

Marshall Memo 882

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
April 12, 2021

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Quotes of the Week

“Now is the time to ask straightforward questions about what we’ve learned in this extraordinary year.”

Justin Wells (see item #1)

“My bet is that the biggest shift from Covid will not be any one tool or technique, but a broadening sense that engagement is not merely something that students ‘bring to class,’ but is a result of the environment of the class itself, and that environment can be designed to better support or encourage engagement.”

Clay Shirky (quoted in item #2)

“I think that serious damage can occur when we mislabel demoralization as burnout. That creates degrees of shame and frustration in teachers that could actually move them out of the classroom rather than helping them to better understand how the conditions need to change in order to feel good about their work.”

Doris Santoro (Bowdoin College) in “Educating in a Pandemic: Burnout and Demoralization,” Portland, Maine, June 25, 2020 (quoted in *The Learning Professional*, April 2021 (Vol 42, #2, p. 3); Santoro can be reached at dsantoro@bowdoin.edu).

“Traditional teacher professional development often takes the form of a lecture-heavy workshop disconnected from the day-to-day lessons that teachers lead. By contrast, curriculum-based professional learning is active, ongoing, and focused on improving the rigor and impact of teachers’ lessons.”

[“The Elements: Transforming Teaching Through Curriculum-Based Professional Learning”](#) by Jim Short and Stephanie Hirsch, Carnegie Corporation, November 19, 2020, quoted in [“High-Quality Curriculum Doesn’t Teach Itself”](#) by Robert Pondiscio in *Education Gadfly*, April 8, 2021

“Let us, by showing grace, make the memory of this stormy school year just a bit more peaceful.”

Matthew Kay (see item # 4)

1. Grading for Learning, Not Sorting

“Now is the time to ask straightforward questions about what we’ve learned in this extraordinary year,” says Justin Wells (Envision Learning Partners) in this article in *Edutopia*. “In general, things that worked during the pandemic are things we should do more of. Things that broke down or exacerbated inequities deserve serious rethinking.”

Wells’s nominee in the latter category: point-based grading. Students getting zeroes for missed assignments, and having those averaged into their overall grades, has been a major factor in a spiraling failure rate in recent months. This is one of several problems with points. Another is turning school into a numbers game. A student is asked how she’s doing in a course. Her answer: “I’m getting a 74.” Nothing about learning goals, skills that need work, or a pathway to improvement.

There’s nothing inherently wrong with points, says Wells. Some aspects of learning are measurable – there are right and wrong answers – and teachers need to keep track and assess students on objective criteria. But there are ways to avoid the negative effects. Here are Wells’s suggestions:

- *Don’t add up all grades.* A lot of the work students do is formative in nature – homework, practice exercises, short quizzes – intended to build mastery. But when these pieces are aggregated and become part of a summative grade, bumps on the road to learning have a disproportionate impact. “As a teacher,” says Wells, “when I kept my students’ practice data discrete (or ignored the aggregations that grading software would do without my asking it to), I was better able to preserve an analytic lens when surveying evidence of student learning. My conversations with students were more nuanced. I found it easier to awaken them, rather than coerce them, into the understanding that practice and performance are strongly correlated.”

- *Have students think in terms of a portfolio.* Often used in visual arts, the idea is to have students curate demonstrations of learning and think of the collection as a photo album. “Portfolios tend to move assessment in healthy directions,” says Wells, “opening more paths to success, inviting more student engagement, focusing more on the work, and creating more opportunities for revision and redemption.”

- *Use a 4-point rubric for course grades.* It’s significant that GPAs, most rubrics, and letter grades use roughly the same 4-point scale, translated by one teacher thusly:

- 4 – You nailed it
- 3 – You got it.
- 2 – You almost got it.
- 1 – Something isn’t working here.

Describing each level in a straightforward 4-level course rubric is very helpful to students, especially those who are struggling, whereas byzantine point systems are confusing and demoralizing. “My students’ relationships to their grades changed dramatically when they used a rubric to self-assess,” says Wells. “Their conclusions almost always matched my own. When they didn’t, important conversations ensued, and sometimes I would have to rethink my judgment.” Using this approach, a grade is “a description of the student’s learning, as demonstrated through evidence.”

- *Listen to students for whom things are not working well.* Many successful students have figured out how to do well in a points-based grading system and don’t see a problem. But struggling students are the canary in the mine, and improving the system for them will improve it for everyone, says Wells.

[“What’s Wrong with Points?”](#) by Justin Wells in *Edutopia*, April 2, 2021; Wells can be reached at justin@envisionlearning.org.

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2. Which Covid-Time Practices Will We Carry Over to the New Normal?

In this *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, Beth McMurtrie shares pandemic-driven innovations instructors say they will keep using when in-person classes return. Although written for a university audience, most of these suggestions also apply to K-12:

- *Make connections* – Several instructors told McMurtrie that taking time to “simply talk to students” before and at the end of classes “paid off in ways both expected and surprising.” Giving students time to talk about what was on their minds helped build relationships and know “the competing pressures in their students’ lives.” It’s part of teachers’ realization that the teacher/student ratio of classroom talk needs to bend more toward student talk. “My bet,” says Clay Shirky of New York University, “is that the biggest shift from Covid will not be any one tool or technique, but a broadening sense that engagement is not merely something that students ‘bring to class,’ but is a result of the environment of the class itself, and that environment can be designed to better support or encourage engagement.”

- *Online guest speakers* – “I know I could have been doing this for years,” says Andrea Bixler of Clarke University in Iowa, “but I was never forced to, so I never did. Now I have guest speakers from around the region (and they could be from much farther afield) join my classes to discuss various topics.” And, she added, it’s more environmentally responsible because there’s no travel.

- *Online tutoring* – Several instructors reported that offering one-on-one instruction via Zoom greatly increased the number of students who showed up. Continuing this after the pandemic seems worthwhile for tutoring, advising, coaching writing, and other individual support. “Definitely a keeper!” said one instructor.

- *Flexibility with due dates and grading* – The concern here is accusations of unfairness or favoritism when an instructor “goes easy” with some students. But during the pandemic, being flexible with deadlines has not been seen as giving students a pass. Kari Morgan, an instructor at Kansas State University, started giving full credit for late work. She checked with

her students on adopting that policy going forward, and hearing no complaints, she plans to continue flexible deadlines with no penalty when regular classes resume. “Treating students with respect and care builds trust,” says Morgan. “This serves as a foundation for learning. It also allows me to focus on the ‘big’ issues, and not the nitpicky ones. I mean, really, if I am not going to grade at the stroke of midnight, why does it matter if their work is a bit late?” But she is strict on assignments that need to be handed in as preparation for a specific class, and explains why.

- *Virtual faculty workshops* – “We have gotten double or triple the attendance we used to have,” says Karyn Sproles, dean of faculty development at the U.S. Naval Academy, “and the workshops have been even more interactive through chat and small groups... Not only did they answer questions we asked them to respond to in chat, but they asked questions, answered each other’s questions, and posted links to resources.”

[“Teaching: After the Pandemic, What Innovations Are Worth Keeping?”](#) by Beth McMurtrie in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 1, 2021

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3. Using the Chat Function to Deepen and Extend Student Engagement

“How do teachers motivate students to share ideas and risk ‘being wrong’ in the digital space, or the public space of the in-person classroom?” asks writer/educator Maureen Picard Robins in this *Edutopia* article. The chat! Robins says she’s found this medium is an effective way to get kids involved during remote classes, and she plans to continue using it when the pandemic is over. Her bag of tricks:

- *Chat me* – Robins pauses at key points in a lesson – after a warm-up, mini-lecture, or breakout discussion – and invites students to contribute ideas in the chat. This “facilitates student comment, questions, connection-making, and time to process information so that it sticks,” she says.

- *Routine openings for thinking* – Robins regularly uses entrance and exit tickets and mid-lesson check-ins. She finds that “insightful student thinking emerges when rituals are put into practice and pace the lesson.”

- *Acknowledging and encouraging* – Robins reads some students’ chats aloud, even if they aren’t fully articulated, and says thank you for every contribution.

- *To prompt longer responses* – Here’s an example: *Describe your emotions in five sentences or more after reading chapter 4 of The Hate U Give*. A prompt like this gets the whole class thinking more deeply and prevents impulsive responses. Students might compose their responses on paper or in a Word doc and then paste them into the chat.

- *For accountability* – “I want to know what they are taking away from the lesson and what they *think* they are taking away from the lesson,” says Robins. “I want to see if they have been listening or they are present in name only.”

- *To give wait time* – “We make the mistake of asking, ‘Are there any questions?’ and are greeted by silence, which we incorrectly interpret as an affirmation of understanding,” says Robins. Better to ask students to make their thinking visible in the chat.

• *Monitoring* – Some teachers are able to toggle back and forth between listening to a discussion and reading the chat. For those who find this kind of multitasking difficult, it's important to have another adult or a trusted student reading chat comments. Some of what appears in the chat gets an immediate response, other items go into a parking lot for “things we are curious about” or “topics we want to learn more about.”

• *Contributing information* – For example, when the class encounters a word whose meaning might not be familiar to everyone, a student might look it up on another device and put the definition in the chat.

• *Private chats* – “This works well for conferring, checking in, providing feedback, reteaching, and enriching,” says Robins, perhaps taking place while students are working in groups or a co-teacher leads the class.

• *Memorializing a conversation* – Shared chat comments can serve as a brainstorm page for students' writing, research, or inquiry, and can provide grist for discussions with colleagues.

[“10 Ways to Harness the Power of the Chat Function”](#) by Maureen Picard Robins in *Edutopia*, April 5, 2021

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4. Positive Endings

(Originally titled “Confronting Inequity/Getting the Endings Right”)

In this *Educational Leadership*, article, Philadelphia teacher Matthew Kay says the way we end human interactions – lessons, meetings, conversations – really matters. But endings are often mishandled – for example, a teacher calls on a student who raises his hand 15 seconds before the bell rings. Other students' minds are on getting to the cafeteria line, nobody hears the question, the teacher admonishes students to “be respectful,” and the interchange fizzles.

“With that in mind,” says Kay, “it might be best to assure that last-minute participant that we will give their contributions the time and patient attention they deserve – *tomorrow*,” then finish with a strong recap of a key point and something to whet students' appetite for the next lesson.

Kay lists several other situations where paying attention to how we end interactions will leave a positive imprint:

- After pulling a student aside for an inappropriate remark, closing by saying how she is so much more than this moment;
- When a student stays after class to ask a question he was afraid to ask in class, ending by celebrating the courage it took to approach the teacher;
- A principal ending a fraught faculty discussion on race and equity with actionable steps to address the issue;
- A supervisor ending a teacher debrief on a problematic observation with reassurances of support on the journey to improvement;
- Closing a disciplinary conversation with a student by asking about something unrelated to their school performance;

- Ending the 2020-21 year on a positive note. “Let us,” says Kay, “by showing grace, make the memory of this stormy school year just a bit more peaceful.”

[“Confronting Inequity/Getting the Endings Right”](#) by Matthew Kay in *Educational Leadership*, April 2021 (Vol. 78, #7, pp. 80-81); Kay can be reached at mrkay@notlight.com.

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5. Options for Spending Recently Approved Federal Funds

In this *Education Gadfly* article, Marguerite Roza and Chad Aldeman say district policymakers have a lot of leeway for spending \$122 billion of K-12 relief funding approved by Congress last month. It’s clear, however, that the money is short-term, which means, say Roza and Aldeman, that “leaders who commit to things they won’t be able to afford once the money runs out are setting themselves up to fall off a funding cliff in a few years.”

The new funding comes to about \$2,450 per child, with variations by state and school district. Roza and Aldeman present five options for addressing unfinished learning, each costing about \$1,000 per child. They encourage districts to open up a discussion on which combination will have the greatest impact:

- Option A: Reduce class sizes by two students for a year. This would ease teachers’ workload a little, but it wouldn’t add instructional time for students who have fallen behind. It would also mean hiring more teachers, which would get tricky when the funding stops.

- Option B: Extend a school year by four weeks for all students. This would add instructional time, but wouldn’t focus extra help on the students who need it the most.

- Option C: Provide one-third of students with a year of intensive tutoring. This supports the neediest students and would work only if schools organized a large-scale, effective tutoring program above and beyond regular instruction and persuaded students to participate.

- Option D: Offer four-week learning camps for all students for the summer of 2021 and 2022. The impact would depend on whether lagging students attended, which depends on competing summer activities and family preferences.

- Option E: Let principals decide what makes the most sense for their school. This would spur creativity and customize interventions to each school’s needs, but there would be inconsistencies and a need for accountability.

“One thing’s for sure,” conclude Roza and Aldeman: “District leaders should prepare to be judged for how they spend their federal relief money. Big one-time sums draw big scrutiny.”

[“Reduce Class Sizes, Lengthen the School Year, Provide Tutoring – or Let Principals Decide?”](#) by Marguerite Roza and Chad Aldeman in *Education Gadfly*, April 8, 2021

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6. Maximizing the Impact of 2021 Summer Schools

In this article in *Chalkbeat*, Matt Barnum reports on what researchers and districts have learned about running effective summer school programs:

- *Find ways to get high attendance.* The evidence is that only students who regularly attend summer school make gains – but threatening to hold students back if they don’t show up is often counterproductive. The best strategy is to avoid drudgery and make summer school attractive by including music, art, dance, and field trips to live theater and art museums, as well as reading and math. A highly engaging summer program goes beyond test-score gains, building students’ connections to school and willingness to take advanced courses.

- *Reach out to families and address barriers to attendance.* Many parents need to be coaxed to sign up their children. It’s helpful to identify students who will benefit the most, make personal contact with their families, and reassure parents about transportation, accommodating working hours, and Covid safety measures.

- *Make summer school appealing for teachers.* Those who are on the fence about teaching in the summer after a very difficult year need to think, “Oh, I could do this.” Enticements might include higher pay, small class sizes, curriculum resources, and the option to work half days and have fewer preps.

- *Go with in-person instruction.* The difficulties with online instruction that educators and children have experienced in 2020-21 will only be magnified over the summer, and studies conducted before the pandemic show few gains from summer programs conducted remotely.

- *Spin summer school as getting a head start on the coming school year.* Better yet, have teachers from the school year loop with students into summer school, or summer school teachers remain with students into the 2021-22 year (although these approaches are likely to be logistically challenging and should be used only when looping is easy to orchestrate).

- *Don’t over-promise.* After all, summer school is only a few extra weeks of instruction. But there may be gains beyond book learning, including students reengaging with school, reconnecting with friends, and giving their parents a break from 24/7 child care. “The challenge is so substantial,” said one school leader. “It’s not a one-year approach. It’s a three-year approach.”

[“Summer School Programs Are Set to Grow. Here Are 6 Tips for Making Them Successful”](#)
by Matt Barnum in *Chalkbeat*, March 30, 2021

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7. Involving Students in Constructing the Criteria for Good Writing

In this *Cult of Pedagogy* article, Jennifer Gonzalez says that early in her teaching career, she would spend entire weekends grading papers, writing extensive comments and highlighting strengths and weaknesses on a rubric. Alas, when she returned the papers, “far too many students would look at their grades and feedback like it was written in another language.” It made no difference that Gonzalez had given them a copy of the rubric and gone over her expectations.

Over time, she added two more steps that improved students’ writing – showing models of finished products and getting students to look more closely at the rubric – but there was still something missing. That’s been supplied by author/educator Starr Sackstein in her latest book, *Assessing with Respect* (ASCD, 2021). The key insight: including students in shaping what will

be assessed. “It’s essentially backward planning with students for success,” says Sackstein. “We’re going over an assignment with them, and we’re having a conversation about what it would take to be successful at it.”

Why is it necessary to include students when the teacher – the professional – has well-developed criteria for good student work? Three reasons:

- Clarity is in the eye of the beholder. “I can have amazing ideas, but sometimes how I communicate them in the assignment doesn’t always come out the way that I think they do in my head,” says Sackstein.
- Unit planning is improved. Going over the criteria with students, the teacher can get a better sense of what skills students have already mastered and where they need help.
- Students get more proficient at self-assessing and commenting on classmates’ writing.

Gonzalez and Sackstein say co-constructing success criteria involves four steps, which will take a full class period at first:

- *Unpack and rewrite the standards.* “Kids have to be familiar with the language of the standards,” says Sackstein. They might work in small groups, circling verbs in a standard (usually the skills) and nouns (the concepts) and brainstorming what it might look like when a student masters it. Students might also translate the standard into kid-friendly *I can...* language and create posters to be displayed around the classroom.

- *Annotate the assignment.* As a new project or learning cycle is launched, students study the prompt, highlighting important words or phrases and writing comments or questions in the margins. The prompt: *What would success look like on this assignment?*

- *Study exemplars.* Next, students quietly read high-quality examples of completed assignments (teacher-made or by other students) and talk with a partner about which rubric criteria they see in the exemplar. The whole class then shares insights on where in the exemplar the required qualities show up, using the language of the standards. “This step really makes the success criteria come alive,” says Gonzalez, “helping students see exactly what it looks like when a student is meeting the standards well.”

- *Identify instructional needs.* Students then identify specifically where they will need instructional support. This might be done as a whole-class KWL chart, a poll, a Google form, or an exit slip – all valuable information as the teacher plans mini-lessons.

When the unit is finished and students hand in their completed work, says Sackstein, “Give very direct, instructive feedback, and make it an iterative process where student voice is a large part of how we assess them with reflection and self-assessment. The partnership between what’s going on for them as learners and what we’re seeing as educators comes together to help them start to set goals and move on, making progress on their own learning.”

[“Build It Together: Co-Constructing Success Criteria with Students”](#) by Jennifer Gonzalez and Starr Sackstein in *Cult of Pedagogy*, April 4, 2021

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8. Jim Knight on the Vital Role of Instructional Coaches

In this article in *The Learning Professional*, coaching guru Jim Knight (University of Kansas) describes two approaches to improving teaching and learning:

- *Outside-in* – Higher-ups decide that teachers should be using certain proven, research-based strategies and mandate implementation. The problem is that teachers may not be convinced about the efficacy of these “best practices,” or may have difficulty fitting the required practices into their existing teaching repertoires – and are then branded as “resistant.” “Not surprisingly,” says Knight, “the outside-in model often has little impact on what really happens in classrooms.”

- *Inside-out* – Teachers identify something their students need, find a strategy to address it, learn the strategy, and implement it, bringing about improvements in their students’ performance. “Theoretically, teachers could do inside-out professional learning on their own,” says Knight. “But, in reality, this is too much without the support of an expert partner whose job it is to think through these steps... Teaching in and of itself makes significant cognitive demands, and there are few teachers who can do all of the knowledge work that teaching entails plus the complex work involved in learning and implementing new strategies.”

Instructional coaches are perfectly positioned to fill this gap – non-evaluative colleagues who can work shoulder to shoulder with teachers in ways that are much more likely to improve teaching and learning: observing classes; chatting with students; reviewing class videos and student work with teachers; working with teachers to identify an important need; setting achievable goals; researching effective strategies; and adapting them for optimal impact.

“Real Learning Happens in Real Life” by Jim Knight in *The Learning Professional*, April 2021 (Vol 42, #2, p. 14); Knight can be reached at jim@instructionalcoaching.com.

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9. Recommended Graphic Biographies

In this *School Library Journal* article, Brigid Alverson recommends ten carefully researched graphic-novel treatments of notable people (click the free link below for cover images, publishers, and brief descriptions):

- *Before They Were Artists: Famous Illustrators as Kids* by Elizabeth Haidle (grade 3 and up)
- *Billionaires: The Lives of the Rich and Powerful* by Darryl Cunningham (grade 11 and up)
- *Chasin’ the Bird: A Charlie Parker Graphic Novel* by Dave Chisholm (grade 10 and up)
- *Corpse Talk* by Adam and Lisa Murphy (grade 5-8)
- *The Incredible Nellie Bly: Journalist, Investigator, Feminist, and Philanthropist* by Luciana Cimino, illustrated by Sergio Algozzino (grade 6 and up)
- *Redbone: The True Story of a Native American Rock Band* by Christian Staebler and Sonia Paoloni, illustrated by Thibault Balahy (grade 6 and up)
- *Seen: Edmonia Lewis* by Jasmine Walls, illustrated by Bex Glendining (grade 7-9)
- *Teddy* by Laurence Luckinbill, adapted by Eryck Tait (grade 7 and up)
- *Why She Wrote* by Hannah Chapman and Laurel Burke, illustrated by Kaley Bales (grade 9

and up)

- *Women Discoverers: Top Women in Science* by Marie Moinard, illustrated by Christelle Pecout (grade 7 and up)

[“Distinguished Panels: Graphic Biographies Bring Notable Figures to Life”](#) by Brigid Alverson in *School Library Journal*, April 2021 (Vol. 67, #4, pp. 38-41)

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About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and other educators very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 50 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, writer, and consultant lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

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

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Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

All Things PLC
American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
AMLE Magazine
ASCA School Counselor
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
Education Next
Education Update
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
English Journal
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
Knowledge Quest
Language Arts
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
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
Teaching Tolerance
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Education Gadfly
The Journal of the Learning Sciences
The Language Educator
The Learning Professional (formerly Journal of Staff Development)
The New York Times
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Time
Urban Education