Marshall Memo 1119

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
January 5, 2026

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"We don't know if we're brave until we first face genuine physical risk. We don't know if we're honest until telling the truth carries a consequence. We don't know if we're kind until our kindness is tested by cruelty."

David French in "What Courage Does for Us" in *The New York Times*, Dec. 19, 2025

"The girl told him that, in elementary school, she had avoided being called on by doing things like pretending to be sick or walking out of the room, and that she had once hit a teacher with a book. She didn't mind being punished, she said, because no punishment could be worse than the laughter of her classmates."

David Owen in "Alphabet Soup" in *The New Yorker*, December 29, 2025/January 5, 2026, describing psychologist Steven Dykstra's interview with a girl with dyslexia

"You'll cry every day."

Said to first-year teachers in an orientation meeting (see item #2)

"When children are under too much pressure, instead of their energy being focused on learning, they will find other ways to release it, often in areas we wish they didn't."

Rabbi Isaac Entin in "Seeing the Child: The Imperative of Diversity in Jewish Education" in *Leadership*, September 2025 (Vol. 5, #2, pp. 14-19)

"Those who develop the ability to organize themselves, their materials, and their time get an automatic boost of self-confidence that follows them throughout the day and supports them throughout their lives."

Rabbi Isaac Entin (*ibid.*)

"Elementary mathematics… is rich and beautiful. But it has a very bad PR department. Many of the textbooks that tell its story do it a grave injustice by not weaving a coherent narrative…

For mathematics to be understandable and enjoyable, students need a coherent narrative to serve as the basis for reasoning."

Jeremy Alm in "Why Is Elementary Math Scary?" in *American Educator*, Winter 2025-26 (Vol. 49, #4, pp. 23-26)

"This past year, the world of AI has been looming over teachers. There is both excitement and confusion around the topic, so in 2026, my goal is to further explore the opportunities of AI in education to show teachers how we can enhance, not replace, our human intelligence in the classroom!"

Pamela Slifer, quoted in "14 New Year's Resolutions to Inspire School Leaders" by Mary Hendrie in *Education Week*, December 31, 2025

"My professional resolution is to get better at saying no – strategically. I want to focus on commitments that truly align with my priorities so I can excel in the areas that matter most, rather than spreading myself so thin that I feel mediocre everywhere."

Renee Gugel, quoted in *ibid*.

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1. Are Smarter People Happier, and If Not, Why Not?

In this article in *Experimental History*, social psychologist Adam Mastroianni lists some widely agreed-upon qualities of an intelligent person:

- Good at reasoning, planning, and solving problems;
- Adept at thinking abstractly and comprehending complex ideas;
- Learns quickly and learns from experience;
- Can take in the surroundings, catch on, make sense of things, figure out what to do.

"Intelligence sounds pretty great," says Mastroianni. "Who doesn't want to 'catch on' and 'make sense'? Hell, 'figuring out what to do' is pretty much all of life!"

It stands to reason, he continues, that intelligent people live happier lives. They can solve problems, plan, get what they want, deal with life's ups and downs, learn from mistakes, and therefore make fewer of them.

Not so fast. Mastroianni says that according to a raft of studies, people who score well on IQ tests are not way happier. Findings from different research: (a) they have the same amount of happiness as those who score lower, (b) they're a tiny bit happier, and (c) in a study covering 50 years of data, they're actually a little less happy. At a societal level, despite the fact that average IQ has gone up 15 points (the so-called Flynn Effect), happiness has plateaued.

What's going on here?

One theory is that intelligence tests are biased along racial and economic lines – and indeed, psychologists have been trying to fix those problems for decades. There's also the fact that when people are paid to take IQ tests, they do better, which suggests that the level of seriousness and effort might be a factor. "But even if intelligence tests only measure something like 'ability to succeed in an unfair society' or 'willingness to try hard,'" says Mastroianni, "it only deepens the mystery. Shouldn't those people end up with happier lives, however unfair that may be?"

It is true, however, that whatever the tests' flaws, the data show a correlation between scores and success in school and the kinds of jobs people get. So why isn't there a strong correlation with happiness?

Mastroianni takes us back to 1904, when a psychologist named Charles Spearman postulated that individuals' performance on tests in different subject areas – vocabulary knowledge, math, French, music – tended to be at pretty much the same level. Spearman's finding has been replicated many times, which suggests that there's some deep underlying quark of intelligence and people either have it or don't.

But this fact about underlying levels of intelligence misses something important, says Mastroianni. Different intelligence tests aren't as different as they appear; they contain questions that share these characteristics:

- There are stable relationships among the variables.
- There's no disagreement on whether the problems can be solved.
- They have clear boundaries; there's a finite amount of relevant information and possible actions.
- The problems are repeatable; although the details may change, the process for solving them doesn't.

In short, problems on intelligence tests are *well-defined*. They may be difficult, but they're not mystical. "Matching a word to its synonym, finding the area of a trapezoid, putting pictures in the correct order (all common tasks on IQ tests) are well-defined problems," says Mastroianni.

But there are other kinds of problems, and they are much closer to the issues that affect happiness. Some examples:

- *Why can't I find someone to spend my life with?*
- *Should I be a dentist or a dancer?*
- *How do I get my child to stop crying?*
- *What do I do when my parents get old?*
- *How can we all get along?*
- *How do you live a good life?*

These are not questions that lend themselves to a multiple-choice format, says Mastroianni. They are *poorly defined* problems, "and getting better at rotating shapes or remembering state capitals is not going to help you solve them."

What are the human qualities that help solve poorly defined problems? *Insight, creativity, agency, self-knowledge, common sense, wisdom*? And some of the "smartest" people

in the world – renowned professors, successful politicians, chess champions – don't have them. Some of these "smart" people say Hitler was a good dude, believe 9/11 was an inside job, and make colossally stupid choices about sex. They fail to solve some basic but poorly defined problems: maintaining a grip on reality, being a good person, and not making life-altering blunders. And there is a dark history of "intelligence" being used to hurt people.

How can we spot people who are *good* at solving poorly defined problem? One way is to look for men and women who feel good about their lives. "*How do I live a life I like?* is a humdinger of a poorly defined problem," says Mastroianni. "This is why people who score well on intelligence tests and win lots of chess games are no happier than the people who flunk the tests and lose at chess. Well-defined and poorly defined problems require completely different problem-solving skills. Life ain't chess. Nobody agrees on the rules, the pieces do whatever they want, and the board covers the whole globe, as well as the inside of your head and possibly several metaphysical planes as well."

What about AI, which can drive cars, defeat our best chess players, and predict how proteins will fold? We're closing in on *general AI*, which will supposedly be able to do all things humans can do. "But if you split problems into *well-defined* and *poorly defined* problems," says Mastroianni, "you'll notice that all of AI's progress has been on *defined* problems. That's what artificial intelligence does. In order to get AI to solve a problem, we have to give it data to learn from, and picking that data requires defining the problem."

It's great that AI is solving some important problems, he continues, but ChatGPT and company will continue to be "hopeless" at solving poorly defined ones. "To solve those, we need humans running around doing weird human stuff." He points to some ancient thinkers – Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Buddha, Confucius, Jesus, St. Augustine, Thoreau, Vivekananda – "but at some point, this kind of stuff apparently fell out of fashion."

Mastroianni gives a shout-out to his grandmother, who, he says, hasn't mastered the input button on her TV remote, "but she does know how to raise a family full of good people who love each other, how to carry on through a tragedy, and how to make the perfect pumpkin pie." Sometimes these qualities are condescendingly referred to as "folksy" or "homespun," he says, but "excluding this kind of intelligence from our definition doesn't just hurt our grandmas – it hurts us too."

His conclusion: "If you don't value the ability to solve poorly defined problems, you'll never get more of it. You won't seek out people who have that ability and try to learn from them, nor will you listen to them when they have something important to say. You'll spend your whole life trying to solve problems with cleverness when what you really need is wisdom. And you'll wonder why it never really seems to work. All of your optimizing, your straining to achieve and advance, your ruthless crusade to eliminate all of the well-defined problems from your life – it doesn't actually seem to make your life any better."

"Why Aren't Smart People Happier?" by Adam Mastroianni in *Experimental History*, August 8, 2022

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2. Teachers Dealing with the Emotional Demands of Teaching

In this *Teachers College Record* article, Christina Galletta Horner (Bowling Green State University) and four co-authors say that in a recent presentation, first-year teachers were told, "You'll cry every day." Warnings like this notwithstanding, say the authors, most beginning teachers are not prepared for the "emotional labor" involved in the profession – how to recognize, express, and regulate feelings they'll have once they're in charge of a classroom. This lack of preparation contributes to the stress, guilt, shame, burnout, and high attrition among new teachers.

"Schools are workplaces where expectations for emotional labor exist, but clear communication and training are lacking," say the authors. "Teachers learn expectations for emotional labor in informal and reactive ways, such as observation of colleagues' behavior or receiving corrective feedback from their school administrator after unintentionally violating a norm." Preservice training in this area can clearly be improved, and school leaders should orchestrate ongoing professional development to raise consciousness and improve skills.

"We believe a good first step," say the authors, "is simply introducing shared language around emotional labor, and therefore encouraging awareness, conversation, and self-reflection about experienced and expressed emotions." Some possible areas:

- Showing genuine emotion with students versus "faking it" in the teacher role;
- Developing meaningful relationships with students while establishing boundaries;
- Expressing personal beliefs while being cautious, given the current political climate;
- Hiding anger while showing empathy to build relationships with students and parents;
- Mustering enthusiasm to get students engaged in a less-than-scintillating lesson.

"Preservice Teachers' Expectations for Emotional Regulation in the Classroom: Learning to Act Like a Teacher" by Christy Galletta Horner, Kristina LaVenia, Meg Vostal, Oluwatobi Ishola, and Colleen Boff in *Teachers College Record*, October 2025 (Vol. 127, #9-10, pp. 172-201); Horner can be reached at cgallet@bgsu.edu.

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3. Three School Practices That Help New Teachers Stick Around

In this *Elementary School Journal* article, Jason Miller (Eastern Kentucky University) and Kimberly Evert (Middle Tennessee State University) say there's a roughly 13 percent annual teacher turnover in the U.S., which costs between $1 billion and $2.2 billion a year. The authors cite studies showing that "perceived person-organization fit" is a key factor in new elementary teachers' job satisfaction, engagement, commitment to teaching, and likeliness to stay at a school. Miller and Evert report on their study showing that three specific school conditions increase this fit:

• Assigning first-year teachers a mentor in the same school who is a positive representative of the school's culture and helps new teachers develop relationships with colleagues through formal and informal activities.

• Implementing policies that support a culture of collective responsibility for student success. This includes teachers helping each other with student discipline, collaborating on developing and implementing lessons, holding high expectations for students, working toward common goals, and engaging with each other in a respectful manner. It's helpful if the principal encourages teacher teamwork through formal and informal recognition.

• Using a teacher evaluation process that is transparent about the criteria for effective instruction and teacher-student relationships and puts the principal in the position to encourage and coach effective practices. "When elementary teachers have a strong understanding of what concepts their teacher evaluation system encourages," say Miller and Evert, "they can build a teaching community around these concepts." That, in turn, improves teachers' classroom effectiveness and develops stronger relationships among teachers.

"School Organizational Conditions That Predict Person-Organization Fit with Teaching Colleagues" by Jason Miller and Kimberly Evert in *Elementary School Journal*, December 2025 (Vol. 126, #1, pp. 197-219); the authors can be reached at Jason.Miller2@eku.edu and Kimberly.Evert@mtsu.edu.

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4. Instructional Leadership and Schoolwide Systems

In this article in *The Principal Center*, Justin Baeder defines instructional leadership as "the practice of making and implementing operational and improvement decisions in the service of student learning." This kind of maxi-leadership is carried out at three levels:

- Tier 1 – Face-to-face feedback to teachers after frequent classroom visits;
- Tier 2 – Coaching teachers to help them grow as professionals;
- Tier 3 – Building school-level systems that transcend individuals and last over time.

The three tiers feed each other, says Baeder. Work with individual teachers in the first two informs Tier 3 decisions. Tier 3 systems provide expectations on which to Tier 1 and 2 feedback is based. Tier 1 feedback helps people get better at implementing Tier 3 systems. Tier 2 coaching helps teachers become more capable of designing and improving schoolwide systems.

Baeder says his focus working with principals in the coming months will be challenging them to continue making frequent classroom visits and coaching teachers, and also orchestrating schoolwide practices that transcend individual teachers' practice and "make each school a system that reliably produces learning." He's come up with a new acronym – CAIRO – to describe the bigger picture of school leadership:

- **C**urriculum – what we teach;
- **A**ssessment – how we measure student learning
- **I**nstruction – how we teach
- **R**ules – how we create a learning environment
- **O**perations – how we support the functioning of the learning environment

With this broader perspective, Baeder says he's seeing – over and over – four problem areas in schools:

• De-emphasizing *knowledge* in favor of vague *skills*, which means "students don't have enough to think about, and classes simply aren't teaching enough."

• Backing away from high expectations "in various attempts to be kind of compassionate, with a result that is neither."

• Valuing educators' individual autonomy over systems that will produce consistent results and last even with staff turnover.

• "When we get results we don't like, we stop collecting data rather than develop a serious plan."

"Tier 3 Instructional Leadership" by Justin Baeder in *The Principal Center*, January 1, 2026

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5. Integrating Key Components of Early Reading Instruction

In this article in *Language Arts*, Ziva Hassenfeld (Brandeis University) and Kalin Gangi (a Massachusetts third-grade teacher) challenge the idea that phonics is the one-size-fits-all solution to teaching young children how to read. Gangi describes Maddox, a bright, social boy who had received lots of phonics instruction starting in kindergarten. He could decode words but "simply could not transfer the skills from his phonics lessons into our whole-class reading lessons."

During the 2023-24 school year, Gangi's third-grade classroom had nine students reading at the first-grade level. Like Maddox, all of them had received direct, structured phonics since entering school, along with reading lessons, but were unable to transfer their phonics skills to reading grade-level texts. The problem, Gangi believes, is separating phonics, an essential foundation, from reading connected texts. "We need to teach our students in real time," she says, "how to use their phonics skills *with* reading rather than isolating it altogether."

Gangi and Hassenfeld worked together to explore research on early reading instruction and the "science of reading" movement that has galvanized educators and parents across the nation. Their conclusions:

• *A narrow focus on phonics first is not supported by most research*. Rather, the evidence points to a more balanced approach where phonics instruction is coupled with reading real texts for meaning.

• *Brain research on children in labs is interesting but not definitive*. "Cognitive studies are only one piece of the larger puzzle," say Hassenfeld and Gangi, "and must be considered in the context of the messiness of the classroom." The most informative research, they believe, is conducted in actual classrooms.

• *Reading lessons must teach students to think, learn, and interpret*. "Without those skills," say the authors, "students may learn about letter-sound correspondence and how to break words into their phonemes – but not make a connection to the activity of reading. Reading is a balancing act that includes foundational skills like phonics, but also meaning making, building background knowledge, and comprehension strategies."

• *Every student is different*. Students like Maddox are not served well by the compartmentalization of phonics and reading skills, say Hassenfeld and Gangi. The strands of reading must be woven together for all students to become proficient readers.

"The Irresistible Promise and the Classroom Reality" by Ziva Hassenfeld and Kalin Gangi in *Language Arts*, July 2025 (Vol. 102, #6, pp. 337-340); Hassenfeld can be reached at zivahassenfeld@brandeis.edu.

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6. Is the LETRS Program More Effective than Other Literacy PD?

In this *Elementary School Journal* article, Brian Gearin (Lexia) and four co-authors report on their study of the effectiveness of LETRS (Language Essentials for Teaching of Reading and Spelling), a widely used PD program for literacy educators. Despite LETRS's popularity, say Gearin et al., "no peer-reviewed journal article has documented its efficacy or effectiveness" – only dissertations and technical reports focused on the first and second editions, and studies that examined LETRS in conjunction with one or more other interventions, limiting findings on its unique impact.

The logic model of LETRS is that by improving teachers' knowledge in key areas of literacy, instructional practices will get better, which will produce improvements in students' reading performance. The program is delivered over two years in two 4-unit volumes, with a total of 56 sessions:

- Volume 1: The challenge of learning to read, speech sounds in English; teaching beginning phonics, word recognition and spelling; and decoding, spelling, and word recognition;
- Volume 2: Oral language and vocabulary; reading comprehension; text-driven comprehension instruction; and the connection between reading and writing.

It is a comprehensive program encompassing the *what, why,* and *how* of reading instruction.

Gearin and his colleagues compared third graders' reading achievement on Colorado's state reading test in schools whose teachers had been trained in LETRS with schools whose teachers went through other state-approved literacy PD programs. There were two major conclusions:

• Educators in the LETRS schools improved their knowledge of instruction in word reading and spelling instruction by as much as 33 percentage points, and their knowledge of oral language, vocabulary, and reading comprehension instruction by as much as 26 percentage points.

• The reading test scores of students in LETRS schools were about the same as those of students in the comparison schools.

What explains this very disappointing (for LETRS advocates) result? The researchers have several hypotheses:

- The comparison schools were all using approved PD programs; they weren't a "business as usual" control group.

- The two groupings of schools may have differed in terms of initial educator expertise and fidelity of implementation.
- The improvements of LETRS schools' educator knowledge weren't substantial enough to translate into improved student performance.
- Instruction did improve, but not enough to show up in significantly better test scores.
- The results reflect methodological limitations, including that not all teachers in the sample were LETRS trained.

"PD plays a crucial role in the development of educators and is a potentially important mechanism and lever for improving student outcomes," conclude the researchers. "Therefore, it is essential to have a robust and well-established body of evidence on PD to inform policy and practice." Given the caveats above, they conclude, "there is a pressing need for randomized studies to expand our knowledge and inform future research and practice."

"Evaluating a Professional Development Program and Third-Grade Reading Achievement Outcomes in the Context of Colorado's READ Act" by Brian Gearin, Rajendra Chattergoon, Young-Suk Kim, Shayne Piasta, and Elizabeth Brooke in *Elementary School Journal*, December 2025 (Vol. 126, #1, pp. 280-306)

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7. Grant Opportunities for School Libraries

School Library Journal recommends four grant opportunities for librarians who want to supplement their regular budgets:

• Peggy Barber Tribute Grant from the American Library Association – applications for a $2,500 grant supporting community ties accepted through February 2, 2026.

• Penguin Random House and United for Libraries Grants for Small and Rural Libraries – grants of $500 and $1,000 will be awarded to assist Friends of Library groups or nonprofit groups that support and fundraise for libraries; submissions due by January 21, 2026.

• Will Eisner Graphic Novel Grants for Libraries – support for libraries to expand existing graphic novel collections: $2,000 for collection development, $1,000 to host a graphic novel themed event, $1,000 grant to attend the ALA annual conference, and $3,000 for Will Eisner graphic novels.

• Association of American Educators Funding – $500 teacher scholarships for conferences, workshops, and materials for professional learning communities, and $500 classroom grants for books, software, calculators, math manipulatives, art supplies, AV equipment, and lab materials.

"Financial Support Grants to Fill Budget Gaps" in *School Library Journal*, January 2026 (Vol. 72, #1, p. 10)

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8. Recommended Tech Tools

In this once-a-year *Cult of Pedagogy* feature, Jennifer Gonzalez and Marnie Diem spotlight six helpful technology tools (curated from Gonzalez's Teacher's Guide to Tech):

- Makers Making Change – integrating engaging STEM with real-world social impact;
- Bandlab – like Apple's Garage Band, helps students create musical tracks;
- Brilliant – a trove of interactive STEM problem-solving content and explanations;
- Napkin AI – turns text into eye-catching visuals, diagrams, and charts;
- Short Answer – integrates writing prompts and anonymous peer feedback into lessons;
- Retro Report – an independent newsroom with 250+ videos on past events

"6 Ed Tech Tools to Try in 2026" by Jennifer Gonzalez and Marnie Diem in *Cult of Pedagogy*, January 4, 2026; Gonzalez can be reached at gonzjenn@cultofpedagogy.com.

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If you have feedback or suggestions, please e-mail kim.marshall48@gmail.com

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 54 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 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 early Tuesday (there are 50 issues a year). Every week there's a podcast and HTML version. Artificial intelligence is not used.

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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 SmartBrief
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
Ed Magazine
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
Kappan (Phi Delta Kappan)
Knowledge Quest
Language Arts
Language Magazine
Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance)
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
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