

Marshall Memo 1107

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
October 6, 2025

In This Issue:

1. [A tribute to Jane Goodall](#)
2. [A tribute to David Berliner](#)
3. [Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey on getting the science of reading right](#)
4. [Oral assessments and exams in the age of GenAI](#)
5. [Students interview a chatbot of Jay Gatsby](#)
6. [When leaders should be transparent and what they should hold in](#)
7. [The impact of teachers with a growth mindset in Chile](#)
8. [A study of school absences in England](#)
9. [Recommended graphic novels about history](#)

Quotes of the Week

“Autonomy amplifies both strengths and weaknesses. For skilled leaders, it can unleash a virtuous cycle of stability, morale, and achievement. For less-capable ones, it risks compounded problems.”

Adam Tyner in [“Autonomy for Principals Can Work – for the Most Capable”](#) in *Education Gadfly*, October 2, 2025

“Narrowing instruction to phonics and decoding at the expense of comprehension risks producing technically proficient word callers who struggle to construct meaning.”

Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey (see item #3)

“Beware of false knowledge; it is more dangerous than ignorance.”

George Bernard Shaw (quoted in *ibid.*)

“The act of having to explain a concept aloud is a valuable learning experience in itself.”

Andrew Fenton (see item #4)

“Absences in the first year of primary school are one of the strongest predictors of later achievement.”

Jascha Dräger, Markus Klein, and Edward Sosu (see item #8)

“For bilingual students, learning to read is a journey made not on a solo bike but on a tandem bicycle, where two languages must work in coordination. This analogy underscores that language comprehension occurs not in isolation but in dynamic interaction between two linguistic systems.”

José Viana [“The Simple View of Reading As a Starting Point for Understanding Reading Development in All Learners”](#) in *The Reading League Journal*, September/October 2025 (Vol. 6, #3, pp. 11-19)

1. A Tribute to Jane Goodall

The primatologist, anthropologist, conservationist, and author Jane Goodall died October 1st at 91. Here is the *New York Times* [obituary](#) and a collection of quotes:

- *Surely we do not want to live in a world without the great apes, our closest living relatives in the animal kingdom? A world where we can no longer marvel at the magnificent flight of bald eagles or hear the howl of wolves under the moon? A world not enhanced by the sight of a grizzly bear and her cubs hunting for berries in the wilderness? What would our grandchildren think if these magical images were only to be found in books?*
- *It actually doesn't take much to be considered a difficult woman. That's why there are so many of us.*
- *Change happens by listening and then starting a dialogue with the people who are doing something we don't believe is right.*
- *We are, indeed, often cruel and evil. Nobody can deny this. We gang up on each other, we torture each other, with words as well as deeds, we fight, we kill. But we are also capable of the most noble, generous, and heroic behavior... It is these undeniable qualities of human love and compassion and self-sacrifice that give me hope for the future.*
- *You cannot go through a single day without having an impact on the world around you. What you do makes a difference, and you have to decide what kind of difference you want to make.*
- *We can have a world of peace. We can move toward a world where we live in harmony with nature. Where we live in harmony with each other. No matter what nation we come from. No matter what our religion. No matter what our culture. This is where we're moving towards.*
- *The greatest danger to our future is apathy.*
- *Only if we understand, can we care. Only if we care, we will help. Only if we help, we shall be saved.*

[Back to page one](#)

2. A Tribute to David Berliner

Educational psychologist and author David Berliner died September 26th at 88. Here is an [obituary](#) and a collection of quotes:

- *Education... is a complex, intricate endeavor that entails inputs we can't control (for instance, family wealth, parents' education, community support, and special needs of children); variables we can't easily identify or measure (such as competing school and district initiatives, classroom culture, peer influence, teacher beliefs, and principal leadership); and outputs we can neither predict nor easily measure (such as resilience, grit, practical intelligence, social intelligence, and creativity).*
- *Not much works well if teachers have things imposed on them that they don't believe in.*
- *This unfounded belief that we have superb and bad teachers, without respect to the kinds of schools they teach in and the kinds of students they teach, is an accepted part of life in contemporary America... America loves individual heroes. No complexities, no interactions. Only one good teacher is needed to fix everything.*
- *Make sure the evaluation system has no consequences for teachers associated with student test scores, but do include multiple classroom observations and an evaluation of classroom artifacts – tests, papers, projects, and the like.*
- *When the class is the unit of analysis, and student growth is the measure we use to judge teacher effectiveness, what we find is a great deal of adequacy, competency, and adeptness by teachers in response to the complexity of the classroom. And we see much less of the extraordinarily great and horribly bad of political and media myth.*
- *The people who say poverty is no excuse for low performance are now using teacher accountability as an excuse for doing nothing about poverty.*

[Back to page one](#)

3. Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey on Getting the Science of Reading Right

In this *Reading League Journal* article, Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey (San Diego State University and Health Sciences High and Middle College) say the recent science of reading movement is in danger of being implemented in ways that produce “a cascade of errors, from policy decisions to curriculum design to ineffective classroom practices.” They quote George Bernard Shaw – *Beware of false knowledge; it is more dangerous than ignorance* – and describe four factors they believe are undermining effective, evidence-based reading instruction:

- *Over-emphasis on decoding* – While phonological awareness and phonics are essential to early reading instruction, there's the risk of neglecting “equally essential components, such as language comprehension, background knowledge, and verbal reasoning,” say Fisher and Frey. “Narrowing instruction to phonics and decoding at the expense of comprehension risks producing technically proficient word callers who struggle to construct meaning.” Once students have cracked the code, there are diminishing returns from phonics.

For older students who haven't yet mastered decoding, those skills need to be backfilled, but it's also essential that kids get instruction in “academic language, syntax, and discourse-level comprehension,” say Fisher and Frey. “We are deeply concerned about the misconception that the science of reading is confined to a narrow range of foundational

skills... Rather, it should be understood as a comprehensive framework for fostering deep transferable reading abilities that are responsive to the diverse needs of learners.”

- *Seeing knowledge-building as a replacement for reading instruction* – Background knowledge is an essential component of skilled reading, say Fisher and Frey, helping students “make inferences, resolve ambiguities, and construct coherent mental models of texts.” But knowledge needs to be used in tandem with reading skills: decoding, making complex texts coherent, and understanding the words and phrases that make texts cohesive. Some students pick up these skills incidentally, but many others – including those who come to school with disadvantages – need explicit instruction.

- *Marginalizing fluency and sight words* – “While decoding and phonemic awareness have rightfully received substantial attention in recent reading reforms,” say Fisher and Frey, “fluency is sometimes treated as a secondary concern, or mistakenly conflated with mere reading speed.” But fluency – reading that is accurate, automatic, and expressive – “is a crucial bridge between decoding and comprehension,” they say, “and, for older students, is associated with college readiness. When students read fluently, they are more likely to allocate cognitive resources to meaning making rather than word recognition.”

Just getting students to read aloud to one another – a common classroom practice – is not enough. The teacher needs to be there to guide, correct errors, and diagnose, say Fisher and Frey. For older students, they recommend a 10-minute-a-day, 5-day routine with one passage, with the teacher modeling fluent reading, students marking up the text, practicing chorally, and then being assessed individually.

As for sight words, it’s a misconception that recognizing words by sight negates phonics instruction, say Fisher and Frey. Unknown words become sight words “not through visual memorization but through repeated decoding that bonds the spelling, pronunciation, and meaning in memory. In other words, sight word recognition is the result of successful phonics instruction and repeated exposure.” If students are plodding along with limited sight words and poor fluency, they “will remain in a state of cognitive overload that hinders comprehension.”

There’s also an equity dimension: “Neglecting fluency instruction, including the development of a robust sight word vocabulary, disproportionately affects struggling readers,” say Fisher and Frey. “Instruction must therefore include structured, research-based fluency practices, including repeated readings and modeled oral reading, while embracing the importance of sight word acquisition as a natural and necessary outcome of skilled decoding.”

- *Overlooking motivation and engagement* – These two “are central to how learners interact with texts and persist in the face of difficulty,” say Fisher and Frey. “When students are motivated, they read more frequently, which in turn leads to greater exposure to vocabulary and syntactic structures that are crucial to comprehension development.” Students’ sense of agency is an essential ingredient, and it develops when teachers honor student voice and decision-making, foster authentic reading experiences, include choice, and respect the cultural and linguistic backgrounds that students bring to the classroom.

The quality of curriculum materials plays a big part, add Fisher and Frey: “Programs that narrowly script instruction or constrain teacher decision-making risk alienating both

educators and learners. The marginalization of motivation within reading science discourse is not a neutral omission; it is a threat to the comprehensive development of reading competence.”

Many consultants and curriculum publishers label everything they do as “science of reading,” say Fisher and Frey. Front-line educators need to be critical consumers, “familiar with the research and willing to pose questions. Further, as a field, we must engage in public scholarship that corrects misconceptions. Only by honoring the full complexity of reading at the cognitive, linguistic, social, and motivational levels can the science of reading fulfill its promise for all learners.”

[“Is the Science of Reading Under Threat?”](#) by Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey in *The Reading League Journal*, September/October 2025 (Vol. 6, #3, pp. 57-63); the authors can be reached at dfisher@sdsu.edu and nfrey@sdsu.edu.

[Back to page one](#)

4. Oral Assessments and Exams in the Age of GenAI

In this article in *Educational Researcher*, Andrea Fenton (Monash University/Melbourne) says that with student access to ChatGPT and other large language models, testing high-school and college students in person has real advantages. Of course, oral exams aren’t new; they were common in ancient Greece, and in the 1500s, all exams at Oxford and Cambridge were *viva voce* – “by the living voice.” A number of European high schools and universities still use them; high-school students in Norway are required to sit for at least one oral exam in their final year.

Oral exams are having something of a renaissance, says Fenton, “with educators looking to preserve the academic integrity of their units and courses and to ensure their students not only achieve their learning objectives but also can actually do things we say they can.” She lists these advantages:

- *Personalized* – There’s a greater sense of connection and interaction between teacher and student, especially with online courses.

- *Authentic* – Oral assessments mirror real-life workplace challenges and job interviews. They can help students “develop their professional identity, their communication skills, and their employability,” says Fenton. “In a world where many tasks can now be completed by AI, the ability to communicate ideas and information verbally is not only an authentic assessment task, it may also be vital to gaining and keeping a job.”

- *Work ready* – Because they are verbal, oral assessments test comprehension more than memorization, giving teachers a deeper understanding of a student’s conceptual grasp of the subject matter and their ability to creatively solve problems on the spot. “The act of having to explain a concept aloud,” says Fenton, “is a valuable learning experience in itself.”

- *Depth of knowledge and skills* – Students must be able to think on their feet, remember and apply knowledge, and demonstrate how concepts link to each other and apply in real-life situations. Students often say that oral assessments are more demanding than written exams, which pushes them to improve their study strategies.

- Feedback for teachers – During oral assessments, it can become evident if there are student misconceptions that haven't been addressed, and gaps in the curriculum and pedagogy.
- Enjoyment and satisfaction – Despite the fact that students are more anxious about oral exams, many report that they are more enjoyable, even fun, and given a choice, they actually prefer them.
- Differentiation – Teachers can prompt and encourage students who are struggling and introduce additional challenges for students who are doing well (following specific guidelines).
- Higher grades – Studies have found that with oral exams, students perform better than they do with written tests, show greater gains, and retain knowledge and skills better over time.
- Academic integrity – Oral assessments reduce the potential for cheating, plagiarism, and unauthorized use of GenAI, helping teachers see if students truly possess the knowledge and skills being assessed.

Educators often raise three concerns about oral exams, says Fenton: the time they take, student anxiety, and ground rules for prompting students. On the first, she says it's important to factor in the time it takes to grade traditional assessments, compared to the quicker on-the-spot process involved in oral exams. Some practical recommendations for teachers planning to use oral assessments:

- Have clear guidelines on assessment criteria, procedures, and format, including whether exams are open or closed book.
- Implement a training or shadowing program for novice staff.
- Create a bank of questions for each learning objective so each student can be presented with a different set of questions.
- Oral assessments shouldn't take more than 20 minutes.
- Create a rubric based on different levels of student mastery of what's being assessed.
- Set clear guidelines for prompting, including neutrality (neither discouraging nor reassuring the student), consistency (the same approach for all), transparency (students know what to expect), and monitoring (ongoing reflection by assessors).
- Use shared online spreadsheets for scheduling to minimize administrative effort.
- Reduce student anxiety by clarifying expectations and issue a set of frequently asked questions with answers.
- Make sure students know what to expect and feel safe in the exam format.
- Use an online booking system that sends reminders to students.
- With large courses, ensure the correct identification of each student.
- When assessing students online, send clear instructions – for example, students being in the waiting room 10 minutes prior to the exam.

[“Reconsidering the Use of Oral Exams and Assessments: An Old Way to Move Into a New Future”](#) by Andrea Fenton in *Educational Researcher*, October 2025 (Vol. 54, #7, pp. 430-436); Fenton can be reached at andrea.fenton@monash.edu.

[Back to page one](#)

5. Students Interview a Chatbot of Jay Gatsby

In this article in *EduPathways*, Mike Kentz says the advent of AI means teachers are “living through a moment that demands both humility and experimentation.” Assigning the traditional character analysis essay is vulnerable to students using GenAI to submit a sophisticated literary analysis that doesn’t reflect real understanding. “But instead of banning AI, or returning to handwritten assessments,” says Kentz, “what if we could redesign the task entirely?” He describes a five-lesson sequence in which students interviewed a chatbot of Jay Gatsby to do character analysis.

- Day 1 and 2 – Having read *The Great Gatsby*, students prepared open-ended interview questions to probe Gatsby’s motivations and contradictions – the “unanswered questions” of the novel – and practiced building on responses, pivoting when necessary, and pressing when the chatbot is evasive or inconsistent.

- Day 3 – Students engaged in 10-14 conversational turns with the chatbot, treating it as a live interview subject. The goal was to understand Gatsby through thoughtful questions and follow-ups.

- Day 4-5 – Students annotated a transcript of their interview, identifying moments when the chatbot deflected, contradicted itself, or revealed limitations. Students then wrote a reflective essay comparing the chatbot’s responses with their understanding of the novel.

Kentz says the level of student engagement was “notably high” throughout this experiment. “The real-time nature of the interview created genuine intellectual pressure – students couldn’t simply retrieve pre-written analysis; they had to think on their feet. Many reported that the experience helped them discover gaps in their character understanding that traditional essay prompts hadn’t revealed.” Kentz attributes this to several design features of the unit:

- Treating the chatbot as a subject put students in the analytical driver’s seat.
- Students were asked to probe in uncharted territory: Gatsby’s missing years, deepest motivations, capacity for self-reflection.
- There were several authentic assessment layers as students prepared questions, engaged “live” with the chatbot, and analyzed the transcript.
- The transcripts were rich texts for analysis.
- Students didn’t just use GenAI; the reflective essay asked them to critically evaluate its limitations.
- The assessment proved resistant to AI shortcuts, especially in the live interview.

[“Redesigning Literary Assessment for the AI Age”](#) by Mike Kentz in *EduPathways*, September 8, 2025

[Back to page one](#)

6. When Leaders Should Be Transparent and What They Should Hold In

“Say what matters. Don’t vent,” advises Dan Rockwell in *Leadership Freak*. Here are some leadership actions that can build trust, clarity, and momentum:

- Clear expectations

- Timely feedback
- Recognition and appreciation
- The *why* behind decisions
- Information to help people succeed
- Vision and growth opportunities
- Support in hard times

But there are things leaders shouldn't be transparent about:

- Personal grudges
- Opinions on political hot topics
- Unfiltered frustrations
- Leadership hardships
- Contempt for irritating people or tasks

In short, Rockwell advises, "Use your voice to build, not to burden." Here are ten questions to help decide whether to share an idea or take an action. Ask yourself, How will this...

- Serve others?
- Inspire confidence?
- Create clarity?
- Enable action?
- Build up or tear down?
- Inspire confidence?
- Help solve a problem?
- Bring people together?
- Encourage growth?
- Show respect?

["Transparency Without Regret"](#) by Dan Rockwell in *Leadership Freak*, October 2, 2025; Rockwell can be reached at dan@leadershipfreak.com.

[Back to page one](#)

7. The Impact of Teachers with a Growth Mindset in Chile

In this article in *Educational Researcher*, Susana Claro and Verónica Cabezas (Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile), Valentina Paredes (Universidad de Chile), and Gabriel Cruz (University of Maryland/College Park) report on their study of whether teachers having a growth mindset (believing that intelligence is malleable) affected their students' achievement. They analyzed data from 292,960 eighth and tenth graders and 26,636 teachers in Chile.

The researchers found that students assigned to teachers with a growth mindset did better than a control group. The effect size was comparable to having a teacher with more than a year's teaching experience versus a teacher with no experience. The researchers suggest that the positive impact of growth-mindset teachers happened indirectly: having a growth mindset influences teachers' pedagogical practices, including better feedback to students and

continuous improvement in teaching methods. It doesn't appear that growth-mindset teachers in the study directly affected students' mindsets about learning.

The study also found that the positive effect on student learning was most pronounced with students from lower-income families; there was no effect with students from wealthier families. However, lower-income schools tended to have more teachers with a fixed mindset, while schools in wealthier communities had more teachers with a growth mindset. This points to the need for professional development aimed at shifting the beliefs and practices of fixed-mindset teachers.

["Do Students Improve Their Academic Achievement When Assigned to a Growth Mindset Teacher?"](#) by Susana Claro, Valentina Paredes, Gabriel Cruz, and Verónica Cabezas in *Educational Researcher*, October 2025 (Vol. 54, #7, pp. 383-395); Claro can be reached at sclarol@uc.cl.

[Back to page one](#)

8. A Study of Student School Absences in England

In *American Educational Research Journal*, Jascha Dräger (German Institute for Economic Research), Markus Klein (University of Strathclyde), and Edward Sosu (University of Glasgow) report on their study of thousands of student school absences in England between 2006 and 2017. Their findings:

- Absences at all levels of schooling are detrimental to students' academic achievement.
- Absences at transition points (years 1 and 6), and in secondary schools (from years 6 to 10) were the most detrimental.
- "Absences in the first year of primary school are one of the strongest predictors of later achievement," say the authors.
- Whether absences were authorized or unauthorized made no difference to their impact on achievement.

The researchers say their findings have the following policy implications:

- Schools should spot absence patterns early, figure out the causes, and intervene.
- Schools should be especially attentive to attendance problems in transition years.
- Schools should pay as much attention to excused as they do to unexcused absences, working to minimize all absences.

"Does the Impact of Pupil Absences Depend on Their Timing?" by Jascha Dräger, Markus Klein, and Edward Sosu in *American Educational Research Journal*, October 2025 (Vol. 62, #5, pp. 872-908); Dräger can be reached at jdraeger@diw.de.

[Back to page one](#)

9. Recommended Graphic Novels About History

In *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, Jennifer Smith (Texas Christian University) and Marla Robertson (Utah State University) recommend using historical graphic novels (fiction and nonfiction) to supplement social studies content. They suggest drawing students'

attention to the front and back matter and the way authors use textual and visual features, including color, typography, images, thought balloons, sidebars, graphs, and charts. Smith and Robertson list these examples of graphic novels on historical topics:

The American Revolution:

- *One Dead Spy* by Nathan Hale, grade 3-8
- *Lafayette!* by Nathan Hale, grade 5-8

The Civil War:

- *Big Bad Ironclad!* by Nathan Hale, grade 5-8
- *The Underground Abductor* by Nathan Hale, grade 3-8

Exploration and Westward Expansion:

- *Donner Dinner Party* by Nathan Hale, grade 3-8
- *Major Impossible: A Grand Canyon Tale* by Nathan Hale, grade 5-8

The Spanish Flu/The Flu of 1918:

- *Fever Year: The Killer Flu of 1918* by Don Brown, grade 5-12
- *Gemma and the Great Flu: A 1918 Flu Pandemic Graphic Novel* by Juliet Gilbert, illustrated by Dan Freitas, grade 3-6

World War I:

- *Above the Trenches: A World War I Flying Ace Tale* by Nathan Hale, grade 5-8
- *Treaties, Trenches, Mud, and Blood: A World War I Tale* by Nathan Hale, grade 5-8

World War II:

- *Raid of No Return: A World War II Tale of the Doolittle Raid* by Nathan Hale, gr. 5-8
- *Faithful Spy: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Plot to Kill Hitler* by John Hendrix, gr. 5-12

The Holocaust:

- *Hidden: A Child's Story of the Holocaust* by Loic Dauvillier, illustrated by Marc Lizano, grade 1-6
- *Run and Hide: How Jewish Youth Escaped the Holocaust* by Don Brown, grade 7-12

U.S. Disasters/Tragedies:

- *Drowned City: Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans* by Don Brown, grade 5-12
- *In the Shadow of the Fallen Towers: The Seconds, Minutes, Hours, Days, Weeks, and Years After the 9/11 Attacks* by Don Brown, grade 7-12

Immigration and Refugees:

- *The Unwanted Stories of Syrian Refugees* by Don Brown, grade 9-12
- *When Stars Are Scattered* by Victoria Jamieson and Omar Mohamed, grade 3-12

[“Historical Graphic Novels: Three Concepts to Highlight for Comprehension of Historical Information”](#) by Jennifer Smith and Marla Robertson in *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, September/October 2025 (Vol. 38, #1, pp. 21-27); the authors can be reached at jennifer.m.smith@tcu.edu and marla.robertson@usu.edu.

[Back to page one](#)

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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 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