

# Marshall Memo 327

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education  
March 15, 2010

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## Quotes of the Week

“I think I’m going to be a psychiatrist, but I don’t want to work with crazy people.”  
A New York City high-school student on her career choices (see item #6)

“It might be true that the principal in some of these lowest-performing schools is the agent of stagnation that has to go before real progress can commence. Or not. Perhaps the low performance is a function of a superintendent who fails to address low performance or a bloated district bureaucracy that stifles innovation. Perhaps the teachers union wields so much power that it has become impossible to dismiss even the egregiously poor teachers. Perhaps it’s a combination of factors.”

Gerald Tirozzi in “Step One: Fire the Principal” a paid advertisement in *Education Week* (Mar. 10, 2010, Vol. 29, #24, p. 25) from the National Association of Secondary School Principals (Tirozzi is NASSP’s executive director)

“One of the best ways to learn deeply is to work with your peers and to try to explain to others what you’ve done.”

Kim Jaxon, California State University/Chico lecturer on composition, in “Big Classes Encourage Experiments in Teaching” by David Glenn in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Mar. 12, 2010 (Vol. LVI, #26, p. 1, A8, A10-11), no e-link

“Cellos sound like hippopotamus rising from bottom of river!”

The late Jerry Kupchynsky (“Mr. K”), longtime East Brunswick (NJ) instrumental music teacher, as remembered by a former student, Joanne Lipman, in this touching article, “And the Orchestra Played On”, *New York Times*, Feb. 28, 2010  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/28/opinion/28lipman.html?scp=1&sq=Joanne%20Lipman&st=cse>

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## 1. Getting Students to Slow Down and Appreciate Reading

(Originally titled “The Case for Slow Reading”)

“As a confessed slow reader, I would like to make the case for slowness,” says University of New Hampshire professor Thomas Newkirk in this thoughtful *Educational Leadership* article. He takes issue with schools rewarding students for reading lots of books, pushing little kids through fluency exercises in which they read nonsense words as quickly as they can, and giving timed standardized tests. “Schools need to take a stand for an alternative to an increasingly hectic digital environment where so many of us read and write in severely abbreviated messages and through clicks of the mouse,” he says. “The term *taste* applies to both literacy and eating. And to taste, we have to slow down.”

Newkirk traces the push for speed and efficiency to a 1921 study in which Edmund Huey found that in oral reading, people can say about four words a second, whereas with silent reading, they can process texts two or three times more quickly without sacrificing comprehension. Much more efficient! But what’s lost in rapid silent reading, says Newkirk, is the “voice” and rhythms of the spoken word. He suggests seven ways that schools can help students slow down and reclaim “the acoustical properties of written language – for savoring it, for enjoying the infinite ways a sentence can unfold – and for returning to passages that sustain and inspire us.”

- *Memorizing* – This allows us to “possess a text in a special way,” he says.

- *Oral reading* – “By reading aloud, teachers can create a bridge to texts that students might read,” says Newkirk; “they can help reluctant readers imagine a human voice animating the words on the page.”

- *Attending to beginnings* – Writers labor over their opening lines, giving us a road map to what follows. Newkirk says that teachers should dwell on them too.

- *Rethinking time limits on reading tests* – “Tests place too high a premium on speed,” he says. “We currently give students with disabilities additional time... we should extend this opportunity to all students.” In the real world, careful and thoughtful reading pays dividends.

- *Annotating a page* – Newkirk suggests having students photocopy a page they really like, tape it to a larger piece of paper, and use the wide margins to jot notes on the choice of words, sentence patterns, images, dialogue, and effective devices.

- *Reading poetry* – Poems demand a slower pace and, often, repeated readings. “More than any other genre, poetry calls on us to see the world differently,” says Newkirk, “to break out of conventional perception.”

• *Savoring passages* – “Children know something that adults often forget,” he concludes, “– the deep pleasure of repetition, or rereading, or of having parents reread, until the words seem to be part of them... We never really ‘comprehend’ these anchoring passages – we’re never done with them; we never consume them. Like sacred texts, they are inexhaustible, continuing to move us, support us, and even surprise us.”

“The Case for Slow Reading” by Thomas Newkirk in *Educational Leadership*, March 2010 (Vol. 67, #6, p. 6-11), <http://www.ascd.org>; Newkirk is at [thomas.newkirk@unh.edu](mailto:thomas.newkirk@unh.edu)  
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## 2. Keys to Getting Sixth Graders Reading

(Originally titled “Becoming a Classroom of Readers”)

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Texas language-arts teacher Donalyn Miller describes how she gets her sixth graders reading like crazy: 30 minutes of silent reading time every day (during which not reading is not an option); having students carry books wherever they go and reading in every spare minute; allowing students to choose their own books from a great selection; reading aloud from riveting books; and doing book talks. Here are Miller’s students’ favorite books:

- *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* by Jeff Kinney (Amulet, 2007) – A loser/hero student navigates the harsh world of middle school.
- *Found* by Margaret Peterson Haddix (Simon and Schuster, 2008) – Two boys try to uncover the secret surrounding their mysterious adoptions 13 years earlier.
- *Gone* by Michael Grant (HarperTeen, 2008) – Every person older than 15 suddenly disappears from a Florida community, and the kids have to fend for themselves without computers, cell phones, or TV.
- *Heat* by Mike Lupica (Philomel, 2006) – A star Little-League pitcher hides his father’s death and his illegal-immigrant status so he can keep playing.
- *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins (Scholastic, 2008) – In the post-apocalyptic U.S., a boy and a girl, chosen by lottery, must fight other competitors to the death until only one remains.
- *Leviathan* by Scott Westerfeld (Simon Pulse, 2009) – World War I is reimagined as a clash between the Clankers with their elaborate war machines and the Darwinists with weaponry consisting of biologically engineered animals.
- *The Lightning Thief* by Rick Riordan (Hyperion, 2005) – A boy with ADHD who has been thrown out of six schools discovers that he is really a demigod, descended from the Olympians of Greek mythology.
- *The London Eye Mystery* by Siobhan Dowd (David Fickling, 2009) – Salim disappears while riding a giant Ferris wheel in London, and a young man with Asperger’s syndrome and his older sister try to find him.

- *Masterpiece* by Elise Broach (Henry Holt, 2008) – A lonely 11-year-old befriends Marvin, a beetle who lives under his kitchen sink, who, it turns out, is a gifted artist. The two collaborate to catch art forgers at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- *The Maze of Bones* by Rick Riordan (Scholastic, 2008) – The heirs to the last matriarch of the Cahill family try to uncover 39 clues that will reveal the source of the family’s power.
- *The Maze Runner* by James Dashner (Delacorte, 2009) – Thomas, who can remember only his name, works with inhabitants of the Glade to escape from their maze and find why they are imprisoned there.
- *NERDS: National Espionage, Rescue, and Defense Society* by Michael Buckley (Amulet, 2009) – Six unpopular but brilliant students use a secret spy base hidden inside their elementary school to fight evil geniuses around the world.
- *Peak* by Roland Smith (Harcourt, 2007) – Peak Marcelo is arrested for climbing and tagging skyscrapers and must live with his estranged father, a professional mountain climber.
- *Stormbreaker* by Anthony Horowitz (Philomel, 2001) – Alex Rider discovers that his uncle, supposedly killed in a car accident, was a secret agent, is recruited into the agency, and tries to find his uncle’s killers and complete his final mission.
- *When You Reach Me* by Rebecca Stead (Wendy Lamb, 2009) – Miranda receives mysterious notes that eerily predict her future.

“Becoming a Classroom of Readers” by Donalyn Miller in *Educational Leadership*, March 2010 (Vol. 67, #6, p. 30-35), <http://ascd.org> ; Miller is at [thebookwhisperer@gmail.com](mailto:thebookwhisperer@gmail.com).

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### **3. A Teacher Experiences the Problems of Grouping**

(Originally titled “I Got Grouped”)

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Colorado high-school English teacher Cris Tovani describes being put in a “dinosaurs” group for computer training based on what administrators perceived as her low level of competence. “Being grouped gave me a taste of what struggling readers must continually face,” she says – and it hurt because she had been making valiant efforts to become more tech-savvy (“I had my first major breakthrough,” she says, “when I figured out how to answer my phone without taking a picture of my ear”). She thought of one of her tenth-graders, Geraun, who said he’d lost hope of ever getting better in reading. “Like Geraun and countless other struggling readers,” says Tovani, “I began to doubt my abilities.” Here are the insights she drew from this experience:

- *Beliefs affect effort, and effort affects success.* Tovani knows that when colleagues ask for help in an area in which she’s an expert, their confidence encourages her to perform well. Conversely, getting the message that she was incompetent with computers, especially from someone in authority, undermined her confidence and willingness to try hard. “Because no one believed in my abilities,” she says, “there was no pressure to perform. I was off the hook.” Thinking of her struggling remedial students, she knew there must be a middle ground: “Having reasonable expectations and providing scaffolding with strategy instruction may not

be flashy,” she says, “but it’s effective... Students need to know that their teachers believe they can succeed.”

- *Homogeneous grouping removes peer helpers and overloads the teacher.* In her “slow” computer group, Tovani was acutely aware that none of her classmates were in a position to lean over and help her and the teacher was the only source of assistance – and he had his hands full. She remembered the words of Olympic skier Jean-Claude Killy: “The best and fastest way to learn a sport is to watch and imitate a champion.” In her class, there was only one champion, and he was running from pillar to post. “Cordoning struggling students off by themselves simply won’t meet their needs,” she says. “Struggling learners tend to shut down with frustration. They melt into the background until the challenge passes. Sometimes the teacher will take over and do the work for them, but this doesn’t help anyone improve... Rarely do people improve when they are continually grouped with unsuccessful learners.” Grouping is about classroom management, not accelerating learning.

- *Past performance is just that – past performance.* Tovani was annoyed that the work she had done over the summer to tune up her technology skills wasn’t recognized. The same can be true for struggling students; test scores are often months old, and students sometimes learn a lot in the intervening time. “If we are quick to judge, we risk demoralizing them and putting out the spark that could ignite their learning,” she says. “Each year, we have to see our students with fresh eyes and give them a chance to show new growth.”

- *Forcing students to read too-difficult material drags them down.* Tovani acknowledges that if she were asked to plow through a chemistry textbook, her reading level would be much lower than it would be reading a literature anthology. If students can’t read the textbook, she believes teachers should get them reading something else that they can read. This builds up their background knowledge, vocabulary, motivation, curiosity, and a sense of purpose. “The truth is that the best way to improve comprehension is to read,” she says. “Ironically, the kids who need to be reading the most have the fewest opportunities to do so.”

“Being grouped refocused my attention on what matters most,” concludes Tovani. “I must make sure that my instructional practices match my beliefs about students’ abilities. I must make available to students the tools, strategies, and experts that will enhance their learning. With scaffolded instruction, choices that drive engagement, and time to practice, our belief in our students’ abilities can become their reality.”

“I Got Grouped” by Cris Tovani in *Educational Leadership*, March 2010 (Vol. 67, #6, p. 24-29), <http://ascd.org>

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#### **4. What Makes Teacher Teams Effective?**

In this *Journal of Staff Development* article, consultants Vivian Troen and Katherine Boles (authors of *Who’s Teaching Your Children?* Yale University Press, 2003) say that teacher teams seldom reach their potential because of:

- Naïve principals thinking that teamwork will happen automatically once teachers have common planning time – “OK, you guys are a team, now collaborate.”
- Lack of clear purpose;
- Not having a vision or models of what effective teamwork looks like;
- Focusing on logistics, operations, and peripheral issues, not teaching and learning;
- Reluctance by team members to assume leadership roles;
- Lack of facilitation skills; not putting structures in place that use time effectively;
- Lack of internal expertise and a reluctance to look outside the team for help;
- Valuing harmonious relationships more than the content of teaching and learning – having discussions that make team members feel good but don’t produce tangible outcomes that improve instruction and student achievement.

That said, Troen and Boles believe that teamwork *can* be a powerful engine for improving teaching and learning. Working with teams in a K-8 school in the Northeast, they refined their Millennium Team model and saw impressive results. Here are the five conditions they believe are essential to effective teamwork:

- *Task focus* – Clearly defining the team’s mission as improving student learning; teams in the target school agreed to spend no more than 15% of meetings on logistics and focused on connecting their discussions to classroom practice. They also forged a consistent schoolwide grading policy for students with special needs to prevent lessons and assessments from being watered down and worked to spread the use of the best inclusive practices to all classrooms.

- *Leadership* – Distributing leadership roles to all team members, empowering members to take risks, and valuing the instructional expertise of all members; for example, teachers on the sixth-grade team were concerned that lesson “launches” weren’t as strong as they might be, so one teacher videotaped the first ten minutes of a number of his classes and showed clips to the team to generate ideas on effective practices. The team adopted a consistent protocol for the first ten minutes of classes and saw marked improvements in student focus and classroom management.

- *Structures and processes* – Carving out uninterrupted blocks of meeting time in the schedule (80 minutes is ideal), agreed-upon ways to work together, efficient distribution of resources, and enlisting outside help when necessary;

- *Collaborative climate* – Creating a working environment that promotes trust, communication, and synergy.

- *Personal accountability* – It is expected that performance will improve at the team and the individual level – and of course that student achievement will improve. For example, in the target school’s kindergarten team, when one teacher wasn’t following up on a recommended practice, colleagues pushed the teacher to get on board.

“Team Spirit: Teachers Work Together to Establish and Achieve Key Goals” by Vivian Troen and Katherine Boles in *Journal of Staff Development*, February 2010 (Vol. 31, #1, p. 59-64), no e-link available; the authors are at [vtroen@comcast.net](mailto:vtroen@comcast.net) and [boleska@gse.harvard.edu](mailto:boleska@gse.harvard.edu).

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## 5. Defusing an Angry Parent with “Mineral Rights” Questions

In this *Journal of Staff Development* article, elementary principal Jamie Sussel Turner describes an episode that started when a parent wrote a two-page e-mail to a second-grade teacher complaining bitterly about how her son was being treated, with a copy to Turner. “This has made me question once and for all the efficacy of your methods,” wrote the parent. “I await enlightenment.”

Turner decided she needed to meet with the parent alone, checked with the teacher, invited the parent in for a meeting, and used a strategy called Mineral Rights that she learned in Fierce Conversation training with Susan Scott. “So, what is going on with Mack and his teacher?” Turner asked the parent, who proceeded to vent about the teacher picking on her son and blowing things out of proportion. “Mack is being singled out and punished for harmless and normal childhood stuff,” she said. Having established the most important thing to talk about, Turner asked a series of questions:

- How long has this been going on?
- What result is this producing? Who does it affect?
- What are your emotions about it?
- If nothing changes, what is likely to occur? When you imagine this scenario, what do you feel?
- What has been your contribution to this problem?
- What would your ideal outcome be? If you succeed in this, what difference will that make?
- What is the most powerful next step you can take? When will you take it? What can I follow up with you?

“Asking about emotions is essential, as emotions create impetus for action,” says Susan Scott, who developed these questions. “When people stay in their heads, it’s doubtful anything will change.”

The angry mother gradually calmed down, acknowledged that her son was no angel and that she hadn’t been in close enough touch with the teacher, and finally sat down for a peace-making meeting with the teacher and reset their relationship. The principal’s questions had helped her to see that the real issue wasn’t the teacher’s handling of her son’s behavior – it was not being informed about her son’s problems and being out of touch with the teacher. “This insight allowed her to let go of her initial anger so that she could have a positive and relationship-enhancing conversation with her son’s teacher,” says Turner. “In the end, she was no longer feeling powerless, but was a partner with the teacher in helping her son to be his best.”

“The Right Conversation Strategy Can Extinguish Anger and Strengthen Parent-Teacher Relationships” by Jamie Sussel Turner in *Journal of Staff Development*, February 2010 (Vol. 31, #1, p. 65-66), no e-link available

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## 6. A Brooklyn High School Schedules Differently

In this *Education Week* article, Stephen Sawchuk reports on the unorthodox schedule at Brooklyn Generation School, a 230-student grade 9-11 school in New York City's Flatbush neighborhood. Here are the main features:

- All students have two 85-minute “Foundations” courses in mathematics and humanities every morning. These classes have only 14-16 students and cover English, integrated algebra, global studies, U.S. history, and living environment. Teachers take advantage of the small class size to focus on students' needs and promote a high level of interaction and involvement. Students are frequently regrouped according to assessment results.
  - Students have three “Studio” courses each afternoon. These 60-minute classes have 24-28 students and cover other sciences, advanced math, foreign languages, electives, enrichment activities, mandated services, and data-informed remediation.
  - Core faculty members have a dual focus, teaching two Foundations courses each morning and one Studio course each afternoon.
  - These teachers have a 120-minute common planning block with same-grade, same-subject colleagues each afternoon, and use it to plan common curriculum units and assessments to measure students' progress, pinpoint the most effective teaching strategies, and plan re-teaching and different approaches. These meetings build an ethos of peer-driven accountability.
  - There are extracurricular activities after hours, which are optional for students and staff.
  - Twice a year, core faculty members take a one-month break consisting of three weeks vacation and a week of professional development with their instructional team.
  - During these months, a different cadre of educators steps in to teach month-long “Intensives” focused on college and career readiness, internships, the college-admissions process, and financial aid applications. Students get up close and personal with different occupations, discovering, for example, that a career in culinary arts involves long hours and backbreaking work. One girl questioned Sawchuk about a career in journalism, then announced, “I think I'm going to be a psychiatrist, but I don't want to work with crazy people.”
  - “Intensive” teachers' schedules look something like this: November 10<sup>th</sup> grade, December 11<sup>th</sup> grade, March 10<sup>th</sup> grade, April 11<sup>th</sup> grade, June 9<sup>th</sup> grade, with breaks in January/February and May.
  - The school year is longer for students – 200 days – but because of the staggered schedule, no faculty members teach more than 180 days. The schedule has the blessing of the teachers union and stays within the regular staffing rules for New York City high schools.
- The schedule was the brainchild of Furman Brown and was developed with support from business partner Jonathan Spear, in collaboration with the United Federation of Teachers, and using the school-based option that is part of the city's teacher contract.

“N.Y.C. School Marches to Unorthodox Schedule” by Stephen Sawchuk in *Education Week*, Mar. 10, 2010 (Vol. 29, #24, p. 1, 12), e-link for subscribers only

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## 7. Should High-School Physics Be Taught Before Biology and Chemistry?

In this *North Jersey.com* article, Stephanie Akin reports on a ten-year New Jersey experiment teaching physics to ninth graders who have only an algebra background. The project was developed by Robert Goodman, a teacher at Bergen County Technical School in Paramus, and is being piloted in 21 schools under the auspices of the Progressive Science Initiative at Kean University in Union.

The starting point was Goodman's conviction that the traditional high-school science sequence – biology, chemistry, physics – was all wrong. He believes that modern biology and chemistry are closely intertwined with physics, and that trying to proceed in the usual sequence leads to rote, superficial learning. Some schools have tried teaching physics first, but have made the mistake of stripping it of math content, eliminating concepts that are important to mastering biology and chemistry.

Goodman figured out that only ten percent of high-school physics requires trigonometry. The rest – including mechanics, electricity, and magnetism – can be handled with algebra, with the added benefit that students see real-life applications of the math they've just learned – what happens when a driver slams on the brakes in a car, for example. Teachers trained in Goodman's approach use vivid examples – how long it takes a drop of water to fall from a rooftop and what a car's velocity will be after it's accelerated for a specified distance – and use “clickers” (wireless audience response devices) to check for student understanding.

Goodman's students have excelled – the number taking and passing the Advanced Placement physics test is 20 times that of other New Jersey schools – and the results from the pilot program so far are encouraging.

“Teacher Finds a Solution to Our Science Problem” by Stephanie Akin in *North Jersey.com*, Mar. 6, 2010 (spotted in *ASCD SmartBrief* Mar. 12, 2010),  
[http://www.northjersey.com/news/87147317\\_Teacher\\_finds\\_a\\_solution\\_to\\_our\\_science\\_problem.html](http://www.northjersey.com/news/87147317_Teacher_finds_a_solution_to_our_science_problem.html)

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## 8. The Basics of Differentiation

(Originally titled “Responding to Research”)

In this *Education Update* interview, author/consultant Carol Ann Tomlinson says that differentiation “doesn't call for teachers to create 20 tasks for 20 students who will come to class tomorrow. It asks teachers to look for patterns of need.” Tomlinson believes teachers should:

- Use quick classroom assessments to see how well students are learning;
- Plan with patterns of need in mind;
- Organize instruction so that, some of the time, more than one thing is taking place.

“Responding to Research” by Laura Varlas in *Education Update*, March 2010 (Vol. 52, #3, p. 3), <http://www.ascd.org>

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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 37 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 evening (with occasional breaks; there are about 50 issues a year).

## ***Subscriptions:***

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- 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 Journal of Education  
American School Board Journal  
ASCD, CEC SmartBriefs, Daily EdNews  
Catalyst Chicago  
Ed. Magazine  
EDge  
Education Digest  
Education Gadfly  
Education Next  
Education Week  
Educational Leadership  
Educational Researcher  
Edutopia  
Elementary School Journal  
Essential Teacher (TESOL)  
Harvard Business Review  
Harvard Education Letter  
Harvard Educational Review  
JESPAR  
Journal of Staff Development  
Language Learner (NABE)  
Middle Ground  
Middle School Journal  
New York Times  
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 (online)  
Teachers College Record  
The Atlantic Monthly  
The Chronicle of Higher Education  
The Language Educator  
The New Yorker  
The Reading Teacher  
Theory Into Practice  
Tools for Schools/The Learning Principal