

Marshall Memo 117

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
January 2, 2006

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Quotes of the Week

“A big part of the problem is consultants, who are *always* rewarded for getting work, only *sometimes* rewarded for doing good work, and *hardly ever* rewarded for evaluating whether they have actually improved things.”

Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton (see item #1)

“Without continuous assessment, student learning is limited to a one-shot, hit-or-miss event – maybe they get it, maybe they don’t.”

Jay McTighe and Marcella Emberger (see item #4)

“Assess, determine a grade, and move on is the norm... Grading is, in fact, the primary purpose of assessment among all levels of teachers.”

Kathleen Topolka Jorissen (see item #5)

“When teachers design assessments, give each other feedback through peer reviews, evaluate student work, and plan together for improvement, they are engaged in highly effective professional development.”

Jay McTighe and Marcella Emberger (*ibid.*)

“You have to emphasize the basics. Like, for instance, a kid knows fractions, knows arithmetic, I guarantee this kid’s going to have success in algebra.”

Jaime Escalante in an interview in *Teacher Magazine*, Jan./Feb. 2006, p. 13

“If public schools don’t teach a comprehensive sex education curriculum, Madonna will.”

Letter from a Minnesota reader to *American School Board Journal*, Jan. 2006, p. 10

1. Evidence-Based Decisions: Advice from the Business World

In this powerful article in the new *Harvard Business Review*, two Stanford professors, Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton, say that what business leaders need is not random advice from a bizarre collection of “management experts” – Shakespeare, Billy Graham, Jack Welch, Tony Soprano, fighter pilots, Santa Claus, and Attila the Hun – but a commitment to using actual *evidence* in making decisions. They argue that leaders need to face the hard facts about what works and what doesn’t, understand the “dangerous half-truths that constitute so much conventional wisdom, and reject the total nonsense... that too often passes for sound advice.”

This sounds obvious, but Pfeffer and Sutton say that doctors and business leaders (and educators?) rarely use best evidence to make decisions. Why? It’s not stupidity, laziness, or deceit, they say. Instead, it’s a human tendency to rely on:

- *Obsolete knowledge* – Many practitioners trust their own experience more than they trust research. “[I]nformation acquired firsthand often feels richer and closer to real knowledge than do words and data in a journal article.”

- *Personal experience* – People often apply strategies from previous job settings that don’t apply where they are now, ignoring glaring differences.

- “*To a hammer, everything looks like a nail.*” – Managers tend to implement solutions that play to their strengths.

- *Hype* – Doctors and business leaders (and educators) hear constantly from vendors who exaggerate the benefits and downplay the risks of their products. But some effective solutions don’t have self-interested advocates pushing them. For example, many doctors recommend that people with plantar warts on their feet go to a specialist. But there’s a remedy that works just as well, minus the expensive and painful surgery – duct tape.

- *Dogma* – “When people are overly influenced by ideology,” write Pfeffer and Sutton, “they often fail to question whether a practice will work – it fits so well with what they ‘know’ about what makes people and organizations tick.” Those in the thrall of an entrenched belief ignore contrary evidence and see what they want to see.

- *Mindless imitation of top performers* – While copying successful practices from other organizations can save time and money, the problem is that people often miss what’s really causing success. For example, United Airlines tried to compete with Southwest in California by dressing gate staff and flight attendants in casual clothes, not serving food on planes, increasing the frequency of flights, and reducing the amount of time planes were on the

ground. But none of this was the essence of Southwest's success, which lay in the company's culture of putting its employees first.

Even for managers who *get it*, Pfeffer and Sutton say that seven additional factors make it difficult to be evidence-based:

- There's too much evidence. The number of books, magazines, and online resources is simply overwhelming.

- There's not enough *good* evidence.

- The evidence doesn't apply evenly. Managers are often confronted with half-truths that apply only some of the time, under certain conditions.

- People are trying to mislead you. "A big part of the problem," say Pfeffer and Sutton, "is consultants, who are *always* rewarded for getting work, only *sometimes* rewarded for doing good work, and *hardly ever* rewarded for evaluating whether they have actually improved things."

- *You* are trying to mislead you. "Many practitioners and their advisors routinely ignore evidence about management practices that clashes with their beliefs and ideologies, and their own observations are contaminated by what they expect to see."

- The side effects of the cure outweigh the benefits. Pfeffer and Sutton point to an example from education – the seemingly "obvious" solution of keeping back students who fail to meet grade-level standards, which flies in the face of overwhelming research evidence that it doesn't work and ignores the side effects: increased costs (since students are spending more time in school), larger class sizes, increased bullying and discipline problems with overage students, and lower test scores (because, as the research shows, retention doesn't produce higher achievement).

- A good story is more persuasive than evidence. It's true that not everything can be quantified – and stories, when used correctly, are powerful tools. But they should, whenever possible, be part of an evidence-based argument.

So what's a leader to do? Pfeffer and Sutton say that becoming an evidence-based manager is a huge challenge. "The demands for decisions are relentless," they write, "information is incomplete, and even the very best executives make many mistakes and undergo constant criticism and second-guessing from people inside and outside their companies." Making the shift to evidence-based decision-making requires a "willingness to put aside belief and conventional wisdom – the dangerous half-truths that many embrace – and replace these with an unrelenting commitment to gather the necessary facts to make more informed and intelligent decisions." Here's Pfeffer and Sutton's advice to leaders:

- Demand evidence.
- Use success (and failure) stories to illustrate sound practices, but not in place of a valid research method.
- Adopt a neutral stance toward ideologies and theories.
- Scrutinize the logic of proposals; be sure to examine drawbacks as well as virtues.
- Be suspicious of "breakthrough" ideas and studies, and stop treating old ideas as if they were brand-new.

- Treat the organization as an unfinished prototype. The CEO of Harrah's says that there are three ways to get fired in his organization: Steal, harass women, or institute a program without first running an experiment.
- Be humble. "Evidence-based management is conducted best not by know-it-alls but by managers who profoundly appreciate how much they do not know."
- Celebrate and develop collective brilliance and ownership. "Knowledge is rarely generated by lone geniuses who cook up brilliant new ideas in their gigantic brains."

"Evidence-Based Management" by Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton in *Harvard Business Review*, January 2006 (Vol. 84, #1, p. 62-74), no e-link available

2. How Did I Miss That? "Bounded Awareness" in Decision Making

In another relevant *Harvard Business Review* article, two professors write about the phenomenon of "bounded awareness," which causes us to ignore critical information. The solution is expanding the limits of our awareness before making important choices so we won't later ask ourselves, "How did I miss that?" Some recommendations:

See information:

- *Know what you are looking for and train your eyes.* Ask yourself, "What if our strategy is wrong? How would I know?" This forces you to pay attention to areas you might overlook.

- *Get an outsider's perspective.* Ask this person or group to tell you things you don't see from your vantage point. Even if they make radical suggestions that you can't implement, it's always better to have more data at hand.

Seek information:

- *Challenge the absence of disconfirming information.* If you get recommendations without contradictory data, it's a red flag indicating that your team members are falling prey to bounded awareness. Assign someone to play the role of "devil's inquisitor" – a person who asks questions (as opposed to the devil's advocate, who argues an alternate point of view).

- *Under-search most of the time, but over-search in critical situations.* Think about the implications of an error; if it would be extremely difficult to recover from, then over-searching in that area is wise.

Use information:

- *Unpack the situation.* Make sure you're not overemphasizing one event and discounting other relevant information. By consciously thinking about the full context of your situation, you're less likely to disregard important data.

- *Assume that the information you need exists in your organization.* It often does, and if you approach it with that mind-set, you're more likely to discover it.

Share information:

- *Everyone has unique information; ask for it explicitly.* At meetings, every team member should be required to give an update, thus increasing the probability that important information is shared.

- *Create structures that make information sharing the default.* Perhaps one individual should be made responsible for assembling information from many sources.

“Decisions Without Blinders” by Max Bazerman and Dolly Clugh in *Harvard Business Review*, January 2006 (Vol. 84, #1, p. 88-97), no e-link available

3. Is Strategic Planning Completely Useless?

“In most companies,” write management consultants Michael Mankins and Richard Steele in a third *Harvard Business Review* article that has implications for educators, “strategic planning isn’t about making decisions. It’s about documenting choices that have already been made, often haphazardly... The timing and structure of strategic planning are obstacles to good decision making.” Writing strategic plans, which has been a major fad in the business world for years, is now falling out of favor with some leaders because they realize that they have been making not-so-thoughtful decisions on the fly because their annual plans are static and stolid. A small number of forward-thinking companies have thrown out their calendar-driven planning process and replaced it with continuous, issues-focused decision making. These companies have shifted from “review and approve” to “debate and decide.” Their process is characterized by:

- Separating – but integrating – decision making and plan making. The result is a set of concrete decisions that management has to make as each year unfolds.

- Focusing on a few key organization-wide themes.

- Making strategy development continuous. Rather than squeezing all long-range planning into a narrow window each year, managers focus on one issue at a time until they reach a set of decisions, and can add unforeseen items to their plan as events unfold.

- Structuring strategy reviews to produce real decisions. The most common obstacles to decision making, say Mankins and Steele, are disagreements among leaders over past decisions, current alternatives, and the facts presented to support plans. The trick is to structure decision making to overcome these problems. At Textron, for example, executives conduct pairs of half-day sessions at intervals through the year organized around: (a) establishing the facts, (b) brainstorming a limited set of viable strategy alternatives, and (c) reaching a decision.

“Stop Making Plans, Start Making Decisions” by Michael Mankins and Richard Steele in *Harvard Business Review*, January 2006 (Vol. 84, #1, p. 76-84), no e-link available

4. Collaborative Creation and Scoring of Student Assessments

“When teachers design assessments, give each other feedback through peer reviews, evaluate student work, and plan together for improvement, they are engaged in highly effective professional development.” So say consultants Jay McTighe and Marcella Emberger in this

detailed and helpful article in the winter *Journal of Staff Development*. “Ongoing assessments are a vital part of the teaching-learning cycle,” they continue. “Without continuous assessment, student learning is limited to a one-shot, hit-or-miss event – maybe they get it, maybe they don’t. Ongoing assessments give teachers feedback so they can adjust their instruction. Ongoing assessments help students focus their efforts.”

McTighe and Emberger believe that the deepest, most informative assessments are performance tasks, which ask students to apply what they have learned to new situations and explain their responses – show their work, support their reasoning, and justify their answers. Here are three strategies that teachers can use to create and use such assessments:

- *Strategy 1: Collaborative design* – The optimal team size is three to five teachers working at the same grade level and subject area with a facilitator (teachers don’t have to be in the same school or even the same district). The team meets to decide:

- The goals or content standards being assessed; not all standards need to be assessed by performance task. For example, state capitals and chemical symbols are best assessed by multiple-choice or fill-in-the-blank questions.
- The task students will perform to show their understanding and proficiency; McTighe and Emberger suggest the GRASPS checklist (students planning a performance task should be sure they have a Goal, Role, Audience, Situation, Product/Performance, and Standards for evaluation).
- The criteria by which students’ performance will be judged – usually a rubric created to assess the degree of understanding or proficiency, work quality, and impact.
- It’s best if the design is written on a computer to make it easier to revise and disseminate. It’s great if team members have access to the Internet as they work. “Teachers are masters at adapting ideas and can build on others’ ideas rather than starting with a blank slate.” It’s also important for the team to have multiple meetings and informal contact between meetings.

- *Strategy 2: A peer review process* – McTighe and Emberger think the best way for performance tasks to be assessed and improved is a structured peer review process by colleagues. Review teams, optimally 3-5 members, can be teachers of the same subject and grade or cross-grade. Peer review is most successful when:

- Feedback is specific, descriptive, and guided by the criteria in the design standard.
- Feedback is not personalized; reviewers don’t praise or criticize the designers, but focus on providing feedback to improve the task and rubric.
- The designer listens to the feedback and asks clarifying questions.
- Meetings stay on schedule.

- *Strategy 3: Anchor the evaluation in student work* – When the unit has been taught and the performance task is completed by students, teachers gather the data and meet again to see how well students understood the unit and what they learned. Here are the steps:

- Teachers each bring 5-8 randomly-selected samples of student work from the assessment with the scores hidden (the sample might be a videotape if the task involves a performance).
- Teachers describe their students' work on the performance task one student at a time.
- Team members describe what they have seen, evaluate the most important criteria, and interpret what the work reveals about student learning and understanding, including patterns that are evident and questions that were raised, and identify follow-up improvement actions.
- The team places student work at rubric scoring levels. The anchor papers (or performances) help teachers understand and apply the criteria and standards consistently to all other students. These anchors can be used inside the school or district-wide.

“Teamwork on Assessments Creates Powerful Professional Development” by Jay McTighe and Marcella Emberger in *Journal of Staff Development*, Winter 2006 (Vol. 27, #1, p. 38-44), no e-link available

5. Making Classroom Assessments Part of the Learning Process

In this *Journal of Staff Development* article, Ohio professor (and former principal) Kathleen Topolka Jorissen reports that when most teachers give students the assessments included in their math or reading programs, there's a strong tendency to enter students' scores as a grade and immediately begin the next unit – missing a golden opportunity to use data to improve their teaching. “Assess, determine a grade, and move on is the norm,” says Jorissen. “Grading is, in fact, the primary purpose of assessment among all levels of teachers.”

Principals, she says, must work to get teachers out of this summative mindset. “Supervision,” Jorissen writes, “needs to focus on classroom assessment *as it relates to instruction*.” She has three recommendations:

- *Embed classroom assessment in the school improvement process.* Principals should provide training, resources, and support for teachers to develop common curriculum goals, write common assessments, and analyze student achievement data. “When classroom assessment becomes an essential tool in school improvement,” says Jorissen, “teachers' collective need and desire for assessment literacy increases.”

- *Develop assessment literacy.* Many teachers aren't confident of their skill at designing classroom assessments, and admit that they have learned most of what they know on the job. This is true of many principals too. The school improvement process is a great opportunity for all staff to increase their assessment literacy. This can come from formal training in summer institutes and during-the-year workshops that further collaborative work; in collegial support within teams looking at interim data; in reflective inquiry and action research that uses classroom data to inform practice; and in book study groups.

- *Incorporate classroom assessment into classroom supervision.* In addition to observing the process of teaching, principals should pay attention to what is being assessed and the quality and appropriateness of assessments.

“Three Skillful Moves to Assessment for the Busy Principal” by Kathleen Topolka Jorissen in *Journal of Staff Development*, Winter 2006 (Vol. 27, #1,p. 22-30), no e-link available

6. A Successful Elementary Writing Initiative in Missouri

In this *Journal of Staff Development* article, Missouri professional developer and assessment expert Janna Smith describes how she supported the staff of an elementary school in her district in an initiative to improve students’ writing. A group of teachers and the principal had attended a conference and returned with the idea of implementing the Six Traits of Writing. The staff decided to administer two writing prompts during the year and score them collaboratively, striving for inter-rater reliability. The principal set up a calendar for the prompts and scoring times, and teachers decided on appropriate topics that students would be asked to write about.

Teachers then decided to hold weekly before-school meetings focused on the writing initiative, replacing monthly nuts-and-bolts meetings after school. The professional development committee developed a calendar of same-grade, adjacent-grade, cross-grade, and whole-faculty meetings, each focused on actions supporting the writing initiative. For example, in one whole-staff meeting, teachers thrashed out what was universal in the traits and what was grade-specific. In a grade 4-5 meeting, teachers zeroed in on individual students’ scores trait by trait; while they didn’t always agree on scores, they avoided defensiveness and saw that their differences weren’t significant. The discussion then began to zero in on the teaching implications of the data.

Commenting on the meetings, one teacher said, “We had to constantly remind ourselves that our goal wasn’t to become expert scorers so the assessment didn’t become more important than the teaching it was meant to enhance.” After each meeting, teachers focused their writing instruction more purposefully on the traits they were studying. For example, writes Smith, “when teachers investigated the word choice and voice traits for their grade level, they became savvy evaluators of specific age groups’ lenses on life. But they could not stop there. Teachers worked to develop conferencing skills that would elicit vocabulary and personality in the writing of their less sophisticated writers... Using the student-friendly rubrics allowed teachers to communicate with students through more meaningful, descriptive feedback. Teachers no longer marked papers with a symbol or margins full of comments, but referred to the rubric in both group lessons and individual writing conferences to highlight strengths and note areas that needed revision.”

During the year, committee leaders collected samples of student writing and posted K-5 anchor papers at various levels of development in the staff lunchroom. Teachers looked at the papers during non-teaching time and noted areas of agreement and disagreement for the next meeting.

Toward the end of the year, Smith asked teachers if they were ready to enter their grades on a schoolwide database. Teachers pushed back. “I just don’t feel confident enough in my scoring capabilities to commit my students’ numbers to a database,” objected a first-grade teacher. But teachers wholeheartedly agreed to continue the process the following year.

The school saw very positive achievement gains. In the first year, the standardized results for third graders went from 61 to 72 percent proficient, and the mathematics scores went from 66 to 78 percent proficient. Since both tests contain significant numbers of constructed-response items, teachers saw the gains as a direct result of their efforts. At the end of the second year, one of the teachers proposed that they develop a database to collect writing achievement data on each student at each grade level, and evaluate and analyze data for trends, patterns, and indicators to guide curriculum decisions, and it was accepted.

[In an e-mail to me, Smith shared the news that this school’s approach has since been adopted by the other elementary schools in the district, and writing assessments have been increased from two to three times year.]

“What Inside-Track Advantage?” by Janna Smith in *Journal of Staff Development*, Winter 2006 (Vol. 27, #1, p. 33-36), no e-link available

7. Model Professional Development in Kansas

In this *Journal of Staff Development* article, Kansas State University professor David Allen describes the work he and his colleagues did with the staff of an elementary school in Ogden, Kansas – a school that had a decade of low student achievement. The intervention was highly successful: between 2000 and 2005, the school increased the percentage of fourth graders scoring proficient and above on state assessments from 63% to 100% in math. The program was so successful that the school took a similar approach in reading, and the percent of students proficient in reading rose from 45% to 84%. Here’s what they did:

Getting a fix on the problem

A planning team consisting of the school’s principal, the assistant principal, the lead math teacher, and a new faculty member at the university met to figure out what was going on. They concluded that:

- Teachers hadn’t had enough professional development in the TERC *Investigations* curriculum; its constructivist, problem-oriented emphasis was at war with the district’s traditional pedagogy.

- Teachers were using a traditional conceptual framework that was not aligned with the curriculum.

- The math scope and sequence was not clearly laid out, with some teachers implementing the curriculum and others avoiding it. Teachers were not communicating within grades, and teachers didn’t know what had been taught in the grades before theirs or what was expected in the next grade.

- In a staff meeting, the staff agreed that mathematical problem solving was a weakness in their instruction and agreed to put in for a grant for staff development to address this issue.
- They won an Eisenhower National Clearinghouse for Math and Science grant to support summer, after-school, and other professional development.
- The school got a new principal who wholeheartedly supported the initiative, and instituted peer coaching to support reluctant teachers. This changed the climate of the school.

Implementing the action plan

The staff took part in three forms of professional development:

- *Book study groups* – During the first year, teachers read *Beyond Arithmetic: Changing Mathematics in the Elementary Classroom* (Mokros et al.) and addressed the challenge of teaching math conceptually, admitting that they were baffled by the TERC approach. One said that she had done well in math herself having been taught the traditional way, and began to realize that many of her students weren't successful when she taught that way. In the second year, teachers read and discussed *The First Days of School: How to Be an Effective Teacher* (Wong and Wong). And the third year, they read *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (Payne).

- *Demonstration lessons* – The professional development team taught model lessons during all-day professional meetings, immersing the staff in math. Teachers took the role of students and worked on problem solving lessons from the *Investigations* curriculum. Teachers experienced the curriculum first hand and began to reassess their teaching methods. “Looking at fractions that way was a new experience for me,” said a 3rd-grade teacher. “I think I finally understood what my 4th-grade teacher never got me to see.”

- *Model lessons presented to students* – The same lessons that teachers had experienced in the professional days were then taught to students while teachers from each grade level, and adjacent grades, observed (the principal arranged for substitutes and covered classes himself). Immediately after each model lesson, teachers met to debrief and discuss the pedagogy and content of the lesson and students' thinking during the lesson. “Having the university folks come into the classroom was a real eye opener for me,” said a 5th-grade teacher. “I have had problems in the past with how to teach a particular lesson. Since they were asking us for ideas to model in the classroom, I chose one of the difficult lessons. When I saw it being taught to my students, I was able to make some of the same connections that my students were. This was an amazing revelation.”

Lessons learned

Allen draws the following staff development lessons from the experience of Ogden Elementary:

- Sustained, long-term professional development can have a significant impact on student learning.
- Involving teachers in planning their own professional learning contributed to selecting the best PD strategies and increased teachers' commitment to the process.

- Multiple approaches to staff development helped teachers improve their math instruction. Sequencing the professional development over 18 months allowed teachers the chance to develop insights into their own pedagogy as well as the teaching of their peers. Taking the role of students, teachers were able to witness and reflect on the ideas from their book studies about teaching and learning math.
- Dialogue among staff developers, teachers, and administrators, as well as reflection following teacher observations, provides opportunities for teachers to clarify their goals for the lesson and allows observers to clarify their understanding. Teachers need time to process and clarify information, and dialogue with colleagues and presenters was a major vehicle for growth.
- The support of the principal was essential to the success of this professional development.
- [This is not in the article, but clearly the Kansas State staff had a good grasp of the math curriculum and were credible and effective in working with elementary school students and teachers.]

“The Push to Excellence: Teachers Focus on Professional Learning to Lift Student Achievement” by David Allen in *Journal of Staff Development*, Winter 2006 (Vol. 27, #1, p. 56-60), no e-link available

8. Short Item:

Helping kids navigate school – This review of a new book, *Keepin’ It Real: School Success Beyond Black and White*, focuses on the author’s main message – what works with students who develop oppositional identities because they fear they will lose their identities if they buy into the “school thing.” The author is quoted as saying that these kids need to interact with adults who “keep it real” but also know the tools that kids will need to succeed in mainstream institutions. Ideally, the school has leaders, teachers, and other role models who are “adaptive and fluent” in these two worlds and successfully act as “multicultural navigators.”

Review of *Keepin’ It Real: School Success Beyond Black and White* by Prudence Carter (Oxford, 2005), by Gregory Michie in *Teacher Magazine*, Jan./Feb. 2006 (p. 43), no free e-link available

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Do you have feedback? Is anything missing?

If you have comments or suggestions, if you saw an article or web item in the last week that you think should have been summarized, or if you would like to suggest additional publications that should be covered by the Marshall Memo,

please e-mail: kim.marshall8@verizon.net

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and others very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 36 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 43 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, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the memo to subscribers every Monday (with occasional breaks; there were 50 issues in 2004-05).

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- 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
Language Learner
Middle Ground
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
Teacher Magazine
Teachers College Record
Theory Into Practice
E-links will be provided whenever possible.