

Marshall Memo 33

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
April 12, 2004

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Quotes of the Week

"You can't teach what you don't know."

Kenneth Gross, Vermont professor involved in math professional development;
Education Week, April 7, 2004, p. 14

"For many teachers used to closed-door teaching, routinely observing and evaluating each other's work, and sharing ideas, can be uncomfortable or even threatening at first."

Nancy Protheroe, *Principal Magazine* (see item #1)

"We had all these talented, committed teachers moving in five hundred directions. There was no focus."

Susan French, Kentucky principal, on turning around her underperforming school, in *Education Week*, April 7, 2004, p. 6

"Middle schoolers have always been selectively sullen, shamelessly self-absorbed, and hopelessly obsessed with winning the admiration of their peers."

Linda Perlstein, *Principal Magazine* (see item 5)

"The idea that middle school has to be either a place of academic rigor or of nurturing is a false dichotomy. It must be both."

Linda Perlstein, *Principal Magazine* (*ibid.*)

"I was lucky enough to have a teacher who didn't take my bad grades as a judgment of my abilities, but simply as an indication that I should study more. He pulled me aside and told me he knew I could do better. He let me retake the tests, and I pulled my grade up to an A."

Carolyn Turk on her 8th-grade algebra teacher (*Newsweek*, see item #7)

"Poverty is a powerful and persistent obstacle to learning. Standards-based reformers acknowledge the injury of poverty, but they reject the temptation to give up on children by declaring 'poverty is destiny.'"

Paul Reville in *Phi Delta Kappan*, April 2004 (p. 297)

1. Getting Effective Teacher Teams Off the Ground

Effective teacher teamwork (grade-level teams in elementary schools and subject-area teams at the secondary level) can be a powerful engine for improving student achievement. Often referred to as “professional learning communities,” teacher teams have been shown to be a key element in overall school improvement, teacher professional development, and student learning. These are some of the factors associated with productive teams:

- Shared vision and values and an unwavering focus on student learning;
- A climate of democratic participation and decision-making;
- Regularly-scheduled meeting time during the school day;
- A mandate to identify specific student achievement [SMART] goals;
- Focus questions from the principal to guide the work of the team;
- Clear direction on what the team will produce [e.g., common assessments, curriculum units, data analysis];
- Relevant data and information made available to the team;
- Team members regularly observing and discussing each others’ teaching;
- Collective learning and application of learning to address students’ needs;
- Respect and trust among colleagues.

Developing trust is a critical element of effective teamwork. “For many teachers used to closed-door teaching,” writes Protheroe, “routinely observing and evaluating each other’s work, and sharing ideas, can be uncomfortable or even threatening at first.” Principals need to nurture trust and monitor four vital signs:

- *Respect* – Interacting courteously, listening to each other, and respecting others’ ideas;
- *Competence* – Believing in one another’s ability and willingness to pursue the school’s mission;
- *Personal regard* – Caring about each other professionally and personally and being willing to go beyond formal roles and responsibilities;
- *Integrity* – Keeping our word and trusting each other to put the interests of children first.

“Professional Learning Communities” by Nancy Protheroe, *Principal Magazine*, May/June 2004 (Vol. 83, #5, p. 39-42), no e-link available.

2. An Alignment Checklist

To raise the achievement of all students over time, says Ronald Thomas, a Maryland leadership educator, schools need to focus on aligning everyday instruction with the standards that are assessed in state tests. Here is an edited version of a checklist designed by Thomas to assess the degree of alignment within a school. You might want to rate your school on this 1-5 scale:

1 <i>Not Planned</i>	2 <i>Planned, Not Implemented</i>	3 <i>Minor Implementation</i>	4 <i>Major Implementation</i>	5 <i>Fully Implemented</i>
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- Teachers know precisely what knowledge and skills students must master by the end of each year to meet state standards.
- Rigor and expectations increase as students progress through the grades.
- The district has consistent expectations for student performance from teacher to teacher, grade to grade, and school to school.
- Teachers agree on the characteristics of acceptable and exemplary student work.
- Students are told what is expected of them in understandable language.
- Teachers focus their daily lessons on:
 - o Areas most important to success in future grades;
 - o Areas most useful to students in more than one academic discipline.
 - o Areas in which students scored poorly on previous assessments;
- Teachers assign engaging work and authentic tasks that students can and will do.
- Classroom assessments include the content that is assessed in the state test.
- Teachers constantly use state-aligned formative assessments to monitor students' progress and adjust instruction.
- Classroom assessments often parallel the format and routines as state tests.
- Classroom assessments are graded with the same rigor as state tests.
- Teachers use the most appropriate type of assessment for each standard or benchmark.
- Teachers can identify the areas in which individual students are doing well and those in which they are struggling.
- Special help is focused on areas where students are weak and is tailored to meet students' individual needs.
- Parents get reports on their children's progress in relation to state standards and benchmarks.

- Intensive academic help is given to all students who need it, even if their parents do not request it.

“Aligning Schools to State Standards” by Ronald Thomas, *Principal Magazine*, May/June 2004 (Vol. 83, #5, p. 16-20), no e-link available.

3. Best Practices in Virginia’s Most Effective Urban Schools

The state of Virginia recently conducted a study to analyze the gap between its best- and worst-performing schools. The study’s most interesting findings concerned “challenged” schools: nine practices appeared to be associated with the success of these schools despite lower parental education and support, lower student motivation and academic preparation, greater transiency, and more violence in the community:

- *Strong and stable principal leadership* – Leaders recognized and addressed gaps between student needs and actual levels of support. Principals continually looked for ways to compensate for low parent support (for example, buying alarm clocks for children whose parents could not be relied upon to wake them up; setting up after-school and Saturday programs for students unable to concentrate at home).

- *An environment conducive to learning* – Successful schools set high expectations and did not accept poverty as an excuse. Principals truly believed that their students could achieve and went to great lengths to convey that belief to students. They had faith in their students, even those who were unmotivated and had low self-esteem. They took every opportunity to reinforce success with recognition and rewards. They brought in male role models to teach male students about respect and acceptable behavior. They addressed discipline problems directly and indirectly (for example, by scheduling class transitions in a way that limited the amount of time students spent in the hallways).

- *An effective teaching staff* – Successful schools had effective staff development, especially for inexperienced teachers. Principals videotaped teachers and used the tapes to help them improve or as examples of exemplary practice for other teachers. They used reading and math specialists to supplement instruction and remediation provided in regular classrooms.

- *Data-driven assessment of student weaknesses and teacher effectiveness* – Successful schools relied more heavily on data analysis and designed remediation to address specific weaknesses.

- *Curriculum alignment, pacing, and resources* – Successful schools aligned their curriculum to state standards, planned the pacing of instruction, and made sure that curriculum materials and other resources were “on mission.”

- *Differentiation in teaching* – These schools altered the content according to student needs and learning styles.

- *Academic remediation* – Successful schools did whatever it took to provide extensive and intensive help for struggling students.

- *Teamwork, collaboration, and vertical integration* – Successful schools encouraged teacher teamwork and got staff members to think of the school as a common enterprise.

- *The structure and intensity of the school day* – Successful schools maximized the amount of time available for instruction and allocated time to address potential weaknesses and provide for remediation.

The Virginia study also looked at district-wide practices associated with higher student achievement. These included:

- An emphasis on the importance of classroom instruction from the top.
- A tone and spirit emphasizing achievement.
- Supporting or dismissing ineffective teachers.
- Using data analysis to ensure accountability.
- Providing instructional specialists to support teachers.
- Getting teachers from the same grade level together to share best practices.

The study noted that the practices noted above would have an impact in any school, but they were far more important to challenged schools: the consequence of not implementing them in high-poverty schools was poor student performance.

“Virginia’s Excellent Adventure” by Kathy Christie, *Phi Delta Kappan*, April 2004 (Vol. 85 #8, p. 565-567). The full study, *Review of Factors and Practices Associated with School Performance in Virginia*, is at <http://jlarc.state.va.us/Reports/Rpt305.pdf>

4. Are We Cheating Disadvantaged Students Out of a Full Curriculum?

In this commentary article on the back of last week’s *Education Week*, two leaders in the Council for Basic Education in Washington make an impassioned case for not depriving students of a full liberal arts curriculum. The authors are concerned that the pressure of standardized testing and No Child Left Behind are leading some schools to focus only on reading, writing, and math and squeeze science, social studies, foreign languages, and the arts out of the curriculum. Citing a study that

found that this was particularly prevalent in high-poverty districts, they say, “These findings raise the specter of a new kind of opportunity gap in which low-income minority students are being excluded from the liberal arts curriculum that their more privileged counterparts receive as a matter of course. In our effort to close the achievement gap in literacy and math, we have substituted one form of educational inequity for another, denying our most vulnerable students the kind of curriculum available routinely to the wealthy.”

The arts, foreign languages, and other subjects are not expendable, they argue. In fact, these subjects are even more relevant in an era in which “the explosion of multimedia technologies compels us to expand our very notion of literacy to include visual and even auditory literacy.”

Not enough time in the school day? Then teachers should be trained to integrate the liberal arts into strategies for raising students’ mathematics and literacy skills.

“Academic Atrophy: The Condition of the Liberal Arts in America’s Public Schools” by Raymond Bartlett and Claus von Zastrow in *Education Week*, April 7, 2004 (Vol. XXIII, #30, p. 48, 36) <http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=30bartlett.h23>

5. A Few Things We Should Know About Middle School Students

Linda Perlstein, an education writer for *The Washington Post* and author of the recent book *Not Much Just Chillin’: The Hidden Lives of Middle Schoolers*, has some thoughtful observations on middle school students. In her words:

- Middle schoolers have always been selectively sullen, shamelessly self-absorbed, and hopelessly obsessed with winning the admiration of their peers.
- In some ways, the preadolescent brain can’t keep up with the demands on it. The frontal lobes, where organization and judgment and reasoning reside, aren’t as well developed as the emotional centers. Knowledge doesn’t necessarily translate into appropriate behavior, which makes it difficult to deal with the pressures of preadolescence.
- Bullying is complicated in middle school, where it’s less about the prototypical take-your-lunch-money bully than about group exclusion – a nastiness so subtle that teachers and administrators often don’t notice.
- Preadolescents also face a barrage of material stimuli, many with sexual messages attached... there’s a lot of sexual harassment that goes unnoticed in the hallways despite school awareness programs.

- [T]hey'll try when the material is presented in an engaging way. They'll try when they're allowed to figure things out for themselves without searching for the one right answer. And they'll try when they don't have to just sit there and copy from the overhead projector.

- Middle schoolers will try when they feel they are involved. They like to choose, to help set the rules, and to tutor each other. They want to feel they are treated fairly.

- As Eric complained about his social studies lesson on the Bill of Rights: "How you gonna be a kid, only 13 years old, and sit there and listen to a teacher talk about nothing?" Eric would love to hear more about the Taliban and Osama bin Laden. If he had been taught there is a connection between the Bill of Rights and why we're fighting the Taliban, it wouldn't be "nothing" anymore.

- The idea that middle school has to be either a place of academic rigor or of nurturing is a false dichotomy. It must be both. Kids know when tasks are stupid; they know when the bar is set high. They are capable of deep thought. They hate goal-setting exercises, but they love to learn new things and show off their knowledge.

- It may be hard to believe when you're bearing the brunt of a sixth grader's whining fit, but middle schoolers feel less conflict with their teachers and principals than they do with their family and friends.

- Even when they don't admit it, it means a lot to them to please adults... [N]othing meant more to [Eric] than when his English teacher called his dad to say how well he did on a quiz. It really turned him around for a while. No matter how tough or jaded a kid is, I have never met one who wasn't thrilled – if only on the inside – with thoughtful gestures like these.

- [T]here's a fine line between letting them fail and nudging them to success. Don't be easy on them. They've got to have responsibility, rigorous work, consequences, and some independence. Just don't forget that they still need your help and understanding. They need allies, not just educators.

"What You Should Know About Middle Schoolers" by Linda Perlstein, *Principal Magazine*, May/June 2004 (Vol. 83, #5, p. 60-61), no e-link available.

6. A Hands-on Principal Sings the Time Management Blues

Allan Vann, a recently-retired principal, reflects on the perennial problem he had with being overloaded with tasks. As principal, he rejected two pieces of advice frequently offered by time management experts:

- *Use a gatekeeper to avoid constant interruptions.* Vann wanted to have an open door to staff members: “I felt it was extremely important that anyone who needed to see me could walk right in. Immediate access often diffused potential problems.”

- *Delegate tasks.* Vann found that this could be counterproductive: “Too often, I found that when I delegated important tasks to clerical or instructional staff, the work simply did not get done with the same level of quality and attentiveness that I would have brought to the task.” There was no way, Vann says, that he would have delegated the job of writing his weekly staff bulletin or monthly parent letter. “These communications vehicles reflected my voice in promoting my vision, reinforcing curriculum priorities, and educating my target audiences about important matters.”

Vann has five pieces of advice for principals who are similarly disinclined to close their doors and let go of key leadership tasks:

- Do paperwork early in the morning, after dismissal, or at home.
- Write for publication; writing articles about stressful situations helped Vann clarify his thoughts and relieved stress.
- Accept the fact that being a hands-on leader will create time commitments that add more pressure to an already stressful job. Vann believes that “it was necessary, and ultimately less stressful, to devote the time needed to do the job the way I felt it must be done.”
- Make the time to enjoy non-school activities. Golf and teaching poetry worked for him.
- Change jobs if the pressures of the principalship are keeping you from enjoying your work.

“Do It Yourself!” by Allan Vann, , *Principal Magazine*, May/June 2004 (Vol. 83, #5, p. 62), no e-link available.

7. You Don't Have to Love Math to Become Proficient At It

In a recent *Newsweek* “My Turn” column, Carolyn Turk, a Maryland woman who had no particular interest in math and science growing up, tells how she ended up working as a mechanical engineer. As a child, she had picked up a belief that women were not good at math and science. But an eighth-grade algebra teacher began to change her belief system: “On one test I got only 36 percent of the answers correct. I failed the next one, too. I started to think, Maybe I’m just no good at this. I was lucky enough to have a teacher who didn’t take my bad grades as a judgment of my abilities, but simply as an indication that I should study more. He pulled me aside and

told me he knew I could do better. He let me retake the tests, and I pulled my grade up to an A.”

At 16, Turk decided to attend a summer program in engineering because she craved independence and wanted to get out of her parents’ house for six weeks. To her surprise, she loved engineering, and that ended up being her major in college. Doubts continued to dog her during her undergraduate years: “I had moments of panic while sitting underneath the buzzing fluorescent lights in the engineering library on Saturday afternoons, when I worried that the estrogen in my body was preventing me from understanding thermodynamics. But the guys in my classes had to work just as hard, and I knew that I couldn’t afford to lose confidence in myself. I didn’t want to chose between my femininity and a good career.”

Reflecting on her turnaround, Turk recalled that she was always told to do what she was best at because it would come easily to her. “But this is what I discovered: just because a subject is difficult to learn, it does not mean you are not good at it. You just have to grit your teeth and work harder to get good at it. Once you do, there’s a strong chance you will enjoy it more than anything else.”

Yes, Turk concedes, there are differences between boys and girls, including in their brains. She recalls that she loved Barbie dolls and her miniature kitchen set as a little girl. But biology is not destiny, she contends. “Instead of translating our differences into hard and fast conclusions about the human brain, why can’t we focus instead on how incredibly flexible we are? Instead of using what we know as a reason why women can’t learn physics, maybe we should consider the possibility that our brains are more powerful than we imagine.”

Girls have to push back against society’s subtle messages, Turk concludes: “Here’s a secret: math and science don’t come easily to most people. No one was ever born knowing calculus. A woman can learn anything a man can, but first she needs to know that she can do it, and that take a leap of faith. It also helps to have selective hearing.”

“A Woman Can Learn Anything a Man Can” by Carolyn Turk, *Newsweek*, April 5, 2004, p. 12 <http://www.newsweek.msnbc.com>

8. Short Items:

- *Steps to Take When State Test Scores Arrive* – In this article, a Texas educator suggests four common-sense steps to analyzing data from state tests:

- *Check for accuracy* – There are sometimes errors that can skew a school’s results. Have someone check that each student is really yours and is accurately entered.
- *Graph the data* – A graphic display is far more powerful than tables of numbers.
- *Analyze the data* – Look at the total students proficient and above and the performance of students broken down by gender, race, ethnicity, special education status, and economic status.
- *Look at performance over time* – What are the trend lines? Is the achievement gap between student groups narrowing?

“Data Analysis: Searching for Clues” by George Hademenos, , *Principal Magazine*, May/June 2004 (Vol. 83, #5, p. 30-35), no e-link available.

• ***Teaching About the Civil Rights Movement*** – Too much teaching on the Civil Rights movement is a repetitious recitation of names and dates, an exercise in lauding a handful of saintly heroes. This is a shame because the events of the Civil Rights movement have the potential to help students develop a critical analysis of U.S. history. A new book entitled “Putting the Movement Back into Civil Rights Teaching” contains lessons and articles for teachers and students who want to go into more depth.

“Putting the Movement Back into Civil Rights Teaching” by Teaching for Change and the Poverty and Race Research Action Council. Spotted in PEN Weekly NewsBlast, April 9, 2004. The book is available at <http://www.civilrightsteaching.org/intro.htm>

• ***Excellent school libraries*** – An Ohio study of elementary and secondary school libraries identified several qualities of the most effective libraries:

- All school libraries should be staffed by certified librarians.
- The library and should be the hub of schoolwide information and professional development.
- The library should be conducive to student learning and should have a strong technology infrastructure.
- The librarian should teach information literacy skills for inquiry learning.
- All school stakeholders should be involved in continuously improving the library collection, technology, and staffing.

“New Study Supports Value of School Libraries” in *Reading Today*, April/ May 2004 (Vol. 21, #5, p. 25). More details on the study at <http://www.oelma.org> .

• ***Connecting with donors of supplies*** – A few years ago, Jerry Hall, a San Diego entrepreneur, launched a website that allows teachers to request classroom supplies from donors nationwide. Teachers can register (address verification is required) and then post a list of supplies and classroom equipment their schools can't afford. Potential donors visit the site and search by region, item, school, and teacher and decide on donations they want to make. Donors and teachers then connect and work out the details of the transactions themselves. Around 4,000 teachers in 49 states have registered and made requests ranging from naptime pillows and baby wipes to computers.

“Teachers Use Web Site That Connects Them with Donors of Supplies” by Marianne Hurst, *Education Week*, April 7, 2004 (Vol. XXXIII, #30, p. 12). The website is at <http://www.iLoveSchools.com> .

• ***Crap-detecting on the Internet*** – Educators and students surfing the Net come across bushels of information that may be erroneous. Reid Goldborough, a syndicated columnist and author of *Straight Talk About the Information Superhighway*, offers the following questions to help evaluate the veracity of what we encounter on line:

- *Who's behind the information?* Some groups have better fact-checking than others.
- *Why is the person or organization presenting the information?* The agenda behind the message may be explicit or it may be hidden.
- *Is the information paid for?* Advertisements and “advertorials” are inherently less credible than other information.
- *Does the information diverge from my current understanding?* If it's way outside your current understanding and could affect an important business, health, or family decision, get a second opinion.
- *Is the information new or old?* A lot of deadwood data are floating around in cyberspace on websites that haven't been updated in years. If the website doesn't have a “last updated” line with a date, be dubious.

“In Search of Truth on the Internet” by Reid Goldborough in *Reading Today*, April/ May 2004 (Vol. 21, #5, p. 12), no e-link available.

• ***Clear and incisive writing award of the month*** – Check out this excerpt from a letter to *Harvard Magazine* responding to an earlier letter that criticized the Harvard

Graduate School of Education: "Schools such as HGSE empower education workers with adjusted visions and adaptive tools that enable them to irrigate obsolete social stratifications and to perforate destructive structural impediments so that capitalism's deathwish of erecting a New Jerusalem on the foundation of a social stone age does not go unchallenged."

Letter from Taylor Ayres McLean to *Harvard Magazine*, March / April 2004

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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, 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; supervision and evaluation of teachers; time management.
- *Effective teaching* – Key variables associated with high student achievement; 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
American School Board Journal
ASCD SmartBrief
Atlantic Monthly
Bay State Banner
Boston Globe
Commonwealth Magazine
Curriculum/ Education Update (ASCD)
Ed. Magazine (Harvard School of Education)
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Elementary School Journal
Harpers
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Education Review
Middle School Journal
New York Times
New Yorker
Newsweek
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal Magazine
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Review of Educational Research
Teachers College Record
Teacher Magazine

E-links will be provided whenever possible to give access to the full article. If you would like to suggest additional publications, please be in touch.

Subscriptions:

The Marshall Memo is sent every Monday (with occasional breaks). Subscriptions are \$50 a year. Reduced rates for institutional subscriptions can be negotiated. Contact Kim at kim.marshall8@verizon.net or 222 Clark Road, Brookline, MA 02445 (617-566-4353).