

# Marshall Memo 138

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

May 29, 2006

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## Quotes of the Week

"I was afraid of cooties."

A 12-year-old California boy starting school ballroom dancing classes (see item #10d)

"Students can't improve or become managers of their own learning without constant, real-time assessment and feedback."

Bob Pearlman (see item #1)

"Once you know where that child is performing and once you have the opportunity to start teaching them what they need to learn, they can really blossom."

Mary Harbolt, 4<sup>th</sup>-grade Oregon teacher (see item #2)

"[W]e had no structure, no clue how to teach students who couldn't read. When I was teaching English, when you came to my classroom, if you couldn't read you were out of luck."

Dee Hawkins, Kentucky high-school teacher (see item #3)

"Understanding the message, thinking critically about the content, using imagination, and making connections are at the heart of what it means to be a reader and why kids learn to love books."

Denise Johnson, reading professor (see item #4)

"Changing schools is tough, and changing secondary schools is particularly difficult. Then when you talk about changing multiple secondary schools in a district, that is a big mountain to climb."

Donald Deschler, University of Kansas researcher (see item #3)

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## 1. Project-Based Learning at Its Best

Entrepreneur and consultant Bob Pearlman begins this *Edutopia* article with a provocative statement: even if all American students reached “proficiency” and owned a state-of-the-art laptop computer by 2014, they would not be ready to be successful citizens and workers. Why? Because they would not have the problem-solving, critical thinking, and communication skills needed to succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. “The new work environment,” says Pearlman, “requires responsibility and self-management, as well as interpersonal and project-management skills that demand teamwork and leadership.”

To truly prepare students for this new world, he writes, schools need a healthy dose of project-based learning. “And don’t confuse project-based learning with activities,” cautions Pearlman. The real thing is “deep, complex, rigorous.” Here’s how a school might organize it:

- Create teams of students to work on an in-depth project for 3-8 weeks.
- Give each team a complex entry question that tells students what they need to know.
- Scaffold the project with activities and new information that deepens the work.
- Calendar the project through plans, drafts, checkpoints, and final presentations.
- Give each team timely feedback based on interim criteria.
- Have each team do a culminating presentation.
- Have an outside panel of parents and community experts evaluate it.
- Use summative criteria that encompass academic and interpersonal skills.

Pearlman describes the project-based learning activities at New Technology High School in Napa, California, focusing on eight learning outcomes:

- Content standards
- Collaboration
- Critical thinking
- Oral communication
- Written communication
- Career preparation
- Citizenship and ethics
- Technology literacy

The school’s strategy is simple:

- To learn collaboration, *work in teams*.
- To learn critical thinking, *take on complex problems*.
- To learn oral communication, *present*.
- To learn written communication, *write*.

- To learn technology, *use technology*.
- To develop citizenship, *take on civic and global issues*.
- To learn content, *research and do all of the above*.

Among the projects students have undertaken:

- Presenting a plan to Congress for solving the oil crisis;
- Addressing economic issues as a team of the president's economic advisors;
- Inventing, under contract from NASA, new sports that astronauts can play on the moon for exercise.

Pearlman believes that project-based learning won't work unless students get continuous feedback. "Students can't improve or become managers of their own learning without constant, real-time assessment and feedback. Assessment for learning starts with outcomes, proceeds with projects, products, and performances that map to the outcomes, and completes the loop with assessment and feedback to students." Rubrics make clear what the criteria are, and ideally, students see them as they start a project and use them to "self-appraise their work in progress and direct their own learning."

Pearlman thinks that grades for projects should be broken down by skill. At New Technology High, each teacher's grade book is online, accessible to students, their parents, and other teachers with a password. Grades are malleable and can be updated any time that new information is available. "Students thus remain constantly aware of their strengths and weaknesses, and can target their efforts toward improvement," says Pearlman. "This continuous feedback is critical in helping students become self-directed learners."

New Tech also allows students to evaluate their teammates, using an anonymous online peer collaboration rubric. Scores go into a database where students can use a secure password to look at their own scores. Teachers and visiting community experts use another rubric to score final presentations. All grades and projects are stored in an elaborate database so they can be accessed by teachers and students in real time and for years to come.

Project-based learning has one thing in common with traditional education, says Pearlman: "it takes good teachers to make it work well." Lots of talent and hard work are needed to design projects, organize activities, rubrics, culminating products, and events, orchestrate projects from beginning to end, and manage super-active classrooms. But this kind of learning, concludes Pearlman, "leaves traditional education in the dust. It sets students to work on their own juices, as self-directed learners. It enables them to master state standards and more."

"New Skills for a New Century: Project-based learning teaches kids the collaborative and critical thinking abilities they'll need to compete" by Bob Pearlman in *Edutopia*, June 2006 (Vol. 2, #4, p. 50-53)

[http://www.edutopia.org/magazine/ed1article.php?id=art\\_1546&issue=jun\\_06](http://www.edutopia.org/magazine/ed1article.php?id=art_1546&issue=jun_06)

## **2. An Oregon Elementary School's Achievement Surges**

This *Edutopia* article on Faubion Elementary in Portland, Oregon charts the 314-student school's impressive achievement gains in recent years: from 66% to 90% of students

meeting state standards in reading and 71% to 92% in math. The two drivers of these gains, says reporter Grace Rubinstein, were (a) teachers using assessment as the “compass for instruction” and (b) teachers constantly working to improve themselves with the help of their peers.

Three times a year, Faubion teachers give students a battery of tests in math problem solving, math content, writing, and reading. All the tests are home-grown except for the DRA (Developmental Reading Assessment) used for reading. After each assessment, teachers meet to pinpoint individual student needs and sort students into working groups based on their particular areas of need. “We’ll create whatever it is the assessments show us they need,” says fourth-grade teacher Mary Harbolt.

The process of using interim assessments began ten years ago with a district mandate. There was teacher resistance, and some teachers left the school. But for others it was a turning point. Jackie David, a Title I teacher who has been at Faubion for 25 years, said, “That was the impetus that made people say, ‘Wow, we need to look at where kids are and where we need them to be, and make a plan to get them there.’ We are still reaping the benefits of that one year.”

The trimester assessments are time-consuming, but teachers say they’re worth it. “It took us a long time to get over the fact that we kind of shut down when we do these assessments,” said Harbolt, “because you start thinking, ‘Oh, my gosh, we’re losing instructional time.’ But in the long run, once we really embraced the assessments, we realized that it made our instruction so much more focused that the time lost wasn’t an issue. Once you know where that child is performing and once you have the opportunity to start teaching them what they need to learn, they can really blossom.” Teachers show students the interim assessment data and work on getting them invested in the improvement process, which strongly motivates them to perform.

Professional development in the school is similarly results-focused. On alternating Monday afternoons, the staff meets for two hours, rotating the topic between math, reading, writing, and life-skills education. The focus is on interim or summative assessment data, the needs of individual students, and workshops given by Faubion teachers who have received training outside the school. Each year’s professional development focuses on one priority topic, typically the one in which students had the most difficulty in the previous year’s state tests. “We figure if they’re weak on it, we must be weak on it,” says Harbolt. Grade-level teacher teams have common prep periods and meet each week to collaborate and plan. As a result of this collegial atmosphere, reports Rubenstein, staff turnover has been minimal.

“Vital Signs” by Grace Rubenstein in *Edutopia*, June 2006 (Vol. 2, #4, p. 20-23) [http://www.edutopia.org/magazine/ed1article.php?id=art\\_1541&issue=jun\\_06](http://www.edutopia.org/magazine/ed1article.php?id=art_1541&issue=jun_06); this link includes several short videos from the school.

### **3. A Successful High-School Reading Program in Kentucky**

This feature article in *Education Week* describes Jefferson County, Kentucky’s efforts to deal with a serious high-school reading problem. Dee Hawkins, an English teacher, is quoted

as saying, “we had no structure, no clue how to teach students who couldn’t read. When I was teaching English, when you came to my classroom, if you couldn’t read you were out of luck.”

The change effort started in one high school with the implementation of the Ramp-Up to Literacy program, focusing at first only on students in need of remediation. Before long, teachers began to see a change in students’ attitudes toward reading. “At the beginning of the year, these kids wouldn’t even admit they read a book,” said Lori Pfeifer, a 9<sup>th</sup>-grade teacher. Soon, students were talking to each other about what they’d read and asking friends for recommendations. A little later, teachers noticed that books were missing from classroom libraries, some students were tussling for a turn to read the latest selection from a favorite book series, and math and science teachers had to chide students to put away teenage novels and poetry collections and focus on the lesson at hand.

The success of the program led to its expansion to 18 of the county’s 21 high schools, along with funding for classroom libraries and teacher training. The district was pleased with the results: test scores rose and discipline problems declined. Most recently, the program was expanded to include other subject areas; social studies teachers will be trained this summer. Donald Deschler, a University of Kansas expert on adolescent literacy, stresses the importance of working in the content areas. “There are a whole lot of other things besides decoding words that affect kids’ literacy,” he said. “There are some critical things teachers can do, unique to their subject area, whether it be science or social studies, relative to building vocabulary and background knowledge and other things so that all kids can get it.”

Ramp-Up, which was developed by the National Center on Education and the Economy in Washington, involves a daily 90-minute literacy block. During the first 20 minutes, students read independently, drawing from classroom libraries of high-interest and classic books. Then teachers lead class discussions of a novel being read by the whole class, with explicit teaching of the habits of successful readers: making personal connections, identifying different genres, visualizing details, making inferences, summarizing, re-reading confusing sections, and using context clues to figure out words and phrases. Reading habits are driven home in lessons and exercises. Students learn how to use diagrams and other graphic organizers to help visualize themes and details from their reading.

Jefferson County teachers have added a rigorous writing segment to prepare students for Kentucky’s requirements – a portfolio of their written work in core subjects and a 12<sup>th</sup>-grade writing assessment.

In a sidebar within this article, *Education Week* synthesizes the recommendations of several recent reports for improving adolescent literacy:

- Teach explicit vocabulary and reading comprehension strategies and skills.
- Embed reading instruction within content areas.
- Build the background knowledge needed to understand complex principles in texts.
- Provide professional development for content-area teachers on how to foster and strengthen reading skills needed in their subject.
- Create school and district literacy plans aligned to state standards.

- Address students' motivation to read by making a variety of texts and high-interest reading materials available.
- Allow time for reading in school.
- Assess student reading skills and use data to guide instruction.
- Offer writing instruction and practice.

“The Heart of the Matter” by Kathleen Kennedy Manzo in *Education Week*, May 24, 2006 (Vol. 25, #38, p. 30-33), no free e-link

#### **4. Audio Books Spur Reading Achievement**

This *Edutopia* article touts the efficacy of having students listen to audio books while reading along with the text. Audio books can stretch reluctant readers to comprehend texts above their current reading level, and can also deepen the understanding of more proficient readers. “It definitely works,” says Kent State education professor Timothy Rasinski. “There have been studies that looked at captioned television or just reading with a parent. Across the board, it seems to have wonderful potential for helping kids.”

Audible books are not for everyone, says Denise Johnson, a reading professor at the College of William and Mary. For some students, they are too fast or too slow, and they feel cumbersome for students who prefer to read text on paper. But Johnson does agree that audible books can introduce children to new genres, cultivate critical listening and highlight the humor in text. “Understanding the message, thinking critically about the content, using imagination, and making connections are at the heart of what it means to be a reader and why kids learn to love books,” she says.

In recent years, there has been a proliferation of websites that make audio books readily available. With a click, it's possible to load a book for multiple students onto a CD or MP3 player. For example, Audible.com is a massive clearinghouse for digital audio, with an education section where visitors can download audible children's books, textbook supplements, newspaper articles, and speeches. (The site gives one free download, then charges: [http://www.audible.com/adbl/site/audibleSearch/anonCategory.jsp?oid=-8094&N=177&BV\\_UseBVCookie=Yes](http://www.audible.com/adbl/site/audibleSearch/anonCategory.jsp?oid=-8094&N=177&BV_UseBVCookie=Yes).)

“Listening to Literature” by Grace Rubenstein in *Edutopia*, June 2006 (Vol. 2, #4, p. 14) Links to books online: [http://www.edutopia.org/magazine/ed1article.php?id=art\\_1535&issue=jun\\_06](http://www.edutopia.org/magazine/ed1article.php?id=art_1535&issue=jun_06)

#### **5. Art As a Bridge to Learning**

In this *American School Board Journal* article, neuroscientist/consultant Kenneth Wesson argues that teaching visual arts – especially drawing – helps students develop important cognitive skills. The human brain, he says, naturally seeks to: (a) find patterns, (b) make sense of information and experiences, and (c) evaluate events and objects for their personal and emotional significance. Good art instruction, which provides its own intrinsic rewards, also helps children “wire up” their neural networks and learn better:

- Art helps develop spatial reasoning skills.

- Art increases the ability to create abstractions and mental processes in the abstract (once they can “see” an abstract idea, they can begin to put it into words).
- Art helps students visualize the images that words represent as they learn to read.
- Art develops fine-motor skills, which are necessary prerequisites for writing.
- Art develops patience, sustained attention, and self-regulation (controlling impulsivity).
- Art serves as a bridge between one’s mind and the real world.
- Art cultivates an important kind of intelligence.
- Art develops the whole brain and the whole child.

“Drawing and the Brain” by Kenneth Wesson in *American School Board Journal*, June 2006 (Vol. 193. #6, p. 40-42), no e-link available

## 6. Programs That Integrate Arts and Technology

This *American School Board Journal* column provides information on programs that weave technology into the arts:

- *Artistic Realization Technologies* – Princeton-area teacher Tim Lefens works with children and adults who have severe and multiple physical challenges. Eric, a student in this program, said, “When I die I want my paintings on my grave so my family can pick them up and read them because the truth is in the paint.” <http://www.artrealization.org>

- *Designing Great Multimedia Projects* – Former teacher and principal Michael Simkins has developed a summer workshop to help teachers and principals recognize exemplary hands-on activities. “Project-based learning units that culminate in multimedia production can be rich, powerful learning experiences; or they can be an indefensible waste of students’ time,” he says. Visit him at <http://www.members.aol.com/mbsimkins> .

- *Art Miles Mural Project* – Artist Joanne Tawfilis is leading an effort tied in with UNESCO to get literally miles of murals painted by students and educators. Visit her at <http://www.the-art-miles-mural-project.org>.

- *Envision Charter Schools* – Bob Lenz and his San Francisco Bay area schools have made a point of integrating the arts into their curriculum. Visit them at <http://www.envisionschools.org>.

“How Technology Enriches the Arts” by Victor Rivero in *American School Board Journal*, June 2006 (Vol. 193. #6, p. 55-56)

## 7. Deborah Meier and Diane Ravitch in Dialogue

In this thoughtful and refreshingly civil article in *Education Week*, Deborah Meier and Diane Ravitch, two educator/writers who have often disagreed over the years, explore their differences and find some surprising areas of agreement, especially their distress at the curriculum mandates of New York City’s department of education. The article is mostly about policy, which is not Marshall Memo material, but here are a few highlights:

- A school district, they write, needs a “central, abiding definition of what constitutes a well-educated person” that unites and rationalizes its mandates.

- “Young people need to see themselves as novice members of a serious, intellectually purposeful community.”

- “It is hard, if not impossible, to run a perfect lock-step system when professionals (if they really are professionals) expect to make decisions and exercise discretion. Resistance to nonsense is one of the habits that citizens need to hone in a free society. But much of the sabotage that occurs behind classroom doors, we recognize, may disguise watering down the curriculum or evading responsibility.”

“Bridging Differences” by Deborah Meier and Diane Ravitch in *Education Week*, May 24, 2006 (Vol. 25, #38, p. 44, 36, 37), no free e-link

## **8. What’s Needed for Success in Real Jobs?**

This front-page *Education Week* article reports on the ongoing discussion among employers on what employees need to be successful in entry-level jobs. While there is agreement on the need for strong academic skills comparable to those needed for success in college, especially if employees are to move up to better jobs (see the item just below), some employers stress that academic skills are necessary but not sufficient. Here is a rank ordering of skills from a 2005 study by the National Association of Manufacturers, with the percentage of employers who said that each would be important over the next three years:

- Strong basic employability skills – 53%
- Technical skills – 53%
- Reading/writing/communication skills – 51%
- Ability to work in a team – 47%
- Strong computer skills – 40%
- Ability to read and translate drawings/diagrams/flowcharts – 39%
- Math skills – 39%
- Strong supervisory/managerial skills – 37%
- Innovative/creative – 31%
- English-language fluency – 27%

In the same vein, the National Work Readiness Council recently created this list of EFF (Equipped for the Future) skills:

- Communication skills:
  - Speak so others can understand
  - Listen actively
  - Read with understanding
  - Observe critically
- Interpersonal skills:
  - Cooperate with others
  - Resolve conflict and negotiate
- Decision-making skills:
  - Use math to solve problems and communicate

- Solve problems and make decisions
- Lifelong-learning skills:
  - Take responsibility for learning
  - Use information and communications technology

“Ambiguity About Preparation for Workforce Clouds Efforts to Equip Students for Future” by Lynn Olson in *Education Week*, May 24, 2006 (Vol. 25, #38, p. 1, 18-21), no free e-link

## 9. Short Items:

**a. Do college-ready skills = job-ready skills?** – Another study, this one by the ACT, has found a remarkable similarity between the reading and math skills needed by electricians, construction workers, and entering college students. The report, “Ready for College and Ready for Work: Same or Different?” compared 476,000 high-school juniors’ 2001-2004 ACT results with scores on WorkKeys, an assessment of employability skills. The finding: the skills needed to be successful in the first year of college are similar to the skills needed to succeed in an entry-level “family wage” job.

Spotted in *PEN Weekly NewsBlast*, May 25, 2006. More on this study can be found at: <http://www.partnership4learning.org/eBriefing/May06/>

**b. The ideal high-school graduate** – When Donald Fraynd first became principal of Jones College Prep, a four-year magnet high school in Chicago, he asked the faculty to sketch the profile of the ideal graduate. After lengthy deliberation, the school made the list their mission statement: students should be “on the road to becoming”:

- Socially skilled and mature
- Compassionate
- Socially just and responsible
- Well-rounded and holistic
- Intellectually competent

To see the sub-traits, go to: [http://jonescollegeprep.org/mission\\_statement.jsp?rn=5900](http://jonescollegeprep.org/mission_statement.jsp?rn=5900).

“The Ideal High School Graduate” in *American School Board Journal*, June 2006 (Vol. 193, #6, p. 64)

**c. Ranking states on proficiency standards** – An article in the current issue of *Education Next* grades each state’s standards by comparing 2003 and 2005 student proficiency levels on the state test with proficiency levels on the NAEP. The following states earned an A: Massachusetts, Maine, South Carolina, District of Columbia, Wyoming, and Missouri. These states were given an F: North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Tennessee. For the full chart, see the link below.

“Keeping an Eye on State Standards: A Race to the Bottom?” by Paul Peterson and Frederick Hess in *Education Next*, Summer 2006 (Vol. 6, #3, p. 28-29)

<http://www.educationnext.org/20063/28.html>

**d. Ballroom dancing** – EduDance is a ballroom dancing program being adopted by some schools in the San Diego area. Started by Anne Krantz, a competitive ballroom dancer who came up with the idea while volunteering in her son’s school, the program teaches groups of up to 30 students once or twice a week. “In the one hour we spend with the students,” says Krantz, “we’re covering state standards for music, dance, and P.E.” Next year she wants to add lessons on the history and cultural origins of various ballroom dances.

The program is also teaching social skills. “It’s important they know how to interact with the other gender,” says Krantz. “They learn a lot about poise and respecting one another.” Students seem enthusiastic about the program, but first they had to get over some apprehensions. “I was afraid of cooties,” said one 12-year-old boy.

“Shall We Dance” by Glenn Cook in *American School Board Journal*, June 2006 (Vol. 193, #6, p. 5), no e-link available. EduDance is at <http://www.edudance.net>.

**e. Creating memorials** – At Wellwood Middle School in Manlius, New York, teachers have eighth graders create memorials of significant people and events. The idea is to help students focus on what it means to live a memorable life. Students explore the facts around the person or event, write them up in an original paper, design and create a tangible memorial, and present their work in a formal speech. For more information and samples of student work, go to: <http://www.fmschools.org/wellwood.cfm?subpage=2246>

Spotted in *PEN Weekly NewsBlast*, May 25, 2006.

**f. Classroom rules** – In an article in *Edutopia* magazine on the New Orleans schools, there’s a photograph of a bedraggled set of classroom rules:

Enter... with a smile.
Show... kindness to others
Always... come prepared
Never... stop learning

“Hard Times in the Big Easy” by Nancy Rutter Clark, photography by David Julian in *Edutopia*, June 2006 (Vol. 2, #4, p. 44-48)

[http://www.edutopia.org/magazine/ed1article.php?id=art\\_1545&issue=jun\\_06](http://www.edutopia.org/magazine/ed1article.php?id=art_1545&issue=jun_06)

**g. Summer activities for educators** – *Edutopia* magazine has compiled a list of professional development and other activities for the summer. Check them out at this link:

<http://www.edutopia.org/flash/summerschoolmap/map.html> (click on the individual icons on the map).

“Summing Up Summer Learning” by Cheri Lucas in *Edutopia*, June 2006 (Vol. 2, #4, p. 40-41)

***h. Billy Collins poem*** – To read a delightful poem by former Poet Laureate Billy Collins on writing poetry, click on the link below.

“The Trouble With Poetry” by Billy Collins in *Edutopia*, June 2006 (Vol. 2, #4, p. 60)  
[http://www.edutopia.org/magazine/ed1article.php?id=art\\_1551&issue=jun\\_06](http://www.edutopia.org/magazine/ed1article.php?id=art_1551&issue=jun_06) (there’s a nice photo of Collins at this link).

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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](mailto: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 effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 36 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 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, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the memo to subscribers every Monday (with occasional breaks; there were 50 issues in 2004-05).

## ***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.

## ***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 all issues
- What readers say
- 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 password

## ***Publications covered***

*Those read this week are underlined.*

American Educator  
American School Board Journal  
ASCD SmartBrief  
Atlantic Monthly  
Boston Globe  
CommonWealth Magazine  
District Administration  
Ed. Magazine  
EDge  
Education Digest  
Education Gadfly  
Education Next  
Education Update  
Education Week  
Educational Leadership  
Educational Researcher  
Edutopia  
Elementary School Journal  
Harvard Business Review  
Harvard Education Letter  
Harvard Educational Review  
JESPAR  
Jimmy Kilpatrick  
Journal of Staff Development  
Language Learner  
Middle Ground  
Middle School Journal  
NASSP Bulletin  
New York Times  
New Yorker  
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  
Teacher Magazine  
Teachers College Record  
Theory Into Practice  
Times Educational Supplement