Marshall Memo 59

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
October 25, 2004

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Everybody's looking for the hundred-percent solution. And when they find it call me, I'm there. But in the meantime, as one of my principal friends likes to say, I'll take a hundred one-percent solutions instead."

Spencer Blasdale, Boston charter school principal (see item #1)

"We propose this bold concept as a precondition for parental involvement in schools: parental involvement in parenting."

Maurice Elias and Yoni Schwab (see item #6)

"What should continue to haunt educators is the knowledge that each child is different and will not respond in the same way to the same instruction. Only by teachers working together in teams, so they are able to analyze student work and provide a variety of means of achievement, will our children attain academic success. A single teacher with 25 students has neither the time, the expertise, nor the stamina to provide what each student needs."

Barbara Nelson Pavan in a letter to *Education Week* (Oct. 20, 2004, p. 43)

1. The Struggles – and Triumphs – of a Boston Charter School

In this remarkable article in *The New Yorker*, journalist Katherine Boo tells the story of the Academy of the Pacific Rim, a high-poverty 330-student Boston charter school for grades 6-12, and its fight to lift students out of poverty, violence, and their own lack of belief and prepare them to enter and succeed in college.

The bulk of the article revolves around Pacific Rim senior Rousseau Mieze, a child of Haitian immigrants, who had been branded as emotionally troubled by his previous school. Rousseau struggles to improve his mediocre grades, deal with constant danger in the community, and control the negative voices in his own head. In his early years at Pacific Rim, his mother made frequent trips to the school for disciplinary conferences, but he slowly succumbed to his teachers' "sneaky" efforts to build him up: "gift for science," "leadership ability," "the male lead in the school play – made for you, Rousseau," "Can you give us a hand judging these summer-internship proposals?" "Rousseau, there's a ninth grader who says he's going to leave school. Can you find him and do what you can?"

The article also describes some of the school's key features: an 8-hour school day and 11-month school year; compulsory classes in Mandarin Chinese and Tai Chi; a "field trip" to China; academic advisors who follow students through the high-school years; maroon polo shirt uniforms; strict discipline (a student gets detention for saying "mines" instead of "mine"); a schoolwide signal for silence and respect (hand raised, palm forward); character education; incessant tutoring; highly qualified, dedicated, and underpaid teachers; significant staff turnover (a third of teachers left the school last year); and considerable student attrition between sixth and twelfth grade (Pacific Rim does not admit students to fill vacant seats).

The school's principal, Spencer Blasdale, frets constantly about weaknesses in the program, for example, students' relatively low scores on AP English essays the previous year: "[W]e're not doing enough to promote analytical writing. We're trying to work on that this year." Blasdale believes in attacking the massive challenge one piece at a time: "Everybody's looking for the hundred-percent solution. And when they find it call me, I'm there. But in the meantime, as one of my principal friends like to say, I'll take a hundred one-percent solutions instead." He struggles to balance his

time between the all-consuming job at the school and his family (a two-year-old and another child on the way), and deals with new responsibilities that keep getting added, such as the need to walk through the middle-class neighborhood south of the school after hours to prevent students from angering nervous residents as they hang out and walk home.

Weekly faculty meetings focus on "students of concern" and wrestle in collegial fashion with dilemmas such as whether to do special education testing for a struggling student who seems increasingly angry (or whether the testing will stigmatize and discourage him and they should try other approaches first), and the heartbreak of Dwayne, who produced an eloquent oral history of his grandmother and then, shortly after writing it, was one of a group of boys arrested by the Boston police for mugging a man and stealing his cell phone.

The school walks a tightrope between rigor and rescue. "Demand a lot from students like Rousseau and Dwayne," Boo writes, "and risk damaging their G.P.A.s and their chance at college. Demand little, and when the students get to college they'll fail." The school seems to err on the side of rigor; Boo describes many students as not exactly loving the place: "Pacific Rim stripped you of your logos and jewelry, your ways of speaking and your means of defending yourself. Its teachers plotted behind your back, sometimes nosing into family things. Then, if your invaded, denuded self didn't live up to the school's high standards, they wouldn't even expel you. They'd imprison you in the homework center at the end of the official school day – more hours, and even more attention, with people from the place you despised… If only our teachers would kick us out." Students also complained about the facility (a recycled Westinghouse factory), compulsory duty cleaning the cafeteria, and the absence of a basketball team.

But the school's results speak for themselves. In 2003, every one of Pacific Rim's first graduating class of eleven students passed the MCAS (Massachusetts' high-stakes diploma test) and now attends a four-year college. The challenge was more difficult for the 24 seniors in the class of 2004. Only six (all girls) were clearly on track for college, and a number of students were at very high risk for failure. After Herculean efforts by students, teachers, counselors, administrators, and parents, every senior finished, and 22 were admitted to four-year colleges (the other two were headed for a community college and a respected non-degree program at a four-year college).

But on graduation night, Dwayne, who had been accepted at a first-rate college in New Hampshire, wasn't there. His classmates, waiting in the wings of Boston's

historic Faneuil Hall, frantically called on their cell phones, but there was no reply and they marched without him. Three weeks after graduation, he suffered two gunshot wounds and was arrested and pleaded not guilty to assault with a dangerous weapon. In the fall, he was in Suffolk County Jail, not at college in New Hampshire.

At graduation, Rousseau, the elected class president, gave the commencement address. Standing under a portrait of Daniel Webster with six hundred people in front of him, Rousseau is described as feeling "uncannily calm. The next time life got hard – and it would get hard, he suspected – there was something he was keen to remember: that once, when challenged, he rose."

"The Factory: At the Pacific Rim Charter School, They Make Scholars" by Katherine Boo in *The New Yorker*, October 18, 2004 (p. 162-175)

2. Reducing the Tested Curriculum to a Few "Super-Skills"

In this thoughtful article in *American School Board Journal*, UCLA testing guru James Popham describes the huge difference he believes high-stakes testing and NCLB have made to the curriculum scene. In the "good old days," state curriculum standards were oversize wish lists, usually so vaguely written that they didn't give teachers very clear direction. But since students and schools were not held accountable for following the standards, few problems arose because the standards were ignored in many schools.

High-stakes assessments linked to state standards have changed all that: "[F]or the first time in the history of American public schooling," writes Popham, "a potent federal law has made curriculum truly count – big time." But this development is causing major problems. The old standards are far too numerous to be taught and tested, and most of the new high-stakes tests cover only a fraction of them and don't give teachers or students a clear heads-up on which ones will be assessed. Teachers have to guess and sometimes teach material that isn't tested and skip material that is tested. In addition, most states' test reports aren't detailed enough to tell teachers and principals what's working and what isn't working in classrooms, which prevents them from making instructional use of the test data. Teachers are frustrated, says Popham, and students are being hurt.

The solution, he says, is to reduce the number of tested curriculum aims to a manageable number so that (a) teachers are not overwhelmed, and (b) students' mastery of each learning expectation can be reported accurately: "Teachers who can focus their instructional attention on a modest number of truly significant skills

usually can get their students to master those skills – even if the skills are genuinely challenging. Accurate reports of students' mastery of each skill will let the students and their parents know which curricular aims have or haven't been mastered – and let teachers know which ones have and haven't been well taught."

Popham outlines three possible ways to accomplish these goals and get better alignment between curriculum and testing:

- Start from scratch and draft new state standards that are manageable.
- Repackage existing state standards, grouping them under fewer targets.
- Leave the state standards alone and glean from them a subset of eligible-to-be-tested curriculum targets.

Popham thinks the first two approaches are too unwieldy and time-consuming to be practical in most states, and he advocates the third approach. "The trick," he writes, "is to isolate a small number of aims that can be described to teachers, are genuinely teachable, and coalesce the most important of the state's existing curricular aims." What teachers need is a few "super-skills" pulling together and simplifying the plethora of state standards in each subject area.

An example of a "super-skill" [Doug Reeves calls them "power standards"] is *purposeful reading*. This skill combines a flock of more specific "en route" or "enabling" skills and can be measured by a single scoring guide focusing on three elements: *relevance*, *accuracy*, and *sufficiency*. The rubric can be taught directly to students so they can measure their own progress and hone their skills. Another "super-skill" is *writing*: based on a student's ability to write a narrative or persuasive essay, it's possible to measure the student's ability to organize content, avoid spelling and grammatical errors, and apply a number of other relevant sub-skills.

Defining a manageable number of test-aligned "super-skills" will not be easy, says Popham, but it is the most practical approach and will pay immediate dividends for teacher sanity, fairness, and student achievement.

"Curriculum Matters" by James Popham in *American School Board Journal*, November 2004 (Vol. 191, #11, p. 30-33), no e-link available yet. James Popham can be reached at wpopham@ucla.edu

3. If Retention Doesn't Work, What Does?

According to Linda Darling-Hammond, several decades of research on keeping students back refutes five widespread beliefs held by many educators. Contrary to myth:

- Retention does not improve low achievement in reading, math, and other subjects.
- Retaining students in kindergarten or first grade is no better than retaining them later.
- Retention does not improve downstream achievement: students who are retained once are 40-50 percent more likely to drop out than promoted students, and students who are retained twice have a 90 percent chance of dropping out.
- Retention does not motivate students to buckle down and behave better.
- Retention does not develop students' social adjustment and self-concept; in fact, retained students run a high risk of developing problems with self-esteem, social and emotional adjustment, peer relations, and school engagement.

Darling-Hammond says that having students spend a second year repeating what didn't work the first time is an exercise in futility. Retention may give students a short-term "bounce," but the evidence is that these gains soon disappear and retained students either level off or fall behind their classmates.

The research notwithstanding, about 2.5 million students are kept back in American schools each year, and they are disproportionately boys, low-income students, children of color, and special education students. Why does this continue if the evidence is so strongly against retention? Teachers cling to the five myths, and may also be concerned about getting flak from colleagues in the next grade if they promote poorly-prepared students. Some teachers make early judgments on which students will be retained: a first-grade teacher is quoted as saying, "By November, I know which half of my class will pass and which half will fail." One third-grade teacher in a New York City school recommended 17 or her 28 students for retention and told a reporter, "there would be no fourth grade if all struggling children were held back." Many principals are "quietly complicit" and give teachers almost complete authority over who gets retained, rubber-stamping their recommendations.

A significant factor the retention rate is a school's "institutional ethos." Research has found that in schools where there is an adversarial climate between teachers, students, and parents, two thirds of students are retained, assigned to transitional classes, or placed in special education. In schools with a respectful, professional climate, only 1-2 percent of students are retained. It appears that schools with a positive ethos take responsibility for *preventing* retention; they work constantly to address inept instruction, jazz up lackluster lessons, raise expectations, and do

everything they can to address student disengagement, behavior, and failure.

Darling-Hammond is not an advocate of social promotion. Moving students on when they are not prepared to succeed in the next grade is often disastrous. The key is doing everything possible to avoid the Hobson's choice between retention and social promotion. Darling-Hammond and another researcher suggest the following:

- Sponsor high-quality preschool programs that focus on child development.
- Teach teachers how to instruct all students according to the ways they learn.
- Use multi-age classes, cross-grade grouping, and block scheduling to give students more intensive learning opportunities.
- Use student assessments to monitor and adjust content and strategies.
- Give struggling students support and services as soon as they are needed.
- Train school psychologists to advocate for children as soon as they show problems learning and inform colleagues on the research on retention.
- Teach students social competency along with academic skills.
- Get the parents of high-risk children involved and develop school-community partnerships.

"Second Time Around" by Susan Black in *American School Board Journal*, November 2004 (Vol. 191, #11, p. 40-42), no e-link available yet.

4. Classroom Discipline: Ten No-No's

Samuel Spitalli, a New Jersey school administrator, has seen it all when it comes to discipline problems, including an indignant teacher who walked into his office and hurled down a sheaf of papers on which a student had written 1,000 times: "I promise never to say #!* in P.E. class again." The teacher loudly demanded that the boy be suspended for misbehaving, mocking the punishment, and using profanity in the assignment, and also wanted the boy's father reprimanded for having the nerve to sign the papers. Spitalli, then a new assistant principal, meekly promised to talk to the boy and his father, and this teacher apparently never got feedback on how he had set himself up to lose a classic power struggle.

Since that day, Spitalli has collected a list of classroom discipline moves that he considers counterproductive. "Some classroom-management 'techniques,'" he writes, actually undermine the establishment of an orderly classroom and impair an otherwise competent teacher's ability to win students' respect. Instead of changing behavior, all teachers achieve with these heavy-handed techniques is minimal

compliance. Under that compliance lies deep resentment, a breeding ground for disobedience." Here is Spitalli's top ten list of discipline no-no's:

• *Punishing the many for the transgressions of the few*. This turns students against each other (and their teacher) and gives well-behaved students the implicit message that there is no point in playing by the rules.

• *Using school work as punishment*. For example, having a class do 50 math problems because it was noisy, giving a pop quiz to punish students who were unruly, uninterested, or unprepared, or giving students a double homework assignment when they complain about homework. Practices like these make students hate their schoolwork – and their teacher.

• *Bullying students*. This includes teasing, insulting, and ridiculing students (and, of course, corporal punishment). The evidence is that this kind of behavior by teachers does not help discipline and can leave lasting scars.

• *Using sarcasm*. Having a sharp tongue can amount to bullying. "Depending on how contemptuous or humiliating the remark," writes Spitalli, "some students may feel they have no alternative but to be abusive in return. Even students who are not the intended targets of sarcasm resent teachers who treat their classmates this way."

• *Ranting and raving*. If teachers constantly raise their voices, students will tune them out, and if teachers embarrass students in front of their peers, the targets get even in creative ways.

• *Lowering grades as a punishment*. Grades should reflect academic performance, not behavior.

• *Teaching through coercion*. Forcing students to memorize grammar rules to regurgitate on tests (rather than as a way of understanding the role of grammar in recognizing good writing and writing well) is counterproductive.

• *Using profanity*. Whether in the classroom or the gym, cursing by teachers "reflects a personal lack of linguistic self-control and a lack of respect for students," says Spitalli, and it gives all the wrong signals to students.

• *Sending students to the principal for inconsequential infractions*. Teachers will never earn students' respect if kids see that their teacher can't handle day-to-day irritants without going to a higher authority. It's the school equivalent of a mother saying to her child, "Just wait till Dad gets home!"

• *Asking a student to repeat unacceptable language*. "What did you just say?" demand some teachers when they hear a student using profane or disrespectful

language, thereby compounding the problem. A private conversation with follow-up is a far wiser strategy.

"Class Struggles" by Samuel Spitalli in *American School Board Journal*, November 2004 (Vol. 191, #11, p. 44-45), no e-link available yet

5. Are Constructivist Math Programs Really Better?

In his *New York Times* education column last week, Samuel Freedman reported on the Ossining, New York school district, which recently invested $200,000 in the TERC Investigations math program. Teachers and students seemed pleased with the hands-on, "constructivist" curriculum, but Freedman was troubled by this interchange in a fourth-grade class. While the teacher had students highlighting multiples of two on their multiples charts, Jimmy, who had just arrived from a parochial school, whispered to a visitor, "I know all my facts." The visitor asked him to solve the problem 23 x 16, and within a minute, Jimmy came up with 368, the correct answer. Asked how he arrived at the answer, Jimmy offered what Freedman said was "a shy, yearning face" and said nothing. It was apparent that he had learned to multiply the "old-fashioned" way, which was not what was being taught in the Ossining schools.

Freedman said this story captures the divide in the "math wars" in American schools today – the conflict between advocates of hands-on, understand-what-you're-doing math and traditionalists who believe, as Matthew Goldstein, chancellor of City University, said recently, that currently-fashionable programs cannot prepare students "to become scientists, engineers, mathematicians, computer scientists, physicians, and educators of mathematics."

Freedman concludes, "[I]t is impossible not to be haunted by the image of Jimmy doing 23 times 16 while everyone else was charting multiples of two, and not to wonder if he knew something nobody else in the room did."

"The Class Multiplies, but the Math Divides" by Samuel Freedman in the *New York Times*, October 20, 2004
http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/20/education/20education.html?oref=login

6. How About Parental Involvement in Parenting?

"Parents spend less time than ever with their children," write two New Jersey researchers in a sharply-worded piece in *Education Week* critiquing NCLB's Title I guidelines on parent involvement. "…[W]hat exactly can parents do that would best

support their children's academic development? We propose this bold concept as a precondition for parental involvement in schools: parental involvement in parenting." This, say the authors, "is the foundation of effective parental involvement in the schools – and student success."

Not that parents shouldn't participate in school policymaking and other activities. If parents have the time, they can add tremendous value. "But parents burdened with too many responsibilities and too little support," argue the authors, "should not be expected to become policy wonks and curriculum specialists… And schools, so often challenged in direct proportion to the life difficulties their families face, should not be saddled with yet another time-consuming and nearly impossible task."

This "nearly impossible task" is the kind of in-school parental involvement promoted by the NCLB guidelines which, the authors argue, go far beyond the expertise of most parents. Similarly, the types of parent outreach that principals and teachers are asked to do are also beyond their training and experience. The researchers say that both parents and school professions should *stick to their knitting*: principals and teachers should focus on running safe and decent schools that foster high achievement for all students, and parents should work to "support their children's education by creating daily routines that are predictable and structured, taking an active interest in school to convey the values of education and effort to their children, and making homework a priority by dealing with the problems of TV and other media distractions."

"What About Parental Involvement in Parenting? The Case for Home-Focused School-Parent Partnerships" by Maurice Elias and Yoni Schwab in *Education Week*, October 20, 2004 (Vol. 24, #8, p. 39, 41)
http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2004/10/20/08elias.h24.html

7. Short Items:

a. Fifteen keys to boosting middle and high-school literacy achievement – In a just-published study of middle and high-school literacy, a panel of researchers headed by Harvard professor Catherine Snow identified fifteen practices that build adolescents' reading comprehension skills:

- Direct, explicit instruction in comprehension skills;
- Effective instructional principles embedded in content;
- Motivation and self-directed learning;
- Text-based collaborative learning;

- Strategic tutoring;
- Diverse texts
- Intensive writing;
- A technology component;
- Ongoing formative assessment of students;
- Extended time for literacy;
- Professional development;
- Ongoing summative assessment of students and programs;
- Teacher teams;
- Leadership;
- A comprehensive and coordinated literacy program.

"Reading Researchers Outline Elements Needed to Achieve Adolescent Literacy" by Kathleen Kennedy Manzo in *Education Week*, October 20, 2004 (Vol. 24, #8, p. 10). A PDF file of the full report, "Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy," is available at: http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2004/10/20/08literacy.h24.html?querystring=Reading%20Researchers%20Outline%20Elements

b. International foreign language e-mail network for students – MMM is the acronym for Mini-Web, Multilingual, Maxi-Learning, an international e-mail and cultural communication network for elementary school students in seven countries, including the U.S., France, Spain, and Brazil. Students can exchange e-mail messages on topics such as what happens during the school day, community life, holidays, and local customs; students can also exchange poems, stories, and original art. The network is at http://www.mmm-ec.org

"Versatile Technologies Broaden Students' Language Horizons" by Rick Allen in *Curriculum Update (ASCD)*, Fall 2004

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 aims to keep busy principals and other educators very well-informed on important research and ideas in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 35 years of experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, coach of principals, and writer, acts as "designated reader." Kim searches through 39 publications the week they come out, chooses the articles that are most relevant and useful to improving teaching and learning, and summarizes them in a brief e-mail. Some ideas will be familiar, reinforcing what readers already know; others will be new and genuinely thought-provoking.

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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 Update (ASCD)
Ed. Magazine (Harvard School of Education)
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Update (ASCD)
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Elementary School Journal
Harper's
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NASSP Bulletin
New York Times
New Yorker
Newsweek
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Teachers College Record
Teacher Magazine

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