x/abstract

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6. How School Working Conditions Shape Teachers

In this letter to *The Boston Globe*, retired Cambridge Public Schools teacher Chris Affleck responds to an Op Ed article about getting better teachers into classrooms. "Good – and bad – teachers don't walk through the schoolhouse door fully formed," she says. "To a large extent, they are created by the environment in which they work." Some schools have these characteristics:

- The faculty is split into cliques and factions.
- Staff members are passively at war with the administration.
- There is little year-to-year curriculum consistency.
- Discipline is ineffective.
- Clunky scheduling wastes instructional time.
- Staff meetings are tedious.
- Administrators make unreasonable demands on teachers.

"It takes a special kind of genius to succeed in this environment," says Affleck, "and it is not necessarily the kind that gets a perfect score on the SATs."

But there are schools with a different set of characteristics, and their impact on teachers and teaching makes all the difference:

- Teachers work collaboratively with a common philosophy in mind.
- A culture of respect is supported by all staff.
- Expectations and routines are consistent from class to class.
- Schoolwide discipline policies create a climate for learning.
- Time is used efficiently.
- Class size and schedules make it possible to teach the curriculum.

"This kind of school, more than high salaries or bonuses, attracts good teachers and turns them into better teachers," says Affleck.

"Examine Schools Themselves for Culture They Create" – a letter to *The Boston Globe* from Chris Affleck, Feb. 8, 2011. See Marshall Memo 365, #1 for another article on this theme. http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial_opinion/letters/articles/2011/02/08/examine_schools_themselves_for_culture_they_create/

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7. Ending Each School Day on a Positive Note

In this article in *Responsive Classroom*, Dana Lynn Januszka and Kristen Vincent describe "closing circle" – an end-of-the-school-day ritual that Vincent uses every day in her fourth-grade classroom. It's designed to counteract the rushed, sometimes frenzied way dismissal is experienced by many teachers and students. "Like morning meeting at the beginning of the day, closing circle brings a sense of calm, safety, and community to students and teachers," say Januszka and Vincent. "The routine also helps students practice reflecting on what's meaningful to them about their schoolwork, their classmates, and themselves." Here are their tips for successful implementation:

• *Set aside ten minutes*. Closing circle needs to be buffered from intrusions, so all other activities should be finished ten minutes before dismissal. "If you allow things to eat into closing circle time," say Januszka and Vincent, "the routine will feel rushed rather than calm and reflective."

• *Everyone takes part*. No students should be outside the circle, for example, doing end-of-day jobs. To get a sense of community, every student and adult in the room should be involved.

• *Come empty-handed*. "Children usually pay better attention if their hands are empty and their belongings are out of sight," say Januszka and Vincent. Backpacks, papers, and coats should be behind students' backs as they sit in the circle.

• *Teach closing circle routines*. These need to be taught, modeled, and practiced so students will know exactly how to finish their work, pack up, form a circle in response to an agreed-upon signal, share and listen to reflections, take part in games and activities, and line up for dismissal.

• *Choose activities for each of the three segments of closing circle*: (a) Reflection: students think about the learning for the day or set goals for the next day, for example, going around the circle responding to a question like, "What's one thing you want to work on tomorrow?" (b) Celebration: students join in a quick, lively chant or cheer on the class's effort, problem-solving, and accomplishments; (c) Closing: this might be a fun way for students to line up (for example, 1, 2, 3, Pop!) or singing a song while putting on coats, hats, and boots.

• *Focus on positives*. Closing circle isn't the time to discuss what didn't go well, say Januszka and Vincent. End the day on an upbeat note by having students answer questions like, "What's one thing you enjoyed learning about today?" If it's been an especially rough day, the question might be, "What's one change you'll make tomorrow?" The goal is for students to walk out feeling calm and positive, with renewed energy and enthusiasm for school.

8. Getting Students to Apologize to One Another

"Learning to give and receive apologies is a complex social skill," says New York counselor Amy Wade in this *Responsive Classroom* article. "I've come to learn that children need specific coaching in giving a genuine apology. In addition to help with seeing the effect of their actions, they often need help with finding the right words to apologize."

Wade recalls getting angry one day at dismissal when Tony pointed to Joshua, a kindergarten classmate, and said loudly, "Why are you so small?" As the other boy's eyes filled with tears, Wade demanded that that Tony apologize. After a little back-talk, he rolled his eyes and said he was sorry.

"In this situation," says Wade, "my intensions were good, but forcing Tony to apologize was not helpful. It did not soothe Joshua's feelings or help Tony take responsibility for his actions, and it may have taught the group that apologies are about moving on, not about making amends."

What would have been a better course of action? Wade sketches the steps she wishes she had taken:

- Give everyone time to cool off – and that includes her. Not every problem needs to be solved on the spot.
- Say, "Tony, it looks like your words were hurtful. Walk ahead to the first stopping point and wait while I check in with Joshua."
- To Joshua: "It looks like your feelings were hurt. When we get down to the playroom, we'll work on fixing this."
- To Tony later on, one-on-one: "You're right, Tony. Joshua is smaller than most kindergartners. But everyone comes in different sizes. I know you didn't mean to hurt Joshua's feelings but you did. Can you think of anything you could say or do to help fix this?"
- If Tony can't think of anything, say, "Did you mean to hurt Joshua's feelings?" He'd probably say no, and the teacher could say, "You could tell him that. It might help."

In situations where students need coaching on how to apologize, a teacher might provide possible lines: "I am sorry. That was my fault" or "I didn't mean to do that. Sorry" or "So sorry. Is there something I could do to help?"

Students who are receiving apologies also need coaching so they give more than the perfunctory and often insincere, "It's okay." Here are some possibilities:

- "I accept your apology."
- "Thank you for telling me."
- "I forgive you."
- "We're still friends."

Wade says she's still thinking about a number of questions: How can we develop empathy in children so they see the world through another person's eyes? Are there times when a quick, perfunctory apology is enough? Can apologies be over-used?

"Genuine Apologies: Helping Students Get There" by Amy Wade in *Responsive Classroom*, February 2011 (Vol. 23, #1, p. 13)
http://www.responsiveclassroom.org/article/genuine-apologies

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9. Effective Use of Hip-Hop in Schools

In this *Education Week* article, Lehigh University professor Floyd Beachum writes about his own identification with hip-hop music as an adolescent in the 1980s and urges educators to tune in to this cultural phenomenon and use it to their benefit. "Encoded in the music are strife, distress, and powerful emotion," he says. "The music can also contain joy, peace, contentment, jubilation, and hope. This is the magic of music, to be able to take listeners on a journey to places they may have never imagined, or to give the listener an in-depth look into the soul of the person or persons making the music. This is the essence of the African-American experience; the highs and lows, the good and the gloom, the realization of the American dream in the midst of the American nightmare."

An important role for teachers is helping students navigate the mixed messages of hip-hop. "Educators who are close to kid culture have to be the ones to help untangle this sticky web of value-confusion," he says, "to help separate reality from fantasy; artistic expression from vulgarity; and the socially acceptable from the reprehensible… The future of hip-hop is open-ended, just like the future of our students in our schools. But our message to our young people should be: It's OK to be a part of a culture like hip-hop, but that does not have to be the limit of your experiences."

"Untangling Hip-Hop for the Classroom" by Floyd Beachum in *Education Week*, Feb. 9, 2011 (Vol. 30, #20, p. 8), no e-link available. Beachum is co-author of *Cultural Collision and Collusion: Reflections on Hip-Hop Culture, Values, and Schools* with Carlos McCray (Peter Lang, 2011).

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Do you have feedback? Is anything missing?

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

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and others very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 41 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
ASCD, CEC SmartBriefs, Daily EdNews
Ed. Magazine
EDge
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Leadership
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Journal of Staff Development
Language Learner (NABE)
Middle Ground
Middle School Journal
New York Times
Newsweek
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Rethinking Schools
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The Atlantic Monthly
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Language Educator
The Learning Principal
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