# Marshall Memo 307

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
October 26, 2009

## In This Issue:



## Quotes of the Week

"I've always loved twice-baked potatoes, especially when they're covered with cheese. But I hate twice-made policy mistakes."

James Popham (see item #2)

"Those who supervise teachers' instructional efforts have been satisfied to focus on what the teacher does rather than what happens to students as a consequence of what the teacher does."

James Popham (*ibid.*)

"To be successful, teams need to set and share goals to work on that are immediately applicable to their classrooms. Without such goals, teams will drift toward superficial discussions and truncated efforts to test alternative instruction."

Ronald Gallimore, Bradley Ermeling, William Saunders, Claude Goldenberg (item #1)

"Look, this is what you need to do. So like it or not, do it."

A principal pushing teachers to raise expectations and adopt an inquiry model (*ibid.*)

"Are we satisfied with that?"

Susan Szachowicz, principal of Brockton High School (MA), showing state test scores to teachers who initially pushed back on the school's improvement drive, in "Turnaround at Brockton High" by James Vaznis in *The Boston Globe*, Oct. 12, 2009
http://www.boston.com/news/education/k_12/mcas/articles/2009/10/12/turnaround_at_brockton_high/

"We have a special power. We can handle all this."

New York City school nurse Nasim Akhtar in "All in a Day's Work: Making It Better, One Child at a Time" by Javier Hernandez, *New York Times*, Oct. 18, 2009
http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/18/nyregion/18nurse.html?scp=5&sq=Javier%20C.%20Hernandez&st=cse

## 1. Teacher Teams Getting Results

In this meaty *Elementary School Journal* article, researchers Ronald Gallimore, Bradley Ermeling, William Saunders, and Claude Goldenberg report on their study of grade-level teacher teams in Title I schools. Prior to this project, two of the authors had a number of unsuccessful experiences trying to raise student achievement by giving workshops to principals. It turned out that the principals were ineffective at getting teacher teams to focus on teaching and learning, and the results were dismal.

So the researchers developed a more aggressive plan that included working directly with teacher teams in summer and winter institutes. They embedded the following "change elements" in schools:

- Common student learning goals;
- Meaningful interim assessments and indicators of student progress;
- Facilitation and support for grade-level teams;
- Distributed leadership that "supports and pressures goal attainment."

All this took place at three levels within the school: grade-level team meetings; an instructional leadership team (ILT) composed of representatives from each grade level, a reading coach, the principal, and a researcher; and all-school faculty meetings. In the first school trying this more focused approach, teachers' attitudes changed and there were dramatic gains in student achievement. The researchers decided to scale up the experiment to more schools, and studied the results over a period of six years.

The heart of the process was the work of grade-level teams, which met 2-4 hours a month to solve what teachers agreed were their students' most significant learning problems. The collaborative inquiry process had these components:

- Set an explicit goal for student learning;
- Plan instruction to address it;
- Implement the plan in classrooms;
- Use common assessments to track student work and monitor progress;
- If the goal was not achieved, circle back to try different approaches;
- If the goal is achieved, move on to a new goal.

Teams received support from the principal, the researcher, and members of the ILT. The whole faculty discussed progress in regular meetings, using time that previously had been devoted to school operations.

What was the mechanism of these dramatic gains? Clearly teachers planned better lessons, were more aware of student needs, and used more effective instructional practices in their classrooms. But what drove those improvements? Here is the researchers' analysis:

• *Changes in attribution* – Focus groups and interviews revealed that teachers' attitudes shifted as a result of the new dynamic within grade-level teams. As teachers tried new practices learned from team discussions, they began to attribute student gains to their own teaching – in contrast with teachers in schools not implementing these practices, who tended to attribute student achievement to external factors such as socioeconomic conditions, students' poor proficiency in English, lack of ability, or low levels of parent involvement.

• *A sense of efficacy* – The work of teacher teams changed the *I taught it and they didn't learn it*, activity-driven approach. Instead, when an approach didn't work, teachers took responsibility for trying different approaches until they saw progress. "We hypothesize," write the authors, "that critical learning opportunities arise when teachers focus on a specific student need over a period of time and shift to an emphasis on *figuring out* an instructional solution that produces a detectable improvement in learning, not just *trying out* a variety of instructional activities or strategies… We claim it is not how long a team works on a problem that determines if they see a cause-effect connection, but whether they persist until it is solved."

• *A balance of administrative support and pressure* – This dynamic won't take place unless the principal supports teacher teams and holds them accountable for keeping up the inquiry/improvement process until they see tangible results. Teachers said it matters that the principal builds trust and isn't critical or evaluative, keeping students' interests front and center. It's also important that the principal remains "firm", teachers said, pushing back against statements like, "Well, I don't know if I can do this" and "I don't know if my children can do this." One teacher remembered the principal saying, "Look, this is what you need to do. So like it or not, do it."

The researchers identify a number of key elements to getting this dynamic operating in a school:

- Job-alike teams – Ideally, 3-7 teachers who teach the same subject or course to students at the same grade level, for example, third grade, seventh-grade pre-algebra, or ninth-grade English. "Absent a common task immediately relevant to each teacher's own classroom, it is difficult to create and sustain the kind of inquiry cycle observed in the scale-up schools and others in which we now work," say the researchers.
- Clear goals – "To be successful," they write, "teams need to set and share goals to work on that are immediately applicable to their classrooms. Without such goals, teams will drift toward superficial discussions and truncated efforts to test alternative instruction."
- Trained peer-facilitators – Skillful facilitation is vital to sustaining teams to the point where they begin showing results. The role can be shared, but few teams can succeed without it. Peer leadership is preferable to administrators leading meetings, say the authors. "Peer-facilitators are uniquely positioned to model 'a leap of faith,' frame the work as an investigation, help the group 'stick with it,' and guide protocol use as a full participant in the inquiry process. Teacher-facilitators are trying out in their classrooms

the same lessons as everyone else in the group." Another advantage is that peer leaders free up literacy and math coaches and administrators to move from team to team and provide support where it's most needed.

- Inquiry-focused protocols – Each team followed these steps: identify appropriate and worthwhile student learning goals; find or develop appropriate means to assess student progress; bring to the table expertise from colleagues and others to accomplish the goals; plan, prepare, and deliver lessons; use evidence from classrooms to evaluate results; and reflect on the process to decide what to do next. This structured approach increased teachers' focus on cause-effect planning, getting them to pay close attention to students' needs, gather helpful classroom artifacts and observations, constantly question existing instructional practices, look carefully at alternative approaches, and use evidence to make decisions.
- Stable settings – "For teams to stick with the protocol long enough to see and attribute improved student learning to their teaching," say the researchers, "there must be a stable, protected setting in which the work of inquiry can get done. With multiple, uncoordinated reform initiatives hitting schools, time for teacher inquiry is often sacrificed for competing demands, such as mandated PD or the responsibilities for parent and IEP conferences. The immediacy and urgency of day-to-day operations gobble up time and put everyone's commitment to the test. In candid moments, teachers battling overload and fatigue report that there are times they feel like just going home, or completing other tasks rather than attending a grade-level meeting to engage in their team's chosen inquiry." Administrative vision and support are crucial to keeping the process going – time for meetings, consistent membership, facilitation, and support.

Here are several examples of cause-effect connections from teacher teams using this process:

• *Grade 1 writing* – A first-grade team decided to focus on getting students to write multi-sentence narratives about a single event. At first, most of the team members doubted that first graders could write at this level, but urged on by their peer facilitator, they took the leap of faith and tried a number of new classroom practices, gave regular assessments, and scored them collaboratively. By March, almost all students were writing more than ten sentences of coherent narrative. Teachers said they accomplished this because of daily modeling and think-aloud practices and also teacher-led sharing and feedback sessions.

• *Grade 3 math* – A third-grade team worked on helping students understand multiplication as repeated addition. What was challenging for the teachers was presenting a difficult problem and letting students struggle with it. "Indeed," write the authors, "teachers felt it was somehow unfair to students to 'withhold' the directed lesson(s) until after students had grappled with the problem." Helped by their math coach (a former teacher at the school), teachers tried the new approach, introducing problems, asking supportive questions while groups of students worked on the problems, leading student discussions about their solutions, and explaining how their solutions connected to the concept of multiplication as repeated

addition. By the end of the year, teachers had significantly changed their classroom practices and felt they planned, taught, and observed students better than before.

• *Grade 4-5 reading* – A team of fourth/fifth-grade teachers decided to focus on reading comprehension to prepare for new open-ended questions on state assessments that asked students to summarize grade-level text and explain the theme or main idea. Teachers were initially skeptical that students had the writing skills to work at this level, but following the lead of their peer facilitator and a literacy coach, they broke down the challenge into manageable chunks. They tried teacher modeling of how to write a summary, conferencing with groups of students and one-on-one, and getting students working in pairs writing responses. What proved most effective was leading student discussions of sample responses, comparing one scored as a 1 to a 2, a 2 to a 3, and a 3 to a 4. By the end of the year, virtually all students improved at least one level on a 4-3-2-1 rubric.

• *Middle-school ESL* – A middle-school team focused on getting students to use correct capitalization and punctuation. Teachers taught the rules early in the year, got students writing every day, and constantly reinforced key lessons in context. By January, over 90 percent of students were using capitals and end punctuation correctly.

• *High-school chemistry* – A chemistry team worked on improving students' analysis of data in written lab report conclusions, having found that students weren't taking the time to do this properly – or perhaps they had never been taught how to do it properly. Teachers developed a series of bite-sized data-analysis activities and had small groups of students write a synopsis of what the evidence told them. Teachers then formed larger groups, had students combine their data, and then asked them to present conclusions to the whole class. "We found when given time and structure, students had no problem correctly analyzing data," said one teacher. "It was beautiful!"

"Moving the Learning of Teaching Closer to Practice: Teacher Education Implications of School-Based Inquiry Teams" by Ronald Gallimore, Bradley Ermeling, William Saunders, and Claude Goldenberg in *Elementary School Journal*, May 2009 (Vol. 109, #5, p. 537-553), no e-link available

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## 2. James Popham on Improving Assessments in Schools

In this *American School Board Journal* article, testing expert James Popham describes six mistakes that he believes many districts and schools are making in the area of curriculum and assessment. "I've always loved twice-baked potatoes," he says, "especially when they're covered with cheese. But I hate twice-made policy mistakes."

• *Too many learning objectives* – Committees and central office people get carried away, says Popham, and load teachers with far more material than they can cover in a year. The consequences of this wish-list approach are "cataclysmic," he says. State tests can only sample the standards, leaving some unsampled and others with insufficient items to draw valid conclusions. Teachers have a no-win choice: either they can try to cover all the standards, giving their students superficial "coverage" of the curriculum, or they can try to guess which

standards will appear on state tests – and often guess wrong. "Children are being educationally harmed because of too many state-dictated curricular aims," says Popham. He urges local educational officials to push their state departments of education to cut back.

• *Not making good use of classrooms assessments* – "Most teachers in America use their classroom assessments either to assign grades or to motivate students to study harder," says Popham. This deprives them of one of the most powerful, research-proven tools for improving student learning – using insights from classroom assessments to reteach, help struggling students, and gain insights that improve teaching.

• *Preoccupation with instructional process* – "Those who supervise teachers' instructional efforts have been satisfied to focus on what the teacher does rather than what happens to students as a consequence of what the teacher does," says Popham. In fact, he continues, there are many different ways to teach any curriculum standard and it's wrong to prescribe one way to teach anything. "Thus," he concludes, "it is only sensible to focus on the outcomes of instruction, not on the instructional process *per se*." Everyone should be focused on student learning results, with fine-grained data used to continuously improve teaching.

• *Not measuring the affective domain* – Students' attitudes, interests, and values are crucial to the learning process, says Popham. "Kids who love to read will go on reading, both now and later in life. Kids who hate to read will rarely do so unless forced to." Fortunately, he says, there are easy, low-cost ways to assess students' attitudes and teachers can use the data to help students turn around negative attitudes.

• *Instructionally insensitive tests* – Most Americans assume that if students score high on state tests, teachers have done a good job. Not necessarily, says Popham. "This sounds so counterintuitive, it might be regarded as unbelievable," he writes. "But it's true. And it's been true for more than two decades." Commercial standardized tests, which are designed to compare students to other students, "end up measuring what students bring to school rather than what those students learn there." And customized state curriculum tests contain so many items (the wish-list problem again) that they yield a misleading picture of a school's effectiveness and end up measuring the socioeconomic make-up of the student body. His conclusion: it's essential that all states give tests that are closely aligned to a manageable number of curriculum standards.

• *Low levels of assessment literacy* – Popham says that school districts should zealously promote assessment sophistication among educators, students, parents, and the public so everyone understands the policy choices and the data that emanate from schools.

"Six Curriculum Mistakes" by James Popham in *American School Board Journal*, November 2009 (Vol. 196, #11, p. 36-38), no e-link available

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## 3. Turning Bloom's Taxonomy Upside Down in History Classes

In this thoughtful *Education Week* article, Stanford University professor Sam Wineburg and doctoral student Jack Schneider argue that it often makes more sense to approach Bloom's

taxonomy from the top down rather than the bottom up. Here's the usual arrangement:

Evaluation
Synthesis
Analysis
Application
Comprehension
Knowledge

In high-school history, for example, the conventional wisdom is that students need to know their facts before they can make evaluative judgments. "But just as math is about more than learning theorems," say Wineburg and Schneider, "history is about more than collecting facts. It is also a discipline that requires piecing together an accurate story from incomplete fragments. Historical thinkers begin by asking questions, evaluating what they don't know in pursuit of their ultimate aim: knowledge. And then they repeat the process."

As an experiment, they asked Jacob, a student in a private high school who had scored 4 out of 5 on the AP U.S. history exam, to read a document "historically." The document in question was an 1892 proclamation by President Benjamin Harrison declaring "Discovery Day" to honor Christopher Columbus as a "pioneer of progress and enlightenment." It proclaimed that in schools, churches, and other places of assembly, there should be "expressions of gratitude to Divine Providence for the devout faith of the discoverer."

Jacob's reaction (which was typical of other high-school students interviewed) was to talk about the gap between Harrison's description of Columbus as a pioneer of progress and enlightenment and the explorers' greedy motives and torture of natives. "Jacob marshaled background knowledge about Columbus and worked his way toward the Bloomian peak," say Wineburg and Schneider, "eventually challenging President Harrison's praise for Columbus with his own critical alternative… Nice job, Jacob."

But when history graduate students were asked to evaluate the same document, they had a totally different take. It wasn't about 1492 or Columbus, they said. They focused on 1892, the year the proclamation was issued, and asked what Harrison was up to. After some digging, they realized that at the turn of the 20th century, waves of immigrants from Italy and other European countries were flooding the U.S. President Harrison was pandering to these new voters!

"Now *that's* critical thinking," say Wineburg and Schneider. The graduate students didn't have any more historical knowledge about Columbus than Jacob, but they knew what to focus on and what question to ask. "Jacob's reading was critical," say the authors, "but there was little thinking in it. Sure, he brought background knowledge and strong opinions to this document. But he didn't know how to get at the document's untold story. He missed what really mattered."

The history graduate students, on the other hand, started with analysis, near the top of Bloom's pyramid. "That's because in history, as in other disciplines, the aim is not merely to collect what is known," conclude Wineburg and Schneider, "but to learn how to think about problems in a new way. Students who think historically know that they need to begin with

analysis: What is this? Who wrote it? What time does it come from? And, just as important, they know that their destination – new knowledge – isn't critical thinking's base camp. It's the summit."

"Inverting Bloom's Taxonomy" by Sam Wineburg and Jack Schneider in *Education Week*, Oct. 7, 2009 (Vol. 29, #6, p. 28-29, 31)
http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2009/10/07/06wineburg.h29.html

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## 4. An Unexpected Study/Memory Strategy

In this intriguing article in *Scientific American*, Washington University/St. Louis professor Henry Roediger and post-doctoral research fellow Bridgid Finn refute the notion of "errorless learning" – that teachers should minimize students' mistakes by giving them lots of repetitive practice with similar items. The theory behind this approach is that if students make errors, they will learn the wrong answers and have to unlearn them to learn the correct answers – a slower and less efficient process.

In fact, say Roediger and Finn, making mistakes *helps* people learn. Recent research shows that a better path to lasting learning is trying to answer challenging questions before formal learning, making mistakes, and then soaking up the material more efficiently.

In one study, two groups of students were challenged to memorize pairs of associated words (for example, *star – night*). The first group was given13 seconds to study each pair of words, and then tested on the words more than a day later. The second group was presented with the first word in each pair and given 8 seconds to come up with the matching word (*star - ???*). Almost all students failed to get the right answer. They were then shown the pair of words (*star – night*) for five seconds. Both groups had the same amount of time – 13 seconds – but students in the second group did significantly better at remembering the word pairs than the first group.

In a similar experiment, one group of students was asked to read a passage on vision and then given questions about it. A second group was asked the questions *before* reading the passage (for example, "What is total color blindness caused by brain damage called?"), then read the passage, and then answered the questions again. Although the first group was given extra time with the passage and the key parts of the passage were highlighted in italics and bold type, the second group did significantly better answering the questions after reading the passage.

This seems counterintuitive; how could students who studied words for 13 seconds and had the advantage of extra time and signposted text do less well than students had less time and fewer prompts? The experiments point to a novel theory of learning: that by challenging ourselves to generate answers we don't know, we can improve our recall. It suggests that to learn material in a textbook chapter, for example, the best strategy would be to try to answer end-of-chapter questions before reading the chapter (or if the book doesn't have questions, look at headings, turn them into questions, and try to answer them), and then read the chapter to confirm or disconfirm our hunches.

"Getting It Wrong: Surprising Tips on How to Learn" by Henry Roediger and Bridgid Finn in *Scientific American*, October 20, 2009, spotted in *ASCD SmartBrief* Oct. 21, 2009
https://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=getting-it-wrong

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## 5. Tips for Difficult Conversations

In this *Education Week* article, author/consultant David Maxfield addresses the risky business of voicing concerns to a school leader, confronting a poorly performing colleague, or dealing with an unsupportive parent. "I've spent thousands of hours watching what teachers and other professionals do to succeed in these dicey moments," say Maxfield. Here are his suggestions:

• *Don't wait until you're angry*. It's a mistake to bottle up emotions and then explode. "The time to talk is when you see the problem emerging and have not yet become emotionally invested," says Maxfield.

• *Don't demonize the person*. Open your mind before you open your mouth, says Maxfield. Ask yourself, "Why would a reasonable, rational, decent person do that?" Try to see a person with flaws, not a villain with no soul.

• *Make the conversation safe for the other person*. Start by trying to find common ground and showing respect; this should reduce defensiveness.

• *Step up to the plate*. The reason many people don't engage in difficult conversations is that they say to themselves, "It's not my job." It's everyone's job to prevent ineffective performance that harms children.

• *Engage in dialogue, not monologue*. Don't go into a difficult conversation assuming that you can speak your mind and the other person will hear you. "This egocentric approach… inevitably provokes defensiveness," says Maxfield, "eventually convincing the teacher it was a waste of time to even try." It's much more effective to come to the conversation intensely curious to hear the other person's perspective. This invites the other person to be open and increases the chances that learning will take place.

"Running Into the Fire: Survival Tips for Education's First-Responders" by David Maxfield in *Education Week*, Oct. 7, 2009 (Vol. 29, #6, p. 28-29)
http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2009/10/07/06maxfield.h29.html

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## 6. Ideas on Decision-Making from the Business World

In this *Harvard Business Review* article, Babson College professor Thomas Davenport says that important decisions are often made without enough thought and support, with all-too many bad results. Smart organizations, he says, improve their decision-making by taking the following steps:

• Identifying key decisions and ranking them in priority order, asking how important they are to achieving the mission and goals of the organization.

• Analyzing each decision in terms of who plays a role in making it, how often has to be made, what information is needed to make it, and the track record with decisions like this in the past.

• Designing the roles, processes, systems, and behaviors needed to make the decisions well and execute them after they're made. Inclusiveness is a key factor in decision design.

• Thinking through and institutionalizing processes to decide how to decide: which decisions should be made unilaterally by the manager, made by the manager after consulting with a group, made by a group by majority vote, or arrived at by group consensus. In addition, there should be procedures for deciding who needs to be consulted or informed and who will be accountable for results.

• Decisions need to be assessed after the fact – what were the results, and how well did the process work?

"Make Better Decisions" by Thomas Davenport, *Harvard Business Review*, November 2009 (Vol. 87, #11, p. 117-123), no e-link available

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## 7. Short Item:

***Conductors as leadership models*** – Check out this tour de force TED lecture showing the different leadership styles of symphony orchestra conductors:
http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/itay_talgam_lead_like_the_great_conductors.html

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***Do you have feedback? Is anything missing?***

*If you have comments or suggestions, if you saw an article or web item in the last week that you think should have been summarized, or if you would like to suggest additional publications that should be covered by the Marshall Memo, please e-mail:* kim.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 37 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).

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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 Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
ASCD, CEC SmartBriefs, Daily EdNews
Catalyst Chicago
Changing Schools (McREL)
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
Teacher Magazine (online)
Teachers College Record
The Atlantic Monthly
The Language Educator
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Tools for Schools/The Learning Principal