Marshall Memo 924

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
February 21, 2022

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Effective schools are not perpetual motion machines. You cannot simply get them set up, put them in motion, and watch them go. They require continual leadership to keep going. You can fix schools all you want. If their districts are dysfunctional, they won't stay fixed."
    Karin Chenoweth in *Districts That Succeed: Breaking the Correlation Between Race, Poverty, and Achievement* (Harvard Education Press, 2021)

"The beauty of mathematics becomes strikingly evident as one sees how intricately new knowledge is connected to prior knowledge, so that mathematics builds gradually over time."
    Jere Confrey, Meetal Shah, and Alan Maloney in "Learning Trajectories for Vertical Coherence" in *Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12*, February 2022 (Vol. 115, #2, pp. 90-103); the authors, who can be reached at jconfre@ncsu.edu, meetal@themathdoor.com, and alan@themathdoor.com, suggest that a climbing wall is a better analogy than a ladder for vertical articulation of math content.

"It is nearly impossible to go backward and remediate what was not learned, and at the same time, to catch up."
    Don Marlett (see item #7b)

"When students are in a hurry, they cannot think straight."
    Jennifer Bay-Williams in "Math, Will You Be My Valentine?" in *Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12*, February 2022 (Vol. 115, #2, pp. 86-87); Williams can be reached at j.baywilliams@louisville.edu.

"History teaches us that banning books has always been futile. The first translation of the New Testament published in English was banned in England, its translator executed for heresy. Anybody care to guess how many English-language Bibles now exist in the world?"
    Margaret Renkl in "Book Bans Aren't Just About Books" in *The New York Times*, February 9, 2022

"Despite parental outbursts, teenagers are going to continue to find ways to assert themselves publicly and privately, and to get their mitts on whatever their parents don't want them to read, see, or discuss."
        Jessica Grose in ["Book Bans Are About the Illusion of Parental Control"](#) in *The New York Times*, February 11, 2022

"Grappling with America's history is one important way students learn to navigate difficult conversations and uncomfortable experiences like those they will inevitably face once they leave the classroom."
        Ashley Burns and Manny Rivera (see item #2)

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1. Incorporating Grace In Today's Classrooms

        In this *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, Nicole Else-Quest, Viji Sathy, and Kelly Hogan (University of North Carolina/Chapel Hill) say that "compassion and kindness are foundational to effective teaching" – especially now, with the stress and trauma experienced by so many students during the pandemic. Here are the authors' suggestions, many of which apply to K-12 classrooms:
        • *Focus on the highest-priority learning objectives*. "Maybe you can't do all the things on your list," say Else-Quest, Sathy, and Hogan, "but you can do many of them really well." Build in pauses to allow students to catch up and understand what's most important.
        • *Link course content to students' values and goals*. This might include essays and other assignments in which students say how the subject matter connects to their own lives and issues they care about. It's also helpful to say why you yourself care about what's being studied and how you got excited about it.
        • *Show that you care about students and help them feel connected and welcome*. "Don't assume they know," say Else-Quest, Sathy, and Hogan; "be explicit and genuine." Say that you know their personal well-being is closely tied to academic success. Regularly check in to see if adjustments need to be made to support their learning.
        • *Reimagine classroom culture*. Especially now, students want and need human connection. Build in opportunities for collaboration, student-led discussions, peer review, and personal sharing.
        • *Give students grace through reasonable flexibility*. This includes submission of assignments, attendance and tardiness, and class participation. The ultimate goal is learning, not compliance.

• *Model taking care of yourself.* Students can learn from your example. "Set boundaries to support your own well-being and prevent burnout," say the authors – regular work hours, limits on e-mail time, and asking for help yourself.

• *Make sure students know where to find help in a crisis.* Key information might be in the syllabus, class website, lab manual, or personal communication. Possible resources: school counselors, the CDC's stress-management suggestions, the Crisis Text Line (HOME to 741-741), and the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273-TALK).

"Give Students the Grace We All Need" by Nicole Else-Quest, Viji Sathy, and Kelly Hogan in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 18, 2022 (Vol. 68, #12, pp. 68-69); the authors are at NEQ@email.unc.edu, viji.sathy@unc.edu, and kelly_hogan@unc.edu.

2. Conducting Brave Conversations on Hot-Button Issues

In this article in *The Learning Professional*, Ashley Burns and Manny Rivera (RALLY) say that in these volatile times – people are increasingly defensive, argumentative, and preachy on race, identity, and equity – four communication principles are helpful in fostering productive conversations with colleagues, students, parents, and community members:

• *Ask thoughtful questions.* Politely questioning emotionally wrought people, say Burns and Rivera, "can lower the temperature, help preserve your energy, and also help guide the conversation so you can better understand the root of their concern." Two examples:
   - "I can tell you're concerned, so what is it that you truly want for your child?"
   - "Where are you seeing that happening in our school? In your child's classroom?"
Questions like these help get the facts on the table, articulate shared goals, and dispel misinformation people may have picked up from cable TV or a Facebook group.

• *Lead with your values.* Rather than getting sucked into a no-win argument about critical race theory or some other controversial issue, Burns and Rivera suggest stating what's important to you and hopefully to those you're talking with – for example:
   - All children deserve a safe, high-trust, low-stress learning environment.
   - When students see themselves reflected in the curriculum, they learn better.
   - Every student needs to be prepared for success beyond high school, which means communication skills, collaboration, cultural literacy, critical thinking, and integrity.
   - Students need to understand the past, recognize inequality and prejudice, and develop empathy, curiosity, and a desire to create a better future.
"Grappling with America's history," say Burns and Rivera, "is one important way students learn to navigate difficult conversations and uncomfortable experiences like those they will inevitably face once they leave the classroom."

• *Seek common ground.* "There is more of it than you think," say the authors. "It turns out that when the jargon and hot-button language are removed, and people understand what is actually being taught in classrooms, there tends to be strong consensus." Surveys reveal that most Americans across party lines are proud of their country while recognizing its flawed past; they want history taught warts and all, with students understanding that we are a work in

progress. By celebrating the good and confronting the bad, students can take part in the process of continuous improvement.

      • *Consider the context.* There's huge variation, say Burns and Rivera, in the information educators, parents, students, and community members bring to the table on high-voltage issues. That's why we need to ask ourselves: Do they know a lot about this issue or only what they've heard in recent headlines? What are their fears and concerns? What do they care most about? Am I, perhaps, not the best person to convey the key message? Perhaps a teacher, a mental health professional, a student, or a parent should join the conversation.

"In Times of Division, Strategic Communication Matters" by Ashley Burns and Manny Rivera in *The Learning Professional*, February 2022 (Vol. 43, #1, pp. 34-37); the authors can be reached at aburns@wearerally.com and mrivera@wearerally.com.

3. School Leaders Using Questions for Maximum Impact

      In this *Learning Professional* article, retired superintendent Charles Mason says that asking good questions is a principal's superpower. Why? Because well-framed questions can model humility, curiosity about others, and a desire to get to the bottom of difficult issues. Mason has these detailed suggestions:

      • *Use questions to fill knowledge gaps.* "I very rarely know more about a given subject than the combined wisdom of all of the people around me," says Mason. "Learning from them is an efficient way to broaden my knowledge of whatever the task is we're working on." Some possible questions:

- Does anyone have personal experience with this issue?
- Who else can shed light on our decision?
- Are there differences in how various subgroups in and around the school see this issue?
- Is there pertinent school history we should know about?
- Is there another school that's dealt with it? Can we learn from them?

Educators who think they know more than their teammates are either delusional or have a weak team, says Mason – with the former much more likely.

      • *Don't begin a discussion by stating your own opinion and conclusions.* That puts colleagues in the position of agreeing or disagreeing with you, and some will be reluctant to go against the boss. For colleagues to be honest and engage in productive thinking, they need for the leader to step back and create a safe space to give their best thinking. Mason suggests open-ended questions to launch a discussion, for example:

- What values should drive our decision?
- What's at stake?
- Who will be affected by our decision, and what are their concerns?
- What are some options, with pros and cons?

As important as asking questions like these is how well the leader listens and responds. This is especially true when there's disagreement.

• *Asking colleagues' opinions and advice says you value them as individuals*. "If, over time, you ask and truly listen," says Mason, "then those you are leading will start any interaction with you from a basic belief that you value them as a person – even when they disagree with you."

• *Get others involved in formulating and asking questions*. If members of a team aren't part of the thinking, discussing, and problem-solving, they'll be less committed to implementing a decision. In addition, the discussion won't be as robust and there will be less attention to potential problems and unexpected information. "Surprises are not a leader's friend," says Mason, "and they can be minimized by engaging a diverse group to work with you through the analysis and decision-making processes."

• *Ask questions up front so you have the answers when you need them*. With the clock ticking on a decision, it's important not to be scrambling for important information as a deadline draws near. The sequence of questions can also guide an orderly decision-making process: first we need to know this, then this…

• *Use questions to help colleagues develop as leaders*. Mason suggests some possible probes:
   - What knowledge and skills do you need to acquire and hone to be successful?
   - Where do you most need support?
   - What resources and individuals can you tap into?
   - Who are the key people you need to communicate with early and often?
   - Who can you recruit as colleagues and allies?
   - Where do you anticipate resistance?

Questioning to build capacity is a key part of a leader's legacy-building, intentionally growing a pool of leadership to step up after departure.

• *Calibrate the level of questioning and direction*. "Often," says Mason, "leaders think they have only two choices in their delegation style: either micromanage every aspect of the person's work or leave the person alone." He uses the analogy of a sound-mixing engineer to suggest differentiating by a colleague's skills, experience, self-confidence, and how much risk is involved if the task isn't performed well. Here are the toggles on the managerial "sound board":
   - Giving explicit instructions
   - Checking progress frequently
   - Giving specific feedback
   - Providing other staff support
   - Granting decision-making authority.

An experienced colleague will need very little of the first three, a small amount of the fourth, and lots of the fifth; an inexperienced person will need a lot of the first three, a moderate amount of the fourth, and very little of the fifth.

"Over the years," Mason concludes, "I've often found that just when I think I've figured out what makes another person tick, an action or a response takes me by surprise and I'm reminded that I'm not a watchmaker. But I don't have to be a watchmaker to keep asking

good questions and letting the other person tell me what they think, what they need, and how I can help them become the best leader they can be for their colleagues and students."

"Asking Good Questions Is a Leader's Superpower" by Charles Mason in *The Learning Professional*, February 2022 (Vol. 43, #1, pp. 38-41, 46)); the author can be reached at cmason.557@gmail.com.

4. Is It a Good Idea for Teacher Teams to Co-Construct Their Norms?

In this article in *The Learning Professional*, Joyce Lin and Ayanna Perry (Knowles Teacher Initiative) say that newly formed teams are often asked to create ground rules for their meetings. The goal is to define what's appropriate and inappropriate in meetings, what's helpful and unhelpful, what will create consistency, foster trust, and help the team be open and collaborative. Two norms that frequently appear:

- *Be respectful.*
- *Assume positive intent.*

The rationale for teams generating their own norms is that it builds community and ensures buy-in.

But as Lin and Perry have mentored and coached teams of high-school math and science teachers, they've noticed that the norms that teams generate can be problematic. Why? Because, say the authors, "unexamined assumptions about the group's work and its membership operate under the surface and can skew the norms toward the needs and interests of some members more than others." As teams brainstorm norms and quickly check for consensus (the process often takes as little as ten minutes), there's a tendency for dominant members' beliefs, values, and ways of interacting to hold sway. "Unexamined assumptions about the group's work and its membership operate under the surface," say Lin and Perry, "and can skew the norms toward the needs and interests of some members more than others."

For example, what does *Be respectful* mean? Be polite? Don't show emotion? Avoid conflict? If so, the concerns and ideas of some group members won't be heard as the team engages in the challenging work of discussing teaching and learning in classrooms, which often gets into issues of curriculum expectations, race, identity, and power. "If group members don't know each other," say the authors, and if members come from diverse backgrounds, "it will be particularly risky for those who have a different perspective from the dominant one and those who don't feel supported to speak up and advocate for themselves. The most vulnerable members will end up feeling the least protected and their voices will be the least represented in group discussions going forward."

These observations have led Lin and Perry to experiment with a different approach to setting norms. With the goal of creating "a safe and respectful space for all," they've begun to give teachers these three norms at the outset:

- *Impact is greater than intent, so own your impact and examine, investigate, and interrogate your intent.*
- *Ask for what you need and tell what you can give.*

- *Ask for what others need and what others can give.*

The first norm specifically pushes back on *Assume positive intent*, which, say the authors, "allows those who have offended to avoid responsibility for inflicting hurt while doing little to absolve the hurt or confusion of the offended. Further, this norm assumes that the people involved have already built a relationship with enough trust and positive interactions to make it easy for the offended to assume that the intention of the speaker was honest and good."

By contrast, *Own your impact* asks the person who's unwittingly said something hurtful to take responsibility for its impact on a colleague, learn from the exchange, and figure out why it happened. "Our norm," say Lin and Perry, "asks speakers to think deeply about the basis of their beliefs and thoughts and recognize that our culture's social constructs color our language and interactions. Furthermore, it asks speakers to scrutinize their intentions to determine whether they were actually good."

The second and third norms push back on society's individualistic ethos, focusing instead on the shared work of improving each team member's teaching and supporting the success of all their students – what each person can contribute and what is expected of every member of the team. Lin and Perry believe these norms nudge teachers to listen to and understand the needs and contributions of their colleagues, become more compassionate, empathetic, and respectful, reconsider and augment their own worldview, and do a better job with their students.

How have teachers responded to having group norms handed to them? Of three cohorts who've used this approach, two responded very positively, saying their groups had broad participation, included shy members, and members were more honest and vulnerable about sharing understandings and experiences. One group was critical of the new approach, saying they wished they had developed the team's norms. There were two important differences between this group and the other two: teachers in the critical group had worked remotely during the pandemic, and unlike the other teams, members hadn't spent time sharing information about their backgrounds, experiences, and identities.

Nevertheless, the critical feedback from one cohort led Lin and Perry to do some additional thinking about setting group norms. Perhaps with enough pre-work and explicit discussion of the possible pitfalls, groups could co-create norms that respect the ideas and contributions of all members. This is a work in progress.

"Should Groups Set Their Own Norms? Maybe Not" by Joyce Lin and Ayanna Perry in *The Learning Professional*, February 2022 (Vol. 43, #1, pp. 30-33); the authors can be reached at joyce.lin@knowlesteachers.org and ayanna.perry@knowlesteachers.org.

Back to page one

5. Can Heterogeneous Groups Work in a Math Class?

In this *Edutopia* article, Hawaii math teacher Joseph Manfre remembers a student in one of his heterogeneous groups demanding to be moved to another group. Why? he asked. "Because they just don't get it!" came the indignant reply. She had always been a high-achiever in math classes, quickly completing her assignments with very few errors. In previous

years, teachers had given her more-advanced work so as not to hold her back, and she came to expect that approach to differentiation and resented being grouped with other students who worked more slowly at math.

But grouping high achievers together is the wrong approach, Manfre believes. It's based on the misconception that these students are innately smarter at math, whereas their achievement is based on being quick processors. These students thrive in classrooms that put a premium on speed; these teachers forge ahead to cover the curriculum, rewarding quick thinkers and leaving many others behind. But for the high achievers, there are significant downsides: acceleration breeds a fixed mindset, narrows their perspective on math, and closes off the opportunity to interact with classmates who learn math differently.

For every quick processor, says Manfre, there is a student who processes more slowly, has to understand the "whys and hows" of a math idea before digesting it, and needs visuals to grasp abstract concepts. Students like this are often seen as less smart at math – an inconvenience for a teacher intent on charging ahead with the syllabus. In such classrooms, differentiation consists of dividing students into three groups: high-achievers do accelerated work; remedial students receive small-group instruction; and the rest of the class works independently or in pairs on grade-level content.

This seems like a sweet deal for high-achieving students who are working above grade level, but Manfre sees three problems:
- Students are making few mistakes so there's little thinking about what can go wrong.
- Under pressure to maintain high grades (self-imposed and parental), students are afraid of making mistakes and asking questions that might make them appear less smart.
- Because teachers are spending a lot of time with low-achieving students, they may not be challenging and extending the understanding of the high fliers.

The result: advanced students don't develop a conceptual understanding of mathematics, and their achievement sometimes hits a wall when they get to advanced math in high school and college. Meanwhile, lower-achieving students are conditioned to be passive recipients of remediation and don't actively contribute in their classrooms.

Manfre has concluded that isolated differentiation doesn't work for *any* students. His core belief is that all students are capable of learning math at a high level if classrooms are structured to allow students to move at different speeds, supported by alternative approaches and scaffolds. Here's how he's implementing this kind of differentiation in his classes:

• *Mixed-achievement groups working on common tasks* – This ensures diversity of ideas and opportunities for productive struggle and sharing, says Manfre, which leads to deeper conceptual understanding. In their groups, students are enlisted as peer teachers, learning with and from each other.

• *Convincing students of the value of mixed groups* – Once students let go of the traditional model and see the value of working with peers who think differently about math, Manfre says they enjoy working in heterogeneous groups – for their own learning and for group esprit and accomplishment. "It also creates a mathematics classroom culture," he says,

"that invites mistakes as an essential contributor to the learning experience, minimizing math anxiety."

• *Scaffolds, roles, and protocols* – Students in each group take on specific responsibilities as they collaborate to solve math problems, using a "protocol for empathic explanation," which helps them as they explain concepts to classmates who at first don't understand.

What happened to the high-achieving girl who demanded to be transferred to another group? Manfre insisted that she stick with her group, and in subsequent months, she "improved her communication ability to not only provide meticulous explanations but also ask inquisitive questions for her peers to articulate their thought processes, allowing her peers to serve as elements of the curriculum. As a result, conversations contained higher-order discourse, leading to a greater depth of conceptual understanding for all members of her learning community."

"The Advantages of Heterogeneous Student Groups in Math" by Joseph Manfre in *Edutopia*, February 14, 2022

6. "Improvemeant" Spellings

"One of the great joys of reading other people's work," says teacher/writer/editor Heather Goodman in this *Boston Globe* article, "is experiencing the world as they do." She gets a special kick from "improvemeant spelling… [which] enriches the original, often clarifies and amplifies." Some examples:
- A high-school student wrote that a character was made an *escape goat*. "Scape" is a shortening of "escape," says Goodman, and surely someone who is falsely blamed wants to escape that label.
- Another student wrote *bullet and board* for *bulletin board*. Accurate enough, since we stick reminders and photos on a slab of cork.
- An adult student asked Goodman how her *manualscript* was coming along – entirely appropriate for what seemed like a ton of manual labor.
- A memoir writer referred to *ease dropping* – and with digital media, eavesdropping is so much easier than it used to be.

"In Spelling, There's Always Room for 'Improvemeant'" by Heather Goodman in *The Boston Globe*, February 20, 2022

7. Short Items:

a. Graphic Organizers – This article by Don Marlett has a number of examples of effective graphic displays to clarify concepts and curriculum content.

"What Are Graphic Organizers?" by Don Marlett on the Learning-Focused website, February 16, 2022

b. Accelerated Learning – A <u>second article</u> by Don Marlett suggests approaches to catching up students who are behind.

"Accelerated Learning: How Do You Move Them Forward Quickly and Effectively?" by Don Marlett on the Learning-Focused website, February 16, 2022

c. A Novel Gets Printed – This *New York Times* <u>multimedia presentation</u> shows step by step how *Moon Witch Spider King*, a new novel by Marlon James, is printed. Extraordinary.

"How a Book Is Made: Ink, Paper, and a 200,000-Pound Printer" by Elizabeth Harris in *The New York Times*, February 20, 2022

If you have feedback or suggestions,
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About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and other educators very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 52 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, writer, and consultant, lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 60 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through more than 150 articles each week, and selects 8-10 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 50 issues a year). Every week there's a podcast and HTML version as well.

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Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

All Things PLC
American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
AMLE Magazine
ASCA School Counselor
ASCD Express
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
English Journal
Exceptional Children
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Educational Review
Independent School
Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Knowledge Quest
Language Arts
Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance)
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Social Education
Social Studies and the Young Learner
Teachers College Record
Teaching Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Journal of the Learning Sciences
The Language Educator
The Learning Professional (formerly Journal of Staff Development)
The New York Times
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Time
Urban Education