Marshall Memo 441

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
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Quotes of the Week

"Get control over the timing and content of what you do."
William Oncken and Donald Wass (see item #1)

"If you just keep bringing in a new agenda every two or three years, you will be mediocre, period."
Jim Collins (quoted in item #2)

"There is no such thing as doing the nuts and bolts of reading in kindergarten through fifth grade without coherently developing knowledge in science, and history, and the arts… It is the deep foundation in rich knowledge and vocabulary depth that allows you to access more complex text."
David Coleman, principal author of the Common Core standards (quoted in item #6)

"These studies help explain why teens behave with such vexing inconsistency: beguiling at breakfast, disgusting at dinner; masterful on Monday, sleepwalking on Saturday."
David Dobbs (see item #4)

"In scientific terms, teenagers can be a pain in the ass. But they are quite possibly the most fully, crucially adaptive human beings around. Without them, humanity might not have so readily spread across the globe."
David Dobbs (*ibid.*)

"How does an institutional culture arise to condone, or at least ignore, something that, individually, every member knows is wrong?"
Amos Kamil (see item 3)

1. Managers: Get the Monkey Off Your Back! (an oldie but goodie article)

In this classic 1974 *Harvard Business Review* article, management consultants William Oncken, Jr. and Donald Wass use the monkey-on-the-back metaphor to discuss delegation. They start by delineating three types of work:

- Boss-imposed – A manager can't ignore these tasks without immediate consequences.
- System-imposed – These must be accomplished, but the penalties for not doing them are less direct and swift.
- Self-imposed – Some of these are discretionary, but some are imposed by subordinates.

The manager's goal, say Oncken and Wass, is to minimize or eliminate subordinate-imposed work, get control of boss- and system-imposed work, and maximize discretionary time.

The big problem, however, is that subordinates have a way of giving you work. "Most managers spend much more subordinate-imposed time than they even faintly realize," say the authors. How does this happen? A manager is walking along a corridor and encounters a subordinate. "Good morning," says the underling. "By the way, we've got a problem. You see…" The manager quickly realizes two things: he knows enough to get involved, but doesn't know enough to solve the problem on the spot. "So glad you brought this up," he says. "I'm in a rush right now. Meanwhile, let me think about it and I'll let you know."

What just happened? Before this encounter, the monkey (the problem) was on the subordinate's back. When the subordinate said, "We've got a problem," the monkey was astride both backs. After the encounter, it was on the manager's back. "Subordinate-imposed time begins the moment a monkey successfully executes a leap from the back of a subordinate to the back of his superior," say Oncken and Wass, "and does not end until the monkey is returned to its proper owner for care and feeding. In accepting the monkey, the manager has voluntarily assumed a position subordinate to his subordinate… [T]he manager has accepted a responsibility from his subordinate, and the manager has promised him a progress report. The subordinate, to make sure the manager does not miss the point, will later stick his head in the manager's office and cheerily query, 'How's it coming?' (This is called 'supervision.')"

In this and countless other interactions, the monkey starts as a joint problem but quickly ends up on the manager's back. Pretty soon the manager is overwhelmed by subordinate-imposed tasks that require follow-up, develops a reputation as a bottleneck, takes weeks to get to things, gets stressed-out, makes his family unhappy by working all weekend, and leaves subordinates spinning their wheels waiting for direction. "Worst of all," say Oncken and Wass, "the reason the manager cannot make any of these 'next moves' is that his time is almost

entirely eaten up in meeting his own boss-imposed and system-imposed requirements. To get control of these, he needs discretionary time that is in turn denied him when he is preoccupied with all these monkeys. The manager is caught in a vicious cycle."

A wise manager, say Oncken and Wass, will call each subordinate in, put the monkey on the table between them, "and figure out together how the next move might conceivably be the subordinate's. For certain monkeys, this will take some doing. The subordinate's next move may be so elusive that the manager may decide – just for now – merely to let the monkey sleep on the subordinate's back overnight and have him return with it at an appointed time the next morning to continue the joint quest for a more substantive move by the subordinate. (Monkeys sleep just as soundly overnight on subordinates' backs as on superiors.')" But most subordinates will leave the manager's office with monkey firmly on their backs and a deadline to produce an answer. The manager might use some of his new-found discretionary time strolling around, sticking his head into people's offices asking, "How's it coming?"

When the deadlines arrive and subordinates are in the manager's office, say Oncken and Wass, he needs to explain the ground rules: "At no time while I am helping you with this or any other problem will your problem become my problem. The instant your problem becomes mine, you will no longer have a problem. I cannot help a man who hasn't got a problem. When this meeting is over, the problem will leave this office exactly the way it came in – on your back. You may ask my help at any appointed time, and we will make a joint determination of what the next move will be and which of us will make it. In those rare instances where the next move turns out to be mine, you and I will determine it together. I will not make any move alone."

The point, say the authors, is to develop *initiative* in subordinates. They won't take it until they *have* it. If the manager has all those monkeys on his back, "he can kiss his discretionary time good-bye." Here are the five degrees of initiative that people can exercise in an organization, from the lowest to the highest:

- Wait to be told what to do.
- Ask what to do.
- Recommend, then take appropriate action.
- Act, but advise at once.
- Act on one's own, then routinely report.

People working at the lowest levels have no control over their time. Those working at the third, fourth, and fifth levels can increasingly manage their own time. "The manager's job, in relation to his subordinate's initiatives, is twofold," say Oncken and Wass. "First, to outlaw the use of initiatives 1 and 2, thus giving his subordinates no choice but to learn and master 'Completed staff work'; then, to see that for each problem leaving his office there is an agree-upon level of initiative assigned to it, in addition to the agreed-upon time and place of the next manager-subordinate conference."

Oncken and Wass conclude with five hard-and-fast rules on the care and feeding of monkeys:

- "Monkeys should be fed or shot. Otherwise, they will starve to death and the manager will waste valuable time on postmortems or attempted resurrections.
- "The monkey population should be kept below the maximum number the manager has time to feed… It shouldn't take more than 5 to 15 minutes to feed a properly prepared monkey.
- "Monkeys should be fed by appointment only. The manager should not have to be hunting down starving monkeys and feeding them on a catch-as-catch-can basis.
- "Monkeys should be fed face to face or by telephone, but never by mail… Documentation may add to the feeding process, but it cannot take the place of feeding.
- "Every monkey should have an assigned 'next feeding time' and 'degree of initiative.'" These should never be vague or indefinite.

"Get control over the timing and content of what you do," conclude Oncken and Wass. Eliminate subordinate-imposed time. Use the new-found discretionary time to see to it that subordinates take the initiative. And then get control over boss-imposed and system-imposed work. "The result of all this is that the manager will increase his leverage, which will in turn enable him to multiply, without theoretical limit, the value of each hour that he spends in managing management time."

"Management Time: Who's Got the Monkey?" by William Oncken, Jr. and Donald Wass in *Harvard Business Review*, November/December 1974 (Vol. 52, #6, p. 75-80), no e-link

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2. Jim Collins on Successful Leadership in Tough Times

In this *School Administrator* interview with Dan Domenech, business author Jim Collins (*Good to Great*) describes several distinctive behaviors that effective leaders exhibit:

• *Fanatic discipline* – Looking at high-poverty Arizona schools that beat the odds with their predominantly Latino students, Collins found that the principals had what he called a 20-mile march philosophy. The trick to walking across the United States, he says, is consistently walking 20 miles a day, rather than doing 50 one day and zero the next. "There were going to be good conditions and bad conditions and good funding and bad funding and large class size and small class size and difficult student populations and not-difficult student populations," he says. "But we still have the 20-mile march on student achievement, and we hold ourselves accountable for that no matter what the weather conditions might be."

A characteristic of mediocrity, says Collins, is "chronic inconsistency." The high-performing schools he studied didn't keep changing their approach. "Rather, they picked a good program and then marched with fanatic, consistent, relentless discipline to improve performance," he says. "Over time, through this consistency, they produced great results… If you just keep bringing in a new agenda every two or three years, you will be mediocre, period."

• *Humility* – Collins has found that most successful leaders are humble. This is especially true in public-sector jobs where the person in charge doesn't have the power to get things done unilaterally and leadership consists of getting people to follow when they don't

necessarily have to follow. "It is humility defined as channeling your ego and your ambition and your drive and your creativity into something that is bigger than you, more important than you," he says. "So a true Level 5 leader would say, 'It is not about me, it is about the schools. It is not about me, it is about how we produce young people who are able to get into the world and contribute and lead.'" Leaders have to really mean that, be willing to put students ahead of their own success – and this usually works because most people will follow someone who is authentically into the mission.

• *Succession planning* – Superintendents need to plan for their eventual departure, says Collins. He believes the best way to ensure future success is to have first-rate principals in schools. They are the real front-line leaders of a school district.

• *Empirical creativity* – If you're going to bet your success and your career on something, says Collins, make sure it will work. That means testing it out in small trials before making a full commitment. "We talk about how you fire bullets before you fire cannonballs," he says. "You fire bullets to get calibrated, *then* you fire the cannonball. My observation of a lot of reform, not just in education but other arenas, as well, is that people like to fire big cannonballs before they've empirically validated them with bullets." In an uncertain environment with negative forces hitting us from all sides, the key to success is finding the empirically-validated strategies and then pursuing then with a dogged, 20-mile-a-day mindset.

• *Productive paranoia* – Collins is an avid rock-climber, and he's learned a leadership lesson from that: fear "the really big things that could kill you, the really big things that could end the game," he says. "Because the only mistakes you can learn from are the ones that you survive. So you always have to know the line that, if crossed, you'd never have a chance to come back and learn from that mistake."

"One big lesson from this work is that almost everyone faces big forces and uncertainties out of their control," concludes Collins. "But the leaders who do really well say that's never an excuse. That's never an acceptable excuse for failing to deliver and get great results."

"Jim Collins on Mediocrity and the Benefits of Paranoia" in *School Administrator*, June 2012 (Vol. 6, #69, p. 40-43), http://aasa.org/content.aspx?id=23588

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3. Sexual Abuse at an Elite Private School

In this deeply disturbing article in *The New York Times Magazine*, Amos Kamil reveals a long-buried history of sexual abuse at Horace Mann, an elite private school in New York City that he attended from 1979-1982. Kamil names and prints photographs of three teachers, now dead, who allegedly preyed on young adolescent boys.

When he arrived at Horace Mann in 1979, a new friend warned Kamil to watch out for certain teachers. "What do you mean? Like, they're hard graders?" asked Kamil. "No," came the reply. "Perverts. Stay away from them. Trust me." There were even rumors that the headmaster, a charismatic leader who was a confirmed bachelor, might have a then-taboo relationship with one of the questionable teachers.

"It was juicy gossip, of course" says Kamil, looking back, "but not all that different from what already swirls around the minds of sex-obsessed high-school students. Certainly it wasn't that different from what swirled around the hallways of typically homophobic high schools at the time, when anyone who was a bit different was suspected of being gay and any teacher who was gay was suspected of being a pedophile."

The truth about what was going on at Horace Mann began to emerge ten years after Kamil graduated, on a camping trip with some of his former schoolmates. Sitting around a campfire, one of them suddenly revealed that he had been sexually assaulted by a Horace Mann teacher. Others around the fire spoke up, and Kamil remembered an incident in his senior year when the headmaster and the teacher he was rumored to be close to took Kamil, his 12-year-old brother, and another boy out for dinner at a local restaurant and plied them with gin and tonics. The boys got a creepy feeling and fled the minute dinner was over.

Kamil came back from the camping trip and got on with his life. Then, twenty years later, the Penn State abuse scandal exploded and got him thinking about Horace Mann again: "How does an institutional culture arise to condone, or at least ignore, something that, individually, every member knows is wrong?" The campfire disclosures came back to him in a rush. "The questions of Penn State, I realized, are the questions of Horace Mann and perhaps every place that has been haunted by a similar history."

Kamil called one of his former schoolmates, and he also had been thinking about Penn State and Horace Mann. Kamil began months of reporting, tracking down leads and interviewing former students, most of whom insisted on remaining anonymous. One after another described sordid details of how certain teachers groomed and then sexually abused them. Victims who kept everything secret were still living in the shadow of actions that took place 30-40 years ago. "I spent decades feeling unlovable," said one. "I drank and drugged for many years, because I just couldn't face all the anger it brought up."

A small number of former students remembered that they or their parents had complained to Horace Mann authorities as soon as the abuse began. In one case the teacher in question "disappeared" almost immediately (with no public discussion or admission of wrongdoing). The students who spoke up suffered no psychological damage. But most victims remained silent, fearful that no one would believe them and deeply ambivalent about teachers they had admired and respected.

Faculty members who suspected what was going on kept silent as well, perhaps reflecting the institutional culture, perhaps suspecting complicity in the school's leadership. "They came to work the next day, as they had the day before," says Kamil. "Teachers had strong incentives not to speak: their jobs were on the line, as was the reputation of an institution in which they had invested some degree of their identities. Even today, witnesses with no current ties to the school have reasons not to speak. Those with school-age children worry about damaging their children's chances at Horace Mann or other elite New York schools. Others point to Horace Mann's influence, real or perceived, and what it could do to their careers or social standing."

Why does sexual abuse cause such serious damage, and why don't victims speak up? "The whole goal of the grooming process," says Paul Mones, a lawyer who represents people who have been abused by authority figures, "is to wrap the child close. The affection and trust is to make the kid complicit in the act. Make them feel like it was their fault, so it won't even occur to them to talk… It's counterintuitive, but sexual abuse emotionally binds the child closer to the person who has harmed him, setting him up for a life plagued by suspicion and confusion, because he will never be sure who he can really trust. And in my experience, this is by far the worst consequence of sexual abuse."

This is why victims who speak out often wait until the abuser is dead or on his deathbed. Disclosing the abuse while the perpetrator is still alive raises the terrifying possibility that he might deny it or blame the accuser. And there's often ambivalence. One of the students who was abused by a Horace Mann teacher over a period of years went to this teacher's funeral. "I don't know why I went," he said to Kamil. "Still, today, after the drinking and the heroin and the therapy and the battered relationships, I just can't bring myself to fully hate the man who gave me so much."

The betrayal involved in such abuse is devastating. "We were at such a vulnerable moment in our lives," says Kamil. "– just beginning to make the transition from childhood into early adulthood, struggling to come to terms with the responsibilities of sexuality and trying to decide what we were willing to stand up for. We needed strong and consistent role models. In many cases we got them. But in too many other cases, we got models of how to abuse authority, how to manipulate trust, how to keep silent, how to fix your eyes forward."

Kamil believes the school is in a much better place today, with clear policies on reporting abuse and the promise of swift action and public discussion. In addition, he thinks that 21st-century social-networking technology would immediately surface any concerns at Horace Mann or any other school. "Today, if faculty members disappeared from campus under suspicious circumstances or if rumors were swirling about predatory teachers, students would be texting about it in real time," he says. "Outraged parents would be organizing into networks and distributing action plans. And schools would dispatch counselors to help everyone through their pain."

"Prep School Predators: The Horace Mann School's Secret History of Sexual Abuse" by Amos Kamil in *The New York Times Magazine*, June 6, 2012, http://nyti.ms/Nhpl3F

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4. What's Up With Teenagers?

In this thought-provoking *National Geographic* article, David Dobbs examines the impulsive, supposedly dysfunctional teenage brain through the lens of evolutionary science. He begins by describing the phone conversation he had with his 17-year-old son after he was arrested for driving "a little fast." How fast was that? Dobbs inquired. "Turns out this product of my genes and loving care, the boy-man I had swaddled, coddled, cooed at, and then pushed and pulled to the brink of manhood, had been flying down the highway at 113 miles an hour." The boy was contrite, but he was also upset about being booked for (among other things)

"reckless" driving. "It's just not accurate," he protested. "Reckless sounds like you're not paying attention. But I was. I made a deliberate point of doing this on an empty stretch of dry interstate, in broad daylight, with good sight lines and no traffic. I mean, I wasn't just gunning the thing. I was driving."

What explains this kind of behavior? What are teenagers *thinking*? Complaints about their erratic behavior go back to Aristotle and Shakespeare, but modern brain scans are providing a more complex explanation. As young people move through adolescence, their brains go through an extensive remodeling – basically a network and wiring upgrade. The brain's axons are gradually coated with myelin, boosting their transmission speed up to a hundred times. The dendrites get twiggier and the most heavily-used synapses grow richer and stronger while those that aren't being used wither away. The cortex, where most complicated thinking takes place, becomes thinner and more efficient. The corpus callosum, which connects the two hemispheres, gets progressively thicker, and the hippocampus, which acts as a memory directory, forms more robust connections to other parts of the brain, making it easier for the person to set goals, weigh different options, and integrate memory and experience.

The most intriguing finding is that these physical changes move in a slow wave from the rear of the brain to the front – from the brain stem (which controls vision, movement, and basic processing) to the front, where higher-order thinking takes place.

"When this development proceeds normally," says Dobbs, "we get better at balancing impulse, desire, goals, self-interest, rules, ethics, and even altruism, generating behavior that is more complex and, sometimes at least, more sensible. But at times, and especially at first, the brain does this work clumsily. It's hard to get all those new cogs to mesh… These studies help explain why teens behave with such vexing inconsistency: beguiling at breakfast, disgusting at dinner; masterful on Monday, sleepwalking on Saturday. Along with lacking experience generally, they're still learning to use their brain's new networks… They act that way because their brains aren't done! You can see it right there in the scans!"

But a different theory about the adolescent brain is emerging. Scientists are moving from the "immature brain" model to believing that the teenager is, Dobbs explains, "an exquisitely sensitive, highly adaptable creature wired almost perfectly for the job of moving from the safety of home into the more complicated world outside." This theory is more flattering to teens, and it's also a better fit with Darwin's survival of the fittest – a construct that has no room for dysfunctional traits. "If adolescence is essentially a collection of them – angst, idiocy, and haste; impulsiveness, selfishness, and reckless bumbling – then how did those traits survive selection?" asks Dobbs. "They couldn't – not if they were the period's most fundamental or consequential features."

His point is that these annoying features *aren't* the most fundamental and consequential characteristics of adolescence. They're just the ones that are bugging us. "To see past the distracting, dopey teenager and glimpse the adaptive adolescent within," says Dobbs, "we should look not at specific, sometimes startling, behaviors, such as skateboarding down stairways or dating fast company, but at the broader traits that underlie those acts." Here are four:

• *The love of novelty and excitement* – "Sensation-seeking, the hunt for the neural buzz, the jolt of the unusual or unexpected – these are at their height during the teen years," says Dobbs. Not all of it is impulsive, viz. his son's carefully planned 113-mph drive. Impulsivity drops throughout life, but thrill-seeking soars at 15. Not all of it is dangerous. "The urge to meet more people, for instance, can create a wider circle of friends, which generally makes us healthier, happier, safer, and more successful," says Dobbs. "A love of novelty leads directly to useful experience. More broadly, the hunt for sensation provides the inspiration needed to 'get out of the house' and into new terrain…"

• *Risk-taking* – From unprotected sex to driving too fast to experimenting with alcohol and drugs, high-risk behavior spikes from 15 to 25. One-third of deaths among American teens are from auto accidents, many involving drunkenness. Isn't this the immature brain talking? Not so, say scientists who have carefully studied adolescent thought patterns. It turns out that 14-17-year-olds, the biggest risk-takers, use the same basic cognitive strategies as adults, are fully aware of their mortality, and *overestimate* risks. Teens take more chances than adults because they weigh risks and rewards differently. "In situations where risk can get them something they want, they value the reward more heavily than adults do," says Dobbs. And one of the most powerful payoffs for teens is social – the approval of their peers. This is why there are fewer accidents when a teenager is driving alone. Adolescents' brains are especially sensitive to the neural hormones dopamine and oxytocin, which are associated with pleasure and social connection. "Engage one, and you often engage the other," says Dobbs. "Engage them during adolescence, and you light a fire."

• *Preferring peers* – "Teens prefer the company of those their own age more than ever before or after," he says. This is about the quest for novelty – peers offer much more of this than the family – and also investing in the future rather than the past. "We enter a world made by our parents," he says. "But we will live most of our lives, and prosper (or not) in a world run and remade by our peers. Knowing, understanding, and building relationships with them bears critically on success… This supremely human characteristic makes peer relations not a sideshow but the main show. Some brain-scan studies, in fact, suggest that our brains react to peer exclusion much as they respond to threats to physical health or food supply. At a neural level, in other words, we perceive social rejection as a threat to existence. Knowing this might make it easier to abide the hysteria of a 13-year-old deceived by a friend or the gloom of a 15-year-old not invited to a party."

• *Prolonged plasticity* – The final trait of adolescence revealed by brain research is that the frontal lobes – which control higher-order thinking – are the last to lay down the myelin insulation that increases processing power so dramatically. "At first glance this seems like bad news," says Dobbs: "If we need these areas for the complex tasks of entering the world, why aren't they running at full speed when the challenges are most daunting?" But once the frontal lobes are myelinized, they become less flexible; when the wiring upgrade is finished, it's harder to adapt and change. "This delayed completion – a withholding of readiness – heightens flexibility just as we confront and enter the world we will face as adults," says Dobbs. "This long, slow, back-to-front developmental wave, completed only in the mid-20s, appears to be a

uniquely human adaptation. It may be one of our most consequential. It can seem a bit crazy that we humans don't wise up a bit earlier in life. But if we smartened up sooner, we'd end up dumber."

The desire for excitement, novelty, risk, and the company of peers is dominant among adolescents in virtually all human cultures around the world, and has been, say anthropologists, for thousands of generations. This suggests that the four traits described above evolved for a reason: to help humans leave a safe home and move into uncharted territory. "The move outward from home is the most difficult thing that humans do, as well as the most critical," says Dobbs, "not just for individuals but for a species that has shown an unmatched ability to master challenging new environments. In scientific terms, teenagers can be a pain in the ass. But they are quite possibly the most fully, crucially adaptive human beings around. Without them, humanity might not have so readily spread across the globe."

Seeing adolescence as evolutionarily adaptive is intriguing, but Dobbs acknowledges that "natural selection swings a sharp edge, and the teen's sloppier moments can bring unbearable consequences. We may not run the risk of being killed in ritualistic battles or being eaten by leopards, but drugs, drinking, driving, and crime take a mighty toll… Our children wield their adaptive plasticity amid small but horrific risks." Adults struggle to help their teenagers get through the dangerous years safely, spending around $1 billion on a variety of sex ed, drug ed, drivers ed, and other programs. Unfortunately, most of them aren't very effective.

Why don't teens listen to us? Because they prefer to learn from their friends. But sometimes they will listen to adults – especially when we offer wisdom from our own struggles as adolescents.

"Beautiful Brains" by David Dobbs in *National Geographic*, October 2011 (Vol. 220, #4, p. 36-59), http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2011/10/teenage-brains/dobbs-text

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5. Does Improving Working Memory Make People Smarter?

In this *Education Week* article, Sarah Sparks reports on new research that questions whether improving working memory boosts general intelligence, problem-solving ability, and academic achievement. A review of 23 studies in *Developmental Psychology* found that exercises to improve working memory produced few long-term benefits, and a randomized, controlled study published in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* came to the same conclusion.

Working memory temporarily holds incoming information as people analyze and make decisions. Up to half of the variation in an individual's intelligence is explained by working-memory capacity. Seven-year-olds can hold 3-5 "chunks" of unrelated information in their heads, and by age 12 this increases to about seven chunks – the number that the average adult can hold. Brain science has produced a broad consensus on the "plasticity" of the brain – that doing a task repeatedly will strengthen neural pathways and improve that capacity the same way repeatedly lifting a weight strengthen arm muscles.

But do exercises to boost working memory lead to improvements in overall brainpower the way exercise strengthens the heart? There's an multimillion-dollar market of products that claim this is so, including Pearson's Cogmed Working Memory Training, Memosyne Ltd.'s JungleMemory, and Mind Sparke's Brain Fitness Pro.

Many researchers are dubious. Charles Hulme, a psychology professor at University College London, calls the claims of working-memory training "a lot of hype." Alvaro Fernandez of SharpBrains, a market research company in San Francisco, says, "The brain-fitness software industry is only in its infancy. It is an emerging and largely unregulated market where many products have limited clinical validation and often present confusing claims that make it difficult for consumers to separate wheat from chaff."

"I'm a little torn," says Thomas Redick of Indiana University/Purdue University Columbus, one of the authors of the randomized study mentioned above. "I'm happy to see an application of basic research being used in the classroom, but I'm not sure it's ready for prime time. For it to already be implemented in classrooms, particularly in a time of budget cuts, makes me wonder whether it might not be the most effective use of resources."

"Brain Training Draws Questions About Benefits" by Sarah Sparks in *Education Week*, June 13, 2012 (Vol. 31, #35, p. 1, 15),
http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/06/13/35memory_ep.h31.html

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6. Content Knowledge and the Common Core

In this *Education Gadfly* article, Robert Pondiscio of the Core Knowledge Foundation says he understands why some teachers see the Common Core State Standards as "just one more damn thing imposed on them from on high, interposed between them and their students." But Pondiscio believes these standards have the potential to be quite different. They explicitly encourage teachers to immerse their students in real content – "rich, deep, broad knowledge about the world in which they live… Common Core *restores* art, music, history, and literature to the curriculum."

Content never should have left the reading curriculum, he says: "Reading is domain specific. You already have to know at least a little bit about the subject – and sometimes a lot about the subject – to understand a text. The same thing is also true about creativity, critical thinking and problem solving. Indeed, nearly all of our most cherished and ambitious goals for schooling are knowledge-dependent… [The Common Core State Standards] rescue knowledge from those who would trivialize it, or who simply don't understand its fundamental role in human cognition."

David Coleman, a principal author of the Common Core, agrees: "There is no such thing as doing the nuts and bolts of reading in kindergarten through fifth grade without coherently developing knowledge in science, and history, and the arts… It is the deep foundation in rich knowledge and vocabulary depth that allows you to access more complex text."

Our mistake in recent years, says Pondiscio, has been teaching reading as a set of generic, transferable strategies like main idea, author's intent, and compare-and-contrast. Common Core will change that: "By asking teachers to focus their efforts on building knowledge coherently – and making it clear that doing so is fundamental to literacy – CCSS represent an essential breakthrough for reading comprehension and vocabulary growth," he says. "CCSS invite elementary-school teachers to rethink the tedious regimen of content-free 'mini-lessons' and empty skills practice on whatever reading materials happen to be at hand."

Pondiscio tees off on another sacred cow in elementary reading lessons: focusing on an item in a text and asking students to produce "text-to-self" responses to literature (*How do you feel about the character's decision to hit her friend?*). This approach, common in many state standards, strikes Pondiscio as condescending; it assumes, he says, "that children cannot be engaged or successful unless they are reflecting upon personal experiences nearly to the exclusion of other subjects."

By contrast, the Common Core standards ask students to do close, evidence-based reading of fiction and non-fiction texts, pushing them to read with clarity, depth, and comprehension. "We're no longer ignoring what we know about reading comprehension and language development," he concludes. "And we're making elementary-school teachers the most important people in America."

"Nobody Loves Standards (and That's O.K.)" by Robert Pondiscio in *The Education Gadfly*, June 14, 2012 (Vol. 12, #23), http://bit.ly/Ml0Izn

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7. Dealing with Senior Slump

In this *Education Week* article, Caralee Adams reports on the perennial problem of high-school seniors slacking off. There are plenty of reasons why this happens. Few colleges and employers look closely at senior-year grades, many seniors have college acceptances in hand by Christmas, and No Child Left Behind accountability focuses mainly on tests in 10th grade and below. "The senior year was bypassed by the standards movement," says emeritus Stanford professor Michael Kirst.

But even for students going to non-selective community colleges, there are consequences to goofing off in senior year. They are more likely to fail placement tests once they get to college and end up wasting money on non-credit-bearing remedial courses. Here are some possible solutions to senior slump:

• The forthcoming PARCC and SMARTER tests work backwards from rigorous high-school graduation standards and will give 11th-grade high-school students a more accurate sense of what they still need to learn to be successful in college. Early-assessment tests given in California and a few other states also serve as a reality check on the work that still needs to be done.

• Dual-enrollment programs allow seniors to take college-level courses, either in a nearby college or at their high school, getting a jump on their post-secondary education and

saving money down the road. Iowa is a national leader in dual enrollment, with half of seniors taking a course for college credit.

• Internships in the workplace are also helpful to jazzing up senior year with real-world experiences.

• Senior projects are part of Rhode Island's response to senior slump – a major written product and presentation before a panel of community leaders. One student researched wildlife rehabilitation, another the history of drumming. "It helps students think about what they are going to do next and helps them explore career options," says state commissioner Deborah Gist. "It helps them see how all the things they have learned are relevant, and how they might use them."

"Senior Slump Remains Troubling for Many Educators" by Caralee Adams in *Education Week*, June 13, 2012 (Vol. 31, #35, p. 10), http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/06/13/35slump_ep.h31.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.marshall48@gmail.com

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 effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 43 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 44 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through more than a hundred articles each week, and selects 5-10 that have the greatest potential to improve teaching, leadership, and learning. He then writes a brief summary of each article, pulls out several striking quotes, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the Memo to subscribers every Monday evening (with occasional breaks; there are about 50 issues a year).

Subscriptions:

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

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

- How to subscribe or renew
- A detailed rationale for the Marshall Memo
- Publications (with a count of articles from each)
- Article selection criteria
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- About Kim Marshall (including links to articles)
- A free sample issue

Marshall Memo 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, title, author, source, level, etc.
- How to change access e-mail or log-in

Publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
ASCD, CEC SmartBriefs, Daily EdNews
Better Evidence-Based Education
EDge
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Elementary School Journal
Essential Teacher (TESOL)
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Educational Review
JESPAR
Journal of Staff Development
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Language Learner (NABE)
Middle Ground
Middle School Journal
New York Times
Newsweek
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
Teachers College Record
Teaching Children Mathematics
The Atlantic Monthly
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Language Educator
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
The School Administrator
Theory Into Practice