

Marshall Memo 10

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
October 27, 2003

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Quote of the Week

"If more students are to be persuaded to work harder in schools... they must be convinced not only that academic achievement matters, but also that hard work will, in fact, result in more learning." (David Goslin, see #1)

1. Four Keys to Motivating Students

To learn, students need to be *engaged*. They need to invest energy and effort. They need to pay attention, listen, concentrate, try to remember, mentally rehearse, think, and practice. But to be willing to do this, students need to be *motivated*. The problem is that motivation has been the "black hole of American psychology" (Herbert Simon). Recently there's been some progress figuring out how to increase student motivation. In a commentary piece in the current *Education Week*, David Goslin makes four points:

- Students and parents need to make academic achievement a higher priority in their lives. Many students are not putting in the time and work needed to excel academically. Students must spend more time on school work and less time on sports, music, television, computers, dating, part-time jobs, and hanging out with friends.
- We need to modify our beliefs about ability and effort. Students need to believe that hard work will result in getting smarter. "Americans have long been

fascinated by the notion of inherited aptitudes and abilities, and educational policies and practices have reflected this preoccupation with native ability,” says Goslin. This includes intelligence tests to choose students for gifted and special education programs, standardized tests that compare students to other students (versus a fixed standard), and college admissions based on aptitude rather than achievement.

- We need to dramatically increase the rewards for getting involved in learning. “There is ample evidence,” Goslin writes, “that rewards – both intrinsic and extrinsic to the learning process, play an essential role in getting students engaged in the learning and in sustaining their engagement and motivation to learn, especially when the going gets difficult.” But there are not enough rewards to keep many students in the game (and only 20 percent of high-school seniors in 2000 said that most of their courses were quite or very interesting). A disproportionate amount of the available rewards (teacher praise and encouragement, good grades, etc.) go to a small number of students.
- Teachers need to share ideas – in other words, work smart. Goslin considers most American schools highly inefficient in that teachers are working alone trying to figure out how (and often what) to teach their classes. “Education is the only activity in America in which many of those responsible for its conduct resist attempts to improve performance by taking advantage of what is known about best practice.”

“Student Engagement: Is Motivation to Learn the ‘Black Hole’ of American Education?” by David A. Goslin, *Education Week*, October 22, 2003 (Vol. XXIII, #8, p. 32, 34) <http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=08goslin.h23>

2. Chaotic High-School Classrooms in New York City

On the Op Ed page of the *New York Times* last Friday, Bob Herbert had a powerful column excoriating the teachers of “noisy, chaotic” classrooms in a number of New York City high schools. These classrooms, he wrote, are “ruthlessly destructive, and scary to students and teachers alike. They are places where childhood dreams all too frequently expire.”

Drawing on interviews with a handful of sympathetic New York City teachers, Herbert described classrooms where students are playing dice in the back of the room, listening to their Walkman, writing rap tunes, rapping to girls, and practicing gang signs (“Now that’s a classroom that’s run by a teacher who doesn’t care,” said one

teacher). Herbert's sources described the protocol: "If they sit in the back, the kids have specifically opted out of dealing with the classroom. They feel as though they can do whatever they want back there... They just slam their desks to the back of the room. There might be 15 or 20 kids back there, with a space between their desks and the ones in the front of the room. The teacher just teaches the ones in the front."

Teachers described some colleagues who categorize all students as thugs and don't require anything of them. "Meanwhile, the students themselves are scared. The class becomes undisciplined, and therefore dangerous. So the good students cut out because they don't want to be in that environment. That's one way you lose the good kids. You have a lot of students who are not thugs, but who left school because they couldn't learn – they couldn't even hear – in that noisy, disruptive atmosphere."

"You have teachers who are very diligent," said one Bronx teacher. "They work very hard, and even come up with money out of their own pockets to pay for supplies, or even to help these children when they are in trouble." But many others do not care, even going so far as to say to students, "I don't care what you do. I'm still going to get paid." Some tolerate students hanging out in classes they're not assigned to without being challenged.

Herbert concludes: "The worst of the problems – the true extent of school violence, the utter chaos in some of the classrooms, the fraudulent grading and promotion practices, the widespread contempt heaped upon the students, and the scandalous lack of parental involvement – have not been fully and honestly revealed. Real progress and real reform won't happen without an understanding of the real truth."

"Failing Teachers" by Bob Herbert, *New York Times*, October 24, 2003 (Vol. CLIII, #52,646) <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/24/opinion/24HERB.html> Bob Herbert's e-mail address is bobherb@nytimes.com

The next day the *Times* printed six letters reacting to Herbert's column. One blamed the disruptive teenagers, who the writer said should be permanently expelled from school. One blamed the K-12 "one size fits all" education structure. One recalled similar experiences in the Bronx in the 1960's and lamented the lack of progress since then. One blamed the parents of disruptive students. One Teach for America alumnus of New York schools lauded the many good teachers and said that the real truth is that "teachers fail mostly because they have been failed. I am surprised that most teachers continue to care as much as they do given the wretched conditions for

teaching.” The last letter put the blame squarely on school administrators: “In a supportive environment, poor teaching is rarely tolerated. In a non-supportive environment, which unfortunately is the norm, good teaching is rarely possible.”

“When Students Run the Classroom” letters, *New York Times*, October 25, 2003 (Vol. CLIII, #52,647) <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/25/opinion/L25HERB.html>

3. Defusing Children’s Violent Behavior

A classroom anecdote begins this article by New Jersey psychologist Diane Smallwood: “It is time for Ms. Smith’s first graders to move from reading to art class. Six-year-old Andy ignores her instructions, even when she repeats them. Another student tells Andy to hurry up. Suddenly Andy swears loudly and hurls his book across the room, banging his fists on the desk. Ms. Smith tells him to stop and to pick up the book. Andy screams that he wants to kill her, knocks over his chair, and proceeds to kick and hit nearby desks. This is the third such episode in two weeks. Visits to the principal’s office, talks with the counselor, and restriction of privileges do not seem to be changing Andy’s behavior.”

Smallwood, who is president of the National Association of School Psychologists, recommends the following steps in dealing with severe cases like Andy’s:

- Identify the underlying reasons for the behavior. Is it attention-seeking, revenge, modeling the behavior of others, or is he showing symptoms of a psychiatric disorder?
- Identify the triggers. Is the child set off by a particular activity? By a particular classmate? By transitions?
- Stay in front of the meltdown. If it’s possible, stop the crisis before it begins, perhaps by being tuned in to clues or warning signs (clenched fists, a jiggling leg, exasperated sighs). These can cue the teacher to intervene, send the child to a “safe” place, have him or her run an errand, etc.
- Encourage prevention and problem solving. This means going beyond “cleaning up” after each meltdown and working with staff, parents, and the student on using each incident as a learning opportunity and planning on how to prevent them in the future.
- Put discipline in a positive light. Schoolwide programs that promote positive behavior help explosive students learn and practice alternative skills and behaviors and communicate better with peers and adults.

- Spend positive time with the child. Principals should try to spend some time with them (eating lunch or playing a favorite game at recess) when they are not in the midst of a crisis.
- Ask for the parents' insights. Emphasize the child's strengths and work together to identify triggers and effective coping strategies they have observed at home.

"Defusing Children's Violent Behavior" by Diane Smallwood, *Streamlined Seminar*, #21, National Association of Elementary School Principals, Summer 2003 (condensed in *Education Digest*, October 2003). No link for this article, but Diane Smallwood's e-mail is diane141@aol.com

4. Proficiency Is the Goal

In an editorial in last week's *Bay State Banner*, publisher Mel Miller cites the huge achievement gap between African-American and white students in Boston Public Schools in 2002:

- 10th-grade ELA MCAS test: students scoring proficient or above (Level 3 and 4):
 - Black – 24 percent
 - Hispanic – 25 percent
 - White – 68 percent
- 10th-grade Math MCAS test: students scoring proficient or above (Level 3 and 4):
 - Black – 12 percent
 - Hispanic – 13 percent
 - White – 60 percent

Miller says that "the goal of public education must be academic proficiency, not merely passing MCAS [Level 2]. And this goal must be achieved in a few years, not decades." Miller touts The Efficacy Institute's program as the way to make this happen.

"Tell the Truth" by Mel Miller, *Bay State Banner*, October 23, 2003, p. 4
<http://www.baystatebanner.com/>

5. Dramatic Television Can Be a Motivational Tool in Classrooms

Too much of classroom television, argues Tim DeRoche in this *Education Week* commentary piece, fails to hook and motivate students. Most classroom TV is informational nonfiction like Channel One, Student Newsroom, Bill Nye the Science Guy, the JASON Project, and the like. DeRoche says that these programs are

fundamentally passive. “Students are expected to absorb whatever information is fed to them by a talking head: the reporter, the host, the scientist. These shows rarely engage children’s *emotions*. Yet, engaging children’s emotions may be the most important job of any educator, since it is a child’s emotions that will motivate the child to learn.”

DeRoche feels that a different use of television could fill this void and get children more intellectually engaged – making predictions, asking questions, imitating behaviors they see, and speaking out loud to fictional characters. His model: short fictional episodes shown once a week, with well-coordinated, rigorous lesson plans that build off the storyline. Galaxy Classroom has begun producing segments like this for science involving a “cliffhanger” that motivates students to get involved in the subject matter. In the same company’s “SNOOPS” series, fifth graders use science to solve mysteries. Such programs can do the following in a classroom:

- Engage and motivate students
- Put escapism to work by stimulating students’ minds with exotic locales, adventure stories, and compelling characters;
- Model behavior by showing believable characters who show healthy behaviors;
- Open the door for teachers to cross the boundaries between English, social studies, math, etc.

DeRoche warns against abusing classroom television – having it replace the curriculum, using poorly-produced shows, showing unhealthy behaviors, and pandering to the lowest common denominator. He believes there are six key factors in making classroom television an effective learning tool:

- Rigorous classroom activities are integrated seamlessly with each episode;
- Teachers get intensive support, training, and easy-to-use teacher’s guides;
- Compelling child characters set goals and overcome obstacles to achieve them;
- Adult characters support the kids but do not take center stage;
- The settings let kids feel transported in time and space;
- All characters model healthy, pro-social behaviors.

“Classroom TV: The Power of a Forgotten Technology” by Tim DeRoche, *Education Week*, Vol. XXIII, #8, p. 33-34)

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=08deroche.h23>

6. Quick Items

- *Merit pay* – Philadelphia and Baltimore are both scrapping pilot plans for merit pay. Both cities said the systems were impractical, ineffective, and too costly. Philadelphia’s system sent specially trained assessors to visit classrooms and identify high-performing teachers for higher pay. In Baltimore, teachers put together portfolios to document the work of a handful of students, with principals counting the portfolios as about a third of a teacher’s evaluation. But the portfolios were widely seen as burdensome paperwork; teachers were reportedly delighted when the portfolio requirement was dropped.

“Big-City Districts Scrap Reward-Based Systems for Evaluating Teachers” *Education Week*, October 22, 2003 (Vol. XXIII, #8, p. 15)

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=08TL.h23>

- *Achievement gap* – In the yesterday’s *Boston Globe*, Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom gave a brief summary of their new book, *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning* (Simon and Schuster, 2003). They present the grim statistics on the widening gap between the achievement of Asian, white, Hispanic, and black students, argue that current school reforms are making no dent in the problem, and describe several charter schools that give them hope (including North Star Academy in Newark and KIPP Academy in the Bronx). I have been asked to review this book for the *Globe* and my review may appear in next Sunday’s edition. I would be happy to send you a copy of the review if you are interested.

“Left Behind” by Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom, *Boston Globe*, October 26, 2003 (p. D-1, 4)

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Do you have feedback? Is anything missing?

If you have comments or suggestions, or if you saw an article or web item in the last week that you think should be covered, please e-mail: kim.marshall8@verizon.net

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

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

- *School leadership* – Building a professional learning community; effective teamwork; effective schools practices; time management.
- *Effective teaching* – Key variables associated with high student achievement; supervision and evaluation of teachers; professional development of teachers; teacher leadership and career ladders; multiple intelligences and brain research.
- *Curriculum* – Alignment and planning with the end in sight; teaching for understanding; new ideas in reading, writing, and math.
- *Assessment* – Aligned formative and summative assessments; using data and student work for continuous improvement; graphic display of student achievement data; standardized testing and the debate on standards.
- *Closing the gap* – Effective strategies to close the racial/economic achievement gap; the innate-ability/intelligence/effective effort debate; safety-net programs.
- *Positive school culture* – Student discipline; social-emotional learning; moral development; parent involvement; community partnerships.
- *And...* – New areas of research; upcoming television and radio programs on education.

Publications covered:

(those read this week are underlined)

American Education Research Journal
American Educator
Atlantic Monthly
Bay State Banner
Boston Globe
Commonwealth Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Update (ASCD)
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Elementary School Journal
Harpers
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Education Review
Harvard School of Education Ed. Magazine
New York Times
New Yorker
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal Magazine
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Review of Educational Research
Rethinking Schools
Teacher Magazine
and occasional books, lectures, and websites.

If one of the summaries is of particular interest, subscribers are encouraged to read the full article. E-links will be provided whenever possible. If you would like to suggest additional publications, please be in touch.

Subscriptions:

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