Marshall Memo 162

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
November 27, 2006

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"You can have amazing teachers, but if you don't have a principal holding it all together… the school's not going to work."

Jacquelyn Davis, New Leaders for New Schools' Washington, D.C. director, in *Education Next*, Winter 2007 http://www.hoover.org/publications/ednext/4612107.html

"Ms. Smith does not play, but she loves us and we know it."

A student talking about Karen Smith, the new principal at Ballou High School in Washington, D.C. (*ibid.*)

"I think we have to teach work ethic in the same way we have to teach adding fractions with unlike denominators. But once children have got the work ethic and the commitment to others and to education down, it's actually pretty easy to teach them."

Dacia Toll, charter school leader (see item #1)

"We all recoil from the anti-egalitarian idea that we can be comfortable and achieve at our best only when we are with 'people like us,' in terms of sex, ethnicity, religion, social class, politics, or anything else."

Judith Kleinfled (see item #2)

"When curriculum is defined as a linear march through stuff covered once (and where no pre-tests are ever done), it is *inevitable* that we end up exaggerating differences and constantly talking (wrongly) about too many kids 'falling behind.' Falling behind *what*? Some mythical average 'pace' of teaching in a single way?"

Grant Wiggins (see item #3)

"People listen more attentively to those who listen to them."

Kouzes and Posner, 2003 (see item #5)

1. What Will It Take to Close the Achievement Gap?

In this trenchant cover article in yesterday's *New York Times Magazine*, journalist Paul Tough describes two very different perspectives on the achievement gap in American schools. The first, largely from the academic world, is an extremely discouraging one, focusing on the origins of the gap and why it is so persistent. The findings of this research, writes Tough, "have demonstrated just how deeply pervasive and ingrained are the intellectual and academic disadvantages that poor and minority students must overcome to compete with their white and middle-class peers. The divisions between black and white and rich and poor begin almost at birth, and they are reinforced every day of a child's life."

The second, much more hopeful perspective comes from a small number of successful inner-city schools, including those established by KIPP, Uncommon Schools, and Achievement First, which are actually closing the gap. How are they doing it? With methods that are radically different and more intensive than most other schools, including:

- A longer school day and year;
- An intense focus on the quality of teaching (both in the selection and de-selection of teachers and their continuing development);
- Careful alignment and planning of the curriculum;
- Constant use of interim assessment to fine-tune instruction;
- Very high expectations of all students;
- Intensive development of students' behavior, character, and values.

"I think we have to teach work ethic in the same way we have to teach adding fractions with unlike denominators," says Dacia Toll, a leader of Achievement First. "But once children have got the work ethic and the commitment to others and to education down, it's actually pretty easy to teach them."

The problem is that these elements of highly effective schools are rare – and misallocated. Tough reports on an Education Trust study that rated teachers on a 4-3-2-1 scale of quality and looked at how teachers were distributed among different types of schools:

- Majority-white schools had 11% of teachers with the lowest rating.
- Heavily minority schools had 88% of teachers with the lowest rating.
- High-poverty schools had just 1% of teachers with the highest rating.

Based on his reporting, Tough concludes: "The evidence is now overwhelming that if you take an average low-income child and put him into an average American public school, he will almost certainly come out poorly educated." This happens, he says, because the system is not designed to close the achievement gap. To accomplish that, we need dramatically different

approaches – probably along the lines of KIPP and the other successful schools, probably with the addition of high-quality early childhood education, incentives to bring the best teachers to the most challenging neighborhoods, and other interventions.

What is clear, concludes Tough, is that closing the gap is within our reach. "Americans are facing an increasingly stark choice," he says. "Is the nation really committed to guaranteeing that all of the country's students will succeed to the same high level? And if so, how hard are we willing to work, and what resources are we willing to commit, to achieve that goal?"

"What It Takes to Make a Student" by Paul Tough in the *New York Times Magazine*, November 26, 2006 (p. 44-51, 69-72, 77)

2. Under What Conditions Do Boys Learn More?

In this letter to *Education Next* responding to an earlier article on matching teacher and student gender [see Marshall Memo 153, #11a], University of Alaska psychology professor Judith Kleinfeld says: (a) matching girls with female teachers and boys with male teachers is impractical; the fact is that most teachers are women and the ratio in the profession is likely to remain the same – and may become even more lopsided; and (b) gender matching is undesirable: "We all recoil from the anti-egalitarian idea that we can be comfortable and achieve at our best only when we are with 'people like us,' in terms of sex, ethnicity, religion, social class, politics, or anything else… We want boys to become adults who are able to work well with women, and we want girls to become adults who are able to work well with men."

The real challenge, she continues, is closing the achievement gap between girls and boys (girls are ahead in most subjects and have caught up in math and science): "What we need is not gender matching but greater understanding of the biological differences between males and females and the different psychological worlds each sex inhabits." She goes on to offer a number of hypotheses based on recent research and the teachers' experiences over the years:

• "Boys learn more when teachers talk less, especially when teachers avoid great torrents of repetitive words.

• "Boys learn more when teachers use lots of joking and humor, the currency of male social life.

• "Boys learn more when teachers themselves are captivated by the great, universal themes that engage male minds and hearts – facing adversity and danger, embarking on great adventures, attaining strength and competence, fighting battles for good and for glory, testing yourself and becoming a hero, and learning how to make the physical world do your bidding.

• "Boys learn more when teachers are neither awed nor enraged by boys' physicality and displays of anger, and respond in calm and measured ways, using such strategies as assigning activities that help boys calm down and regain control.

• "Boys learn more when the teacher does not humiliate them by forgetting that genuine vulnerability and lack of confidence lie underneath their cocky displays of toughness and bravado.

• "Boys learn more in structured, authoritative educational environments, under clear teacher control, which provide them with safety and security from the power plays and put-downs of other boys.

• "Boys learn more when competition gets them excited, when they need to learn so as to do well for their team, when they get to be active, when they get breaks, when they are having fun, and when teachers make the point of the learning activity clear.

• "Boys learn more when teachers praise and mentor them and when they believe that the teacher understands, likes, and respects boys."

"Teacher Gender" by Judith Kleinfeld, a letter to *Education Next*, Winter 2006 (Vol. 7, #1, p. 6), http://www.hoover.org/publications/ednext/4611142.html

3. Grant Wiggins on "Intelligent Grouping" Versus Tracking

In his "Contrarian" column on the *Big Ideas* website, assessment guru Grant Wiggins notes that many educators confuse *tracking* with *intelligent grouping*. They make the assumption that homogeneous grouping is always bad. "This does not follow logically," says Wiggins, "and it makes every teacher's job more difficult than it needs to be." Noting that about 25 percent of high-school freshmen fail the typical one-size-fits-all Algebra I course, he asks, "How is *that* an intelligent response to diversity?"

Yes, we should avoid tracking, he says, defined as dead-end classes with low expectations, often with less interesting work and less effective and eager teachers. Intelligent grouping, on the other hand, maintains the same hopes and expectations for all students, but recognizes where they are on a learning continuum.

In fact, we already do a lot of intelligent grouping in schools, writes Wiggins. "We have no guilt about putting kids in Jazz Ensemble, JV soccer, or French I," he says, based on their level of achievement, regardless of age. "Private lessons in all areas of training have done the same for decades." In these areas, it seems quite natural and efficient to group students by level, minimizing variation that's unhelpful to students and their coaches and teachers.

So what makes intelligent grouping different from tracking? "You're free to move up, indeed encouraged to do so," says Wiggins. "There is no self-fulfilling prophecy about being a tenth grader in Spanish I or a junior in JV basketball. Why can't the same be true for history, English, and biology?" Why can't we plan intelligently by having some students take an Algebra I course that lasts for three semesters rather than two – and is geared to their learning styles? This might cut down on that 25 percent failure rate.

But it's not just inappropriate and inefficient heterogeneous grouping that's adding to the failure rate. It's also poor curriculum design. "When curriculum is defined as a linear march through stuff covered once (and where no pre-tests are ever done)," says Wiggins, "it is *inevitable* that we end up exaggerating differences and constantly talking (wrongly) about too many kids 'falling behind.' Falling behind *what*? Some mythical average 'pace' of teaching in a single way?"

Intelligent grouping, he argues, "would require less differentiation and wasted time if the work were designed to be more interesting, recursive, and performance-based, as it is in music, athletics, and foreign language. That way, failure to 'get it' the first time around wouldn't matter as much, because the core tasks keep recurring and progress is what matters."

In other words, Wiggins concludes, we should "deal with diversity the way the wider world does: intelligent grouping, with incentives to keep advancing, against clear, de-mystified, and worthy performance goals. Then we might find that diversity is more of a teaching pleasure than a burden."

"Voices: The Contrarian" by Grant Wiggins on the *Big Ideas* website: http://www.essentialquestions.org (subscription required)

4. James Popham on Formative Assessments

In this paper prepared for the Council of Chief State School Officers, UCLA assessment professor James Popham tackles the subject of formative assessments, starting with a helpful definition: *Formative assessment is a process used by teachers and students during instruction that provides feedback to adjust ongoing teaching and learning to improve students' achievement of intended instructional outcomes*. In other words, says Popham, commercial "benchmark" assessments that are not reported to teachers in a timely way and aren't used for immediate classroom follow-up are not formative. Popham criticizes test companies that call their benchmark assessments "formative" and make disingenuous claims about their achievement-producing potential that are not backed up by the research.

Popham goes on to describe what during-the-year assessments should look like (he leans toward the in-the-moment type of assessments that some call "dipstick"), and how they should be used to get the kinds of dramatic learning gains that research has reported are possible:

• *Timeliness* – It's vital that teachers and students know the results of formative assessments, he says, "while there is still meaningful instructional time available so that any adjustments in instruction or learning activities can pay off in terms of improved student achievement."

• *Student participation* – Like James Stigler [see Marshall Memo 112], Popham is a strong advocate of involving students as "self-directed partners" in the formative assessment process. He believes that at least half of the benefit of such assessments comes from students' own insights and increased motivation when they are fully involved in looking at and using formative assessment results. One important point: teachers need to tell students which assessments are for grades (i.e., summative) and which are for immediate learning (formative).

• *Clarity of purpose* – Popham says that when we design formative assessments, we may want to write them slightly differently depending on which audience they are intended to help. "Teachers need the information to help them decide whether they need to modify their instructional activities… Students need to know if their learning tactics are working and, if

they aren't, what sorts of changes in those learning tactics might prove beneficial." For both audiences, the most important question is, "What should I do next?"

• *Accessibility* – "There's no need to make formative assessments so complicated that their results require a code-book to decipher," says Popham.

• *Task analysis* – Those who write formative assessments must have a clear grasp of the steps in the learning progression that students need to go through to reach proficiency in a particular area. This makes it possible for them to design assessments that will reveal students' misconceptions and learning problems so they can be fixed.

• *Teacher ownership* – Popham is against forcing formative assessments on teachers; he prefers to make them available and give teachers the option of implementing them.

"Defining and Enhancing Formative Assessment" by James Popham, September 15, 2006; a special paper for the Council of Chief State School Officers

5. The Case for a Weekly Principal's Memo

In this solid article in *Principal Leadership*, former principal Richard Knuth endorses the idea of principals writing a weekly memo to all staff (when he was a principal, he always distributed his on Monday). Good communication is essential to effective leadership, he says, but schools are workplaces in which communication is not easy – teachers are isolated in their classrooms most of the day, everybody is busy-busy-busy all the time, and meetings are infrequent.

Knuth believes that a weekly memo can be highly effective for two kinds of communication:

• *Level one communication* – Routine administrative information and reminders, such as schedule changes, assemblies, and school picture days. Getting this information out to everyone is vital to the smooth functioning of a school, and conveying it in a regular memo from the principal has several advantages:

- The fact that it comes from the principal leads more people to pay attention to the information than if it's from less authoritative sources.
- Communicating the information in writing doesn't interrupt classes the way PA announcements do; teachers can read it when they have time.
- Consolidating routine information in one memo is convenient for teachers; they can keep referring to it during the week as needed.

• *Level two communication* – In addition to routine matters, a principal can use a weekly memo to share vision, beliefs, values, ideas, research findings, goals, and other higher-level material with colleagues. This kind of communication can be effective at:

- Sharing strong beliefs about schooling;
- Establishing clear goals and keeping everyone's eyes on the prize of improved student learning;
- Celebrating staff accomplishments and praising individual achievements and successful collaboration;

- Showing an awareness of staff members' personal side, for example, acknowledging a teacher receiving an advanced degree, becoming a grandparent, or recovering from an illness.
- Introducing humor, which can reduce tension and build staff cohesiveness.
- Building a sense of community and cooperation;
- Posing questions and soliciting feedback from colleagues.
- Sharing best practices and research tips.

"In the hectic, often turbulent, distraction-filled school environment," says Knuth, it is essential to frequently and regularly reorient ourselves to the true north. The weekly memo is one instrument for doing so."

Praise is especially effective in a staff memo, he adds, because (a) it's both personalized and shared with an audience; (b) it's in writing, so recipients can reread it and share it with friends and family members; and (c) knowing you might be praised gets everyone reading the memo.

One of the great virtues of a regular staff bulletin, says Knuth, is that it frees up the principal's time in staff meetings and one-on-one conversations to talk about educational substance – and really listen. "Listening communicates caring and respect and fosters trust," he says. "People listen more attentively to those who listen to them." (Kouzes and Posner, 2003)

Sadly, says Knuth, many principals don't send out a regular staff memo. Why would they pass up such a golden leadership opportunity?

• *Lack of time* – Some principals never get around to it because they are just too busy. But Knuth argues that a memo takes only about an hour a week to write, and if they don't publish a memo, principals will end up spending more than an hour dealing with the rumors, speculation, and misinformation that that will occur without this kind of transparency and good communication.

• *Weak skills* – Another reason that some principals don't write a memo is that they're not confident in their writing ability. No excuse, says Knuth. A principal would not have landed the job without some writing skills, and a weekly memo gives plenty of practice – and models good literacy.

• *No vision* – Some principals shy away from a regular memo because they don't believe they have enough to say – they lack a clear agenda. This is a sad state of affairs, says Knuth, and acknowledges that no amount of memo-writing can fill this leadership void.

Done well, a weekly memo "supplements rather than supplants other important forms of communication," concludes Knuth. "It cannot replace personal notes of thanks, congratulations, or sympathy or the broad range of one-on-one interactions that deepen principal-staff member relationships." And it doesn't cover communication with students, parents, and the community. But for its specific purpose, a regular weekly memo is an indispensable leadership tool, and Knuth urges all principals to consider using it.

"The Monday Memo" by Richard Knuth in *Principal Leadership*, November 2006 (Vol. 7, #3, p. 32-36), no e-link

6. What Builds Trust in a School

In this thoughtful article in *Principal Leadership*, California school administrator Devin Vodicka reviews the research on teacher-principal trust as a well-established correlate of smoothly-functioning schools with high student achievement. What does trust look like in a school? Vodicka thinks a good indicator is teachers agreeing with the following statements (Bryk and Schneider, 2002):

- It's OK in this school to discuss feelings, worries, and frustrations with the principal.
- The principal looks out for the personal welfare of the faculty members in this school.
- I take the principal at his or her word.
- The principal is an effective manager who makes the school run smoothly.
- The principal places the needs of the students ahead of his or her political interests.
- The principal has confidence in the expertise of the teachers.
- The principal takes a personal interest in the professional development of teachers.
- I really respect my principal as an educator.
- I feel respected by the principal.

How can we go about increasing the level of trust in a school? Vodicka suggests that there are four things principals can work on:

• *Consistency* – The principal says the same thing to parents, staff members, students, and the community.

• *Compassion* – This can take the form of creating flexible work schedules, allowing for personal time, offering employment stability, promoting social events, asking after colleagues' well-being, offering forgiveness, and simple courtesies like saying good morning, please and thank you.

• *Communication* – Teachers and other staff members appreciate an open flow of information from the principal (both positive and negative), as well as confidentiality on sensitive matters. The opposite – the principal withholding information and engaging in gossip – breeds distrust and leads staff members to rely on rumors to know what is going on.

• *Competence* – Teachers watch carefully to see if their principal knows the job and is performing effectively; competent performance of a wide range of administrative responsibilities is a key element in trust.

Vodicka stresses that one or two of these elements are not enough: all four are required for trust to build in a school. But once it's present, a high level of trust acts as a key enabler of high performance by staff and students.

"The Four Elements of Trust: Consistency, Compassion, Communication, and Competency" by Devin Vodicka in *Principal Leadership*, November 2006 (Vol. 7, #3, p. 27-30), no e-link

7. Differentiation 101

In this article from the website *A Different Place*, Nancy Bosch describes ways to differentiate that take little preparation, and ways that take more:

• Low-preparation differentiation:

- Choice of books
- Homework options
- Use of reading buddies
- Various journal prompts
- Varied pacing with anchor options
- Student/teacher goal-setting
- Working alone or together
- Flexible seating
- Varied computer programs
- Design-a-day
- Varied supplemental materials
- Options for varied modes of expression
- Varied scaffolding
- Computer mentors
- Think-pair-share by readiness, interest, or learning profiles
- Open-ended activities
- Exploration by interest
- Options for competition
- Flexible-learning groups by readiness, interest, or learning profile

• High-preparation differentiation:

- Tiered assignments (designed for students at different achievement levels)
- Tiered products (designed to allow some students to go into more depth)
- Tiered centers
- Graduated rubrics (with upper-level expectations that challenge high-achieving students)
- Independent study (students plan activities and in-depth study and show their understanding of a topic)
- Alternative assessments (students have the option of demonstrating their understanding in "real-world" ways)
- Course compacting (students are allowed to demonstrate proficiency in units or courses and move on to more challenging material)
- Interest centers (linking curriculum topics to areas in which some students excel or have high interest, allowing them to get more depth and breadth)
- Stations with materials prepared to engage students at different achievement levels
- Spelling by readiness
- Varying organizers
- Community mentorships
- Multiple texts
- Multiple assessment options
- Group investigations

- Choice boards
- Think-tac-toe
- Simulations
- 4-MAT

"A Differentiated Classroom" by Nancy Bosch at *A Different Place*, spotted on the Big Ideas website. http://www.adifferentplace.org/classroom.htm. Nancy welcomes feedback at nbosch@aol.com

8. What Principals Can Do About Student Steroid Use

In this article in *Principal Leadership*, three Brooklyn College-CUNY educators lay out the facts on adolescent use of steroids:

- Steroids are a serious health risk for adolescents and can lead to negative physical changes, emotional and behavioral damage, depression, and suicide.
- A 2005 study showed that among boys, steroids were used by 1.2% of eighth graders, 1.8% of tenth graders, and 2.6% of twelfth-graders.
- The same study showed that among girls, steroids were used by .9% of eighth graders, .7% of tenth graders, and .4% of twelfth-graders.
- Between 1998 and 2003, the percentage of high-school seniors who considered steroids risky and inappropriate dropped from 68% to 55%.
- Steroid use is most common among students in football, wrestling, track and field, and strength training, including body building.
- However, problem behaviors such as substance abuse, fighting, and sexual risk-taking are better predictors of adolescent steroid use than participation in sports.

The authors have the following suggestions for principals:

• Implement schoolwide programs to alert students to the dangers of steroids and intervene if students are using them – or any other risky dietary supplements.

• Educate teachers, coaches, and parents about the dangers of steroids and the tell-tale warning signs.

• Establish clear guidelines for coaches and trainers on what kinds of advice they can give students who want to build up their bodies and improve their athletic performance.

• Create an atmosphere of openness, team cooperation, and ethical responsibility in sports, versus cutthroat competition that may lead some students to do anything to improve their performance.

• Identify and intervene with students who appear to be suffering from depression and self-image problems and may be vulnerable to using steroids.

• Identify referral sources for families of steroid users.

The authors suggest the following websites for further information:

- The ATLAS Program (Athletes Training and Learning to Avoid Steroids): http://www.ohsu.edu/hpsm/atlas.html
- Drug Rehab Programs: http://www.drug-rehabs.com

- NIDA Steroid Abuse Site: http://www.steroidabuse.org
- U.S. Dept. of Justice: http://www.deadiversion.usdoj.gov/pubs/brochures/steroids

"Adolescents and Steroids: What Principals Should Know" by Sarita Gober, Paul McCabe, and Malky Klein in *Principal Leadership*, November 2006 (Vol. 7, #3, p. 11-15), no e-link

9. Short Items:

a. Math and science lessons online – This website, created by the University of Colorado and seven other universities, features free lesson plans geared to national STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) standards. For each learning activity, the site lists the grade level, the classroom time it takes, the state standards it meets, and the details of implementation: http://www.teachengineering.org

"Tech Showcase" in *Principal Leadership*, November 2006 (Vol. 7, #3, p. 52)

b. Special needs transition planning resources – This website from Wizdom Education has an online data tool to help students with special needs plan their transition from high school. The site includes a survey for the student and his or her parents to complete together and suggestions for developing a plan to take to the student's IEP meeting to plan the best post-secondary education, training, employment, home life, and community participation: http://www.wizdomeducation.com/mytransplanner.html

"Tech Showcase" in *Principal Leadership*, November 2006 (Vol. 7, #3, p. 52)

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 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).

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- 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
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Principal Leadership
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Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
Teacher Magazine
Teachers College Record
Theory Into Practice
Times Educational Supplement