

# *Marshall Memo 87*

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education  
May 16, 2005

## **In This Issue:**

1. Using the “positive deviance” strategy for improvement
2. Using student achievement data effectively
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4. Using infra-red “clickers” to check on students’ understanding
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## **Quotes of the Week**

“People get attached to the status quo, even when it’s not good for them.”  
Richard Tanner Pascale and Jerry Sternin (see item #1)

“The trick is to introduce already existing ideas into the mainstream without excessive use of authority. Why use a sledgehammer when a feather will do?”  
*Ibid.*

“When teachers need extensive training to understand a data tool or report, this is an indication that too little thought was invested in that tool’s design.”  
*ibid.*

“Used alone at the school level, annual tests do not provide timely information to guide school change.”  
*ibid.*

“Lack of results at a school is rarely due to lack of will or care; teachers work hard doing all they know how to do... Teachers are also inherently eager learners. The challenge is to couple data immediately with more effective strategies and to help teachers learn how to approach their work differently.”  
Suzanne Tacheny and Linda Plattner (see item #2)

“If statistics show that students are weak in science, teachers need to talk about science.”  
*ibid.*

“All children deserve not only the opportunity to succeed, but also the actual experience of succeeding.”  
Louis Pugliese, Los Angeles teacher (see item #3)

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## 1. Using the “Positive Deviance” Strategy for Improvement

This *Harvard Business Review* article by Richard Tanner Pascale and Jerry Sternin is written for corporate executives, but it has direct application to any school leader thinking about imposing “best practices” from outside in a top-down manner. The problem with importing ready-made ideas, argue the authors, is that it’s almost always seen within your organization as saying, “Why aren’t you as good as the other guy?” Caught up in this dynamic, your staff becomes defensive and quick to attribute the success of the “best practice” to special or unique conditions wherever it came from: “We’re not them.” “It just won’t work here.” This is why attempts to replicate “best practices” from outside have historically had a dismal track record.

Pascale and Sternin advocate a completely different strategy: reaching into the organization, learning from its own “hidden wisdom,” and respecting solutions that have been worked out over the years. “Somewhere in your organization,” write the authors, “groups of people are already doing things differently and better... Somehow, a few isolated groups and individuals, operating with the same constraints and resources as everyone else, prevail against the odds... To create lasting change, find those areas of positive deviance and fan their flames.” They recommend a six-step strategy:

- *Make the group the guru.* “Some problems can be solved only by those in the trenches,” write Pascale and Sternin. Find out who they are and tap their techniques. They tell the story of a village in Mali where people were resigned to their children suffering from malnutrition because they believed the local sorcerer had cast a spell on them. Representatives of Save the Children began a “positive deviance inquiry” with a simple question: “Has the sorcerer put a spell on *every* child in the village?” It turned out there were some children who were rarely sick or lethargic, and upon further investigation, villagers found that the parents of these healthy children did certain things differently than others in the village: they fed their children several additional snacks a day, all the members of the household washed their hands with soap and water, and the fathers were actively involved at mealtimes and helped decide whether their children needed to go to the clinic (a decision usually made by grandfathers). When other families emulated these practices, their children got healthier, and the village had an epiphany: We can be agents of change. Malnutrition is no longer beyond our control. As one wizened grandmother said, “We have vanquished the sorcerer!”

- *Reframe through facts.* “Inside-the-box definitions of problems guarantee inside-the-box solutions,” write Pascale and Sternin. The trick is to ferret out the real challenge and cast it in a different light, “using hard data to confront orthodoxies” and getting people within the organization to make a mental shift. There are three steps to this process: (a) grasp the conventional presentation of the problem (“The sorcerer’s curse makes our children sick.”); (b) find out if there are exceptions to the norm, people in identical conditions who are doing better; (c) reframe the problem to focus attention on the exceptions. The authors tell the story of a World Bank project in Argentina working with a group of teachers and principals to address the high dropout rate in schools. “Imagine the setting,” write Pascale and Sternin. “A stark cafeteria with concrete floors and steel chairs. The teachers and principals are seated, with their arms folded across their chests. Their body language speaks volumes: ‘OK, dazzle us with your expertise. This problem involves a whole bunch of things we can’t control. We’re angry. We haven’t been paid in six months. We don’t want to be here.’ Blame for the dropout problems lay elsewhere, in lazy students, uninterested parents, and lousy facilities.”

The World Bank staffers asked whether there were any schools in the Misiones district that had a better track record. Looking at the district’s statistics, the educators found a few schools with much higher student retention. “The mood shifted from self-righteous anger to surprise and curiosity,” say Pascale and Sternin. Teams of educators subsequently visited the high-retention schools and discovered their secret: the teachers were negotiating “learning contracts” with rural parents before the beginning of each school year, making illiterate parents partners in their children’s education.

- *Make it safe to learn.* “People get attached to the status quo, even when it’s not good for them,” write the authors. “Problems often go unresolved because the path to the solution is littered with potential losses and other risks. It is essential to acknowledge that journeying into terra incognita is a danger sport. Positive deviants may fear being exposed, ridiculed, or subjected to retaliation if their newly enhanced influence challenges the status of others.” Pascal and Sternin tell the story of a local nongovernmental organization (NGO) working with an Indonesian village on the problem of human trafficking of young girls to urban centers. The problem was an “undiscussable” because of villagers’ shame and fear of retaliation from the procurers. The NGO convened a positive deviance group and began by discussing “safer” problems like school dropout rates. Slowly the group opened up about the trafficking

problem and zeroed in on the core issue – poverty – and the small number of families whose daughters were not “going out.” The village identified what these families were doing to make ends meet (including creating home gardens and buying fewer cigarettes), and local officials began to crack down on the traffickers. Within a year, the amount of trafficking had been cut in half.

- *Make the problem concrete.* “While words are exchanged and heads are nodded, a great deal of signal distortion is happening between sender and receiver,” write Pascale and Sternin. “Because of unwritten social codes meant to keep individuals from being put on the spot, people aren’t forced to speak concretely – in fact, they’re discouraged from doing so. These abstractions do a lot to obscure insight.” They tell the story of working with prostitutes in Myanmar, all of whom said they faithfully made all their clients use condoms. The workshop leader then asked all the prostitutes to apply a condom to a banana, and it quickly became apparent that some had been telling the truth and others had not. The “positive deviants”, once identified, began sharing the negotiation strategies they used to persuade their clients to use condoms, and soon others became adept at overcoming clients’ objections.

- *Leverage social proof.* “Seeing is believing” is the operative maxim here. An example is Alcoholics Anonymous, founded by two “positive deviants” in the 1930s and now a successful program for millions with alcohol and other addictions.

- *Confound the immune defense response.* “Newton was right,” say Pascale and Sternin, “Every action has an equal and opposite reaction. In organizations, that reaction comes in the form of avoidance, resistance and exceptionalism.” But organizations behave differently when solutions come from within. “Internally developed solutions circumvent transplant rejection, since the change agents share the same DNA as the host. The trick is to introduce already existing ideas into the mainstream without excessive use of authority. Why use a sledgehammer when a feather will do?”

Pascale and Sternin conclude by saying that the “positive deviance” approach definitely requires a shift in the role of the leader: “[E]xperts become learners, teachers become students, and leaders become followers. Leaders must relinquish to the community the job of chief discoverer. This isn’t easy, for it requires leaders to set aside their egos and habitual identities (being the go-to guy, the decision maker who knows what to do).”

But incredibly important work remains to be done: (a) management of attention; (b) allocation of scarce resources; (c) reinforcement to sustain the

momentum of inquiry; and (d) the application of score-keeping mechanisms to sustain attention and ensure progress toward goals once the community has chosen its course of action. Instead of being the CEO (chief expert officer), the leader becomes the CFO – chief facilitation officer – “whose job it is to guide the positive deviance process as it unfolds.”

Is the positive deviance approach the right one in every situation? Of course not, say Pascale and Sternin. If proven solutions to technical problems are available, leaders should use them to work harder, faster, and smarter. The same is true of problems that don't require major behavioral adjustments. But positive deviance is the best approach when behavioral and attitudinal changes are called for – when there is no apparent off-the-shelf remedy and successful coping strategies are buried deep in the organization. “In such cases, change from within, discovered, celebrated, and implemented by people who need to do the changing, is a surefire win.” In the words of the Chinese sage Lao-tzu:

Learn from the people  
Plan with the people  
Begin with what they have  
Build on what they know.  
Of the best leaders  
When the task is accomplished  
The people all remark  
We have done it ourselves.

“Your Company's Secret Change Agents” by Richard Tanner Pascale and Jerry Sternin in *Harvard Business Review*, May 2005 (Vol. 83, #5, p. 72-81), no e-link available

## 2. Using Student Achievement Data Effectively

In this pointed article, Suzanne Tacheny and Linda Plattner show the pitfalls of the current obsession with data in schools. “When used well,” they write, “statistical and other information... is a potent tool, an essential ingredient in improving schools... When used badly, it can do more harm than good.” They worry that focusing on data has become an end unto itself, rather than a tool that “quickly helps educators identify and attend to teaching in areas of student need.” Tacheny and Plattner list several common misconceptions about data use and suggest a better approach.

- *Pressure versus support* – Some principals and district leaders see data as motivational, and indeed, “in the hands of a skilled leader, comparative data can challenge educators to re-examine their assumptions about what their students can accomplish.” But used clumsily and in isolation, public reporting of student

achievement data can make things worse. “Intense pressure applied without a constructive plan to help teachers improve their teaching often introduces unproductive strategies for teachers and students: narrow test preparation, elimination of all subjects except those tested, instruction focused on only those students likely to pass the test, and others.”

Tacheny and Plattner give teachers the benefit of the doubt: “Lack of results at a school is rarely due to lack of will or care; teachers work hard doing all they know how to do... Teachers are also inherently eager learners. The challenge is to couple data immediately with more effective strategies and to help teachers learn how to approach their work differently.” This includes tangible support in the form of training aligned with state standards and time for teacher teams to discuss how to improve their work. Without this, teachers will become alienated.

- *Summative versus formative tests* – End-of-the-year tests have helped improve American schools by measuring progress, showing how good is good enough, and helping policymakers allocate resources and target professional development. But summative tests have limited utility at the school level, say Tacheny and Plattner, and can even sour teachers about using assessment data to help their students: “Used alone at the school level, annual tests do not provide timely information to guide school change. At best, they provide a second check on school-level data. A careful look at successful schools shows that it takes more than annual, end-of-year tests to improve schools. Those schools that improve student learning recognize that data must be valued throughout the process of learning, not just as an end measure... Effective districts support their teachers by providing frequent, low-stakes benchmark assessments that are aligned to standards and annual tests, along with time for collegial analysis of data from several sources.” The data from benchmark assessments and individual teachers’ observations are even more powerful when teachers work together, sharing and analyzing the information.

- *Data-crunching versus talking about teaching* – Tacheny and Plattner do not believe that teachers need to be trained as data analysis experts: “[S]howing teachers how to read data tables will not improve learning. Expecting teachers to spend valuable time making sense of undigested reports and complicated charts diverts them from their core responsibility of improving student learning... When teachers need extensive training to understand a data tool or report, this is an indication that too little thought was invested in that tool’s design. The challenge is to give teachers practical information that is easily understood and immediately useful... Data, clearly

presented, can point teachers to areas of student need and answer the question, 'What should I do differently?'... Teachers need time to talk about teaching, not about data... If statistics show that students are weak in science, teachers need to talk about science... They have too little opportunity to meet with colleagues to discuss student work, the content they are teaching, and effective strategies for delivering that content. When these opportunities do come, data should guide the conversation by spotlighting areas in need of improved instructional methods and strategies. But it should not *be* the conversation..."

Tacheny and Plattner conclude by listing the benefits of using student achievement information:

- It's a powerful tool that allows teachers to discuss their students' strengths and weaknesses with specificity.
- It helps teachers find the resources they need to strengthen their teaching.
- It helps them feel proud when they can demonstrate that their students have made progress.

"Giving 'Data' Its Own Assessment" by Suzanne Tacheny and Linda Plattner in *Education Week*, May 11, 2005 (Vol. 24, #36, p. 37-38)  
<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2005/05/11/36tacheny.h24.html>

### **3. Teaching Primary-Grade Children About Effort**

In this *Education Week* commentary piece, Los Angeles primary-grade teacher Louis Pugliese bemoans the way in which bulletin board displays of student work with 4-3-2-1 criteria for proficiency (originally intended to encourage effort) have been distorted in some schools. Pugliese is distressed when he sees displays that include primary-grade student work with scores of 2 or 1. "It looks alarmingly similar to the old ability-based D's, C's, B's, and A's of the past," he writes. "While there are clearly-expressed criteria, models of good and poor work, and rubrics for both the teacher and learner, some kids still 'didn't get it.' So they got a 2, or a 1. For a young child, this doesn't encourage effort at all."

What bothers Pugliese is teachers using end-of-the-year criteria to judge students' work-in-progress and label it with a 2 or 1. He thinks that teachers do this to get principals and coaches off their backs, "displaying general standards that are the end goals for the grade level, misusing scores to demonstrate little more than 'this 6-year-old isn't 7 yet.'"

"Let's teach effort first," he urges, which includes scaffolding students with intermediate expectations and recognition of progress toward the goal. "All children

deserve not only the opportunity to succeed, but also the actual experience of succeeding,” he writes. “Even if the accomplishment is small or intermediate, their effort needs to be rewarded with recognition and a sense of success. They should know that they have indeed done their best work, even if just for the moment, and what that feels like. Accomplishments displayed in a classroom should represent just that: success. If a teacher is doing his or her job, the walls should be literally laminated with accomplishments. Not 1s, 2s, 3s, or 4s.”

In addition to not being scored on end-of-the-year standards, Pugliese thinks that primary-grade kids need more time and help to reach those standards. He sees students whose opportunity to improve is sometimes arbitrarily curtailed. “It ends when the unit is over, or the time is up, or the bell rings, or the teacher says so,” he says. “And when it’s over, like a game of musical chairs, it’s over. Children end up where they are, and their scores get recorded and displayed.” Instead, says Pugliese, teachers should keep giving their students support so that effort is continuous until mastery is achieved.

“F Is for Effort: Misinterpreting Effort-Based Education in Primary Classrooms” by Louis Pugliese in *Education Week*, May 11, 2005 (Vol. 24, #36, p. 36-37)  
<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2005/05/11/36pugliese.h24.html>

#### **4. Using Infra-Red “Clickers” to Check on Students’ Understanding**

This *Education Week* article reports on a Virginia middle school’s use of infra-red devices to check for students’ understanding in classrooms. As a lesson unfolds, the teacher periodically poses a multiple-choice question to test students’ mastery of what’s being presented. Students choose the answer and use their clickers (which resemble TV remotes) to beam their choices to a dome-shaped receiver on top of a television at the front of the room. The TV and a computer hooked up to it instantly tallies students’ responses and displays them in a bar graph (percent of students who answered A, B, C, or D), and the teacher can follow up by discussing why students chose (incorrect) answer A, re-teaching, or moving on if students seem to have mastered the concept.

The devices were originally designed for large university lecture classes, but have recently been adopted in some K-12 schools to give teachers quick feedback on what all students in a classroom understand. Among the companies that manufacture the systems (which go for about \$1,500 a classroom and can be put on a cart) are

Hyper-Interactive Teaching Technology (Fayetteville, Arkansas), Promethean, Ltd. (Blackburn, England), and Quizdom (Pullayup, Washington).

The clickers have their critics. Virginia high-school teacher Alan Warhaftig expressed concern that they could be overused and would lead to over-reliance on multiple-choice questions and low-level test-prep. “It’s kind of inherently a failed approach at making schools more entertaining,” he said. But other teachers in this Virginia district spoke highly of the clickers, and eighth graders who had been using them for three years had not lost their enthusiasm for the devices. Teachers’ comfort level varied according to how tech-savvy and well-trained they were. To make good use of the clickers, teachers also have to have quick concept quizzes prepared. One format popular with students and teachers is a Jeopardy-type game in which students select the difficulty-level and category of question and the entire class (or a team within the class) can respond using their clickers.

“Technology Turns Test-Prep Into Clicking Experience” by Andrew Trotter in *Education Week*, May 11, 2005 (Vol. 24, #36, p. 8)  
<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2005/05/11/36clickers.h24.html>

## **5. Effective Interview Questions for Middle-School Teachers**

This article summarizes the authors’ wisdom on interviewing candidates for teaching positions. Their bottom line: hypothetical questions (“What would you do in the following situation...”) are of little value; it’s much better to ask candidates to describe what they have actually done in the classroom (or interacting with parents) and reflect on their actions. According to James Polzin, an Illinois assistant superintendent who endorses this approach, “Exceptional candidates have the ability to observe, analyze, and understand the dynamics of effective instruction in their own classroom and can articulate it. They see and understand at a different level.”

Here are some suggested interview questions from a sidebar in the article:

### ***Curriculum***

- Describe the experience you have had in implementing a mandated or standards-based curriculum.
- What were some of the skills in math that students learned in your classroom, and how did you know that they mastered those skills?
- Tell me about an individual lesson in reading that went well.

### ***Methods and planning***

- How have you divided large amounts of material that you were required to cover?

Describe your daily lesson plans. How do you write a plan, and what is included in each plan?

- When have you had success with small group work?
- Tell me about a time you planned a lesson and had to change the plan after you began instruction.

### *Classroom organization and management*

- Describe classroom management plans that you have used. Why did they work?
- Describe an experience you have had becoming established with a class at the beginning of the school year or semester.
- Tell me about a time you had to address a disruptive student.
- What rewards have worked well to motivate your students?

### *Homework and grading*

- Describe a grading system that has worked successfully for you in the past.
- What methods have you used to informally assess student learning without grading.
- Tell me about a typical homework assignment in your class.
- How have you dealt with students who do not complete homework?

### *Individual students' needs*

- How have you modified assignments for gifted or special education students?
- Can you describe an experience where you have worked with English language learners? Which methods worked best with this student population?
- What are some approaches to teaching your subject matter that have helped all students succeed?

### *Communication*

- Describe how you have conducted parent conferences.
- Share an example of a communication with a parent that enabled you to better help that student in your class.
- Tell me about a time when you needed to ask your principal or mentor teacher for help.
- Describe an experience where you co-planned an activity or co-taught a lesson with another teacher.

### *Professionalism*

- Describe a teaching situation where you knew you made a mistake. What was it? Describe what you did.

- What have you read recently that led to a change in your classroom?

- How have conferences, workshops, or inservice training helped you to improve your teaching?
- What parts of your teacher education training do you use on a daily basis?

“A Question of Experience” by Mary Clement, Warren Kistner, and Wes Moran in *Principal Leadership*, May 2005 (Vol. 5, #9, p. 58-62), no e-link available

## 6. Getting the Most Out of an Instructional Coach

This article by Kansas researcher Jim Knight in *Principal Leadership* makes the following points about instructional coaches (ICs) in schools:

- They can act as an extension of the principal, making it possible for the principal to be a true instructional leader.
- If the principal doesn’t understand the role of the coach and doesn’t use the role effectively, the coach will have little or no effect on student achievement.
- Key to an instructional coach’s effectiveness is being a master teacher who is comfortable going into any classroom and loves having the chance to work with teachers. “Simply put,” says Knight, “no matter how much IC’s know, they won’t win over teachers unless they can be successful in the classroom.”
- Coaches act as on-site professional developers, enhancing the implementation of effective teaching practices; promoting positive professional conversations; helping teachers to address concerns; guiding teachers through instructional manuals, checklists, and other materials; collaboratively planning when and how teachers should implement effective instructional practices; preparing materials for teachers; modeling practices in classrooms; observing teachers and giving feedback. [Note that this list does not include helping teachers analyze student work and interim achievement data, which would seem like a valuable use of a coach’s expertise.]
- Coaches should always communicate “their deep, honest belief in teachers – even when they are talking about specific ways that teachers need to improve their teaching practices.” They must be “respectfully pushy.”
- Coaches should prepare succinct summaries of their classroom interventions (strategies at a glance) for busy principals.
- Teachers are more likely to embrace a change suggested by an instructional coach if it has two qualities: (a) it’s more powerful than what they were doing before and (a) it’s easier to use. As Knight notes sardonically, “teachers don’t resist change as much as they resist poorly designed change programs.”

“A Primer on Instructional Coaches” by Jim Knight in *Principal Leadership*, May 2005 (Vol. 5, #9, p. 16-21), no e-link available

## 7. Short Items:

*a. Who will do better, Da’Quan or John?* – A University of Florida study confirms earlier reports that African-American students with “exotic” names (Da’Quan and Damarcus, for example) are more likely to score lower on reading and math tests and are less likely to meet teacher expectations and be referred to gifted programs than siblings with more common names. David Figlio, the economist who did the research, believes that students with unusual names get less attention and inferior instruction because teachers expect less from children with names that sound like they were given by parents with lower educational levels – and these lower expectations become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Figlio says, “This study suggests that the names parents give their children play an important role in explaining why African-American families on average do worse because African-American families are more inclined than whites or Hispanics to give their children names that are associated with low socio-economic status.”

*PEN Weekly NewsBlast*, May 13, 2005,  
<http://www.newswise.com/aarticles/view/511720/>

*b. Effective college preparatory courses* – The Education Trust and ACT have just produced a report on the specific features of high-school courses that successfully prepare students for college. The descriptions are drawn from ten schools that get good results and delve into the syllabi and other characteristics (including extra help for struggling students) that seem to be making the difference. The report is available at <http://www.act.org/path/policy/reports/success.html>.

Spotted *The Education Gadfly*, May 12, 2005

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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](mailto:kim.marshall8@verizon.net)*

# About the Marshall Memo

## ***Mission and focus:***

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and others very well-informed on current research and best practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 35 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 39 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through scores of 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, provide e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the memo to subscribers every Monday (with occasional breaks; there were 50 issues in 2003-04).

## ***Subscriptions:***

Individual subscriptions are \$50 for the school year (\$25 for a half-year, beginning late January). Rates decline steeply for multiple readers within the same organization. See the website for these rates and information on paying by check or credit card.

## ***Website:***

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

- How to subscribe or renew
- Why the Marshall Memo?
- Focus topics
- Headlines for issues 1-68
- What readers say
- About Kim Marshall
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- All back issues (also in PDF or Word)
- A database of all articles to date, searchable by topic, article headline, source, article title, author, and level
- How to change access e-mail or password

## ***Publications covered:***

(those read this week are underlined)

American Educational Research Journal  
American Educator  
American School Board Journal  
ASCD SmartBrief  
Atlantic Monthly  
Bay State Banner  
Boston Globe  
CommonWealth Magazine  
District Administration  
Ed. Magazine (Harvard School of Education)  
Education Digest  
Education Gadfly  
Education Next  
Education Update (ASCD)  
Education Week  
Educational Leadership  
Educational Researcher  
Edutopia  
Elementary School Journal  
Harper's  
Harvard Business Review  
Harvard Education Letter  
Harvard Educational Review  
Journal of Staff Development  
Middle School Journal  
NASSP Bulletin  
New York Times  
New Yorker  
Newsweek  
PEN Weekly NewsBlast  
Phi Delta Kappan  
Principal Magazine  
Principal Leadership  
Psychology Today  
Reading Research Quarterly  
Reading Today  
Rethinking Schools  
Review of Educational Research  
Teachers College Record  
Teacher Magazine

E-links will be provided whenever possible.