Marshall Memo 940

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
June 13, 2022

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Humor is good for learning. Seriously."

Anabel Gonzalez, North Carolina educator, in "Advice from Teachers in 7 Words or Less" in *Education Week*, June 7, 2022

"Words and the ability to 'decode' them are just the tip of the iceberg; comprehension lies beneath."

Robert Pondiscio in "'Expert' Idiocy on Teaching Kids to Read" in *Education Gadfly*, June 9, 2022

"It appears that the single-sex classrooms have an effect on student achievement through how female students respond to the absence of male students."

Valentina Paredes (see item #6)

"How many children are truly innocent by the time they leave middle school? And how many more have developed empathy and understanding because they witnessed (or read about) an injustice that stirred their social conscience?"

Sean Connors and Roberta Seelinger Trites (see item #1)

"At a societal level, redshirting is a wasteful practice. Essentially, it is a zero-sum game, since there will always be younger and older children in the same school class. Equally important, since redshirting is more prevalent among white children from high-income families, it contributes to the gaps in test scores observed along income and racial or ethnic lines."

Pablo Peña (see item #4)

1. Respectfully Pushing Back on Parents' Attempts to Censor Literature

In this article in *English Journal*, Sean Connors (University of Arkansas) and Roberta Seelinger Trites (Illinois State University) note recent challenges to controversial books, among them *New Kid* by Jerry Craft, *Brown Girl Dreaming* by Jacqueline Woodson, *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, *All Boys Aren't Blue* by George Johnson, *Drama* by Raina Telgemeier, and *Maus* by Art Spiegelman. Connors and Trites believe that most parents who object to these and other books are genuinely concerned for their children, and educators need to understand their concerns while also helping them understand why teachers want to use the books in their classrooms. Here are their suggested talking points:

• *The desire to shield young people from certain kinds of knowledge and content is based on an unrealistic understanding of innocence*. Many adults believe that children are born pure, gradually gain knowledge, and eventually lose their innocence, say Connors and Trites, and parents see their job as preserving and protecting youthful innocence as long as possible. "But anyone who has taught school-aged children," they say, "knows that children are typically so inquisitive that they are rarely innocent of knowledge about, for example, sex and sexuality." Whether they live in cities, suburbs, or rural areas, children find out about that subject, and others, around the age of seven. Most parents will acknowledge that fact.

• *Paradoxically, many parents assume their children have a Rousseauian innocence while admitting that they, as children, did not*. Upon reflection, adults remember when they first learned about topics like the Holocaust and economic injustice and heard homophobic slurs. "How many children are truly innocent by the time they leave middle school?" ask Connors and Trites. "And how many more have developed empathy and understanding because they witnessed (or read about) an injustice that stirred their social conscience?"

• *In every classroom, students are at different stages of maturation*. When Connors taught eleventh-grade English, a parent said her child wasn't old enough to read *The Bluest Eye* with the class. They arranged for an alternative book and writing assignment without denying the rest of the class the powerful experience of reading Toni Morrison's novel.

• *Arguments for protecting young people are often made with only one type of student in mind*. Are those objecting to a particular book "thinking of African-American teenagers who have no choice but to attend underfunded and under-resourced schools?" ask Connors and Trites. "Or immigrant children whose parents live under the threat of deportation? Are they

imagining children who have experienced physical or sexual abuse, or who are exposed to some form of addiction at home, or whose families struggle in poverty?"

• *Reading literature develops young people's capacity for empathy and understanding*. Research shows that people who read fiction on a regular basis are better able to understand and empathize with fellow humans and see the world from their perspective – abilities most parents want their children to possess.

• *Removing books that might make white, heterosexual students feel uncomfortable ignores the fact that LGBTQ parents and parents of color also have school-aged children*. They too want their children to learn about their own histories and experiences. All students need books that provide "windows" and "mirrors" on their own experience and culture. "By engaging in this kind of perspective-taking," say Connors and Trites, "students are better able to comprehend how other people understand and experience those historical events and social topics. Equally important, they are better prepared to make informed, conscious decisions as to whether they wish to reproduce discriminatory policies and practices that have been, or are, injurious to other people."

"What Happens to Knowledge Deferred? Defending Books from Conservative White Censors" by Sean Connors and Roberta Seelinger Trites in *English Journal*, May 2022 (Vol. 111, #5, pp. 64-70); the authors can be reached at sconnors@uark.edu and seeling@ilstu.edu.

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2. Maximizing Teachers' Impact in a Time of Staff Shortages

In this *District Management Journal* article, Richard Viard and Craig Gibbons suggest ways for schools to make the best use of professional staff in a time of widespread staffing challenges (click the article link below to see graphics illustrating each suggestion):

• *Look for opportunities to reduce the number of classrooms or class blocks*. In elementary schools, this means decreasing the number of homerooms. "Of course, this directly impacts class size," say Viard and Gibbons, "but it might have a smaller impact than you might think. Before ruling out this option, take into account students who spend most of their time in substantially separate classrooms, or who are remote-learning students, or who are in other settings outside the general education classroom." In middle schools, science and social studies teachers might work with two grade levels on an A/B day schedule with longer periods for all core subjects.

• *Regroup students during specials*. For example, if there are five 5th-grade homerooms with 20 students each, they can be regrouped into four groups of 25 when they go to specials, making it possible to operate with four rather than five special teachers.

• *Schedule intervention periods across classrooms to allow grouping based on need*. If each grade level has a common schedule, intervention and small-group instruction can be slotted at the same time across the grade, making it possible to regroup students across classes by specific needs. "Providing more opportunities for effective and efficient regrouping," say Viard and Gibbons, "can have a profound impact on the reach and impact of staff. And student needs can be matched with the teacher best qualified to meet those needs." If intervention

periods are staggered across grades, support services can "flood" each grade level in succession through the day, making optimal use of their time.

• *Regularly assess students' progress*. The schedule can be adjusted periodically, following these steps:

- Identify student groups across classrooms based on their needs.
- Assign each group to the most qualified teacher for their area of focus.
- Schedule intervention and small-group instruction blocks so teachers can go from grade to grade through the day and work with all students.
- Every 6-8 weeks, review progress based on assessments and update groups; in some cases, students may no longer need interventions.

• *Stagger small-group ELA and math time across grade levels*. Scheduling these slots at the same time across a grade allows students to be regrouped across classrooms, and staggering the blocks among grades allows support staff to reach all students.

• *Target pullout opportunities throughout the day while protecting core instruction*. Viard and Gibbons say pullouts for special education, intervention, and enrichment support should not occur during whole-class ELA and math time (versus small-group time mentioned just above). They suggest that science and social studies classes are possibilities, but pullouts should be limited so students don't miss too much in those important subjects. Scheduling science and social studies at the same time within each grade level, staggered by grade, allows more students to be pulled out based on need. This is advantageous for meeting student needs, and also makes it possible to manage with reduced staffing. Another strategy is scheduling science and social studies immediately before or after an intervention period, providing extended time for support.

• *Maximize support staff time with clear guidelines for direct service and group size*. Paperwork, IEP meetings, and other non-instructional duties often gobble up a lot of support teachers' time. Viard and Gibbons's study of thousands of student service providers found a wide range of contractual time spent working directly with students, with an average of 50 percent or less. They urge school leaders to streamline paperwork, allocate non-instructional duties to other staff, and emphasize the importance of support teachers' contact time with students, working with optimal group sizes. Taking these steps can also make it possible to meet students' needs when staff vacancies can't be filled.

• *Leverage shared staff across schools*. If this is done based on workload (time spent with students) rather than caseload, a smaller number of teachers can reach more students in multiple buildings. It can be more efficient to have teachers spend a whole day in one school, then a whole day in another school, versus traveling from school to school during the day. It's also important for support staff to have up-to-date schedules for each school so they can be at each site at the right times. Specialist teachers (art, music, library, physical education) can also be shared across schools if rotations (for example, four days in one school, four days in another) are synchronized.

• *Use a scheduling program that communicates up-to-date information*. Excel and Google Docs are not ideal unless they are constantly updated and shared, say Viard and

Gibbons. They recommend using a dedicated scheduling program that can be shared online with educators and parents.

"Making the Most of Student Time Amid Staff Shortages" by Richard Viard and Craig Gibbons in *District Management Journal*, Spring 2022 (Vol. 31, pp. 51-58); the authors can be reached at rviard@dmgroupk12.com and cgibbons@dmgroupK12.com.

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3. Making the Most of Remote Teacher Interviews

In this article in *School Administrator*, Laurie Kimbrel (University of West Georgia) says that before the pandemic, most principals relied on face-to-face interviews when hiring teachers. This, says Kimbrel, "has led well-intentioned leaders to make judgments based on subjective factors such as appearance, confidence, eye contact, enthusiasm, knowledge of the school district, and ability to sell oneself rather than factors that accurately predict teaching ability." During coronavirus remote learning, school leaders have had to interview remotely as well and found several advantages:

• *Fewer geographic limitations* – Offering virtual interviews to prospective teachers, school leaders have been able to attract a bigger pool of applicants than before, many from outside their region.

• *More revealing interactions* – Interviewing candidates via videoconference, hiring committees have found several advantages: insights on whether the teacher can handle online technology (with students as well as adults); more time for the hiring committee to examine digital portfolios and teaching artifacts; and greater ability to review model lessons.

• *Efficiency* – More interviews can be scheduled in a shorter period of time; more staff members can participate from different locations; interviews can be scheduled in the evening or early morning; and it's easier to truncate an obviously unproductive session than it would be when the candidate has traveled and taken a day off work.

• *Less subjectivity* – "Virtual interviews," said one superintendent, "forced us to rethink our whole format and to create specific questions ahead of time that would elicit more than a few words of response." Other leaders Kimbrel interviewed said they found online questioning did a better job of getting at candidates' specific behaviors in common teaching situations and enabled the hiring committee to make better predictions about on-the-job performance.

Virtual interviews are not perfect, says Kimbrel. They don't include seemingly important factors like a firm handshake, the subtle messages sent by facial expressions and body language, and what can be discerned while taking a candidate on an informal tour of the school. Even so, concludes Kimbrel, the key question is whether a candidate will be effective with students, and a well-run virtual interview can get at that information quite successfully.

"Upsides to Teacher Hiring from Pandemic Panic" by Laurie Kimbrel in *School Administrator*, June 2022 (Vol. 79, #6, pp. 38-41); Kimbrel can be reached at lkimbrel@westga.edu.

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4. The Advantages Enjoyed by Older Students within Each Grade Level

In this article in *Education Next*, Pablo Peña (University of Chicago) says that within each grade level, older students typically score better on academic assessments than their younger classmates. "Time and again," write Peña, "studies looking at an array of countries, grade spans, and subjects have found that age differences of even a few months do matter." (Click the article link below to see illustrative graphics.) Within an age cohort, older students are more likely than younger students to end up in more-demanding and academically oriented programs and more-selective schools.

Schools in the U.S. have mainly ignored the age advantage, but some parents are keenly aware of it and engage in "academic redshirting" – delaying a child's entry to kindergarten by a year. Some states, including Illinois and New Jersey, have considered banning parents' ability to tilt the playing field in favor of their children.

Other than discouraging redshirting, how can the built-in age bias be addressed? Peña describes the work of British assessment expert Godfrey Thomson, who in the mid-1900s devised an "age allowance" formula to adjust the achievement of younger students in test-based admission to selective schools. Thomson's algorithm adds or subtracts a few points for every month in a student's age, making it possible to compare students' academic achievement irrespective of age. The idea is analogous to the way pediatricians compile growth charts for children's height and weight, compiling a month-by-month average score to allow comparisons with children of exactly the same age.

After a major 1944 education reform act in England and Wales, all students began taking the 11+ exam to determine admission to selective grammar schools. An age allowance was built into one widely used test, so researchers were able to measure its impact. Admission to selective schools when the test with an age allowance was used was significantly more equitable by age than with tests without it.

But there's a problem with this equity-minded calculation. "Age allowances make admissions fairer," says Peña, "but students who benefit from them tend to do worse than those who don't. That is not because they are worse students; rather, it's because such allowances don't follow students into the classroom… Leveling the playing field in admissions doesn't erase the differences in test scores and GPA *after* admissions. On average, younger students will still perform worse than their older classmates."

So should age allowances not be used? That depends on the purpose of using test scores to decide who gets admitted to selective schools, says Peña. If the goal is to predict students' performance in the school, non-adjusted scores are a better crystal ball. But if the goal is to provide an equal opportunity for younger students to compete for a desirable education and social resource, age allowances are a good idea. In Thomson's words, "The object of an age allowance is not to improve prediction, but to do justice to children born in different months of the year."

Peña leans toward the fairness argument. "The fact that an institution, a school district, or a country cannot fix all the distortions introduced by relative age doesn't mean it shouldn't fix some of them," he says. "Partially fixing the problem is better than not fixing any of it."

In U.S. schools, age allowances are not being used in selective admissions exams. That's because of the belief that age differences of a few months stop mattering early on (not so, says Peña; age matters throughout students' education). A more powerful reason is that if a school implemented age allowances on its own, there would be a drop in test scores without the age allowance tweak. "Of course, admissions to that school would be fairer," he says. "But the average quality of incoming students as measured by test scores would look worse relative to both past incoming classes and peer institutions." This would hurt rankings – a key metric in a competitive environment, especially with admission to colleges and private schools.

The SAT and ACT have an age bias of as much as three percentile points from the oldest to the youngest students within a cohort. Students who re-take these tests a year later score an average eight points higher. That's partly because of familiarity with the format and test preparation, and partly because of the age advantage. "Age allowances have a proven track record," says Peña, "and should be included in any test for which there is indication that age matters" – including the SAT and ACT.

There's a trend in many universities toward making the SAT and ACT optional, but that won't solve the age equity problem, says Peña. College admissions officers look at other data, including grades, GPA, and teacher recommendations – and older students have the same advantage in these areas. That's an argument for using age allowances across the board.

If that happened, there would be less incentive for some parents to redshirt their children. "This isn't a minor point," says Peña. "At a societal level, redshirting is a wasteful practice. Essentially, it is a zero-sum game, since there will always be younger and older children in the same school class. Equally important, since redshirting is more prevalent among white children from high-income families, it contributes to the gaps in test scores observed along income and racial or ethnic lines. By making redshirting less appealing, age allowances could simultaneously save resources and help level the playing field – a rare chance to enhance efficiency and equity at the same time."

"End the Birthday Bias" by Pablo Peña in *Education Next*, Summer 2022 (Vol. 22, #3, pp. 22-28); Peña can be reached at pablo@uchicago.edu.

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5. What's the Difference Between Projects and Performance Tasks?

(Originally titled "Performance Tasks or Projects? Complementary Approaches for Student Engagement")

In this online *Educational Leadership* article, author/consultants Jay McTighe and John Larmer say performance tasks and projects are "fraternal siblings," with many common ways of getting students more actively involved in deeper learning, but are not "identical twins." Performance tasks, which are shorter and more teacher-directed, can be a stepping stone to longer-term, more-autonomous projects. The key variables in both are the learning goals, students' age and experience, teachers' experience handling these learning strategies, and the available time and resources. McTighe and Larmer suggest eight continua along which performance tasks and projects fall:

• *Time frame* – Performance tasks are usually shorter in duration – 2-4 class periods (including time for presentations and evaluation) – while projects might last two weeks.

• *Authenticity* – Performance tasks often simulate a situation or audience in the classroom, while projects tend to have students tackling outside-of-school issues and producing authentic products or performances for an external audience.

• *Integration of subjects* – Performance tasks usually focus on one subject, expressed through a variety of media (written, oral, visual), while projects often involve multiple disciplines to accomplish the task.

• *Who directs* – With performance tasks, the teacher usually specifies exactly what students need to do, while in projects, students identify the need, issue, or problem that will be tackled.

• *Teacher support* – A performance task can be an integral part of instruction or a way the teacher assesses learning; the same can be true of projects. With the former, the teacher is conducting lessons and activities, providing resources, and giving ongoing feedback; with the latter, the teacher stands back, evaluating how much students have learned.

• *Student choice* – Performance tasks usually have limited student choice of the topic and who they work with, while projects are more open-ended with student decision-making throughout.

• *Performance mode* – Performance tasks are usually specific assignments or assessments for individual students or small groups. Projects are much more likely to involve teamwork, with collaboration being one of the assessment criteria.

• *Evaluation* – The range for assessment of products and performances is from the classroom teacher to evaluation by outside-school evaluators or experts, with projects being more at the external end.

"Regardless of where they fall along the continua," conclude McTighe and Larmer, "quality tasks and projects need to meet certain qualities to make sure that the juice is worth the squeeze." (Click on the article link below for lists of ten desirable qualities of performance tasks and five for projects.)

"Performance Tasks or Projects? Complementary Approaches for Student Engagement" by Jay McTighe and John Larmer in *Educational Leadership*, June 2022; McTighe can be reached at jay@mctighe-associates.com.

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6. Research on Single-Gender Math Classes in Chile

In this *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness* article, Valentina Paredes (Universidad de Chile) reports on her study comparing girls' and boys' 10th-grade math standardized test scores in two settings:

- Single-gender classrooms within coeducational schools;
- Mixed-gender classes in coeducational schools.

Paredes found that girls did better in the single-gender classes, closing the boy-girl gap by more than half. This happened with no decrease in boys' math achievement.

Why did girls' math achievement improve in single-sex classes? It was not because of differences in school quality, teacher characteristics, curriculum coverage, assessments, or the way students were sorted. Rather, says Paredes, "It appears that the single-sex classrooms have an effect on student achievement through how female students respond to the absence of male students." This suggests that grouping high-school students by gender in math classes might be a good way to close persistent gender gaps. But Paredes cautions: "Even though an easy way to reduce mathematics gender gaps within a school is to separate boys and girls during math classes, preparing both teachers and students to handle gender diversity should not be neglected."

"Mixed but Not Scrambled: Gender Gaps in Coed Schools with Single-Sex Classrooms" by Valentina Paredes in *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, April-June 2022 (Vol. 15, #2, pp. 330-366); Paredes can be reached at vparedes@fen.uchile.cl.

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7. Recommended Books About Dinosaurs for All Ages

In this *School Library Journal* feature, author/librarian Cathy Camper recommends twelve books about dinosaurs that incorporate evolving discoveries and theories:

- *My First Dinosaur Atlas: Roar Around the World with the Mightiest Beasts Ever!* by Penny Arlon, preschool-grade 4
- *The Griffin and the Dinosaur: How Adrienne Mayor Discovered a Fascinating Link Between Myth and Science* by Marc Aronson and Adrienne Mayor, grade 5-8
- *Fossil Hunter: How Mary Anning Changed the Science of Prehistoric Life* by Cheryl Blackford, grade 5-8
- *The Age of Dinosaurs: The Rise and Fall of the World's Most Remarkable Animals* by Steve Brusatte, grade 3-7
- *Dinosaurs and Other Prehistoric Life* by Anusaya Chinsamy-Turan, illustrated by Angela Rizza and Daniel Long, grade 4-7
- *Dinosaurs: By the Numbers* by Steve Jenkins, grade 1-4
- *Dinosaurs Roar* by Steve Jenkins, baby-preschool
- *My Book of Dinosaurs and Prehistoric Life: Animals and Plants to Amaze, Surprise, and Astonish!* by Dean Lomax, grade 2-6
- *Fossil Legends of the First Americans* by Adrienne Mayor, high school-adult
- *Dinosaur Feathers* by Dennis Nolan, grade 1-4
- *My First Big Book of Dinosaur Facts* by Ruth Owen, kindergarten-grade 3
- *Roar! I'm a Dinosaur* by Merrill Rainey, baby-preschool

"Great Books: Dino-SOAR! Dino-MIGHT!" by Cathy Camper in *School Library Journal*, June 2022 (Vol. 68, #6, pp. 41-43)

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8. Short Items:

a. Juneteenth Books – This *School Library Journal* feature recommends and describes seven books to teach young children about Juneteenth, the June 19th commemoration of the end of slavery in the U.S., established in 2021 as a national holiday.

"7 Titles to Teach Young Children About Juneteenth" in *School Library Journal* (online), June 10, 2022

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b. A Walk Down Literacy Lane – For a little perspective on the current literacy debate, check out my interview with Jeanne Chall in 1981, just before she published her influential book on the stages of reading.

"Teachers, Always Use Your Judgment: An Interview with Jeanne Chall" in *Learning Magazine*, November 1981

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

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and other educators very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 52 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 150 articles each week, and selects 8-10 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 Express
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
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Independent School
Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
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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
Phi Delta Kappan
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