Marshall Memo 22

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
January 26, 2004

In this Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"What is a good school? Educators would offer a variety of answers, but in the eyes of the media, the public, and many elected officials, a good school is defined by high test scores."

Ted Hershberg, Virgina Adams Simon, & Barbara Lea-Kruger (see item #1)

"Family income remains the strongest predictor of scoring 1500 on the SAT – an absolute test score. But when predicting student progress, teacher effectiveness is 10 to 20 times more powerful than income, class size, race, or family educational background."

Ted Hershberg et. al (*ibid*.)

"The key is for students to think that change is possible. Kids who believe intelligence is malleable are not demoralized and succeed… [E]ncouraging adolescents to attribute academic troubles to their situation rather than to their shortcomings can meaningfully increase student achievement."

Joshua Aronson, *New York Times* (see item 5)

The district's overriding goal is not to become an effective school system, but instead a system of effective schools.

Michele Cahill, New York City Schools, *Education Week*, January 21, 2004

"Inequality is like an unwanted guest who comes early and stays late… Gaps in school achievement…have deep roots – deep in out-of-school experiences and deep in the structures of schools."

Paul Barton in "Parsing the Achievement Gap" (see Memo 15, item #2)

1. The Value of Value-Added Assessment

This powerful and well-written article makes the case for the value-added approach to measuring student achievement. Value-added has two important benefits over conventional approaches: it is far more accurate for measuring student and school performance over time, and it provides far better data for helping teachers and principals improve classroom teaching. "Without it," the authors argue, "we will continue to work in the dark, tinkering at the edges of the system, ignoring what has always mattered most: good teaching."

The argument goes like this: raw test scores of the type used by most districts (and those required by NCLB) are unlikely to help school districts transform teaching and learning in every classroom. "Raw achievement scores reveal in bold strokes how well broad groups of students are performing, but do not provide information that can help determine whether students are making progress as a result of what the school or teacher is doing." This is because these tests don't follow the same students over time and tease out the impact of different teachers, different curriculum materials, different school programs, and factors outside the school. In effect, conventional tests mask the impact of what the school is doing by making it impossible to separate school impact from the impact of family background and socioeconomic status on student achievement. Value-added assessment, on the other hand, makes it possible to see "how effective teachers and schools are, how to differentiate truly exceptional changes from predictable ones, and how to use data at the classroom level to make necessary adjustments in pedagogy, curricula, and professional development…"

One of the original proponents of value-added assessment is William Sanders, who has been doing this work in Tennessee for the last twelve years. The basic premise of his work is that although schools cannot solve all of society's problems, they can and should ensure that every child receives at least a year's growth (from his or her individual starting point) each school year. A value-added analysis separates a student's growth each year into two parts: that which can be attributed to the student, and that which can be attributed to the classroom, school, or district.

Test scores are projected for students and then compared with the scores they actually get at the end of the school year. Classroom scores that exceed projections suggest that a teacher is highly effective. Scores that are below projections suggest that instruction was less effective. Using this statistical approach, it's possible to see if a student's performance is due to short-term factors outside the classroom, such as a divorce or a traumatic event. "By using data from multiple years in multiple subjects, it considers the whole child, providing a more accurate analysis of student achievement. In addition, because students' projected scores are based solely on their prior academic record, value-added does not explicitly consider students' race or socioeconomic background, and no bias is introduced."

From a value-added analysis over at least a three-year period, it's possible to see the impact of teaching and schools and divide them into three categories:

- *Highly effective* – Students are stretched beyond what their previous record would indicate was predictable.
- *Effective* – Students make a year's growth from where they were in September.
- *Ineffective* – Student achievement consistently and significantly falls below the level of achievement they showed in previous years.

How much difference does it make for a student to have a highly effective versus an ineffective teacher? A 1999 study in Tennessee found that low-achieving (bottom-quartile) students who had the misfortune of being assigned to ineffective teachers for four years had less than a 15 percent chance of passing the Tennessee ninth-grade exam required for high-school graduation. If the same students spent four years with teachers from the 50th percentile of teacher effectiveness, they had a 38 percent chance of passing the high-stakes test. And if they had four highly effective teachers, the same students had a 60 percent chance of passing. These are the students who many educators would consider hopeless, lacking in inherent ability ("Some children have it, others don't."). The assumption with these "bottom-of-the-barrel" students is that the fault lies with them rather than with the quality of instruction. "Students who are considered hopelessly low achievers or academic failure can perform at much higher levels – if they receive high-quality instruction."

Of course, value-added assessment by itself doesn't improve student achievement. Only by looking at the data and putting it to use can a school improve performance. Here are some of the questions principals and teachers might ask of the data:

- Are we focusing on the achievement of some students to the detriment of others (e.g., higher-achieving or lower-achieving or middle-of-the-road)?
- Are we differentiating instruction?
- Are we skimping on higher-order thinking and problem-solving?
- Are we communicating with colleagues who taught our kids the year before?
- Are we spending too much time reviewing what students already know?
- Are some of us effective with some students and less effective with others?
- Are we sharing best practices?

The bottom line, the authors say, is that *a school must not lost value*. A good school, they believe, is a school that: (a) provides at least a year's worth of growth on average for every student, and (b) stretches all students in all subgroups and grades beyond their year's worth of growth to achieve proficiency as defined by the state's NCLB standards by the time they graduate. This happens by using the data well and providing job-embedded professional development, "ending the isolation of teachers and teaching, building learning communities where educators are actively engaged in discussing what is happening in their classrooms, and enriching the process of data-driven decision making."

Value-added assessment can also serve as the basis for an accountability system that holds individual teachers and administrators responsible for student-learning results.

"Measuring What Matters" by Ted Hershberg, Virginia Adams Simon, and Barbara Lea-Kruger, American School Board Journal, February 2004 (Vol. 191, #2, p. 27-31) http://www.asbj.com . For information on all four aspects of value-added assessment (assessment, capacity, professional development, and evaluation and compensation), see http://www.operationpubliced.org .

2. Thoughts on Communicating with Parents

In a middle-school science class, a boy stuck his fingers into boiling water, spilled it over some other students – and then blamed his teacher for not stopping him. The assistant principal handling the disciplinary case (the author of this article) told the mother that the boy had been "irresponsible," provoking an angry and defensive reaction. Was the AP attacking her parenting skills? "What do you expect?" she asked. "He is in special education." The AP concluded that his characterization of the boy was accurate but not tactful, and chalked up a lesson for his future dealings

with parents. The author goes on to share other insights from his years working with parents:

In written communications:

- *Proofread*. Double-check your letters and notices to avoid grammar and spelling mistakes. [If catching errors is not your strength, have someone else proofread.]
- *Avoid jargon*. "Educators have a tendency to use gobbledygook, shop talk, and idioms that other people don't understand. Instead, use natural, plain, simple, unaffected language. Pompous or pretentious word choices sound condescending and are guaranteed to irritate people.
- *Remember that less is always better*. Keep it short!
- *Watch what you write*. Remember that letters and e-mails are subject to discovery by an attorney, hearing officer, or a court.

For face-to-face conferences with parents:

- *Make every effort to contact parents with good news.* Doing this in as many contexts as possible will counter the impression that all the school cares about is catching students doing something wrong.
- *Solicit input and advice from colleagues*. Teachers, deans, counselors, psychologists, and social workers may have useful insights before or during parent conferences.
- *Keep district policies in mind*. Having copies of key documents on hand can be helpful.
- *Return calls as quickly as possible*. This can prevent a little thing (letting a lot of time go before returning the call) from becoming the big issue – the parent fusses about that and does not focus on the real reason you called.
- *Be available to meet parents on their own turf*. It's diplomatic and disarming to meet parents in their homes or a community center, especially if they have difficulty getting to the school or have child-care needs.
- *When you telephone, say up front that it's not an emergency*. With all the news coverage of child abductions and shootings, many parents are jumpy any time they get a call from their children's school, and it helps to reassure them right at the beginning.
- *Advise parents of a problem before it passes the point of no return*. If at all possible, intervene while it's still early enough to bring about improvement.
- *Use correct names*. Get the parent's name right, and don't assume it's the same as the child's.

- *Don't assume that parents see the same facts you do*. This is especially true when parents only know what their children have told them. Start the conference by outlining the facts as you know them.
- *Offer suggestions and solutions that are appropriate for the child*. For example, telling a middle-school girl to just ignore classmates who are spreading vicious rumors about her promiscuity is not a realistic or sensible idea.
- *Don't disclose confidential information about other students*. This is important even when telling a parent that another student has been in trouble before would help your case.
- *Listen to parents and don't interrupt them*. Nothing infuriates a parent more than the sense that a school official is not listening. Rephrasing and summarizing key points is an excellent way to give evidence that you hare really heard what they are saying. Taking notes also communicates attentiveness.
- *Get into a mutual problem-solving mode*. Convince parents that you need to work together to change the child's behavior and improve academic performance. Convey that you expect improvement – not perfection – and that you are there to work together to improve the situation.
- *Don't give the impression that you have already made up your mind*. This will make parents think the whole conference was waste of time. Take a position, but be prepared to compromise or look at reasonable alternatives.
- *Don't be disrespectful.* Use a friendly, professional tone and be sure to thank parents at the end for their concern and time. Be tactful, avoid derogatory terms ("irresponsible.," "pathological liar," "incorrigible"), and watch the sarcasm. Avoid referring to older siblings who may have had their own difficulties in the past. Don't take a parent's words personally and don't get defensive, argumentative, or emotional. "Stick with the facts, and don't allow yourself to be bullied or drawn into a power struggle. If the conversation or conference is becoming hostile, avoid giving ultimatums and offer to reconvene at another time." Keep trying, and don't give up.
- *If you make a mistake, apologize and move on.*

"Little Things Mean a Lot" by Samuel Spitalli in *American School Board Journal*, February 2004 (Vol. 191, #2, p. 23-26) http://www.asbj.com

3. Making Educational Research More Like Medical Research

In a searing commentary piece in the current *Education Week*, Karin Chenoweth (a *Washington Post* columnist) says that educational research is in the dark ages. What we need, she avers, is research that tells us what works for which children under what circumstances.

As an example, she bemoans the fact that we do not have solid research on what approach works best for English-language learners. "Is it best to teach math, history, and science in their home language while teaching English separately? Or is it to intensively teach English, leaving aside the other subjects until English is mastered? Does it make a difference if the child comes to this country when he is 2 years old or when he is age 12? Does it matter whether the child's first language has a lot of overlap with English, like German or Spanish, or if it is completely unrelated, like Turkish or Chinese? Does it help or hurt to continue to use the home language outside of school? … Unfortunately, we have no idea… This leaves us with philosophies. We have a bilingual philosophy and an English-first philosophy, complete with testimonials about what worked for whose grandparents, but these really are political – bordering on religious – arguments, rather than scientific ones."

See if you can guess which field this quote refers to:

> This history of the profession has never been a particularly attractive subject… and one reason for this is that it is so unrelievedly deplorable a story. For century after century, all the way into the remote millennia of its origins, [the profession] got along by sheer guesswork and the crudest sort of empiricism. It is hard to conceive of a less scientific enterprise among human endeavors. Virtually anything that could be thought up for treatment was tried out at one time or another, and once tried, lasted decades or even centuries before being given up. It was, in retrospect, the most frivolous and irresponsible kind of human experimentation, based on nothing but trial and error, and usually resulting in precisely that sequence.

You guessed it. This is Lewis Thomas talking about the field of medicine before the 20th century. What changed medicine a century ago was that researchers adopted standards for medical research and doctors were required to master a body of knowledge that included pathology, anatomy, organic chemistry, etc. Quack cures could not longer call themselves medicines unless they met rigorous standards for safety and effectiveness, usually in controlled, randomized trials.

What's needed, Chenoweth believes, is this kind of rigor – in fact, a *Consumer Reports* – for classroom practices. Does "Hooked on Phonics" really help kids learn to

read? Will the math curriculum we're thinking of buying work with our student population? What makes a good teacher in different kinds of schools? Is peer mediation the best way to cut down on discipline problems?

The good news is that the federal Department of Education recently set up the "What Works Clearinghouse.". The idea is to use reliable, scientific research to go beyond the hypotheses and hunches and get clear answers to the biggest research questions in the field – and in the process establish the kind of "standard practice" that medicine has. Doing this will require the extensive use of the "gold standard" of research: well-designed and implemented randomized controlled trials. If we do this well, Chenoweth believes we will spur "an enormous intellectual revolution in education" comparable to what happened in medicine a hundred years ago, and that the learning of our children will benefit in the same way that the health of all Americans benefited when doctors got their act together.

"Knowing What Works: We Must Understand Education to Revolutionize It" by Karin Chenoweth, Education Week, January 21, 2004 (Vol. XXIII, #19, p. 36, 38)
http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=19chenoweth.h23

4. Closing the Racial Gap by Using Data from Frequent Assessments

A study of 32 K-8 urban and suburban California schools found that half of them were successful at narrowing the racial achievement gap (judged by state achievement test scores) over a four-year period. The gap-closing schools had certain common characteristics, among them: they tested their students frequently and used the results to make changes in their instructional programs. The successful schools made a point of:

- Giving teacher time to discuss assessment results;
- Providing teachers with weekly or monthly training on linking assessment data to instructional strategies;
- Calling in experts and coaches to help teachers alter what they did in their classrooms based on the data.

Two-thirds of the teachers in gap-closing schools used test and other data several times a month, sometimes several times a week, to understand their students' skill gaps. This was true of less than a quarter of the teachers in gap-widening schools.

"So much of the debate in California and at the national level is on high-stakes tests and prepping kids for it," said Kiley Walsh Symonds, author of the study. "We hope we can contribute to a shift in the debate from before the test to after the test."

The study also found that the gap-closing schools tackled questions of race head-on. One school, for example, took a hard look at the data on higher suspension and expulsion rates for African-American students and acted on what they found.

"Achievement-Gap Study Emphasizes Better Use of Data" by Debra Viadero, *Education Week*, January 21, 2004 (Vol. XXIII, #19, p. 9)
http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=19Gap.h23 . The full study, "After the Test: How Schools Are Using Data to Close the Achievement Gap," by Kiley Walsh Symonds is available at http://www.basrc.org

5. Teaching Students to View Intelligence as Malleable

A new study of Texas seventh graders found that the way students think about intelligence makes a big difference in how well they do on tests. The theory behind this study was that gender and racial achievement gaps can be traced to anxiety-producing stereotypes (e.g., girls aren't good at math, African-American students score lower in reading). The researchers found that arming students with the means to overcome their anxiety reduced gender and racial disparities. "One of the biggest pictures our research tells is that performance is so much more psychological than anything else," said Joshua Aronson, one of the researchers.

In the study, college mentors encouraged some students to view intelligence as a faculty that could be developed, while others were told that their academic struggles were inevitable in their new junior high school environment. At the end of the year, the researchers compared students' performance on statewide math and reading tests. Girls who were taught that intelligence develops over time scored significantly higher on the math test, and minority and low-income students who were told that they could overcome challenges and achieve academic success scored significantly higher on the reading test.

The findings suggest that if students get positive messages about their ability to learn and succeed academically, they are less likely to conform to stereotypes they believe others have of them when taking standardized tests. This suggests that educators can successfully stem the spiral of self-blame, anxiety, and under-performance that many adolescents experience in school.

"In Fighting Stereotypes, Students Lift Test Scores" by Melissa McNamara, *New York Times*, January 20, 2004
http://www.nytimes.com/2004/01/20/health/psychology/20INCO.html
The original study (by NYU psychologists Catherine Good, Joshua Aronson, and Michael Inzlicht) appeared in the December 2004 *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*

6. Creating a Safe Climate for Gay Middle and High School Students

A recent survey found that 83 percent of gay and lesbian students experienced verbal, physical, and sexual harassment at school. Disturbingly, in one-third of the incidents of anti-gay harassment, adult witnesses did not help. Given the high rate of suicide and attempted suicide among gay and lesbian youth, it is a moral imperative for school leaders to lead staff in creating a safe climate for these students. Here are some pointers:

- *Dispel misinformation and affirm diversity*. Accurate information on the formation of sexual identity, sexual minority rights, and famous gay and lesbian individuals through history should be given to all students.
- *Provide a support network for sexual minority students*. Student should know that there is at least one trained staff member (a counselor, psychologist, or teacher) who can serve as a resource on these issues.
- *Prevent discrimination*. The school discipline code should include a clear statement about harassment and discrimination.
- *Ensure sexual minority students equal access to all school-related activities*. After-school clubs, sports teams, social events, etc. need to be explicitly open to all.
- *Train all staff to understand sexual minority students and use effective interventions*. Anti-bias training and education on legal responsibilities should aim at getting beyond staff prejudices and making them the front line in preventing harassment from other students.
- *Be aware – and wary – of interventions to change an individual's sexual orientation*. These "reparative therapy" and "transformation ministry" programs view homosexuality as pathological and try to change sexual orientation through psychotherapy or religious ministry. This approach has no support among health or mental health professionals and has the potential to do serious harm.
- *Be prepared to address controversy*. The issue of sexual identity raises strong emotions. It's important for secondary school leaders to know the facts about sexual orientation and convey them to all groups. School should welcome all students for who they are, accept diversity of all kinds, and be a safe and healthy learning environment for everyone.

"Legally and Morally, What Our Gay Students Must Be Given" by Erica Weiler, *Principal Leadership*, December 2003 (#4, p. 10-13). Only NASSP members can use the e-link at www.nassp.org. Condensed in *Education Digest*, January 2004 (Vol. 69, #5, p.38-43.

7. Short Items:

• ***What works in reading?*** A three-year study at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee found that highly scripted, teacher-directed methods of teaching reading were not as effective as more flexible approaches. The study found that the most highly scripted method, Direct Instruction, should be used only in certain situations and not as the primary method. The study looked at a range of methods, from Direct Instruction to balanced literacy and concluded that "Most approaches work for some children – no single approach works for all children. Which method is the best method for teaching reading varies for any student at any given time."

"Study: Direct Instruction Not Best Way to Teach Reading" from *PEN Weekly NewsBlast*, Jan. 23, 2004, http://www.uwm.edu/News/PR/04.01/Reading.html

• ***Great school not meeting AYP?*** – In last week's *New York Times* "On Education" column, Michael Winerip described the transformation of the highly dysfunctional Julia Richman High School in Manhattan into six successful small schools in the mid-1990's. The schools host scores of visitors each year, and Tom Vander Ark, the Gates Foundation point person on small schools, says "There is not a better example in the U.S. They are remarkably good schools whose success can be measured in real-life ways, like getting kids into college."

But here's the rub: the Julia Richman schools originally got permission to use portfolio assessments in place of state tests, but the portfolio approach is no longer accepted by New York State. Curriculum and assessment have not been fully aligned with standardized Regents tests, and there is the possibility that the schools, for all their high student achievement, will be branded as failing. New York City has protested to the state department of education, and the matter is under review.

"Students Pass, But Schools Fail?" by Michael Winerip, *New York Times*, January 21, 2004 http://www.nytimes.com/2004/01/21/education/21educ.html

• ***Should we give students a choice on writing prompts?*** In this month's Center for Performance Assessment newsletter, Doug Reeves answers a teacher's question on whether or not to give students a choice of writing prompts in during-the-year writing assessments. Reeves's advice: if the state writing exam gives students a choice of topic, give them a choice in interim assessments. If the state gives only one topic, school writing assessments should follow that structure so that students have practice doing a good job with only one option.

On the question of whether the teacher should have a choice of writing prompt topics, Reeves says that this can be good because it increases links the writing assessments to teachers' specific content. When the teacher can link writing assignments to their area (writing about Kandinsky and Monet in art class, Bach and Rolling stones in music, comparing and contrasting the American and French revolutions in social studies), there is a far greater chance that writing will occur across the curriculum.

One more thing: Reeves is a strong advocate of students doing non-fiction writing in *every* grade, at least four times a year, followed by collaborative scoring by teaches and required rewriting by students.

"Questions and Answers from the Real World" in Center for Performance Assessment Monthly E-mail Newsletter, January 2004 http://www.makingstandardswork.com

• ***Blue-ribbon teaching commission*** – The recommendations of the commission headed by former IBM C.E.O. Louis Gerstner (*Teaching at Risk: A Call to Action*) on linking pay to value added, improving working conditions, and other issues sound intriguing. The 60-page report is available at http://www.theteachingcommission.org/publications/FINAL_Report.pdf

• ***Hastening the departure of ineffective teachers*** – In a January 14th speech, New York City teacher union head Randi Weingarten proposed a plan for giving the union 90 days to improve faltering teachers or counsel them out, and then turning them over to the tender mercies of a much-accelerated process of removal by the district. The speech is available at http://www.abny.org/docs/UFT_speech.pdf .

• ***The real deal on African-American inventors*** – Rensselaer Polytechnic professor Rayvon Fouché believes that there are far too many factual errors in the commonly-used write-ups of African-American inventors. He has just published a book, *Black Inventors in the Age of Segregation* (Johns Hopkins University Press), in which he examines the work of Shelby Davison, Lewis Latimer, and Granville Woods. Fouche presents them in all their genius, but also shows them as three-dimensional characters. "We must rescue the complexity – the greatness and imperfection – of black inventors to understand more fully their relevance in America today," he write in his introduction.

"By correcting inaccuracies, a professor tires to deliver a fuller picture of the lives of African-American inventors" by Teresa Riordan, *New York Times*, January 19, 2004. http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F30717FA3F5D0C7A8DDDA80894DC404482

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 principals, teachers, and other educators very well-informed on important research, ideas, and developments in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, a former Boston teacher and administrator, is your "designated reader," searching through a wide range of publications the week they come out, zeroing in on the articles that are most relevant and useful to improving teaching and learning at the school level, and summarizing them in a brief e-mail. Target topics include the following:

• *School leadership* – Building a professional learning community; effective teamwork; effective schools practices; supervision and evaluation of teachers; time management.

• *Effective teaching* – Key variables associated with high student achievement; 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 in reading, writing, and math.

• *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.

• *Closing the gap* – Effective strategies to close the racial/economic achievement gap; the innate-ability/intelligence/effective effort debate; safety-net programs.

• *Positive school culture* – Student discipline; social-emotional learning; moral development; parent involvement; and community partnerships.

• *And…* – New areas of research; upcoming television and radio programs on education.

Publications covered:

(those read this week are underlined)

American Education Research Journal
American Educator
American School Board Journal
ASCD SmartBrief
Atlantic Monthly
Bay State Banner
Boston Globe
Commonwealth Magazine
Curriculum/Education Update (ASCD)
Ed. Magazine (Harvard School of Education)
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Elementary School Journal
Harpers
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Education Review
Middle School Journal
New York Times
New Yorker
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal Magazine
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Review of Educational Research
Teachers College Record
Teacher Magazine

If one of the summaries is of particular interest, subscribers are encouraged to read the full article. E-links will be provided whenever possible. If you would like to suggest additional publications, please be in touch.

Subscriptions:

The Marshall Memo is published every Monday (with occasional breaks). Individual subscriptions are $50 a year. Reduced rates for institutional subscriptions can be negotiated. To subscribe, contact Kim Marshall at kim.marshall8@verizon.net or at 222 Clark Road, Brookline, MA 02445 (617-566-4353).