Marshall Memo 147

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
August 14, 2006

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"If [computer] games are too hard they're boring, and if they're too easy they're boring, but if they're right in the zone they're addictive."

Steven Johnson, *Harper's*, September 2006 (Vol. 313, #1876, p. 33)

"How can instruction in one language lead to better achievement in another?... Most people find this contrary to common sense… But this is why we do research. If we relied solely on common sense, we would still think the earth is flat."

Claude Goldenberg (see item #2)

"The best evidence we have suggests that English-language learners learn much the same way as their non-English-learning peers, and that good instruction for students in general tends to be good instruction for English-language learners."

Claude Goldenberg (*ibid.*)

"Unless you understand the real, current needs of your colleagues, you can't help them to help you achieve your vision."

Lisa and Barry Bjork (see item #4)

"[T]eacher evaluation as a way to improve practice is oversold to educators and the public. There are few instances in the literature where a teacher evaluation system has been empirically shown to make a difference."

Kenneth Peterson and Catherine Peterson, *Effective Teacher Evaluation: A Guide to Principals* (Corwin, 2006), reviewed in *Principal*, September/October 2006, p. 56

1. How a Boston School Boosted Home Reading (an oldie but goodie article)

In this classic article from the September 2000 issue of *Principal*, Boston principal Bill Henderson describes the steps that he and his colleagues took after receiving abysmal standardized-test scores at the end of the 1989-90 year, placing their student achievement near the bottom of the city's 78 elementary schools. As they planned an improvement strategy, they agreed on spending more time on reading, improving the quality of instruction, getting more books, and providing more help to students who were reading below grade level. But there was also strong sentiment that these strategies wouldn't result in higher achievement unless students spent a lot more time reading – and the best place to do that was at home.

But how could they get students in this high-poverty school to read at home? Here is the ten-year story of how Henderson's school figured this out:

• *A contest* – During the 1990-91 school year, the school promised to give prizes to students who read the most books. Some students read a lot of books, but as the year progressed, it became evident that less-proficient readers were giving up because they realized they had no chance of winning a prize. Other students tried to game the system by reading lots of short, easy-to-read books. The school distributed prizes to the winners at the end of the year, but teachers had no illusions that they had changed many students' reading habits. If anything, they had reinforced existing inequalities.

• *Flooding students with reading material* – During 1991-92, the school used every possible approach to get more books into students' hands:

- Expanding the school library's collection;
- Stocking classroom libraries;
- Taking students to neighborhood libraries and signing them up for their own library cards;
- Giving students free books through Reading Is Fundamental;
- Giving each student a book on his or her birthday;
- Setting up a swap cart where students could exchange used books and magazines;
- Bringing in vendors to sell book to families at rock-bottom prices;
- Requesting book donations from the community.

All these measures exposed children to a lot more reading material, and that was good. But many students still weren't reading regularly at home.

• *Reading contracts* – During 1992-93, the school developed a contract that required students to read or be read to at least four days a week at home. Kindergarten through second-grade students had to read for at least 15 minutes a day, grade 3-5 students for at least 20 minutes. In deference to concerns raised by the school council, the policy allowed families to

skip days when they were busy or had a crisis, and allowed children to read independently or be read to by any relative or family friend. The school pushed the reading contracts at parent meetings, teacher conferences, and in school bulletins and newsletters. However, the results that year were disappointing. Fifty percent of students participated at least 75 percent of the time, and those students showed steady growth in reading proficiency. But the other 50 percent were not reading regularly at home. What was most disturbing was that the students who were not reading at home were generally the least-proficient readers, students whose families qualified for free or reduced-price meals, and students with special needs.

• *Parent workshops* – At the beginning of the 1993-94 school year, a committee of parent leaders asked Henderson to send a strong letter to all parents emphasizing the benefits of reading at home. They also held a series of parent workshops on the importance of home reading. But those who showed up for the workshops were parents whose children were already honoring the reading contract. It was obvious that a more aggressive approach was needed.

• *A literacy show* – At the beginning of 1994-95, the school council decided to hold a literacy show in which students dressed up as children's book characters performed skits. Parents packed the auditorium and loved watching their children perform, and Henderson took advantage of the turnout to deliver a strong message about how children's future academic progress depended largely on how much they read at home. But there were still a good number of homes in which very little reading was taking place.

• *Home visits and calls* – The next year, some parents decided to address this issue by visiting the homes of all newly-enrolled students. Twelve parents received training and technical assistance from the Boston-based Institute for Responsive Education and proceeded to visit homes, giving a book to each family, talking up the importance of home reading, and discussing ways that each family could fulfill the reading contract. The visiting parents also called and/or visited the homes of parents who were not participating regularly in home reading; as fellow parents, they were usually well received. The school council upped the ante, making performance on the reading contract part of each student's report card. Teachers checked off each student's level of participation and sent warning notices to non-participating students midway through each marking period.

• *Reaching the hard core* – All these measures brought participation in the home reading program to 84 percent – a significant accomplishment. But an analysis of the 16 percent of non-participating students revealed the same pattern as before: almost all of these students came from low-income homes, had special needs or reading problems, and were reading below grade level. In other words, they were the students who needed the program the most. "The hard reality," says Henderson, "was that unless we could change the reading patterns of these children, their chances of academic success were limited." And the older they got, the more difficult it would be to change their habits.

In the fall of 1996, parent and staff leaders held a pizza party to which only the families of the students who were not participating in the home reading program were invited.

Invitations were sent, follow-up phone calls were made, transportation was arranged, and parents were encouraged to bring along younger siblings so child care would not be an issue.

Two-thirds of the targeted families showed up, and after a pizza feast, parents went to the auditorium while children stayed in the cafeteria with adult volunteers to do arts and crafts projects and watch a movie. The parents had a frank discussion about why it was so difficult to honor the reading contracts. Some parents vented about the stress of being single parents trying to find time after work to make dinner, clean up, and get their children ready for bed. Others said that they had to work in the evening and leave their children with an older sibling or relative. Many spoke of their children's addiction to television and video games.

Parent leaders listened sympathetically to these concerns, acknowledging their own parenting difficulties. Then they led the group in brainstorming strategies for getting children reading *despite* the barriers: setting a specific time and/or place for reading; restricting TV time; reading to all children in the household together; asking a relative or family friend to read with children; contacting teachers for suggestions on the best reading materials; and calling each other for ideas and support. Coming from fellow parents in much the same circumstances, the suggestions hit home.

After this meeting, the school paired a number of students who were not reading at home with parent and community volunteers, who read with them at the neighborhood library. The school also began to check on some students whose participation in the reading contracts seemed dubious, quizzing them on their books to make sure they were really fulfilling their contracts. And in the fall of 1997, the school reached out to its expanding population of Vietnamese-American families, telling them with the help of translators about the importance of home reading, giving them easy-to-read English books, and assuring them that home reading in Vietnamese was perfectly acceptable.

By the middle of the 1999-2000 school year, 95 percent of students were participating regularly in the home reading program, and reading at home was firmly established as part of the school's culture. As participation increased, the school's standardized-test scores also rose, reaching the national average and putting the school near the top of Boston's elementary schools.

Henderson is quick to acknowledge that many factors went into this dramatic improvement – additional instructional time, extensive staff development, adopting best teaching practices, and tutoring for high-need students. But he believes that regular reading practice is critically important to reading proficiency – and that the home reading program has been the most effective venue for extensive practice. "Hopefully," he concludes, "we have implanted a reading habit that will stay with them throughout their lives."

"Home Reading: The Key to Proficiency" by Bill Henderson in *Principal*, September 2000

2. Research Insights on ELL Instruction

In this helpful *Education Week* article, Claude Goldenberg, a California State/Long Beach professor and former National Literacy Panel member, reports three key findings from the research on teaching ELL students:

• *Teaching reading in the native language boosts reading achievement in English.* To many people, this seems counterintuitive. "How can instruction in one language lead to better achievement in another?" asks Goldenberg. "But this is why we do research. If we relied solely on common sense, we would still think the earth is flat." The impact of primary-language instruction on students' reading achievement is modest but real – the effect size is between 0.20 and 0.60. This means that instruction in the native language can boost student achievement in English by about 12 to 15 percentile points. It's no panacea, but neither is teaching phonics (which has a similar impact on achievement) or any other classroom intervention.

Beyond this general finding, on which there is a solid consensus in five meta-analyses conducted by researchers from across the ideological spectrum, the literature is less unanimous. Is more instruction in the primary language, and for more years, better for student achievement? Is primary-language instruction better for some learners than for others? In an English-only situation, what is the most effective way to use the primary language to support children's learning in the English? Studies don't agree.

The National Literacy Panel did find that teaching both Spanish and English (at different times in the school day) improves literacy in both languages. Why does this happen? "[E]vidence suggests that literacy and other skills and knowledge transfer across languages," says Goldenberg. "If you learn something in one language (which is easiest to do in the language you know best) – phonological or comprehension skills, for example, or a concept like democracy – you either know it or can more easily learn it in a second language. There is also an added benefit that primary-language instruction helps maintain the first language, [and] being bi-literate and bicultural confers clear advantages intellectually and economically."

• *Good instruction for English-language learners has the same characteristics as good instruction for native English-speakers.* In schools where first-language instruction is not permitted (California and Massachusetts, for example), good pedagogy matters. "The best evidence we have," says Goldenberg, "suggests that English-language learners learn much the same way as their non-English-learning peers, and that good instruction for students in general tends to be good instruction for English-language learners." Generic characteristics of effective teaching include:

- Clear goals and objectives;
- Well-designed instructional routines;
- Active engagement and participation;
- Opportunities to interact with other students;
- Opportunities to practice and apply new learning and transfer it to new situations;
- Frequent assessments with re-teaching as needed;
- Informative feedback;

- Periodic review and practice.

For teaching literacy, here are the key characteristics of instruction for all students:

- Learning to discriminate and manipulate the sounds of the language (phonemic awareness);
- Decoding words (phonics);
- Building vocabulary and content knowledge (especially important after third grade);
- Building fluency and comprehension;
- Writing instruction.

• *Certain accommodations must be made when ELL students are taught in English*. The research is not very robust on this point, but Goldenberg suggests that the following accommodations might be helpful in English-immersion schools:

- Strategic use of the primary language;
- Building on students' knowledge and skills in their native language;
- Instructions that are predictable, clear, and consistent;
- Extended explanations and additional opportunities for practice;
- Redundant information, such as visual cues and physical gestures;
- Pointing out similarities and differences between English and the native language;
- Identifying and clarifying difficult words and passages;
- Consolidating text knowledge through summarization;
- Providing extra practice in reading words, sentences, and stories;
- Targeting vocabulary and checking comprehension frequently;
- Paraphrasing students' remarks and encouraging students to expand on them.
- Giving students ample opportunity to practice their English speaking skills;
- Using reading matter that is somewhat familiar to students so they can build on prior knowledge.

"Improving Achievement for English-Learners: What the Research Tells Us" by Claude Goldenberg in *Education Week*, July 26, 2006 (Vol. 25, #43, p. 34-36), no free e-link

3. A Dozen Leadership Lessons from the School of Hard Knocks

In this piece in the September/October issue of *Principal*, recently-retired administrator Paul Young offers twelve lessons he learned in his years leading schools:

• *Don't write e-mail messages when you're angry*. Type away to get your thoughts out, but don't hit "send" until you cool down. Better still, talk to the offending colleague in person.

• *Don't gossip*. As a principal, what you say (and don't say) will spread through the grapevine and come back to bite you.

• *Don't shoot the messenger*. You need for your colleagues to feel safe telling you things you don't want to hear, but they won't dare if you lash out at bearers of bad tidings. "When people bring you bad news," advises Young, "take a deep breath, thank them, and if necessary, vent privately or with your mentor."

• *Don't be a Lone Ranger*. "You can have the best ideas and be the most ambitious principal in your district," says Young, "but if you fail to work collaboratively with your staff, your efforts will likely fail. Success comes when there is mutual agreement."

• *Don't conceal big, embarrassing problems*. Tell the truth, accept the fallout, and move on.

• *Don't knock the boss*. If you share negative thoughts about the superintendent with colleagues, they might follow suit – trashing you behind your back. "Model the conduct you expect in others," says Young.

• *Don't criticize your predecessor*. "Until you've walked in his or her shoes for a while, keep your perceptions to yourself."

• *Don't sugar-coat negative evaluations*. When writing up problem employees, it's tempting to sprinkle in positive comments – but these will be used against you when the person must be reprimanded or terminated.

• *Align yourself with people who do things the right way*. "Those who do things the sneaky way may appear to be more fun or even more successful," says Young. "However, in the long run your association with shady characters leaves you [open] to guilt to association."

• *Pick your battles*. "Only problems that can potentially have a negative impact on your core values, personal or professional goals, or the mission of your school are worthy of consideration for battle," writes Young. "You don't have to assume full responsibility for everything… When people bring problems to you, focus on how you can help them find effective solutions."

• *Don't be a martyr*. Maintain a balance between your professional and personal life. Don't volunteer for everything, and never agree to a job demotion or pay decrease.

• *Don't make promises you can't keep*. "If you agree to kiss a pig or shave your head as part of a reading challenge," says Young, "you had better do it!"

"Been There, Done That – and Won't Do It Again" by Paul Young in *Principal*, September/ October 2006 (Vol. 86, #1, p. 18-21), no e-link available

4. How Is Driving on an Interstate Like Running a School?

In this clever article in the September/October *Principal*, Seattle professors Lisa and Barry Bjork draw a number of parallels between driving down a busy interstate highway and running a school:

• *Know where you're going and at least a couple of routes for getting there*. School leaders need a clear vision – and flexibility on how to implement it. "If you're stuck on only one way to move forward," write the Bjorks, "you won't be able to adjust to important events or opportunities that may make a change of plans necessary."

• *Don't focus too far ahead*. "It is equally important to pay attention to the here and now as well as the 'big picture' in pursuing your vision," they write. "Unless you understand the real, current needs of your colleagues, you can't help them to help you achieve your vision."

• *Carpool whenever possible*. You can't lead when there are no followers, and shared leadership will get you there faster in the long run, say the Bjorks.

• *Always signal before you turn*. Colleagues and parents need clear advance warning of any major change of direction.

• *Keep your mind on your driving*. Once you have a plan for improving student achievement, stick to it. "It is dangerous to be distracted by interesting initiatives or ideas that are not part of your focus," they write.

• *Slow down at the first 'road work ahead' sign*. "Pay attention to warning signs of conflict, confusion, and disengagement before they surge out of control," warn the Bjorks. "Sometimes there will only be a small clue."

• *Obey the speed limit*. In schools, implementing change at a reasonable pace increases the chance that it will be embedded in the organization and become "the way we do business here."

• *Relax and enjoy the scenery along the way*. Take time to enjoy the improvement process and celebrate even the smallest accomplishments.

• *Watch out for people who run red lights*. "Unfortunately, schools can be minefields of nay-sayers or 'attack dogs' who can have as negative an effect on school climate as a broadside collision," say the Bjorks. Be aware of these people!

• *Use the highway rest area when you're tired or lost*. "Sometimes you must step away, at least mentally, from the pressure-filled arena of multiple demands and reflect on where you're headed," conclude the Bjorks.

"Driving Rules for Principals" by Lisa Bjork and Barry Bjork in *Principal*, September/ October 2006 (Vol. 86, #1, p. 58), no e-link available

5. Planning an Effective Freshman Transition Program

In this article in the July *Principal's Research Review*, by three Virginia educators describe the Freshman Transition Initiative for high-school students developed at George Washington University (for more information, see http://gsehd.gwu.edu/FTI+10+Steps). More students fail ninth grade than any other level, report the authors. "Eighth and ninth grade is a defining period for teenagers," they continue, "and researchers have noted adjustment problems during this transition period that include decreases in grade-point average, attendance, feelings of connectedness, and co-curricular participation and increases in anxiety concerning school procedures and older students, social difficulties, and changes in relationships with parents."

Many schools conduct one-day transition/orientation programs for incoming freshmen, but the authors think much more is required if ninth-grade failure rates – and the dropouts that ensue – are to be turned around. They advocate an extensive program for incoming freshmen and a program that continues through the high-school years blending "youth development with caring relationships, cognitive challenges, a culture of support, community and connection to learning and career opportunities."

Here is a summary checklist of the characteristics the authors believe an effective freshman transition program should have:

- Students learn to project into the future and understand the consequences of the actions and choices they make today.
- Students analyze the effect of their personal interests and aptitudes on their educational and career plans.
- Students complete formal assessments and surveys to help them establish and consolidate their identity.
- Students develop meaningful ten-year, career-inclusive educational plans.
- Students see the impact of their educational and career choices on their future lifestyle and life satisfaction.
- Students learn to locate, analyze, and apply career information and secure entry-level employment.
- Students understand the importance of productive work habits and attitudes.
- Students know how societal change affects career opportunities.
- Students know the skills they need to enter a variety of careers and realize that these skills can be transferred from one career to another.

"Freshman Transition Programs: Long-Term and Comprehensive" by Rebecca Dedmond, R. D. Brown, and Jean LaFauci in *Principal's Research Review*, July 2006 (Vol. 1, #4, p. 1-8), no e-link available.

6. What Teachers Should Do When They Can't Stand a Student

This *Education Update* article reports on the work that New Hampshire educators Joy Bryan and Joyce Corbin have done on a taboo subject – when a teacher doesn't like a particular student. "Why am I feeling this way?" a teacher might ask. These emotions usually come from:

• *Childhood memories* – How we relate to another person may be directly related to the way we were treated by our mothers, fathers, or other caregivers.

• *Transference and counter-transference* – Perhaps a student reminds a teacher of a person he or she didn't get along with, sparking negative emotions, often without the teacher being aware of it. This kind of negativity can bounce back and forth between two people, creating an even more negative relationship.

• *The shadow* – A student may have something the teacher didn't have growing up (artistic ability or an affluent family, for example) and the teacher unconsciously envies and resents the student.

Bryan and Corbin recommend a four-step process to escape these negative dynamics with a student:

1. Write a confidential statement expressing your emotions. For example: "I'm Mrs. Corbin, and I have a student named Larry. The first thought I have when I see him is, 'What a slug!' Here's why: Larry doesn't do his homework and heads to the bathroom as soon as I start giving directions in class. His parents don't support me and expect me to bend over backwards to help him. He feels so entitled; I can't stand him."

2. Ask yourself if the statement is entirely true. For example: "Do I absolutely know that Larry feels entitled? I think he acts like he feels entitled, but I don't know for sure what's really going on."

3. Consider what would happen if you didn't make this judgment about the student. For example: "If I didn't have this thought that Larry felt entitled, I might instead think: 'Boy, Larry really has trouble with reading and spelling, and his parents have trouble helping him get homework done at home.' If I didn't think Larry felt entitled, I would willingly give Larry the help that he needed."

4. Modify your original statement. For example: "Larry is entitled to appropriate instruction because he's not succeeding in school."

Corbin and Bryan report that this approach can help teachers get beyond irrational feelings toward students and find the one piece with which they can connect. But it doesn't always work. If a student has serious problems, it might be time to bring in a specialist.

"My Teacher Doesn't Like Me! Understanding and Resolving Student-Teacher Conflicts" by Kathy Checkley in *Education Update*, August 2006 (Vol. 48, #8, p. 1, 2, 6), no e-link available

7. Taking Phys. Ed. Up a Notch Produces Academic Gains

A study reported in *Child Health News* found that middle-school students who exercised vigorously at least three times a week significantly improved their math, science, English, and social studies achievement. They did about 10 percent better than students who took less vigorous physical education classes and those who had no phys. ed.

"We have precious few studies that link activity or fitness to measurable academic outcomes," said Jim Pivarnik, a Michigan State University professor who co-authored the study. "Considering all the factors that go into what determines students' grades in school, a 10 percent increase by the most physically active kids is huge."

Dawn Podulka Coe, the study's lead author, expressed surprise that students who had less vigorous phys. ed. did no better than the couch potatoes who had none. "Physical education and activity during the school day reduce boredom and help keep kids' attention in the classroom," she said. "We were expecting to find that students enrolled in PE would have better grades because of the opportunity to be active during the school day. But enrollment in PE alone did not influence grades." Regular-PE students did no better (but also no worse) than students who had no PE.

What made the difference was when students engaged in more vigorous exercise like running, soccer, football, swimming, or skateboarding, which increased heart rates and breathing to the point where they had a beneficial academic impact.

"Vigorous Exercise Helps Kids Perform Better in Class" in *Child Health News*, August 3, 2006. The original study was published in the August 2006 issues of *Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise*, the journal of the American College of Sports Medicine, http://www.news-medical.net/?id=19243

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 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