

Marshall Memo 101

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
September 5, 2005

In This Issue:

1. Richard Elmore on what we can learn from improving schools
2. How new teachers can survive their first year
3. Current thinking on gifted education
4. Advice for the SAT and ACT writing tests
5. Short items: (a) Hurricane Katrina teaching resources; (b) Taking tests on paper and on the computer

Quotes of the Week

“Kids need a beat, a cognitive beat”

Rudy Crew, Miami-Dade superintendent and son of a Duke Ellington band member, on what schools should give their students (*District Administration*, Sept. 2005, p. 8)

“I never had a father to do this for me, and it feels good. It’s my duty.”

Joseph Washington, a Capitol Heights, Maryland father walking his four sons to school as part of the Million Father March organized by the Black Star Project (in *Education Week*, Aug. 31, 2005, p. 3)

“There are more than 90,000 public schools in America. On average, the principal of each of those schools holds in his or her hands the formative years of roughly 500 of our children, more than the number of ‘souls on board’ a typical 747.”

Chris Whittle in *Crash Course: Imagining a Better Future for Public Education* (Penguin Riverhead Books, 2005), excerpted in *District Administration*, Sept. 2005

“We’ve programmed ourselves to having the summer off.”

New Mexico principal Jamie Jones on the difficulty getting teachers for a summer Kindergarten Plus program (in *Education Week*, Aug. 31, 2005, p. 36)

“I don’t believe the first two chapters of Genesis were meant to be scientific textbooks for the 21st century.”

Warren Eshbach, retired Church of the Brethren minister, in *Education Week*, August 31, 2005, p. 22

“[Intelligent Design] suggests that God is just intelligent enough to have created our complex and subtle world in a simple and straightforward manner, but not sufficiently intelligent to have done so through mechanisms as appropriately complex and subtle as evolution. We don’t need to pervert science to see God’s mark on the universe, and real science can never take it away – all you need to see it are an open mind, open eyes, and a little faith.”

Jim Bosch of Fairfield, California in a letter to *Newsweek* (Aug. 29./Sept. 5, 2005)

1. Richard Elmore on What We Can Learn From Improving Schools

Harvard professor Richard Elmore reports that he sees many of the same instructional problems in affluent and high-poverty schools:

- Low expectations of what students are capable of accomplishing;
- Too much emphasis on factual recall and procedural knowledge and not enough on analysis, reflection, and deeper understanding;
- Classroom-to-classroom variations in the degree to which students are challenged;
- Teachers basing instruction on the level of challenge that they (rather than their students) are comfortable with;
- Instruction focused on “easy to teach” rather than struggling students.

Elmore then turns his attention to successful high-poverty schools – those that are beating the odds and bringing about high student achievement on state tests, or are on the way to doing so. Elmore lists what he believes are the key variables:

- Clearly articulated expectations for student learning;
- A sense of urgency about the need to improve;
- Challenging and effective curriculum materials;
- A heavy investment in professional development;
- Teachers internalizing responsibility for student learning;
- Teachers critically examining their practices, and if they’re not working, abandoning them and trying something else;
- Classrooms that are open to colleagues, administrators, and outsiders for observation and analysis of instructional practice;
- Teachers reviewing interim assessment results, pinpointing content areas and classrooms where children are struggling, and discussing what changes might help those children succeed.

Elmore contrasts these practices with what he sees in more affluent schools. On paper, he says, the student achievement in more advantaged communities looks reasonably good, but when examined more closely, many of these schools are “jarringly different” from the successful high-poverty schools:

- Variations in student performance are frequently taken for granted. “Instead of being seen as a challenge to teachers’ practice,” says Elmore, “these differences were used to classify students as more or less talented.”

- Access to high-level courses is limited, reinforcing the view that innate talent, not good teaching, is the basis of student achievement.
- Staff tend to define learning difficulties as a problem to be solved by students and their families, most often by private tutoring. “These schools are outsourcing the task of teaching every student,” writes Elmore, “From classroom to classroom, teachers may not even be aware of it.”
- “As a result,” he continues, “teachers are not challenged to identify shortcomings in their own practice that inhibit student learning, or to share knowledge about which teachers are most successful and why.
- “Improvement can be a dangerous business in settings like these,” says Elmore, “and some principals and superintendents have the scars to prove it. Unlike low-performing schools, which may be galvanized by external pressure to improve, so-called high-performing schools must often swim against a tide of complacency to generate support for change.”

Elmore concludes with a call for “value-added” measurement of school performance. Looked at through this lens, he says, high-performing schools fall into two categories: those where student success is the result of effective teaching and teamwork and those where it is the result of income and social class. “As an educator,” he says, “I think we have much more to learn from studying high-poverty schools that are on the path to improvement than we do from studying nominally high-performing schools that are producing a significant portion of their performance through social class rather than instruction.”

“What (So-Called) Low-Performing Schools Can Teach (So-Called) High-Performing Schools” by Richard Elmore in *Harvard Education Letter*, September/October 2005 (Vol. 21, #5, p. 8, 7) no e-link available

2. How New Teachers Can Survive Their First Year

This Boston Plan for Excellence study of new-to-Boston teachers in 2003-04 lists the following conclusions and recommendations:

- *The greatest challenges teachers faced in their first year were twofold: insufficient communication, direction, and support from principals and other administrators and lack of clarity about norms and expectations for teachers.* One teacher said, “I have no clue how I am doing in the classroom except I think I am doing well based on general feedback. I know the principal thinks I am a good teacher, but this does nothing to reassure me when every day I fight/argue with my students.” Another teacher said that the biggest challenge was a “lack of a clear disciplinary plan and a poor administrative response to disciplinary problems.”

Recommendations:

- Evaluate principals on their ability to provide useful feedback to teachers from their classroom observations.

- Require each school to plan a formal orientation for new teachers and prepare a written handbook with school procedures, norms, important dates, evaluation protocols, and other relevant information.
- Expect that principals will support teachers in managing disciplinary issues.

• *New teachers found their colleagues to be their most valued resource.* One teacher said of her fellow teachers, “Without them, I wouldn’t have made it.”

Recommendations:

- Provide new teachers with more opportunities to learn from their colleagues in team meetings and other school-based professional development.
- Require that schools increase opportunities for new teachers to be observed by and observe their colleagues and ensure that feedback is provided.
- Ask schools to offer candidates opportunities to interview with other teachers during the hiring process and to invite serious candidates to shadow a teacher for a day.
- Assign all new teachers a mentor who works in the same school, grade, and/or subject and provide formal release time to support this relationship.
- Provide training for all new mentors and support for all mentors.

The report also quotes the elements of a successful induction program from Wong and Wong’s 2003 paper, *How to Retain New Teachers*:

- Begin with an initial four or five days of training in classroom management and effective teaching techniques before school starts.
- Offer a continuum of professional development through systematic training over a period of two or three years.
- Provide study groups where new teachers can network and build support, commitment, and leadership in a learning community.
- Incorporate a strong sense of administrative support.
- Integrate a mentoring component into the induction process.
- Present a structure for modeling effective teaching during in-service and mentoring.
- Provide opportunities for inductees to visit demonstration classrooms.

“Building a Professional Teaching Corps in Boston: Survey of Teachers New to the Boston Public Schools in SY 2003-04” – a report of the Boston Plan for Excellence, June 2005

3. Current Thinking on Gifted Education

This update on gifted education declares that neither tracking nor pullout of very high-achieving students is the best approach, and reports that the tension that has existed between advocates of enrichment and acceleration is easing. The article approvingly describes the Renzulli enrichment model.

Renzulli defines giftedness as the Venn diagram intersection of three attributes: above-average ability, creativity, and motivation. His school-wide approach involves mainstreaming

high-achieving students in regular classrooms and hiring an enrichment specialist to coach teachers to differentiate instruction in ways that meet the needs of the full range of achievement levels in each classroom. “Ninety percent of the time should be spent on differentiation, because it’s very easy to get distracted by sparkly events, and that’s not what we’re about,” says Ellen Agostinelli, assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction in the Webster Central Schools in outside Rochester, New York, which is using the Renzulli model. “We’re about improving every classroom so it’s a quality-first environment.”

The article reports that some Renzulli schools (including Webster’s) use additional interventions, including homogeneous grouping for advanced math and allowing some super-high-achieving students to skip a grade.

“Gifted Education: Deceived, Denied and in Crisis” by Rebecca Sausner in *District Administration*, September 2005 (Vol. 41, #9, p. 26-31)
<http://www.districtadministration.com/page.cfm?p=1230>

4. Advice for the SAT and ACT Writing Tests

Richard Rubin’s recent *Newsweek* article on the SAT and ACT writing tests has a sidebar giving students helpful advice, much of which also applies to school-based tests:

- *Check the samples.* Essay questions are available on the websites, including descriptions of top-scoring essays and clunkers:
 - SAT: http://www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/sat/prep_one/essay/pracStart.html
 - ACT: <http://www.act.org/aap/writing/index.html>

It’s a good idea to get familiar with the types of questions they ask, try a few timed essays at home, and get feedback.

- *Use your No. 2 pencil.* In the first administration of the new SAT writing test, many students used a pen, which isn’t picked up by the scanning technology used to get essays to readers. The College Board scored the essays anyway, but in the future it might not be so merciful.

- *Plan your essay.* Despite the time pressure, take a minute or two to read the question carefully and think about what you want to say before you start writing.

- *Take a side.* “Test-makers want to see how well you can argue and develop your case,” says Rubin. “Even if you acknowledge in your own mind that you could answer both ways, don’t be tempted to be wishy-washy. Pick one argument and follow it through.”

- *Use examples.* Bolster your arguments with real-world material from your school or your life.

- *Don’t overreach.* “There’s no need to use five-syllable words to wow the readers,” advises Rubin. “Clear thoughts and clear arguments will work just fine.”

- *Don’t worry.* Spelling and grammar are not a big part of the score. All that’s expected is a solid first draft.

- *Watch the clock.* It’s not cool to finish in mid-sentence. Two minutes before “pencils down” time, reread what you’ve written and look for quick ways to polish and wrap up.

“Alas, You Can’t Guess ‘C’” by Richard Rubin in *Newsweek*, August 22, 2005 (p. 54), no e-link available

5. Short Items:

a. Hurricane Katrina resources – MindOH! has created resources for students to learn more about the devastation of Hurricane Katrina and what they can do to help its victims. These include lesson plans, a family activity, and messages that can be read over a school’s PA system. See <http://www.mindohfoundation.org/hurricanekatrina.htm>

Spotted in *PEN Weekly NewsBlast*, Sept. 2, 2005

b. Taking tests on paper and on the computer – A recent Educational Testing Service study compared students’ performance on paper-and-pencil and computer-delivered tests. Researchers found that if students were familiar with the technology, they did better taking tests on computers. If they were unfamiliar with the computers or lacked input and accuracy skills, students did better on paper-and-pencil tests.

“Impact of Paper-and-Pencil, Online Testing Is Compared” by Lynn Olson in *Education Week*, Aug. 31, 2005 (Vol. 25, #1, p. 14)
<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2005/08/31/01online.h25.html?querystring=Impact%20Paper-and-Pencil,%20Online%20Testing%20is%20Compared>

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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 best practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 35 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 39 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 2003-04).

Subscriptions:

Individual subscriptions are \$50 for the school year. Rates decline steeply for multiple readers within the same organization. See the website for these rates and information on paying by check or credit card.

Website:

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- All back issues (also in PDF or Word)
- A database of all articles to date, searchable by topic, title, author, source, level, etc.
- 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
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

E-links will be provided whenever possible.