

Marshall Memo 103

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

September 19, 2005

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Quotes of the Week

"Knowledge powers a global economy that is utterly unforgiving to the unskilled, uneducated young adult."

Joel Klein, chancellor of schools in New York City (*Education Next*, Fall 2005, p. 21)

"What do you do when a child doesn't learn?"

Sandra Husk, superintendent of Clarksville-Montgomery County Schools in Tennessee, to her principals (*Education Week*, Sept. 14, 2005, Vol. 25, #3, p. S18-22)

"When she left, I felt so lousy, but today, I can say with confidence that I am the instructional leader of this building."

Beth Unfried, Clarksville principal, on the impact of the superintendent's question

"I was the facilities manager, and I was busy. I felt good about what I was doing. I was keeping the peace. Sometimes we made good test scores, sometimes we didn't, but everyone was happy."

Beth Unfried on her approach before her superintendent dropped the bomb (*ibid.*)

"Teachers are formative assessors. It's what they do every day. But if the results don't guide instructional practices, then the exercise is virtually meaningless."

Stuart Kahl (see item #7)

"Struggling students often think that intelligence is magically dispersed to others and they are just some of the unlucky ones."

Christine Redford in *MASCD Perspectives*, Sept./Oct. 2005, p. 16

"I was like, 'I don't want to eat that,' but I had to, because there was nothing else. Then it was like, 'This is good.'"

Ebony Richards, 12, a Harlem student on Swiss chard in the cafeteria (see item #10a)

1. Research Evidence on K-8 Versus Middle Schools

American seventh and eighth graders attend schools with about 30 different grade configurations. A host of issues come into play when districts decide on how to chunk their schools K-12, including: academic performance, school environment, social adjustment, discipline, the number of school-to-school transitions students have to make, parent involvement, building usage, fiscal considerations, personnel deployment, transportation efficiency, neighborhood schools, desegregation, and school viability.

The main grade-configuration debate nowadays is whether K-8 schools are better for young adolescents than 6-8 middle schools. In this *Middle School Journal* article, Vincent Anfara, Jr. and Alison Buehler summarizes the research evidence, which they complain is “sparse” and rarely considers whether 6-8 schools are faithfully implementing the basic tenets of effective middle schools (vis. *Turning Points*).

The most compelling findings from recent studies, they say, revolve around the issue of the impact of transition from one school to another. No matter how well-run middle schools are, students have an additional transition under a K-5 elementary, 6-8 middle, 9-12 high school configuration. One study summed up the evidence this way: “The more grade levels that a school services, the better the student performs. The more transitions a student makes, the worse the student performs.” (Wren, 2004) Anfara and Buehler cite the following research findings:

- A large study in Philadelphia showed markedly higher achievement for students who attended K-8 schools, including 11 percent higher admissions to selective high schools and better ninth-grade GPA’s for K-8 students as compared to those who attended middle schools. (Offenberg 2001)

- A 1999 study showed a significant drop in achievement every time students make a transition from one school to another, i.e., from elementary to middle and from middle to high school. (Alspaugh 1999)

- This study also showed that the achievement loss was greater in districts where several elementary schools merge into a single middle school.

- Students who attended K-8 schools had a less severe drop in achievement when they moved to high school than students who attended middle schools.

- High-school dropout rates were higher among students who had attended middle schools than for students who attended K-8 schools.

- Each time students switched schools, feelings of anonymity increased. (Paglin and Fater 1997)

- Sixth-grade boys had more suspensions if they attended middle and junior-high schools than they did in K-8 schools. (Franklin and Glascock 1998)

- Young adolescent girls suffered a drop in self-esteem, extracurricular participation, and leadership behaviors when they attended middle or junior high schools, but not when they remained in K-8 schools. Boys had lower grades and extracurricular participation in middle schools, but their self-esteem did not drop. (Simmons and Blyth 1987)

- In a recent survey, middle-school principals in Philadelphia (which is shifting from middle to K-8 schools) cited the following advantages of K-8 schools (Look 2001):

- It is easier to fill teaching vacancies.
- A K-8 school is safer.
- Parent involvement is greater.
- Younger and older siblings can travel to school together.
- Staff members feel more connected to the community because the K-8 serves a smaller geographic area than a middle school.
- Teachers can see their impact on students as they grow into young adults.

All this notwithstanding, Anfara and Buehler caution against a thoughtless stampede to K-8 schools. Before abandoning middle schools, they say, a district needs to answer questions on which the research evidence is sparsest:

- Will the grade configuration increase or decrease parent involvement?
- How many students will be at each grade level, and what implications will this have for course offerings and instructional grouping?
- How will the presence or absence of older students affect younger students?
- What are the opportunities for interaction between age groups?
- Is the design of the school building suited to this grade configuration?
- What is the cost and length of student travel?
- How will grade configuration affect the continuity and articulation of the curriculum?

Anfara and Buehler also cite some cautions and disadvantages that emerged from the Philadelphia study:

- Some districts provide lower levels of funding for elementary schools.
- K-8 schools are not automatically assigned an assistant principal or police officer.
- K-8 schools may be assigned only one counselor.
- Will young adolescents get a developmentally-appropriate curriculum in K-8 schools?

Anfara and Buehler conclude by emphasizing the importance of high-quality teaching that is well-tuned to the unique needs of young adolescents. They attribute the poor track record of many middle schools to districts' failure to faithfully implement the recommendations of *This We Believe* and *Turning Points*, as well as inadequate funding and the failure of many states to require specialized training and certification for middle-school teachers. "[U]nder any grade configuration," they say, "educating young adolescents is hard work... No sequence of grades is perfect or, in itself, guarantees student academic achievement and healthy social and emotional development." Nonetheless, they hold out some hope that

middle-grade students will do better in K-8 settings because of their more student-centered faculty ethos.

“Grade Configuration and the Education of Young Adolescents” by Vincent Anfara, Jr. and Alison Buehler in *Middle School Journal*, Sept. 2005 (Vol. 37, #1, p. 53-59), no e-link

2. When a Middle School Isn’t a Middle School But Still Is a Middle School

In his lead editorial in *Middle School Journal*, editor Tom Erb finesses the K-8-versus-middle-school debate by arguing that schools that faithfully implement the middle school model are middle schools whatever type of building they inhabit. “The middle school concept is about organizing and delivering developmentally appropriate programs for young adolescents,” he writes, “not about what grades may or may not be housed in the school building.” Erb continues:

- Studies show that schools that implement the middle-school model (as described in *Turning Points 2000*) do well in terms of student achievement and behavior.
- The admitted failure of many big-city middle schools is due to their size. Erb quotes Howley (1995): “Large schools compound the negative effects of being impoverished.” The middle school concept, Erb asserts, “has long called for small schools or schools made to seem small through teaming and advisories and adult advocates.” But big-city districts have failed to implement small learning communities in their secondary schools.
- Attacks on middle schools are really attacks on poor practices carried out in middle school buildings.
- The move to educate grade 6-8 students in K-8 buildings “is really an attempt to achieve the small, personalized school climate that is integral to the middle school concept.”
- Escaping to K-8 buildings may get some big-city districts closer to the middle-school ideal.

Erb observes that four variables seem to interact to affect student behavior and learning: school size, timing of school transitions, student SES, and how the middle grades are organized to deliver instruction. Smallness and fewer transitions should help, he says, but that’s not enough: “these factors would be more powerful if combined with the other elements of effective middle schools in any setting where young adolescents gather to learn.”

“The Making of a New Urban Myth” by Tom Erb in *Middle School Journal*, Sept. 2005 (Vol. 37, #1, p. 2-3, 59), no e-link

3. Pros and Cons of Shifting to K-8 Schools

In another *Middle School Journal* article, Florida professor Paul George summarizes the reasons for the current bandwagon for K-8 schools:

- Improving test scores;
- Improving student discipline;
- Closing troubled middle schools;
- Relieving overcrowded middle schools;

- Eliminating a big transition to sixth grade in a new building;
- Longer-lasting and potentially more positive teacher-student relationships;
- Students staying longer in a neighborhood school;
- Children “staying younger” for a longer period of time;
- Increased parent involvement and communication;
- An enriched curriculum for younger children;
- Benefits for elementary and secondary educators being in the same building (elementary teachers developing more subject-area expertise and middle-school teachers being more tuned in to the “whole child”);
- Benefits for teacher education and administrator preparation (e.g., the possibility of a new K-8 certification and stretching knowledge and skills).

George then lists a number of negative consequences that could come from reorganizing along K-8 lines:

- Reconfiguration to K-8 might occur without the necessary re-culturing of those schools.
- Just changing grade configuration is unlikely to produce test score gains.
- There might be conflict between elementary and secondary educators: “At the school and classroom level, teachers who see the school world in starkly different ways may find it difficult to communicate, let alone collaborate in a way that creates a cohesive school program within the K-8 building.”
- Essential professional development for principals might be slighted; leading a K-8 school is quite different from doing so in a K-5 or 6-8 school, and educators need extensive support to make the transition.
- There might be inadequate teacher preparation and orientation for the new K-8 world.
- Students’ transition to high school might be more difficult from a K-8 setting; after all, the junior high school was invented because the elementary-to-high-school transition was such a challenge.
- Some students “outgrow” elementary school and get claustrophobic in grades 6-8.
- Younger students might be “corrupted” by street-wise older students.
- There might be scheduling conflicts between the upper and lower segments of the building.
- Some K-8 buildings might get administrators who are “unprepared, inexperienced, or unsympathetic to one or the other age group.
- For budget reasons, districts might fail to assign enough additional staff needed to educate young adolescents.
- There might be problems refitting elementary buildings to accommodate bigger students as well as moving furniture, books, computers, and other materials and equipment.

George is clearly worried that young adolescents may be slighted in the headlong rush to K-8 schools. Students in grades 6, 7, and 8, he argues, “need well-trained teachers, cohesive learning communities, mentoring programs, and a rich and rigorous curriculum focused on

their interests and needs. Can educators seize this new opportunity to create schools that are unique institutions for the age group they embrace? The next generation of young adolescents awaits the answer.”

“K-8 or Not? Reconfiguring the Middle Grades” by Paul George in *Middle School Journal*, Sept. 2005 (Vol. 37, #1, p. 6-13), no e-link

4. An Argument for 6-8 Middle Schools

In this article, three professors report on a study of 101 K-8 schools examining the impact of this grade structure on upper-grade students. Most of the K-8 principals surveyed (84%) said they would prefer to have middle-school students in separate 6-8 buildings, and the researchers agree. Among the reasons:

- K-8 schools offered fewer non-core subjects than middle schools (e.g., band, art, chorus, computers, foreign language, technology, and minicourses).
- K-8 students were much less likely to be taught by interdisciplinary teams of teachers.
- Fewer K-8 schools have implemented teacher-led advisory groups (although advisory groups are hardly universal in middle schools).

The only positive that emerged for K-8 schools was that upper-grade students have about 30 minutes more time devoted to literacy (because K-8 schools typically have fewer non-core and elective offerings).

“How Effective Are K-8 Schools for Young Adolescents?” by Kenneth McEwin, Thomas Dickinson, and Michael Jacobson in *Middle School Journal*, Sept. 2005 (Vol. 37, #1, p. 24-28), no e-link. The full 69-page report, *Programs and Practices in K-8 Schools: Do They Meet the Educational Needs of Young Adolescents?*, Can be purchased at:

<http://store.nmsa.org/index.asp?PageAction=VIEWCATS&Category=209>

5. How Do K-8 and 6-8 Students Do When They Get to High School?

This article reports on a study of Miami-Dade County’s pilot program of five small K-8 schools. Results within the schools were positive, but this study followed the graduates into their first year of high school and compared them to students who had attended grade 6-8 middle schools. The findings:

- *Reading* – Students who attended K-8 schools outperformed middle-school students while they were in grades 6-8, but in their first year of high school, the gap closed; both groups had identical Stanford reading scores.

- *Math* – K-8 students outperformed middle-school students in grades 6-8 and maintained their lead in ninth grade.

- *Attendance* – K-8 students had much better attendance than middle-school students in grades 6-8; their attendance declined in high school, but was still slightly better than the middle-school students (9 days absent for the year versus 10).

- *Behavior* – Both K-8 and middle-school students had more out-of-school suspensions as they got older, increasing at the same rate in eighth grade. But in ninth grade, K-8 students had a smaller increase than middle-school students (4.7 versus 6.83 per hundred students).

“The Effects of Small K-8 Centers Compared to Large 6-8 Schools on Student Performance” by Rodolfo Abella in *Middle School Journal*, Sept. 2005 (Vol. 37, #1, p. 29-35), no e-link.

6. Five Mental Qualities Our Students Need

In this *Education Week* article, multiple-intelligences guru Howard Gardner says we need to look at more than test scores to judge whether our students are prepared for the 21st century. Here are the qualities that Gardner believes schools need to cultivate in our students if we are to be successful as a nation – and a world:

- *A disciplined mind* – One that can think well and appropriately in the major disciplines.
- *A synthesizing mind* – One that can sift through a large amount of information, decide what is important, and put it together in ways that make sense personally – and for others.
- *A creative mind* – One that can raise new questions, come up with novel solutions, and think outside the box.
- *A respectful mind* – One that honors the differences among individuals and groups, trying to understand and work productively with them.
- *An ethical mind* – One that thinks beyond selfish interests and aspires to be a contributing worker and citizen.

“Beyond the Herd Mentality: The Minds That We Truly Need in the Future” by Howard Gardner in *Education Week*, Sept. 14, 2005 (Vol. 25, #3, p. 44), no free e-link anymore!

7. Key Characteristics of Formative Assessments

“Teachers are formative assessors,” says Stuart Kahl, head of Measured Progress, an assessment company based in New Hampshire. “It’s what they do every day. But if the results don’t guide instructional practices, then the exercise is virtually meaningless.” Kahl suggests four questions that we should ask about during-the-year assessments to gauge their impact on learning:

- *Timing* – Are formative assessments given in the same time-frame that the content is being taught?
- *Quality of questions* – Do interim assessments contain constructed-response (in addition to multiple-choice) questions so teachers can see actual student work, get insights into student reasoning, and detect misconceptions and erroneous practices?
- *Quality of data* – Do formative assessments give teachers accurate, pertinent, diagnostic information on students’ learning?
- *Follow-up* – Do teachers use the information from interim assessments to inform and adjust instruction for individual students?

“Where in the World Are Formative Tests? Right Under Your Nose!” by Stuart Kahl, CEO of Measured Progress, an assessment company based in New Hampshire, in an advertisement in *Education Week*, Sept. 14, 2005

8. Effective Use of Interim Assessments

Teachers in Gilroy, California have recently begun looking at data from interim assessments to improve their teaching and help struggling students. Teachers’ meeting rooms are now plastered with material tracking students’ progress on assessments, including color-coded computer spreadsheets and Post-It notes and poster boards to show which students have mastered which skills. “There’s a constant conversation about what’s working, and what’s not,” says Theresa Graham, a fifth-grade teacher whose team focused their reading instruction on a problem area (author’s intent) and saw student performance jump. “It’s ‘What did you do? How did you get that to happen?’”

Overall achievement in the district has improved, but the initiative has not been without bumps. Teachers filed a grievance when data-analysis meetings went beyond contractual time allocations. But things are now smoothing out.

“Forward Motion” by Jeff Archer in *Education Week*, Sept. 14, 2005 (Vol. 25, #3, p. S-12), no free e-link available

9. A Google for Math Teaching Ideas

In his *New York Times* column last Friday, Thomas Friedman continued prodding Americans to learn from high-performing Asian schools. “They are not racing us to the bottom,” says Friedman. “They are racing us to the top.” This column focuses on Singapore, which is working to make further improvements in its already highly-touted math curriculum, encouraging teachers to be more creative. “We have shifted the emphasis from content alone to making use of the content,” explained one high-school principal. “Knowledge can be created in the classroom and doesn’t just have to come from the teacher.”

In pursuit of this goal, 35 of Singapore’s 165 schools are now using HeyMath, a website created four years ago by a team of Indian, Chinese, and English math specialists. The platform is a compendium of the best math teaching approaches and materials (complete with animations) for any given topic (for example, teaching congruence to 14-year olds). The HeyMath platform also has an online collection of questions indexed by concept and grade to save teachers time writing homework and tests. HeyMath’s goal is to be an international math Google, enabling any student and teacher to tap into the ideas and approaches of the “best teacher in the world” and also be able to measure themselves against their peers globally. You can check it out at <http://www.heymath.net>.

“Still Eating Our Lunch” by Thomas Friedman in *New York Times*, Sept. 16, 2005
<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/16/opinion/16friedman.html>

10. Short Items:

a. Eating healthy in the Big Apple – Promise Academy, a charter school in Harlem, is on a campaign to get students eating healthier food. A whopping 44 percent of the students in this high-poverty school are overweight, and Promise has effectively taken control of students' diets, dictating a regimen of unprocessed, regionally-grown food in school and trying to influence what students eat outside school hours. This has been a shock to students, most of whom were used to junk food and had never eaten a fresh raspberry or peach that wasn't canned in sugar syrup. "I was like, 'I don't want to eat that,'" said Ebony Richards, 12, when she first encountered Swiss chard in the cafeteria line. "But I had to, because there was nothing else. Then it was like, 'This is good.'"

Promise Academy is part of the Harlem Children's Zone, a 60-block area of New York City targeted by Geoffrey Canada for a comprehensive, well-funded attack on poverty and its consequences. "Our challenge is to create an environment where young people actually eat healthy and learn to do it for the rest of their lives," said Canada, a teacher and author from the Bronx who earned a master's degree at Harvard. Following Canada's lead, staff at Promise Academy consider food as important as homework, and regularly measure children's weight and fitness along with their academic proficiency. The school's dream is well-fed, high-achieving students with college and bright, healthy futures ahead.

"Harlem School Introduces Children to Swiss Chard" by Kim Severson in the *New York Times*, Sept. 9, 2005; this article can be purchased at <http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=FA0615FD38550C7A8CDDA00894DD404482>

b. Qualifications for "highly qualified" math teachers - What is a "highly qualified" teacher? No Child Left Behind has one definition, but some national curriculum groups want to set the bar somewhat higher. Here are the criteria suggested by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM):

- For high-school teachers, math coursework equivalent to that required for a major;
- For middle-school teachers, math proficiency equal to a minor in college;
- For elementary teachers, at least three college-level courses that emphasize math essential to younger students;
- Expertise working with students from diverse backgrounds;
- An ability to conduct effective lessons and gauge their impact;
- A commitment to lifelong professional development and improvement.

"Subject-Matter Groups Want More From Teachers Than NCLB Seeks" by Sean Cavanagh and Kathleen Kennedy Manzo in *Education Week*, Sept. 14, 2005 (Vol. 25, #3, p. 6-7), no free e-link available

c. Do boys do better with male teachers? A recent British study found that male teachers in the elementary grades do not boost the academic achievement of boys or

make them more positive about school. Researchers gave attitude surveys and tests in reading, math, and science to 9,000 eleven-year-olds and found that boys who had male teachers did no better than those who had female teachers (although in general, children taught by female teachers had more positive attitudes toward school). “We’re not saying that we could not do with more male teachers,” said Peter Tymms, the director of Durham University’s Curriculum, Evaluation, and Management Centre, “but we are saying that it is not going to impact on boys’ performance and attitude.” About 15 percent of British elementary teachers are male.

“Male Teachers Don’t Benefit Boys, Study Finds” by Chris Johnson in *The Guardian* (London), Sept. 9, 2005 <http://education.guardian.co.uk/schools/story/0,5500,1565646,00.html> (spotted in *ASCD SmartBrief*, Sept. 15, 2005)

d. School website reviews – The website of ArtSpace Charter School in North Carolina is featured (and commented on) in this month’s issue of *Curriculum Review*. The school’s site is <http://www.artspacecharter.org>. If you would like *Curriculum Review* to review your school’s site, send the URL plus basic information on your school to frank@paper-clip.com.

“CR Review Your School’s Web Site” in *Curriculum Review*, September 2005 (Vol. 45, #1, p. 5), no e-link available

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Do you have feedback? Is anything missing?

If you have comments or suggestions, if you saw an article or web item in the last week that you think should have been summarized, or if you would like to suggest additional publications that should be covered by the Marshall Memo, please e-mail: kim.marshall8@verizon.net

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and others very well-informed on current research and best practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 35 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, and writer, lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 39 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through scores of articles each week, and selects 5-10 that have the greatest potential to improve teaching, leadership, and learning. He then writes a brief summary of each article, pulls out several striking quotes, 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 2003-04).

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- A database of all articles to date, searchable by topic, title, author, source, level, etc.
- How to change access e-mail or password

Publications covered:

(those read this week are underlined)

American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American School Board Journal
ASCD SmartBrief
Atlantic Monthly
Bay State Banner
Boston Globe
CommonWealth Magazine
District Administration
Ed. Magazine (Harvard School of Education)
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Update (ASCD)
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
Harper's
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Educational Review
Journal of Staff Development
Middle School Journal
NABE News
NASSP Bulletin
New York Times
New Yorker
Newsweek
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal Magazine
Principal Leadership
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
Teacher Magazine
Teachers College Record
Theory Into Action

E-links will be provided whenever possible.