

# Marshall Memo 35

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education  
April 26, 2004

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## Quotes of the Week

“These children would gain nothing by being stuck in third grade in a dismal school for an additional dismal year... What these schools need...is an academic Marshall Plan. This means bringing in new principals, teachers, a proven new curriculum and smaller classes in the early grades.”

Brent Staples on the prospect of retention for third graders in New York’s worst-performing schools. *New York Times* editorial page column, April 6, 2004

“In the popular imagination, great school leaders are larger-than-life figures who inspire through their powerful convictions, uplift through relentless optimism, dazzle through creative genius, or motivate through a passionate commitment to disciplined performance. We look at the successes of these outsized figures and say, ‘Wow! It is possible! Why isn’t everybody doing as well?’”

Frederick Hess, *American School Board Journal* (see item #1)

“[V]ery few principals are authoritative without being authoritarian.”

Frederick Hess (*ibid.*)

“Today...we have a wealth of information on achievement and on various facets of teacher performance. The limited value of classroom observation, never great to begin with, has diminished further, while understanding and applying data is at a premium.”

Frederick Hess (*ibid.*)

“[M]ost principals have come up through the ranks in the same school systems where they now play supervisory roles. Raised in that culture, they are uncomfortable with routinely and aggressively monitoring or pushing their employees.”

Frederick Hess (*ibid.*)

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## 1. Beyond Instructional Leadership

In this provocative essay, Frederick Hess questions whether principals who come up through the teaching ranks have the training and skills to make the kinds of tough management decisions needed to turn around failing schools. Hess cites a number of troubling statistics:

- Only 30 percent of principals say they take student achievement into account when evaluating teachers.
- Only 36 percent of principals say they are scrutinizing teacher performance more rigorously than in the past.
- Superintendents rate only 11 percent of principals excellent at holding teachers accountable for instruction.
- Superintendents rate only 16 percent of principals excellent at making sound recommendations on teacher tenure.
- Superintendents rate only 7 percent of principals excellent at moving ineffective teachers out of their building. (Public Agenda poll)
- Fewer than 40 percent of superintendents were happy with their principals' ability to make tough decisions, delegate responsibility to staff, involve teachers in developing policies and priorities, or spend money efficiently.
- 60 percent of superintendents said you have to "take what you can get" when filling a principal vacancy. (Earlier Public Agenda study, *Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game*)

Hess casts a jaundiced eye on the conventional wisdom about heroic principals (see quote above) and concludes, "today's effective school leaders are successful in spite of their jobs. They're successful because they have such strong personalities, so much energy, or such creativity that they are able to work around the standard procedures and arrangements when they stand in the way. In a sense, these leaders are artists – finding ways to coax improvement without incentives, accountability, support, or an ability to overturn outmoded regulations. They charm, cajole, and browbeat subordinates and community members into cooperating, often at great personal or professional cost."

The problem, says Hess, is that we have 85,000 public schools and not enough exceptionally gifted principals to go around. Relying on rare genius is not a viable reform strategy. Instead, we must reconsider our outmoded ideas about "instructional

leadership” and rethink the type of training – and the type of individual (not necessarily drawn from the teaching ranks) – needed to improve failing schools.

Hess argues that the push for instructional leadership, while it was helpful in pushing an earlier generation of school leaders to look beyond bus schedules and purchasing textbooks and pay more attention to teaching and learning, is less germane today. What we need now are the “different leadership capabilities called for in different circumstances... providing leadership in terms of culture, human resources, management, external development, and strategy.”

Hess questions whether today’s principals need to be so directly involved in classroom supervision. This was necessary when principals “were limited to observing classes and monitoring parents’ complaints in order to judge teacher effectiveness.” Now, says Hess, “we have a wealth of information on achievement and on various facets of teacher performance. The limited value of classroom observation, never great to begin with, has diminished further, while understanding and applying data is at a premium.” In today’s schools, Hess argues, “It might be less essential that leaders be prepared to personally coach teachers than that they be able to establish accountability systems, build a culture of excellence, deal firmly with unproductive personnel, manage information, improve business practices, recruit good supporting personnel, cultivate a strong leadership team, and negotiate political and parental pressures.”

In high-functioning schools where good management practices are in place and teachers self-monitor, principals can afford to personally coach teachers. And in schools where there is nobody else to do direct supervision and support, the principal has no choice but to perform those functions. “But in troubled schools that are marked by chaotic conditions or weak morale,” Hess says, “it might be necessary to overhaul the organization before it makes sense to seek a traditional instructional leader.” In such schools, principals cannot afford to personally help teachers improve curriculum and instruction and this function needs to be delegated to other capable staff members. Fortunately, there are a number of professionals filling these roles today – literacy and math coaches, university partners, consultants, and others.

Are teachers the best pool from which to recruit principals? Hess acknowledges that some teachers make great principals, but wonders whether we should limit ourselves to teachers when we select principals for dysfunctional schools. “The problem with the notion of instructional leadership,” he writes, “is not its healthy focus on teaching and learning but its presumption that only former teachers are

suiting to be education leaders.” Hess worries that former teachers tend to have blind spots or drag their feet “when it is necessary to impose painful change or overhaul a troubled organization.” In addition, principals who have come up through the ranks and have been raised in the same culture in which they are now supervisors “are uncomfortable with routinely and aggressively monitoring or pushing their employees.”

Hess also worries about whether most teachers have had a chance to develop the skills needed to manage a staff, a leadership team, or a million-dollar budget. He argues that there are “few opportunities for teachers to develop leadership skills and limited room for entrepreneurship. Teachers have little or no opportunity to gain experience managing teams, evaluating adults, changing organizational routines, or leading with a light touch. The result is that very few principals are authoritative without being authoritarian.” Hess thinks that this is why “tough-minded accountability systems often result in small-minded micromanagement of teaching practice rather than sparking the kinds of ingenuity and collaboration that have been evident in well-run for-profit firms or public agencies.”

While agreeing that instructional expertise is desirable, Hess makes the case for opening principalships to those who have worked in other institutions that help raise and educate children, including tutoring programs, counseling programs, youth clubs, literacy programs, and preschools. After all, he argues, “we don’t presume that architects need to have started as bricklayers, senators as civil servants, airline executives as pilots or baggage handlers, or hospital administrators as doctors or nurses.”

[Whatever we may think of Hess’s argument for choosing non-traditional principals, it serves as a powerful challenge to schools on the type of courage and leadership skills needed to turn around failing schools.]

“Treating Principals Like Leaders” by Frederick Hess in *American School Board Journal*, May 2004 (Vol. 191, #5, p. 32-35), no e-link available.

## **2. Suggestions on Formative (“Dipstick”) Assessments**

Each month, Doug Reeves, director of the Center for Performance Assessments, answers questions from practitioners. This month’s question was on resistance in one school to doing during-the-year assessments. It seems this school was getting bogged down in “test-creation” issues. Doug suggested the following:

- *Agree on power standards* – Write down the 12 most important standards for each subject, each grade. One way to narrow these lists to really *core* skills and knowledge is to have teachers answer this question: “What knowledge and skills do students need in order to enter my class with confidence and success next year?” Fifth-grade teachers (for example) usually have a very short and specific list in their heads of what they want fourth-grade teachers to produce.

- *Write common final exams* – At least at the high-school level, teachers should agree on a common year-end test and have a shared standard for student proficiency on that test. Year-end standards should be “as consistent as the height of basketball goals are from coach to coach, school to school.”

- *Write short monthly tests* – Have teachers put together *very short* assessments (no more than 15 items: 12 multiple-choice and 3 extended response). These tests, which shouldn’t take more than 20 minutes of class time, should be given every month to measure students’ progress on the power standards.

- *Work on inter-rater reliability* – Give teachers time in staff meetings (or already-scheduled grade-level or department team meetings) to score the extended-response items. Teams should get to the point where an anonymous student paper receives the same score from everyone.

- *Put the data to work* – Give teachers time to look at the results from each monthly assessment and strategize on how instruction should be different in the coming weeks based on students’ results. This includes possible changes in curriculum, teaching methods, and scheduling [as well as help for struggling students].

Doug thinks that formative tests that have 60 items and take two hours to administer are excessive, but the short 15-item tests he’s advocating are do-able and critically important to raising student achievement. “That’s good teaching,” he writes “and I’ll bet many good teachers are doing that now. To fail to do this is like driving west on I-90, hoping to get to New York City, but saying ‘I’m too busy to look at the map.’ That’s not going to be any more successful in getting to New York City than is saying, ‘I know the kid is having reading comprehension problems, but I’m too busy to find out what’s wrong and make changes that will make it better.’”

“Questions and Answers from the Real World” by Doug Reeves, *Center for Performance Assessment Monthly E-Mail Newsletter*, April 21, 2004 (p. 5-6)  
[center@makingstandardswork.com](mailto:center@makingstandardswork.com)

### 3. A Hundred Words Every Ninth Grader Should Know

Drawing on teachers' summer reading assignments and favorite high-school freshman books, researchers at Houghton Mifflin chose one hundred words they felt every high-school freshman should know. This list is not definitive, but it is a good sampling of words that crop up in English, earth science, and social studies classes in high school. The book containing these words (which is a prequel to another volume of must-know words for high-school graduates) gives definitions and origins of each word; for example, vaccine comes from the word "vacca" or cow, from Edward Jenner's discovery that injecting healthy people with the fluid from cowpox sores protect them against smallpox. Here's the list:

accentuate	fallacy	mutation	solstice
alliteration	flourish	nebula	spectrum
analogy	formidable	nocturnal	stereotype
antibody	gargoyle	nuisance	strategy
aspire	guerrilla	omnivore	suffrage
bamboozle	guru	outrageous	symbiosis
bizarre	heritage	ozone	tariff
boisterous	hieroglyphic	parasite	technique
boycott	hologram	participle	tempo
camouflage	hypocrisy	phloem	toxin
chronological	immune	plateau	tranquility
commemorate	impertinent	polygon	tumult
cover	inference	protagonist	tundra
decorum	introspection	pulverize	ultraviolet
deduction	jaunty	quandary	unanimous
deign	jovial	quarantine	undulate
despondent	kilometer	quota	vaccine
dialogue	labyrinth	rainforest	vacillate
divulge	laconic	random	vertebrate
eclectic	lichen	recede	virtuoso
ellipse	light-year	renaissance	voracious
embargo	marsupial	renegade	wretched
enthusiastic	maneuver	repose	xylem
exponent	metaphor	sacrifice	yacht
exult	mosaic	silhouette	zoology

“100 Words Every High School Freshman Should Know” by the editors of the American Heritage Dictionaries (Houghton Mifflin, 2004), reviewed in the *New York Times Education Life*, April 25, 2004 (p. 11)

#### 4. Academic “Redshirting” in Kindergarten: Does It Help?

Some parents think they will give their children an academic (and athletic) advantage if they hold them out of kindergarten for a year. The hope is that if kids are a year older, they will outperform the rest of the class. According to the U.S. Department of Education, about 9 percent of primary-grade students started kindergarten a year late in 1995, and the trend has continued. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, school-age children are older than a generation ago:

- 13 percent of first graders were 7 or older in 1970;
- 22 percent were in 2002.
- 9.3 percent of first graders were 5 or younger in 1970;
- 4.8 percent were in 2002.

And downstream, twelfth graders are older.

- 22 percent of seniors had turned 18 in 1970;
- 36 percent had in 2002.

Does being a year older give students an advantage? Since “redshirting” happens more often with boys and is twice as common among white, non-Hispanic families as among black, non-Hispanics, does it widen the boy / girl and black / white achievement gaps?

The emerging consensus among researchers is that starting kindergarten a year later makes no difference on the long run. A major study of 22,000 children who entered kindergarten in 1998 found that older students did slightly better in pre-reading and pre-math skills, but the differences were small and typically evaporated by third grade. A 2002 study by Deborah Stipek, dean of the School of Education at Stanford, found that on average older children did not academically outperform their younger peers, nor did older students reap any social or emotional benefits. So much for this suburban legend. If these findings are accurate, it would appear that “redshirting” is not contributing to the achievement gap.

There are four *disadvantages* to entering school a year older. First, more mature children are more likely to get bored in kindergarten and subsequent grades. Second, a wider span of age and school readiness adds to the already-formidable demands on kindergarten teachers, who have to contend with a wide range of developmental

levels among entering students. Third, older children have more behavior problems (perhaps because they are under-challenged). A study by Robert Byrd, a California pediatrician, found that teenagers who were older in their grade because they had started school late were twice as likely to get in trouble as classmates who had entered at the normal age. And fourth, in some schools: parents of late-entering kindergarten students, realizing that their children are bored, push teachers to introduce developmentally-inappropriate academics. If teachers cave in to these demands, children who are on level are forced-marched into academic work that is above their level and may frustrate them or turn them off.

The consensus among experts: parent should enter their children in kindergarten at the regular age. Dr. Byrd summed it up: “If parents are holding their kids out of kindergarten if they’re ready because they think it gives them an added advantage of top of everything else they have done for them, they won’t be challenged. And if parents are holding them out because they don’t look ready for school, they should enroll their children in school, too, where that can be addressed rather than going back to the same environment that didn’t get them ready for school in the first five years.”

“Older (but Smarter?)” by Mary Bounds, *New York Times Education Life*, April 25, 2004 (p. 16-17) <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/04/25/edlife/EDKINDERT.html>

## 5. Short Items:

*a. The elements of excellent instruction* – A new book analyzing outstanding college teachers has implications for K-12 instruction as well. Ken Bain, director of New York University’s Center for Teaching Excellence, studied 63 excellent college teachers (according to students’ and colleagues’ recommendations and their student’s work). Here’s what he found:

- Teachers’ personalities varied widely, from charismatic extroverts to brooding introverts.
- Great teachers worked backward, thinking first of the content and intellectual skills they wanted students to learn and then planning week-to-week lessons.
- Great teachers pushed students to examine their own conceptions and misconceptions about the subject matter – to “think about their thinking.”
- On the first day of class, star teachers avoided talking about course requirements; instead they focused on “the promises of the course, about the kinds of questions the discipline will help students answer.”

- Great teachers began discussions by posing a question and then giving students a few minutes to ponder it. They did not push for “canned” responses.
- Great teachers encouraged intellectual curiosity and asked students to take responsibility for their own learning.

*What the Best College Teachers Do* by Ken Bain (Harvard, 2004), reviewed by David Ruenzel in *Teacher Magazine*, May/June 2004 (Vol. XV, #6, p. 55)

***b. Doing away with middle schools*** – A new RAND study, “Focus on the Wonder Years,” reviews two decades of research on middle schools, looking at the dismal academic performance of most middle school students and what can be done about it. The report argues for disbanding middle schools and replacing them with K-8 schools. The report also argues for focusing on academic interventions for low-performing students, comprehensive disciplinary models to nip problems in the bud, quality professional development for teachers, and increasing parent involvement.

Spotted in *The Education Gadfly*, April 22, 2004 (Vol. 4, #16, p. 6). The study is available at <http://www.rand.org/publications/MG/MG139>.

***c. A different view*** – In last week’s *Education Week*, Sue Swaim, the director of the National Middle School Association, takes the opposite view, arguing that changes in grade structure do not address the real issues, namely, “the need for challenging and relevant curriculum, instruction, and assessment in every classroom; on-going, job-embedded professional development for all teachers; positive relationships with adult advocates for all students; and strong, two-way communication between families and educators.”

“Strength in the Middle” by Sue Swaim in *Education Week*, April 21, 2004 (Vol. XXIII, #32, p. 32, 35) <http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=32swaim.h23>

***d. Middle school success factors*** – In another article on middle schools, Deborah Kasak, director of the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, lists the five gifts she would like to bestow on all middle schools middle schools if she had a magic wand:

- *A close, mutually-respectful environment* – Small teaching teams leading small learning communities are crucial to middle schools (as they are to elementary and high schools). Students need to be *known* by adults.

- *High-quality instruction and developmentally appropriate programs* – “Rigorous content provided within the context of strong social support is the winning combination.” Data should be collected to assess student and school performance.
- *Mandated teacher training* – “Teachers must have a deep knowledge of academic subjects as well as an understanding of the needs of young adolescents and how to teach effectively.”
- *High-quality, ongoing professional development* – This includes leadership training and time for teachers to collaborate.
- *An emphasis on literacy* – Only one-third of eighth-graders are proficient in reading, and a quarter read below the basic level (according to NAEP). There need to be serious reading programs in middle school!

“What Middle Grades Need” by Deborah Kasak in *American School Board Journal*, May 2004 (Vol. 191, #5, p. 44-45), no e-link available.

*e. A charismatic middle-school teacher in Chicago* – In the cover article in the new *Teacher Magazine*, Toni Billingsley, a Chicago middle-school Spanish teacher, is the subject of a laudatory profile, including some great pictures.

“Great Expectations” by Gregory Michie in *Teacher Magazine*, May/June 2004 (Vol. XV, #6, p. 28-32) <http://www.teachermagazine.org/tmstory.cfm?slug=06Great.h15>

*f. Outsourcing student health services* – Caught in a budget crunch, the Austin Independent School District recently became one of the first U.S. school districts to outsource student health services to a private health-care provider. Children’s Hospital of Austin, a pediatric facility that is part of the Seton Healthcare Network, agreed to work with the district. The four goals of the program were to: (a) improve student health care, (b) increase time in class, (c) increase students’ access to primary health care, and (d) reduce the frequency of non-emergency and preventable visits to Children’s Hospital of Austin. Student Health Service Teams consisting of a registered nurse and an unlicensed assistant are assigned to each school, gradually replacing traditional school nurses.

There has been progress on all fronts, according to school district and health officials. Financially, the program has also been a success. A study showed that cost saving to the community was 2.5 times the budget for the school health program in a single year.

“Partners for Health” by Janet Katz in *American School Board Journal*, May 2004 (Vol. 191, #5, p. 40-42), no e-link available.

**g. Houston’s high-school shift** – The Houston, Texas public schools have adopted a new approach to high-school grade-to-grade promotion. Rather than mandating that students pass core academic subjects in each grade to be promoted to the next grade, Houston is now requiring that students complete all core courses by the time they graduate. “It doesn’t make sense to keep a child back until he is 17 or 18 years old because he passed all his subjects except one,” said Superintendent Kaye Stripling. “A kid sitting in 9<sup>th</sup> grade at age 17 is a kid who is going to say, ‘Forget this, I’m dropping out.’ And Houston can’t afford to lose its children that way.” Some experts praised this more flexible system, but cautioned that Houston will have to monitor struggling students closely and ensure that they get the extra help they need to catch up on failed courses. “It will take a concerted, full-court pres to get these students to standards,” said Gene Bottoms of the High Schools That Work program.

“Houston Shifts on High School Promotion” by Catherine Gewertz in *Education Week*, April 21, 2004 (Vol. XXIII, #32, p. 3)  
<http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=32Houston.h23>

**h. Averages are deceptive** – Using test-score averages to measure schools’ progress is misleading, says a new report by Northwest Evaluation Associates, a non-profit group that consults with 1,200 districts. Averages can mask big differences in student performance; two schools with the same average can have a very different spread of achievement. Averages also don’t show where a student started – the “value added” from the school’s efforts. Misleading averages can distort the No Child Left Behind status of a school, the report says, giving parents inaccurate information on the instructional prowess of a school.

“Test-Score Averages Don’t Tell Whole Story About Schools, Study Says” in *Education Week*, April 21, 2004 (Vol. XXIII, #32, p. 10)  
<http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=32Aera.h23> . The full study, “Individual Growth and School Success,” is available at <http://www.nwea.org/research/growthstudy.html>

**i. Review of high-school world history textbooks** – Gilbert Sewall has just released a review of six popular grade 6-12 world history textbooks (through the American Textbook Council). Sewall reviewed the books himself, looking at specific

issues, events, or topics, and used outside experts to review his drafts. His report echoes many of the findings of Diane Ravitch's recent *Consumer Guide to High School History Textbooks*, although she used a somewhat different methodology. Both reports said (in the words of Chester Finn) that "history textbooks as a whole are boring and ridiculously inclusive yet lack a central story line or anything else that would make you want to turn the page. They also tend toward the politically correct and are fraught with errors and dubious judgments."

Spotted in *The Education Gadfly*, April 22, 2004 (Vol. 4, #16, p. 5-6). Sewall's study is available at <http://www.historytextbooks.org/world.htm>

*j. School planning website* – The Annenberg Institute has a website designed to support school planning. It contains observation protocols, focus group samples and questions, a recommended step-by-step planning process, sample worksheets and rubrics, types and uses of data, ideas for selecting and analyzing data, and suggestions for using results to drive planning efforts. (Spotted in *PEN Weekly NewsBlast*, April 23, 2004). The site is at <http://www.annenberginstitute.org/tools/>

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***Do you have feedback? Is anything missing?***

*If you have comments or suggestions, or if you saw an article or web item in the last week that you think should be covered, please e-mail: [kim.marshall8@verizon.net](mailto:kim.marshall8@verizon.net)*

# About the Marshall Memo

## *Mission and focus:*

This weekly memo aims to keep busy principals, teachers, and other educators very well-informed on important research, ideas, and developments in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, a former Boston teacher and administrator, is your “designated reader,” searching through a wide range of publications the week they come out, zeroing in on the articles that are most relevant and useful to improving teaching and learning at the school level, and summarizing them in a brief e-mail. Target topics include the following:

- *School leadership* – Building a professional learning community; effective teamwork; effective schools practices; supervision and evaluation of teachers; time management.
- *Effective teaching* – Key variables associated with high student achievement; professional development of teachers; teacher leadership and career ladders; multiple intelligences and brain research.
- *Curriculum* – Alignment and planning with the end in sight; teaching for understanding; new ideas in reading, writing, and math.
- *Assessment* – Aligned formative and summative assessments; using data and student work for continuous improvement; graphic display of student achievement data; standardized testing and the debate on standards.
- *Closing the gap* – Effective strategies to close the racial/ economic achievement gap; the innate-ability / intelligence / effective effort debate; safety-net programs.
- *Positive school culture* – Student discipline; social-emotional learning; moral development; parent involvement; and community partnerships.
- *And...* – New areas of research; upcoming television and radio programs on education.

## *Publications covered:*

(those read this week are underlined)

American Education Research Journal  
American Educator  
American School Board Journal  
ASCD SmartBrief  
Atlantic Monthly  
Bay State Banner  
Boston Globe  
Commonwealth Magazine  
Curriculum/ Education Update (ASCD)  
Ed. Magazine (Harvard School of Education)  
Education Digest  
Education Gadfly  
Education Next  
Education Week  
Educational Leadership  
Educational Researcher  
Elementary School Journal  
Harpers  
Harvard Business Review  
Harvard Education Letter  
Harvard Education Review  
Middle School Journal  
New York Times  
New Yorker  
Newsweek  
PEN Weekly NewsBlast  
Phi Delta Kappan  
Principal Magazine  
Psychology Today  
Reading Research Quarterly  
Reading Today  
Review of Educational Research  
Teachers College Record  
Teacher Magazine

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

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