Marshall Memo 46

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

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"In any cohort of ninth graders, only 25 percent will go on to earn some sort of postsecondary degree. More and more, a young person who leaves high school unable to earn at least a two-year college degree faces a life of constant economic struggle. This can only be considered a growing national disaster."

Marc Tucker in *Harvard Education Letter*, July/August 2004, p. 8

"Hope is not a method."

U.S. Army maxim quoted by Rod Norland, *Newsweek*, July 5, 2004

"When anyone is trying to learn, feedback about the effort has three elements: recognizing the desired goal, evidence about present position, and some understanding of a way to close the gap between the two."

Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam (quoted in #1)

"If your child is in our school, we will guarantee that child succeeds. There will be no excuses. We're not going to say, 'The child failed because they came from a home with only one parent.' We're not going to say, 'The child failed because they're new immigrants into the country.' If your child gets into our school, that child is going to succeed. If you work with us as parents, we are going to do everything – and I mean *everything* – to see that your child gets a good education."

Geoffrey Canada talking to parents about the Harlem Children's Zone Promise Academy (quoted in the *New York Times Magazine*, June 20, 2004, p. 73)

"They call it coaching, but it is teaching. You do not tell them it is so. You show them the reasons why it is so."

Vince Lombardi, former N.F.L. football coach (quoted in item #2)

"To be effective… professional development must be ongoing, deeply embedded in teachers' classroom work with children, specific to grade levels or academic content, and focused on research-based approaches."

Alexander Russo (see item #2)

1. Wisconsin Kids Get Smart by Setting SMART Goals

This article describes how a Wisconsin elementary school decided to have students set goals for their learning. It all started when the school's data team (part of a shared governance model) had a hunch that student involvement would improve achievement. They read the classic article "Inside the Black Box" by British researchers Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam (*Kappan*, 1998), which confirmed that students who understand what they are supposed to learn and are engaged in the ongoing assessment process and receive quality feedback can dramatically improve their achievement. One quote in particular stood out: "When anyone is trying to learn, feedback about the effort has three elements: recognizing the desired goal, evidence about present position, and some understanding of a way to close the gap between the two."

Inspired, the school's data team looked at baseline data and wrote schoolwide three-year SMART goals by grade level. Some examples:

- 80% of second graders will be proficient in reading (using Iowa test scores)
- 80% of third, fourth, and fifth graders will be proficient on the district writing test.

Teachers then developed a professional development plan to reach the long-term goals and plunged into the *how to.* They worked in weekly grade-level team meetings to define "good quality writing," "strong reading skills,", and "strong math skills" so students would have a clear picture of their learning targets. Teachers also developed exemplars to show students exactly what proficient work looked like.

Teachers then translated the SMART goals acronym into kid-friendly language (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Real, and Timeline) and had each student set specific learning targets in reading, math, and writing. Students became quite conscious of what they were working on, telling visitors, "I'm working on word choice" or I'm working on sounding out letters." These were the factors that teachers considered at they helped students set their SMART goals:

- *Self-reflection* – Students asked, What am I doing well? What do I need to improve?
- *Goal-setting* – Students made a plan on what to do.
- *Rationale* – Students explained why he or she chose the goal.
- *Action plan* – Students described strategies and steps to complete the goal and specified what resources they needed.
- *Timeline* – Students decided how much time to spend working on the goal and set progress checkpoints.
- *Evidence* – Students described how they would know if the goal is reached. What will it look like? What work might I collect?
- *Implementation* – Students carried out their plan.
- *Reflection* – Students were asked: Did I reach my goal? How do I know? What went well? What gave me trouble? Did I use or follow my action plan? What is my next step?

Teachers began each lesson by telling students the learning target (for example, creative and expressive word choice), explained it in a mini-lesson, gave students time to work, and then had them evaluate their own work based on the target and the exemplar. Frequent assessments kept students informed on their progress, and teachers dug into the data on areas that were strongest and weakest for students. They used early-release days and common planning times to collaborate and develop action plans to help struggling students. The whole process drove teachers to differentiate instruction and zero in on meeting the needs of students who were not "getting it."

The school's principal, Bil Zahl, cited three positive outcomes of this initiative:

- Kids were more committed to trying harder.
- Students were tuning in more to teachers' mini-lessons.
- Teachers were able to critique and challenge the students in ways beyond what they had in the past.

"As they came to understand and define 'quality feedback,'" the principal said, "the feedback has become timely, explicit, and tied to goals and students learning content. They have higher expectations based on more individualized knowledge of students' abilities, and students are working to the higher levels. They have been able to identify students who continue to struggle and work with them in small, skill-based groups to provide additional intensive instruction."

One fourth grade student wrote about her SMART goal: "I learned if you set a goal and work at it, you could really reach it and become better at something. I've

found out that goals can really help you." A teacher said, "It's the relentless nature of this goal setting that reinforces the kids to continuously work to improve."

The results were very positive. The school reached or came very close to reaching its three-year SMART goals and did particularly well with minority and special education students.

"Teachers Learn to Set Goals with Students" by Jan O'Neill in the *Journal of Staff Development*, Summer 2004 (Vol. 25, #3, p. 32-37), no e-link available.

2. The Pros and Cons of School-Based Coaching

This thoughtful article by Chicago-based education writer Alexander Russo looks at the pluses and minuses of coaching. Russo notes the dismal track record of conventional professional development; conferences, lectures, and mass teacher-institute days "are unpopular with educators because they are often led by outside experts who tell teachers what to do, then are never heard from again.

Coaching, on the other hand, seems more in line with what research has found about effective professional development: it needs to be "ongoing, deeply embedded in teachers' classroom work with children, specific to grade levels or academic content, and focused on research-based approaches. It must also open classroom doors and create more collaboration and sense of community among teachers in a school." At its best, coaching does this because it "is focused on authentic student work, is closely tied to a specific school or district's curriculum and to teachers' practice, takes place on a continuous basis, and relies heavily on research."

Gemina Gianino, who trains coaches in Boston, says that coaches' message to teachers is: "We're with you through this. We're not only helping you figure out what it is, but we're going to stay with you while you figure it out." The coach's main goal, Gianino says, it to ensure that the ideas teachers pick up in professional development are translated into actions that have a chance to improve student learning.

However, Russo cautions that there are a number of reasons to be proceed with caution and skepticism with coaching. He lists the following:

• *Lack of focus* – A study by Alan Richard for the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation found that in many cases coaching was poorly focused and coaches were given so many tasks that it seemed they were being set up for failure. "I saw too many examples where the coaching wasn't enough," Richard wrote. "Most of what I saw showed that coaches could help a school improve, but not alone, and not without attention to other pressing issues such as broader efforts in professional development,

learning environment, leadership, resources, use of technologies, community involvement in the school, well-developed and thoughtful curricula, etc."

• *Weak research base* – The evidence on the impact of coaching is anecdotal and the research base is woefully small. "Few, if any, studies provide evidence that coaching strategies, in whatever form, lead to greater student learning," said a report by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education.

• *Robbing Peter to pay Paul* – It's difficult to find enough coaches without stripping schools of their best teachers.

• *Training* – It's a challenge to train coaches in the specific skills they need to be successful with teachers. [See #3 and 4 in last week's Marshall Memo for ideas.]

• *Time* – It's difficult to carve out enough captive-audience time during the school day for coaches to do their work.

• *Cost* – Coaches are expensive. Boston has spent almost $6 million for 75 coaches in 97 schools.

• *Neither fish nor fowl* – The coach-teacher relationship is a new one, and some teachers have difficulty getting used to dealing with someone who is neither a colleague nor a supervisor. Many teachers are not accustomed to talking about their work with anyone!

• *Lack of system commitment* – Ellen Guiney, head of a Boston education fund that has championed coaching, says that it was a mistake to work only with teachers who volunteered to be coached (this was the approach in the early years of Boston's program). "If the school's leadership doesn't support [coaches] and the staff doesn't see them being supported," says Guiney, "then the coaches are wasted. Teachers have a lot to do. Time has to be set aside, they need support, and they need to see the work as worthwhile." Boston's coaches now work intensively with groups of 4-10 teachers twice a week for 6-8-week cycles.

All these concerns notwithstanding, Russo concludes that coaching, done right, has great potential. "At least in theory," he writes, "school-based coaching helps educators envision a world where professional development means showing and not telling, where teachers can learn and improve their practice in a reflective, supportive setting, and where coaches serve as liaisons between research and practice, bringing the latest findings to where they are most needed – the classroom."

"School-Based Coaching: A Revolution in Professional Development – or Just the Latest Fad?" by Alexander Russo in *Harvard Education Letter*, July/August 2004 (Vol. 20, # 4, p. 1-4), no e-link available.

3. It's Phonics *and* Integrated Language Arts!

This heavy-duty study of the impact of early literacy instruction on 13,609 kindergarten children looks once again at the phonics versus whole language debate. The bottom line: "Our results indicate that the combination of integrated language arts and phonics promotes children's growth in literacy achievement as well as their motivation to learn… To learn to read, all children must know the letters and understand letter-sound relationships. Although phonics is an essential part of beginning reading instruction, the findings from this study suggest that it is best taught in conjunction with meaningful reading and writing activities and comprehension instruction. In short, phonics is more effective when combined with integrated language arts activities in the classroom. Conversely, integrated language arts instruction works better in classrooms where phonics is also taught more frequently. This suggests that the combination of integrated language arts instruction and phonics is more effective than either method used alone. Neither can be omitted from kindergarten classrooms without children's learning potentially suffering."

At the end of the article, the authors bravely venture into the political minefield, noting that the No Child Left Behind Act's requirement that schools use "scientifically based" approaches to teaching reading has often been interpreted as mandating a heavy phonics emphasis. The authors contend that this bias came from the flawed National Reading Panel report, in which the achievement of children taught using phonics was compared with the achievement of children not taught with phonics. The authors point out that this report did not look at the effects of *combining* phonics and integrated language arts in a single classroom; the effects of this are "dramatically different from studies that exclusively compare one approach with another."

This study is notable for including three different measures of students' literacy learning:

- Direct cognitive test scores;
- Indirect teacher ratings of children's achievement in language and literacy;
- Indirect teacher ratings of children's approaches to learning.

"Early Literacy Instruction and Learning in Kindergarten: Evidence from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Kindergarten Class of 1998-1999" by Yange Xue and Samuel Meisels in *American Educational Research Journal*, Spring 2004 (Vol. 41, #1, p. 191-229), no e-link available.

4. The "Satisficient" Trap; How a Good Facilitator Can Help a Team

In this thoughtful piece, California professor emeritus Robert Garmston notes three common problems in groups, especially groups of teachers under accountability pressure:

• *The tendency to come to agreement too quickly*. "Humans are uncomfortable with unresolved issues," he writes, "and often seek answers or solutions prematurely. Research on group decision-making finds that groups will be attracted to the first viable solution that appears." Herbert Simon, the Nobel economics laureate, coined the term "satisficient" to describe the minimally satisfying and sufficient solution that groups often settle for.

• *The tendency to get bogged down and become defensive or adversarial* when new ideas or data are introduced.

• *The tendency to become confused about their decision-making authority*. Is the group's role to inform, recommend, or decide? Without clarity, groups typically assume they have more decision-making authority than they really do and are miffed when their word does not become law. "When groups are dissatisfied with the results of work to which they have contributed," writes Garmston, "they attack the process. Either way, leaders lose more than they gain."

Garmston argues that group facilitators have a crucial role in counteracting these three tendencies:

- *Anticipating issues* – A good facilitator know the traps and heads them off at the pass. He or she might say, "You know, there is a tendency for teams to settle for the first viable idea. I'm going to suggest you keep gong until we have at least three more ideas on the table." Or the facilitator clarifies exactly what the group's role in decision-making is up front.
- *Explaining process* – It helps a lot if the facilitator explains why the group is using a particular process. "An explanation inevitably reduces the group's resistance and focuses members on what is most relevant – the content or purpose for the group's work."
- *Building understanding* – "Teams need the greatest possible collective understanding of an issue to be able to work on improving student learning… Problems at the 5th grade must be studied in relationship to what is occurring at the 4th, 3rd, and 2nd grades. To understand systems relationships, the group needs the cognitive and emotional skills of inquiry,

curiosity, and the discipline to ask, "What are some factors contributing to this problem?"

- *Following meeting standards* – Teams must know how to talk together. There are five basic standards:
    - One topic at a time;
    - One process at a time;
    - Balanced participation;
    - Safe engagement in cognitive conflict;
    - Understanding meeting rules.

Groups also must be skilled at dialogue (talking to understand) and discussion (talking to decide). And they must develop skills in communication, including getting ideas heard, paraphrasing, pausing, and balancing inquiry and advocacy.

"Group Work Has Its Dangers, but Facilitators Have Some Helpful Strategies" by Robert Garmston in *Journal of Staff Development*, Summer 2004 (Vol. 25, #3, p. 65-66), no e-link available.

5. Three Keys to Effective Professional Development

In this piece, Cindy Harrison, the president of the National Staff Development Council, reflects on recent trends in staff development and three key needs for success:

• *Student achievement results at each school need to guide the areas and topics for professional development*. Teacher staff development should be driven by looking at the gap between where students are achieving and the standards in that school, in those classrooms, and at that grade level or department area.

• *Schools should ensure that time is allocated for professional learning and that structures are in place to support teachers when they try to implement new strategies*. Harrison believes that 75% of a teacher's professional development time should involve working with other teachers on tasks aimed at implementing new knowledge. Formats include:

- peer or expert coaching;
- study groups;
- lesson study;
- protocols for looking at student work.

• *The principal must have excellent content knowledge and skills and knowledge about effective professional development*. Otherwise high-quality professional development will not happen.

"Bridging the Gaps of Professional Learning" by Cindy Harrison in *Journal of Staff Development*, Summer 2004 (Vol. 25, #3, p. 7), no e-link available.

6. A European-Style Proposal for American High Schools

In this intriguing article, Marc Tucker of the National Center on Education and Economy calls U.S. high schools "the Waterloo of the current round of school reform." Citing recent statistics on the number of ninth graders who graduate from college and the dire consequences this has for students' futures (see quote above), Tucker proposes a new model along the lines of those used in several European countries:

- A strong common K-10 curriculum with clear standards and few choices;
- Common examinations at fixed gateways;
- Multiple pathways for students to get into universities or technical training.

The European model, Tucker believes, has several advantages: "It is this combination of fixed gateways, clear standards, and multiple pathways for getting to those standards that makes these systems work as well as they do." He then proposes an adaptation of this model for the U.S.:

• *Establish the first "gateway":* a state standard that students must meet to enter either the upper grades of high school or the state college system. Assessments need to be created to judge when students have met this standard.

• *Create the conditions that make it possible for high schools to get all their tenth graders to the new college-ready standard*. This includes breaking large high schools into smaller learning communities of around 400 students, creating common curriculum standards, and requiring low-performing schools to use a proven reform model.

• *Establish a series of pathways for students who successfully pass through the first "gateway."* Students who are ready to do college work should go to college. Students who are ready to go to two-year technical schools should do so. Students who want to pursue International Baccalaureate-type programs in high school and leap-frog into the second year of college should have that option.

• *Establish a second "gateway":* the standards required for students in the upper grades of high school or in community and technical colleges to transfer into four-year state colleges. Examinations are needed to judge whether students have met this standard.

• *Establish a third set of "gateways":* skill standards for the technical degree programs offered in two-year post-secondary institutions.

• *Create funding mechanisms that allow community colleges to compete with upper-grade high school programs.*

Tucker sums up the argument for such a plan: "It is not easy. But it is both possible and necessary. We know that it is possible because other nations have done it and many of the pieces have been enacted somewhere in the United States. We know that it is necessary because our analysis of the economy leads to no other conclusion."

"Rethinking High School and Beyond" by Marc Tucker in *Harvard Education Letter*, July/August 2004 (Vol. 20, # 4, p. 8, 6, 7), no e-link available.

Do you have feedback? Is anything missing?

If you have comments or suggestions, if you saw an article or web item in the last week that you think should have been summarized, or if you would like to suggest additional publications that should be covered by the Marshall Memo, please e-mail: kim.marshall8@verizon.net

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo aims to keep busy principals and other educators very well-informed on important research and ideas in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, a former Boston teacher and administrator, is your "designated reader," searching through 37 publications the week they come out, choosing the articles that are most relevant and useful to improving teaching and learning, and summarizing them in a brief e-mail. Some ideas will be familiar, reinforcing what readers already know, but others will be new and genuinely thought-provoking. Target topics include:

• *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 Next
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Elementary School Journal
Harpers
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Education Review
Journal of Staff Development
Middle School Journal
NAASP Bulletin
New York Times
New Yorker
Newsweek
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal Magazine
Principal Leadership
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Review of Educational Research
Teachers College Record
Teacher Magazine

E-links will be provided whenever possible.

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