

Marshall Memo 977

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
March 13, 2023

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Quotes of the Week

“Disability only becomes a tragedy when society fails to provide the things we need to lead our lives — job opportunities or barrier-free buildings, for example. It is not a tragedy to me that I’m living in a wheelchair.”

Judy Heumann, “Mother of the Disability Rights Movement,” who died last week at 75; see this [interview](#) with Trevor Noah and the documentary [Crip Camp](#).

“Part of the problem is that we tend to think that equality is about treating everyone the same, when it’s not. It’s about fairness. It’s about equity of access.”

Judy Heumann in *Being Heumann: An Unrepentant Memoir of a Disability Rights Activist* (Beacon Press, 2021)

“Our anger was a fury sparked by profound injustices. Wrongs that deserved ire. And with that rage we ripped a hole in the status quo.”

Judy Heumann (*ibid.*)

“Change never happens at the pace we think it should. It happens over years of people joining together, strategizing, sharing, and pulling all the levers they possibly can. Gradually, excruciatingly slowly, things start to happen, and then suddenly, seemingly out of the blue, something will tip.”

Judy Heumann (*ibid.*)

“... adjusting the budget so that students who need more, get more.”

Nathan Levenson (see item #2)

“It is like the needles on a magnetic compass reversing their polarities. Suddenly, working for gender equality means focusing on boys rather than girls.”

Richard Reeves (quoted in item #1)

“When her car would pull in the driveway, I would start to be like, ‘Oh gosh, now what?’”
A principal on her reaction to a visit from her superintendent (see item #3)

1. The Future Looks Better for Girls – but Not for Many Boys

“The notion of female equality is, historically, an innovation,” says Idrees Kahloon in *The New Yorker*. In recent years, that innovation has taken hold. “By a variety of metrics,” says Kahloon, “men are falling behind parity. Is the second sex becoming the better half?” He lists some data points – while mentioning the continued dominance of men in many social and economic areas (women make 84 cents for every dollar earned by men):

- At the elementary, secondary, and college level, boys’ and men’s academic performance is lower than girls’ and women’s.
- Boys are at least twice as likely to be diagnosed with ADHD and twice as likely to be suspended in K-12 schools.
- Boys are more affected than girls when they grow up in single-parent households. “The gender gap in school suspensions, already large, more than doubles among children with single mothers,” says Kahloon.
- The undergraduate gender ratio is close to two females for one male (in the 1980s it was 50/50), and women earn 3/5 of all bachelor’s and master’s degrees.
- Women are the majority of current medical and law students and 40 percent of business school students.
- Automation and globalization have decimated traditional blue-collar jobs traditionally held by men.
- Men are increasingly dropping out of the workforce in their prime working years.
- There’s an increase of alcohol abuse, drug overdoses, early deaths, and suicides among men.
- Diaries of unemployed men show they are spending most of their time on screens (video games have become more immersive and compelling) rather than doing household chores, caring for family members, or being involved in their communities.
- Right-wing ideology thrives among men, says Kahloon, “premised on a return to better times, when America was great – and, unsubtly, when men could really be men.”
- The Internet “manosphere” is steering impressionable boys toward misogyny.
- A significant number of men are failing to perform their paternal obligations.

- These burdens fall most heavily on African-American men and men without college degrees.

“It is like the needles on a magnetic compass reversing their polarities,” says Richard Reeves in his recent book, *Of Boys and Men*. “Suddenly, working for gender equality means focusing on boys rather than girls... As far as I can tell, nobody predicted that women would overtake men so rapidly, so comprehensively, or so consistently around the world.”

The wage gap, which has closed somewhat, is still heavily influenced by the unequal impact of childbearing and rearing due to employers’ rigid policies. “For most women,” says Reeves, “having a child is the economic equivalent of being hit by a meteorite. For most men, it barely makes a dent.” In the wake of the pandemic, that may be changing somewhat as employers are forced to become more flexible with work schedules.

Reeves has a number of policy ideas to foster “prosocial masculinity for a postfeminist world,” among them:

- Creating more vocational high schools.
- Encouraging more men to become nurses and teachers.
- Expanding paid leave.
- “Redshirting” boys – giving them an extra year in kindergarten so the gender difference in cognitive development has a chance to even out.

Redshirting is controversial, says Kahloon; some studies show negative effects.

“Masculinity is fragile,” he concludes. “It’s also malleable. The shapes it will assume in the future have consequences.”

[“Falling Behind: What’s the Matter with Men?”](#) by Idrees Kahloon in *The New Yorker*, January 30, 2023

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2. “Equity Formulas” to Level the School Budget Playing Field

(Originally titled “Improving Budget Fairness (Without the Pushback)”)

In this *Educational Leadership* article, former superintendent Nathan Levenson tells the story of a district leader who lost his job when he tried to shift funds from schools in wealthier neighborhoods to schools serving higher-need students. This district was operating under the traditional paradigm of equal resources to all schools – one reading teacher, one instructional coach, similar class sizes. When the superintendent tried to move funds according to student needs, there was fierce pushback from parents, teachers, and school leaders in the more-fortunate schools slated to lose positions. People were fine with adding funds to certain schools in the interest of equity, but definitely not by subtracting funds from their schools.

One solution in situations like this is to increase the overall budget, making it possible to add funds to needier schools without taking away from others. But in lean budget times, this is not an option; for higher-need schools to get additional resources, other schools will have to have less, and there will be passionate resistance.

This can be reduced, says Levenson, if districts adopt *equity formulas*: “a transparent and precise way to calculate need in all schools” and “adjusting the budget so that students who need more, get more” – with the goal of guaranteeing sufficient resources for *all* students.

The first step for a district considering equity formulas is determining how much staffing is required for several key areas – for example:

- One reading specialist for every 35 students who score below the benchmark on a literacy assessment;
- One instructional coach for every 20 teachers with less than five years of teaching experience;
- One counselor for every 75 students identified by a universal screener for mental health and trauma.

Applying research-based equity formulas like these often reveals that some schools are over-resourced and others have critical needs, pointing to a fairer and more equitable allocation of resources.

Levenson gives an example: the principal in a wealthier school was upset when the superintendent proposed a reallocation of reading teachers that would reduce her staffing. It turned out that the principal’s school had 15 students who needed a reading specialist while another school had 105 struggling readers. Applying the equity formula to the data, it seemed reasonable that the wealthier school should be reduced to one half-time reading specialist while the lower-SES school should have three full-time reading teachers. Looking at the whole district, the superintendent was able to make the case for shifting reading teachers away from several over-resourced schools while still serving the small number of low-performing students in those schools, thus meeting all students’ needs and not busting the budget.

Levenson has used this approach in a number of districts and found it very helpful in determining and explaining equitable allocations and reducing resistance to equity-focused budgeting. He has several practical suggestions:

- Focus on only a few key staffing areas (e.g., reading specialists, instructional coaches, and mental health counselors).
- Decide on a research-based staffing formula for each area.
- Involve principals in setting the formulas.

Levenson includes two cartoons showing the difference between equity “by addition” and equity “by transfer.” Click the article link below to see them.

[“Improving Budget Fairness \(Without the Pushback\)”](#) by Nathan Levenson in *Educational Leadership*, March 2023 (Vol. 80, #6, pp. 64-69); Levenson can be reached at nlevenson@newsolutionsk12.com.

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3. What Does It Take for a Superintendent to Earn Principals’ Trust?

In this article in *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice*, Justin Benna (North Dakota State University) examines how five elementary principals in New England perceived and experienced their superintendents’ trustworthiness. From in-depth interviews and a review

of the research, Benna found that principals gauged their bosses' trustworthiness in four overlapping (and sometimes contradictory) areas:

- **Support** – This included the ways in which principals saw their superintendent enhancing and reinforcing their own school leadership, specifically:

- *Providing guidance* – Offering suggestions, answering questions, and helping to generate options as principals dealt with problems, opportunities, and projects. Guidance could be helpful, but sometimes the superintendent became directive in ways the principal saw as impinging on their autonomy. A key variable was the principal's sense of the superintendent's competence.
- *Taking action* – Superintendents scored trustworthiness points when they reinforced a principal's decisions (especially helpful when extra clout was needed in personnel decisions) and protected them from potential negative consequences.
- *Building a supportive district team* – Principals appreciated the superintendent orchestrating staff support on legal issues, state requirements, and curriculum questions.

- **Autonomy** – The key was superintendents supporting principals and at the same time respecting them as leaders of their own schools. “A superintendent who strikes this balance,” says Benna, “sends a powerful message to a principal: that the principal is trusted.” He found three key areas:

- *Volition* – Principals were deeply appreciative when their boss granted them time to get to know their school, experiment and figure out their own strategies, and be free from micromanagement.
- *Role boundaries* – Building leaders appreciated clarity on when, how, and why it was appropriate for the superintendent to step in and what the bigger picture of authority was in the district. In the words of one principal: “Yes, the superintendent is the boss, but I also feel like it should be more of an open partnership. You're both directing different parts of the district, but for the same goal. There shouldn't necessarily be a ton of friction.”
- *Knowing the context* – “Participants expressed appreciation when they noticed how superintendents approached and validated the unique context of the principals' schools,” says Benna. “Superintendents who sought to understand and demonstrated an understanding of a school's context were also perceived to be better positioned to provide principals with support.”

- **Presence** – This was a willingness to “be there” at key moments when the superintendent's physical presence was meaningful and supportive. The opposite of this was the boss being intrusive. In the words of one principal: “When her car would pull in the driveway, I would start to be like, ‘Oh gosh, now what?’” Principals appreciated it when superintendents were available (when needed) and visible:

- *Availability* – Could the principal reach the superintendent when needed (while recognizing that they are always busy), and were district leaders attentive, invested, and responsive? Being reachable was especially important in emergency situations; at those

times, a quick response really built trust. The opposite, said one principal, was the feeling of being “dangled out there with no support.”

- *Visibility* – Seeking out face-to-face interactions and being in tune with the daily heartbeat of schools and the larger district scene demonstrated concern, interest, and commitment and built trust. The opposite of this was infrequent visits to schools and showing no interest in getting into classrooms, watching student performances, or talking about instruction.

- *Openness* – The final trust-building aspect of superintendents’ leadership was their style of communication in two key areas:

- *Asking questions, showing vulnerability, and listening* – In Benna’s interviews, principals repeatedly spoke of the importance of these traits, which he says demonstrated superintendents’ “genuine interest in knowing about individual schools, educators, students, and families.” Questioning and listening also showed that the boss saw the principal-superintendent team as interdependent, and “that superintendents relied upon knowing and learning from others to inform the course of their own leadership.” In the words of one principal, “That exudes that lifelong learner type mentality. I would trust them going forward.”

- *Being honest, clear, and transparent* – These three were closely linked in principals’ minds as they assessed their bosses’ trustworthiness. As soon as a superintendent’s honesty came into question, principals were wary in their interactions, and if they had the option to leave the district, they did.

In short, says Benna, a trusting bond with the superintendent was an important factor in principals’ success. One principal said it allowed her “to be able to fully participate and not be afraid. You have to be able to do that in order to grow and push yourself. You have to be able to take risks... And I think that I’ve been a better leader because of it.” Another principal said that with a trusting relationship with her superintendent, “People become more light-hearted, and they go about their day because an assumption is there that you’ve built that relationship and so there’s much more energy for other things.”

But Benna found that many of the principals had worked with superintendents they didn’t trust, and one said flatly that he’d rarely had a superintendent who was trustworthy. “The trust factor,” said this principal, “while very important, is not something that I’ve experienced a whole lot. So, while we would all want a superintendent we can trust, that’s not the end all and be all. Sometimes you don’t have that person and you just have to make sure that you surround yourself with supportive staff, supportive parents, a supportive school board, and keep on going, doing the right thing.”

Benna sums up: “Superintendent trustworthiness is desired and perceived to enhance the principals’ work and professional lives, but it is not something that they depend on. In other words, a principal’s perception of superintendent trustworthiness is *complementary to but not required for* a principal’s own sense of efficacy, commitment and resolve as a school leader.”

[“Superintendents’ Trustworthiness: Elementary School Principals’ Experience and Perceptions”](#) by Justin Benna in *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice*, Winter 2023 (Vol.19, #4, pp. 9-25); Benna can be reached at justin.benna@ndsu.edu.

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4. Can Constraints Make Us More Creative?

In this *Science of Creativity* article, Annie Murphy Paul says that in 1957, Theodor Geisel’s publisher bet him (Dr. Seuss) that he couldn’t write a children’s book using 50 or fewer words. This was challenging – *The Cat in the Hat* had used 236 words – but Geisel accepted the bet and went to work. Treating it as a math problem, he put words and flow charts on the wall and finally won the bet with *Green Eggs and Ham*, which was published in 1960 and became a classic.

For psychologist Catrinel Tromp (Rider University), this was an example of how working with constraints can actually boost creativity. It’s commonly assumed that creative people need an unstructured, open-ended palette free of external limits, but Tromp and other researchers have found that working within strictly defined limits can produce fresher, more-original ideas.

Why? Because with open-ended, blank-sheet-of-paper tasks, we tend to use what’s worked for us in the past, whereas constrained tasks have a “forcing function,” says Paul; “they make us look farther afield, for solutions that will satisfy a particular set of demands. The domains in which we search for those solutions are fewer in number, and so we search those domains more deeply. We tap knowledge that has previously gone unused; we reorganize and restructure that knowledge; we come up with ingenious new associations and connections.”

Paul suggests five steps that an artist, writer, or student might follow to get the most out of a constrained creative challenge:

- State the constraints at the beginning of the process.
- Find the “sweet spot” between too many constraints and too few, with just enough room to experiment.
- Write them down and post them where you can see them as you work.
- Choose to focus on a few things (for example, the many shades of blue in a painting) and/or decide on what to exclude (no color, only black and white).
- Try to avoid what you’ve used in the past.
- Adopt a positive attitude toward the constraints: they’re your friend, not your enemy.

[“Freedom Is Bad for Creativity”](#) by Annie Murphy Paul in *Science of Creativity*, March 7, 2023

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5. Useful Feedback on Student Work

In this *Tips for Teaching Professors* article, Breana Bayraktar says students definitely want feedback on their work, “yet there’s the sneaking sense that students haven’t even read your comments, much less revised their work accordingly.” Why would that happen?

- Timing – feedback didn’t come when it could be transferred to students’ next task.
- General – feedback wasn’t relevant to students’ work.
- Vocabulary – students might not understand the academic language instructors use.
- Skillset – students weren’t prepared to make sense of feedback and put it to work.
- High stakes – students paid more attention to the grade than the feedback.

Bayraktar says the solution to these problems is frequent, formative, low-stakes feedback as students work on a project or writing product, providing timely, actionable, understandable support geared to incremental improvement toward the final product. This approach is more effective and makes better use of students’ and instructors’ time.

[“Tip: Feedback Students Actually Read”](#) by Beana Bayraktar in *Tips for Teaching Professors*, March 3, 2023

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6. Getting the Most Out of Frequent Check-In Meetings

“None of us want more meetings in our schedules,” says Minda Zetlin in this article in *Inc.*, but according to behavioral scientist Jessica Wisdom, having brief weekly check-ins results in better employee engagement, trust, satisfaction, and retention.

To make check-in meetings optimally productive, Wisdom suggests that managers and their direct reports collaboratively set the agenda. The heart of each meeting is posing these five questions:

- *What’s going well?*
- *Where can I help?*
- *What are your top priorities these days?*
- *Is there anything new or upcoming that should be on my radar?*
- *How are you feeling outside of work?*

Taking notes on action items and following up afterward, says Wisdom, is vital to the manager’s credibility. It’s also important, says Zetlin, to give colleagues the bigger picture about the organization and talk about career development

[“The Best Leaders Ask These 5 Questions Every Week, According to a Behavioral Scientist”](#) by Minda Zetlin in *Inc.*, March 12, 2023

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7. Room for Improvement in Elementary Social Studies

In this RAND Corporation paper, Melissa Kay Diliberti, Ashley Woo, and Julia Kaufman report on a literature review and survey of teachers and principals on social studies instruction in U.S. elementary schools in 2021-22. Their main findings:

- Social studies curriculum standards vary in quality and detail from state to state.
- There is very little student assessment on and accountability for the standards that exist.
- Principals are less likely to observe and evaluate teachers when they are teaching social studies (compared to ELA, math, and to a lesser degree science).

- There is less professional development in social studies than in other core areas.
- Only half of the principals surveyed said they had recently adopted published curriculum materials in social studies.

Diliberti, Woo, and Kaufman note the key role of social studies in developing students' civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions, and recommend beefing up social studies instruction in each of these areas, including adopting standards geared to existing national frameworks.

[“The Missing Infrastructure for Elementary \(K-5\) Social Studies Instruction”](#) by Melissa Kay Diliberti, Ashley Woo, and Julia Kaufman, RAND Corporation, March 7, 2023

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8. Children’s Books That Support the Teaching of Black History

In this article in *Social Studies for the Young Learner*, Brianne Pitts (Western Michigan University) and Dawnvyn James (University of Buffalo) recommend books that support the teaching of African-American history in the elementary and middle grades, following LaGarrett King’s eight-part framework for Black Historical Consciousness (see Memo 872):

- Power and Oppression:
 - *Unspeakable: The Tulsa Race Massacre* by Carole Boston Weatherford, illustrated by Floyd Cooper
 - *Stamped for Kids: Racism, Antiracism, and You* by Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi, art by Rachelle Baker
- Black Agency, Resistance, and Perseverance:
 - *Your Legacy* by Schele Williams, illustrated by Tonya Engel
 - *Heart and Soul: The Story of America and African Americans* by Kadir Nelson
- Africa and the African Diaspora:
 - *Africa, Amazing Africa* by Atinuke, illustrated by Mouni Feddag
 - *Schomburg: The Man Who Built a Library* by Carole Boston Weatherford, illustrated by Eric Velasquez
- Black Joy and Emotionality:
 - *Crown: An Ode to a Fresh Cut* by Derrick Barnes, illustrated by Gordon James
 - *The ABCs of Black History* by Rio Cortez, illustrated by Lauren Semmer
- Black Identities:
 - *What Do You Do with a Voice Like That? The Story of Extraordinary Congresswoman Barbara Jordan* by Chris Barton, illustrated by Ekua Holmes
 - *Voice of Freedom: Fannie Lou Hamer, Spirit of the Civil Rights Movement* by Carole Boston Weatherford, illustrated by Ekua Holmes
 - *Woke Kindergarten* by Ki Gross
- Black Historical Contention:
 - *1619 Project: Born on the Water* by Nikole Hannah-Jones and Renée Watson, illustrated by Nikkolas Smith

- *The ABCs of the Black Panther Party* by Chemay Morales-James and S. Khalilah Brann, illustrated by Uela May
- Black Community, Local, and Social Histories:
 - *H Is for Harlem* by Dinah Johnson, illustrated by April Harrison
 - *The People Remember* by Ibi Zoboi, illustrated by Loveis Wise
- Black Futurism:
 - *The Me I Choose to Be* by Natasha Anastasia Tarpley, art by Regis and Kahran Bethencourt

[“Committed to Teaching Black History: Children’s Books That Champion Black Historical Consciousness”](#) by Brianne Pitts and Dawnvyn James in *Social Studies for the Young Learner*, January/February 2023 (Vol. 35, #3, pp. 13-19); the authors can be reached at brianne.pitts@wmich.edu and dawnvyn@buffalo.edu.

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About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and other educators very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 48 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, writer, and consultant lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 60 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through more than a hundred articles each week, and selects 5-10 that have the greatest potential to improve teaching, leadership, and learning. He then writes a brief summary of each article, pulls out several striking quotes, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the Memo to subscribers every Monday evening (with occasional breaks; there are 50 issues a year). Every week there's a podcast and HTML version as well.

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- The current issue (in Word or PDF)
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- The "classic" articles from all 14 years

Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

All Things PLC
American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
AMLE Magazine
ASCA School Counselor
ASCD SmartBrief
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
English Journal
Exceptional Children
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Educational Review
Independent School
Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Kappan (Phi Delta Kappan)
Knowledge Quest
Language Arts
Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance)
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Principal
Principal Leadership
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Social Education
Social Studies and the Young Learner
Teachers College Record
Teaching Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Journal of the Learning Sciences
The Language Educator
The Learning Professional (formerly Journal of Staff Development)
The New York Times
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Time
Urban Education