

Marshall Memo 1035

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

May 6, 2024

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Quotes of the Week

“Teachers with comparable knowledge and experience are far more likely to agree when distinguishing an A level from a B level of performance than when distinguishing a 90 from an 89 using the percentage scale.”

Thomas Guskey (see item #3)

“I find that many students who are two or more grade levels below have rarely had the experience of independently *reading* a text.”

Heidi Anne Mesmer (see item #5)

“The brains of humans contain a mechanism that is designed to give priority to bad news.”

Daniel Kahneman, a psychologist who studied human fallibility and won the Nobel Prize for economics, died in March at age 90; his *New York Times* obituary is [here](#).

“We would all like to have a warning bell that rings loudly whenever we are about to make a serious error, but no such bell is available.”

Daniel Kahneman

“Being wrong is the only way I feel sure I’ve learned anything.”

Daniel Kahneman

“If people are failing, they look inept. If people are succeeding, they look strong and good and competent. That’s the ‘halo effect.’ Your first impression of a thing sets up your subsequent beliefs.”

Daniel Kahneman

“The effort invested in ‘getting it right’ should be commensurate with the importance of the decision.”

Daniel Kahneman

1. Getting Better at Difficult Conversations

In this *Kappan* article, Maury Grebenau says that as a young associate principal in a private school, he dreaded difficult conversations. When his head of school asked him to tell a parent that his son would not be allowed to return to school until the squabbling parents could provide a monthlong schedule of who would pick him up each day, Grebenau froze, feeling ill equipped to make the call.

When he finally dialed the number and delivered the ultimatum in a tremulous voice, the father was angry. “Do you mean to tell me that you aren’t going to let my son back into school until we get you a schedule of who is picking him up for the next month?” he thundered. Grebenau, after considering saying it was the head of school’s decision or hanging up and blaming a bad connection for the disconnect, finally said, “Yes.” After a pause, the father said, “Okay” and then hung up.

Following this trial by fire, Grebenau went through three mindshifts as he got better and better at having difficult conversations:

First was the realization that he had to get over his discomfort and step up to the plate with certain parents, colleagues, and students. “Rather than spending my time worried that people were upset with me,” he says, “or endlessly imagining how I would respond to all the emotion angry people would bring to the room, I needed to learn how to engage with upset people.” He found that if he calmly stated a reasonable position, people usually regained their composure and sometimes apologized for being strident.

Second, Grebenau noticed that people sometimes thought he was being rigid – that his mind was already made up and he was just trying to convince them of the correctness of his position. He began taking the time to understand the other person’s position before staking out his own. In one case, he said to a venting parent, “It sounds like you really have lost trust in the school,” eliciting the response, “Yes, that’s it!” after which things went much better and the issue was resolved. “The power of feeling understood completely changed the dynamics of the conversation,” says Grebenau.

Third, he learned to have face-to-face or phone conversations rather than trying to resolve contentious situations by e-mail. With people who seemed “difficult” and “unreasonable,” there were often issues beneath the surface that weren’t apparent in an initial outburst. Having a conversation and being a good listener often surfaced these concerns and helped resolve the matter. Grebenau also learned to check in regularly with the most volatile people. “Moving into a proactive space before the inevitable rough patch would emerge,” he says, “opened a pathway to communicate before things set them off.”

[“Learning to Have Difficult Conversations As a School Leader”](#) by Maury Grebenau in *Kappan*, May 2024 (Vol. 105, #8, pp. 58-59); Grebenau is at grebenau@sbcglobal.net.

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2. What Went Wrong with Teacher-Evaluation Reform

In this *Education Gadfly* article, Tim Daly analyzes the effort under the Bush and Obama administrations to reshape the way teachers are evaluated, in which he was an active participant. The core elements were evaluating teachers every year; clear and rigorous expectations; multiple measures (including student achievement); 4-3-2-1 rating scales (sometimes more levels); frequent classroom visits; and consequences (from merit pay to dismissal). At the height of this reform effort, 44 states were on board to some degree. The bad news: several recent reports have concluded there was no impact on student achievement. Why, Daly asks, did this ambitious and well-intentioned effort fail? His analysis:

- *Using value-added measures (VAM) was a mistake.* “Our technocratic tendencies did us in,” he says. “We believed that considering growth in student test scores – controlling for a host of factors – would anchor the whole evaluation process and offset the tendency of principals to be lenient. But the methodology was intelligible only to those with advanced training in math – and half of them were pretending... We should have left it as a research tool and not brought it into the assessment of individual teachers.”

- *The reforms were top-down.* Pushing for statewide legislation that mandated evaluation changes in every school “created a built-in opposition force of superintendents, boards, and school leaders who resented the burden of rolling out new systems they didn’t believe in,” says Daly. Their hearts weren’t in it, and that showed up in lackluster implementation.

- *Accountability elements freaked teachers out.* “By making dismissal of low-performing veterans a central focus of evaluation reform,” says Daly, “– especially when ratings could be based substantially on the black box of value-added scores – we sent teachers (and unions) into a frenzy and suggested that reform wasn’t about elevating the teaching profession, it was about making it more precarious.” This was a politically and psychologically unwise strategy.

- *Differences in teaching contexts were not taken into account.* Front-line educators were right to argue that uniform rubrics and rating scales didn’t acknowledge that some classrooms are much more challenging than others, says Daly, which “ended up penalizing some teachers for accepting mission-driven, high-priority assignments.”

- *Few principals used the flawed tools they were provided.* “Regardless of how principals are portrayed by unions – as vindictive despots – they are mostly the opposite,” says Daly. “They are non-confrontational, hesitant to upset or divide their teams, and not that confident in their ability to evaluate teachers in specialty subjects. They are keen to avoid inclusion on their local union’s list of despots.”

In short, Daly says, the campaign to improve teacher evaluation was too aggressive as well as being deeply flawed, leaving opponents with plenty of good arguments to make against it. The result has been the dismantling of many of the elements and cynicism about the efficacy of evaluating teachers. In addition, there's been increased backlash against standardized tests and no clear mandate to schools of education to improve the way teachers are prepared.

Then along came Covid with heated debates about when schools should reopen and, when they did, an urgent need to catch students up academically and behaviorally. "Our schools are not in a good place," he says. "Decades of hard-won progress on student learning and achievement gaps has been lost." He wishes the teacher-evaluation reforms of the last two decades had been better thought out, and is uncertain about how we can meet the significant challenges that schools face today.

[There are ways to rebuild trust: by reorienting the teacher evaluation process to focus on coaching, continuous improvement, and student learning. See my earlier [Gadfly](#) article and this [Edutopia](#) piece (with Doug Reeves). K.M.]

["Where Teacher Evaluation Went Wrong"](#) by Tim Daly in *Education Gadfly* May 3, 2024

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3. Thomas Guskey on Solving the Problem of Inconsistent Grading

In this *Kappan* article, Thomas Guskey (University of Kentucky) says the main reason for parent pushback on standards-based grading is inconsistency among teachers. Within the same school, he says, "What counts as part of the grade, what doesn't count, and how different aspects of students' performance are weighted in determining grades – all can be different."

Such variations in grading policies from classroom to classroom, says Guskey, are unfair and inequitable because:

- Some students game the system, calculating and manipulating points for good grades.
- For other students, the grading game is a mysterious puzzle they must figure out in every class, and their grades don't reflect their actual learning.
- When parents ask their children what grades they expect, kids often have no clue.

"Before standards-based or competency-based grading reforms can be implemented," says Guskey, "this inconsistency in grading must be addressed." Here are three steps he believes schools and districts need to take:

- *Reach consensus on the purpose of grading and report cards.* This involves deciding what information grades will communicate, the primary audience, and the purpose. Guskey shares these exemplars:

- Elementary: *The purpose of this report card is to describe students' learning progress to parents and families, based on our school's learning goals for each grade level. It is intended to inform parents and families about learning successes and to guide improvements when needed.*
- Middle/high: *The purpose of this report card is to communicate with parents, families, and students about the achievement of specific learning goals. It identifies students'*

current levels of performance regarding those goals, areas of strength, and areas where additional time and effort are needed.

- The American School of Paris: *The primary purpose of grading is to effectively communicate student achievement toward specific standards, at this point in time. A grade should reflect what a student knows and is able to do. Students will receive separate feedback and evaluation on their learning habits, which will not be included in the academic achievement grades.*

In the Paris school’s statement, Guskey highlights the importance of grades reporting mastery of standards, not averages (which allow early stumbles to unfairly pull down students’ grades), and separating students’ academic achievement from other areas of performance.

- *Use grading scales with 4-7 levels of performance.* Guskey believes that 100-point grading scales offer “the illusion of precision” but are actually more vulnerable to teacher subjectivity and unreliability. Researchers have found that using fewer grading levels increases inter-rater reliability and reduces teacher subjectivity and variability from class to class. “Teachers with comparable knowledge and experience,” says Guskey, “are far more likely to agree when distinguishing an A level from a B level of performance than when distinguishing a 90 from an 89 using the percentage scale. The use of clear and well-defined scoring criteria, along with a limited number of grading categories, helps ensure a shared understanding among teachers and promotes more-consistent grading practices.”

- *Separately report academic and non-academic student performance.* “Hodgepodge” grades that combine academic attainment, progress/improvement, and other areas (effort, class participation, collaboration, responsibility, initiative, organization, self-regulation, low-stakes assessments, homework) make report cards “a confusing amalgamation that is impossible to interpret clearly and accurately,” says Guskey. He advocates separate reporting of these three categories on report cards and transcripts, which produces a more-accurate picture of academic performance, progress, and other areas. What’s more, he says, it’s less work for teachers since they don’t have to calculate an amalgam of student performance in the different domains.

“These steps,” Guskey concludes, “address the greatest concerns of parents and families, facilitate better communication between school and home, and ensure greater honesty, accuracy, and equity in grading.”

[“Addressing Inconsistencies in Grading Practices”](#) by Thomas Guskey in *Kappan*, May 2024 (Vol. 105, #8, pp. 52-57); Guskey can be reached at Guskey@uky.edu. See Memo 962 for another Guskey article on grading.

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4. How to Deal with Students Who Refuse to Do Their Work

In this *Edutopia* article, Daniel Leonard says that when students won’t do assigned work, teachers often get into power struggles with what seems like obstinate and willful behavior. Better, says Leonard, to look under the hood for possible explanations – perhaps:

- *A desire for autonomy* – Kids sometimes resist being asked to do things the teacher’s way, and providing options can solve the problem – for example, third graders choosing how

they'll report on required evening reading, eighth graders given a say in formulating classroom rules, high-school students showing what they've learned at the end of a curriculum unit by a video report, an essay, a demonstration, a debate, or a dramatic presentation.

- *Fear of failure* – When students believe an assignment is too hard and trying will result in failure, they may act out – or refuse to try. When grades are involved, the stakes are higher and the chance of shutting down increases. Not grading every assignment and giving appreciative feedback counteracts these tendencies, as does specific versus global praise (*This essay is persuasive* versus *You're so smart at this*). It's also helpful if teachers are open about their own mistakes, foster a climate in which mistakes are seen as opportunities to learn, and allow re-takes when students score poorly on assessments.

- *A need for purpose and belonging* – Researchers have found that these are often predictors of student eagerness and engagement – as psychologist Geoffrey Cohen puts it, “that sense that we are part of a larger whole, that there is a kind of goodness of fit between me and my environment.” Teachers tend to overestimate how effective they are at making the goals of classroom work clear to students (*What's the point of doing this?* students ask). Linking assignments to real-world issues (sports statistics, personal finance, a community issue) can boost engagement and commitment. So does having students write about what their work means to their life purpose. Another idea: asking students at the beginning of the year to jot a list of things they would like to learn about in school.

- *Trauma* – “It's unfair to ask teachers to be therapists or doctors,” says pediatrician Nadine Burke Harris, but teachers can “deliver that daily dose of buffering care that's so important to healing.” This might be something as simple as a quick check-in every morning, breathing exercises, a “peace corner” with calming activities, cooperative projects to help isolated students bond with a few classmates, and telling troubled students that they are not to blame for their circumstances.

[“Addressing Work Refusal in the Classroom”](#) by Daniel Leonard in *Edutopia*, April 26, 2024

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5. Supporting Struggling Readers in the Upper-Elementary Grades

In this article in *The Reading Teacher*, Heidi Anne Mesmer (Virginia Tech University) channels a fourth-grade teacher's concern as she conducts a tutoring intervention with students who are reading at the first-grade level: “Are they supposed to *read* grade-level texts or am I supposed to just read it to them?” asked the teacher. “That's fine if I am supposed to read it to them, but at what point do *they* practice reading?” The teacher, like many others, is caught between two demands:

- Keeping the level of complexity high so students don't miss out on grade-level content;
- Making sure students spend time recognizing words in the text themselves so they will become fluent, accurate, and expressive readers.

“Boy, I felt her pain,” says Mesmer. Limiting below-level students to simple decodable texts may result in less frustration, but students won’t get the rich vocabulary, content knowledge, and advanced comprehension they need.

But is the time these students are spending having fourth-grade texts read to them denying them the systematic, explicit decoding and morphology instruction they need to read at higher levels? What will happen to these students when they arrive in middle school, Mesmer worries, “thinking like champs but unable to recognize words?” To solve this dilemma, she addresses four questions:

- *When to scaffold word recognition in grade-level texts (and when not to)* – If students who read below level have support from a teacher or a capable peer (pronouncing unfamiliar words and rereading), they can benefit from reading texts about two grades above their level – with two exceptions: English learners and students who haven’t mastered decoding the most common vowel graphemes. These students need to work with texts closer to their reading level.

- *Scaffolding word recognition in grade-level texts* – Students who are able to decode benefit from reading grade-level texts using three strategies:

- Repeated reading the same text across a week – The Fluency Oriented Reading Instruction (FORi) program has these steps: (a) students listen to the teacher read aloud while following along in their own text; (b) the teacher discusses the story with the class; (c) the teacher reads 2-3 sentences at a time with students repeating; (d) students read the text with a partner; (e) students read the story 1-2 times at home; (f) the entire class reads the passage together; and (g) students read the text with a partner. This approach has brought about significant gains in reading level and comprehension.
- Using text sets (usually science or social studies) with rich, advanced vocabulary and different levels of difficulty, paired with easier texts and visuals to build confidence. This approach has been effective, says Mesmer, “because a diversity of materials with the same content presented vocabulary and information repeatedly and at different levels of depth.”
- Providing words – Surprisingly, struggling readers working with texts in which they had only 80 percent comprehension (frustration level) benefited when a teacher helped with difficult words.

- *How to differentiate texts, when necessary, to ensure time-in-text* – It’s problematic, says Mesmer, when students are spending most of their reading time listening to someone else reading texts. She suggests these strategies to maximize the time students are doing their own reading:

- Block out at least 20 minutes when students can read independently after an adult has introduced a book or passage, explained challenging words, and then provides individual help. “This is not DEAR time,” says Mesmer (students reading without support, accountability, or supervision), “a practice that is not research-based.”
- Use readability formulas to make a “best guess” at books and texts that students can read on their own, and then monitor and make adjustments as needed.

- Choose books for individual students (or groups of students) based on their interests and what the class is studying, and then follow up with a discussion. “I find that many students who are two or more grade levels below have rarely had the experience of independently *reading* a text,” says Mesmer. “Many readers also have never had the experience of reading a text themselves and then discussing it.”

• *How to close decoding gaps for struggling readers* – “One of the patterns I see in schools,” she says, “a pattern that causes much concern, is a lack of on-level, systematic, accelerated phonics and morphology instruction for students who are not reading during comprehension and vocabulary lessons.” Those students may be contributing to discussions, learning new vocabulary, and demonstrating higher-level thinking, but half of the reading process isn’t taking place: they’re not recognizing words. These students need “intense, assessment-informed instruction to close decoding gaps,” says Mesmer, but it has to be different than what’s used in the primary grades. She suggests two distinct features for upper-elementary grade decoding instruction:

- Teaching students single-syllable decoding *and* dealing with words with multiple syllables and morphemes. Two successful programs for upper-elementary students teach them to try different sounds in tricky words (like *head*), use analogies (I know *long*, so I know *strong*), peel off prefixes and suffixes, look for the parts of words they know, practice vowels, blend and segment words into morphemes, and use speeded-up word reading practice.
- Upper-elementary decoders need to tackle trickier words like *these* and *instead* and words where vowel graphemes can represent more than one sound (*oo* and *ea*). Students have to learn to try different sounds and cross-check with their vocabulary to understand a word like *stomach*.

It’s commendable that many teachers “are now challenging the intellect of students with below-level decoding skills with complex text,” Mesmer concludes. “The exposure to the ideas, vocabulary, and content in these texts is pivotal for their literacy development – but so is accurate, automatic, and fluent decoding. It is essential that exposure to grade-level content during comprehension not squeeze out or replace time-in-text. Context-free, automatic word recognition cognitively frees students for the complex ideas, narratives, and concepts they must comprehend. To progress, students must practice recognizing words *themselves*. They must orthographically map words and consolidate patterns through the repeated practice of large amounts of text.”

[“Time in Text: Differentiating Instruction for Intermediate Students Struggling with Word Recognition”](#) by Heidi Anne Mesmer in *The Reading Teacher*, March/April 2024 (Vol. 77, #5, pp. 1-27); Mesmer can be reached at hamesmer@vt.edu.

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6. Teaching Writing in Middle and High Schools

In this *Journal of Educational Psychology* article, Steve Graham (University of Arizona) and nine colleagues report on their meta-analysis on teaching writing in middle and high schools. Their conclusions:

- “Currently,” say the authors, “students do little writing at school and little time is spent teaching them to write.” It’s critical that secondary teachers devote more time to explicit writing instruction. When students’ writing improves, they become better readers and thinkers, and their content knowledge increases if they are writing about substantive matters.

- Some instructional strategies work better than others, among them: help with planning, drafting, revising, and editing; writing summaries; constructing more-complex sentences; and applying grammar correctly. Some students also need focused instruction on spelling, handwriting, and keyboarding.

- As students write, they benefit from teachers’ direct support, including with inquiry and prewriting activities, goal setting, in-the-moment feedback, and opportunities for students to provide feedback to each other.

- Students’ writing proficiency is boosted by analyzing models of good writing, observing others as they write, and learning about the purposes and characteristics of different types of text.

- “Secondary students write better when using digital tools,” say the authors – word processing to compose, digital writing programs, and multimodal texts.

[“A Meta-Analysis of Writing Treatments for Students in Grades 6-12”](#) by Steve Graham, Young-Suk Kim, Yucheng Cao, Will Lee, Tamara Tate, Penelope Collins, Minkyung Cho, Youngsun Moon, Huy Quoc Chung, and Carol Booth Olson in *Journal of Educational Psychology*, October 2003 (Vol. 115, #7, pp. 1004-1027); Graham can be reached at steve.graham@asu.edu.

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7. Recommended Graphic Novels for Kids

In this *School Library Journal* feature, New York City librarian Rosemary Kiladitis features these “genre-bending” graphic novels:

- *Adora and the Distance* by Marc Bernardin, illustrated by Ariela Kristantina and Bryan Valenza, grade 6 and up
- *Jukebox* by Nidhi Chanani, grade 4-8
- *Super Boba Café* by Nidhi Chanani, grade 4 and up
- *Things in the Basement* by Ben Hatke, grade 3-5
- *Displacement* by Kiku Hughes, grade 6 and up
- *The Legend of Aunti Po* by Shing Yin Khor, grade 5-8
- *Dungeons & Dragons: Dungeon Club: Roll Call* by Molly Knox Ostertag, illustrated by Xanthe Bouma, grade 4 and up
- *Ghost Book* by Remy Lai, grade 4 and up
- *Burt’s Way Home* by John Martz, grade 3-6

- *Chunky Goes to Camp* by Yehudi Mercado, grade 4-8
- *Batcat* by Meggie Ramm, grade 3 and up
- *Doña Quixote: Rise of the Knight* by Rey Terciero, illustrated by Monica Magaña, grade 4-8
- *Red Scare* by Liam Francis Walsh, grade 4 and up
- *Bea Wolf* by Zach Weinersmith, illustrated by Boulet, grade 5 and up

“A Bit of This, a Dash of That: Genre-Bending Graphic Novels for Middle Grade Readers” by Rosemary Kiladitis in *School Library Journal*, April 2024 (Vol. 70, #4, pp. 45-48)

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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 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 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 SmartBrief
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
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 Ed (formerly Ed. Magazine)
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
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