

# Marshall Memo 292

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

June 29, 2009

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## Quotes of the Week

“We can't control the world, but we can control how we think about it.”

Walter Mischel (see item #1)

“You see this marshmallow? You don't have to eat it. You can wait. Here's how.”

Walter Mischel (*ibid.*)

“How we *feel* about a learning situation affects attention and memory more quickly than what we *think* about it.”

David Sousa (see item #2)

“Francis Bacon said knowledge is power. But real power lies in *applying* knowledge.”

David Sousa (*ibid.*)

“We should stop allowing the punitive *policy* of zero tolerance to co-opt the protective *principle* of zero tolerance, which is an essential underpinning of safe and supportive schools.”

Rhonda Armistead (see item #4)

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## 1. Can Deferring Gratification Be Taught?

In this intriguing *New Yorker* article, science writer Jonah Lehrer describes the famous “marshmallow” research on deferred gratification and explores its implications for schools. In the late 1960s, Stanford psychologists led by Walter Mischel asked preschool children to pick their favorite treat from a tray containing marshmallows, cookies, and pretzel sticks. Once children made a selection, they were left alone in a small room, having been told that if they didn’t eat the treat until the researcher returned, they’d be allowed to eat two treats. Children were also told that they could ring a bell at any point and the researcher would come right back – but they’d only have one treat.

A hidden camera recorded what happened inside the room as children struggled with temptation. Some covered their eyes or turned away so they couldn’t see the treat. Others kicked the desk, tugged at their pigtails, or stroked their marshmallow like a tiny stuffed animal. One boy looked around to make sure no one was watching, twisted his Oreo cookie apart, licked off the white filling, put the two pieces back together, and smiled happily.

The average amount of time that children were able to hold out was three minutes. Some rang the bell in less than thirty seconds. Some refused to take part in the exercise because they knew how difficult it would be. But about thirty percent of children waited for the full fifteen minutes and got to devour their double reward.

At first, Mischel had no plans to follow up on this research, but his three daughters were going through school with many of the children who took part in the marshmallow experiments, and he occasionally inquired over dinner about how they were doing. Over time, Mischel was struck by a link between the ability to wait for the second treat and school success as teenagers. He started asking his daughters to rate various children on a five-point scale, and noticed a close correlation with students’ ability to defer gratification as preschoolers. “That’s when I realized I had to do this seriously,” said Mischel.

Careful research on the 653 children who had taken part in the original study found a high correlation between the ability to wait at the age of four and later school success. Conversely, most children who couldn’t wait the fifteen minutes had more behavioral problems, shorter attention spans, a higher body-mass index, were more likely to have problems with drugs, struggled with stressful situations, and scored an average of 210 points lower on the SAT than children who passed the marshmallow test.

For centuries, psychologists have believed that abilities like deferring gratification are stable personality traits. But as Mischel conducted his research, he began to have doubts. When

he studied children in a summer camp, he noticed that the way kids reacted was often dependent on the circumstances. A child might react violently when teased by peers but submit meekly to adult punishment. In other words, aggression seemed to depend on “if-then” patterns. Mischel began to believe that psychologists should diagnose people’s problems the way mechanics diagnose a car’s squeaks and rattles: by asking under what *conditions* they occur. Is it when the car is accelerating? When you’re shifting gears? When you’re turning at slow speeds? When the specific conditions are identified, the cause becomes apparent. Mischel believes human behaviors can also be investigated by looking for “if-then” patterns.

After hundreds of hours observing children in the marshmallow experiment, he realized that all children felt the “hot emotion” of craving the treat, but those who were successful in deferring gratification had a strategy: they distracted themselves. Successful deferrers got the marshmallow out of their minds by covering their eyes, pretending to play hide-and-seek under the desk, or singing songs from Sesame Street. Those who used the strategy of staring at the marshmallow didn’t last long at all. “If you’re thinking about the marshmallow and how delicious it is,” says Mischel, “then you’re going to eat it. The key is to avoid thinking about it in the first place.” The best strategy is paying attention to something else. “We call that will power,” he says, “but it’s got nothing to do with the will.”

Mischel and his colleagues are now doing brain scans on as many of the original subjects as they can find in an attempt to map the neural circuitry of self-control. He is convinced that people who were successful at deferring gratification as children possess something in addition to will power or self-control. “It’s much more important than that,” he says. “This task forces kids to find a way to make the situation work for them. They want the second marshmallow, but how can they get it? We can’t control the world, but we can control how we think about it.”

Whatever its origins, the ability to defer gratification is an extremely useful life skill. When adults operate like this, it’s called metacognition – thinking about your thinking to outsmart your shortcomings. A classic example is Odysseus having his men rope him to the mast to survive with the temptation of the Sirens’ song, knowing that he couldn’t possibly resist if he weren’t tied up. Children who figure out this strategy have a huge advantage as they navigate the dangerous waters of childhood and adolescence. “If you can deal with hot emotions, then you can study for the SAT instead of watching television,” says Mischel. “And you can save more money for retirement. It’s not just about marshmallows.” He found that children who grow up in poverty tend to be less adept at deferring gratification. Their environment predisposes them toward instant gratification and doesn’t reward delaying, so they don’t develop and practice the right strategy.

Does this skill have a genetic origin? Mischel thinks not. First of all, some of the children who “failed” the marshmallow test have grown up to be successful adults; somewhere along the line they learned how to defer gratification. Mischel is studying them to see what changed their early tendency toward instant gratification. Second, when taught how to distract themselves, children who initially didn’t wait sixty seconds could hold out for the full fifteen minutes. “All I’ve done is given them some tips from their mental user manual,” says Mischel.

“Once you realize that will power is just a matter of learning how to control your attention and thoughts, you can really begin to increase it.” But will these learned skills persist in later life, as children make decisions about homework, television, junk food, and sex? Researchers are looking into that.

Self-control and deferral of gratification may very well be more important to life success than I.Q. The big question is whether schools can teach these strategies and get students to practice them enough so they become second nature. David Levin, co-founder of the national network of KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) schools, is intrigued and has invited researchers to work with his students. KIPP schools make a point of teaching character, including self-control (KIPP students in Philadelphia are even wearing shirts with the slogan, *Don't Eat the Marshmallow*). Preliminary results are promising, but it's not certain that new habits will survive unless they are reinforced at home. Children need practice at deferring gratification. Some families build “sly exercises in cognitive training” into the family routine, for example, forbidding children from snacking between meals, telling them to save their allowance for a special purchase, and not letting them open presents till Christmas morning. These parents make waiting worthwhile, teaching children how to outsmart their desires. Mischel believes that all adults need to teach these skills explicitly. “We should give marshmallows to every kindergartner,” he says. “We should say, ‘You see this marshmallow? You don't have to eat it. You can wait. Here's how.’”

“Don't – The Secret of Self-Control” by Jonah Lehrer in *The New Yorker*, May 18, 2009  
[http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/05/18/090518fa\\_fact\\_lehrer?printable=true](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/05/18/090518fa_fact_lehrer?printable=true)  
See Marshall Memo 258, #4 for another article on this subject.

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## **2. How to Make Professional Development Stick**

(Originally titled “Brain-Friendly Learning for Teachers”)

In this *Educational Leadership* article, author/consultant David Sousa draws on recent brain research to argue that four factors determine how likely a teacher is to remember and use what's presented in a PD session:

• *Emotions* – “How we *feel* about a learning situation affects attention and memory more quickly than what we *think* about it,” says Sousa. Teachers who are annoyed at being ordered to attend PD or feel emotionally detached from what's being presented may conceal their negative feelings, but they won't get much out of it. To increase the chance that teachers will remember something and put it to use in their classrooms, those who organize and present PD should keep the following precepts in mind:

- Offer learning experiences with some challenge, excitement, creativity, and joy.
- Address problems and concerns that teachers have identified.
- Get teachers excited about the initiative.
- Include opportunities for hands-on participation and involve a variety of learning styles.
- Provide opportunities for teachers to give feedback on the training.

It helps if teachers are involved in planning the PD.

• *Application and feedback* – “The need to be valued is a potent emotional force,” says Sousa, “and positive feedback fills that need.” Participants in PD should have a chance to try out ideas and get comments and suggestions that are timely, specific, and build on strengths.

• *Drawing on past experiences* – If professional development links to previous PD experiences that made a positive difference, teachers are much more likely to tune in, says Sousa. The opposite is true of past PD experiences that were unhelpful.

• *Meaning* – “As a learning episode ends, the brain decides whether to encode the new learning into long-term memory or let it fade away,” explains Sousa. What are the criteria? First, does this make sense? Second, does it have meaning for me personally? When the answer to both questions is yes, there’s a strong likelihood that the learning will be stored in long-term memory. PD presenters maximize the chance of this happening when they:

- Directly connect their content to teachers’ job-related goals.
- Do more than a one-shot workshop; follow-up activities are vital.
- Model strategies.
- Have teachers apply them immediately.
- Get participants involved in action research in which they personally assess the impact of the strategies they are learning.
- Promote in-school study groups to share classroom experiences and explore why, and under what conditions, a new strategy is effective.

“Francis Bacon said knowledge is power,” concludes Sousa. “But real power lies in *applying* knowledge. Ultimately, we hope teachers will not only retain what they learn in professional development encounters but also transfer that new knowledge into action.”

“Brain-Friendly Learning for Teachers” by David Sousa in *Educational Leadership*, June 2009 (Vol. 66 #9, online only) [http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational\\_leadership.aspx](http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership.aspx)

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### **3. The Benefits of Full-Service Community Schools**

In this *American Educator* article, Jane Quinn of the Children’s Aid Society and consultant/author Joy Dryfoos make the case for full-service community schools. These are schools that:

- Are open before and after school hours, evenings, vacations, and over the summer.
- Provide after-school and summer enrichment programs linked to the curriculum.
- Provide access to health, dental, and mental-health services.
- Offer social and educational services for families and community members.
- Have a family resource center that helps parents get involved in the school.
- Help the neighborhood address its problems.
- Are governed by a partnership between the school and community agencies.

Such schools have a strong track record for boosting children’s academic achievement, say Quinn and Dryfoos, because of the following elements:

- *Improved school readiness* – A consistent theme in full-service community schools is outreach to improve children’s readiness for school, including parenting education and pre-school programs.

- *Increased student attendance and reduced student mobility* – Teachers report more instructional time and less time catching up students who have been absent or arrive mid-year.

- *Increased parent involvement* – Teachers in these schools more often reach out to parents, including making home visits, and partner with family-service agencies and YMCAs to do additional outreach. There is more likely to be a two-way street, with parents being asked, “How are you sharing with the school what you know about your child?”

- *Greater access to health care* – This means that children’s vision and dental issues are dealt with, as well as lead-paint poisoning and mental health problems, helping students be more successful in classrooms.

- *Greater access to extended learning opportunities* – Time after school and during school vacations is used to provide remedial help and enrichment experiences.

- *Enhanced community support for public schools* – Only 31 percent of American households have school-age children, which makes it even more critical that schools’ work is visible and known in the community.

“Freeing Teachers to Teach: Students in Full-Service Community Schools Are Ready to Learn” by Jane Quinn and Joy Dryfoos in *American Educator*, Summer 2009 (Vol. 33, #2, p. 16-21), [http://www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american\\_educator/issues/summer2009/freeingteachers.pdf](http://www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/summer2009/freeingteachers.pdf)  
In a sidebar later in this issue of *American Educator*, “Establishing Your Community School”, there is a list of resources for creating community full-service schools:

- Growing Community Schools: The Role of Cross-Boundary Leadership: <http://www.communityschools.org/CCSDocuments/GrowingCommunitySchools.pdf>.
- Community and Family Engagement: Principals Share What Works: <http://www.communityschools.org/CCSDocuments/CommunityAndFamilyEngagement.pdf>.
- The Basics: Building, Assessing, Sustaining, and Improving Community Schools: <http://johnwgardnertestsites.pbworks.com>.
- The Coalition for Community Schools: <http://www.communityschools.org/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=11&Itemid=33>.
- The Finance Project: [http://www.financeproject.org/all\\_pubs.cfm?cat=3&p=1](http://www.financeproject.org/all_pubs.cfm?cat=3&p=1).

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#### **4. Five School-Reform Ideas That Didn’t Work Out**

In this *American School Board Journal* article, editor Lawrence Hardy lists five school reform efforts that ultimately failed – although each seemed like a good idea at the time:

- *Open classrooms* – The idea was to give students choices of “learning stations” within the classroom based on their interests. “Unfortunately,” says Hardy, “these classrooms were often noisy and chaotic, and teachers weren’t always trained to run them.” As the nation became more conservative and standards became the norm, the open-classroom idea faded.

- *Mandated class-size reductions* – Smaller classes are a good thing, says Hardy, especially in the lower grades, but when states like California and Florida mandated them, billions of additional dollars were needed for new teachers and classrooms, the supply of good

teachers ran low, and in some cases high-achieving and more-affluent students benefited, rather than the disadvantaged students for whom the initiative was designed. A 2008 study showed that class-size reductions had no impact on the achievement gap.

- *Privatization* – The idea was that private companies could cut schools’ administrative costs, boost student achievement, and make a profit. In practice, this didn’t work, and companies like Education Alternatives Inc. and Edison scaled back their operations.

- *Abstinence-only sex education* – A 2007 Mathematica Policy Research study found that students enrolled in abstinence-only programs were no more likely to abstain from sexual activity than those who didn’t have the program – and the pregnancy rate for adolescent girls 15-19, after going down for several years, went back up during the heyday of these programs.

- *Zero tolerance* – Many districts got tough on drugs, weapons, bullying, and even dress-code violations, but common sense was violated in enough instances (for example, a Delaware student getting suspended for bringing a pastry knife to school for a Junior Achievement project) that the idea was discredited. “We should stop allowing the punitive *policy* of zero tolerance to co-opt the protective *principle* of zero tolerance, which is an essential underpinning of safe and supportive schools,” wrote Rhonda Armistead of the National Association of School Psychologists.

Hardy goes on to list five reform efforts for which the jury is still out – not enough evidence to proclaim them successes or failures:

- Charter schools
- Mayoral control of schools
- Alternative certification
- Single-gender classrooms and schools
- Performance pay

“5 Reforms That Failed” by Lawrence Hardy in *American School Board Journal*, July 2009 (Vol. 196, #7, p. 16), no e-link available; Hardy can be reached at [lhardy@nsba.org](mailto:lhardy@nsba.org).

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## **5. Is Abolishing Teacher Tenure the Answer?**

This *American School Board Journal* article says it’s “Hogwash” that teacher tenure is a major obstacle to improving the quality of education in U.S. schools because:

- *A few bad teachers aren’t the main problem.* Ineffective teachers absolutely need to be removed from the classrooms, say the authors, “But the broader, more fundamental issue in American education is the overall quality of instruction available to children.” The priority should be a commitment to train and improve all the “good enough” teachers.

- *Don’t give tenure to incompetents.* “In many instances, principals lack the training to properly evaluate teachers,” say the authors. Tenure should not be awarded lightly; marginal teachers must be weeded out before they are awarded lifetime tenure.

- *Help problem teachers improve.* These teachers need mentoring, coaching, professional development, and thorough evaluation, say the authors. In some cases they will

improve. If they don't, principals have a track record of having tried, which makes dismissal that much easier – and also increases the chance that the teacher will see the handwriting on the wall and resign.

- *Establish a precedent.* Firing a tenured teacher is difficult and time-consuming, but once it's been done successfully a few times, the word gets out and ineffective teachers are more likely to leave rather than going through an emotionally wrenching experience and having a dismissal on their record.

- *Tenure isn't going away.* Efforts to do away with teacher tenure have run into determined opposition from teachers' unions and failed in state legislatures. Better to use the strategies above to gradually improve the quality of instruction that students experience day to day.

“5 Reasons to Quit Whining About Tenure” in *American School Board Journal*, July 2009 (Vol. 196, #7, p. 18), no e-link available

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## **6. The Importance of Phonological Awareness for Spanish ELLs**

In this article in *NABE News*, researchers Jean Mercier Smith, Doris Baker, and Lana Santoro say that teaching phonological awareness to Spanish-speaking English language learners in Spanish is helpful – provided it's done right. Spanish has much more transparent orthography than English, with a highly consistent grapheme-phoneme correspondence. There are 30 letters and 22-24 phonemes in Spanish (depending on the region); English has 26 letters and 41-44 phonemes, with 29 letter combinations that represent one sound and multiple vowel sounds depending on letter combinations. In Spanish, the most common syllables fall into two categories; in English, there are six. For all these reasons, syllable recognition is easier in Spanish, and Spanish-speaking children acquire phonemic awareness more quickly.

In both Spanish and English, say Smith, Baker, and Santoro, research shows that phonological awareness and beginning decoding skills in Spanish are important steps to learning to read, especially for at-risk ELLs, helping children to make the eventual transition to English more quickly and proficiently. The authors have found that explicit and systematic instruction is key, with a thoughtful progression from simpler to more complex sounds, careful explanations of the purpose of each task, modeling correct responses (watching students' mouths and having them watch the teacher's mouth), giving students plenty of opportunities for practice as a whole group and individually, and providing immediate corrective feedback. Phonological awareness instruction for ELLs should take place every day in kindergarten and first grade, they say. Instruction should last only a few minutes, with practice interspersed through the day (for example, while waiting in line).

“Early Intervention in Bilingual Education: Teaching Phonological Awareness in Spanish” by Jean Mercier Smith, Doris Baker, and Lana Santoro in *NABE News*, January/February 2009 (Vol. 1, #3, p. 5-14, 27-28), no e-link available

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## 7. Short Items:

**a. Getty Museum website** – This site gives access to the J. Paul Getty Museum collection in Los Angeles and has more than 150 lesson plans geared to elementary, middle, and high school. Some examples:

- Who's Afraid of Contemporary Art?
- Gods, Heroes and Monsters: Mythology in European Art
- Artful Women
- Neoclassicism and the Enlightenment
- Looking at Illuminated Manuscripts
- Historical Witness, Social Messaging

The site is at <http://www.gettytrust.us/education/search/curricula.html>

“Where Art and History Meet” in *American Educator*, Summer 2009 (Vol. 33, #2, p. 2)

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**b. It helps to be able to see well** – This *Education Gadfly* article reports that the Mollie Rae Elementary School in Orlando, Florida arranged for vision testing for all 530 of its students and prescribed glasses for those who couldn't see the board or read their textbooks. Kathryn Shuler, the principal, says this is an important reason the school went from an F to an A on Florida's rating scale in just one year.

“Squinting Students” in *The Education Gadfly*, June 25, 2009; for the full article, see

<http://www.clickorlando.com/education/19788688/detail.html>

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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:***

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

## ***Website:***

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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  
Changing Schools (McREL)  
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 Language Educator  
The New Yorker  
The Reading Teacher  
Theory Into Practice  
Tools for Schools/The Learning Principal