Marshall Memo 13

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
Monday November 17, 2003

In this Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"In this age of accountability, we must define good teaching by results, not by personal characteristics or our preconceived notions. When the goal is student learning, *seeming* to be a good teacher and actually *being* a good teacher can be very different."

Craig Jerald in *Educational Leadership* (see item #2)

"In the age of accountability, teacher creativity simply has less to do with what to teach and much more to do with how to teach it."

Craig Jerald, *ibid*.

"A teacher may have taught an apparently coherent and thoughtful lesson, but the real question is: What do students know and what are they able to do as a result of the lesson?"

Tony Wagner in *Education Week* (see item #1)

"Effective supervision – done either by peers or administrators – is almost nonexistent in most districts."

Tony Wagner, *ibid*.

"I'd rather be defiant and stupid in class than let the teacher call me a failure. My friends know I'm not dumb and we laugh at the teacher together."

Reginald, a student quoted by Herbert Kohl in Lisa Delpit article (see #4)

"Human beings are hard-wired to react adversely to mistakes by blaming themselves (guilt and shame), others (finger-pointing), or bad luck (resignation and fatalism)."

Richard Pascale, Mark Millemann, Linda Gioja, *Harvard Business Review*, 1997

1. Tony Wagner on Seven Key Practices Used by High-Gain Districts

In a seminal piece in the current *Education Week*, Tony Wagner argues that most school and district leaders are not very good at helping teachers to prepare all students for today's "knowledge society" standards – and they worry too much about test scores. Wagner and his colleagues have worked with school districts that have dramatically raised the achievement of the lowest quartile of students, including the least-advantaged students, and they have identified seven practices that seem to be central to this process:

1. *Urgency and data* – "The district creates an understanding and a sense of urgency among teachers and in the community for the necessity of improving *all* students' learning, and it regularly reports on progress. Data are disaggregated and are transparent to everyone. Qualitative data (for example, from focus groups and interviews), as well as quantitative data, are used to understand students' and recent graduates' experience of school."

2. *Good teaching* – "There is a widely shared vision of what good teaching is, which is focused on rigorous expectations, the quality of student engagement and effective strategies for personalizing learning for all students."

3. *Instructionally-focused meetings* – "All adults meetings are about instruction and are models of good teaching." The opposite of this is the all-too-common unwritten agreement between teachers and administrators: "I will pretend this is a meeting and listen to announcements that could as easily be put in a memo, just so long as you leave me alone in my classroom."

4. *Curriculum goals and assessments* – "There are well-defined standards and performance assessments for student work at all grade levels. Both teachers and students understand what quality work looks like, and there is consistency in standards and assessments…It matters less that a district agrees on which books will be covered at different grade levels than on whether there is agreement on what students should write about what they read – and what should be the standard for student work at all grade levels. Data about student work are also indispensable in the assessment of teaching." (see Quote of the Week above)

5. *Effective supervision* – "Supervision is frequent, rigorous, and entirely focused on the improvement of instruction. It is done by people who know what good instruction looks like." Principals must go beyond the "annual perfunctory checkup" focused mainly on classroom management, get into classrooms *much* more frequently, and take the next step of effectively coaching teachers who need improvement.

6. *First-rate professional development* – "Professional development is primarily on-site, intensive, collaborative, and job-embedded, and is designed and led by educators who model the best teaching and learning practices."

7. *Use of formative assessment data* – "Highly effective districts create their own assessments, which are given four to six times a year at every grade level in reading, writing, and math. The tests are scored internally for quick turnaround, and the results are used to track each student's learning progress so that early interventions can be made. Teams of grade-level teachers, as well as whole school faculties, are then given time to study the data. When one teacher's scores are better than his or her colleagues', the team works to understand which teaching practices may be getting these results, instead of using the data to stigmatize an 'underperforming' teacher."

Wagner contends that these seven practices are not a buffet to choose from; *all* are needed to produce high student achievement. While it's impossible to implement all seven at once, none can be skipped. He suggests some priorities:

- Urgency for change drives the need to clearly define good teaching.
- Data about student work drives a better-informed conversation about good teaching.
- A shared vision of good teaching, clear standards for student work, and interim data on student learning all set the stage for effective supervision.
- Good interim data inform effective professional development.

"Beyond Testing: The 7 Disciplines for Strengthening Instruction" by Tony Wagner, *Education Week* November 12, 2003 (Vol. XXIII #11, p. 28, 30)
http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=11wagner.h23

2. How Do We Escape from Between a Rock and a Hard Place?

In this right-on-target article, Craig Jerald lays out the major problems he sees in American schools today, all of which have a disproportionate effect on low-income students and contribute to the widening achievement gap:

- Grade-by-grade learning expectations are left up to schools or individual teachers, resulting in "an uneven hodgepodge of instructional aims and subject matter, with content and expectations varying sharply from classroom to classroom and from school to school."
- We focus on teaching inputs rather than on whether students actually learn: teachers can work very hard and strive to use best practices, but the focus is often on "how instruction feels and looks rather than on how much the teacher actually helps students learn."

- Many principals are not able to spot the classrooms in which students are learning the most (see Quote above);
- Teachers get very little information on "exactly which students are 'getting it' on a week-by-week and skill-by-skill basis."

Because most principals and teachers have never been in a school where things work differently, they find it hard to see a way of responding to new pressures to produce results. Many think they have only two alternatives: (a) wait for No Child Left Behind to go away, like all the other fads; (b) game the system by using "test prep," teaching narrowly to the test, and ignoring subjects that are not tested. Jerald thinks we can do better! Here are his suggestions:

1. Develop common grade-by-grade learning expectations – Teachers need "a common, coherent, and specific curriculum telling them what students should have learned at the end of each grade level and at key checkpoints along the way." The district needs to do this because few teachers are trained in developing and/or aligning curriculum, and trying to do it at the school level is slow, inefficient, and leads to finger-pointing (fifth-grade teachers blaming fourth-grade teachers, etc.). Common learning expectations do not negate teacher creativity; they just focuses is on the "how to" rather than the "what."

2. Learn from interim student assessment data – Teachers need "much more regular, reliable, and thorough information about which students are actually mastering the knowledge and skills in the curriculum." This information has to come from regular interim assessments. In Houston they give "snapshot assessments" at several points during the year and get the data back to teachers quickly so they can put them to use. Discussing interim assessment data in teams, teachers are less isolated and can collaborate and share good ideas much more readily. "With ready access to data on student performance, they can discuss how to help students academically rather than simply report discipline problems…Teachers and administrators also become aware of colleagues across town or down the hall who are getting much better results. And they become more willing to learn from those colleagues."

3. Create a culture of problem solving – A focus on results pushes practitioners to "work collectively to remove barriers to learning, create new approaches when old ones fail, and think hard about how to make what they do work for *all* students rather than just for some…Layer by layer, problem-solving administrators and teachers peel the instructional onion, constructing step by step a more sophisticated system of working than those they had relied on in the past…These educators take nothing for granted because nothing can be left to chance."

For example, some schools in Texas have begun to experiment with flexible achievement grouping, overcoming the preconception that all "tracking" was bad. Other schools confronted the fact that many students in high-poverty schools were not doing homework because their beleaguered parents were not providing much support; the schools asked themselves, "If an instructional strategy doesn't work for a large number of students, and even puts many students at a disadvantage, why continue to use it? If homework is necessary, does it necessarily have to take place at home? Are there other approaches to arranging extended practice and reinforcement activities that work for *all* students?"

"Beyond the Rock and the Hard Place" by Craig Jerald, *Ed. Leadership*, Nov. 2003 (Vol. 61, p. 12-16) http://www.ascd.org/publications/ed_lead/200311/jerald.html

3. Richard Elmore's Thoughts on Improving Schools

In the lead article in this month's *Educational Leadership*, Richard Elmore tees off on No Child Left Behind ("draconian and dysfunctional"), but then warns that educators will get little public sympathy or support for dumping the accountability aspects of NCLB: "Most politically alert citizens, of whatever ideological stripe, work in organizations that have already internalized performance-based accountability. They find the complaints of educators about accountability to be out of touch and whiny." Elmore goes on to give some practical advice to school leaders:

- *Internal accountability precedes external accountability* – "Nor surprisingly, school and school systems that do well under external accountability systems are those that have consensus on norms of instructional practice, strong internal assessments of student learning, and sturdy processes for monitoring instructional practice and for providing feedback to students, teachers, and administrators about the quality of their work. Internal coherence around instructional practice is a prerequisite for strong performance, whatever the requirements of the external accountability system."

- *Improvement will not be linear* – Better student proficiency will not happen in a straight line; there will be surges and plateaus as adult learners struggle to internalize new ways of working. Performance often lags behind practice.

- *Leadership is a cultural practice* – It's not all about personal attributes. "Successful leaders have an explicit theory of what good instructional practice looks like. They model their own learning and theories of learning in their work, work publicly on the improvement of their own practice, and engage others in powerful discourse about good instruction. These leaders understand that improving school

performance requires transforming a fundamentally weak instructional core, and the culture that surrounds it, into a strong, explicit body of knowledge about powerful teaching and learning that is accessible to those who are willing to learn it."

- *The work of instructional improvement is distributed* – Good school leaders seek out good ideas wherever they are in the school. Good professional development does not segregate staff members by roles. "Improving schools pay attention to who knows what and how that knowledge can strengthen the organization."

- *Knowledge is not necessarily where you think it is* – Some of the best thinking about improving student achievement is in low-performing schools that are on the move. "Most high-performing schools in our highly segregated society have gotten there not by knowing a great deal about instructional practice or improvement but by getting and holding on to students in high socioeconomic groups."

Richard Elmore, "A Plea for Strong Practice" in *Ed. Leadership*, November 2003 (Vol. 61, #3, p. 6-10) http://www.ascd.org/publications/ed_lead/200311/elmore.html

4. Lisa Delpit on Three Keys to High Student Achievement

In the opening segment of this piece, Lisa Delpit rages against high-stakes testing and scripted teaching programs, especially Success for All, and extols the power of traditional African educational thinking and the practices in the Freedom Schools that sprang up in the American South during the Civil Rights movement. Delpit then lays out three steps that she feels are crucial to getting children of poverty to high achievement:

1. *Believe in the children* – We must be convinced of the "inherent intellectual capability, humanity, physical ability, and spiritual character" of our students, write Delpit. She cites several schools that have acted on this conviction and produced very high standardized test scores: Marcus Garvey School in Los Angeles; Chick School in Kansas City, Missouri; Harmony-Leland School in Cobb County, Georgia; Prescott School in Oakland; and Sankofa Shule, a charter school in Lansing, Michigan. These schools, Delpit believes, deliver "a consciously devised, continuous program that develops vocabulary in the context of real experiences, provides rigorous instruction, connects new information to the cultural frameworks that children bring to school, and assumes that the children are brilliant and capable, and teaches accordingly."

2. *Fight foolishness* – By this, Delpit means that we need to stop looking only at "one number" (the test score) and trying to build "teacher-proof" schools with scripted low-level instruction. Instead, we need to enlist and retain "perceiving and thinking teachers who challenge their students with high-quality, interactive, and

thoughtful instruction." Delpit says that successful schools "take every opportunity to introduce children to complex material. While children are learning to 'decode,' teachers read complex information to children above their reading level and engage in discussions about the information and the advanced vocabulary they encounter. Students are involved in activities that use the information and vocabulary in both creative and analytical ways, and teachers help them create metaphors for the new knowledge that connects it to their real lives. Students memorize and dramatize material that involves advanced vocabulary and linguistic forms…Students are asked to explain what they have learned to others, thus solidifying new knowledge…Never do the successful teachers of these children believe that students have learned enough or that they cannot learn more."

3. *Learning who our children are and the legacies they bring* – Delpit believes educators should focus less on what we assume students to be – at risk, learning disabled, behavior disordered, etc. "This means developing relationships with our students, and understanding their political, cultural, and intellectual legacy…Part of truly allowing the brilliance of our children to shine forth would be to consciously organize institutions and instruction that expose them to their intellectual legacy; clarify their position in a racialized society; ritually express expectations for hard work and academic, social, physical, and moral excellence; and create alternative reasons for success other than 'getting a good job' – for our community, for your ancestors, for your descendents."

"Educators as 'Seed People' Growing a New Future" by Lisa Delpit, *Educational Researcher*, October 2003 (Vol. 7, #32, p. 14-21); this was the 2003 Dewitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Distinguished lecture. No e-link available.

5. Pacing Guides, Formative Assessments, and Data Meetings

The Waynesboro schools in Virginia recently developed a three-step process to boosting student achievement:

1. Pacing guides – Using end-of-year expectations and looking realistically at how much instructional time was available during the year (one school found that only 135 days were available because of pep rallies and other interruptions), grade-level and department teams developed a format for long-range planning grouping learning objectives into units, allocating time for each unit, and sequencing the units through the year. Teamwork was key, both for ownership of the sequence and to improve its quality. They found that summer was the best time to do this work.

2. Formative assessments – The Waynesboro folks feel that during-the-year assessments are "the lifeblood of school improvement." It's crucial that these assessments are well-aligned with end-of-year expectations and the pacing calendar. They believe that "the power of formative assessment increases when teachers of the same content area design and administer common assessments."

3. Data meetings – In these meetings (they had three a year) teacher teams look at the formative test results, revise the pacing guide if necessary, identify areas where students are having difficulty, and plan interventions and differentiation. The principal or another administrator chaired each of these meetings.

In Waynesboro they found that without administrative leadership, this whole process could not get off the ground. "We all know that the culture of teaching tends to be isolated and entrepreneurial; sometimes teachers would just rather do it themselves. Working together to create pacing guides, share student achievement results, and give and accept feedback about instruction is, as one teacher put it, 'uncomfortable, like looking in someone else's purse.' Still, such collaborative efforts make student achievement a schoolwide mission, one that teachers can actually accomplish."

"A Blueprint for Increasing Student Achievement" by Michael Rettig, Laurie McCullough, Karen Santos, and Chuck Watson in *Educational Leadership*, Nov. 2003 (Vol. 61, #3, p. 71-76). No e-link available.

6. Using Low-Stakes Reading Tests in a Tennessee High School

Facing the challenge of teaching students who ranged all the way from third-grade to college graduate reading level (a 15-year span), the teachers in a Tennessee high school decided to give a standardized reading test early in the year. They chose the Gates-MacGinitie and the Nelson-Denny tests, eyeballing students' levels to decide which level tests to administer. The results confirmed the huge reading achievement span and provided more precise information to help teachers accommodate students' diverse reading levels. Looking at the results, teachers found themselves adjusting their assumptions about some students' performance: for example, were 11th-grader Tony's low grades due to "laziness" or the fact that he was reading at a 5th-grade level? Was sophomore Tamika disengaged because she had an attitude problem, or was she bored because she could read at a college level?

The testing showed that 35 percent of students were reading one or more grade levels below grade placement, in many cases far below level, and 18 percent of

students were reading one or more grades above their grade placement. The staff came up with three initiatives to respond to the data:

- *Sustained silent reading* – The school purchased and collected hundreds of high-interest young adult novels and magazines covering a wide range of reading levels and gave a set to each classroom. Students were given at least one 25-minute silent reading period each week.
- *Young adult novels* – Teachers in several content areas began to use high-interest novels to teach subject matter (for example, a biology teacher used *Never Cry Wolf* in a unit on food chains)
- *Alternative texts* – Teachers found highly-engaging material on the Internet to convey some subject matter (for example, a U.S. Government teacher used several readings from the Web on federalism and the Fourteenth Amendment).

Post-test results showed that nearly half of students increased their scores by two or more grade levels, and another third maintained their pretest scores with an average grade equivalent of 12.5. At the end of the year, 73 percent of student were reading at or above their grade placement, compared with 65 percent on the pre-test.

"Using Low-Stakes Reading Assessment" by William Brozo and Charles Hargis in *Educational Leadership*, November 2003 (Vol. 61, #3, p. 60-64). No e-link available.

7. Brief Items:

• ***Religion in the classroom quiz*** - In *red italics*, these are the answers to last week's quiz on which kinds of activity are legally permissible in the classroom:

1. A Jewish teacher lectures on the Five Pillars of Wisdom. *This is okay as long as the lecture does not "advance or inhibit" the Islamic religion.*
2. During a class discussion on the U.S. role in the Middle East, two students claim that the U.S. is obligated to "protect the Holy Land because America is a Christian nation." *This is okay since students are entitled to free speech as long as that speech is not disruptive.*
3. During a unit on the American civil rights movement, a teacher assigns a group of students to research the role of the church in African American life. *This is okay since the topic teaches about religion without endorsing religion itself.*
4. A student brings a Bible to class every day and reads it silently during free reading time. *This is okay as long at the student is not disruptive.*

5. A student wears a T-shirt to class that reads, "Hell will keep you warm" on the front and "Are you saved?" on the back. *This is okay (free speech), subject to school dress codes.*
6. In response to an essay prompt asking students to write about the most influential person in their lives, a number of students write about Jesus. *This is okay and must be evaluated free of discrimination based on the religious content.*
7. In response to a speech prompt that asks students to give a seven-minute speech about the most influential person in their lives, one student talks about the Dalai Lama and Buddhist teaching. *This is okay; students are free to choose religious content to fulfill assignments.*
8. A Muslim girl wears a head covering (*hijab*) to class. *This is okay as free religious expression.*
9. A teacher tells his class that he is fasting for Ramadan. *This could be questionable; as an official representative of the school, he needs to be careful not to endorse religious activity through his own religious expression.*
10. A teacher has a calendar on her desk with Bible verses on each page. *This is a questionable practice; as an agent of the school, the teacher cannot appear to endorse a particular religion.*
11. After polling her class and finding that all the students identify themselves as Christian, a teacher holds a party on the last day of school before winter break and plays Christmas music. *This is definitely not okay; the teacher may not celebrate religious holidays. She could teach about religious holidays if her presentation was balanced among major religions.*
12. A teacher tells students who are being rude to one another that they have a moral obligation to be good and kind to one another. *This is okay; schools can teach civic virtues without endorsing the religious systems that also revere these virtues.*

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

• ***Why should a superintendent be like a highway engineer?*** – In a tongue-in-cheek column on the back of the current *Education Week*, John Merrow contends that a school superintendent needs to be more like a fire chief, swimming coach, band director, and highway engineer. Here's why:

- A competent fire chief puts resources where they are needed the most. If a fire chief was in charge of schools, he or she would put the best teachers in the neediest schools, at least until the "educational fires" were extinguished.

- A good swimming coach wouldn't be self-congratulatory about teaching kids to swim if even *one* of the students was lying at the bottom of the pool. If a swimming coach was running the schools, teachers would have to show results for all kids, which would force them to develop methods that worked.

- A good band director would not boast about the performance of the band if the trumpets played well but the percussion and woodwind sections were out of tune or off the beat. If a band director was in charge of schools, teachers would have to pay attention to *everything* – curriculum, individual training, and teamwork. They would have to encourage individual talent, but at the same time acknowledge that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

- A good highway engineer designs roads to get travelers to their destinations safely, which means making lanes about one-third wider than cars to allow for occasional inattention and wandering. If a highway engineer was running a school, teachers wouldn't play "gotcha" – they would anticipate mistakes and design systems to prevent accidents and see that all students succeed.

Merrow asks us to imagine superintendents, with their current operating philosophies, as fire chiefs, highway engineers, band directors, or swimming coaches. "Make a school administrator your fire chief, and the nicest neighborhoods would have all the fire engines. Put an educator in charge of highway design, and interstate-highway lanes would be one inch wider than cars, perfectly designed to punish any and all driving errors. If the school superintendent is directing the band, cover your ears. As for letting someone who says, "I taught it, but they didn't learn it," become a swimming instructor, let's not even go there."

Merrow concedes that no fire chief, highway engineer, band director, or swimming coach would ever want to run a school system because it's "just about the toughest task imaginable." So we have to push for change with the people who are now in charge.

"A Modest Proposal for New School Leadership" by John Merrow, *Education Week,* November 12, 2003 (Vol. XXIII, #11, p. 44)
http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=11merrow.h23

• ***Twenty-five big questions in science*** – *The New York Times* devoted most of last week's "Science Times" section to posing 25 of the big unanswered questions of science. This could be great material for curious kids of all ages: Does science matter?

Is war our biological destiny? Will humans ever visit Mars? How does the brain work? What is gravity, really? Will we ever find Atlantis? What are our replaceable parts? What should we eat? When is the next ice age? What came before the Big Bang? Could we live forever? Are men necessary? Women? What is the next plague? Can robots become conscious? Why do we sleep? How smart are animals? Could science prove there's a god? Is evolution truly random? How did life begin? Can drugs make us smart? Happy? Could the genome be improved? How much nature is enough? What's the hardest math problem? Does the paranormal exist?

Times, Nov 11, 2003 http://www.nytimes.com/2003/11/11/science/11MATT.html is the first article; you can download the remainder by typing in the questions above

• ***The five mind-sets of a manager*** – Managing effectively involves five tasks, each with its own mind-set, says this *Harvard Business Review* article:

- Managing the self (the reflective mind-set) – "You must appreciate the past if you wish to use the present to get to a better future."

- Managing the organization (the analytic mind-set) – "Analysis loosens up complex phenomena by breaking them into components parts."

- Managing context (the worldly mind-set) – Escaping parochial blinders.

- Managing relationships (the collaborative mind-set) – "To be in a collaborative mind-set means to be inside, involved, to manage throughout…To get management beyond managers, to distribute it so that responsibility flows naturally to whoever can take the initiative and pull things together."

- Managing change (the action mind-set) – "Imagine your organization as a chariot pulled by wild horses…These horses represent the emotions, aspirations, and motives of all the people in the organization…An action mind-set…is about developing a sensitive awareness of the terrain, and of what the team is capable of doing in it and thereby helping to set and maintain direction, coaxing everyone along."

These five mind-sets are threads and the manager is the weaver. To be effective, the manager must weave each mind-set over and under the others to create a fine, sturdy cloth.

"The Five Minds of a Manager" by Jonathan Gosling and Henry Mintzberg, *Harvard Business Review*, November 2003. No e-link available.

Do you have feedback? Is anything missing?

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

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

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

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

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

• *Curriculum* – Alignment and planning with the end in sight; teaching for understanding; new ideas in reading, writing, and math.

• *Assessment* – Aligned formative and summative assessments; using data and student work for continuous improvement; graphic display of student achievement data; standardized testing and the debate on standards.

• *Closing the gap* – Effective strategies to close the racial/economic achievement gap; the innate-ability/intelligence/effective effort debate; safety-net programs.

• *Positive school culture* – Student discipline; social-emotional learning; moral development; parent involvement; and community partnerships.

• *And…* – New areas of research; upcoming television and radio programs on education.

Publications covered:

(those read this week are underlined)

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

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