Marshall Memo 381

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
April 11, 2011

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Unless all participants in the system are working to solve the same problems and unless solving them improves everyone's work lives, there is no compelling reason for them to work together to build problem-solving products."

Anne Morris and James Hiebert (see item #1)

"It's a drug. It's like online crack."

Julia Taylor, high-school counselor, about Formspring.me (see item #2)

"We say this happens outside of school. If they're in my office and they're upset about it, it's affecting school."

Julia Taylor (*ibid*.)

"What makes students and families crazy during this transition is their belief that the college admissions process is about finding *the* right college. It isn't. It's about a child successfully leaving the family and beginning young adulthood. Educators need to maintain that perspective when students – and families – lose it."

Michael Thompson (see item #6)

"For all principals in all schools, there comes a time to leave."

Joanne Rooney (see item #7)

"When you leave, leave."

Joanne Rooney (*ibid*.)

1. A Formula for Improving Teaching and Learning

In this thoughtful article in *Educational Researcher*, University of Delaware professors Anne Morris and James Hiebert agree with *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof when he says that our "greatest national shame" is the fact that American students' learning opportunities vary so much from school to school and classroom to classroom. "Students who happen to receive ineffective instruction fall further and further behind those who receive good instruction," say Morris and Hiebert. "Even a few years of [ineffective] instruction can doom students to a lifetime of fewer opportunities."

Another problem, say the authors, is that overall, teaching in U.S. schools has changed very little over the last hundred years. By and large, the way classrooms are organized and teachers relate to students has remained stubbornly consistent.

Morris and Hiebert believe that the first problem – variability in teaching quality – is linked to the second – lack of improvement over time. "If instruction varies from classroom to classroom," they say, "there is no way of accumulating evidence about what works and what does not across different classroom settings. There is no way of developing a 'science of improvement' that yields the kind of knowledge needed to build improvements upon improvements over time."

To improve teaching and learning for all students, Morris and Hiebert say that educators need three enabling conditions:

• *A shared problem or goal* – "Unless all participants in the system are working to solve the same problems and unless solving them improves everyone's work lives," they argue, "there is no compelling reason for them to work together to build problem-solving products." The best way to get educators to collaborate, they say, is for them to focus on the common challenge of improving student learning in specific ways and be accountable for getting results.

• *Small tests of small changes* – Morris and Hiebert say that lots of "empirical tinkering" in classrooms is an excellent way to develop teaching practices that work best.

• *Multiple sources of innovation* – "Taking advantage of different kinds of knowledge and different kinds of expertise results in products that are more useful and of higher quality than products created by individuals working alone," say the authors. "In addition, products that are jointly constructed are owned by all the participants, which, in turn, results in increased use of the products and increased commitment to improve them over time."

Morris and Hiebert describe three examples of situations – one in health care and two in education – where these enabling conditions were present and professionals built public, effective, usable "knowledge products":

• Example #1: The quality movement in health care – In the late 1980s, Dr. Donald Berwick and other health-care leaders became concerned about the variable quality of care in hospitals around the country – especially the number of preventable medical errors. Berwick and his colleagues found that a lot of what doctors did was based on local practice, habit, intuition, and the particular training doctors happened to have received. For example, in one hospital, there were 50 different ways of inserting IVs. This made it impossible to find the sources of IV infections.

Berwick concluded that the key to improving medical practice was identifying some standardized treatment protocols, trying them out, measuring patient outcomes using common metrics, refining the protocols, zeroing in on the most effective practices, and spreading the word. Some doctors objected to this approach, saying that it treated them like robots and turned medicine into a mechanical system. Patients were too variable for this approach to work, they said.

But the reformers pushed back. "It's not the patient variations we're talking about," said Dr. Lucian Leape, one of Berwick's colleagues. "It's *our* variations that are the problem." If different patients receive different treatments according to each doctor's intuitive judgment, it's very difficult to figure out what's working and what isn't. "To be studied," say Morris and Hiebert, "variability must arise as the differential effect of standardized treatments. As different groups emerge, defined by the similarity of their responses to a treatment, the reasons for the variability between groups can be studied systematically and the treatment can then be adapted to meet each group's needs."

Berwick and his colleagues conducted multiple small trials – for example, trying an improved procedure for inserting IVs with the next 10 patients who entered a hospital – and found that they quickly moved from hunches to hypotheses to revisions. Over time, these small trials produced major improvements, reducing IV infections and deaths to practically zero. This was because the three enabling conditions were all present: a shared problem (reducing medical errors), lots of small trials (using standardized procedures to allow measurement of results), and multiple sources of innovation (doctors, nurses, medical assistants, and technicians all contributed in a democratic team seeking best practices).

• Example #2: Lesson study – Over the last 60 years, Japan's elementary school teachers have adopted an approach to lesson development that is credited for major improvements in the quality of teaching and learning in Japanese grade 1-8 schools. Teams of 3-6 teachers (often joined by an outside expert) decide on an area of the curriculum in which students need improvement, search the literature for ideas, develop a detailed lesson plan and a way of assessing learning, observe one member of the team teaching the lesson, debrief and revise the lesson, observe another member teaching the improved lesson, make further revisions, and share the lesson with others.

"The lesson study cycle," say Morris and Hiebert, "includes a sequence of carefully choreographed events designed to increase these teachers' knowledge and the profession's knowledge of how to help students reach these particular learning goals… The success of lessons often hinges on small changes – asking a question in just the right way at the right time or posing a particular task at a particular point in the lesson." Japanese teachers' annotated lesson plans include the rationale for changes, which makes it possible for other teachers to use and adapt them to their own classrooms. Because Japan has a national curriculum, instructional goals and challenges are shared by all same-grade teachers, which means that well-crafted lessons are extremely helpful in schools across the country.

• Example #3: Word Generation – This middle-school vocabulary program was developed by researchers at the Harvard Graduate School of Education in collaboration with SERP (Strategic Education Research Partnership) and the Boston Public Schools. Word Generation, which went through several rounds of pilot testing and revision and is now available to schools across the U.S., consists of 24 weeks of daily 15-minute vocabulary-building modules taught by different subject-matter teachers.

The challenge the program addresses is secondary-school students' weak grasp of academic and technical vocabulary. "Word Generation illustrates the way in which research can inform the pedagogical details of instructional practice and blend research findings with key instructional moves," say Morris and Hiebert. They note that most other instructional materials, including state teaching and learning standards, scope and sequence charts, and textbooks, don't meet these criteria and are therefore considerably less useful to teachers.

These three examples – health-care improvement, Lesson Study, and Word Generation – are helpful instructional products because:

- They address shared problems and goals.
- They are detailed enough so other practitioners can implement them.
- They are testable and improvable; other practitioners can try them out, assess results, and make further improvements.
- They are accessible to everyone via the Internet.

"Creating Shared Instructional Products: An Alternative Approach to Improving Teaching" by Anne Morris and James Hiebert in *Educational Researcher*, January/February 2011 (Vol. 40, #1, p. 5-14); to purchase, go to http://edr.sagepub.com/content/40/1/5.full; the authors can be reached at abmorris@udel.edu and hiebert@udel.edu.

Back to page one

2. Another Venue for Internet Bullying

In this troubling *Education Week* article, Nirvi Shah reports on the way some students are using the social-networking site Formspring.me to post anonymous comments about peers – You're ugly, fat, stupid, gay, etc. Some teens have gone further, telling someone not to show up to school. One Canadian mother says taunts on Formspring contributed to her 15-year-old daughter's suicide in January 2011.

The original idea of Formspring was to allow people to find out more about each other through online quizzes. Since it was created in November 2009, the site has attracted 23 million users, a third of them between 13 and 17, and handles about 10 million posts a day. A Formspring page is a string of questions, resembling an interview, and you can choose which questions to answer. Questions are private, and if users get questions they don't like, they can delete them, and can also block a person from asking more questions. But it is possible to ask questions and post answers without revealing your identity. About 75 percent of users attach their names, according to Formspring spokeswoman Sarahjane Sacchetti.

Needless to say, Formspring harassment and bullying add to the headaches of school administrators, who must decide whether they can discipline students for activity that often takes place before or after school hours. "We say this happens outside of school," says North Carolina high-school counselor Julia Taylor. "If they're in my office and they're upset about it, it's affecting school. It's the online version of truth or dare – without the dare. It's a drug. It's like online crack."

And indeed, once students start using the site, they find it difficult to stop. "It's the reality-TV fad," says University of Wisconsin/Eau Claire professor Justin Patchin. You want to be where the action is. I've heard other students tell me they feel it's safer to be on these sites with their bullies. They can see what they're saying about them and maybe win them over. From the logic of a teenager, it makes sense."

School administrators can't always discipline off-campus online activity, but Elizabeth Englander of the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center at Bridgewater State University says, "There are many, many things [schools] can do besides disciplining the cyberbully. They need to be involved in the education issue. Their responsibility is to help children who are being traumatized and educate children who are engaging in risky behavior." They can have a frank conversation in which they tell suspected cyberbullies that they may be engaging in illegal activity.

For its part, Formspring says it cooperates with schools and the police when threats are reported, and can ban a student from the site for abusing it. The problem is that Formspring is understaffed and complaints are processed slowly. MIT computer experts have recently teamed up with Formspring to try to develop software that can flag problems more quickly.

"Bullies Operate Anonymously on Popular Social Network" by Nirvi Shah in *Education Week*, Apr. 6, 2011 (Vol. 30, #27, p. 12-13), http://www.edweek.org.

Back to page one

3. The Importance of School Food

In this *Educational Researcher* article, University of North Dakota professor Marcus Weaver-Hightower argues that we need to pay more attention to school food. He's addressing researchers, but what he says applies equally to principals and district officials:

• *School food affects student achievement*. Studies are increasingly showing a link between good nutrition and academic success.

• *School food affects teaching*. Many educators eat school food, so its nutritional value is important to their performance.

• *Food affects school spending*. The money earned from junk food sales benefits schools, which is why some administrators are unwilling to curtail such sales.

• *Schools teach children about food*. There's a "hidden curriculum" in current practices, which can be counteracted by more explicit teaching (and actions) on nutrition.

• *School food is a window into identity and culture*. In the school cafeteria as in society at large, food is a means of identifying and separating people, says Weaver-Hightower. In too many schools, junk food is what students eat and healthy food is for adults. "To eat healthy food was almost viewed [by the children] as a rejection of the intrinsic meaning of being a child," said the authors of a study of school food in England. They found that students used food as a kind of "social camouflage" to fit in and avoid bullying.

• *School food affects the environment*. Because of the massive number of meals served in schools every day, what's on the menu has major environmental consequences – the fuel used to transport food, refrigeration costs, plastic containers, the energy involved in raising livestock, use of chemical fertilizers, etc.

• *School food is big business*. The food served in school cafeterias and vending machines makes up a significant part of the economy, and is stable even during economic downturns (kids still have to eat every day). "Schools are corporations' prime targets for getting children to try new products, view advertising, and develop brand loyalty," says Weaver-Hightower.

• *School food can be a wedge issue politically*. Conservative politicians in Great Britain and the U.S. have sometimes tried to cut back on school meals – President Reagan caused a stir when his administration began to count ketchup as a serving of vegetables. First Lady Michelle Obama's campaign against obesity has been attacked by some as unwarranted government intrusion into people's lives.

• *School food affects social justice*. In 2009, the U.S. Department of Agriculture found that nearly 15 percent of households had insufficient food at some point during the year. In the recent economic downturn, record numbers of children qualified for free and reduced-price school meals. School food is an important leveler when it comes to combatting food insecurity.

"Why Education Researchers Should Take School Food Seriously" by Marcus Weaver-Hightower in *Educational Researcher*, January/February 2011 (Vol. 40, #1, p. 15-21) http://www.aera.net/uploadedFiles/Publications/Journals/Educational_Researcher/4001/15-21_02EDR11.pdf; the author can be reached at mwh@und.edu.

Back to page one

4. Tuning a Middle School to the Young Adolescent

(Originally titled "Movin' Up to the Middle")

In this *Educational Leadership* article, author/consultant Rick Wormeli stresses the life-altering importance of a successful middle-school experience, especially for students from high-poverty environments. "It's interesting, too, how some adults revert to adolescent

responses when stressed by conflict, failure, and risk-taking," he says. "If we learn to handle issues constructively during these formative years, ages 10-15, we tend to respond positively to challenges later on." Wormeli lists five keys to making middle school work for students:

• *Understanding students' concerns about belonging* – This includes introducing rising students to the school before they enroll; decorating classrooms and hallways appropriately; giving students meaningful roles from the start; getting them into clubs and activities; and plunging right into rigorous middle-school course content.

• *Empathizing with students* – Staff need to be in touch with their inner young adolescent, says Wormeli, remembering the predictable worries about homework, demanding teachers, making mistakes, bullying, and getting lost. Think of rising middle-school students as arriving in a new country where they don't speak the language and know the customs, he advises.

• *Understanding the age group* – Staff members should be up to speed on where young adolescents are developmentally, including differences in girls' and boys' maturation; worries about body changes; raging hormones; the importance of nutrition and hydration; the fact that students' brains haven't fully developed for decision-making, moral and abstract reasoning, planning, understanding consequences, and other executive functions; the tendency toward addictive behaviors and pleasure seeking; curiosity and independence; a craving for social connection; self-centeredness; compassion toward the less fortunate; and more.

• *Not underestimating students* – Staff should sweeten their beginning-of-the-year lectures about rules with exciting material and new opportunities (like being able to check out ten books at a time from the library, versus the two in elementary school). Students should be given meaningful work and allowed to solve challenging problems. "Marching a class to the cafeteria for lunch and back, with the teacher monitoring their every move, is insulting," says Wormeli. Students need to be taught proper behavior, but the goal is autonomy, not dependence.

• *Building hope* – "To young adolescents, hope is oxygen," says Wormeli. *Maybe the teacher won't know what a jerk I was on the bus this morning. Why did I just say that to Melissa? Can I fix this? Please tell me I left my science notebook in my locker and not at home; please, please, please!* We should give fewer warnings and more hope, he says, and teachers should separate the consequences for impulsive, immature behavior from academic grades, giving students hope that they can survive their mistakes.

"Movin' Up to the Middle" by Rick Wormeli in *Educational Leadership*, April 2011 (Vol. 68, #7, p. 48-53), http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership.aspx; Wormeli can be reached at rwormeli@cox.net.

Back to page one

5. Cheating in High School

In this *Education Week* article, Sarah Sparks reports on a Harvard/Duke study demonstrating that students who cheat on one test tend to believe that their undeserved performance is real and have inflated expectations of how they will do on a subsequent test. In

other words, cheaters lie to themselves. "We see that the effect of cheating is, the more we engage in dishonest acts, the more we develop these cognitive distortions – ways in which we neutralize the act and almost forget how much we are doing it," says Jason Stephens of the University of Connecticut/Storrs.

Inflated expectations of future performance were more likely to occur if the student is praised for the test on which he or she cheated. "In our experiments, we find that social recognition reinforces self-deception," says Zoe Chance, the lead author of the Harvard/Duke study. Cheaters find themselves on a slippery slope, thinking they're smart when they haven't done the work necessary to succeed and spiraling into worse and worse performance in situations where they can't cheat. "Kids start to disengage from responsibility habitually," says Stephens; "cheating in high school does lead to dishonesty in the workplace as an adult."

The percentage of students who admit to cheating in school has been over 50% since surveys were first taken on this subject in 1992. A recent national study of 40,000 public and private high-school students found the following:

- 59% admitted to having cheated on a test.
- 55% of admitted cheaters were honors students.
- 80% admitted copying homework from another student.
- More than a third had plagiarized an Internet document for a class assignment.
- 61% admitted lying to a teacher about "something important" at least once in the last year.
- Only 20% admitted cheating in sports.

All this despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of students say that cheating is wrong. So why do they cheat? Among the reasons:

- Pressure to get high grades;
- The school's emphasis on high grades over real learning;
- Uncertainty about their own ability;
- Not being engaged with the material;
- Believing the teacher is unfair or uninteresting.

And what are some ways to reduce cheating? The researchers suggest:

- Establishing classwide and schoolwide codes for academic integrity;
- Reminding students of the school's honor code before every assignment and test;
- Reducing opportunities for cheating;
- Making learning meaningful and interesting.

"Think about helping cheaters find alternative means to get what they want," says Chance, "so that they don't react by cheating more or giving up."

"Studies Shed Light on How Cheating Impedes Learning" by Sarah Sparks in *Education Week*, Mar. 30, 2011 (Vol. 30, #26, p. 1, 16), http://www.edweek.org

Back to page one

6. Preparing Students to Move On From High School

(Originally titled "Fighting College Craziness")

In this *Educational Leadership* article, psychologist Michael Thompson has wise counsel for parents and educators as high-school students apply for college. "What makes students and families crazy during this transition is their belief that the college admissions process is about finding *the* right college," he says. "It isn't. It's about a child successfully leaving the family and beginning young adulthood. Educators need to maintain that perspective when students – and families – lose it."

Thompson has a list of what schools should make sure seniors focus on in the months before they graduate:

- Practicing their leadership skills;
- Using the process of choosing their next life step for rich, unpressured self-discovery;
- Taking stock of their talents and accomplishments;
- Giving back to the school community in a meaningful way;
- Participating in a ritual that marks their passage to adulthood. This should involve a smaller, more intimate ceremony in addition to the whole-school graduation ritual.

"Fighting College Craziness" by Michael Thompson in *Educational Leadership*, April 2011 (Vol. 68, #7, p. 84-86), http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership.aspx

Back to page one

7. Advice to a Departing Principal

(Originally titled "Passing the Torch")

"For all principals in all schools," says Joanne Rooney in this *Educational Leadership* article, "there comes a time to leave." Her advice:

• *Tell the central office early*. This gives time to find the right replacement.

• *Make sure the selection committee knows your school*. This includes teacher leadership, union, and parent issues.

• *Prepare colleagues*. They're the ones most deeply affected. Tell them – all together – before the official announcement.

• *Keep working on planning, budgeting, and hiring*. "Show that you care about the school's future," says Rooney.

• *Keep supervising*. Give specific praise to effective teachers and have tough-love conversations with underperformers.

• *Welcome the new principal*. Tour the school, make introductions, and pass along important information on teachers and programs.

• *Plan ceremonies and rituals*. "These are important for closure, for preserving memories of your leadership, and for introducing the new principal," says Rooney.

• *Leave an organized workspace*. Clean out your stuff, but leave a detailed calendar and up-to-date files.

• *When you leave, leave*. "Some relationships will continue and, indeed, might last a

lifetime," counsels Rooney. "But hearing how much better things were 'when *you* were here' is self-serving and harmful to the new leader."

"Passing the Torch" by Joanne Rooney in *Educational Leadership*, April 2011 (Vol. 68, #7, p. 94, 93), http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership.aspx; Rooney can be reached at joannerooney@comcast.net

Back to page one

8. Websites:

a. Environmental issues – This site, created by the Smithsonian Institution, Microsoft Partners in Learning, and TakingITGlobal, focuses on six environmental issues and encourages students to learn about them and take action: http://shoutlearning.org

"Shouting in School" in Bulletin Board, *Principal Leadership*, April 2011 (Vol. 11, #8, p. 6)

Back to page one

b. Anonymous tips – This free website allows students, parents, and teachers to send messages about bullying, harassment, fights, and other issues to school officials, confident about remaining anonymous: http://www.anonymoustips.com.

"Reporting Without Retaliation" in Bulletin Board, *Principal Leadership*, April 2011 (Vol. 11, #8, p. 6)

Back to page one

c. Student donations – The Giving Effect website helps connect students to charitable efforts: http://thegivingeffect.com/donate-clothes-food-household-items.

"Community Service" in Bulletin Board, *Principal Leadership*, April 2011 (Vol. 11, #8, p. 6)

Back to page one

d. College searches – The free Edu Launch Pad website helps students and their parents with the entire college identification and application process: http://www.edulaunchpad.com.

"College Searches Made Easy" in Bulletin Board, *Principal Leadership*, April 2011 (Vol. 11, #8, p. 7)

Back to page one

e. Why chemistry matters – This website features four Nobel laureates explaining their lives as chemists, their work, and the beauty of chemistry: http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/chemistry/chemistry_matters.html.

"The Relevance of Chemistry" in Bulletin Board, *Principal Leadership*, April 2011 (Vol. 11, #8, p. 7)

Back to page one

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 41 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:

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- How to change access e-mail or log-in

Publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
ASCD, CEC SmartBriefs, Daily EdNews
Ed. Magazine
EDge
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
Essential Teacher (TESOL)
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Educational Review
JESPAR
Journal of Staff Development
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
The Atlantic Monthly
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Language Educator
The Learning Principal
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
The School Administrator
Theory Into Practice
Tools for Schools