

# Marshall Memo 163

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education

December 4, 2006

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## Quotes of the Week

“You’ve got to be sick and tired of things being how they are before you can change.”

Larry Winget (see item #7)

“I’m tough but fair. I always communicate clearly what I expect to be done, and then I always inspect what I expect. I’m very easy to get along with as long as people do their best and take responsibility for any mistake they make.”

Larry Winget (*ibid.*)

“When a school is not a safe, engaging place, when it is filled with adults and youth who are in conflict or beset by expressions of disrespect, the attention and energy needed for learning is dissipated or diverted.”

Maurice Elias, Mary Utne O’Brien, and Roger Weissberg (see item #4)

“The driving emotional force of fear triggered by the prospect of an upcoming test now must be replaced by the emotions of optimism and persistence triggered by the belief that, ‘I can succeed at learning if I try.’ In other words, students must have continuous access to credible evidence of their own academic success.”

Rick Stiggins (see item #2)

“[I]f assessments are to support improvements in student learning, their results must inform students how to do better the next time. This requires communicating results that transmit sufficient, understandable detail to guide the learner’s actions.”

Rick Stiggins (*ibid.*)

“If a student decides that the learning is beyond reach for her or him or that the risk of public failure is too great or too embarrassing, then regardless of what adults do, there will be no learning.”

Rick Stiggins (*ibid.*)

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## 1. “The Curse of Knowledge”

This intriguing article in the *Harvard Business Review* is quite relevant for schools – both in the principal’s office and in the classroom. The authors, Chip Heath and Dan Heath, note that business leaders often don’t get their ideas through to subordinates because they talk in general, sweeping terms that have meaning to them but come across as vague abstractions to their listeners. This is because of a phenomenon called “the curse of knowledge.” Leaders know the logic and conventions of business and when they speak abstractly; they are summarizing lots of concrete data that they have in their heads. But their subordinates, who don’t have access to the underlying data, hear only abstractions and often don’t “get it.”

Back in 1990, Stanford graduate student Elizabeth Newton did an experiment to investigate the curse of knowledge. She asked pairs of people to sit at a table and assigned roles: a “tapper” and a “listener.” The tapper thought of a well-known song (like “Happy Birthday”) and tapped out the rhythm on a table, and the listener tried to guess the song. Before tapping the song, each tapper was asked privately to predict the chance of the listener correctly guessing the song; tappers generally predicted that listeners would guess right 50% of the time.

Newton repeated this experiment 120 times, and the listeners guessed the song only three times – a success ratio of 2.5%. The tappers were flabbergasted. They had predicted that they would get their tune across one time in two, and they succeeded one time in forty. What happened?

“When a tapper taps,” explain Heath and Heath, “it is impossible for her to avoid hearing the tune playing along to her taps. Meanwhile, all the listener can hear is a kind of bizarre Morse code... The problem is that once we know something – say, the melody of a song – we find it hard to imagine not knowing it. Our knowledge has ‘cursed’ us. We have difficulty sharing it with others, because we can’t readily re-create their state of mind.”

Heath and Heath say that the way for leaders to overcome this information imbalance is to use very concrete language, preferably real stories. FedEx, for example, has a corporate goal that packages will “absolutely, positively” arrive on time. To make this goal concrete, managers tell the following story: a New York FedEx driver’s truck broke down and the back-up truck was slow arriving. The driver tried to deliver her remaining packages on foot, but realized that she wasn’t going to get them all to their destinations on time. So she flagged down a competitor’s truck and talked him into helping her deliver the remaining packages. FedEx leaders use this story to dramatize how serious they are about reliability, and drivers can’t help but see that their job is not just to drive a route and go home at 5:00 p.m. but to use their ingenuity to get packages delivered *on time*.

“Concrete language and stories defeat the curse of knowledge and make executives’ strategy statements stickier,” conclude Heath and Heath. “As a result, all the members of an organization can share an understanding of the strategies and a language for discussing them.”

This has obvious implications for principals talking about a school’s strategic objectives (“All Children Can Learn,” “90 Percent Proficiency”): make the school’s goals concrete and tell real stories about how teachers and other staff members have been successful in carrying them out. But what are the implications for the classroom? Teachers are constantly bedeviled with the curse of knowledge. They have a deep understanding of what they are teaching – they are the “tappers” who know the tune they are communicating – and often it’s difficult to understand why students don’t immediately “get it.” The same advice holds true: be concrete, be dramatic, try to get inside students’ heads and understand what it’s like not to know what’s being taught. And one more thing: constantly check to see if your message is getting through.

“The Curse of Knowledge” by Chip Heath and Dan Heath in *Harvard Business Review*, December 2006 (Vol. 84, #12, p. 20-22), no e-link available

## **2. Rick Stiggins on What Good Formative Assessments Can Accomplish**

“If schools are to be effective,” writes assessment expert Rick Stiggins in this *EDge Magazine* article, “educators must use the evidence gathered through assessments for two purposes: to inform instructional decisions and to encourage students to try to learn.”

This seems like an obvious point (isn’t that the way we’ve always used tests?), but Stiggins paints a *bleak* picture of the way assessments have been used in the past – and are sometimes still used:

- The basic mission of schools was to separate the sheep from the goats.
- Learning goals were vague; criteria for good work were largely secret.
- Feedback to students was evaluative (grades), rather than helpfully descriptive.
- The amount of time available to learn was fixed: one year per grade.
- Students’ learning varied greatly: some learned a lot, some much less.
- Students who did well in the early grades scored high on assessments, built on success, came to feel they were capable learners, and were confident enough to risk striving for more success because they felt it was within their reach if they tried.
- These successful students’ emotional reaction to assessments was often: “I understand these results. I know what to do next to learn more. I can handle this. I choose to keep trying.”
- Students who did less well in the early grades scored poorly on assessments, didn’t master essential learning skills, fell further and further behind, felt stupid, lost confidence, became discouraged, and gave up. “Chronic failure was hard to hide and became embarrassing,” says Stiggins. “It was better not to try.”
- These students’ emotional reaction to assessments was often: “I don’t know what these results mean for me. I have no idea what to do next. I can’t handle this. I quit.”

- The wide span of achievement, from superstars to dropouts, was regarded as an inevitable product of schooling. If a student did well, it was because the student was smart and worked hard. If a student did poorly, it was because the student was not smart and didn't work hard. In other words, it was the student's fault, not the school's. "The school's responsibility was to provide the opportunity to learn," says Stiggins. "If students didn't take advantage of the opportunity, that was not the system's responsibility."

Students are constantly deciding if they can handle the work, says Stiggins. "They ask, can I get this, or is it just too hard for me? Is the learning worth the energy I must expend to attain it? Is the learning worth the risk of public failure?... If a student decides that the learning is beyond reach for her or him or that the risk of public failure is too great or too embarrassing, then regardless of what adults do, there will be no learning."

Stiggins believes that this dynamic is highly destructive for students who are not doing well, and must be changed if we are to reach the ambitious goals we have set for ourselves in the current era. "We can't have students who have yet to meet standards losing faith in themselves and giving up in futility," he says.

To change the old assessment paradigm will require a radically different approach – and a different climate. "The driving emotional force of fear triggered by the prospect of an upcoming test," writes Stiggins, "now must be replaced by the emotions of optimism and persistence triggered by the belief that, 'I can succeed at learning if I try.' In other words, students must have continuous access to credible evidence of their own academic success."

For all students to learn at high levels, says Stiggins, the research evidence is overwhelming: our assessments must do more than churn out scores for administrators; they need to serve teachers and students and be used in a way that narrows, rather than widens, the achievement gap. We need to use frequent formative assessments – assessments *for* learning – in a skillful way. Specifically:

- Assessments need to give rich, descriptive information that is genuinely helpful to teachers and students and elicits productive reactions:
  - "For the teacher," writes Stiggins, "the assessment is helpful if it reveals what comes next in the learning. The assessment is counterproductive when it leaves teachers with no idea of what to do next."
  - "For the student, a productive reaction leaves them confident and willing to keep trying. A counterproductive response has the student confused, frustrated, and ready to give up in hopelessness... [I]f assessments are to support improvements in student learning, their results must inform students how to do better the next time. This requires communicating results that transmit sufficient, understandable detail to guide the learner's actions."
- Assessments need to happen frequently enough (and be sensitive enough) so patterns of student learning will be revealed. "In this way," says Stiggins, "both the learner and the teacher will be able to discern not only the student's current level of achievement, but also how

much the student’s capabilities have improved, which is a powerful booster for confidence and motivation.”

- Students need to be involved in the assessment process, using interim results to continuously assess themselves in ways that are encouraging, not overwhelming. “Students become partners in the self-assessment process,” says Stiggins, “by, for example, collaborating with their teachers in creating and using assessments like those they will be held accountable for later. This reveals to them the secret to their own learning success while they are still learning. Students become partners in the accumulation of growth portfolios that reveal to them, their teachers, and their families the changes in their own achievement as it is happening... This feedback builds progressively over time and thus helps students continue to believe that success is within reach if they keep trying.”

- Students need to see a clear road map of where the curriculum is going and exactly what is required of them. This enables students to watch themselves grow and continuously reinforces their belief that success is within reach if they keep working hard.

Below is a modified version of charts that Stiggins included in this article, focusing on the questions that each school-based “client” of assessments might ask at each stage of the process:

	<b>Student</b>	<b>Teacher</b>	<b>Principal</b>	<b>Parent</b>
<b>Beginning a unit</b>	What am I supposed to learn?	What are my students supposed to learn?	What standards are students expected to master by subject at each grade level?	What is my child supposed to learn?
<b>Early formative assessment</b>	What have I learned already, and what do I still need to work on?	What have they learned already, and what do they still need to learn? Which students need special services?	Which of these standards are students mastering or progressing appropriately toward? Are there problem areas?	What has my child learned already, and what still needs to be learned? Does my child need specialized services?
<b>Later formative assessment</b>	Have I met or am I moving toward the learning targets?	Have my students met or are they progressing on the important achievement standards?	What standards are students to master across our classrooms, grade, and schools	Is my child progressing satisfactorily in meeting the teacher’s classroom learning expectations?
<b>Summative assessment</b>	Have I met state achievement standards?	Did they meet state achievement expectations?	Did enough of our students meet standards this year?	Has my child met the state achievement expectations?

Stiggins’s model of assessment *for* learning can be summarized in these seven steps to teaching an effective curriculum unit:

- Start by giving students a crystal-clear statement of the learning targets.
- Show students samples of student work at excellent, proficient, and not-proficient levels.
- Teach one facet of quality at a time.
- Teach students the practice of focused revision – how to improve their work one facet at a time.
- As students work, give them continuous, descriptive feedback on their efforts; help them see how to do better.
- Help students learn how to generate their own descriptive feedback.
- Teach students to understand, keep track of, and reflect on changes in their own proficiencies as they improve.

“Assessment *For* Learning: A Key to Motivation and Achievement” by Rick Stiggins in *EDge Magazine*, November/December 2006 (Vol. 2, #2, p. 3-19), no free e-link available

### **3. Social-Emotional Learning Programs in Secondary Schools**

In this article in *Principal Leadership*, the authors (two psychology professors and the director of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning - CASEL) make the case for comprehensive social-emotional learning programs in middle and high schools. “When a school is not a safe, engaging place,” they write, “when it is filled with adults and youth who are in conflict or beset by expressions of disrespect, the attention and energy needed for learning is dissipated or diverted.”

Research has shown, they continue, that well-run social-emotional learning programs result in higher student achievement, improved physical health, better citizenship and employability, and reductions in maladjustment, failed relationships, interpersonal violence, and substance abuse.

What are the main elements of social-emotional competence? The authors list five key areas:

- *Self-awareness*: knowing one’s own emotions and strengths and having a sense of self-efficacy and self-confidence;
- *Self-management*: impulse control, stress management, goal setting, assertiveness, persistence, and motivation;
- *Empathy*: the ability to see different perspectives, be socially aware, and have respect for others;
- *Relationship skills*: cooperation with others, willingness to seek and provide help, and communication skills;
- *Responsible decision-making*: being able to evaluate situations, reflect on personal and ethical responsibilities, and make good decisions.

To foster these skills in students, principals need to exercise visionary and courageous leadership, implement a schoolwide program, and model the skills themselves. The authors recommend the following steps for principal who want to move in this direction:

- Make a personal commitment to creating a schoolwide social-emotional learning program and become its main champion.
- Engage stakeholders and form a steering committee that has genuine authority and responsibility for the work.
- Develop and articulate a shared vision with high hopes and dreams for what students will become. Resources can be found at <http://www.character.org>.
- Conduct a needs and resources assessment. Build on what's already in place and working well and zero in on areas of need.
- Develop an action plan, including goals, objectives, and specifically how they will be reached.
- Select programs with proven track records; it's important to have a shared framework and vocabulary for students and staff. Examples include: Facing History and Ourselves as part of social studies and ELA; Teenage Health Teaching Modules in health; Social Decision Making/Social Problem Solving and Lions-Quest Skills for Adolescence in guidance and advisories; and Lions-Quest Skills for Action in civics and social studies.
- Conduct initial staff development to ensure that teachers know the theory and practices of social-emotional learning.
- Implement social-emotional skill-building curriculum units in regular classes.
- Expand and integrate social-emotional learning schoolwide, building a consistent environment and experiences for students. Infuse social-emotional content and themes – such as problem-solving and critical thinking – in literacy, history, and performing arts classes.
- Involve students in service-related projects. For resources on service learning, see [http://www.casel.org/projects\\_products/servicelearning.php](http://www.casel.org/projects_products/servicelearning.php).
- Check on progress to catch problems early on; revisit activities and adjust for continuous improvement.

“Transformative Leadership for Social-Emotional Learning” by Maurice Elias, Mary Utne O’Brien, and Roger Weissberg in *Principal Leadership*, December 2006 (Vol. 7, #4, p. 10-13), no e-link available

#### **4. What Is School Climate? How Can We Improve It?**

In this *Principal Leadership* article, three leaders from the Center for Social and Emotional Education (CSEE) lead off with a troubling anecdote. Alma, a high-school student, hurries into school on a chilly Monday morning, looking forward to her first-period English class and the reactions that her classmates will have to the book they have been reading (she’s finished the assigned reading ahead of schedule). Alma starts up the stairs and realizes that repair work on the stairway hasn’t been finished yet and she has to take the long way around to get to class on time. Rushing down a hallway, she is loudly berated by a security guard for failing to greet him in a respectful manner, as required by the school’s new “code of respect.” Just outside her classroom, Alma is accosted by a classmate who says, “What are you going to say in class today, little miss suck-up?” Alma looks away and slumps into her seat just as the

bell rings. “Just ignore her,” whispers Alma’s friend, Renée, from a nearby seat. “She’s too stupid to get good grades – she’s just jealous.”

Clearly this is a school with some climate problems, and the authors use the anecdote to frame their definition of good school climate:

- *Environmental* – cleanliness, adequate space and materials, inviting aesthetics.
- *Structural* – size of school, curricular and co-curricular offerings
- *Physical safety* – clearly communicated rules, clear and consistent response to violations, feelings of personal safety, attitudes about violence, a crisis plan
- *Social-emotional safety* – attitudes about individual differences, students’ and adults’ attitudes about and responses to bullying, conflict resolution taught, belief in school rules
- *Teaching and learning* – high expectations for student achievement, all learning styles honored, help provided when needed, learning linked to real life, engaging materials, use of praise and rewards, opportunities for participation, varied teaching methods, instructional leadership, creativity valued, social-emotional and well as academic learning valued and taught, varied intelligences appreciated, connections across disciplines
- *Relationships* – positive adult-adult relationships between and among teachers, administrators, and staff members; positive adult-student relationships; positive student-student relationships; shared decision-making; common academic planning opportunities; diversity valued; student participation in learning and discipline
- *Sense of school community* – students and adults feel and demonstrate a sense of community in the school.
- *Morale* – engagement among students, enthusiasm among staff members, connections between each student and one or more adults, positive feelings about the school among students and staff members.
- *Peer norms* – students and staff members feel that learning is important, are invested in caring, appreciate importance of being able to say no, expect collaboration and cooperation.
- *School-home-community partnerships* – mutual support and ongoing communication; school-community involvement; parent participation in school decision-making; shared parent-teacher norms vis-à-vis learning and behavior; student-family assistance programs
- *Learning community* – learning and continuous improvement supported by standards and measures; systematic and on-going professional development; data-driven decision-making that is linked to learning; evaluation of school systems.

The authors go on to recommend a systematic process of fostering better school climate, very much along the lines of the previous article on social-emotional learning. One useful resource is the school climate inventory formulated by their organization; see <http://www.csee.net/climate/csciassessment/>.

“Finding the Heart of Your School” by Jonathan Cohen, Laura Shapiro, and Melody Fisher in *Principal Leadership*, December 2006 (Vol. 7, #4, p. 26-31), no e-link available

## 5. Helping Struggling Readers Catch Up

This article in the London *Times Educational Supplement Magazine* describes Catch Up, a twice-weekly, one-on-one program to help struggling readers. Taught by teachers or teaching assistants, Catch Up lessons last 10 minutes for primary students and 15 minutes for secondary students and follow a consistent format:

- The teacher chooses a book that is at the student's instructional level (all books have been leveled).
- The teacher introduces the main ideas or plot and any tricky vocabulary.
- The student reads, the teacher notes errors, and they talk about the book.
- The student does a writing activity linked to the book; the teacher chooses a word from the story that caused problems and the student practices spelling it and uses it in a sentence.
- The Catch Up teacher collaborates closely with the regular classroom teacher.

Data from each session are recorded and students' progress is monitored. Students are given formal reading assessments at intervals during the year. Studies of the secondary program showed that in 10 months, seventh and eighth graders made an average gain of 22 months in reading level and 28 months in comprehension.

"The Secret to My Success" by Diana Hinds in *The TES Magazine*, November 17, 2006; for more information, see <http://www.catchup.org.uk> for more information.

## 6. "Extreme" Jobs

In this sidebar in a *Harvard Business Review* article on the trend toward "extreme" jobs in the corporate world, the authors list their criteria for such jobs:

- Physical presence at workplace at least ten hours a day
- Working 60 hours or more a week
- Unpredictable work flow
- Large number of direct reports
- Responsibility for mentoring and recruiting
- Inordinate scope of responsibility that amounts to more than one job
- Work-related events outside regular work hours
- Availability to clients 24/7
- Responsibility for profit and loss
- Fast-paced work under tight timelines
- Large amount of travel

Except for the last one, does this remind you of a particular job in education? Sorry, but the article offers no solutions, only a series of cautions about the dangers of operating in the "extreme" zone for any length of time.

"Extreme Jobs: The Dangerous Allure of the 70-Hour Workweek" by Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Carolyn Buck Luce in *Harvard Business Review*, December 2006 (Vol. 84, #12, p. 49-59), no e-link available

## 7. Tough Love from Managers

In this interview with the *Harvard Business Review*, tough-talking corporate executive and consultant Larry Winget shares his ideas on leadership. Two excerpts:

“You’ve got to be sick and tired of things being how they are before you can change. So I tell people, ‘You are better than the results you are getting. You shouldn’t be satisfied with where you are.’

“I’m tough but fair. I always communicate clearly what I expect to be done, and then I always inspect what I expect. I’m very easy to get along with as long as people do their best and take responsibility for any mistake they make. If someone comes to me and says ‘Larry, I screwed up, and I’m sorry, and here’s what I plan to do to fix it, and I need your help in this way,’ that goes a long way with me. But if someone lies to me, or shirks their responsibility, they’re done.”

“Shut Up and Stop Whining: Larry Winget on ‘Irrational’ Leadership” – an interview with Gardiner Morse in *Harvard Business Review*, December 2006 (Vol. 84, #12, p. 26), no e-link available

## 8. Short Items:

**a. History online resources** – The TIELab History Lab is a website that features a simple template for creating lessons and activities around primary sources. The site has links to collections of primary and secondary sources and ideas on how historians analyze documents. Once a teacher finalizes a lesson or activity, it can be saved on the website and shared with others. See <http://hlab.tielab.org/index.php>

“History Resources Online” in *Principal Leadership*, December 2006 (Vol. 7, #4, p. 50)

**b. Google resources for educators** – Google, the search engine company, has created a new set of tools for teachers and students: <http://www.google.com/educators/index.html>. On this site, you have access to:

- Searches – tips for doing better web searches
- Google Earth – three-dimensional mapping software based on satellite photos
- Book searches – find books using students’ search terms
- Google maps – maps or satellite photos of any address
- Documents and spreadsheets – online word processor and spreadsheet software
- Blogger – tips on creating and using weblogs
- Sketch-up – lets students design buildings and explore geometric concepts
- Calendar – teachers, administrators, and students can share calendar information
- Picasa – free software to make it easier to find, load, edit, and share photographs
- Personalized home page
- Applications for educators

“Google for Educators’ Unveils Interactive Tools for Schools” by Rhea Borja in *Education Week*, November 29, 2006 (Vol. 26, #13, p. 9), no free e-link available

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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](mailto: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 36 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 (with occasional breaks; there are about 50 issues a year).

## ***Subscriptions:***

Individual subscriptions are \$50 for the school year. Rates decline steeply for multiple readers within the same organization. See the website for these rates and information on paying by check or credit card.

## ***Website:***

If you go to <http://www.marshallmemo.com> you will find detailed information on:

- How to subscribe or renew
- Why the Marshall Memo?
- Publications read
- Article selection criteria
- Topics covered
- Headlines for all issues
- What readers say
- About Kim Marshall (including links to articles)
- A free sample issue

Marshall Memo subscribers have access to the Members' Area of the website, which has:

- The current issue (in PDF or Word format)
- All back issues (also in PDF or Word)
- 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 School Board Journal  
ASCD SmartBrief  
Atlantic Monthly  
Catalyst Chicago  
CommonWealth Magazine  
Ed. Magazine  
EDge  
Education Digest  
Education Gadfly  
Education Next  
Education Update  
Education Week  
Educational Leadership  
Educational Researcher  
Edutopia  
Elementary School Journal  
Essential Teacher (TESOL)  
Harvard Business Review  
Harvard Education Letter  
Harvard Educational Review  
JESPAR  
Jimmy Kilpatrick  
Journal of Staff Development  
Language Learner (NABE)  
Middle Ground  
Middle School Journal  
NASSP Bulletin  
New York Times  
New Yorker  
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  
Teachers College Record  
Theory Into Practice  
Times Educational Supplement