

Marshall Memo 1121

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
January 19, 2026

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Quotes of the Week

“To do anything well, students need to practice it, ideally in the presence of a teacher who can guide them when they struggle.”

James Lang (see item #1)

“Black boys deserve schools that embrace, challenge, and nurture them, treating them as children to love rather than problems to solve.”

Tangela Scales (see item #7)

“A family’s bank account matters more than a wedding ring.”

Jill Barshay (see item #8)

“One day, we will look back at this period of unbridled social media use, free-for-all texting, and never-ending screen time and wonder how we could have done this to our kids.”

Robin Abcarian in *The Los Angeles Times*, December 14, 2025

“Happiness and life satisfaction, physical and mental health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, close social relationships, and financial and material stability.”

Conditions that help a person flourish, from Tyler VanderWeele’s team at Harvard, quoted in [“Is Flourishing a Fad or the Real Deal?”](#) by Jenny Anderson and Mike Goldstein in *Education Next*, January 2026

“Horseback riding, reloading a firearm, heckling a windbag politician, climbing trees, driving, dancing, drinking, cooking, repairing ceilings, setting a broken leg, surviving in the wild, camping, and introducing a stranger.”

From “What the Young Man Should Know” in *Harper’s*, March 1933, quoted in [“Mis-Portraits of a Graduate”](#) by Daniel Buck in *Education Next*, January 2026

1. Getting Students to Do the Most Important Work in Class

In this *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, James Lang (Notre Dame University) says that when he first started teaching English in the early 2000s, he asked students to come to class having read a work of literature, listen to his lecture, and write an essay outside of class. “Theoretically,” says Lang, “that plan could work if a lot of stars aligned: if the students were super-invested in learning to write, if they could apply the techniques I presented, and if they began writing shortly after class instead of waiting two weeks and completing the essay a day before it was due.”

But alas, those stars seldom aligned, and Lang gradually changed the way he taught, dedicating more and more class time to helping students get better at thinking and writing about literature. “What never stopped bothering me,” he says, “was the sense that I wasn’t actively teaching when the students were writing in class.” What if an administrator walked in during one of the days when he wasn’t on his feet lecturing?

Lang has gotten over that anxiety and now devotes full days to guided writing sessions on specific techniques with carefully thought-out prompts. His suggestions for other English teachers:

- Whatever you care most about students learning in your course, do it in class.
- If you don’t use class time for skills practice, start doing so now.
- If you already do, do it more.

This advice is especially pertinent now, with GenAI giving students a way to “write” without building their intellectual muscles. This has many teachers engaging in a game of whack-a-mole trying to keep students from cheating – and some teachers have given up on assigning essays.

Instead, says Lang, teachers need to “commit more fully to shifting the balance of class time from first exposure to skills practice.” Studio arts and composition teachers have always taken this approach, and the “flipped classroom” idea shifts instruction in that direction.

English teachers face another problem: fewer and fewer students are doing the assigned reading. “Faculty consternation about non-reading students seems omnipresent,” says Lang, “and for good reason: much of the intellectual work that instructors demand from students presupposes that they have read course materials.” He bemoans the lack of book-length reading

students do before they get to college, and the way cellphones and social media lead to bad habits that are difficult to break when students are asked to do deep reading.

Most humanities course objectives call for students to read complex texts with good comprehension, write thoughtfully about them, work productively with classmates on a presentation, deliver it in class, and respond to questions. “To do anything well,” says Lang, “students need to practice it, ideally in the presence of a teacher who can guide them when they struggle.” Hence his shift to more class time devoted to reading and writing. He’s especially attentive to the components of essay-writing: introductory paragraphs, thesis statements, body paragraphs, clear prose, and conclusions.

GenAI tools make explicit teaching of these skills even more important. “If you continue to ask students to create presentations and write essays,” he says, “and don’t teach the component skills, you shouldn’t wonder that students will seek help from an AI tool that will complete the work for them. If you don’t want them to default to AI, the classroom has to become the laboratory for practicing the skills that you care about: reading, writing, problem-solving, thinking, and creating.”

[“A Simple Teaching Fix”](#) by James Lang in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 16, 2026 (Vol. 72, #10, pp. 44-45); Lang can be reached at jlang4@nd.edu.

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2. Literacy Skills for the 21st Century

K-12 policymakers should be embarrassed, say Rick Ginsberg and Yong Zhao (University of Kansas) in this *Kappan* article. Why? Because after more than five decades of debate on how to teach reading, student achievement is still disappointing, with major proficiency gaps by class and race.

Now that GenAI tools like Gemini and ChatGPT can generate audio of any text and analyze it in seconds, what skills do students need to be successful after graduation? “AI and other technologies are creating an informational and cultural challenge,” say Ginsberg and Zhao. “Our thinking is that curiosity, creativity, innovation, critical thinking, and other human-centered abilities will continue to be essential and should dominate what we should teach.” What about literacy? Beyond basic decoding skills, they suggest six key proficiencies:

- Information access literacy – In the past, people got information by word of mouth, books, newspapers, radio, and television; more recently through social media, YouTube, and podcasts. Now we have GenAI tools and need to know how to use them – along with all the others – as a source of information and power.
- Prompt engineering literacy – Being able to create written and audio queries to get the most out of GenAI tools is an essential skillset. Asking the right questions makes all the difference in getting helpful responses.
- Literacy for truth – GenAI draws on human-made texts, photos, and videos – and sometimes makes stuff up – so there’s a lot that shouldn’t be trusted, especially since it’s

presented so smoothly and confidently. Students must be able to spot unreliable and inaccurate information using skills like lateral reading and chain of verification prompting.

- Communication literacy – “Traditional reading ability has its place,” say Ginsberg and Zhao, “but being able to read what is written in the texting world is increasingly important” – emojis, standard and non-standard abbreviations, and pictures.

- Ethical literacy – In the new Wild West of AI, what is appropriate use and what violates intellectual property? How do we define cheating in schools? What citations do students need to use?

- Multi-modal literacy – Students need to be able to understand information coming in from multiple sources – text, pictures, audio, video – each with its own comprehension and critical thinking skillset.

[“Reconsidering Literacy in an AI World”](#) by Rick Ginsberg and Yong Zhao in *Kappan*, May 5, 2025; the authors can be reached at ginsberg@ku.edu and yongzhao@ku.edu.

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3. A Strategy to Get Middle-School Students Reading Good Novels

In this online article, Adrian Neibauer says that getting upper-elementary and middle-school students to read is like feeding a baby who’s a picky eater: “No matter what book I suggest, they spit it back out.” A couple of years ago, a student told him, “I don’t do reading.” Some teachers in Neibauer’s school are enabling this trend by not having classroom libraries, and his district’s recent library renovation emphasized technology over physical book collections. Scholastic Book Fairs still come to the school but promote short, simple graphic novels and tchotchkes rather than Newbury Award winners.

“The more students read, the more successful they will be in all aspects of school,” says Neibauer, but “video games will always offer my students’ brains a more-immediate dopamine fix. If I am going to be successful in motivating my students to read, I need a big carrot.” This year, he’s trying a new idea, originally from William Melvin Kelley and adapted by Dan Ryder: challenging students to summarize a book in three sentences of three words each. For example, with *Cinderella*:

Cinderella can’t go.

She goes anyway.

Cinderella gets prince.

And *The Pied Piper*:

Man lures rats.

People won’t pay.

Man takes children.

Neibauer introduced the idea to his students as a contest, challenging them to guess a Disney movie based on the 3x3 summary – for *Beauty and the Beast*:

Arrogance transforms handsomeness.

Mistake creates captivity.

Inner beauty conquers.

And for *The Little Mermaid*:

Curiosity seeks freedom.

Silence creates confusion.

Love breaks spell.

Students were successful at guessing the movies, and then Neibauer asked them to identify well-known middle-grade novels based on 3x3s: *The BGF*, *Holes*, *Charlotte's Web*, *Tuck Everlasting*, *Because of Winn-Dixie*, *The Giver*. Students struggled because they hadn't read them.

So Neibauer asked his students to read novels and use the 3x3 format to summarize them and post their index card with a color illustration of the book's cover on the class bulletin board. He posted a few examples to get the ball rolling, telling students they had to use complete sentences, effective word order, strong verbs and adjectives, with no specific names or events. As an incentive, he offered a coupon for free pizza or ice cream from local restaurants each time a student was successful.

It worked! Students started making trips to the school library and asking for more independent reading time. "Our board is slowly growing with each book a student reads," he says. The school library may have a paltry selection of novels, but the local public libraries have a better selection and give book talks on new and popular middle-grade novels and donate a few copies. (Click the article link below to see the class bulletin board display.)

"I am brazenly bribing my students to read both at school and at home, and it appears to be working," says Neibauer. "Wrapping novels in free pizza and dipping them in ice cream may seem like egregious measures to convince my students that reading is pleasure, but I do not care. My goal is for students to read and read well, by any means necessary."

["Literary 3x3s"](#) by Adrian Neibauer in *Adrian's Newsletter*, January 12, 2026

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4. Should Students Memorize Facts When They Can Just Google Them?

In this online article, high-school history teacher Dave Stuart Jr. makes the case for students remembering important subject-area information. How can we expect students "to create complex thoughts, experience intellectual breakthroughs," he asks, "or even gain basic comprehension of course concepts, if we've not gifted them with a chance to commit foundational knowledge to memory?"

In his 9th-grade AP world history class, Stuart has students memorize about 120 key facts; in his 9th-grade general world history class, students learn about 70. Here are some examples from the unit on 19th-century revolutions:

- 1776 – U.S. Declaration of Independence, Adam Smith writes *Wealth of Nations*
- 1791 – Olympe de Gauges' Declaration of the Rights of Women
- 1804 – Haitian Revolution
- 1815 – Congress of Vienna establishing Europe's "balance of power"

- 1839 – First Opium War in China, declining Qing dominance
- 1848 – Marx and Engels publish *The Communist Manifesto*
- 1861 – End of serfdom in Russia
- 1863 – Emancipation Proclamation in the U.S.

Stuart has found that many students think they're not good at memorizing things and can't improve. To change that mindset, he conducts the following exercise when he launches a course with new students:

- He has students write in their notebooks if they believe they're good at memorizing dates, how they've done that in the past, how long it takes, and whether it's hard.
- He projects five historical dates and events on the screen.
- He has students copy them on a piece of paper, saying he'll test them in a minute (they scoff).
- He has students cover their list and turns off the projector.
- He asks students to write as many of the dates and facts as they can remember.
- Students get out their first list and compare it to what they remembered.
- Students score their list, with one point for a correct date and one for a correct event.
- Students make revisions to the second list so it's 100 percent correct.
- Covering both lists, students try again to write the dates and events from memory.
- They get out the first two lists and make any corrections to the third.

At this point, virtually all students have remembered the dates and events correctly, but Stuart has them cover the three sets of answers and try once more to write the dates and events from memory. At this point, students' accurate retrieval and level of confidence is high.

Stuart then has students look at the responses they wrote in their notebooks a few minutes ago and discuss the shift in mindset that many of them have undergone. That's a perfect segue for him to talk about knowledge being an integral part of all the other things he wants them to learn. "It doesn't matter that there's Google," he says. "I want it in their brains, and I want to show them that there's a lot of unadvertised joy in this old-fashioned idea of building knowledge."

In this 15-minute exercise, Stuart has made the following points about teaching, psychology, and the science of learning:

- His credibility as a teacher – "The kids know that I'm a teacher who can help them do things they didn't think they could do, and I can do it fairly quickly."
- The idea that memorization matters – Students may not be completely convinced at this point, but he's sown the seeds.
- Effort – Memorizing is work, but if it's the right kind, students can quite readily become more knowledgeable about history.
- Efficacy – The limited exercise in memorizing – only five dates and events – proves that success is within reach.
- Self-confidence – Stuart is helping kids see themselves "as the kinds of people who can do the work I'll ask them to do."

Of course, memorizing facts is only effective if the knowledge is important, relevant, and is put to use throughout a curriculum unit, Stuart concludes. “If your sets of knowns aren’t marinated in meaningful practice, then they won’t stick... Knowledge-building must be meaningful – toward this we must labor constantly.”

[“Teach Students to Memorize Sets of Knowns”](#) by Dave Stuart Jr., December 2, 2025

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5. How General Education Teachers Can Support English Learners

In this article in *American Educator*, Diane August (University of Houston and Center for the Success of English Learners) summarizes research findings on key factors that support English learners in general education classes. (Click the article link below for details on how one teacher implemented these strategies, along with sidebars with curriculum ideas.)

- Collect information on students’ language, literacy, and content-area knowledge and skills at the beginning of the year. This is key to building on students’ strengths and knowing where they need additional help.

- Provide high-quality vocabulary instruction. Tier 2 and discipline-specific academic words are the most important, along with other words central to understanding the texts students are reading. Visual aids and individual tutoring are helpful in building understanding of an increasing number of the 4,000 words that make up 80 percent of the English texts students will read.

- Develop students’ background knowledge. English learners often have gaps in cultural, historical, chronological, scientific, and spatial information that is essential to understanding texts and classroom discussions. General education teachers need to see where these gaps are (perhaps a blank expression on a student’s face), check for understanding, and help build knowledge week by week.

- Scaffold text using visual supports. Photos, cartoons, graphic organizers, videos, and the teacher’s gestures help make material that seems inscrutable understandable to English learners.

- Support close reading. This might mean reading texts more slowly, more than once, asking text-based questions, and getting English learners focused on the details of word choice, sentence structure, logic, and meaning.

- Provide writing opportunities to solidify student learning and help students become effective writers. English learners especially need frequent opportunities to write about what they are learning and solidify gains in vocabulary and exposition, integrating the writing with oral language.

- Use formative assessments to monitor and support student progress throughout the year. This includes during-class checks for understanding, exit tickets, and other quizzes and tests to identify weak areas and celebrate gains.

[“Supporting English Learners in General Education Classes”](#) by Diane August in *American Educator*, Winter 2025-26; August can be reached at dlaugust@uh.edu.

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6. A Daily Leadership Team Huddle

In this *Edutopia* article, Baltimore principal Steve Skeen and consultant Matthew Ebert say that in the sheer *busy-ness* of the school day, school leadership teams “can lose focus on the bigger picture of what we’re doing together, what we’re doing with other team members, and who we’re doing it for.” This can lead to miscommunication, lack of coordination, bad feelings, and a loss of trust, all of which affects teaching and learning.

One solution: a daily 5-10-minute stand-up huddle in which leadership team members connect with each other professionally and personally and break down silos. Key steps:

- Decide on the earliest time when everyone can meet before things get hectic.
- Choose a quiet space where the team can stand in a circle.
- If someone is absent or late, the huddle still happens.
- The agenda: tasks for the day, questions for the group, asks and needs, the big picture.
- Set a one-minute time limit for each person’s sharing and use a timer to stick to it.
- Conclude with a moment of gratefulness or a team cheer – for example, *Do work!*

“The huddle is more than just operations,” say Skeen and Ebert. “It provides a temperature check for the team. When you are standing in a circle, you see everyone’s facial expressions, you hear everyone’s tone, and you can glean what they are holding and how they might move.” Perhaps a colleague needs to be lifted up, a connection made to something that happened the day before, a rumor addressed, the air cleared, or an affirmation of the importance of the work in a brief motivational speech. Sometimes a team member comes up with a new idea during the huddle and it’s followed up in a subsequent meeting.

In Skeen’s school, the admin huddle has become a regular routine, and the idea was picked up by the special education team. Leaders, social workers, and other service providers are now huddling bi-weekly to touch base on paperwork, assessments, and ideas for supporting students. “In a short period of time,” say Skeen and Ebert, “the special education team huddle has led to smoother individualized education program meetings, improved data compliance, and a stronger sense of community.”

Huddles may feel stilted at first, they say, but that fades as people come to see the value of the routine. “This quick conversation is low stress, high reward, and provides individuals a space to share their goals and needs with their teammates each day,” say Skeen and Ebert. “Better communication and stronger relationships between staff lead to better outcomes for students.”

[“How a Quick Morning Huddle Can Transform Leadership Teams”](#) by Steve Skeen and Matthew Ebert in *Edutopia*, January 9, 2026

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7. Keys to the School Success of African-American Boys

In this article in *Principal*, Maryland elementary principal Tangela Scales describes how a 7-year-old African-American boy was labeled as “unteachable” and ended up in the back of a police car. He was homeless, had experienced multiple adverse childhood experiences, and was in special education. The solution to his outbursts was often to exclude him from learning and sit him in an office.

Scales describes a multi-year path to changing the culture of the school and greatly improving the achievement of all students, especially those who seemed to bear the brunt of ineffective approaches. “Black boys deserve schools that embrace, challenge, and nurture them,” she says, “treating them as children to love rather than problems to solve.” The school implemented ten steps to help African-American boys feel they belong:

- Build authentic relationships. Take time to learn what brings students joy and strength.
- Model and teach self-regulation. Help students manage their emotions and behavior through routines, mindfulness, and social-emotional learning.
- Believe in their potential. Communicate confidence in boys’ ability regardless of past challenges.
- Be culturally competent and focused on equity. That means honoring students’ cultural identities in curriculum, language, and action.
- Create a supportive and trauma-informed environment. Heal rather than punish through empathetic responses and services.
- Treat children as children. Respond in developmentally appropriate ways, nurturing, guiding, and protecting.
- Reflect and check biases. Engage in self-reflection, know one’s triggers, and examine how beliefs and decisions can powerfully affect student outcomes.
- Speak up against injustice. Challenge bias when it shows up in conversations, practices, and policies, creating a culture of accountability.
- Rethink discipline as collective care. Implement restorative practices based on love and justice.
- Lead with heart and courage. “Inclusion starts when students feel seen, valued, and safe,” concludes Scales. “Be the adult who listens, advocates, and stays present.”

[“Help Black Boys Belong”](#) by Tangela Scales in *Principal*, January/February 2026 (Vol. 105, #3, pp. 26-29); Scales can be reached at tscales@ccboe.com.

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8. Stop Blaming Single-Parent Families for Low Achievement

In *Hechinger Report*, Jill Barshay says conservatives have long espoused the idea that single-parent households are a major factor in low student achievement, while traditional two-parent families produce better achievement. Robert Pondiscio recently wrote that “the most effective intervention in education is not another literacy coach or SEL program. It’s dad.”

True, there’s a correlation between low academic achievement and single-parent families,

but that doesn't prove causation. Barshay points to NAEP data that "complicate the conservative claim."

The fact is that among low-income students, achievement differs little by family structure. Fourth and eighth-graders from low-income households score at roughly the same level whether they live with both parents or with only one parent. And growing up in a two-parent household doesn't give children an academic advantage. The poorest 1/3 of fourth graders who live with both parents scored a 199 on a NAEP assessment; those who live with one parent scored 200 – almost identical.

As economic status rises, household structure is more important. Among middle- and high-income students, those who live with both parents tend to score higher than those living with one parent, with the biggest gap among the most-affluent students – a 10-point gap in reading scores among fourth graders, which amounts to a year's worth of learning.

"It's better to be rich in a single-parent household than poor in a two-parent household," says Barshay. "High-income students raised by a single parent substantially outperform low-income students who live with both parents by at least 20 points, underscoring that money and the advantages it brings – such as access to resources, stable housing, and educational support – matter far more than household composition alone."

"In other words," she concludes, "income far outweighs family structure when it comes to student achievement... For low-income students, academic outcomes are largely similar regardless of whether they live with both parents all the time, some of the time, or only live with one parent... A family's bank account matters more than a wedding ring."

["Conservatives See Married Parents As a Solution to Low Student Achievement: It's Not That Simple"](#) by Jill Barshay in *Hechinger Report*, January 12, 2026; Barshay can be reached at barshay@hechingerreport.org.

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9. What Makes Tutoring Effective

In this *Education Gadfly* article, Kevin Huffman reports the conclusion of 24 randomized control trials and dozens of other studies of tutoring: high-dosage tutoring works – but only if specific conditions are present:

- Tutors are carefully selected and well trained.
- Tutoring sessions are aligned with the core curriculum.
- Students have enough tutoring sessions.

The third – dosage – is the most important, says Huffman. "The other pieces are basically just determinants of the degree of magnitude." If students don't get enough sessions – which is happening in many schools – "then you wind up with very modest impacts. That's a failure of implementation and accountability."

In short, tutoring, when done right, is effective – and it polls well with parents. "Its evidence base is incredibly strong," says Hoffman. "Implementation can focus on one simple baseline proposition: ensuring kids get their sessions. And it builds on, rather than replacing, existing instruction."

[“Tutoring Works When It’s Done Well. Period.”](#) by Kevin Huffman in *Education Gadfly*,
January 16, 2026

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About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and other educators very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 54 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, writer, and consultant lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 60 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through more than a hundred articles each week, and selects 5-10 that have the greatest potential to improve teaching, leadership, and learning. He then writes a brief summary of each article, pulls out several striking quotes, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the Memo to subscribers early Tuesday (there are 50 issues a year). Every week there's a podcast and HTML version. Artificial intelligence is not used.

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Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

All Things PLC
American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
AMLE Magazine
ASCA School Counselor
ASCD SmartBrief
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
Ed Magazine
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
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Exceptional Children
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Educational Review
Independent School
Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Kappan (Phi Delta Kappan)
Knowledge Quest
Language Arts
Language Magazine
Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance)
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
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Peabody Journal of Education
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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