Marshall Memo 79

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
March 21, 2005

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Contrary to popular belief, we do not learn from experience, only from reflecting on experience. [A]ny group that is too busy to reflect is too busy to improve."
Robert Garmstom in *Journal of Staff Development*, Spring 2005 (Vol. 26, #2, p. 66)

"What is it we want students to learn?
How will we know if they've learned it?
What will we do when they don't learn it?"
Richard DuFour (quoted in *Journal of Staff Development*, Spring 2005, p. 18)

"If we allow students to fail, some will. The only way to ensure that all students succeed, therefore, is to remove failure as an option."
Dick Corbett, Bruce Wilson, and Belinda Williams (see item #1)

"You need to push that boy! He was reading beyond that level at the end of last year. He's just playing possum!"
One teacher to another in a literacy team meeting (see item #4)

"[T]he language of complaint, dependency, and resignation when regularly used by leaders can deaden the human spirit, infect others, and lead to organizational atrophy. Conversely, language that expresses commitment, integrity, and accountability energizes and sustains productive actions."
Dennis Sparks in *Results*, March 2005 (p. 2)

"I have found that when negative people don't get the support that they need to keep pushing their negative issues, they have two choices: to become positive or to leave."
Armando Aguirre, a middle-school principal in El Paso (*Educational Leadership*, March 2005, Vol. 62, #6, p. 16)

"If a student goes to a low-performing elementary school and then a low-performing middle school, they won't have history until they're 15 or 16."
Nancy McTygue (see item #8)

1. Giving Students No Choice but to Succeed

This article in *Educational Leadership* reports on a three-year study of two urban school districts. The researchers describe some teachers who do not take responsibility for student learning; they feel they are working against insurmountable obstacles and blame students for not being motivated, not holding up their end of the bargain. One teacher is quoted as saying:

> My job is to teach. My job stops at 3:00. It is their responsibility from 3:00 until 8:30 the next morning. Today I threw some homework in the trash that had no names on it. I have been telling them all year long that they need to put their name on it. I finally drew the line and told them they would get a zero for today's homework assignment. It is my job to pass on information, but it is their job to do homework. There is only so much I can do. I can't knock on the door of their home and ask if they are reading. My job is to set clear consequences for their actions."

Other teachers in this category blame neglectful parents, saying that many students who start out eager to learn lose their motivation because their parents don't care. These teachers basically demand reciprocity from students and parents and are not surprised when they don't get it. They regard other teachers who refuse to accept student failure as unrealistic.

The researchers interviewed some of these "unrealistic" teachers and concluded that it wasn't primarily their teaching methods that made them more effective. A number of other teachers in these schools used cooperative groups and hands-on activities, activated prior knowledge, checked for understanding, etc. Good teaching methods, the researchers concluded, were *necessary but not sufficient*. The key difference lay in the "unrealistic" teachers' belief that student learning results were their personal responsibility. They refused to let students fail, saying, in effect: "If we allow students to fail, some will. The only way to ensure that all students succeed, therefore, is to remove failure as an option."

Mrs. Franklin, one of the teachers profiled, had this to say about her students and the role of expectations:

> We don't have any kids who cannot do it. They have been allowed to get away with it. I believe they will perform well if they know I am concerned about what they do. I do think we have a group that

> someone has given up on. It is real easy to not expect much. That bothers me. We've given them an excuse to not do well… Kids aren't the problem; adults are the ones finding the excuses.

In Mrs. Franklin's classroom, any grade lower than a *C* has to be done over. (Two of the most effective schools in the study took this a step further: any work below a *B* was marked incomplete and had to be re-done until the student earned a *B* or an *A*.) When Mrs. Franklin poses a question to her class, she waits until every hand is raised and then randomly calls on a student to make sure everyone "got" what she was teaching. She cajoles, teases, berates, and praises her students to better achievement. "I just don't accept mediocrity," she said. "The world is too demanding, too competitive."

"No Choice But Success" by Dick Corbett, Bruce Wilson, and Belinda Williams in *Educational Leadership*, March 2005 (Vol. 62, #6, p. 8-12)
http://www.ascd.org/portal/site/ascd/template.MAXIMIZE/menuitem.459dee008f99653fb85516f762108a0c/?javax.portlet.tpst=d5b9c0fa1a493266805516f762108a0c_ws_MX&javax.portlet.prp_d5b9c0fa1a493266805516f762108a0c_journaltypeheaderimage=%2FASCD%2Fimages%2Fmultifiles%2Fpublications%2Felmast.gif&javax.portlet.prp_d5b9c0fa1a493266805516f762108a0c_viewID=article_view&javax.portlet.prp_d5b9c0fa1a493266805516f762108a0c_journalmoid=ebc379a96e962010VgnVCM1000003d01a8c0RCRD&javax.portlet.prp_d5b9c0fa1a493266805516f762108a0c_articlemoid=44f379a96e962010VgnVCM1000003d01a8c0RCRD&javax.portlet.prp_d5b9c0fa1a493266805516f762108a0c_journalTypePersonalization=ASCD_EL&javax.portlet.begCacheTok=token&javax.portlet.endCacheTok=token

2. How a Kansas High School Responded to Disappointing Results

Teachers in Blue Valley High School in suburban Kansas were shocked when they realized that more than 40 percent of their students had received at least one D or F as a final course grade in 1997-98. "We had never looked at that before," said math department chair Karen Nixon. "It was appalling. We were just so shocked." Other data showed that students were learning less than teachers assumed as they moved through the high school; in fact, many were actually regressing.

Teachers were stung and decided they had to do something. Led by their principal, Dennis King, teachers committed themselves to a new vision for the school: (a) the school would be about *learning*, not just teaching; (b) collaboration among teachers would be central; (c) they would pay more attention to data; and (d) all students would achieve at the proficient level on the Kansas State Assessment in math and reading by June 2011.

King said that once the staff had committed to this vision, "everything else pretty much fell into place." He convened a leadership team and shared the work of Richard DuFour on professional learning communities. Several teachers visited Adlai Stevenson High School outside Chicago, where DuFour was principal and

superintendent for many years. The leadership team crafted a schedule that allowed the math, English, science, and social studies department teams to meet for 40 minutes a week. (After a year, this time was expanded to 55 minutes a week starting at 7:30 every Thursday morning.) "That time is held sacred and everyone knows it," said one of the department chairs.

In the team meetings, teachers began to collaborate on drafting common quizzes and common semester exams. "We used to shout at each other as we walked down the hall, 'Are you in Chapter 4 yet?' We don't do that any more," said Nixon. "There's a lot of trust now because we know what is said in there stays in there." Initially the team meetings dealt with learning problems after the fact ("My kids really bombed on this and I don't know what went wrong."). But as teachers worked together over time, they began to design interventions to tackle learning problems before they developed. "There was a shift where [teachers] became more interested in doing it better in the first place so (students) were successful rather than having to rework something later," said another department chair.

Next, teams began to set SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Results-oriented, Time-bound) for each year. For example, one of the math department's goals was to reduce the number of zeroes on assignments to less than one percent. After two years of working toward that goal, teachers had driven the number of zeroes down to 3 percent.

Over six years, the school made significant progress toward its 2011 goal. The number of D's and F's was cut in half, the percent of students performing at the lowest levels on the statewide assessments in math and reading went down, and the percent scoring proficient and above and student performance on the ACT both improved.

Dennis King, who is now director of school improvement for the Blue Valley district, has these pointers for schools trying to make similar gains in student achievement:

- Maintain a constant focus on school improvement.
- Create a leadership team within the school.
- Create time within the school day to meet on school improvement.
- Develop a belief that everyone working together can make a difference for each student in the school.
- Confront individuals who are not working towards the school's mission and vision.

• "Persist, persist, persist. Maintain the vision created by the staff."

"Up Close and Personal: Data Review Creates an 'Aha' Moment for Suburban Teachers" by Joan Richardson in *Results* (from the National Staff Development Council), March 2005, no e-link available

3. Keys to Encouraging Teacher Leaders

New Jersey-based consultant and author Charlotte Danielson tells the story of a second-grade teacher who became interested in "looping" (keeping the same students for more than one year), researched the topic with several colleagues, proposed the idea to the principal, and won approval to begin looping the following year. Danielson says this kind of grass-roots teacher leadership can form the backbone of a school. This is especially significant when we consider that the average tenure for a principal in a school is 3-5 years, while many teachers stay for 20 to 30 years.

Effective teacher leaders establish credibility within their schools and become the "go-to" person on a particular issue, but many of them are uninterested in taking on a formal leadership role. This is what makes teacher leadership distinct from delegated, shared, or "distributed" leadership; it is spontaneous, unofficial, fluid, and evanescent; a teacher leader might choose to exercise leadership one year but not the next.

Danielson suggests a number of way that principals, staff developers, and coaches can encourage teacher leaders to blossom and enhance their long-range influence on a school's culture and instructional effectiveness:

• *Focus everyone on student learning results.* Principals should establish and maintain a professional culture of inquiry and insist that teachers examine student achievement data and adjust instruction accordingly.

• *Promote teacher collaboration.* In many schools, teachers work in isolation from one another. Principals, coaches, and staff developers play a vital role in getting teachers to work in teams and develop the skills of active listening, valuing others' ideas, and synthesizing diverse contributions.

• *Show confidence in budding teacher leaders.* Some potential leaders are not accustomed to taking the initiative and lack confidence in their ideas. They need encouragement and recognition from administrators and coaches if they are to take on an informal leadership role.

• *Clarify ideas and plan a strategy.* A budding teacher leader may come forward with a partially-formed idea or one that is off target in certain respects. Principals,

coaches, and staff developers can play a vital role by helping to hone or redirect the idea, grease the skids for it to gain acceptance within the school, and communicate it to others so the idea can bear fruit.

• *Rally support from "downtown."* If a suggestion from a teacher leader needs support from the district office, the principal is a key liaison in getting the OK; if money is needed, the principal usually knows where the bucks are.

• *Locate additional resources.* The principal can help to make connections to business or parent groups that might be helpful to a teacher leader.

• *Support the innovation in public.* The principal can bring important weight to bear when selling an idea to parents and the general public.

"Strengthening the School's Backbone" by Charlotte Danielson in *Journal of Staff Developmen*t, Spring 2005 (Vol. 26, #2, p. 34-37), no e-link available

4. Tips for Instructional Coaches

In this article, a group of Illinois literacy experts suggests six strategies for instructional coaches who work with teachers:

• *Establish your credentials.* It's essential that teachers see coaches as capable, hardworking, generous, and able work with "our kids."

• *Make student learning results the focus.* Some teachers have a negative reaction to coaches at first ("Oh, so you're here to 'fix' our teaching again."). A good way to counteract this is to focus on student results ("No, we're here to see how we can work together to improve student reading achievement."). After this exchange, which actually happened in a school, the team and coach set up twice-a-month meetings to look at students' reading progress. Results became the focus of this coaching relationship and teachers constantly discussed where students were "at" and what was working to move them ahead – and what wasn't. At one point, a teacher who had known a student the year before said to a colleague, "You need to push that boy! He was reading beyond that level at the end of last year. He's just playing possum!"

• *Connect to current practice.* In other words, avoid the "Christmas tree effect" of loading new, faddish programs onto what teachers are already being asked to do.

• *Choose generative practices.* That is, pick classroom strategies that are most likely to raise student achievement – for example, zeroing in on reading fluency and identifying best practices in that area.

• *Use a repertoire of coaching strategies.* Among the options: (a) being a strategy coach (modeling an approach and helping the teacher try it); (b) a guide on the side

(observing a new strategy in action while helping antsy students be successful); (c) an observation aide (the teacher observes the coach teaching and notes positive and critical points); and (d) a grouping coach (helping to set up student learning activities during guided reading, such as Read with Partner, Read Alone, Work at Writing Center, Work at Reading Center, Work at Listening Center, etc.).

• *Video, video, video.* A common reaction to new ideas is, "Sure, that's a great idea. But it won't work with *our* kids!" Videotapes of classrooms with similar students that are successfully using new practices can have great credibility with teachers – and the videos don't need to be polished, professional productions. In fact, if a video contains glitches, it may be more credible and winning.

"Literacy Coaching for Change" by Camille Blachowicz, Connie Obrochta, and Ellen Fogelberg in *Educational Leadership*, Mar. 2005 (Vol. 62, #6, p. 55-58), no e-link available

5. Achieving Synergy in a School

In a sidebar within a longer article, California administrator Suzette Lovely gives her views on how principals can get their staffs energized. "Capacity-building leaders," she says, "work to make the strengths of employees productive and their weaknesses inconsequential." Lovely has found that small grade-level interdisciplinary groups are an ideal venue for leaders to help teachers examine complex issues, ask hard questions, and grow as professionals. "Without in-depth probing and dialogue," she says, "weaknesses are camouflaged, mistakes are covered up, and assumptions rule the day." To get the most out of teachers and prevent them from "roaming their campuses as free agents," she believes that leaders must:

• *Use "us" language.* "Rather than I, my, and them," says Lovely, "use language like us, we, and our. Talk about 'our' staff, not 'my' staff, and 'It's up to us to make this better,' not 'up to them.'"

• *It's not a choice.* "Don't let collaboration be an option," she recommends. "Confront individuals who don't adhere to the commitments endorsed by the team by asking, 'How is your refusal to work/collaborate with Ms. XYZ helping Johnny's learning?'"

• *Layer the learning.* Introduce new information in bite-size pieces so teachers don't feel overwhelmed.

• *Provide substance for team meetings.* Lovely recommends that principals ask teams to read and reflect on a journal article, react to assessment data or student work, or address a school issue, sometimes reporting back to the entire faculty.

• *Dare to delegate.* It's essential that the principal hands off duties to others. "Asking subordinates to get involved in decisions and projects raises the bar on their level of commitment toward the institution."

• *Promote social interaction.* Get-togethers outside the school setting help staff members get to know each other on a personal level. "When people like each other, they perform better together."

• *Spotlight success.* Teams and individuals need and deserve recognition for their successes.

"Making the Leap to Shared Leadership" by Suzette Lovely in *Journal of Staff Development*, Spring 2005 (Vol. 26, #2, p. 16-21), no e-link available

6. A Teacher Tries to Dislodge Students' Stubborn Misconceptions

This article describes how Debbie Cobb, a Houston high-school teacher, addressed her students' (very common) misconceptions about light and vision. She asked students to draw a diagram with a light source, an apple, and an eye and explain how the eye could see the apple. About half the students said that light hit the apple, reflected off it to the eye, and made it possible for the eye to perceive the apple. Almost as many students said that something called sight went out from the eye in a straight line and when that line of sight and the light both hit the apple, the eye would see the apple. A third group of students felt that light wasn't really necessary: if the person waited long enough, seeing would occur.

Cobb grouped her students according to the theory they espoused and asked them to produce evidence that would convince the other groups to give up their theories. Students worked for several *weeks*, creating ingenious experiments, blacking out the room, and debating back and forth. But even after all this time, the correct theory did not emerge as the unanimous choice. Cobb finally explained the functioning of light receptors in the retina, but some students still stubbornly refused to give up their belief in the "line of sight" theory. However, on the final exam, these students gave the "right" answer, indicating that although they didn't really believe it, they realized that light bouncing off the apple to the eye was the mainstream scientific view.

"Science Teachers, Under Construction" by Elnora Harcombe in *Educational Leadership,* March 2005 (Vol. 62, #6, p. 50-54), no e-link available

7. Improving Students' Memory of What's Taught

In this article, a California middle-school teacher sums up the research on improving students' retention of what is presented in class. Here are her pointers:

• *Increase relational memory connections*. The more students personalize what they are learning and relate it to their prior knowledge and experience, the more likely they are to retain it.

• *Show how material is organized*. Retrieval of information is increased when students understand how it is organized; they remember even better if they create the categories themselves.

• *Have students move around*. Memory is helped by physical movement every 15 minutes or so (even if it's just standing up), and seeing things from a different physical perspective also helps – as does drinking water.

• *Take brain breaks*. Without these, memory efficiency drops rapidly. Here are some possibilities (all of which also liven up blocks of learning time):

- Have students fold a piece of paper into four sections at the beginning of class. After every 15 minutes of lecture of discussion, have students "think, connect, write" about something they have learned so far that they feel is important, valuable, interesting, or applicable. Students could also be asked what the new material reminds them of or what they would like to learn more about.
- Have students make a prediction about what will come next or write what they might do differently based on what they have just learned, or what strategy might work for them to learn this material.
- Have students get into pairs and reflect, first silently, then with their partner, on what they saw, heard, or learned that was difficult.
- Ask students to reflect on "Why might this information be useful or important to you or to historians, writers, scientists, or mathematicians in the future?"

• *Increase students' sleep time*. Recent memories are transferred to long-term memory during REM (rapid eye movement) sleep, and kids need lots of it.

• *Chunk the data*. The brain can only hold 5-9 unrelated items in short-term memory, so putting information into groups of 3 or 4 (like phone numbers and social security numbers) is helpful.

• *Review*. Once information has been learned, teachers should use multiple forms of review spaced over time to make sure the memories don't decay.

"Sharpen Kids' Memory to Raise Test Scores" by Judy Willis in *Education Digest*, March 2005 (Vol. 70, #7, p. 20-24), no e-link available

8. Arguments for Keeping Social Studies in the Curriculum

This front-page article in *Education Week* describes a national trend to de-emphasize social studies in the curriculum. Despite the fact that the No Child Left Behind Act considers social studies a core academic subject that is vital to being a well-rounded student, it is rarely tested, and schools tend to focus on the high-stakes subjects – reading and math.

The impact of this curriculum shift may fall more heavily on school districts with low student achievement. Nancy McTygue, head of the California Social Studies Project, says, "Low-performing schools have dropped history, choosing instead to have a three-hour block to teach a scripted reading program, in addition to two hours of math and required [physical education] classes. If a student goes to a low-performing elementary school and then a low-performing middle school, they won't have history until they're 15 or 16, and all they'll have is 20th-century history."

Isn't emphasizing reading and math the best strategy for students who are way behind? Not so, say social studies advocates, and they make two arguments.

- First, trimming social studies will end up hurting students' achievement in reading. E.D. Hirsch, Jr., the head of the Core Knowledge Foundation, bemoans the excising of history, science, and the arts. "This is a futile strategy," he says, "since reading achievement depends on broad knowledge of [these subjects]."
- Second, social studies is vital to building students' knowledge and appreciation of the roots of American democracy and preparing them to become empowered and active citizens. "No one can dispute the importance of literacy and math," says Nancy McFarland, a St. Louis-based consultant, "but literacy is something that all societies promote, even totalitarian societies. There are just more things that are important [educational mandates] in a democratic society."

"Social Studies Losing Out to Reading, Math" by Kathleen Kennedy Manzo in *Education Week*, March 16, 2005 (Vol. 24, #27, p. 1, 16, 17)
http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2005/03/16/27social.h24.html

9. Short Items:

a. How one principal gets feedback – In this article, St. Louis principal Thomas Hoerr describes the way he gets input on his work every year:

- "*Breakfast with Tom*" – Several times a year he invites teachers to an informal feedback session over doughnuts and coffee; the agenda is theirs.

- *Single-word feedback* – Every few months in his weekly parent letter, Hoerr asks parents to sum up their feelings about the school in a single adjective. On more than one occasion, a parent's use of a negative adjective alerted the principal to a problem that he was able to address before it became serious.
- *Faculty survey* – Every spring, Hoerr asks teachers what he should *start*, what he should *stop*, and what he should *continue*.
- *Parent survey* – Every spring, he surveys parents on (a) their opinions on the school's strengths and weaknesses; (b) whether or not they believe their children's individual needs are being met; (c) their opinions about Portfolio Night and parent-teacher conferences; and (d) whether the principal has been supportive.
- *360-degree evaluation* – Every few years, Hoerr works with an outside consulting company to get confidential feedback from teachers, parents, and board members on a broad range of issues.

"Perception Is Reality" by Thomas Hoerr in *Educational Leadership*, March 2005 (Vol. 62, #6, p. 82-82), no e-link available

b. Three leadership stories – In an interview in the *Journal of Staff Development*, leadership expert Noel Tichy (who is doing extensive work with New York City's Leadership Academy) says he is much taken by an idea put forward by Howard Gardner several years ago. Gardner observed that great leaders galvanize their followers by telling three stories:

- *Who I am* – "Leadership, in my view, is autobiographical," says Tichy. "Who we are as leaders comes from the ups and downs of our life experience, not the books we have read or the courses we have taken. When people look back at what shaped them, inevitably it is the tough times. Really good leaders learn from those experiences."
- *Who we are* – It is essential for the leader to give the group a sense of identity and purpose, a sense of what its story is.
- *Where we are going and how we'll get there* – Good leaders show people a "story board" for the future of the organization.

According to Tichy, the leader needs to be able tell all three stories, to show the alignment between them, and to get others to sign up and mobilize around them. When he works with leaders in a workshop, Tichy has participants practice telling the

three stories for their school in under five minutes – and videotapes them. "People don't think in PowerPoint," he says, "they think in and remember stories."

"Explain, Inspire, Lead" an interview with Noel Tichy by Dennis Sparks in *Journal of Staff Development*, Spring 2005 (Vol. 26, #2, p. 50-53), no e-link available

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).

Subscriptions:

Individual subscriptions are $50 for the school year ($25 for a half-year, beginning late January). 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:

If you go to http://www.marshallmemo.com you will find detailed information on:

- How to subscribe or renew
- Why the Marshall Memo?
- Focus topics
- Headlines for issues 1-68
- What readers say
- About Kim Marshall
- A free sample issue

Subscribers have access to the Members' Area of the website, which has:

- The current issue (in PDF or Word format)
- All back issues (also in PDF or Word)
- A database of all articles to date, searchable by topic, article headline, source, article title, author, and level
- 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
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
Teachers College Record
Teacher Magazine

E-links will be provided whenever possible.