

Marshall Memo 98

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
August 15, 2005

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Quotes of the Week

“Nothing is quite so irksome to me as finding little sense of urgency in schools where many students struggle with learning to read. By urgency I mean a focus on ensuring all available instructional time is well used.”

Richard Allington (see item #1)

“You can walk into any school system, large or small, and ask to see samples of work that’s proficient from five different 4th-grade classrooms. You’ll get five radically different qualities of work. The only antidote to that is common assessments.”

Doug Reeves (see item #3)

“Testing becomes formative when the results are used to adapt teaching to meet needs. It’s not about giving the assessments; it’s about doing something about the results.”

Doug Reeves (*ibid.*)

“The vast majority of teachers have never been given the opportunity to learn about sound assessment practices. And assessment training has been nonexistent in leadership training programs.”

Rick Stiggins (*ibid.*)

“Research shows that professional development leads to better instruction and improved student learning when it connects to the curriculum materials that teachers use, the district and state academic standards that guide their work, and the assessment and accountability measures that evaluate their success.”

AERA study (see item #5)

“Social skills aren’t developed through preachy lectures and prepared lessons.”

Polly Greenberg (see item #7)

1. Making Every Minute Count

In his "President's Message" in the current issue of *Reading Today*, Tennessee education professor Richard Allington writes: "Nothing is quite so irksome to me as finding little sense of urgency in schools where many students struggle with learning to read. By urgency I mean a focus on ensuring all available instructional time is well used." He cites four ways that some schools waste precious time:

- At the beginning of the day, too much time is used to get students settled in their classrooms, take attendance, collect lunch money, and listen to morning announcements. "Even 20 to 30 minutes after the beginning of the official instructional day," writes Allington, "few students are yet engaged in productive academic work."

- Some teachers spend an inordinate amount of time on transitions and non-academic activities during the day (e.g., taking attendance, distributing materials, waiting to begin lessons, managing disruptions, snack time, cleaning up, and lining up). The variation among teachers is enormous: non-academic activities can take as little as 15 minutes and as much as *two hours* a day.

- Public address system announcements frequently interrupt instruction.

- At the end of the day, teachers have students begin packing up 15 to 20 minutes before dismissal time.

Allington cites a study by Jodie Roth (*Teachers College Record* 2003) which found that an average of 2 hours and 10 minutes are spent on non-academic activities every day. The same study found shocking social-class disparities in the allocation of instructional time: affluent districts usually had longer school days (6½ or 7 hours) with an additional half hour of instructional time devoted to traditional academic subjects, as well as more time for art, music, and physical education. High-poverty and high-minority districts typically had a shorter school day (6 hours) with less academic learning time and fewer specialty subjects.

The International Reading Association has launched an initiative on the use of school time, focusing on these questions:

- Is reading instruction pushing other subjects out of the school day?
- Why is the organization of the school instructional day so woefully inadequate in some schools?
- Why do schools serving poor and minority children have significantly shorter school days and less time for academic instruction?
- Why do some schools and classrooms make so much better use of the time available to offer academic instruction than others?

“It takes time to teach and time to learn,” concludes Allington. “To achieve the highest quality educational outcomes requires that we make every moment of the school day count.”

“Urgency and Instructional Time” by Richard Allington in *Reading Today*, August/September 2005 (Vol. 23, #1, p. 17), no e-link available

2. Reflecting on the Big Picture

Mike Connolly, principal of an international secondary school in Vietnam, suggests that all school leaders should carve out time in their busy schedules for strategic reflection. “Picture a field commander without a map and a compass,” he writes, “or a coach without a game plan. Principals, as leaders of their schools, must have an especially strong vision because schools are chaotic environments and the demands of multiple constituencies with different agendas will keep them that way. So if we leaders are to pilot our schools through the turbulence of change, we need a clear way of assessing at different points during the year where we are going and whether we are getting there.”

What should principals reflect about? Connolly suggests that, at set intervals during the school year, leaders should ask themselves the following personal questions:

- Who am I and what do I stand for?
- In what areas of my life/job do I find greater/lesser satisfaction?
- What are my strengths as a person? As a leader?
- What have I accomplished in my professional life or in my personal life?

• Having answered these, Connolly then suggests reflecting with one’s staff on a set of schoolwide questions:

- Who are we and whom do we serve?
- What are the aims of our school?
- Are those aims broad enough, inclusive enough, inspiring enough?
- Which of our school practices further our aims? Which inhibit them?
- Are we truly walking the talk we put into our mission and philosophy statements?
- Do we make daily decisions with our mission and philosophy firmly in mind?

• Finally, Connolly suggests reflecting at the end of each year on a third set of questions. “People often make the same mistakes over and over again,” he writes, “not because they are stupid but because they fail to reflect on the reasons for their mistakes and what they might do in the future to avoid them. Likewise, we do not learn from our successes simply by achieving them.”

- What obstacles did I/we have to overcome on the way to success?

- How did I/we confront them?
- What was the turning point?
- What resources did I/we find to support me/us?

“Time Out for Reflection” by Mike Connolly in *Principal*, September/October 2005 (Vol. 85, #1, p. 64), no e-link available

3. Key Issues with Formative Assessments

This article in *District Administration* explores the great variety of assessments these days, including weekly teacher-made quizzes, trimester versions of the state test to predict student failure, and a growing number of commercial tests. The article touches on four key issues with formative (during-the-year) tests:

- *Shared standards of proficiency* – “You can walk into any school system, large or small, and ask to see samples of work that’s proficient from five different 4th-grade classrooms,” says Doug Reeves of the Center for Performance Assessment. “You’ll get five radically different qualities of work. The only antidote to that is common assessments.”

- *Alignment of classroom teaching with state standards* – “[T]eachers still struggle to match up what they’re doing in the classroom to what’s being evaluated on state tests,” says Hardin Daniel of ThinkLink Learning. Wyoming has taken the radical step of throwing out its entire high-stakes testing system, creating a new one that maps closely to classrooms, and offering free on-line formative tests to all its districts. This is in line with Doug Reeves’s thinking: “The whole point is not to have a ‘Gotcha!’ where people are surprised and embarrassed [by the results of summative tests]. We need a seamless and morally fair link between assessment and what’s happening in the classroom.”

- *Effective use of interim assessments* – If the results aren’t used to modify instruction on a day-to-day basis, some experts believe they are a waste of time. “Testing becomes formative when the results are used to adapt teaching to meet needs,” says Reeves. “It’s not about giving the assessments; it’s about doing something about the results.”

- *Formative assessment in daily instruction* – Dylan Wiliam, a British expert on formative assessments who is now working at Educational Testing Service, takes this idea a step further: “What I mean by formative assessment is not assessment that takes place every five or six weeks, but assessment that takes place every 10 seconds. We acknowledge that there’s a place for these 10-week reviews, but in most instances I regard that as too late.” Wiliam and Rick Stiggins (of the Assessment Training Institute) argue that the key to improving learning (and test scores) is teachers making effective use of assessment results on a daily basis.

Wiliam illustrates this point with a common classroom scenario: a teacher finishes teaching a concept to a group of 20 students and asks a question to see if they

understand. Six students raise their hands, and the teacher calls on one of them. William argues that polling one child who volunteers is not an accurate way to assess learning. He suggests having all students write their answer on small dry-erase boards with a marker and hold them up for inspection. "With whiteboards, you can't hide, everybody has to respond," he says. "Then the teacher has a very quick take on whether the class has understood something."

Stiggins calls this assessment *for* learning, as opposed to assessment *of* learning, and argues that many teachers and principals don't know how to use it. "The vast majority of teachers have never been given the opportunity to learn about sound assessment practices," he says. "And assessment training has been nonexistent in leadership training programs."

"Making Assessments Work" by Rebecca Sausner in *District Administration*, August 2005 (Vol. 41, #8, p. 31-34), no e-link available

4. Formative Assessments: Focusing on the Essence

In this *Education Week* commentary article, Oregon assessment expert Stephen Chappuis worries that the idea of formative assessment is being debased by pressure to raise test scores, and that too many districts are buying package deals from testing companies and trying to "teacher-proof" testing. The purpose of formative tests, he says, is to *inform teachers* – "to provide information on what an individual student needs to practice, should be re-taught, or is ready to learn next, and how students themselves might become formative users of assessment information."

The ideal, he says, is assessment *for* learning: "It involves students in every aspect of their own assessment, including record-keeping and communication, and helps teachers teach and students learn. Assessment for learning rests on the understanding that students, not just adults, are data-based decision-makers. In that sense, assessment for learning cannot be reduced to a package purchase. It is a human process: teachers and learners together generating accurate information about student learning and then using it effectively to promote even greater learning." Assessment, Chappuis concludes, should not be an end in itself, but an integral, daily part of teaching and learning.

"Is Formative Assessment Losing Its Meaning?" by Stephen Chappuis in *Education Week*, August 10, 2005 (Vol. 24, #44, p. 38)

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2005/08/10/44chappuis.h24.html>

5. Effective Professional Development

A new AERA study on professional development says: "To be effective, professional development must provide teachers with a way to directly apply what they learn to their teaching. Research shows that professional development leads to

better instruction and improved student learning when it connects to the curriculum materials that teachers use, the district and state academic standards that guide their work, and the assessment and accountability measures that evaluate their success.” The study concludes that for professional development to have an impact on student learning, it must focus on:

- How students learn particular subject matter;
- Instructional practices that are specifically related to the subject matter and how students understand it;
- Strengthening teachers’ knowledge of specific subject-matter content;
- Closely aligning professional development with actual classroom conditions.

There also needs to be enough time for professional development to have its impact – although time is less important than quality and relevance.

A final key ingredient is “collective participation.” Professional development has more impact when it actively involves groups of teachers from the same school, department, or grade level in observing and being observed while teaching; planning for classroom use of what is being learned; reviewing student work; and giving presentations, leading discussions, and producing written work.

For the full study, go to:

http://www.aera.net/uploadedFiles/Journals_and_Publications/Research_Points/RPSummer05.pdf

“Teaching Teachers: Professional Development to Improve Student Achievement” , spotted in *PEN Weekly NewsBlast*, August 12, 2005

6. Using Classroom “Walkthroughs” to Improve Instruction

This *Education Week* article on classroom supervision describes the shift that New Orleans elementary principal Donna Berggren made in the way she observes teachers. She used to look at whether a teacher could hold students’ attention and keep them under control. Now, instead of focusing on what teachers are doing, Berggren asks herself what the children are learning. “It was like this light bulb went off,” she said of the shift she made. “It allows you to go past that first layer, to what is the teacher enabling the student to do.”

Berggren now makes a point of visiting three classrooms a day for 5-10 minutes each, and often asks students why they’re doing what they’re doing. She notices patterns – for example, too much copying of vocabulary definitions or not enough emphasis on hands-on measuring. Berggren is tactful when she gives feedback to teachers: “I never made the teacher feel like ‘You did it wrong.’ It was, ‘You used this approach; let’s see if we can tweak it a little bit.’”

Berggren’s is one of seven Louisiana districts where principals are being trained in “walkthroughs” – a way of observing classrooms to improve instruction. Ann Van Sickle, San Diego district administrator who is conducting the training in Louisiana,

stresses the importance of focus and follow-through: “A walkthrough is a waste of time unless you use that to inform your leadership practice,” she says. “It has to change what you do.” Elaine Fink, a retired school leader who pioneered walkthroughs with Anthony Alvarado in District 2 in New York City, likens the practice to a corporate leader’s visit to the factory floor to figure out how to raise production. “This is about why kids aren’t getting what they need,” she said. “And the only way to know that is to get into the classroom.”

A cautionary note: if walkthroughs aren’t done right, they can lose their value and heighten mistrust among teachers. In Los Angeles, feelings about walkthroughs were so strong that the most recent teacher contract bans them. Lauren Resnick, a Columbia professor who did training on walkthroughs in Los Angeles, cautions that if the right conditions of trust and community are absent, the practice “has a nearly 100 percent chance of blowing up in your face.” She prefers the term “learning walks,” stresses that they are not part of teacher evaluation, and invites teachers to join administrators as they make the rounds.

[For a more detailed description of classroom mini-observations and follow-up with teachers and teacher teams, see my June *Kappan* article, which is summarized in Marshall Memo 90, #2.]

“Educators See Classroom Visits as Powerful Learning Tool” by Jeff Archer in *Education Week*, July 27, 2005 (Vol. 24, #43, p. 22, 24)
<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2005/07/27/43walkthrough.h24.html?querystring=Jeff%20Archer>

7. What Principals Should Push for in Early Childhood Programs

In the U.S. (unlike a number of other countries), teachers who work with pre-school children get the least professional respect. Veteran early childhood specialist Polly Greenberg has the following suggestions for principals who direct pre-kindergarten programs:

- *Value teachers who are warm and encouraging.* Young children have a keen sense of whether they and their family members are treated respectfully or condescendingly, says Greenberg. “As we all know, teachers are hugely concerned about classroom discipline. But principals can point out to them that their colleagues with the fewest discipline problems are usually those who have strong, positive relationships with children, especially those with troublesome behavior. These are teachers who talk and listen respectfully to a child when behavioral issues arise, show that they appreciate the child’s point of view, emphasize the well-being of the group, and how the child can enhance it.”

- *Make sure all children in pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and primary classes have generous amounts of outdoor playtime and physical fitness adventures.* Principals should be advocates for recess and physical education because research shows that:

- Exercise stimulates the brain for more effective learning;

- Children learn a great deal, such as spatial relations and other mathematical concepts, language, and social skills as they play with others;
 - Children are at high risk for obesity, heart disease, and other life-threatening ailments, caused in large part by lack of exercise.
- *Expect teachers to help children problem-solve when personal difficulties arise.*

Academic pressures should not prevent teachers from walking children through the “slow-motion, step-by-step process required in learning to use words rather than reacting to difficult situations with tears or blows, or by giving up... Social skills aren’t developed through preachy lectures and prepared lessons. Whenever feasible, effective early childhood educators should stop what they’re doing and facilitate social problem-solving on the spot.”

• *Support teachers in making literacy, math, and other academic experiences meaningful and fun for children.* “Well-trained early childhood teachers know how to do this both by picking up on spontaneous happenings and developing them into educationally important learning experience, and by using published learning materials,” says Greenberg. “It’s also crucial that principals schedule time for early childhood, kindergarten, and primary-grade teachers to have time to discuss:

- Reconciling apparently conflicting requirements;
- Reading and discussing early childhood professional literature and curriculum;
- Sharing ways of livening up lessons with experiential learning and humor;
- Creating, maintaining, and managing interesting and enriching learning centers in all subjects.”

• *In all ways, support your early childhood teachers.* “Across the country,” writes Greenberg, “teachers yearn for more time to plan, share ideas with colleagues, and grow through stimulating professional development. They especially want more help from principals with the one, two, or three exceptionally difficult or emotionally disturbed children who dominate their attention.”

“Five Ways to Achieve Quality Early Childhood Education” by Polly Greenberg in *Principal*, September/October 2005 (Vol. 85, #1, p. 27-29), no e-link available

8. The Power of Good Children’s Books

Minnesota elementary principal Cheryl Bjerk gives two strong messages to her students about reading:

- “Reading is like eating. You must read every day to build a strong and healthy brain.”
- “Reading for pleasure is the greatest gift you can give yourself.”

Bjerk also believes that the heroes and heroines in children’s books often exemplify twelve life skills she considers essential for children’s development:

- Respect
- Responsibility

- Cooperation
- Integrity
- Effort
- Perseverance
- Patience
- Good judgment
- Organization
- Problem-solving
- Initiative
- Caring

“Heroes and Heroines: Finding Role Models in Books” by Cheryl Bjerck in *Principal*, September/October 2005 (Vol. 85, #1, p. 58), no e-link available

9. Hats, Pencils and Eating in Classrooms: Are These the Real Issues?

In this thoughtful essay, New Hampshire professor Laura Thomas captures the endless debates among teachers and administrators about students wearing hats, eating in class, and not having a pencil:

- “Why do we have this rule if we’re just going to ignore it?”
- “It’s just a matter of common courtesy.”
- “I don’t care what the rule is, I’m not going to waste time on a hat.”
- “I’m going to fail him if he shows up without a pencil again.”
- “The administration needs to clamp down on this.”
- “If a kid is hungry, how can she learn?”

Thomas suggests that these trivial squabbles prevent educators from getting down to the real issues. “Our deepest fear,” she says, quoting writer Marianne Williamson, “is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.” Keeping the conversation on small things keeps us safe, she says. “We spend our time and energy on things that are seemingly simple (to eat or not to eat?) leaving the bigger issues for later... What if we have the answers in us and are just too afraid to look for them? What if we really are powerful beyond measure? What if we’re letting our fear keep us from doing that which we absolutely must do – and should have done years ago?”

“The Fork Debate” by Laura Thomas in *Education Week*, August 10, 2005 (Vol. 24, #44, p. 39) <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2005/08/10/44thomas.h24.html>

10. Short Items:

a. Million Father March – The Black Star Project is sponsoring a “Million Father March” in which African-American fathers and other men are urged to take their children, relatives, or other youth to school on the first day of the 2005-06 school

year. For extensive information on this project, including the cities already registered to participate, go to: <http://www.blackstarproject.org/wp/index.php?p=35>

Spotted in *PEN Weekly NewsBlast*, July 29, 2005

b. Beginning-of-the-year activities to help students get to know each other – At the start of the school year, all teachers face the challenge of creating a sense of community in their classrooms. The ReadWriteThink website has gathered 750 peer-reviewed lessons plans aimed at stimulating positive interaction among students. Here is a sampling:

- *It's Too Loud in Here! Teamwork in the Classroom* (grades K-2) by Jennifer Reed in Arlington, Texas:

http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=218

- *Building Classroom Community Through Exploration of Acrostic Poetry* (grades 3-5) by Sarah Dennis of Brockton, Massachusetts:

http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=807

- *Exploring and Sharing Family Stories* (grades 6-8) by Kristina McLaughlin of East Palestine, Ohio:

http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=805

- *The Pros and Cons of Discussion* (grades 9-12) by Karen Luchner of Palm Beach Gardens, Florida:

http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=819

For additional lesson plans, see <http://www.readwritethink.org>

“Creating Classroom Communities” in *Reading Today*, August/September 2005 (Vol. 23, #1, p. 40), no e-link available

c. Minimal conditions for school success – In this *Education Week* commentary article, John Moir bemoans the dismal conditions in a Santa Cruz school in which he’s mentoring a teacher and sets forth what he believes are the minimal requirements for teacher and student success. It’s striking that all of these can be directly affected by most principals:

- Dedicated time for teachers to plan and collaborate with colleagues;
- Suitable resources and an inviting work environment;
- Meaningful professional development;
- Frequent opportunities for teachers to take on decision-making responsibilities and school leadership roles.

“The Culture of Scarcity” by John Moir in *Education Week*, July 27, 2005 (Vol. 24, #43, p. 40-41) <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2005/07/27/43moir.h24.html>

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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, provide 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).

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- 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
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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.