

# Marshall Memo 31

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education  
March 29, 2004

## **In this Issue:**

1. Closing the racial achievement gap
2. Is keeping students back effective?
3. Aligning high-school exit requirements to college and the workplace
4. Quarterly tests that are not too hard and not too easy
5. Could cruise-liner customer service ever exist in a school?
6. A powerful critique of PowerPoint

## **Quote of the Week**

“The single most powerful change that states could make would be to better align high school exit requirements with the expectations of colleges and employers.”

Richard Kazis, Kristin Conklin, and Hilary Pennington (see item #3)

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## **1. Closing the Racial Achievement Gap**

Harvard researcher Ronald Ferguson has been studying high-achieving suburban districts affiliated with the Minority Student Achievement Network, and reports on best practices adopted by schools that have been particularly focused on narrowing the achievement gap. Ferguson has zeroed in on several factors that seem to be at work in schools where minority students' achievement is rising:

- The school provides strong curriculum and teaches students important content.
- Teachers adapt classroom instruction to meet students' ways of thinking, learning, and understanding.
- Adults in the school willingly provide extra help.
- Adults encourage students to work hard.
- Teachers make their subject interesting and their lessons pertinent and valuable.
- Staff develop trusting relationships with students and support their growth and achievement: time and time again, Ferguson found high-achieving

minority students talking about the value of a teacher's note of encouragement or a principal's pat on the back.

"Unfinished Business" by Susan Black in *American School Board Journal*, April 2004 (Vol. 191, #4, p. 67). Fergusson's study is "What Doesn't Meet the Eye: Understanding and Addressing Racial Disparities in High-Achieving Suburban Schools", Learning Point Associates and NCREL, November 2002, <http://www.ncrel.org/gap/ferg>

## **2. Is Keeping Students Back Effective?**

In this 100-page report, three researchers from the Consortium on Chicago School Research analyzed data and conducted extensive interviews and surveys on teachers and students on Chicago's grade 3, 6, and 8 Iowa-test-driven student retention policy (first implemented in 1996 and recently scaled back to eliminate math and include only reading). Major findings include:

- Most teachers supported the policy; they felt that it reinforced their work.
- The policy led teachers to focus their instruction more on reading and math.
- The policy resulted in low-performing students getting more support from teachers and parents.
- However, teachers spend more time teaching test prep skills – explaining techniques for successfully taking the multiple-choice tests (one teacher said she had devoted 240 hours to test prep in 1999).
- Additional teacher training is needed to actually improve instruction.
- The long-term effects of grade retention are unclear.

"Ending Social Promotion: The Response of Teachers and Students" by Robin Tepper Jacobs, Susan Stone, and Melissa Roderick, Consortium on Chicago School Research, February 2004, <http://www.consortium-chicago.org/publications/p68.html> (spotted in *Education Gadfly*, March 25, 2004).

## **3. Aligning High-School Exit Requirements to College & the Workplace**

In this commentary piece in the current *Education Week*, three advocates make the case for a more rigorous set of high-school graduation requirements aligned with the needs of college and employers (see quote above). They recommend the following action steps:

- Set a statewide "stretch" goal for the percent of students who complete high school and a first postsecondary credential program. This goal should be disaggregated by race, English language learners, etc. so that policymakers and the public can track progress for all groups of students.

- *Align K-12 and higher education standards, assessments, and expectations.*

Elementary and secondary learning expectations need to be drawn up with close attention to what colleges and employers say that high-school graduates need to know and be able to do to be successful.

- *Integrate the K-12 and higher education data system into a single system.* It's essential to be able to track each student's progress through the entire educational "pipeline". This means a unique identifier number for every entering student.

- *Promote a diverse range of learning options.* The one-size-fits-all approach has demonstrably failed many students; alternatives are needed, especially at the high-school level.

- *Aggressively reform poorly performing high schools.*

"Shoring Up the Academic Pipeline" by Richard Kazis, Kristin Conklin, and Hilary Pennington in *Education Week*, March 24, 2004 (Vol. XXIII, #28, p. 56, 39)  
<http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=28kazis.h23>

#### **4. Quarterly Tests That Are Not Too Hard and Not Too Easy**

Each month, Doug Reeves of the Center for Performance Assessment answers a question from a principal or teacher. This month's question was on quarterly assessments: how can teachers keep from giving students questions that are easier than the questions they will encounter in their state assessment (leading them to be sucker-punched by the state test) or too hard (leading to discouragement during the year)? Reeves's response began with his two cardinal rules for quarterly assessments:

- They must be directly related to state academic content and performance standards.
- They must be sufficiently rigorous to help students and teachers understand what they need to do in order to improve performance on state assessments.

Reeves acknowledges that it's difficult to write questions at the Goldilocks "just right" level of difficulty, but says it is better to err on the side of more difficult than less difficult. "Ask the most successful Advanced Placement teachers what they do for classroom assessment," writes Reeves, "and they will invariably say that they want their classroom assessments to be more challenging than the actual AP exams. Students gain confidence when they walk into the actual exam and KNOW that they have mastered the material and that they have already faced challenges more rigorous than the ones they face on the real exams."

But setting a high bar on quarterly assessments means that principals and other school leaders need to show "assessment integrity" and not shoot the messenger

when a teacher honestly reports only two percent of students proficient and above in September or October. The school must have a culture of “honest bad news,” and this attitude is not easy to pull off: “[M]any student, parents, and administrators do not like hearing that the honor roll student needs to buckle down and do some work, but this level of integrity is essential for improved student achievement.”

“Questions and Answers from the Real World” in *Center for Performance Assessment Newsletter*, March 2004

## **5. Could Cruise-Liner Customer Service Ever Exist in a School?**

I was on a Caribbean cruise aboard the *Dawn Princess* last week, courtesy of my wonderful brother-in-law, who took eleven family members on a one-week trip to celebrate his 65<sup>th</sup> birthday. What was most striking throughout the week was that everywhere on this enormous boat, crew members looked you in the eye, smiled, and gave you a cheerful, upbeat greeting – and the service really was terrific! This company has clearly been successful at inculcating a deep ethos of customer service. Perusing the liner’s information packet, I came across the Princess line’s service credo, and it struck me that I’ve never seen anything like this in a school. Is it possible that something like this could exist in a public school, where the purpose of the organization and the customers (no disrespect to vacationers) are *far* more important?

Here is the cornerstone statement and the credo, with minor word changes to adapt it to a hypothetical school:

### Cornerstone statement:

Every time a student, parent, or community member comes in contact with one of us, we make an impression, good or bad.

### Service Credo:

1. *We strive to be the very best.* We do the best job we are capable of all the time in every part of this school; we are proud of what we do.

2. *We react quickly to resolve student and parent problems immediately.* We do everything possible to further the mission of the school.

3. *We smile; we are on stage.* We always maintain positive eye contact and use our service vocabulary. We greet students and parents and treat them with respect.

4. *We are friendly, helpful, and courteous.* It is our school’s way. We treat our students, parents, and colleagues as we would like to be treated ourselves.

5. *We are ambassadors for our school.* When at work or play, we always speak positively and never make negative comments.

6. *We take pride and care in our dress and personal grooming.*

7. *We are positive.* We always find a way to get it done. We always try to make it happen. We never, never give up.

8. *We use proper telephone etiquette.* We always try to answer within three rings and with a smile in our voice.

9. *We are knowledgeable* about all school operations and readily recommend services available in other parts of the school.

10. *We never say "no."* We say "I will be pleased to check and see." We suggest alternatives. We call our principal or department head if we feel we cannot satisfy a parent's or student's needs.

## **6. A Powerful Critique of PowerPoint**

This compelling 27-page pamphlet by Edward Tufte, a Yale statistician who has authored three best-selling books on effective graphic display of information, is a diatribe against PowerPoint. While conceding that PowerPoint is a competent slide manager and projector of images, Tufte feels strongly that the "cognitive style" of Powerpoint, especially when people use the default templates, "actively facilitates the making of lightweight presentations." Tufte *hates* it when presenters read their PowerPoint slides that the audience could easily read themselves (a PowerPoint slide generally shows about 40 words, which is about eight seconds of silent reading material). Tufte says that PowerPoint "allows speakers to pretend that they are giving a real talk, and audiences to pretend that they are listening." Tufte is especially upset when educators teach kids to use PowerPoint in schools. He urges teachers to ask more of student presentations than a few slides with little text, a few illustrations, and very little subtlety and complexity.

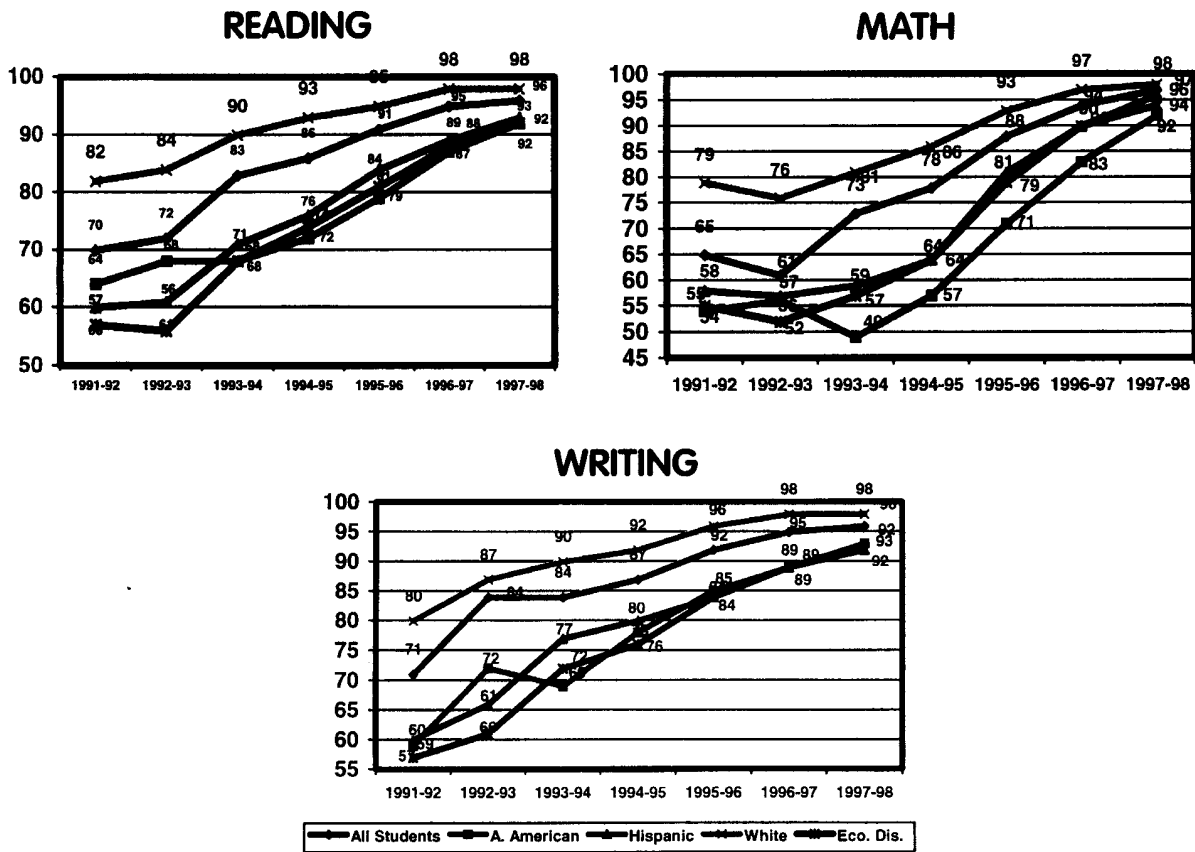
Instead, Tufte advocates using just a few detailed, content-rich slides containing data, graphics, or an illustration (he quotes the artist Ad Reinhardt: "As for a picture, if it isn't worth a thousand words, the hell with it."), and using those slides to *educate* your audience. "A better metaphor for presentations," writes Tufte, "is *good teaching*. Teachers seek to explain something with credibility, which is what many presentations are trying to do. The core ideas of teaching – *explanation, reasoning, finding things out, questioning, content, evidence, credible authority not patronizing authoritarianism* – are contrary to the hierarchical market-pitch approach."

Above all, Tufte advocates focusing on the *content* that's being presented. "The way to make big improvements in a presentation," he writes, "is to get better

content. Designer formats will not salvage weak content. If your numbers are boring, then you've got the wrong numbers. If your words or images are not on point, making them dance in color won't make them relevant. Audience boredom is usually a content failure, not a decoration failure. "

*The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint* by Edward Tufte, 2003, available from [www.edwardtufte.com](http://www.edwardtufte.com)

Speaking of the graphic presentation of information, I can't resist attaching one of the most powerful graphs in education: the growth in students achievement in Brazoport, Texas over a six-year period – with a dramatic narrowing of the achievement gap. This graphic shows the power of watching a single number over time: percent proficient and above. From *The Results Fieldbook* by Mike Schmoker (ASCD 2001)



Source: Brazoport Independent School District. Used by permission.

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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](mailto:kim.marshall8@verizon.net)

# About the Marshall Memo

## ***Mission and focus:***

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

- *School leadership* – Building a professional learning community; effective teamwork; effective schools practices; supervision and evaluation of teachers; time management.
- *Effective teaching* – Key variables associated with high student achievement; professional development of teachers; teacher leadership and career ladders; multiple intelligences and brain research.
- *Curriculum* – Alignment and planning with the end in sight; teaching for understanding; new ideas in reading, writing, and math.
- *Assessment* – Aligned formative and summative assessments; using data and student work for continuous improvement; graphic display of student achievement data; standardized testing and the debate on standards.
- *Closing the gap* – Effective strategies to close the racial/ economic achievement gap; the innate-ability / intelligence / effective effort debate; safety-net programs.
- *Positive school culture* – Student discipline; social-emotional learning; moral development; parent involvement; and community partnerships.
- *And...* – New areas of research; upcoming television and radio programs on education.

## ***Publications covered:***

(those read this week are underlined)

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

E-links will be provided whenever possible to give access to the full article. If you would like to suggest additional publications, please be in touch.

## ***Subscriptions:***

The Marshall Memo is sent every Monday (with occasional breaks). Subscriptions are \$50 a year. Reduced rates for institutional subscriptions can be negotiated. Contact Kim at [kim.marshall8@verizon.net](mailto:kim.marshall8@verizon.net) or 222 Clark Road, Brookline, MA 02445 (617-566-4353).