

Marshall Memo 7

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
October 6, 2003

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Quote of the Week

“Knowing the right thing to do is the central problem of school improvement. Holding schools accountable for their performance depends on having people in schools with the knowledge, skill, and judgment to make the improvements that will increase student performance.” Richard Elmore, quoted in the MCREL study (see #1)

1. What principals do that makes the biggest difference

A new analysis of 5,000 studies on the impact of school leaders identifies 21 characteristics linked to improvements in student achievement. The strongest was situational awareness – “the extent to which the leader is savvy about the details and undercurrents in the running of the school and uses that information to address problems.” The study found that “just as leaders can have a positive impact on achievement, they also can have a marginal, or worse, a negative impact on achievement.” Among the least effective items on the list was whether principals recognized and rewarded the accomplishments of staff members.

The key is for the leader to focus on the right change for that particular school and understand the “order” of that change. A “first order” change is one that is in synch with a school’s existing values and practices and offers obvious benefits to everyone (a “quick win”). More challenging “second order” initiatives ask staff members to break with their traditions. Tim Waters, one of the authors, stressed the importance of principals addressing the first-order initiatives. Commenting on leaders

who don't, he said, "We believe this explains why, in some cases, people work hard to introduce improvements and things don't get better. They get worse."

From the full study (see e-link below), these are the 21 effectiveness factors listed in order of their impact on student achievement (average r in parentheses):

1. Situational awareness – The principal is aware of the details and undercurrents in the running of the school and uses this information to address current and potential problems (.33)
2. Intellectual stimulation – Ensures that faculty and staff are aware of the most current theories and practices and makes the discussion of these a regular aspect of the school's culture (.32)
3. Change agent – Is willing to and actively challenges the status quo (.30)
4. Input – Involves teachers in the design and implementation of important decisions and policies (.30)
5. Culture – Fosters shared beliefs and a sense of community and cooperation (.29)
6. Outreach – Is an advocate and spokesperson for the school to all stakeholders (.28)
7. Monitors/evaluates – Monitors the effectiveness of school practices and their impact on student learning (.28)
8. Order – Establishes a set of standard operating procedures and routines (.26)
9. Resources – Provides teachers with materials and professional development necessary for the successful execution of their jobs (.26)
10. Affirmation – Recognizes and celebrates school accomplishments and acknowledges failures (.25)
11. Ideals/beliefs – Communicates and operates from strong ideals and beliefs about schooling (.25)
12. Discipline – Protects teachers from issues and influences that would detract from their teaching time or focus (.24)
13. Focus – Establishes clear goals and keeps those goals in the forefront of the school's attention (.24)
14. Knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment – Is knowledgeable about current curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices (.24)
15. Communication – Establishes strong lines of communication with teachers and among students (.23)

16. Flexibility – Adapts leadership behavior to the needs of the current situation and is comfortable with dissent (.22)
17. Optimizer – Inspires and leads new and challenging innovations (.20)
18. Relationship – Demonstrates an awareness of the personal aspects of teachers and staff (.19)
19. Curriculum, instruction, assessment – Is directly involved in the design and implementation of curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices (.16)
20. Visibility – Has quality contact and interactions with teachers and students (.16)
21. Contingent rewards – Recognizes and rewards individual accomplishments (.15)

“Analysis Teases Out Ways Principals Boost Learning” by Debra Viadero, *Education Week*, October 1, 2002 (Vo. XXIII, #5, p. 7). The full report, “Balanced Leadership: What 30 Years of Research Tells Us About the Effect of Leadership on Student Achievement” by Tim Waters, Robert Marzano, and Brian McNulty, is available at this website (a heads up: this document takes *forever* to print!): <http://www.mcrel.org/topics/productDetail.asp?topicsID=7&productID=144>

2. Test prep – the junk food of education

Is “teaching to the test” destroying the quality of classroom teaching? It depends on how it’s done, says Kim Marshall in a commentary piece in this week’s *Education Week*. “If teachers are using first-rate classroom methods and materials to teach to standards that are measured by the tests, that’s great. If students who have fallen behind are getting skilled tutoring that boosts their confidence and performance, excellent. If nervous students are given test-taking tips and familiarized with the test format a couple of weeks before testing time, fine. But if low-quality “test prep” materials and recycled test items are being used to drill and kill the subject matter, that’s a problem.”

Marshall asserts that bad test prep is like junk food: “It can give students a quick burst of energy (short-term test-score gains), especially if kids are malnourished (deprived of good teaching and learning), but all too quickly, students get that empty feeling (their achievement sags).” Test prep is junk food if it:

- Bore students (tests, tests, tests all the time) and turns them off school;
- Demoralizes teachers, making them feel they’re working in a test-prep factory;
- Promotes lazy pedagogy (just assign and correct);
- Uses de-contextualized passages so kids don’t read whole stories and books;
- Over-uses multiple-choice questions in daily classroom teaching;

- Drills lower-level skills and skimps on writing and teaching for understanding;
- Focuses on memorizing facts rather than expressing ideas in an authentic voice.

Why would any self-respecting educator indulge in the junky kind of test prep?

There are five reasons that many superintendents, principals, and teachers succumb:

1. Many district curriculum documents contain far more than teachers can cover; test prep materials seem to offer a way to cover the stuff that's on the tests.
2. Many school districts have not aligned their curriculum expectations with state standards and tests; test prep thrives on this kind of misalignment.
3. Some educators buy the misconception that their students will only do well on tests if they are fed a steady diet of worksheets and cloned test questions.
4. Some educators think they can continue to teach their private curriculums and "game" the system by using test prep.
5. The pressure of high-stakes tests can create a group panic attack, leading educators to think they must use test prep materials or their kids will fail.

But teachers don't have to teach badly to raise test scores, says Marshall. Tests dictate the *what*, not the *how to*, of teaching. What produces high achievement – and students who are well-prepared for life – is *good teaching*: engaging, hands-on classroom activities, challenging subject matter, and energized teachers who know their subject and make it exciting and relevant. Test prep is a shortcut that doesn't work.

Marshall urges educators to say no to junky test prep, accept the reality of high-stakes tests, align their grade-by-grade curriculum with test expectations, reduce what's required of teachers to a teachable amount, ensure that 99 percent of classroom time is devoted to high-quality, aligned instruction, and put a premium on excellent teaching, trusting that this is the best way to get and sustain high student achievement.

"Test Prep: The Junk Food of Education", Kim Marshall, *Ed. Week*, Oct. 1, 03, (Vo. XXIII, #5, p. 30, 34) <http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=05marshall.h23>

3. Is there a hidden bias in the S.A.T.?

The Scholastic Achievement Test purports to be an unbiased measure of student learning. But Roy Freedle, who worked for many years at Educational Testing Service, wrote in last summer's *Harvard Educational Review* that the true potential of many African-American students may be understated by the S.A.T. Freedle found that black students do better than same-scoring white students on more difficult

S.A.T. questions – and not as well as white students on the easier questions. Freedle argues that black students' scores should be weighted to reflect this fact.

The achievement gap in S.A.T. scores is significant: on this 1600-point test, Asian students average 1070, white students 1060, Hispanic students 900, and black students 857 (and the gap between black and white students has widened by 16 points in the last decade). Although selective colleges admit some black and Hispanic students with lower scores in the interests of diversity, and although affirmative action was recently affirmed by the U.S. Supreme Court, most colleges continue to use S.A.T. (and A.C.T.) scores to evaluate students' potential. Any distortion of the S.A.T. performance of black and Hispanic students can have an impact on their chances of admission (and on possible scholarships).

In recent years, test makers have taken elaborate steps to ensure fairness, carefully screening all test questions for possible racial and economic bias. E.T.S. and the College Board thought that the scholarly debate that raged in the 1980's and 90's was settled, and that the achievement gap between black and white students is now attributable to differences in family income and culture and the deficiencies of K-12 schools. "It's not bias in the tests," said Wayne Camara, vice-president of research and development for the College Board, in a recent interview. "It is the differences in the opportunities the students have to get a quality education, the kinds of support they have in school and in the community and in the home."

Freedle proposed a different theory. His research at E.T.S. during the 1980's identified the seven factors that make tests items difficult and uncovered an intriguing pattern: white students did better than black students on the easier items, blacks better than whites on the harder items. Freedle concluded that there was "an unintended but persistent cultural and statistical bias in the verbal section of the SAT that adversely affects African Americans."

How did this operate? Freedle found that the easier test questions contained words like "horse," "snake," "canoe," and "golf," while the harder test questions used words like "vehemence," "anathema," "sycophant," and "intractable." The easier words had more definitions than the more difficult words (an average of 5.2 dictionary entries as compared to 2.0). Black students who studied hard in school mastered the difficult words, but white students' everyday language experience in middle-class neighborhoods better equipped them to handle the multiple meanings of the easier words and the ways they were used in the test. Freedle argues that this explains why black students do worse on questions containing common words than

they do on questions that depend on the harder (but less ambiguous) words they learn in school. He found that this effect was most visible on test questions that give students little or no context. Freedle's research was done on the verbal S.A.T., but he believes that the same effect could be found in the math section and perhaps also on essay questions and AP exams.

Freedle's theory was not given much credence within E.T.S., and he eventually left, continuing to explore his theory on his own. In his *Harvard Education Review* article, he does not suggest a completely new S.A.T. Instead, he proposes a supplement to S.A.T. scores – the Revised-SAT, or R-SAT – that would be calculated based only on the hard items and sent to colleges as a supplement “to help them identify students, mostly lower-income students of all races, whose S.A.T. scores suffered because of the distance between the language of their families and neighborhoods and that of middle-class America.” Freedle says that if we weight the scores toward the harder items, many minority students get a boost of a hundred points or more on the S.A.T. He contends that his findings, which were done on earlier versions of the S.A.T., still apply to the revised tests used now, and will be true in the further-revised S.A.T. (which will eliminate analogy questions and add an essay) due to be released in 2005.

Freedle's *Harvard Education Review* article has caused a stir. E.T.S. and the College Board discount his theory, but the University of California has launched an independent study to check out his findings. The goal is clear, says Jay Matthews: removing “barriers that limit young people's choices in life.”

“The Bias Question” by Jay Matthews, *The Atlantic Monthly*, November 2003 (Vol. 292, #4, p. 130-140)

4. Why do small classes produce better student learning?

Decades of research have established that smaller classes get better results, especially in the primary grades and for disadvantaged students. But what is the mechanism? A study in this month's *Review of Educational Research* summarizes previous findings: students are more engaged in learning, display less disruptive behavior, and exhibit increased pro-social behavior. The authors believe that the benefits of small classes have a direct impact on these learning behaviors, on students' pro-social behavior, and on teachers' interpersonal styles, which in turn have an impact on academic achievement.

Delving deeper, the study showed how smaller classes affected the “visibility of the individual” (students feel more “on the firing line”) and a “sense of belonging”. Larger classes have the opposite effect: there is a “diffusion of responsibility” and “social loafing” (students in larger groups put forth less effort than students in smaller groups). The study also found that the effects of smaller classes could be enhanced or canceled out by other factors, including how safe and orderly the environment inside and outside the classroom was, whether the physical conditions were adequate, and how often classroom instructional time was interrupted.

“The ‘Why’s’ of Class Size: Student Behavior in Small Classes” by Jeremy Finn, Gina Pannozzo, and Charles Achilles, *Review of Educational Research*, Fall 2003 (Vol. 73, #2, p. 321-368)

5. Grading state standards in U.S. History

A study released by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation rates each state’s U.S. History curriculum standards and gives A’s to only six states: Alabama, Arizona, California, Indiana, Massachusetts, and New York (23 states were given failing marks). The criteria used in the ratings include: the study of history in chronological fashion, including historical details, strong history content in the early grades, and the absence of what the authors called “politically correct ideology.” The full report, “Effective State Standards for U.S. History: A 2003 Report Card”, is available online at www.edexcellence.net.

6. Quick Items

- **Teacher blogs** – An article in the current *Teacher* magazine reports on a trend: new teachers posting web-logs (a.k.a. blogs) on their classroom experiences (one teacher was called in by her principal when it appeared from her blog that she was suicidal). You can look at the blogs discussed in the article (and get other blog information) at <http://www.teachermagazine.org/tmstory.cfm?slug=02Blog.h15> “This Time, It’s Personal” by Mark Toner, *Teacher*, Vol. XV, #2, p. 31-33).

- **Better parent conferences** – There is more material on Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot’s new book and parent conferences with the student present in a *Teacher* magazine article, “Talking Points” by Debra Gordon (*Teacher*, Vol. XV, #2, p. 9-10 <http://www.teachermagazine.org/tmstory.cfm?slug=02Conference.h15>

• **Homework** – Do students have too much homework these days? A new study by Tom Loveless says that a handful of students are buried in homework but for most students, the amount of homework has not gone up appreciably. The amount of homework each week went from 113 minutes a week (in 1981) to 136 minutes (in 1997). The average student spends 19 to 27 minutes on homework a day. And the number of students doing *no* homework increased from 18 percent to 38 percent. The study is at <http://brookings.edu/comm/news/20031001brown.htm>.

• **Kids' book reviews** – The current *Teacher* magazine has reviews of eight children's books. Try <http://www.teachermagazine.org/tmstory.cfm?slug=02Kids.h15>

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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 be your “designated reader”, looking through a wide range of publications as soon as they come out and sending a brief e-mail every Monday 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.
- *Effective teaching* – Key variables associated with high 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.
- *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.
- *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
Atlantic Monthly
Bay State Banner
Boston Globe
Commonwealth Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Update (ASCD)
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Elementary School Journal
Harpers
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Education Review
Harvard School of Education Ed. Magazine
New York Times
New Yorker
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal Magazine
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Review of Educational Research
Rethinking Schools
Teacher Magazine
Occasional books, lectures, and websites.

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.

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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).