

Marshall Memo 145

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
July 17, 2006

In This Issue:

1. “Wise schooling” – the key to black student success (an oldie but goodie article)
2. Fixing high schools that have become “dropout factories”
3. A compromise plan for cellphones in schools
4. What the National Reading Panel said about sustained silent reading
5. Jay Mathews defends his *Newsweek* “best schools” list

Quotes of the Week

“Remediation defeats; challenge strengthens.”

Claude Steele (see item #1)

“A valuing teacher-student relationship goes nowhere without challenge, and challenge will always be resisted outside a valuing relationship.”

Claude Steele (*ibid.*)

“[F]rom the first grade through graduate school, blacks share the extra fear that in the eyes of those around them their full humanity could fall with a poor answer or a mistaken stroke of the pen.”

Claude Steele (*ibid.*)

“You are valued in this program because of your academic potential – regardless of your current skill level. You have no more to fear than the next person, and since the work is difficult, success is a credit to your ability and a setback is a reflection only of the challenge.”

Claude Steele on Uri Treisman’s calculus program at Berkeley (*ibid.*)

“[I]n modern America a good education is the only reliable path out of poverty.”

Robert Balfanz and Nettie Legters (see item #2)

“[O]ne reason that the 9th grade finishes off so many students is that they may already have been struggling with and disengaging from school for three years or more.”

Robert Balfanz and Nettie Legters (*ibid.*)

1. “Wise Schooling” – the Key to Black Student Success (an oldie but goodie)

In this powerful article from the April 1992 *Atlantic Monthly*, Stanford social psychologist Claude Steele puts his finger on what he believes to be the most important cause of the chronic underachievement of black students: *stigma* – “the endemic devaluation many blacks face in our society and schools” – which leads them to hold back from identifying with education. He then describes “wise schooling” – the way some educators have counteracted the power of racial stigma and unleashed the full potential of black students. “If blacks are made less racially vulnerable in school,” he argues, “they can overcome even substantial obstacles.”

Steele begins with the brutal facts, which haven’t changed much since he wrote this article 14 years ago.

- Black and white students often live in different, unequal worlds even within the same desegregated school; most attend racially segregated schools.
- The achievement gap widens with each grade.
- This is true for the black middle class as well as low-income students.
- In college, black students’ grades are on average a full letter below those of whites.
- 70% of black college students drop out – versus 45% of whites.
- In graduate and professional schools, the percentage of black students is stagnant or falling.
- American society is suffering from “problem fatigue” – a loss of hope that the achievement gap can be closed and “resignation to an unwanted condition of life.”

What causes this widening achievement gap? The conventional wisdom says it’s the legacy of slavery, continuing segregation, job discrimination, dysfunctional schools, broken families, drugs, violent neighborhoods, the “acting white” pressures from peers, and the social isolation of black students. But Steele doubts that these factors fully explain the persistent racial gap because: (a) achievement still lags among middle-class blacks who have the same advantages as their white peers; (b) the gap exists even among black students with strong academic preparation; (c) surveys show that the poorest black parents value education at least as highly as white parents; and (d) some schools have improved black achievement even though the external problems remained.

“From elementary school to graduate school,” concludes Steele, “something depresses black achievement *at every level of preparation, even the highest...* Clearly, something is missing in our understanding of black underachievement... Something else has to be involved.”

That something else, says Steele, is a set of forces that prevents most black students

from identifying with school and committing effective effort to the process of doing well. He tells about his own experience as a graduate student. At first, he kept his distance from the process, not caring too much about his grades or how his experiments turned out. But as people began to take his ideas seriously and treat him as a valued person with good prospects, he got hooked, deeply identifying with being an academic and making it part of his psyche.

Steele's success in higher education contrasts to the experience of a black female undergraduate he volunteered to mentor – but too late; she had already decided to drop out. All along she sensed that her skin color placed her under suspicion of intellectual inferiority, exposing her to a double vulnerability: “She risks confirming a particular incompetence, at chemistry or a foreign language, for example; but she also risks confirming the racial inferiority she is suspected of... In reaction, usually to some modest setback, she withdraws, hiding her troubles from instructors, counselors, even other students... She disidentifies with achievement; she changes her self-conception, her outlook and values, so that achievement is no longer so important to her self-esteem... [N]ow she is psychologically insulated from her academic life, like a disinterested visitor. Cool, unperturbed. But, like a pain-killing drug, disidentification undoes her future as it relieves her vulnerability.”

The same thing happened to a black third grader named Jerome whom Steele heard about from a friend who volunteered in his Seattle classroom. Jerome had amazing artistic talent, but it was ignored by his teacher. His teacher wasn't a racist, but Steele believes that she had unconsciously adopted an image of black students' achievement profile from movies, advertisements, the school's curriculum, and the literary canon. “Had Jerome had a reading problem, which fits these images,” writes Steele, “it might have been accepted as characteristic more readily than his extraordinary art work, which contradicts them.”

“At precisely the time when he would need to see school as a viable source of self-esteem,” continues Steele, “his teachers fail to appreciate his best work... Unable to entrust his sense of himself to this place, he resists measuring himself against its values and goals. He languishes there... not allowing achievement to affect his view of himself. This psychic alienation – the act of not caring – makes him less vulnerable to the specter of devaluation that haunts him.”

“Doing well in school,” Steele continues, “requires a belief that school achievement can be a promising basis of self-esteem, and that belief needs constant reaffirmation even for advantaged students. Tragically, I believe, the lives of black Americans are still haunted by a specter that threatens this belief and the identification that derives from it at every level of schooling.”

Steele cites another study that corroborates this theory about self-esteem: black boys in Champaign, Illinois, had high regard for themselves despite their poor academic achievement. “This stunning imperviousness to poor academic performance was accomplished... by their deemphasizing school achievement as a basis of self-esteem and giving preference to peer-group relations – a domain in which their esteem prospects were better. They went where they had to go to feel good about themselves.”

“These images do something else as well,” argues Steele. “They set up a jeopardy of double devaluation for blacks, a jeopardy that does not apply to whites. Like anyone, blacks risk devaluation for a particular incompetence, such as a failed test or a flubbed pronunciation. But they further risk that such performances will confirm the broader, racial inferiority they are suspected of. Thus, from the first grade through graduate school, blacks share the extra fear that in the eyes of those around them their full humanity could fall with a poor answer or a mistaken stroke of the pen...

“Tragically, such devaluation can seem inescapable. Sooner or later it forces on its victims two painful realizations. The first is that society is preconditioned to see the worst in them. Black students quickly learn that acceptance, if it is to be won at all, will be hard-won. The second is that even if a black student achieves exoneration in one setting – with the teacher and fellow students in one classroom, or at one level of schooling, for example – this approval will have to be re-won in the next classroom, at the next level of schooling... Thus... too many black students are left hopeless and deeply vulnerable in America’s classrooms.”

What is to be done? Black students need *wise schooling*, says Steele. This means teachers and school administrators who see all students’ value and act accordingly. There’s considerable evidence, he says, that “wiseness” in the classroom has a major impact on black students’ achievement. In fact, he says, it may be “the missing key to the schoolhouse door.” He cites several programs that seem to have this key:

- In the mid-1970s, Berkeley mathematics professor Uri Treisman dramatically boosted the calculus performance of his black freshmen so they outperformed white and Asian peers and graduated from college at similar rates. The central technique was group study of calculus concepts, but the underlying driver of success was “wiseness” – systematically allaying black students’ racial vulnerabilities. The program stressed their potential to learn, enlisting them in a challenging honors workshop with difficult work beyond course requirements. “Working together,” explains Steele, “students soon understand that everyone knows something and nobody knows everything, and learning is speeded through shared understanding. The wisdom of these tactics is their subtext message: ‘You are valued in this program because of your academic potential – regardless of your current skill level. You have no more to fear than the next person, and since the work is difficult, success is a credit to your ability and a setback is a reflection only of the challenge.’ The black students’ double vulnerability around failure – the fear that they lack ability, and the dread that they will be devalued – is thus reduced. They can relax and achieve.”

- Jaime Escalante used the same approach – assurance combined with challenge – to get extraordinary achievement in AP calculus from Chicano high-school students in East Los Angeles.

- Xavier University has had great success producing African-American medical students not by providing remediation but by saying, “You may be somewhat behind at this time but you’re a talented person. We’re going to help you advance at an accelerated rate.”

- James Comer transformed two low-achieving New Haven elementary schools by establishing a valuing and optimistic atmosphere in which a child can identify with learning.

“After all,” says Comer, “what is the difference between scribble and a letter of the alphabet to a child? The only reason the letter is meaningful, and worth learning and remembering, is because a *meaningful* other wants him or her to learn and remember it.” Comer’s program has many components – teacher training, parent workshops, coordination of information about students – but Steele is convinced that the most important ingredient is ensuring that “the students – vulnerable on so many counts – get treated essentially like middle-class students, with conviction about their value and promise. As this happens, their vulnerability diminishes, and with it the companion defense of disidentification and misconduct... Comer’s genius... is to have recognized the importance of these vulnerabilities as barriers to *intellectual* development, and the corollary that schools hoping to educate such students must learn first how to make them feel valued.”

Steele believes the success of these and other programs is evidence that racial stigma is the most important factor lowering black students’ achievement in the first place. “This is no happy realization,” he says. “But it lets in a ray of hope: whatever other factors also depress black achievement – poverty, social isolation, poor preparation – they may be substantially overcome in a schooling atmosphere that reduces racial and other vulnerabilities, not through unrelenting niceness or ferocious regimentation but by wiseness, by *seeing* value and acting on it.”

Why haven’t more schools acted on this simple insight? Steele believes it’s because it flies in the face of the prevailing American ideology of assimilation, which prevents many well-intentioned educators from accepting black students as they are. It’s harder for African-Americans to assimilate than it is for other immigrant groups, he believes: “For them, the offer of acceptance in return for assimilation carries a primal insult: it asks them to join in something that has made them invisible.” Steele says an important part of “wise schooling” is the full inclusion of black contributions to American history and culture. It’s what’s *not* taught, he says, that “keeps black disidentification on full boil.”

Another dysfunctional aspect of American schools and colleges, Steele believes, is “the presumption that black students need academic remediation, or extra time with elemental curricula to overcome background deficits. This orientation guides many efforts to close the achievement gap – from grammar school tutoring to college academic-support programs – but I fear it can be unwise... [B]ecause so many such programs target blacks primarily, they virtually equate black identity with substandard intellectual status, amplifying racial vulnerability. They can even undermine students’ ability to gain confidence from their achievement, by sharing credit for their successes while implying that their failures stem from inadequacies beyond the reach of remediation.”

Steele sums up with a list of five school factors that reduce black students’ vulnerabilities and help them develop a strong identification with schooling:

- *Teachers who truly value their students.* “If what is meaningful and important to a teacher is to become meaningful and important to a student,” he writes, “the student must feel valued by the teacher for his or her potential and as a person.”

- *Remediation defeats; challenge strengthens.* “The challenge and the promise of personal fulfillment, not remediation (under whatever guise), should guide the education of these students,” says Steele. “Their present skills should be taken into account, and they should be moved along at a pace that is demanding but doesn’t defeat them. Their ambitions should never be scaled down but should instead be guided to inspiring goals even when extraordinary dedication is called for. Frustration will be less crippling than alienation.”

- *The first condition won’t work without the second, and vice-versa.* “A valuing teacher-student relationship goes nowhere without challenge,” writes Steele, “and challenge will always be resisted outside a valuing relationship.”

- *Racial integration helps – but is not essential.* “Segregation, whatever its purpose, draws out group differences and makes people feel more vulnerable when they inevitably cross group lines to compete in the larger society,” argues Steele. The only exception is segregated schools that beat the odds and produce especially robust academic achievement and confidence, but those are few and far between.

- *A truly inclusive curriculum.* “The particulars of black life and culture – art, literature, political and social perspectives, music – must be presented in the mainstream curriculum of American schooling, not consigned to special days, weeks, or even months of the year, or to special-topic courses and programs aimed essentially at blacks,” says Steele. “Such channeling carries the disturbing message that the material is not of general value. And this does two terrible things: it wastes the power of this material to alter our images of the American mainstream – continuing to frustrate black identification with it – and it excuses in whites and others a huge ignorance of their own society. The true test of democracy, Ralph Ellison has said, “is... the inclusion – not assimilation – of the black man.”

Steele ends with a brief message for black parents. “[A]lthough we, along with all Americans, must strive constantly for wise schooling, I believe we cannot wait for it. We cannot yet forget our essentially heroic challenge: to foster in our children a sense of hope and entitlement to mainstream American life and schooling, even when it devalues them.”

“Race and the Schooling of Black Americans” by Claude Steele in *Atlantic Monthly*, April 1992, p. 68-78), no e-link available

2. Fixing High Schools That Have Become “Dropout Factories”

In this call to arms in the current *Education Week*, Johns Hopkins researchers Robert Balfanz and Nettie Legters focus on 15 percent of U.S. high schools that are producing half of the nation’s dropouts. These 2,000 “dropout factories” are typically under-resourced and economically and racially segregated; they are “social dynamite, since in modern America a good education is the only reliable path out of poverty.”

Contrary to the findings in *The Silent Epidemic*, a recent study that said that many dropouts earn pretty good grades before quitting high school, Balfanz and Legters have found that inner-city dropouts fail most of their classes and leave high school with few credits. What

can be done? The small number of successful high-poverty high schools provide multiple layers of support inside and outside the traditional school day and year, including:

- Strong instructional programs;
- A schedule that allows for double-dosing in core subjects;
- Committed adults who refuse to give up on students;
- Extra help within a personalized, interdisciplinary team structure;
- Summer school;
- Additional support at the beginning of tenth grade;
- Additional time, resources, training, and materials.

But the root of the problem, say Balfanz and Legters, is back in middle school. Too many students enter high school poorly prepared for success. In some high schools, up to 80 percent of freshmen are over-age, in need of special-education services, or have math and reading skills below the seventh-grade level. High-school teachers and students may work hard and care a lot, but they are “overmatched by the immense educational challenges they face.” Poorly-prepared students “disengage from school, attend infrequently, fail too many courses to be promoted to the 10th grade, try again with no better results, and ultimately drop out of school,” write the researchers.

So another part of the solution is preventing failure in middle schools. In one study, Balfanz and Legters were able to identify more than half of a district’s future dropouts as early as sixth grade by looking at poor attendance, behavior problems, and failing grades in math and English. Sixth graders with any of these risk factors had less than a 20 percent chance of graduating within five years of entering high school. “[O]ne reason that the 9th grade finishes off so many students,” they write, “is that they may already have been struggling with and disengaging from school for three years or more.” These powerful and accessible indicators provide middle school educators with the information they need to intervene before it’s too late.

Balfanz and Legters conclude with a list of three ways to attack the nation’s graduation crisis head-on:

- *Identify and fix the nation’s dropout factory high schools.* “Transforming these schools and school systems,” they write, “is the best shot we have at ending the stubborn grip of concentrated and intergenerational poverty that engulfs too many of our citizens and their communities.” Because these schools serve a disproportionate number of needy students, they need extra resources to be successful, and many of them aren’t getting what they need. “Because reforming or replacing these schools is the educational equivalent of open-heart surgery,” say Balfanz and Legters, “states and districts need to develop sufficient technical capacity to do the job or support third-party intermediaries who can.”

- *Invest in research and development in curriculum, instruction, and assessment.* “High school coursework needs to develop students’ intellect and reflect tighter and more substantial connections to higher education and the workplace,” they write. Courses must have a strong hands-on component, engage students in activities that build their skills and make connections

to supportive social networks, and meet the needs of ELL students. And assessments should go beyond what's easily testable and encourage real intellectual development.

- *Join forces with other community resources that attack poverty.* Schools must make common cause with agencies to provide intensive supports to help students “negotiate the treacherous transitions between educational levels.” We need a K-16 perspective, conclude Balfanz and Legters, facing the fact that “adolescence (especially when combined with poverty) brings its own risk factors, and that a secondary approach spanning middle and high schools is needed to keep all students on track toward graduation... With a targeted, inventive, aligned, and integrated approach, we can do this. And we must.”

“Closing ‘Dropout Factories’ – The Graduation-Rate Crisis We Know, and What Can Be Done About It” by Robert Balfanz and Nettie Legters in *Education Week*, July 12, 2006 (Vol. 25, # 42, p. 42-43), no free e-link available. Research cited in this essay can be found at the website of the Center for Social Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins University:
<http://www.gradgap.org>

3. A Compromise Plan for Cellphones in Schools

In this *Education Week* article, Fordham University professors Bruce Cooper and John Lee suggest guidelines for regulating, rather than banning, the use of cellphones during the school day:

- Students are required to turn off their cellphones and keep them out of sight during classes, programs, meetings, and assemblies.

- Each school sets up a neutral “phone zone” where students are allowed to use cellphones to answer messages or hear from parents at specified between-class times. A parent might tell a child in the morning, “Dear, I’ll call you between 4th and 5th periods, at 12:15 p.m., so be in the phone zone, please.”

- Parents are required to sign permission slips for their children to use a cellphone, for example, because of a medical condition like asthma or diabetes.

- Another approach is requiring students to leave their phones at an agreed-upon location in the morning and pick them up at dismissal. Any contact with parents during the school day would have to be done the old-fashioned way.

- Another approach is for the school to black out cellphone use electronically, as some hospitals and banks have done. In such schools, students could carry cellphones but wouldn’t be able to use them during the day.

“Cellphones in Schools?” by Bruce Cooper and John Lee in *Education Week*, July 12, 2006 (Vol. 25, # 42, p. 44), no free e-link available.

4. What the National Reading Panel Said About Sustained Silent Reading

In response to last week’s summary of a summer 2006 *American Educator* article on sustained silent reading (see Marshall Memo 144, item #2), Russ Walsh, Director of Language Arts for the Montgomery Township Schools in New Jersey, sent the following correction:

“In your largely informative and on-target synopsis of the Hasbrouck article from *American Educator* you state, ‘The National Reading Panel report (issued in 2000) confirmed that sustained silent reading does not improve fluency.’ This is inaccurate. The NRP report does state that ‘with regard to the efficacy of having students engage in independent silent reading..., the Panel was unable to find a positive relationship [between] large amounts of independent reading....[and] fluency.’

“They go on to say, however, that ‘these findings do not negate the positive influence that independent reading may have on reading fluency.’ They then complain that the research in the area has not been sufficiently rigorous.

“This position of the NRP is probably the most controversial of all the pronouncements of the Panel. There is indeed a large body of research on the effectiveness of sustained silent reading, but the reading Panel rejected these very sound studies because they did not meet their exceedingly narrow criteria. Indeed, in private conversations with Panel members, I have been told that this is the part of the report they most regret.

“Students who are reading material on the appropriate level silently and who are engaged in that reading do improve their fluency. Of course, sustained silent reading is not a reading program, but just one necessary component of sound instruction... For commentary on the NRP position on sustained silent reading see the following: Stephen Krashen; *Phi Delta Kappan*, Vol. 83, 2001.”

Walsh agrees with the *American Educator* article’s critique of round-robin reading and its suggestions for developing fluency. But he disagrees with the author’s belief that teachers should wait until midway through first grade before stressing reading with expression:

“I would take issue with the concept that we must wait for students to become proficient decoders before asking them to read fluently. Fluent reading contributes to decoding by allowing the reader to access all the cues available for decoding a word - the syntax, the meaning and the phonics. By delaying the push for ‘reading so it sounds like talking’ we may be robbing the student of a full opportunity to decode. There is nothing wrong with students guessing at a word. What is important is that the guess is supported by what makes sense, what sounds right and what looks right. Fluent reading supports these informed guesses.”

Personal communication from Russ Walsh, Director of Language Arts, Montgomery Township School District, New Jersey, July 11, 2006

5. Jay Mathews Defends His *Newsweek* “Best Schools” List

In a letter in the current *Education Week*, education writer Jay Mathews defends his ranking of the best U.S. high schools that’s published every year in *Newsweek*. He concedes that just putting students in Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses doesn’t make them smarter. But, he says, “putting kids in hard courses and giving them extra time, encouragement, and good teaching does in many cases lead them to reach levels of achievement they never thought possible, and changes the school in a way that should qualify it to be on somebody’s best list.”

“The Meaning of ‘Best’ – Defending the Criteria for Ranking America’s High Schools” – a letter to *Education Week* by Jay Mathews, in *Education Week*, July 12, 2006 (Vol. 25, # 42, p. 45), 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 44 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 Educator
American School Board Journal
ASCD SmartBrief
Atlantic Monthly
Boston Globe
CommonWealth Magazine
District Administration
Ed. Magazine
EDge
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Update
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Educational Review
JESPAR
Jimmy Kilpatrick
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
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
Teacher Magazine
Teachers College Record
Theory Into Practice
Times Educational Supplement