

Marshall Memo 1037

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
May 20, 2024

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Quotes of the Week

“Handwriting is probably among the most complex motor skills that the brain is capable of.”
Marieke Longcamp, Aix-Marseille Université, quoted in [“Why Writing by Hand Beats Typing for Thinking and Learning”](#) by Jonathan Lambert, NPR, May 11, 2024

“According to theoretical models and studies, spelling and word reading have a symbiotic relationship, developing hand in hand.”
Young-Suk Kim in [“Crucial Connections”](#) in *Literacy Today*, April/May/June 2024 (Vol. 41, #4, pp. 18-20)

“Creating active reading assignments where students are required to annotate a text and discuss it with fellow students slows down the process and adds friction to the experience. It also makes reading a social activity as opposed to an individual one and invites inquiry and debate within the reading process.”
Marc Watkins in [“No One Is Talking About AI's Impact on Reading”](#) May 3, 2024

“Trust in school leadership is a kind of social lubricant that allows teachers to see observations as fair and, when necessary, forgiving.”
Aaron Pallas and Cami Touloukian (see item #1)

“Many educators believe that the use of Danielson and similar observational rubrics in high-stakes evaluation systems is a distortion of their original purpose to create rich conversations about teaching practice.”
Aaron Pallas and Cami Touloukian (*ibid.*)

“Don't have the same conversation over and over. More of the same leads to more of the same.”
Dan Rockwell (see item #6)

1. Teacher Efficacy and New York City's Performance Evaluation Process

In this *Teachers College Record* article, Aaron Pallas and Cami Touloukian (Columbia University) report on their study of how New York City public school teachers reacted to the district's Advance performance evaluation system during the 2015-16 school year. Here are its main characteristics:

- Measures of teacher practice (MOTP), with supervisors making classroom visits, rating teachers on eight components of the 22-item Danielson Framework, and averaging ratings for the end-of-year evaluation;
- Measures of student learning (MOSL) using ELA and math state tests and Regents exams or, for grades and subjects not using those tests, student learning objectives (SLOs) determined by teachers in consultation with their administrators;
- Four performance categories – Highly Effective, Effective, Developing, and Ineffective – summing up teachers' performance (60 percent MOTP, 40 percent MOSL).

High ratings confer no tangible rewards, but teachers with Ineffective and Developing ratings are put on improvement plans, and teachers with two consecutive years of Ineffective ratings are subject to an expedited dismissal process. The year before this study, 11 percent of New York City teachers were rated Highly Effective, 81 percent Effective, 7 percent Developing, and 1 percent Ineffective.

There are four options in the way teachers are evaluated: (1) At least one formal and at least three informal observations; (2) at least six informal observations; (3) for teachers with an overall Highly Effective rating the preceding year, at least three informal observations and at least three scheduled visits by colleagues; and (4) for teachers with an overall Effective rating the previous year, at least four informals.

Drawing on in-depth interviews with 141 teachers and 24 principals in 27 elementary, middle, and high schools, Pallas and Touloukian analyzed teachers' sense of efficacy as they went through the Advance process. While teachers felt a measure of control over classroom pedagogical choices, and a few were successful in convincing their principals to change their ratings, most felt their teaching lives were ruled by a hierarchical, top-down system: state, city, school district, school, and principal. The researchers described teachers' perceived lack of control over colleagues' and students' behaviors, the technology of the Advance system, and factors outside the school. Here are some details:

Educators and students:

- *Other teachers* – Most important was the quality of teaching students experienced the preceding year, as well as the skills of other teachers working with students in the current year.

In many schools a teacher's MOSL rating was based on the performance of teachers in other subject areas – e.g., science teachers rated on ELA scores.

- *Administrators* – Teachers noted wide variation in principals' and assistant principals' expertise and skill as observers, as well as subjectivity and bias, even with the supposedly objective Danielson standards. Some teachers described more-positive relationships with their supervisors, and this softened problematic aspects of the Advance system. "Trust in school leadership," say Pallas and Touloukian, "is a kind of social lubricant that allows teachers to see observations as fair and, when necessary, forgiving."

- *Teachers' artifacts not taken into account* – One teacher said, "Basically, they came in and observed and then they basically had everything filled out and said, 'This is your rating.' And then, you know, if I said, 'Okay, let me give you evidence of this or that, or say this happened,' they would cut you off and say, 'Okay, that's really nice, but this is just a random thing. Don't worry about it. This is what you're getting.'"

- *Students' behavior and effort* – Teachers especially fretted over what was required to get a Highly Effective rating on the Danielson rubric, which involves a significant level of student agency. For example, for a teacher to get the highest score on Danielson 3b, Using Questioning and Discussion Techniques, the observer must conclude that "Students themselves ensure that all voices are heard in the discussion."

- *Student performance on standardized tests* – Teachers said this was affected by many factors outside the classroom, including a student having a bad day for an important test.

The components of the Advance system:

- *The evaluation rubric* – Teachers interviewed consistently said that the Danielson Framework didn't allow for teacher discretion and flexibility to meet students' needs, was too heavily focused on direct instruction and therefore not appropriate for many lessons, and, with informal classroom visits, depended on which part of a lesson the supervisor happened to see. Teachers felt a tension, say Pallas and Touloukian, "between needing to demonstrate a narrow set of practices that the rubric deemed important and needing to choose what they felt was right for students in the moment... Many educators believe that the use of Danielson and similar observational rubrics in high-stakes evaluation systems is a distortion of their original purpose to create rich conversations about teaching practice." One teacher spoke of the need to put on a "dog and pony show" when an administrator walked in the door, showing parts of the expected script.

- *Student assessments* – Many teachers got their MOSL rating from other teachers' work. "I don't think I should be judged on these tests that are being given in classrooms on subjects that have nothing to do with what I teach," said one teacher. Even with teachers whose ratings were based on tests in their subject area, there were complaints about the fairness and alignment with state tests. "If you're going to have a state test," said one teacher, "you should actually tell us what's on the test."

- *Statistical models* – In theory, the value-added model (VAM) used to determine students' academic progress for teachers' MOSL scores took into account factors outside of teachers' control, but there was widespread confusion about and distrust of the calculations.

“Teachers are not trained as statisticians or psychometricians,” say Pallas and Touloukian, “and New York State and New York City did not invest heavily in helping teachers understand just how their ratings on MOSL were to be calculated.”

The broader social context:

- *Inequality* – Teachers were keenly aware of disparities in funding and support from school to school, as well as the widely varying economic conditions from which some students came to school every day. “In acknowledging these community forces beyond their immediate control,” say Pallas and Touloukian, “most teachers still voiced a deep sense of commitment and responsibility for their students’ learning” – but in many cases they knew they were swimming against powerful currents.

- *Students’ home lives* – Teachers spoke with deep compassion about the difficult conditions many students faced – working parents who were not there to get them ready for school in the morning, noisy neighbors who kept them from getting a good night’s sleep, family members arguing, and more. Teachers said that “metrics like tests or observations based on the Danielson rubric would never recognize or be sensitive to these challenges,” say Pallas and Touloukian. In the words of one teacher, “The whole system is so predicated on finding fault... Could we maybe take the focus away from pointing fingers and placing blame and maybe, I don’t know, focus on finding ways of reaching them, of working with them, of working with teachers, or attracting the best people that we can to the profession?”

Despite teachers having such a low sense of efficacy with their evaluations and viewing the system as punitive and unhelpful, Pallas and Touloukian did not see evidence of mass defections from the New York City schools, either during their study or in the years afterward. Given such a high level of dissatisfaction, why did teachers stay? For one thing, very few teachers were actually dismissed; by the 2018-19 school year (the most recent with citywide data), 98 percent of teachers were rated Effective and Highly Effective and only 1 percent Ineffective.

Another reason that most teachers stayed was that most viewed the Advance system as basically imposed by the state and were in compliance mode. Even with the flexibility schools had in negotiating MOSL criteria and the choices on how often teachers were observed, these were “tinkering around the edges,” say Pallas and Touloukian. The basic shape of the system was dictated by state law, and teachers saw no alternative but to go along with it.

The authors close with some reflections on how an evaluation system might be designed in a way that increases teachers’ sense of efficacy. “An explicit focus on teacher coaching and improving teaching practice,” they say, “could yield deeper conversations within a school about practice, and decouple them from the compliance features of many observational rubrics.”

But Pallas and Touloukian believe school leaders are too busy to do high-quality observations of their teachers and take on this kind of coaching role. “It is pleasing to envision school principals as instructional leaders,” they say; “however, many school systems ask school principals to do so much more than to lead instruction, and there simply may not be enough hours in the day to carry out all of their responsibilities at a high level of competence.”

Spreading classroom observations out over several administrators, they believe, would only lead to teacher complaints about unfair variations between “good” and “bad” observers.

[I strongly disagree with this downbeat assessment. Principals *can* be instructional leaders with a redesigned teacher evaluation process. The Advance system (which is still being used today) has three key flaws. First, requiring supervisors to give 4-3-2-1 ratings after each observation on multiple Danielson criteria leads to cookie-cutter, bureaucratic feedback and is especially difficult with short observations. Giving Developing or Ineffective ratings creates a contentious dynamic with teachers, incentivizing “okay” ratings for almost everyone and giving a pass to mediocre teaching practices.

Second, the four options given to teachers for observation frequency, and which are announced and unannounced, creates a paperwork nightmare for principals charged with keeping track of all the moving parts – *which teacher is in which category?* – and in most cases doesn’t result in anywhere close to the number of visits needed to get an accurate picture of the 900 lessons each teacher teaches in a school year.

Third, the MOSL process – using students’ state test scores, other teachers’ test scores, and teacher-constructed SLO assessments – is riddled with unfairness and discredited methodology. The 2015 ESSA legislation removed the requirement to include test scores in teachers’ evaluations, and states are beginning to realize that they’re liberated from this well-intentioned but deeply flawed approach to accountability.

The good news is that there is an alternative, and it’s being used by more and more schools: (a) short, frequent, systematic, unannounced classroom visits, each followed by a face-to-face conversation focused on appreciation and a single coaching point; (b) rubric scoring at the end of the school year, pulling together data from observations, conversations, teacher teamwork, other points of contact, and the teacher’s self-assessment; and (c) looking at student learning in every lesson observation, in the debrief with each teacher, and in teacher team meetings. And this is manageable by the vast majority of school leaders. K.M.]

[“A Taxonomy of Subjective Control: Teachers’ Narrative Accounts of a Teacher Evaluation System”](#) by Aaron Pallas and Cami Touloukian in *Teachers College Record*, February 2024 (Vol. 126, #2, pp. 26-69); Pallas can be reached at amp155@tc.columbia.edu.

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2. Which Assessments Are Vulnerable to AI Cheating – and What to Do

In this online article, Leon Furze says that as an English teacher in the age of generative AI, “I have to ask hard questions about the subject that I’ve taught for over fifteen years, and the methods I have used to teach... I have absolutely no way of knowing whether the work I’m seeing at the end is the student’s, or has been created partially or entirely with GenAI.” This new reality has convinced him of the urgent need to decide:

- Which fundamental skills students need to learn “slowly, methodically, and without offloading onto technology.”
- Which skills and content lend themselves to using technology.

The best way to address these tasks, Furze believes, is for a school’s faculty to take a close look at the assessments being given to students. He recommends these steps:

- Ask teachers to choose and share one or two recent assessment tasks.
- Identify a couple of teachers who are proficient with generative AI tools like ChatGPT.
- Ask those teachers to pretend they are students and use the AI tool to complete as much of several assessments as possible, as quickly as possible.
- During a faculty meeting, share the AI-generated solutions (click the article link to see several examples).
- Facilitate a discussion in which teachers share their reactions, which will produce a clear realization (among those not already savvy) of how easily students can misuse AI.
- Break teachers into groups and ask them to brainstorm specific ways to modify their assessments, or create new ones, so they are more resistant to cheating – for example, in-person demonstration of skills, collaborative work, and project-based learning.

What will emerge from this exercise, says Furze, is how vulnerable many assessment tasks are to GenAI and the need for teachers to clearly identify “which skills we are assessing and why,” where they can use AI productively, and areas in which students need to learn the old-fashioned way.

“The brutal reality is that Generative AI is here to stay,” concludes Furze, “and it’s going to impact every aspect of education, whether we like it or not... It doesn’t matter if you’re teaching English, maths, science, or art – GenAI is coming for your assessments.”

[“GenAI Strategy: Attack Your Assessments”](#) by Leon Furze, May 13, 2024

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3. Ideas for Using ChatGPT in Literacy Classes

In this article in *The Reading Teacher*, Amy Hutchison (University of Alabama/Tuscaloosa) shows ChatGPT’s response to the prompt, “What is the main idea of the book *Because of Winn-Dixie*? Write the response like a third grader would say it.”

The main idea of the book “Because of Winn-Dixie” is about a girl named Opal who moves to a new town and finds a dog named Winn-Dixie. Opal makes new friends because of Winn-Dixie and learns about the power of kindness and forgiveness. The book is about how a dog can help bring people together and make everyone happier. It’s a really nice story about love and friendship.

The chatbot’s ability to produce something like this in a few seconds scares some teachers and has produced a new sense of urgency about figuring out how artificial intelligence should and should not be used in schools. *Will students cheat? Will they take shortcuts and not learn how to think and write? Should ChatGPT be banned?*

Hutchison believes there are ways teachers can put generative AI tools to good use in their classrooms, even with early-elementary students. She suggests these three strategies:

- *Building background knowledge* – “Lack of prior knowledge on a topic has been

shown as one of the most significant barriers to reading comprehension,” she says. This is especially true for English learners, students with disabilities, and students who have not yet developed broad vocabularies. GenAI can help individual students build on existing knowledge and learn new words and concepts. Here’s an example with the book mentioned above:

- Before reading the book, the teacher guides students to ask ChatGPT, “What is the book *Because of Winn-Dixie* about?”
- Students read the response and highlight or write down any words or ideas that are unfamiliar to them and any questions they have.
- The teacher guides students to ask ChatGPT follow-up questions – for example, the meaning of words like *eccentric* or *heartwarming*.
- The teacher leads an all-class discussion of students’ reactions to the responses from ChatGPT and other questions they still have.

There are other ways to build background knowledge before reading a book, including Wikipedia, but this approach is more interactive and zeroes in on individual students’ questions and knowledge gaps, increasing motivation and interest as they dive into the book.

- *Developing critical evaluation skills* – A second way to use ChatGPT is having students look at the text it produces and discuss what information was left out, how it might be biased, or better ways to express the ideas. For example, a teacher might ask the chatbot, “How do the drawings in *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein contribute to what is conveyed by the words in the story?” (click the article link to see the actual response to this prompt). The teacher then leads students in critically analyzing the AI text for accuracy, completeness, and ways it could be improved, based on their reading of the book. This discussion reveals the shortcomings of ChatGPT’s response and students’ ability to use close reading to spot them, which builds their reading skills and confidence in outthinking artificial intelligence. Teacher guidance is important as students develop these skills.

- *Building lateral reading skills* – One of the best ways to check the accuracy of online information is to leave one website and move “sideways” to explore related websites and get other perspectives. For example, students might start by asking ChatGPT for the difference between a frog and a toad and then check out the [Kidtopia](#) search engine for other sources, explore them, and compare them to ChatGPT’s response. Lateral reading reveals missing information and builds students’ Internet savvy, helping them get past the tendency to trust the first site that pops up.

Hutchison acknowledges teachers’ worries about students passing off material generated by ChatGPT as their own, and says there are no foolproof ways to spot AI cheating. The best strategy, she says, is to concentrate more on the process of writing than the final product, working closely with students and teaching them to use chatbots for idea generation, critiquing, and editing.

[“Making Artificial Intelligence Your Friend, Not Your Foe, in the Literacy Classroom”](#) by Amy Hutchison in *The Reading Teacher*, May/June 2024 (Vol. 77, #6, pp. 899-908); Hutchison can be reached at achutchison1@ua.edu.

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4. Should We Analyze and Score Individual Reading Standards?

In this online article, Timothy Shanahan (University of Illinois/Chicago) responds to a teacher whose district requires teachers to complete an item analysis of standardized tests and narrow instruction to the specific reading skills students haven't mastered.

"The honest answer," says Shanahan, "is that this kind of standards-based grading makes no sense at all. It is simply impossible to reliably or meaningfully measure performance on the individual reading standards... No one has been able to come up with a valid or reliable way of providing scores for individual reading comprehension 'skills' or standards... Studies have repeatedly shown that standardized reading comprehension tests measure a single factor – not a list of skills represented by the various types of questions asked."

So what should teachers do? Shanahan suggests giving students passages at the appropriate level for each grading period (for third grade, perhaps Lexile 475, 600, 725, and 850) and see if students can demonstrate 75 percent comprehension after reading them silently. "You can still ask questions about these passages based on the 'skills' that seem to be represented in your standards," he says. "You just can't score them that way... In other words, it's the passages and text levels that should be your focus, not the question types or individual standards. If kids can read such passages successfully, they'll be able to answer your questions. And, if they can't, then you need to focus on increasing their ability to read such texts. That means teaching things like vocabulary, text structure, and cohesion and having the kids read sufficiently challenging texts – not practicing answering certain types of questions."

["Should We Grade Students on Individual Reading Standards?"](#) by Timothy Shanahan in *Shanahan on Literacy*, February 10, 2024; Shanahan can be reached at shanahan@uic.edu.

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5. The Effects of School Cellphone Bans in Norway

In this *Education Gadfly* article, Daniel Buck reports on a study by Sara Abrahamsson of cellphone bans in 477 Norwegian middle schools between 2010 to 2018. These were the results:

- The number of consultations for psychological symptoms went down by 2-3 visits per child, per year.
- The incidence of bullying for girls and boys was reduced.
- Girls made gains in their GPA and externally graded math exams on the order of 0.22 standard deviations.
- The benefits were especially strong for students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds.
- The effects were strongest in schools with the strictest bans, where students were required to hand in their phones at the beginning of the day or have them locked up through the school day.

Abrahamsson notes that even when phones are on silent mode in pockets or purses, they can still tug at kids' attention, distracting them with worries about whether someone has messaged them, "liked" their status, or something else.

Buck says that for several years, he's volunteered at a summer camp that impounds teens' phones as they arrive. Students grumbled at first, "but in short order," he says, "they were voicing appreciation for the time they could spend sitting in circles chatting with friends, without all eyes staring down. Few had experienced the simple pleasure of getting lost in thought because boredom had always prompted them to grab their phones. By week's end, every single student – every single one – expressed some hesitation to check their phones when we handed them back. They'd learned to love being phone-free."

Banning cellphones in schools, Buck believes, "is a simple, easily implemented, and clear win-win for our students, teachers, and society writ large."

["The Evidence for Phone Bans Mounts"](#) by Daniel Buck in *Education Gadfly*, May 9, 2024

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6. Skillfully Handling One-on-One Conferences

In this *Leadership Freak* article, Dan Rockwell suggests question options for the beginning, middle, and conclusion of one-on-one talks:

- The beginning:
 - What is the most important thing we can focus on today?
 - What will make this conversation useful to you?
 - What would you love to take away from this talk?
- The middle (if the focus has strayed from the intended purpose):
 - Are we on track with this conversation?
 - How is this being useful so far?
 - Which of these two issues is more important to you?
- The conclusion:
 - What's your biggest takeaway from our talk?
 - What are your next steps?
 - What would you like me to ask about in our next one-on-one?

"Don't have the same conversation over and over," says Rockwell. "More of the same leads to more of the same." Look for what's useful and mix things up.

["The 3 Most Important Moments in a One-on-One"](#) by Dan Rockwell in *Leadership Freak*, May 6, 2024; Rockwell can be reached at dan@leadershipfreak.com.

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7. Picture Books About Bittersweet Goodbyes

In this *Edutopia* article, Kristin Rydholm recommends books about kids who are

moving and leaving behind their classmates and friends (click the article link for cover images and brief synopses):

- *Shine-a-Light My World: Moving* by Carron Brown and Manuela López, preschool-grade 1
- *Florette* by Anna Walker, preschool-grade 2
- *Goodbye, Old House* by Margaret Wild, illustrated by Ann James, preschool-grade 2
- *House Finds a Home* by Katy Duffield, illustrated by Jen Corace, preschool-grade 2
- *A New Friend: One Book, Two Stories* by Lucy Menzies, illustrated by Maddy Vian, preschool-grade 2
- *Paper Planes* by Jim Helmore, illustrated by Richard Jones, preschool-grade 2
- *The Many Colors of Harpreet Singh* by Supriya Kelkar, illustrated by Alea Marley, preschool-grade 2s
- *A New Home* by Tania de Regil, preschool-grade 3
- *Friends Beyond Measure: A Story Told with Infographics* by Lalena Fisher, preschool-grade 3
- *Home Is a Window* by Stephanie Ledyard, illustrated by Chris Sasaki, preschool-grade 3
- *Goodbye, Friend! Hello, Friend!* by Cori Doerrfeld, preschool-grade 3
- *Evelyn Del Rey Is Moving Away* by Meg Medina, illustrated by Sonia Sánchez, kindergarten-grade 2
- *Mabel and Sam at Home: One Brave Journey in Three Adventures* by Linda Urban, illustrated by Hadley Hooper, kindergarten-grade 3
- *Ten Beautiful Things* by Molly Beth Griffin, illustrated by Maribel Lechuga, kindergarten-grade 3

[“14 Picture Books About Moving Away”](#) by Kristin Rydholm in *Edutopia*, May 14, 2024

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

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and other educators very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 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 every Monday evening (with occasional breaks; there are 50 issues a year). Every week there's a podcast and HTML version as well.

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Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

All Things PLC
American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
AMLE Magazine
ASCA School Counselor
ASCD SmartBrief
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
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 Ed (formerly Ed. Magazine)
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