Marshall Memo 1088

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
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Special Issue: Supporting New Teachers

Between 20 and 40 percent of beginning teachers quit within the first five years (eleven percent after just one year), which undermines instructional continuity, faculty cohesion, and student learning. Preventing burnout and attrition has always been a priority, but especially since the pandemic, which increased educator stress and turnover. This week's issue has the best articles from 20 years of Memos to help school leaders provide effective support for new teachers and give those teachers specific suggestions for getting their careers off to a good start.

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Quotes of the Week:

"The most profound support we can offer new teachers is our willingness to question our successes and to admit our failures."

Gail Davis and Margaret Metzger (see item #3)

"Part of persevering in this profession involves carrying a high threshold for bureaucratic blunders, miscarriages of justice, untimely copy machine malfunctions, misguided policies, betrayals of trust, and other epic travesties – as well as one's own mistakes."
Dan Brown (see article #14)

"Almost without regard to the questions asked, teachers consistently connected their exit to the effectiveness of, support from, and relationship with their school leaders."
Michelle Doughtry (see article #5)

"Asking teachers to fix their burnout is like asking a seed to grow better when the soil is dry and the sun is nowhere to be found."
Chase Mielke (see article #6)

"The real teacher retention crisis is not simply the failure to retain enough teachers. It is the failure to retain the right teachers."
Melissa Wu (see article #7)

"Feeling incompetent is awful."
Jennifer Gonzalez (see article #9)

"Once you've figured out why you avoid asking for help, it's possible to change your behavior."
Manfred Kets de Vries (see article #10)

"Our brains have a negativity bias, so everything that is challenging, that is potentially a threat, appears really vividly and clearly to us, because of the way our brains are wired, and so one of the skills that we need to hone is the ability to see all the things that are going well or even just okay."
Elena Aguilar (see article #12)

"Creating a climate of respect is as much a part of teaching as content delivery."
Erin Merlino (see article #13)

Induction and Professional Working Conditions

1. Effective Induction for Beginning Teachers

"The number of beginning teachers entering classrooms has reached its highest point in decades," say Andrew Kwok and Kathy Ogden Macfarlane (Texas A&M University) in this Annenberg/Brown University EdResearch for Action Brief. "Beginning teachers, while often passionate and eager to make a difference, are less effective than their more experienced colleagues, on average. This gap stems from the steep learning curve that new educators face as they transition from preparation programs to the realities of the classroom."

Effective induction is essential to bridging this gap, and Kwok and Macfarlane report on their study of key factors in the best programs for novice teachers. They cite research evidence that the right kind of support improves new teacher retention (20-40 percent leave within the first five years, 11 percent after just one year), the quality of instruction, and student

achievement. Here are the components that have the best evidence of positive impact:

• Coaching – The most successful induction programs provide high-quality coaching throughout the first year. Some important components:

- Carefully chosen coaches, ideally in the same content area and grade as coachees;
- Training, ongoing support, and accountability for coaches;
- Frequent interactions with new teachers – at least 90 minutes weekly or biweekly;
- Specific help for new teachers on the daily responsibilities of teaching;
- Modeling of effective classroom practices in real or simulated classroom settings;
- Weekly or bi-weekly classroom visits and timely, structured, actionable feedback;
- Guiding new teachers in evaluating student work and assessment data.

Ideally coaches are full-time, or have reduced teaching loads and stipends, so they can devote significant time to beginning teachers.

• Targeted professional development – High-quality training directly linked to what beginning teachers are experiencing day to day: classroom management, technology, lesson planning, curriculum development, and pedagogy.

• Peer collaboration – Regularly scheduled meetings in common planning times with same-grade or same-subject colleagues (or, for lonely singletons, access to an external network of teachers) to share effective strategies, discuss classroom challenges, and analyze student work and assessments. Being observed and getting feedback from colleagues is also helpful.

• Administrative support – This includes establishing a positive professional working environment, setting goals, regular communication, classroom visits, appreciation and specific guidance for improvement, supporting new teachers with student misbehavior and parent interactions, and supervising the work of instructional coaches.

• Workload adjustments – Customizing new teachers' class size, student load, schedules, preps, and paraprofessional support can make all the difference in supporting their learning curve. Arranging for them to observe colleagues' classrooms is also helpful.

Kwok and Macfarlane conclude with a list of practices that are not helpful for beginning teachers:

- Voluntary induction programs that don't deliver equitable support to all new teachers;
- Sporadic and superficial coaching that fails to build skills and confidence;
- Rigid, overly prescriptive requirements, especially those that are out of synch with new teachers' previous training;
- Top-down approaches in which beginners passively receive knowledge and procedures and don't build independent problem-solving skills and a sense of efficacy.

"Strengthening Early-Career Teachers: Effective Components of Teacher Induction Programs" by Andrew Kwok and Kathy Ogden Macfarlane, Annenberg/Brown University EdResearch for Action Brief #32, February 2025, summarized in Marshall Memo 1075

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2. Onboarding New Teachers: A Model Program

In this article in *Edge*, Massachusetts teachers Gayle Davis and Margaret Metzger describe the program their Massachusetts high school ran to support new teachers, resulting in much lower rates of attrition. Here are the main features (see the Best of Marshall Memo section on Teacher Leadership #10 for a longer summary):

• *Nuts and bolts first* – The beginning of orientation is no time for lofty educational goals and philosophy. Davis and Metzger turned the first meeting into a question-and-answer session in which the newbies can get answers questions like these: How can I get the keys to my room? Where are the supplies? How do I make copies? What is the attendance system? They also gave a tour of the campus, a handbook with maps, class and lunch schedules, tips from veteran teachers, and sample copies of course syllabi and student learning expectations.

• *Monthly seminars* – All the new teachers (about 25 each year) met once a month with Davis and Metzger and other veteran teachers. These are the topics covered:

- Lesson planning;
- Work-life balance;
- Using school resources, including the librarian, nurse, guidance staff, social workers, union representatives, violence- and drug-prevention counselors, ELL and special education staff, and second-year teachers;
- Communicating with parents: This topic was usually covered just prior to the annual October back-to-school night;
- Classroom management – dealing with a disruptive student, an inattentive student, a confrontational student, a perpetually tardy student, a passive or noncompliant student.

• *Mentoring* – Each new teacher was assigned a mentor who met regularly with the mentee, observed classes, and gave advice on curriculum, classroom management, and teaching in general. These were key elements to optimize mentor/mentee relationships.

- Shared office or classroom space, which promoted frequent informal interactions.
- Teaching the same courses, which allowed the mentor to guide the new teacher through curriculum sequence and expectations.
- Shared planning time, which made regular meetings far more likely to occur.

Mentor teachers, who are freed up from a duty and paid a $450 stipend each year, attended an extensive orientation, including standard pointers and lots of role-playing around common scenarios. Confidentiality was a tricky issue, and the sessions dealt with the question of when it was necessary to break confidentiality – for example, when the mentor felt students were being harmed.

• *Observing veteran teachers* – Davis and Metzger believed that observing experienced teachers is one of the most powerful learning experiences for new teachers. The school goes out of its way to schedule numerous observations, and the coordinators prod new teachers to follow through by posting a schedule of all observations. New teachers first observe veterans in the same department, then branch out to observe teachers in other subject areas. “These old teachers have so much energy,” exclaimed one newbie. “The ed school said the old teachers

were all burnt out, but they're not!" New teachers are much more observant when they observe others than they were in graduate school; now they know how hard teaching is!

• *Classroom observation by the coordinators* – Davis and Metzger regularly observed all new teachers' classrooms, and gave them unvarnished but confidential feedback. "The importance of observing new teachers cannot be overstated," they say. "In addition to the support we are able to offer, these experiences also allow us to identify perennial problems and to shape the entire induction program." At the beginning of each year, they divide up the list of new teachers and start their observations immediately, so as not to miss any start-up problems. Post-conferences after each observation often last an hour, and advice is dispensed on several key topics:

- Assuming command;
- Teaching all the kids;
- Planning and pacing.

• Social events and a retreat – Each monthly meeting began with coffee and conversation, and there are periodic Friday social gatherings during the year, parties at individual teachers' houses, occasional outings to plays, and an end-of-the-year "congratulations" party. But most important, each cohort has an overnight retreat right after first-quarter grades are handed in (a relatively quiet time in teachers' workload).

Davis and Metzger were proud of their new teacher support program. They believed a program like this accomplishes four things that are vital in any school:

- It decreases teacher isolation.
- It gives veteran teachers a way to give back.
- It is a valuable career track experience for veteran teachers short of going into administration.
- It encourages all teachers to be reflective practitioners: "The most profound support we can offer new teachers," say David and Metzger, "is our willingness to question our successes and to admit our failures."

"Teachers Mentoring Teachers" by Gayle Davis and Margaret Metzger in *Edge*, January/ February, 2006 (Vol. 1, #3, pp. 3-19), summarized in Marshall Memo 120

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3. Building Key Skills in a Teacher's First 90 Days

In this *Kappan* article, Newark charter-school leader and author Paul Bambrick-Santoyo says the first weeks and months of a new teacher's career are a critical window of opportunity to accelerate classroom effectiveness. The mistake many principals make is pushing rookie teachers to master every element of teaching from Day One. A much better strategy is to focus on a small number of building-block skills in the first three months and then broaden the agenda. Here are some of Bambrick-Santoyo's priorities for new teachers:

• Covered in professional development meetings before the first day of school:

- Management routines and procedures 101: These are specified down to the smallest detail – exactly what is said and done – and the teacher plans how and when to roll out routines and procedures in the classroom.
- Rigorous lesson plans: These include data-based objectives and pre-planned questions that students will be asked.

• By September 30:
- Strong voice 101: When giving instructions, the teacher stands still, squares up, strikes a formal pose, uses formal tone and word choice, and uses as few words as possible.
- Checking for understanding: The teacher monitors student work conscientiously, noting student errors, and assigns and reviews brief end-of-class mini-assessments to see who has mastered the material and who hasn't.

• By October 30:
- Individual student corrections: The teacher redirects students, choosing the right spot on a continuum from the least to the most invasive: proximity, eye contact, body language, saying the student's name quickly, small consequence; the teacher anticipates student off-task behavior and rehearses what to do next; the teacher restates expectations while looking at students who are not complying.
- Data-driven instruction 101: The teacher analyzes why students answered incorrectly; plans dates and times to reteach what students didn't understand; scripts desired student responses; annotates in lesson plans which questions to ask students based on the analysis and calls on those students.

• By February 15:
- Pacing 101: The teacher creates a brisk pace so students feel constantly engaged; uses brief 15- to 30-second turn-and-talks; allows no more than two or three seconds between student responses and instruction continuing.
- Data-driven instruction 201: The teacher scripts what will happen when students don't answer correctly; repeats wrong answers, giving time for the teacher and student to reflect; asks scaffolded questions that break the problem into smaller chunks; after correcting an error, asks the student who made the error to summarize the correct answer.

Crucial to mastering these developmental steps are frequent classroom observations by an administrator or lead teacher, feedback conversations, and role-playing to practice effective questions and moves. The principals in the nine schools that Bambrick-Santoyo manages push teachers to think through what happened in classroom interactions, sometimes viewing videos: Why was this student's answer unsatisfactory? What was missing in the teacher's questioning? What would have worked better? Let's try it. This process, says Bambrick-Santoyo, "is an incredible boon to rookie teachers. It empowers them to get to the bottom of nagging worries about how effectively students are really learning, to master those practices that will lock in student success, and to do it all while honing their own instincts about what will make their teaching great."

"Rookie Teachers: The First 90 Days" by Paul Bambrick-Santoyo in *Phi Delta Kappan*, November 2013 (Vol. 95, #3, pp. 72-73), summarized in Marshall Memo 510

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4. How School Working Conditions Affect Teachers and Students

In this *Teachers College Record* article, Susan Johnson and Matthew Kraft (Harvard Graduate School of Education) and John Papay (Brown University) report on their study of the impact of working conditions in Massachusetts public schools on teachers' professional satisfaction, the likelihood that they would transfer from their school or leave the profession, and their students' achievement. Here are the findings:

• First, school working conditions have a strong impact on teachers' job satisfaction and career plans. In fact, professional conditions are more important than students' socioeconomic background. "This finding," say Johnson, Kraft, and Papay, "suggests that much of the apparent effect of student demographics really derives from differences in schools' work environments." Here are the nine working conditions the authors examined (in alphabetical order):

- Colleagues – teachers have productive working relationships with their colleagues and work together to solve problems in the school;
- Community support – families and the broader community support teachers and students in the school;
- Facilities – teachers work in a safe, clean, and well-maintained school environment that enables them to be productive;
- Governance – teachers are involved in decision-making within the school;
- Principal's leadership – school leaders provide feedback on instruction, create an orderly and safe instructional environment, and address teachers' concerns about issues in the school;
- Professional expertise – teachers are recognized as educational experts and are given the flexibility to make professional decisions about instruction;
- Resources – teachers have access to sufficient instructional materials, instructional technology, and support personnel in the school;
- School culture – there is mutual trust, respect, openness, and commitment to student achievement;
- Time – teachers have sufficient time to meet their instructional and noninstructional responsibilities.

• Second, working conditions are important predictors of student achievement growth in mathematics and English language arts.

• Third, some school working conditions are more important than others. Specifically, three variables had the strongest correlations with teachers' job satisfaction and desire to remain where they are teaching:

- Collegial relationships;
- Principal's leadership;

- School culture.

The magnitude of these effects is almost twice as large as that of school resources and facilities. "It is surely important to have safe facilities, adequate resources, and sufficient time for preparation," comment Johnson, Kraft, and Papay, "but if teachers are to achieve success with their students – particularly low-income and high-minority students who rely most on the school for their learning – they also must be able to count on their colleagues, their principal, and the organizational culture of the school to make success possible."

For student achievement in math and ELA, these four working conditions had the strongest correlation:

- Community support – "This finding makes sense," comment Johnson, Kraft, and Papay, "because positive relationships between teachers and parents may well improve students' attendance and effort in school."
- Collegial relationships;
- Principal's leadership;
- School culture.

"Thus," the authors conclude, "colleagues, principals, and culture matter, not just for teachers, but for their students as well."

"How Context Matters in High-Need Schools: The Effects of Teachers' Working Conditions on Their Professional Satisfaction and Their Students' Achievement" by Susan Johnson, Matthew Kraft, and John Papay in *Teachers College Record*, October 2012 (Vol. 114, #10, pp. 1-39), summarized in Marshall Memo 456

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Preventing Burnout

5. Key Contributors to Teacher Turnover

"The retention of high-quality teachers is a crucial policy issue across the United States," says Michelle Doughty (Vanderbilt University) in this *Teachers College Record* article. "Although some teacher turnover is healthy, high rates of turnover are associated with negative outcomes for students and schools." Turnover tends to be higher in schools serving low-income families and students of color, she says, "contributing to patterns wherein the very students that most need a stable teacher workforce are least likely to have one." Below, in order of importance, are insights Doughty gleaned from 1,178 exit and transfer surveys of teachers in a large urban district from 2016 to 2018:

• *School leadership* – Departing teachers pointed to the shortcomings of the leadership team in terms of vision and handling of classroom resources, facilities, student behavior, and safety; inequitable treatment of teachers and students; unsupportive staff relationships and school culture; and teachers feeling unappreciated and not having input on decisions. One teacher described how her school went from being "a great place to work" to "a dictatorship" when a new principal arrived.

• *Teacher evaluation* – A quarter of departing teachers cited their performance evaluations as a major reason for leaving. Teachers pointed to unfairness in how formulas were used to determine their ratings, how student achievement was factored in, and how the system seemed biased against teachers working with high-need students. Although very few teachers got ratings that jeopardized their job security, they nonetheless perceived a threat to their status. One teacher said, "I don't perform at my highest when I feel constrained, managed, and/or evaluated like that. I work best when I have complete autonomy in my classroom and where a supportive specialist comes in at least twice a month to support (not evaluate) me."

• *Workload* – Teachers mentioned the difficulty of maintaining work/life balance, insufficient planning time, and the amount of time spent on activities unrelated to student learning. One young special education teacher who left the profession said, "I went into teaching fully expecting a heavy workload. I've had previous jobs where the duties and requirements were substantial and put me under a lot of stress. The difference with this teaching job was the amount of time taken away from me by an enormous amount of nonsensical meetings."

• *Personal reasons* – These included retirement, health issues, child care responsibilities, a long commute, and tempting job offers elsewhere. Personal reasons for leaving were often malleable, meaning that improvements in their current school's working conditions could have led teachers to stay longer. One teacher who chose to retire early said she "was not planning on retiring for another two years, but the lack of discipline at [the school] was not conducive to learning or a positive environment."

• *Student behavior* – Most teachers who cited this as a reason for leaving were concerned that school leaders weren't strict enough. One teacher cited "Students cursing out administrators as well as teachers. Students threatening administrators and they were right back at school in two or three days. The lack of structured discipline for the whole school." But some teachers left because discipline was too harsh. One teacher said, "I wanted to work under an administration that took a softer touch with behavior management." Another said, "My students would often confide in me that they felt disrespected by the school leadership." Some teachers pointed to biased and disproportionately punitive treatment of African-American students.

• *Pay* – This was lower down the priority order, but unhappiness with total compensation, the benefits package, and job security was part of some teachers' decision to leave their positions as they struggled to make ends meet and pay off student loans. One teacher said, "Your best and brightest will never remain as teachers in this kind of culture, because the best and brightest don't spend their lives in entry-level positions. Teaching needs to be rebranded in our culture. And part of that rebranding needs to come with better pay and better benefits."

Summing up, Doughty says school leadership is a common factor across all teachers' reasons for leaving. "Almost without regard to the questions asked," she says, "teachers consistently connected their exit to the effectiveness of, support from, and relationship with their school leaders. Leaders mediated the way they experienced their evaluations, workload,

and relationships with students. Though evaluations and student behavior are considered as their own working conditions, teachers often expressed that their real issues were how specific leaders implemented evaluations or responded to student behaviors… Thus, the support of school leadership is not only a working condition in and of itself but also a key part of the social landscape that determines other working conditions."

"Making Sense of Teacher Turnover: A Mix-Methods Exploration of Why Teachers Leave" by Michelle Doughty in *Teachers College Record*, August 2024 (Vol. 126, #8, pp. 32-62), summarized in Marshall Memo 1063

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6. A Systems Approach to Combating Teacher Burnout

(Originally titled "Educator Well-Being 2.0")

In this article in *Educational Leadership*, author/instructional coach Chase Mielke argues that educator stress is an organizational, not an individual problem. "Asking teachers to fix their burnout," he says, "is like asking a seed to grow better when the soil is dry and the sun is nowhere to be found." Mielke suggests a computer analogy for addressing exhaustion and cynicism in K-12 schools:

• The charger and battery: Self-care strategies – Educators can do all the right things with exercise, sleep, nutrition, and meditation – be fully charged – and yet still have their energy depleted if the hardware is damaged or too much software is running at the same time. This is what's going on when we return from a wonderful vacation and our school's poor working conditions quickly make us feel exhausted again. To change this dynamic, says Mielke, "we have to address the systems, policies, and conditions that 'drain batteries' so quickly and reliably."

• Software: Curricula, programs, initiatives, expectations – Running too much software on a computer or cellphone depletes the battery and degrades performance. Mielke says his wife, an elementary teacher, is being asked to implement seven scripted curriculum programs, three of them recent additions. It's no wonder that teachers dealing with overload like this are burning out. "Too many schools try to fix problems by doing more with more," says Mielke, "rather than more with less."

• Hardware: Efficacy, skills, strengths – Schools have a lot of demands on them and often need to run more than one initiative at a time. To make that possible, says Mielke, it's necessary to boost educators' "hardware" – their sense of competence, mastery, and efficacy. That can happen only by devoting significant time to high-quality coaching, feedback, and support.

• WIFI: Human relationships and connectedness – We use technology channels to connect to the outside world. Similarly, educators need personal links with colleagues, students, parents, and the community.

Mielke believes that to have any hope of alleviating educator burnout, school leaders need to troubleshoot system failures. Continuing the computer analogy, here are his tips for addressing dysfunctional features:

• Run systems diagnostics. A detailed staff survey (not just asking what's stressing people out) can determine whether overload is caused by too many initiatives, skill deficits, not enough personal connections, or other causes.

• Prioritize the CPU. By this Mielke means candid communication about school security and other possible stressors, ensuring safety from verbal abuse by parents and others, and giving plenty of personalized appreciation and compassion (a hand-written thank-you note goes a long way).

• Close out software. "As school leaders," says Mielke, "we should ask ourselves, are we doing too many things with mediocrity rather than a few things with excellence?" He suggests taking inventory of programs and initiatives with an eye to desired outcomes, evidence of impact, and the effect on educators' sense of efficacy.

• Invest in new hardware. Introducing new skills and practices takes time and support, and that means additional (non-evaluative) coaching, informal peer coaching opportunities, and maximizing the benefits of teacher teamwork.

"Educator Well-Being 2.0" by Chase Mielke in *Educational Leadership*, July 2022 (Vol. 79, #9, online only), summarized in Marshall Memo 945

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7. Smart Teacher Retention Is the Best Turnaround Strategy

"The real teacher retention crisis is not simply the failure to retain enough teachers," say Melissa Wu and colleagues in this New Teacher Project report. "It is the failure to retain the right teachers." The researchers estimate that every year, 10,000 highly effective teachers (dubbed "the irreplaceables") leave their schools, while 100,000 mediocre teachers stay. Each departing irreplaceable leaves a vacuum that it takes eleven subsequent hires to fill.

Star teachers leave because they feel isolated, unappreciated, and unsupported. One highly effective elementary teacher who was reluctantly leaving her school said of her principal, "If he would have said, 'What's it going to take for me to get you to stay?' that's all he had to do." Like most other principals in the study, he made no effort to keep her.

Apart from significant student learning gains, what distinguishes irreplaceables from other teachers? It's not the hours they work, says the report, nor primarily their beliefs: "Diligence and good intentions are poor predictors of good teaching." What makes the difference is the daily application of effective teaching practices. Surveys of the most effective teachers' students show strong affirmations on questions like these:

- Students in this class treat the teacher with respect.
- My teacher explains difficult things clearly.
- My teacher in this class makes me feel that s/he really cares about me.
- My teacher doesn't let people give up when the work gets hard.
- My teacher wants us to use our thinking skills, not just memorize things.
- My teacher makes learning enjoyable.

Students see the difference, but administrators apparently don't.

Worse still, many low-performing teachers reported that their administrators told them they were high-performing, steered them toward teacher-leadership opportunities, and encouraged them to stay at the school. Underlying this approach are two deeply rooted fallacies about teacher performance: (a) low-performing teachers will improve; and (b) a struggling veteran will do better than a brand-new teacher.

"Both assumptions encourage a simplistic and hands-off approach to teacher retention," say the authors. In fact, struggling veterans rarely improve and rarely "self-select out." In most cases, even a brand-new teacher would do better. "Three out of four times, new teachers perform better in their first year than the low-performing teachers they replace," say the authors, "and they are more likely to improve over time."

Teacher turnover is not the best data point, they argue; it's which teachers are turning over. The report identifies three reasons so many irreplacables are leaving:

• Principals make far too little effort to retain them. What a principal says and does makes all the difference. Some strategies:

- Regularly give irreplacables positive feedback; publicly recognize accomplishments.
- Help identify areas for development and give constructive, informal feedback.
- Identify pathways for teacher-leader roles; put them in charge of something important.
- Provide them with access to additional resources for their classrooms.

"These are strategies most school leaders could start implementing tomorrow, without any changes in policies, contracts or laws, and at little or no cost," say the authors.

• Poor school cultures and working conditions drive away great teachers. Turnover rates among irreplaceables were 50 percent higher in schools with weak instructional cultures. This is primarily the principal's job, but district leaders have an important responsibility – including bringing data about school culture to the attention of school leaders.

• Policies give principals and district leaders few incentives to change their ways. "In most districts, managing teacher retention is simply not considered a priority for principals," says the report. "Most don't even track separate retention rates for irreplaceables and low performers." Other of policy changes would also help, including a more-robust teacher evaluation process.

The report's final recommendations: Make retention of irreplaceables a top priority; counsel out low performers; make this a major factor in principals' evaluations; pay irreplaceables more; and strengthen the teaching profession through higher expectations. "Teachers who cannot teach as well as the average first-year teacher should be considered ineffective – unless they are first-year teachers," concludes the report. "Those who fail to improve rapidly – within one year – should not remain in the classroom, and principals should be held accountable for making sure they don't."

"The Irreplaceables: Understanding the Real Retention Crisis in America's Urban Schools" by Melissa Wu, Kelli Morgan, Jennifer Hur, Kymberlie Schifrin, Lisa Gordon, Gina Russell, Hai Huynh, and Sandy Shannon et al., a report from The New Teacher Project, 2012, summarized in Marshall Memo 447

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8. How a Future Teacher of the Year Averted First-Year Burnout

In this *Kappan* interview with Kathleen Vail, Rebecka Peterson, the 2023 National Teacher of the Year describes what saved her during a very rocky first year teaching math at Union High School in Tulsa, Oklahoma. She happened to find the One Good Thing blog, which challenged teachers to find something positive in every day, no matter how badly things had gone. She liked the idea and halfway through that year, started posting a positive thought at the end of every day.

At first it was difficult to think of anything good, says Peterson, but then there was a shift. "I would notice good things throughout the day. Johnny asked a question today – one good thing. I started writing them down throughout the day so that I wouldn't forget… When I took the time to notice the good, the part of my brain that filtered the good expanded and allowed me to see more good things. Eventually, I reached a turning point where I wanted to not just actively notice the good. I wanted to proactively create the good. I wanted to be the one good thing for my students. I went from reactive to active to proactive. One good thing, one step at a time, one day at a time, one blog post at a time. And it changed my life." A decade later, she had written 1,400 posts.

Peterson likens the process to exponential growth in mathematics – starting slowly, gradually gathering steam – and that's become her teaching philosophy. "We don't always feel that change right at the beginning," she says, "but what a shame to stop those practices in the beginning, and not experience the uptick."

Isn't this just toxic positivity, desperately looking for the silver lining when it's not there? Not so, says Peterson. "This is taking ownership of our story." A day might be going poorly – the lesson plan bombs and 20 minutes are lost because someone pulls a fire alarm – but one student says good morning in a way that melts your heart. "It's so easy to focus on the bad," says Paterson, "and if we're not careful, we will start a downward spiral. Gratitude jolts us out of that spiral. Gratitude gave me eyes to see what I was missing before… small, everyday moments that I was missing before I was intentional about noticing them and documenting them. It's making room for the good things to land."

Peterson has asked her students to adopt One Good Thing. Every Friday she puts on music and they get out their math notebooks, turn to the last page, and silently write one good thing that happened that week – a word, phrase, sentence, paragraph. Some students write to her after they graduate saying they've continued the practice.

For several years, Peterson moved up with her students from precalculus to calculus, so most of them knew her well as they began the most challenging math course of high school. Students who had looped told the newbies, "She's going to push us, but it'll be fine," and results were excellent. Then the schedule changed; Peterson was teaching calculus without the benefit of looping and worried that students wouldn't do as well.

That's when she began telling her story (she's the child of Swedish and Iranian medical missionaries and came to the U.S. as a preschooler), then invited students to sit with her before or after school or over lunch and tell their stories. Every year it takes ten weeks to hear 100

teenagers' tales, but doing this "softened me," says Peterson. "When we learn each other's stories, we carry a piece of each other with us. I carried my students with me every time I stepped into my classroom. My patience and my grace grew tremendously because I knew their backgrounds… I can feel the atmospheric shift. Because everyone is in. Everyone belongs. Everyone has a seat at the table. There's this inherent trust, and it allows me to push them mathematically. And then they soar; they just soar."

"One Good Thing, One Day At a Time: A Conversation with Rebecka Peterson" by Kathleen Vail in *Kappan*, September 2023 (Vol. 105, #1, pp. 8-12), summarized in Memo 1001

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How Teachers Can Build Self-Efficacy and Resilience

9. A Teacher Almost Cries in Front of Her Students

In this *Cult of Pedagogy* article, Jennifer Gonzalez remembers a day in her fourth year as a middle-school ELA teacher (she'd arrived at the school in mid-January to replace a teacher who'd just retired) when she felt her gorge rising. She'd worked hard the night before preparing a card-sorting activity, but some students weren't getting started after she gave instructions, a boy grabbed a girl's purse, and the girl squealed flirtatiously and started hitting his arm.

"As I tried to get them back on track," says Gonzalez, "I found myself getting in my head. They would never act this way in Tony's class, I thought like I often did, comparing myself to my much more experienced mentor down the hall. They don't respect me." When she saw two students laughing, she assumed they were laughing at her. Then a desk got knocked over, students laughed, and she lost her temper and yelled loudly at the class.

"They sat in stunned silence while I ranted for another twenty seconds or so, and then for a moment, I just looked at them and they looked back at me." That's when Gonzalez felt a wave of shame. The tears were coming and she headed out the door, asked the teacher next door to watch her class, and locked herself in the bathroom and cried and cried.

Are tears in front of students – this kind of loss-of-control crying – okay? If it's a one-time thing, it's pretty common, says Gonzalez, especially among first-year teachers, and should not be seen as the end of the world. It's part of growing a thicker skin. Students may even show remorse, turn on their misbehaving and disrespectful classmates, and play a part in improving classroom dynamics. But if crying becomes a pattern, it can lead colleagues and administrators to believe you can't handle the job. That could be true, or it might be a poorly-run school, a mismatched teaching assignment, or personal problems outside of school.

In Gonzalez's case, the incident made her determined that it would not happen again. For starters, she analyzed the factors that produced that moment:

- Taking things personally – "When we let our thoughts go in this direction," she says, "it's easy to get our feelings hurt."

- Feeling disrespected – When Gonzalez compared the way students acted with her versus her colleague down the hall, it made her feel weak and ineffective, triggering the tears.
- Overwhelming demands on time and attention – Students need help, technology breaks down, a desk crashes to the floor.
- Shame – "Feeling incompetent is awful," she says, especially when a supervisor or colleague sees your out-of-control class.

Gonzalez suggests some strategies to prevent these moments – and cope with them if they occur:

• Pay attention to early signs and regulate your emotions – Take slow, deep breaths, count to ten, or go for a short walk after getting someone to cover your class.

• Do something totally unexpected. Here's an example. Stop teaching, sit in a chair at the front of the class, open a notebook to a blank page, and start writing. "Within a minute," she says, "this calm, simple act would silence the whole class, because they had no idea what I was doing, and my sudden stillness caught them off guard. As I wrote, I felt my adrenaline and anxiety dropping, my breathing becoming slower, my sense of self-control returning."

"In between short bursts of writing, I'd breathe and look around the room, taking in all of their faces and mentally noting all the ones who really hadn't caused any trouble at all. Every time I did this, I was surprised to discover that what I thought was an out-of-control class was actually more like 3 or 4 kids who were giving me trouble, another handful that were merely distracted by the show and a whole lot more who were mostly just waiting for things to get back to normal. Huh. That's the sound my brain would make upon realizing this."

• Tell yourself a different story. Using cognitive reframing with the incident described above would have consisted of acknowledging that the activity she had planned wasn't working, and she needed to scrap it or start again.

• Move into third person. "When you're feeling emotionally triggered," says Gonzalez, "it can be incredibly helpful to take one step away from yourself mentally and think of yourself as an observer of your own mind, rather than letting your emotions dictate how you interpret a situation."

• Approach situations with curiosity and care. "By doing this," she says, "it makes students seem less threatening, it moves the focus off of yourself, and it helps get you into problem-solving mode." When a student doesn't follow instructions you've just given, it seems disrespectful and rude, but what else could be going on? The student is preoccupied? Simply didn't hear you?? Of course, this approach works best if you know students really well.

The day after Gonzalez's meltdown with the seventh graders, she spent a few minutes talking to the class about what happened: "Although they hadn't seen me cry, I wanted them to know that I had kind of lost it, that I was a little embarrassed, and that it made me realize that I needed to get better about communicating expectations and giving clearer instructions. Then we moved on and it never happened again."

"Some Thoughts on Teachers Crying in the Classroom" by Jennifer Gonzalez in *Cult of Pedagogy*, March 17, 2024, summarized in Marshall Memo 1029

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10. Overcoming Reluctance to Ask for Help

In this *Harvard Business Review* article, Manfred Kets de Vries (INSEAD) says that self-reliance is a much-admired quality in our society. "But if you want to be fulfilled and successful at work," he says, "it's important to acknowledge when you're working beyond your individual capacity and be open to seeking assistance."

The problem is a variety of psychological factors that lead people to go it alone when they shouldn't:

- Fear of appearing incompetent and weak – The person might also be suffering from imposter syndrome.
- Needing to be self-sufficient – Some people are programmed by family and cultural mores to play Lone Ranger.
- Fear of losing control – Resistance to reaching out might be a reluctance to being beholden to others.
- Fear of rejection – What if the person we ask for help says no? It's hard not to take that personally.
- Overempathizing with others – We're so tuned in to other people's heavy workload or stress level that we don't want to impose on them.
- A sense of victimhood – Some people go through life with a sense that they don't deserve to be helped, so they never ask.

"Clearly, many of the people caught up in these behaviors have self-esteem issues," says de Vries. "But history isn't destiny. Once you've figured out why you avoid asking for help, it's possible to change your behavior." His pointers on rewriting the inner script:

• Seek counsel. Sitting with a coach or therapist might make a big difference, especially for people who have grown up in a caretaker role, always tending to others and not themselves.

• Reframe. Rather than seeing a request for help as a burden on colleagues and family members, see it as an opportunity for them to step up and contribute. "When you place trust in others," says de Vries, "you show that you value them, which deepens the relationship. In turn they'll trust you enough to ask for help when they're in need themselves." A rejected request for help can also be reframed as feedback on how and when to ask for help next time.

• Be SMART. Make requests that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound. Explain why you need help, suggest steps the other person could take, be aware of the other person's capabilities, and be explicit about when it needs to happen. It's also wise to be smart about timing and tone, not asking people for help when they're stressed out or in a bad mood.

• Communicate. One of de Vries's clients was so stoic that her colleagues, friends, and family members had no idea what she was going through juggling stressful work and childcare responsibilities. By being more open about her feelings, and by having lunch in the company's cafeteria rather than bringing her own and eating alone in her office, she opened channels and even got some offers of help without asking.

• Just do it. "As with any skill," says de Vries, "asking for help gets much easier with practice." His stoic client was surprised when she got offers to split carpooling children to school, and that success motivated her to reach out to a former university classmate for a monthly chat about knotty issues in their respective workplaces.

"Why It's So Hard to Ask for Help" by Manfred Kets de Vries in *Harvard Business Re*view, July/August 2023 (Vol. 101, #4, pp. 139-143), summarized in Marshall Memo 994

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11. Productive and Unproductive Teacher Mindsets

In this *Kappan* article, William Powell and Ochan Kusuma-Powell (drawing on the work of Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey) list some aspirational goals embraced by many teachers:

- I would like to see all my students achieve success.
- I want to better meet the needs of diverse learners in my class.
- I want to be more student-centered.
- I want to personalize learning so every student feels included and invited to learn.

But then they list some unconscious tendencies that pull teachers in another direction:

- I like to feel in control of the classroom.
- I need to be needed.
- I want students to feel I am indispensable to their learning.
- I don't want to try something new, fail, and look like a fool.
- I tend to think that the way I learn is the best way.

Here are some of the ways these tendencies can show up in classrooms:

- I have a tendency to jump in to "save the day." I like to be helpful.
- I look for (or manufacture) situations in which students depend on me for their learning.
- Sometimes I don't listen well.
- I have difficulty appreciating that other people may learn differently.
- My approach works for most kids.

Powell and Kusuma-Powell highlight the underlying assumptions that need to be confronted in all classrooms, especially new teachers whose habits and mindsets can still be shaped:

- I assume I won't feel professional satisfaction unless all learning in the class comes from me.
- I assume that success (mine and students') is monolithic and defined by outside forces over which I have no control.
- I assume that failure (mine and students') is something to be avoided, rather than something to be learned from.
- I assume that to engage in public learning may be a sign of weakness (that I don't know everything I'm supposed to know) and may make me look like a fool.

"Overcoming Resistance to New Ideas" by William Powell and Ochan Kusuma-Powell in *Phi Delta Kappan*, May 2015 (Vol. 96, #8, pp. 66-69), adapted from Immunity to Change by Kegan and Lahey (Harvard Business Press, 2009), summarized in Memo 587

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12. Twelve Ways to Build Resilience

Teaching, says Jennifer Gonzalez in this *Cult of Pedagogy* article, "traps us in small rooms with an unpredictable assortment of personalities, energies, and needs. It forces us to make hundreds of small, exhausting decisions every day. And over and over again, it puts us in predicaments that test our confidence, wear out our patience, and break our hearts. You can learn all the techniques, plan outstanding lessons, and set up a watertight classroom management system, but to do this work and stick with it long enough to get good at it, you need a level of emotional resilience most other jobs will never require."

Fortunately, says Gonzalez, there is helpful advice in Elena Aguilar's book, Onward: Cultivating Emotional Resilience in Educators (Jossey-Bass, 2018). "The best way to make all twelve of these habits stick," says Gonzalez, "is to work through them slowly, over the course of the year. Even better, do it with a group of committed colleagues."

• Know yourself. "Being really anchored in your purpose, being really clear about what you want to be doing in life, helps you deal with challenges and setbacks," says Aguilar.

• Understand emotions. It's important to examine the way feelings influence our thinking (and vice-versa) and work with them instead of against them.

• Tell empowering stories to reframe classroom events. For example, when a student rolls her eyes at you, the story could be, "This student doesn't respect me," but it could also be, "This is very typical behavior from 12-year-olds, and I'm going to move on to the next part of the lesson."

• Build community. Nurturing relationships with colleagues, students, parents, and administrators strengthens resilience. The beginning of the school year is an ideal time to focus on this.

• Be here now. Mindfulness – focusing on what is happening right now without judgment – can help prevent unhelpful "triggered" reactions to daily challenges. Daily meditation or brief moments of focusing on our breathing can help bring us to that place of calm.

• Take care of yourself. "I think people know what to do," says Aguilar. "We know we should be eating more leafy greens and exercising more and so on, but why is it so hard?" Finding out why can help develop healthier habits.

• Focus on the bright spots. "Our brains have a negativity bias," says Aguilar, "so everything that is challenging, that is potentially a threat, appears really vividly and clearly to us, because of the way our brains are wired, and so one of the skills that we need to hone is the ability to see all the things that are going well or even just okay."

• Cultivate compassion. We can get out of the drama of the moment by empathizing with others' points of view and seeing the big picture.

• Be a learner. “Resilient people experience a challenge and turn around and say, Wow. That was really hard. That pushed me to my limits. What can I learn from that?”

• Play and create. “I think it’s a human right to be creative, to create, enjoy, and appreciate art,” says Aguilar. “Playing and creating can unlock inner resources for dealing with stress, for solving problems… It can help us see different things and find different approaches to tackle problems.”

• Ride the waves of change. Slow down, face and deal with fear, and ask how we can direct our energy to the actions that make the biggest difference.

• Celebrate and appreciate. Savor our own accomplishments and those of our students and colleagues.

“12 Ways Teachers Can Build Their Own Resilience” by Jennifer Gonzalez and Elena Aguilar in *The Cult of Pedagogy*, May 6, 2018, summarized in Marshall Memo 736

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Practical Tips for Rookies

13. A Non-Perfectionist Approach to the First Year of Teaching

(Originally titled “Redefining Success for First-Year Teachers”)

In this *Educational Leadership* article, veteran teacher Erin Nerlino says she came very close to quitting during her first year. Looking back, she realizes that all her pre-service training didn’t prepare her for a “lingering and pervasive feeling of failure.” She has these first-year suggestions:

• Identify lesson shortcomings. Seeing what went wrong and adapting is the first step. “For now,” says Merlino, “it’s enough that you recognize areas for improvement as the basis for growth.”

• Get lots of feedback. Asking supervisors and fellow teachers to visit and give informal advice pays dividends, including helpful tips and less discomfort with observations.

• Ask for help in specific areas. New teachers need to not be too hard on themselves, focus on a few areas, read relevant articles and books, and reach out to trusted mentors.

• Observe other teachers. This is the best way to find solutions to common issues, model openness, and find kindred spirits.

• Show care for students. Asking about their lives and well-being (including their pets) “is fundamental,” says Merlino. “This emotional connection forms the basis of a positive learning environment and can compensate for areas where you’re still developing expertise.”

• Keep believing in students’ potential. Teachers’ dogged faith in all students’ ability to make progress and achieve is crucial.

• Engage in difficult conversations. Stepping up to the plate with discipline problems is vital, says Merlino: “Creating a climate of respect is as much a part of teaching as content delivery.”

• Listen to student feedback. Periodic surveys, asking students about a lesson or unit, and informal chats provide valuable ideas.

• Celebrate small victories. This might be a shy student participating in a discussion or a student expressing pride in a piece of work.

• Plan for the next year. "If you have a list of new classroom management techniques and lesson ideas you want to implement," says Merlino, "you've finished the year strong."

"Redefining Success for First-Year Teachers" by Erin Nerlino in *Educational Leadership*, March 2025 (Vol. 82, #6, online only), summarized in Marshall Memo 1077

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14. 20/20 Hindsight on a Bad Year

(Originally titled "Now That I Know What I Know")

In this *Educational Leadership* article, high-school English teacher Dan Brown describes his naïve assumptions as he started teaching in New York City in 2003 – and the horrible first year that ensued. Brown resigned that summer, wrote a book about his experience, and returned to the classroom a year later, determined to do better. He did, eventually earning National Board Certification. But it was years before he understood why that first year went so badly – for him and thousands of others. The central problem, he now believes, is that new teachers "don't know what they don't know." He had bought into the idea that anybody with intelligence and motivation can succeed at teaching and if they don't, it's their fault. Here's his analysis of the real success factors. If even one is missing, he believes, the whole ship can sink.

• *Comfort with your teacher persona* – "You can't entirely be yourself as a teacher," says Brown; "you have to cultivate a teacher persona – a blend of your real self and the benevolent pedagogical manipulator and authority figure that teachers must be… As Dan, I don't really care if a kid tucks in his shirt. As Mr. Brown, little matters more. As Dan, I utter a curse word every now and then. As Mr. Brown, foul language offends me deeply." Brown recommends closely observing a variety of teachers in action, trying some of their strategies, and above all, learning students' names as soon as humanly possible. "It all boils down to coming across as well-organized and kind," he says; "these are the two qualities that stand out to students more than any other… Kids can sense phoniness or fear… Losing your composure in front of students is bad, bad news."

• *Familiarity with the school community* – It's a mistake to think that closing your classroom door and controlling your room will lead to success, says Brown: "Relationships among adults beyond the classroom walls make all the difference in a school. This includes administrators and colleagues, of course – but also parents… Phone calls, e-mails, and conversations on the blacktop are very important."

• *Dedication to the job* – "Part of persevering in this profession," says Brown, "involves carrying a high threshold for bureaucratic blunders, miscarriages of justice, untimely copy machine malfunctions, misguided policies, betrayals of trust, and other epic travesties – as well

as one's own mistakes." It's crucial to collaborate with veteran teachers on issues like lesson planning, and if the school doesn't support this, new teachers need to reach out and make it happen underground. "Novice teachers can only figure out so much on their own," he avers. "Dedication to the job means forging relationships and creating opportunities to pick colleagues' brains, figure out what works, and apply it to your class."

• *A supportive school leader* – "For much of my first year, the sight of administrators filled me with dread," he says. "The idea that they could help me become a better teacher was not even a passing thought; they were menaces to avoid." In his current school in Washington, D.C., he has nothing but praise for his leaders; they run a tight ship, build school culture, support teachers, and help him forge external partnerships.

• *High-quality curriculum* – "Administrators who choose scripted test prep are operating from a position of fear," says Brown. "Scripted curriculums are boring for students and teachers. People don't have breakthroughs or epiphanies, and it's deadening for intellectual curiosity." There's exciting and empowering material out there, and teachers need to be able to use it, he says.

• *District policies that promote good teaching* – Brown had bad experiences with district administrators in his early years, including one district superintendent who photographed teachers' bulletin boards and put stinging critiques in their permanent files. "New teachers can't thrive when their supervisors' priorities do not involve excellent teaching," he says.

"Now That I Know What I Know" by Dan Brown in *Educational Leadership*, May 2012 (Vol. 69, #8, pp. 24-28), summarized in Marshall Memo 436

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15. Avoiding Some Common Pitfalls

(Originally titled "Avoiding the Siren Calls")

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Mark Wise and Beth Pandolpho (West Windsor-Plainsboro Regional School District, New Jersey) identify five "siren calls" that can prevent novice teachers from having a successful first year:

• *Siren call #1: Stay on top of the details and everything else will fall into place*. Following this advice can make teachers look like bureaucrats and distract them from what matters most: getting to know their students. "Teachers who ask students about their lives and share theirs in return," say Wise and Pandolpho, "can bridge the divide between adults who seem to have all the answers and students who are still figuring things out. These meaningful relationships can also support and inform a new teacher's classroom practices and policies."

• *Siren call #2: The most important thing is preparing lesson activities*. This runs the risk of students being busy with things that aren't part of a well-planned unit focused on key knowledge and skills, big ideas, essential questions, and transfer goals. It also lulls the teacher into believing that when students complete the activities, it means the lesson was successful –

which might not be the case. Framing solid lesson objectives is not just a compliance exercise; it's at the heart of moving students toward important learning outcomes.

• *Siren call #3: When students are working in groups, the lesson is student-centered.* Not necessarily, say Wise and Pandolpho: "New teachers may earnestly, but mistakenly, assign 'group' work that consists of routine tasks that could just as easily be completed independently… A group-worthy task challenges students to generate new ideas and revise their collective thinking in their quest to solve a problem, answer a question, or create an original product. It requires the unique talents and abilities of all members as they work independently and together to create a final product."

• *Siren call #4: Quick-hit checks for understanding do the job*. Asking "Does anyone have any questions?" or asking students to give a thumbs-up or thumbs-down signal does not give a teacher a good sense of student mastery. Neither does calling on a few confident students who have the right answer, and taking the quiet compliance of the rest of the class as evidence of learning. "The importance of checking for understanding in a thorough way cannot be overstated," say Wise and Pandolpho. The key is getting information on all students' learning and fixing misconceptions and errors in real time.

• *Siren call #5: Exit tickets are the best way to get a handle on student mastery*. The problem with this kind of end-of-lesson check-in, say Wise and Pandolpho, is that there will be at least a 24-hour delay in following up on students' errors and misconceptions. "Imagine a football team down by 20 points at halftime with a coach who doesn't offer any new ideas," they say, "or a violin tutor who does not provide feedback when a measure is played sharply out of tune… Timely feedback can be just as powerful a tool for classroom educators as it is for coaches and music instructors." New teachers must have a sense of urgency about during-lesson, on-the-spot checks for understanding, followed immediately by appropriate praise and correctives.

"Avoiding the Siren Calls" by Mark Wise and Beth Pandolpho in *Educational Leadership*, September 2019 (Vol. 77, #1, pp. 22-29). summarized in Marshall Memo 802

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

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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."

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American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
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American School Board Journal
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