

Marshall Memo 1081

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
March 31, 2025

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Quotes of the Week

“The person doing the learning is the person doing the work.”

Jeremy Rentz, quoted in [“Tired of Awkward Silences? Upgrade Your Think-Pair-Share”](#) by Ashley Harvey in *Faculty Focus*, March 10, 2025

“Too many teachers and principals have supposed that asking questions like the ones on their state tests will lead to higher reading comprehension scores, and despite the research, they don't want to be convinced otherwise.”

Timothy Shanahan (see item #2)

“Kids should be grappling with books they cannot read well, and instruction should help transform those into something comprehensible.”

Timothy Shanahan (*ibid.*)

“Trauma has unfortunately become a buzzword that is used easily in conversations without a complete understanding of its complexities.”

Amber Howard (see item #4)

“Sometimes the most effective tool in our communication arsenal isn't a keyboard, it's our voice.”

Michael Gaskell (see item #6)

“Good ideas are not adopted automatically. They must be driven into practice with courageous patience.”

Hyman Rickover

1. Emily Hanford on Beat-the-Odds Schools in Ohio

In the latest series of the “Sold a Story” podcasts on early reading instruction, journalist Emily Hanford (American Public Media) describes her visit to the Steubenville, Ohio public schools. She chose this district because, despite being in an economically depressed, low-income area, its students have some of the best reading achievement in the state. A recent study found that kids in Steubenville were more than two grade levels ahead of students in U.S. schools with similar levels of poverty. Hanford reports on what she observed:

- Teachers attend to students’ basic needs, providing socks, sweatshirts, and sneakers.
- Teachers have high expectations for students and don’t make excuses for poverty.
- There’s been little turnover in teachers and administrators over the years, and many of the district’s educators grew up in the community.
- Nearly 80 percent of students attend preschool, which is free for the poorest families.
- Preschool teachers work on oral language and vocabulary and coach students on speaking in full sentences.
- In kindergarten, students learn their letters and also the *sounds* each letter makes as they look at letter cards.
- In first grade there’s systematic, whole-class phonics instruction, teaching students how to decode and sound out unfamiliar words.
- Students do lots of writing integrated with reading instruction.
- There’s an emphasis on students reading with expression and making sense of what they read and write.
- In third grade classes, Hanford saw cooperative learning, students teaching each other, and lots of time practicing reading.
- Through the elementary grades, all teachers teach reading, including in music, art, science, and physical education classes.
- In the 90-minute morning literacy block, students are grouped by their reading level.
- The literacy coach has detailed information on students’ reading levels and a plan to accelerate students who are not on grade level.
- A cadre of trained tutors works one-on-one with students who are behind.
- By fifth grade, all students are reading on grade level.
- The school closely monitors attendance, contacts families immediately when students are absent, and publicly recognizes classes with the best attendance.
- The school has been implementing Success for All, a schoolwide reform program, for 25 years; it includes many of the elements described above, as well as teacher training.

“Teaching kids to read is about more than just a program,” says Hanford, though she gives Success for All the lion’s share of credit for Steubenville’s remarkable track record.

Hanford goes on to describe how Success for All was developed by Robert Slavin and Nancy Madden in the 1980s, its research track record, SFA’s up-and-down status during various literacy initiatives, and how the program ended up not being on Ohio’s 2023 list of approved literacy programs – which meant that Steubenville would have to stop using a program that was a key driver of its success. Why wasn’t SFA on the list? Because it hadn’t been rated by EdReports, and Ohio looked at those ratings to decide which literacy programs to recommend.

After some vigorous lobbying, Ohio was persuaded to add Success for All to its approved literacy programs, so Steubenville can continue to use SFA. Hanford also reports that EdReports has begun to include foundational literacy skills in its rating criteria.

“Sold a Story” by Emily Hanford, American Public Media: [Episode 11: The Outlier](#), February 20, 2025; [Episode 12: The Evidence](#), February 27, 2025; and [Episode 13: The List](#), March 6, 2025; see Memo 997 for a collection of articles on the early literacy debate.

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2. Timothy Shanahan on Teaching Reading Comprehension

In this two-part online article, Timothy Shanahan (University of Illinois/Chicago) says too many lessons on reading comprehension just teach students vocabulary and test them on passages they’ve read, which isn’t the best way to prepare them to tackle new material. Shanahan suggests a better goal: “Teaching reading comprehension means improving students’ abilities to read other texts – on their own – with greater understanding... If the aim isn’t to alter reading behaviors for future texts, then it isn’t comprehension instruction. Reading practice is not enough.” Shanahan suggests six key ingredients in effective comprehension teaching:

- *Quantity* – He believes students need two hours of reading/writing/ spelling/language instruction a day, with 30 minutes devoted to comprehension. And the comprehension segment needs to be much more than what he calls the “quiz show.”

- *Substantive, challenging texts* – Good comprehension instruction consists of teachers guiding students through a shared text – narrative, expository, argumentative, literary – highlighting the passage’s content, rhetorical structures, and text conventions. Shanahan strongly disagrees with the idea that comprehension lessons should use material at students’ instructional level – what they can read with 75-89 percent comprehension with no teacher support. “That’s just the opposite of what’s needed,” he says. “Kids should be grappling with books they cannot read well, and instruction should help transform those into something comprehensible.” Part of that is helping students deconstruct complex sentences – pronouns, synonyms, conjunctions – and track ideas across a text.

- *Language comprehension* – Shanahan disagrees with pre-teaching words that are defined explicitly in the passage or that students can figure out from context clues, morphology, or using a dictionary as they read. “Pre-teaching encourages kids to ignore the text,” he says. “Telling those word meanings may discourage the use of those essential tools

and won't teach students how to use them." In addition, new vocabulary that's worth remembering, he says, "needs to be reviewed frequently, and kids need to be induced to use these words in their talking and writing."

- *Knowledge development* – "Research shows that reading comprehension depends on knowledge," says Shanahan. "The knowledge a reader brings to a text can reduce the cognitive load required to comprehend, it can be the source of inferences, and it can help with long-term recall of the information gained from the text." This suggests that comprehension texts should be knowledge-rich and informative, he says – although building knowledge is not the main purpose of reading comprehension instruction.

- *Executive function* – As students wrestle with difficult texts, they need explicit instruction on maintaining focus, monitoring their understanding, recognizing when their mind is wandering, and making sense of the content. "There is an extensive body of research," says Shanahan, "that shows that a small amount of this kind of teaching and guidance can have powerful impacts on comprehension and learning from text."

- *Questioning and answering* – "Too many teachers and principals have supposed that asking questions like the ones on their state tests will lead to higher reading comprehension scores," says Shanahan, "and despite the research, they don't want to be convinced otherwise." The problem with this strategy is that it doesn't generalize; drilling students on main idea questions doesn't teach them how to find the main idea of a passage.

Much better to ask questions about clues to a character's motivations, the links between seemingly unrelated events, figuring out the meaning of unfamiliar words, and making meaning of complex sentences. These aren't "quiz show" questions; they're at the heart of good comprehension instruction, and will give students skills that will make them better comprehenders with their future reading.

"Are We Teaching Reading Comprehension? [Part I](#) and [Part II](#)" by Timothy Shanahan in *Shanahan on Literacy*, March 15 and 29, 2025; Shanahan is at shanahan@uic.edu.

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3. Common Problems When Students Get Feedback from Their Teachers

In this *Grading for Growth* article, mathematics professor Sarah Hanusch (SUNY Oswego) says many students aren't making good use of the feedback their teachers give them. Here are the four problems she and her collaborators found when they interviewed students:

- *Problem #1: Students don't have time to use the feedback.* This is especially true when teachers hand back corrected work at the beginning of a class but give students only a few minutes to look it over. What happens is that students look at the grade, put the paper away, and it never again sees the light of day. An obvious solution: give students time to look over their work and provide incentives to learn from the feedback through revision and second attempts.

- *Problem #2: Students don't understand the feedback.* This can happen when the teacher assumes a student will know the next step or where to find a piece of information, but

the student actually doesn't. It's also possible that the teacher's feedback is too cryptic for the student to understand what needs to be fixed. The solution: don't make assumptions, give clear and detailed feedback that any student can use, and explain *why* the work is correct or incorrect. A rubric can be a good way to convey expectations and show what was done well in addition to what needs improvement.

- *Problem #3: Students can't apply the feedback.* "We tend to only provide students 'feed-back,' but they also need 'feed-forward' if they are to actually apply the feedback," says Hanusch. "Feed-forward is defined as answering the question, 'What activities need to be undertaken to make better progress?' Many students need to be told specifically how their feedback applies to new tasks, and what they need to do on those new tasks."

- *Problem #4: We may not apply feedback equitably.* Teachers might unconsciously decide to give students the benefit of the doubt based on their past performance. For example, a teacher might decide that a "weaker" student who turned in a good paper had copied from a classmate, while believing that a "stronger" student submitted their own work. "Ultimately," says Hanusch, "this means we grade *the student*, not the work itself." What we don't know, she says, is whether "there are differences between who does and does not get the benefit of the doubt along racial, economic, gender, or any other type of category... We need to be aware of our biases and the potential for our feedback to be swayed by those biases."

Giving more-detailed feedback takes more time, Hanusch acknowledges, and she suggests using technology or recording feedback videos as a solution, talking to students as work is handed back, and creating whole-class mini-lectures when there's a pattern of errors.

["Improving the Feedback Given to Students"](#) by Sarah Hanusch in *Grading for Growth*, March 24, 2025; Hanusch can be reached at sarah.hanusch@oswego.edu.

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4. Secondary Trauma as Teachers Work with Traumatized Students

"Trauma has unfortunately become a buzzword that is used easily in conversations without a complete understanding of its complexities," says Amber Howard (Missouri State University) in *The Educational Forum* – for example, the same word used to describe the feelings of a Hollywood star losing her luggage and a soldier who lost a close friend in combat. Howard studied the way students' truly traumatic experiences affect educators, using interviews and surveys and drawing on her twelve years teaching in K-12 schools.

"When students experience trauma outside of school," she says, "those experiences enter their classrooms with them because they impact the wiring of a child's brain." Empathetic teachers and administrators can be deeply affected by what students are going through, and terms like "compassion fatigue" and "burnout" don't capture what these adults are experiencing. Secondary trauma has been described in police officers, mental health professionals, rescue workers, doctors and nurses, and therapists, but there is little research on the phenomenon in schools – or preparation of educators for what they may experience.

Here are some of the effects of secondary trauma revealed in Howard’s interviews and surveys of Missouri teachers:

- Feeling physically and emotionally drained;
- Emotional fatigue and numbness;
- Stress, intrusive thoughts, and avoidance of reminders of students’ trauma;
- Lingering effects of emotional encounters;
- Constant worry and emotional investment beyond school hours;
- A blurred boundary between work and personal life;
- Strained personal relationships as teachers brought their emotions home;
- A sense of responsibility and lack of systemic support;
- Diminished job satisfaction;
- Believing they were ill-equipped to deal with students’ trauma.

“We feel helpless which stresses us out,” said one teacher, “and students sense this.”

How do educators deal with this welter of emotions? Howard’s interviews and survey data identified these strategies:

- Seeking support from colleagues and friends;
- Setting boundaries and prioritizing personal time;
- Relying on personal faith and spirituality;
- Engaging in physical activity and practicing mindfulness;
- Recognizing limitations and seeking professional help.

“While these strategies offer valuable insights into how teachers navigate the emotional challenges of their profession,” Howard concludes, “teachers also underscored the need for greater systemic support, including easier access to mental health services, reduced workloads, and a cultural shift that normalizes and encourages self-care practices among educators. Many teachers caveated sharing about how they practice self-care with qualifying statements such as, ‘If I have time...’ or ‘What I would like to do is...’ Teachers also identified a spectrum of self-care from healthy practices to unhealthy practices... Several teachers shared about this struggle of making sure their self-care practices did not become obsessions or addictions.”

“[What Teachers Take Home: Stories of Secondary Trauma from PreK-12th Grade Teachers](#)” by Amber Howard in *The Educational Forum*, April-June 2025 (Vol. 89, #2, pp. 152-168); Howard can be reached at AmberHoward@MissouriState.edu.

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5. When a Student Is in Trouble, Effective Tactics for Calling Home

In this *Edutopia* article, former teacher and PD specialist Liz Capone has these suggestions when calling home about a disciplinary incident:

- *Start with reassurance.* When a parent or guardian sees a call coming from school, their first thought is that the child was hurt. Capone suggests saying right up front that the child is safe. This heads off the parent’s worst-case fears and communicates that the educator is approaching the conversation “from a point of care.”

- *Use nouns and verbs, not adjectives.* Adjectives (*disrespectful, disruptive*) tend to be subjective and can be inflammatory, while nouns and verbs (*Ava was watching videos on her phone during class*) convey objective information and make it less likely that the conversation will go south.

- *Don't ask the parent to "talk to" the student.* Saying that implies that the parent hasn't already talked to their child about appropriate behavior in school, which comes across as judging their parenting. "It is a given that a parent or guardian would speak to their child about a major incident involving them at school," says Capone. "Your only job is to let them know this happened."

- *Stay focused on the incident.* This is not the time for a general behavioral assessment, questions about what's going on at home, on possible consequences for the infraction (like not going on a field trip). For a parent learning about an incident for the first time, it's best to stick to the facts and keep the call short.

- *Try to add one positive note about the student.* "Reference a prior example of when the student did make a better choice," says Capone, "so the parent or guardian knows this is not the be-all and end-all on how you view their child" – perhaps saying that what happened is out of character for this child.

- *End the call with a thank you.* One possible approach: *I thought you would want to know this as soon as possible, and I really appreciate your taking my call* – which may very well be followed by, *No, thank you for calling!*

["6 Tips to Make Difficult Phone Calls Home More Manageable"](#) by Liz Capone in *Edutopia*, February 21, 2025

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6. The Power and Wisdom of Face-to-Face Connections

"Sometimes the most effective tool in our communication arsenal isn't a keyboard, it's our voice," says New Jersey principal Michael Gaskell in *SmartBrief*. "While digital communication has its place, it often falls short, especially when clarity and understanding are needed in sensitive and sensible situations... Words on a screen camouflage tone, inflection, and body language, which can all be easily misinterpreted." He cites studies showing that digital communication is only seven percent as effective as face-to-face dialogue.

E-mail exchanges have great potential to go sideways – a parent taking offense at perceived disrespect or a teacher misinterpreting what seemed like a straightforward message. What's more, getting caught up in an e-mail back-and-forth is highly inefficient, says Gaskell. Pick up the phone or catch the person in the hallway, deal with the issue directly, or schedule a Zoom chat. "While it might seem like adding another item to your agenda," he says, "a well-structured interaction can *save* you time in the long run by addressing the issue comprehensively and preventing future misunderstandings."

What about that lengthy e-mail you receive at the end of the school day, within which is buried one important piece of information? Gaskell says he uses a chatbot to summarize it and find what matters, then he picks up the phone and deals with the person directly. This reduces

his stress level, saves time, and builds trust and relationships, with direct benefits to teaching and learning. His key points:

- Recognize the limitations of digital channels; nuance and emotion get lost.
- Prioritize dialogue for important and sensitive topics, where clarity counts.
- Don't be afraid to pick up the phone, which is often a real time-saver.
- Embrace the potential of direct interactions to build collaboration.
- Model effective communication, showing the value of respectful and thoughtful dialogue.

“By prioritizing dialogue,” Gaskell concludes, “we can build stronger relationships, foster deeper understanding, and ultimately create a more positive and productive learning environment for everyone.”

[“Stop Typing, Start Talking: Why Dialogue Beats Digital Communication”](#) by Michael Gaskell in *SmartBrief*, March 18, 2025

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7. Recognizing and Dealing with Toxic Behaviors

In *Leadership Freak*, Dan Rockwell says even one “toxic behavior” can poison a team and undermine otherwise good leadership. Here’s his list of dysfunctional leadership traits:

- Rushing around with your hair on fire
- Gossiping and shading the truth
- Tolerating high performers who act like jerks
- Failing to deal with poor performance
- Making self-serving decisions
- Avoiding tough issues
- Giving yourself special privileges
- Ignoring morale
- Throwing people into situations without preparation
- Pushing, pushing, pushing
- Overmanaging
- Promising more than you deliver

A leader’s first step is identifying problem areas, says Rockwell. His suggestions: (a) Zero in on behaviors that repeatedly cause tension, resistance, and disengagement; (b) Seek feedback from trusted colleagues, mentors, or team members, asking what’s holding them back; (c) Notice situations where you consistently feel frustrated or where others react defensively; (d) Pay attention to criticisms you quickly dismiss; and (e) Do a gut check on times when you feel uncomfortable, stressed, or defensive.

[“12 Toxic Behaviors to Avoid at All Cost”](#) by Dan Rockwell in *Leadership Freak*, March 24, 2025; Rockwell can be reached at dan@leadershipfreak.com.

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8. Jennifer Gonzalez on the Instructional Effect of Teachers' Gestures

In this *Cult of Pedagogy* Edutip, Jennifer Gonzalez cites research on the power of teachers' gestures to improve students' understanding and recall – and teachers' own recall of information. There are four types of gestures:

- Iconic – representing something physical, like tracing the shape of a circle;
- Metaphoric – representing an abstract idea, like a fist showing strength;
- Deictic – pointing at what's being talked about;
- Beat – emphasizing speech, like making karate chops while saying important words.

While all four types of gestures can improve learning, the first two have the strongest impact because they have a semantic relationship to what they're emphasizing. Gonzalez suggests making a point of incorporating gestures – perhaps working with students to create specific movements that you and the class will use to represent important curriculum content.

[“Edutip 28: Add Gestures to Strengthen Learning”](#) by Jennifer Gonzalez in *Cult of Pedagogy*, March 23, 2025; Gonzalez can be reached at gonzjenn@cultofpedagogy.com.

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9. A Study of Indiana's Grade 3 Retention Policy

“Grade retention is a potent but highly disruptive education intervention,” say NaYoung Hwang (University of New Hampshire) and Cory Koedel (University of Missouri) in *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*. “Supporters of grade retention policies argue they provide students with the opportunity to master skills that are essential for learning in subsequent years, while opponents question the value of the extra time and emphasize the potential for negative social impacts.”

In this article, Hwang and Koedel report on their study of 2011-2017 data to assess the long-range impact of Indiana's policy of retaining third graders who didn't meet ELA and mathematics benchmarks. The bottom line: significant positive short- and medium-term effects on student achievement in math and English language arts, with no negative impact on discipline and attendance. The benefits continued for the five years of the study.

Hwang and Koedel conclude that retention “is a promising intervention for students who are struggling academically early in their schooling careers. In the context of the larger literature, our results fit with an emerging theme that timing greatly affects the impacts of grade retention. Retention policies in later grades – for example, in middle school – mostly have negative impacts on a variety of student outcomes, whereas retention policies in earlier grades tend to be beneficial, albeit with some exceptions.”

[“Helping or Hurting: The Effects of Retention in the Third Grade on Student Outcomes”](#) by NaYoung Hwang and Cory Koedel in *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, March 2025 (Vol. 47, #1, pp. 65-88); Hwang can be reached at nhwang.edu@gmail.com.

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10. Recommended Multicultural Children’s Books

In *The Reading Teacher*, Roberta Price Gardner and Allison Briceño recommend these “culturally rich” books (click the link below for cover images and brief synopses).

- *Big* by Vashti Harrison
- *Sankofa: A Culinary Story of Resilience and Belonging* by Eric Adjepong, illustrated by Lala Watkins
- *Spanish Is the Language of My Family* by Michael Genhart, illustrated by John Parra
- *Plátanos Are Love* by Alyssa Reynoso-Morrist, illustrated by Mariyah Rahman
- *Indigenous Ingenuity: A Celebration of Traditional North American Knowledge* by Deidre Havrelock and Edward Kay, illustrated by Kalila Fuller
- *Forever Cousins* by Lauren Goodluck, illustrated by Jonathan Nelson

[“The Reading Teacher’s Children’s Literature Review Column”](#) by Roberta Price Gardner and Allison Briceño in *The Reading Teacher*, February 25, 2025 (Vol. 78, #5, pp. 1-15); Briceño can be reached at allison.briceno@sjsu.edu.

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11. Short Item:

A Physical Timeline of the Universe – This dramatic [video](#) by Wylie Overstreet and Alex Gorosh vividly portrays vast stretches of time.

“To Scale: Time” by Wylie Overstreet and Alex Gorosh, YouTube, 2024

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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