

Marshall Memo 865

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
December 7, 2020

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Quotes of the Week

“Covid-19 has blown the doors off our schools and the walls off our classrooms. It has Zoomed educators into homes and parents into classrooms, providing the transparency that parents have long deserved. No longer are our practices hidden behind doors or buried in the pages of policy and collective bargaining agreements; they are now in full view on a screen. And our parents are watching.”

Sonja Brookins Santelises (see item #2)

“Change sticks only when teachers and staff no longer think of the new approach as ‘the new way’ but simply regard it as ‘the way things are done in the district,’”

Adam Anderson and David James (see item #1)

“All students need to be able to use math as a window to see the world, and a mirror to see themselves and their experiences, their communities. But it’s particularly important for students of color, who often don’t see themselves in the mathematics curriculum.”

Robert Berry (see item #5)

“Even if teachers do use social justice to get students to learn math, my question is, what kind of math are they learning?”

Hung-Hsi Wu (*ibid.*)

“No matter how well you prepare, how much time you give, or how hard you try, you cannot manipulate, control, or direct others’ responses.”

Jessica Cabeen (see item #3)

1. What It Takes to Lead a Successful Districtwide Initiative

“Only about one in four change efforts across sectors is successful, and change is particularly challenging in public education,” say Adam Anderson and David James in this article in *District Management Journal*. They point to four unique characteristics that make change so difficult in the K-12 sector:

- People-intensive – Personnel make up about 80 percent of school budgets, so a successful change effort means changing the mindsets and behaviors of lots of people.
- Serve all – “Districts must serve every student who walks through their doors,” say Anderson and James, “inclusive of all backgrounds, learning needs, and socioeconomic statuses.”
- Diverse stakeholders – Students, families, taxpayers, unions, business leaders, and others demand a place at the table.
- High accountability – Local, state, and federal laws and guidelines and political pressures hold districts’ feet to the fire.

This is a daunting playing field, especially the human dimension – dealing with the emotions and strongly held views of so many different people. But, say Anderson and James, “With the privilege of being at the center of communities, district and school leaders are in the position to lead change efforts that can result in more-equitable educational opportunities that will prepare all students to succeed and live fulfilling lives.”

Using an actual case study – a district’s effort to dramatically improve the achievement of students with mild to moderate disabilities – the authors suggest a nine-step change process. Their model draws on the work of John Kotter, Jeanie Duck, Kurt Lewin, the Center for Creative Leadership, *Harvard Business Review*, and others.

- *Choose a “keystone” initiative* – The exemplar in this article – boosting the achievement of students with mild to moderate special needs – meets these key criteria:
 - Recent student-achievement results indicated that it was a high priority.
 - It would involve educators at every level.
 - Success in this area promised to improve overall student outcomes.
 - The leader was passionate about it (in this case, the superintendent had been a special educator earlier in her career).
 - There was buy-in from at least three-quarters of district leaders.
 - The initiative involved reallocating resources, but it wouldn’t bust the budget.

The choice of a keystone initiative “should not arise from the need to copy a peer district or to respond to a single, loud stakeholder group or to comply with the wishes of a forceful

superintendent,” say Anderson and James. “Setting off on the wrong transformation journey can be a recipe for failure.”

- *Create a sense of urgency.* Success depends on engaging stakeholders’ hearts as well as their minds, making them feel part of an important mission, and convincing most that the effort is worthwhile and do-able. This can be done with a combination of facts and data about why the current state of affairs is unacceptable, compelling stories and quotes from students, staff, families, and members of the community, and honestly acknowledging how past efforts have been unsuccessful. All this helps to reduce cynicism and foster the belief that success is possible.

- *Build a guiding coalition.* This group must bring “content expertise, diverse perspectives, the energy to effect change, and a growth mindset,” say Anderson and James. There need to be “pride builders” – people who motivate and inspire others – “trusted nodes” – repositories of the district’s culture – and “change ambassadors” – those who can serve as exemplars and communicate well with colleagues. In the special needs case study, the guiding coalition had 20 people: teachers, principals, counselors, psychologists, special education staff, social workers, behavior specialists, a student on an IEP, a member of a respected advocacy group, a parent, a school board member, and a local university professor. Meetings were arranged so people were able to carry on with their regular responsibilities.

- *Articulate a strategic vision, a theory of action, and specific initiatives.* The vision must be “sensible, clear, simple, elevating, and situation-specific,” say Anderson and James, articulating what the district is moving “from” and “to.” It should be ambitious and yet pragmatic, and in under three minutes, leaders should be able to explain it to any member of the district and community. In the special-needs case study, the theory of action was as follows: “If every student with a mild to moderate disability has increased access to high-quality general education and intervention supports, outcomes will improve.” The initiatives:

- Provide general-education teachers with focused coaching to support their development and ability to meet the needs of most students.
- Stop pulling students out from general-education blocks and provide interventions during extra time.
- Ensure all students have access to intervention taught by content experts.
- Streamline meetings, paperwork, and processes to increase the time special education staff spend supporting students.

Having drafted the vision, theory of action, and initiatives, district leaders had a series of “listen and learn” meetings, got feedback, and finalized the initiative.

- *Enlist a volunteer cohort.* The key is mobilizing people who believe in the vision and are willing to get involved, report on what’s working, and help leaders steer clear of landmines. “Teachers, school staff, and families tend to be deep repositories of knowledge about where potential glitches may occur,” say Anderson and James, “what technical and logistical issues need to be addressed, what past experiences may influence attitudes toward the proposed change, and how others may react to the changes over time.”

• *Enable action by removing barriers.* Impediments to success need to be addressed early in the process – specifically:

- Systems that undermine the new vision;
- Schedules that pull students with special needs out of regular classes;
- Overly narrow job descriptions and collective bargaining clauses;
- A misaligned performance evaluation system;
- Managers who are slow to change, or outright opposed to the change effort.

Dealing with these early on is essential, say the authors, “both to empower others and to maintain the credibility of the change effort and of those leading it.”

• *Orchestrate short-term wins.* These need to be “unambiguous, visible to many, and closely related to the change effort,” say Anderson and James. In the case study:

- Showing the additional instructional minutes students were receiving as a result of tweaks in the schedule;
- Showing the increased proportion of time special education staff were spending working directly with students;
- Highlighting improved student outcomes on interim assessments;
- Sharing testimonials from teachers, students, and families.

“But leaders should be careful to recognize the wins without celebrating too much,” say the authors, “because these small wins are not a vision achieved; they should be used to build credibility, confidence, and the excitement to tackle even bigger challenges.”

• *Sustain urgency.* This is challenging because some educators will consider the small wins to be “good enough” and dial back their commitment and energy. Leaders need to keep the long-range goals front and center and provide a continuous stream of data showing progress toward long-term goals. There will be ups and downs, say Anderson and James, and leaders need persistence and emotional intelligence to keep people motivated and energized.

• *Anchor changes in the district’s culture.* “Change sticks only when teachers and staff no longer think of the new approach as ‘the new way’ but simply regard it as ‘the way things are done in the district,’” say the authors. At this point it’s time to celebrate the results, recognize those who made it happen, ensure that true believers are in key positions, and insert sustaining resources in the district’s budget.

[“Leading Change”](#) by Adam Anderson and David James in *District Management Journal*, Winter 2020 (Vol. 27, pp. 16-35)

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2. A Silver Lining to the Pandemic?

“Covid-19 has blown the doors off our schools and the walls off our classrooms,” says Baltimore Public Schools CEO Sonja Brookins Santelises in this article in *Education Week*. “It has Zoomed educators into homes and parents into classrooms, providing the transparency that parents have long deserved. No longer are our practices hidden behind doors or buried in the pages of policy and collective bargaining agreements; they are now in full view on a screen... We are now guests in their homes.” Parents are seeing the daily work students are doing, the

way different classes are run, how educators talk to children, and their beliefs about what students can learn.

Santelises, who has campaigned aggressively to close the digital divide in Baltimore and bring additional resources to her schools, believes the current situation is a golden opportunity to address the deep systemic problems in the “old normal” of our public schools – among them:

- The uneven quality and rigor of everyday classroom assignments [see Marshall Memo 602 for the analysis she and co-author Joan Dabrowski did on this issue];
- Overly rigid ways of determining class size and bell schedules;
- Providing social-emotional support to some students while providing academic challenge to others;
- Assigning novice teachers to students who desperately need expert instruction.

On the last point, Santelises has been encouraged to see some Baltimore principals assigning their most effective teachers to deliver direct instruction and less-experienced teachers to observe those lessons and provide small-group follow-up. She’s been moved by the determination of many parents and caregivers to travel long distances to get laptops for their children and flood hotlines at all hours for help logging into remote learning, then getting deeply involved in their children’s learning. She’s heard educators say, “they were wrong about this parent or that grandmother, now seen more as a vital ally rather than an unwanted adversary.”

Santelises is hopeful that in these and other ways, we will make our “new normal” better than what existed before the pandemic.

[“Parents Are Watching Like Never Before. ‘Trust Us’ Isn’t Enough”](#) by Sonja Brookins Santelises in *Education Week*, November 25, 2020 (Vol. 40, #14, p. 24)

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3. Pointers for Difficult Conversations

In this article in *Principal Leadership*, Minnesota principal and author Jessica Cabeen confesses that she herself has failed in fraught encounters – often because she started with a hidden agenda or a preconceived notion of how things would work out. She offers some hard-earned lessons on handling professional confrontations “with grace, vulnerability, and a goal of maintaining or increasing depth in the relationship going forward.”

- *Don’t worry about being hated.* This fear, and the flip side – worrying about hurting the other person’s feelings – can lead us to sugarcoat the message and distort what needs to be heard and understood. Being a leader “means allowing others to sit with the discomfort and process a conversation without circling back right away or diminishing the message by flooding the person with positive accolades,” says Cabeen. Phrases like *Help me understand...* and *Tell me more...* are helpful in guiding the conversation toward a productive outcome.

- *Keep it professional and don’t take things personally.* Cabeen uses BIFF as a guideline for tough conversations and e-mails: Brief, Informative, Friendly, and Firm (this is from the High Conflict Institute in San Diego). She knows that when she’s nervous, she tends

to ramble and fidget; now she writes down her key message and rehearses with a colleague or superior before a tense encounter. Her middle-school staff has practiced composing BIFF responses to aggressive e-mails.

- *Focus on what you can control.* “No matter how well you prepare, how much time you give, or how hard you try, you cannot manipulate, control, or direct others’ responses,” says Cabeen. “What you can do is model what you want to see from others.” She’s learned to pause and take three deep breaths (or jot down her fears) if she’s upset going into a meeting; to respond to yelling with a calm, quiet voice; to recognize and name another person’s strong emotions; to be aware of her own body language; and to be sensitive to circumstances in colleagues’ and students’ personal lives that may be affecting their behavior.

- *Empathize.* “Keep in mind that the person on the other side of the conversation has a point, a plan, and a purpose,” says Cabeen, “– no matter how different it is from ours.” Building a foundation of trust and understanding with colleagues is helpful in even the most difficult confrontations, and helps leaders keep their eyes on the prize and deal with short-term setbacks.

These precepts, she concludes, “help me grow and develop into a better leader, mother, friend, and spouse.”

“Leading with Grace Through Difficult Conversations” by Jessica Cabeen in *Principal Leadership*, December 2020 (Vol. 21, #4, pp. 10-12); Cabeen can be reached at jessica.cabeen@austin.k12.mn.us.

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4. Balanced Assessment of Learning in Kindergarten

In this *American Educational Research Journal* article, Angela Pyle, Erica Danniels, and Hanna Wickstrom (University of Toronto) and Christopher DeLuca (Queens University) address a dilemma faced by kindergarten teachers as their districts increasingly focus on academic goals: how to gather accurate assessment data on student learning while staying true to their philosophical commitment to play-based classroom activities. Ideally, say Pyle, Danniels, Wickstrom, and DeLuca, assessment of student learning in a kindergarten classroom should have four characteristics:

- Assessment takes place continuously.
- Teachers assess learning through conversations, observation, and individual testing.
- Teachers measure students’ progress on academic standards *and* developmental targets.
- There’s a commitment to child-centered and developmentally appropriate practices.

When these are implemented smoothly, assessments have these dimensions:

- Assessment *for* learning – collecting information to shape teaching practices and enhance student learning;
- Assessment *as* learning – getting students to actively monitor their own learning through self-, peer- and teacher-based feedback;
- Assessment *of* learning – collecting evidence of student progress toward curriculum goals to draw summative conclusions on achievement.

Assessment *as* learning supports a meta-goal of kindergarten classrooms: helping students develop metacognitive awareness and self-regulation skills and become increasingly independent.

By closely observing 20 kindergarten classrooms, the researchers noticed that teachers were using these types of assessments:

- Embedded – Assessments take place in the context of play to measure academic and developmental learning. The child and teacher are actively engaged in play; the teacher might ask students questions and show them an iPad photo or video to get their reactions.
- Observational – The teacher unobtrusively observes during child-initiated play, taking anecdotal notes, using a checklist, or taking photos or videos, usually to measure developmental learning.
- Withdrawal – The teacher takes a child aside and conducts a formal assessment such as a running record or test of letter recognition, letter-sound association, or sight-words.

Pyle, Danniels, Wickstrom, and DeLuca say the teachers they observed definitely felt the pressure to measure academic learning in line with their districts' focus on accountability. While most teachers were also assessing developmental learning as students engaged in free play, guided play, and teacher-directed play, the researchers felt there was an imbalance. "Based on the pathways the teachers used to implement and assess kindergarten curriculum," they say, "there appears to be an emphasis on academic learning. It may be time to pause and reflect on our curricular priorities and the pedagogies and assessments that might best support them."

["A Model for Assessment in Play-Based Kindergarten Education"](#) by Angela Pyle, Erica Danniels, Hanna Wickstrom, and Christopher DeLuca in *American Educational Research Journal*, December 2020 (Vol. 57, #6, pp. 2251-2292); Pyle can be reached at angela.pyle@utoronto.ca.

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5. "Woke Math" or Necessary Relevance?

In this *Education Week* article, Catherine Gewertz reports that some teachers are bringing social justice into their math lessons – for example, applying concepts to pandemics, campaign finance, school segregation, and policing patterns. A recently published NCTM book on understanding and responding to social injustice is selling briskly and generating buzz on social media. The rationale behind these efforts: helping students see the relevance of mathematics to understanding and critiquing the world around them – and exploring ways to make it better. "My kids deserve to have a connection to the things we're talking about," says José Luis Vilson, an equity advocate in New York City.

Robert Berry, co-editor of the NCTM book, agrees: "All students need to be able to use math as a window to see the world, and a mirror to see themselves and their experiences, their communities. But it's particularly important for students of color, who often don't see themselves in the mathematics curriculum." One Los Angeles teacher created a map of police

shootings as part of a lesson on proportionality and graphing. “I wanted to couch what I teach in something that’s topical and relevant for them,” he said. “Otherwise, why teach it?” A Chicago private school teacher had her students calculate a personal budget for a person graduating from college with a significant loan debt, having just lost their job. She believes that for children of privilege, the exercise “helps them see life through another person’s eyes.” This teacher believes in giving her students choices, and their choices sometimes surprise her: once it was calculating how many Jell-O packets it would take to fill the Grand Canyon.

Predictably, there’s been pushback on what’s been dubbed “woke math,” sometimes degenerating into personal insults and threats on social media. Education historian Diane Ravitch worries that too much focus on relevance can undermine the work of mastering skills and leave students at the mercy of teachers’ political ideologies. Hung-Hsi Wu of the University of California/Berkeley is concerned that social-justice math may be distracting educators from what he considers the real problem: a math curriculum that is a jumble of imprecise definitions and unrelated ideas. “Even if teachers do use social justice to get students to learn math,” he says, “my question is, what kind of math are they learning?”

Andrew Brantlinger of the University of Maryland reflects on his own unsuccessful attempts to connect social justice topics to math with Chicago night school students. His worry: that trying to do this may create a two-tiered system: “real-world math” for students of color and the less-advantaged, while white, largely affluent students get math that prepares them for college.

[“Teaching Math Through a Social Justice Lens”](#) by Catherine Gewertz in *Education Week*, December 2, 2020 (Vol. 40, #15, pp. 14-6)

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6. Getting Students Involved in an Advocacy Project

In this *Cult of Pedagogy* article, Jane Currell describes how she immersed her 9-10-year-old students in the details of a fictional island for three weeks – its geography, natural resources, forested area, and economy. She then presented them with the following scenario: *Dear Residents of Alchemy Island, I am writing to inform you that a decision has been made to sell the eastern part of our island to a large development company. They plan to use the land to build a vast new resort for people to come on holiday here. It will provide a lot of jobs for people living on the island as well as countless other economic benefits. Part of the Enchanted Forest will be cut down to provide adequate space for this state-of-the-art complex.*

Students then went to work composing speeches, letters, and other persuasive pieces on the question of whether the development should proceed. Currell shifted from “sage on the stage” to “guide on the side,” providing anchor charts, mini-lessons, and individual support as groups of students immersed themselves in the simulation.

A “campaign” like this – fictional or real – is a powerful way to engage students in an authentic project, get them thinking about important issues, foster collaboration, and develop

persuasive writing and presentation skills. Currell suggests the following steps to plan and implement this kind of unit:

- Look for a suitable spot in the curriculum. There are probably natural openings for a project on climate change, race, poverty, gender, and other hot topics.
- Let students choose a focus from a short list of possibilities. Choice heightens students' engagement and enthusiasm.
- Gather resources to support students' work. With her Alchemy Island project, Currell showed video clips about deforestation and other aspects of the scenario, generated a word bank, and discussed the components of successful advocacy.
- Identify the types of writing students will be doing. This might include letters, songs, placards, posters, interviews, speeches, and leaflets, along with anchor charts and rubrics to analyze and enhance quality.
- Get students working in groups. With the Alchemy Island project, Currell let students form groups around each type of writing, capping groups at five members.
- Plan lessons, each focused on one aspect of the project. The final lessons consisted of editing, revising, and publishing.
- Differentiate. Some students and groups will need more support than others; adult and student assistants can provide that.
- Arrange for preview presentations so students can get formative feedback and pick up ideas from other groups.
- Have groups present their completed work and celebrate the completion of the unit with group photos, displays, and other evidence of good work.

[“Fire Up Your Students with a Campaign Project”](#) by Jane Currell in *Cult of Pedagogy*, December 6, 2020

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7. Scheduling Remote Learning in Elementary Schools

In this *District Management Journal* article, Hallie Ventling summarizes some best practices for organizing remote instruction in an elementary school:

- *Schedule dedicated time for target social-emotional supports.* This should include a daily synchronous morning meeting, buffer time before “live” instructional blocks to allow time to deal with technology glitches, individual check-ins by homeroom teachers, and short breaks throughout the day for guided movement. Teachers might coordinate live recesses with physical education teachers, share fitness and movement videos and tips on mindfulness with families.
- *Differentiate instructional blocks.* Students working remotely need shorter blocks of time and more-frequent breaks. Ventling suggests 20-30-minute blocks of synchronous direct instruction in the morning and 15-30-minute blocks of asynchronous small-group or independent practice in the afternoon.
- *Schedule a common lunch and recess time.* Ventling says many schools have decided to have the whole school do lunch and recess in the same time-block of at least one hour. A

mid-day pause shared by all teachers gives everyone a much-needed breather and allows educators time to troubleshoot concerns from the morning, shift students to different groups, and target afternoon remediation and enrichment.

- *Rotate specials*. In the spring of 2020, some schools using remote instruction found that conventional scheduling of art, music, physical education, and other specials was confusing for students. An alternative is a class having one special for 6-9 weeks, then rotating to the next one. “This approach,” says Ventling, “can help students engage with the content on a deeper level and form stronger connections with teachers, ease staffing demands, and simplify grading.”

- *Communicate regularly with students and families*. Given the key role of parents supporting elementary children during each school day, and the fact that schools may be toggling between remote, hybrid, and in-person instruction, clarity on scheduling is at a premium. Ventling suggests the following:

- Send scheduling information home at regular intervals (weekly, bi-weekly), always on the same day of the week.
- Share the resources available for families and students – for example, student assignment pages, frequently-asked questions, and Covid-19 policies.
- Explain the daily routine and clarify when synchronous and asynchronous instruction will be happening, along with check-in times for families.
- When scheduling changes are announced, ask parents to acknowledge receipt.
- Survey parents and provide feedback channels so the school can identify and address concerns.

[“Creating Effective Remote Elementary Schedules”](#) by Hallie Ventling in *District Management Journal*, Winter 2020 (Vol. 27, pp. 57-59)

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8. Short Items:

- a. Comic Takeoffs on Literature Classics* – In this [online feature](#) in *Bored Panda* Jonas Grinevicus and Li spoof literary classics by Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Harper Lee, Stephen King, and others.

“Artist Pokes Fun at Literature Classics in 30 Cartoons” by Jonas Grinevicus and Li in *Bored Panda*, December 2019, spotted in *Educator’s Notebook*, December 2020

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- b. A Book Recommendation* – *Phi Delta Kappan* is running a series in which authors recommend their favorite professional books. My choice was the 1979 British study on the factors that make some schools more effective than others, *Fifteen Thousand Hours: Secondary Schools and Their Effects on Children* by Michael Rutter, Barbara Maughan, Peter Mortimore, and Janet Ouston. [Here’s](#) my appreciation of the book.

“Kappan Authors on Their Favorite Books” in *Phi Delta Kappan*, November 2020 (Vol. 101, #4, p. 70)

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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 50 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
District Management Journal
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
Education Next
Education Update
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
English Journal
Essential Teacher
Exceptional Children
Go Teach
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Educational Review
Independent School
Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Knowledge Quest
Language Arts
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Reading Research Quarterly
Responsive Classroom Newsletter
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Social Education
Social Studies and the Young Learner
Teachers College Record
Teaching Children Mathematics
Teaching Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Education Gadfly
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 Magazine