

Marshall Memo 6

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
September 29, 2003

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Quote of the Week

“Parent involvement initiatives have the potential to exacerbate rather than alleviate educational inequity by further marginalizing families who define their roles with respect to family-school interactions differently than what the schools demand.” (#1)

1. More productive family-school conferences

Parent-teacher conferences are very much part of the routine in most schools and form a major channel of communication between teachers and parents. But how well do they really work? Kathleen Minke and Kellie Anderson looked under the surface and concluded that parents and teachers often approach conferences with “varying degrees of trepidation.” Teachers feel pressure and fatigue and go through the motions without being convinced that there is much of an instructional payoff. Parents feel anxious because they are often defensive about their children and the format (sitting opposite the teacher, often in tiny chairs) conjures up memories of their own school experiences. Conferences may produce relatively little bang for the buck because so often they gloss over difficult issues, limit honest communication, and fail to nurture future dialogue between home and school.

To address the shortcomings of traditional parent conferences, Minke and Anderson experimented with a different model. Their goal: to have all participants leave a conference feeling more connected, optimistic, respected and empowered than

they did before the encounter. These are the key elements to their family-school conference model, which they say takes no longer than regular conferences:

1. Teachers send home a written invitation encouraging all interested parties to attend the conference.
2. All parties are asked to prepare in advance.
3. Students are active participants and introduce family and teacher at the outset.
4. The conference is a conversation; teachers are not presenters of information and concentrate as much on receiving as on giving information.
5. Teachers focus on family and child strengths.
6. The outcome of the conference is a collaboratively developed plan for student improvement, increased student ownership of learning, and improved relationships among the participants.

The key to this experimental model was training teachers for a very different type of interaction.

- Teachers were urged to go into conferences with the assumption that all families care about their children and are acting in their best interests.

- Teachers were trained to talk differently with families and use active listening to elicit the insights that parents and students possess but rarely express in this forum.

- Teachers were trained to reframe negative labels (“uncooperative”) with more positive terms (“strong willed”).

- Teachers were trained to present negative information skillfully, striving to be brief, specific, calm, and tentative in their presentation and conveying confidence that problems can be solved.

- Teachers were trained to listen non-defensively to negative information, clarify the problem by reflecting both content and emotion, and plan their responses based on the family member’s goal (i.e., does the person just want to be heard or do they want something done?).

Teachers and family members who took part in this experiment strongly preferred this type of conferences to the traditional format because:

1. There was better communication, with the child’s presence playing a key role in getting everyone on the same page. “Because students were present to hear everything first-hand, neither parents nor teachers had to interpret conference events to them later.” Despite a good deal of initial anxiety about having the child there during conferences, teachers and parents found that there were very few situations where it was necessary to exclude the child.

2. Participants learned more about the child and each other than in traditional conferences. Families said they learned about children's skills and interests and gained insights watching the teacher interact with their child. Students said they gained confidence from being part of the conversation and got specific pointers (and a plan) on how to improve. And teachers found out about positive aspects of children's homes and said that children brought up information that would not have come to light in traditional conferences. Teachers also said they felt less alone in this kind of conference – there was more support to solving problems collectively.

- Teachers found that they could conduct family conferences within the standard 15-20-minute time slot allocated for traditional conferences but felt more of a sense of accomplishment afterward. One teacher remarked, "When I left the room, the parents and the child were still smiling. And I was still smiling too. I didn't feel like, 'Oh my God, I gotta do this another full day' ... I didn't feel drained."

Overall, this kind of conference seemed to be a structure through which families and teachers could more easily develop trusting relationships. The researchers think that conferences like these could help narrow the achievement gap (see the Quote of the Day) by involving parents who tend to be alienated from schools and shy away from involvement in their children's education. "Conferences in which teachers are encouraged to learn about and respect families' goals, beliefs, and practices (rather than simply telling them what the school expects) may be more effective in accommodating these different family positions in ways that support all children's educational growth."

"Restructuring Routine Parent-Teacher Conferences: The Family-School Conference Model" by Kathleen Minke and Kellie Anderson, *Elementary School Journal*, September 2003 (Vol. 104, #1, p. 49-69)

2. Higher-level teaching produces higher-level reading and writing results

A study of a teaching reform effort in nine high-poverty schools sought to pinpoint teaching practices that took students to higher levels of thinking and produced better reading and writing achievement. The study describes ineffective classrooms in which teachers talked most of the time, interjected their own ideas about what was being read, and provided few opportunities for students to form and express their own ideas and elaborate their thinking. In short, these teachers were doing most of the intellectual work for students.

Teachers who got better results in writing and in reading fluency and comprehension minimized routine comprehension questions and passive turn-taking responses and maximized:

- asking higher-level questions and demanding higher-level thinking;
- keeping students actively involved;
- challenging students to apply reading strategies to their work;
- assessing students' learning through their answers to challenging questions;
- giving students responsibility for holding their own discussions;
- constantly coaching students;
- having students write answers to open-ended, challenging questions in response journals (e.g., Do you think the Herdmans will do a good job? Why or why not? How do you think the audience will react? Give evidence from the story).

"Reading Growth in High-Poverty Classrooms: The Influence of Teacher Practices That Encourage Cognitive Engagement in Literacy Learning" by Barbara Taylor, David Pearson, Debra Peterson, & Michael Rodriguez, *Elementary School Journal*, September 2003 (Vol. 104, #1, p. 3-28)

3. Philly teachers grade parents on "home support"

The Philadelphia School Districts is giving teachers the opportunity to send parents a "Satisfactory" or "Needs Improvement" rating on specific aspects of home support – what superintendent Paul Vallas calls a "gentle reminder" at report card time on these items:

- Does the child appear rested?
- Is he or she getting proper attention for vision and hearing problems?
- Do parents respond to notes and phone calls?
- Does the child have the necessary supplies, e.g., pencils and notebooks?
- Does the child complete homework assignments?

All teachers in grades K-8 will send home the ratings. The district has not yet decided whether to use them at the high-school level.

"Philadelphia Parents to Get Graded by Teachers" in PEN Weekly NewsBlast, Sept. 19, 2003; full article www.philly.com/mid/inquirer/living/education/6797322.htm

4. James Popham on Instructionally Sensitive Tests

On the back of last week's Education Week is a powerful article by James Popham, the UCLA testing guru, in which he continues his campaign against the

inappropriate use of norm-referenced tests for school accountability. He accuses some states of trying to work around No Child Left Behind by using what he calls “instructionally insensitive” tests to satisfy the law’s accountability requirements. “An instructionally insensitive test,” he writes, “is one that is essentially incapable of detecting improved student learning, even if improved learning is present. Examples of instructionally insensitive tests are any of the nationally standardized achievement test that, in order to produce the score-spread required for their norm-referenced comparisons, invariably contain too many items linked to students’ socioeconomic status or inherited academic aptitudes. Such tests measure what students bring to school, not what they learn there.”

Popham also knocks state-customized achievement tests that cover unrealistically large numbers of curriculum goals without telling teachers where to aim their instruction and which fail to give schools feedback on which objectives students have mastered.

The responsible course, Popham argues, is for states to use instructionally sensitive standardized tests that “assess students’ mastery of a modest number of genuinely significant skills in reading and mathematics.” Tests like these set the stage for teachers to make a real difference in student achievement and for states (and the feds) to be able to accurately identify schools that are successful and unsuccessful.

“The ‘No Child’ Noose Tightens – But Some States Are Slipping It” by James Popham, *Education Week*, Sept. 24, 2003 (Vol. XXIII, #4, p.48)
<http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=04popham.h23>

5. Should we handicap SAT scores?

In a brief, provocative article in last Sunday's *Times*, Michael Bérubé lays out the brutal facts on the growing achievement gap in SAT scores: the white-black gap is now 206 points; the gap between Mexican-Americans and whites is 158 points; 259 points separate children whose parents make under \$10,000 from those whose parents make \$100,000 and over; and children whose parents hold graduate degrees outscore those whose parents did not finish high school by a staggering 272 points. (There is also a gap of 68 points between suburban and rural students and a gap of 43 points between boys and girls.) If the SAT gap continues to widen as it has over the last decade, the need for affirmative action in college admissions will continue, rather than becoming obsolete as Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor hopefully wrote in the recent Michigan decision.

As we continue to strive to level the playing field in American education so that all children can achieve at high levels, how can we get an accurate reading of the potential of children who are not yet in a situation where their talents can come to fruition? Without some way of allowing for disadvantages over which many young people have no control, millions will never have access to college.

Bérubé suggests the golf handicap as a useful analogy for what should be done. If we compare the SAT scores of an African-American girl from rural Alabama whose parents did not graduate from high school and make under \$10,000 with the scores of an affluent, suburban white boy, both of whose parents have Ph.D.'s, the girl faces a theoretical 848-point SAT deficit (a combination of the parental-education, income, racial, regional, and gender gaps). Bérubé suggests scaling handicaps to allow for overlapping categories, and comes up with a 452.7-point handicap for this young woman which, he contends, would more accurately gauge her true talents and give her access to the opportunities that would allow her to fully develop them. People use handicaps in golf, he argues. Why not in education?

"Testing Handicaps" by Michael Bérubé, *New York Times Magazine*, Sept. 21, 2003, p. 18

6. Missing the Boat on Urban Teacher Hiring

In a widely reported study by the New Teacher Project, major urban school districts are roundly criticized for losing the chance to hire many of the best-qualified teachers because hiring timelines are months behind those of suburban, private, and charter schools. Many of the "best and brightest" teachers would like to teach in urban

schools but see no alternative to signing on with schools that make offers in March and April and sometimes earlier. Delays in urban districts are caused by layers of policy and practice and union regulations. Can these barriers to timely hiring be changed to bring the very best teaching to children who need it the most?

“Urban Hiring Rules Faulted for Driving Away Best Teachers” by Catherine Gewertz, *Education Week*, Sept. 24, 2003 (Vol. XXIII, #4, p.1, 20). The study can be found at www.tntp.org.

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Do you have feedback? Is anything missing?

If you have comments or suggestions, or if you saw an article or web item in the last week that you think should be covered, please e-mail: kim.marshall8@verizon.net

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo aims to keep busy educators very well-informed on important research, ideas, and developments in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, a former Boston teacher and administrator, will act as your “designated reader”, looking through a wide range of publications as soon as they come out and sending a brief weekly e-mail summarizing a few select articles. Items will be chosen based on their relevance and usefulness to improving teaching and learning. Target topics include the following (those covered in this issue are underlined):

- *School leadership* – Building a professional learning community; effective teamwork; effective schools practices; time management.
- *Closing the gap* – Effective strategies to close the racial/economic achievement gap; the innate-ability/intelligence/effective effort debate.
- *Effective teaching* – What produces high levels of student achievement; supervision and evaluation of teachers; professional development of teachers; teacher leadership and career ladders; multiple intelligences and brain research.
- *Curriculum* – Alignment and planning with the end in sight; teaching for understanding; new ideas for teaching reading, writing, and math; parent involvement.
- *Assessment* – Aligned formative and summative assessments; using data and student work for continuous improvement; graphic display of student achievement data; standardized testing and the debate on standards.
- *Positive school culture* – Student discipline; social-emotional learning; moral development.
- *And...* – New areas of research; upcoming television and radio programs on education.

If one of the summaries is of particular interest, subscribers are encouraged to read the full article. E-links will be provided whenever possible.

Publications covered:

(those read this week are underlined.)

American Education Research Journal
American Educator
Atlantic Monthly
Bay State Banner
Boston Globe
Commonwealth Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Update (ASCD)
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Elementary School Journal
Harpers
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Education Review
Harvard School of Education Ed. Magazine
New York Times
New Yorker
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal Magazine
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Review of Educational Research
Rethinking Schools
Teacher Magazine
Occasional books, lectures, and websites.

If you would like to suggest additional publications, please be in touch.

Subscriptions:

The Marshall Memo is published weekly (with occasional breaks), usually on Monday. Major support from Research for Better Teaching and New Leaders for New Schools makes it possible to offer individual subscriptions at \$50 a year. To subscribe, please contact Kim Marshall at kim.marshall8@verizon.net or at 222 Clark Road, Brookline, MA 02445 (617-566-4353).