

Marshall Memo 764

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
December 3, 2018

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Quotes of the Week

“The point of a good education is to expose children to the best of what has been learned, spoken, or thought over the past ten thousand years of human civilization. It’s their intellectual paycheck. Enjoy it and spend some today. Invest the rest where it can mature and pay dividends forever. Not everything should or will be immediately or obviously useful or relevant.”

Robert Pondiscio in “Improving Student Motivation and Engagement” in *The Education Gadfly*, November 28, 2018 (Vol. 18, #47), <https://bit.ly/2PbLItI>

“For me writing is a complete and total joy, and if I’m not writing I’m miserable... It’s such a strongly felt need that if it was something socially maladaptive it would be considered a vice.”

Harvard historian and author Jill Lepore in an interview with Evan Goldstein in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 30, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2FonKvH>

“There is no foolproof algorithm for life’s difficult choices. But the research shows that you can get better at making them.”

Steven Johnson (see item #2)

“Women leaders are expected to be both personable and authoritative, both analytic and affable, both warm (including being open to any question, no matter how off-putting) and clearly commanding... [C]onversations with staff, faculty, and students can turn on a dime from inter-role (employer to employee) to interpersonal. When this happens, too often personal traits replace leadership capabilities as the metric by which women are judged.”

Mariko Silver, President of Bennington College, in “What Are the Biggest Challenges You’ve Faced as a Female Leader?” in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 30, 2018 (Vol. LXV, #13, p. A8-10), no free e-link

1. Jon Saphier on Building a Trusting Professional Culture

“Trust gives school leaders the respect and credibility they need for educators to listen to, collaborate with, and follow them,” says author/consultant Jon Saphier in this article in *The Learning Professional*. But building trust is not an easy matter because teachers “mostly work individually and often see themselves as artistic, solo practitioners rather than working side-by-side in teams and being members of an organization.” Over the years, Saphier and his colleagues have crystallized the following description of what teachers would say of their leader in a school with a trusting culture. This kind of school, says Saphier, is an “engine for constant improvement in teaching and learning.”

- I trust that you are competent and can keep the wheels turning by staying on top of essential operations and handling crises.

- I trust that you think I am a worthwhile person because you consistently notice and comment on the things I am doing well and are interested in my life outside of school.

- I trust that you will make it safe for us to make mistakes by making yourself vulnerable; acknowledging what you don’t know and where you need help; acknowledging mistakes, righting wrongs, apologizing, and making restitution; showing loyalty by giving credit freely, acknowledging others, and not bad-mouthing anyone behind their backs; holding yourself accountable and sharing how you’ll communicate; and being a constant learner with us – and visibly so.

- I trust that you will be honest, meaning that you give me honest feedback about my performance; talk straight, let people know where you stand, use simple language, call things as they are, and not leave false impressions; create transparency, erring on the side of disclosure; confront reality, take issues head on, and lead courageously in conversations; clarify expectations, discuss and validate them, and renegotiate if necessary.

- I trust your integrity – that is, that your motives are in the interest of the students, not primarily your own career advancement, because you stand up for important values; keep your moral compass; maintain urgency for what needs to be done; keep your promises and follow through on your commitments.

- I trust that you will act courageously by protecting us from initiative overload and keeping us safe from toxic behavior.

- I trust that you will make legitimate decisions because you solicit input; explain how our input was used and why; can set limits and say no; and make decisions for the good of the school.

- I trust that you will deliver results by highlighting small victories and getting the right things done.

- I trust that you will show me respect by listening first and not assuming you know what matters most; using active listening skills; hearing out different points of view; valuing my time; having my back; sharing critical feedback because you think I can get better and deserve the chance.

- I trust that you will act in a caring and compassionate way by showing kindness in little things; being generous; and going the extra mile to show consideration to individuals.

Saphier suggests having a staff create vignettes for what some of these statements look like in everyday contexts. “These vignettes can become a playbook for any leader who wants to build trust and respect,” he says.

“What I’ve Learned: Let’s Get Specific About How Leaders Can Build Trust” by Jon Saphier in *The Learning Professional*, December 2018 (Vol. 39, #6, p. 14-16), www.learningforward.org; Saphier can be reached at saphier@rbteach.com.

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2. Strategies for Making Big Decisions

In this *New York Times* article, author Steven Johnson says most people’s method for making important choices hasn’t changed over the centuries: they make a list of pros and cons and weigh their relative importance. Johnson suggests some better ways, drawing on cognitive science, management theory, and literary studies. “None of these new tools, of course, provide *solutions* to the decisions you face,” he says. “They’re intended to help you see the current situation from new perspectives, to imagine new possibilities, to weigh your options with more sophistication. There is no foolproof algorithm for life’s difficult choices. But the research shows that you can get better at making them.” His pointers:

- *Generate additional options.* Researchers have found that most people make decisions without looking beyond the alternatives on the table; they often consider only one or two. The evidence is that the more options considered, the more successful will be the ultimate decision.

- *Consult with a diverse group.* “Homogeneous groups,” says Johnson, “whether they are united by ethnic background, gender, or some other commonality like politics – tend to come to decisions too quickly. They settle on the most-likely scenario and don’t question their assumptions, since everyone at the table seems to agree with the broad outline of the interpretation.” Checking in with people of varied backgrounds increases the quantity of ideas, the rigor of deliberation, and the group’s persistence in pursuit of good decisions.

- *Imagine different outcomes.* One approach is conducting a “pre-mortem” – imagining a bad outcome and working backward to figure out what might have produced it. Another is to tell three stories about how the situation might work out: (a) things improve; (b) things get worse; (c) things get weird. Both of these strategies help one think through the possible consequences of a decision and avoid blind spots and a false sense of confidence.

- *Weigh competing values.* The decision maker writes down relevant values and gives each one a numerical weight. Each possible course of action is then scored on the values it serves, with the highest-scoring scenario emerging as the winner.

“How to Make a Big Decision” by Steven Johnson in *The New York Times*, September 2, 2018, <https://nyti.ms/2PZQ48N>

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3. How Making Too Many Decisions Can Erode Their Quality

In this *New York Times* article, John Tierney explores “decision fatigue” – the research finding that having to make lots of decisions degrades people’s ability to decide wisely. This can happen, for example, to judges, quarterbacks, and couples preparing for a wedding (the decision-fatigue equivalent of Hell Week, says Tierney).

In one experiment, college students were offered the chance to keep one item from a store’s going-out-of-business sale. The treatment group (deciders) had to make a series of choices: A pen or a candle? A vanilla-scented candle or one with an almond scent? A candle or a T-shirt? A black T-shirt or a red T-shirt? The control group (non-deciders) looked over the same items for a similar amount of time but didn’t have to make any choices; they were asked what they thought about each product and how often they had used it over the last six months. Afterward, all the students were subjected to a classic test of self-control: how long they could hold their hand in ice water. Those who had been required to make lots of decisions gave up much sooner (28 seconds, on average) than the non-deciders (67 seconds). Making all those decisions had sapped the deciders’ willpower.

Similar experiments with people who’d been making purchasing decisions in a suburban mall, deciding on multiple features on a tailor-made suit, and deciding on extra features on a new car produced similar results. The most intriguing experiment looked at the parole decisions made by judges at different times of day. It turned out that prisoners had a much lower chance of being paroled just before lunch and late in the afternoon, when judges had been making difficult decisions for hours. At those points, they were more likely to make the non-decision of keeping a prisoner locked up. “Once you’re mentally depleted,” says Tierney, “you become reluctant to make trade-offs, which is a particularly advanced and taxing form of decision making.”

“Decision fatigue helps explain why ordinarily sensible people get angry at colleagues and families, splurge on clothes, buy junk food at the supermarket, and can’t resist the dealer’s offer to rustproof their new car,” says Tierney. “No matter how rational and high-minded you try to be, you can’t make decision after decision without paying a biological price. It’s different from ordinary physical fatigue – you’re not consciously aware of being tired – but you’re low on mental energy.” That leads people to take shortcuts – acting impulsively, taking the easy way out, or deciding not to act (the judges not granting parole). It seems that people have a finite amount of decision-making energy, and when it’s depleted, they’re less able to make good decisions.

Tierney offers another case study: Julius Caesar’s dilemma as he returned from Gaul in 49 B.C. and had to decide whether to cross the Rubicon River with his army (bringing his troops with him was forbidden and would lead to civil war). The three phases of the decision were: (a) pre-Rubicon – weighing the options; (b) deciding to cross the river, at which point the die would be cast; and (c) what to do after crossing. Modern researchers have found that the second step in a Rubicon-type decision is by far the most mentally taxing.

Making choices when grocery shopping is particularly challenging for the poor, says Tierney. Multiple trade-off decisions with very limited resources deplete mental energy, leaving people vulnerable to impulse buying when they get to the cash register – which is, of course, why the sweet snacks are displayed there. And there’s a reason that sugary products are temptingly available at that location: glucose restores mental energy very quickly. The problem, Tierney says, is that it’s short-term mental energy, not the kind of wise decision-making energy that serves people best. That’s why dieting is a decision-making Catch 22: In order not to eat, the dieter needs willpower; but in order to have willpower, especially after resisting temptation all day, the dieter needs to eat, and sweets are tempting – but not helpful. Protein and other more-nutritious foods eaten throughout the day are better.

Even with better food choices, decision fatigue is still a factor. The study of the parole judges found that just after a mid-morning snack, they made more merciful decisions, but an hour or so later, they were back to harsher decisions, keeping prisoners locked up, even with exactly the same characteristics. The same was true just after lunch – more mercy – and late afternoon – slim chances of being paroled.

“To Choose Is to Lose” by John Tierney in *The New York Times*, August 17, 2011, <https://nyti.ms/2yhofEq> (see Memo 619 for a related article on “compassion fatigue”)

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4. Improving High-School Students’ Discussions with Classmates

In this *Cult of Pedagogy* article, Jennifer Gonzalez describes California high-school English teacher Jeff Frieden’s attempts to get students engaging in productive conversations. He tried think-pair-share, groups of four, mixer-style activities, and appointment clocks, but none of them worked very well. Many students took advantage of such opportunities for off-topic chats with their friends, while others never learned the names of peers with whom they’d gone to school for years.

One day, Frieden hit upon a way to get students to dive deeper into the content, take more academic risks, and get to know each other better. Here’s how his “ongoing conversations” method works as students, for example, study a novel:

- Each student gets a conversation tracker chart to record conversations with classmates. Students are required to talk with a specified minimum number of classmates (perhaps 75 percent of the class) within two or three weeks.

- Conversations are based on topic prompts from the teacher – for example, *Explain one thing to your partner that really confused you in the chapter*. Sometimes Frieden has students

switch partners and address the same topic, summarizing the conversation they just had with their previous partner.

- For each chat, students record the name of the person they talked with, the date, and a one-line summary of the content. Students continue to find new partners until they've reached the minimum number.

- To kick off ongoing conversations, the teacher explains the process, goes over how the tracker works, and models a conversation in a fishbowl format. Frieden frames it as a way for students to give each other mutual support. "I'm going to come clean that I'm a confused reader," he says to each class. "Join the club. When I read something for the first time, it's always confusing, and I need help to understand it. So let's basically form this class-wide support group here for struggling readers, and as we go through this, let's talk about the things that are perplexing to us that we don't get, words we don't understand. Maybe we miss a detail that our partners or our friends figure out, so they can help us."

Frieden has been delighted at how well the ongoing conversations strategy has worked, and believes it can be used in other subject areas. The benefits he's noticed:

- Much more on-task student talk;
- Students getting to know many more classmates;
- Developing social skills: "There's tremendous benefit in getting past some of the socially awkward stuff," says Frieden. "And really just learning how to interact with another human being will actually enrich your academic life too."
- The opportunity to quickly check for understanding by walking around listening in on conversations – for example, when he asked a sophomore class to talk about Clover as the class read *Animal Farm*, he heard a lot of students asking "Who's Clover?" so he called time out and talked about the character and her relevance to the book.
- Less need for exit tickets and quizzes. "I collect less work," he says, "but students do more."

Frieden holds students accountable for having the conversations by judging their ultimate mastery of the subject matter.

"Get Students Talking with Ongoing Conversations" by Jennifer Gonzalez in *The Cult of Pedagogy*, November 18, 2018, <https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/ongoing-conversations/>
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5. The Problem of Ambiguous Questions in History Classes

In this article in *4QMTeaching*, Massachusetts high-school curriculum coordinator Gary Shiffman describes how a fellow teacher's students froze when given this essay prompt: *What's the most important cause of the American Civil War?* (Students also got an article describing five causes of the war and were asked to pick one and defend it in their essays.) Why were the students stymied?

Shiffman says it's because the essay prompt was an ambiguous mix of different question types, making it virtually impossible to write about it in a coherent way. He and his

colleague Jon Bassett believe there are four types of history questions (hence their Four Question Method approach):

- *What happened?* (narration) – for example, What were the major events that led to the American Civil War?
- *What were people thinking?* (interpretation) – What were the protagonists thinking on the eve of the War?
- *Why then and there?* (explanation) – What changes in economics, politics, and demography made a violent constitutional crisis more likely in the middle of the 1800s rather than earlier or later?
- *What do we think about that?* (judgment) – Who is to blame for the American Civil War?

The teacher's question – *What's the most important cause of the American Civil War?* – combined narration (the story of events leading to the war), interpretation (people's thought processes), and a request to rank-order causes. Students who took the prompt seriously "would need to complete a number of challenging intellectual tasks," says Shiffman. "They would need to distinguish narration and interpretation from causal explanation. Then they would need to compare factors. Then they'd have to rank them in order of importance. The first two tasks are quite difficult. The third is impossible." That's why students' brains froze: the prompt made no sense to them.

Some students fake their way through ambiguous questions by substituting an easier question – for example, writing a narrative of events leading to the Civil War. "If it's a good story – a proficient narrative – we may give them a good grade," says Shiffman. "If not, we tell them they need to make an argument. If they do, it's typically not a great one, or even a coherent one. But since our 'causes of X' prompts don't compute for us either, we're likely to substitute right back. Not having answered the question doesn't mean you can't get an 'A'."

In this case, students weren't adept at fakery, and the teacher realized that her question was the problem. The next day, she told students she'd framed the question poorly and asked them to pick a cause and say how it contributed to increasing tension between North and South (narrative). It wasn't the greatest prompt in the world, but it was clear and students started writing.

Shiffman's advice: "Take your questions seriously. If you can't tell which of the Four Questions you're asking, assume you're not clear yet. Whatever question you ask, try answering it yourself, conscientiously, before you ask your students to try it. The stakes are high."

"The High Stakes of Getting the Question Right" by Gary Shiffman in *4QMTeaching*, November 18, 2018, <http://4qmteaching.net/the-high-stakes-of-getting-the-question-right/>

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6. Responding Effectively to Students' Writing

In this portion of one of Larry Ferlazzo's question-and-answer columns in *Education Week Teacher*, Susan Brookhart (Dusquesne University) suggests five steps when giving students feedback on their writing:

- *Make sure students know what qualities their writing should exhibit.* For example, if they're writing descriptive paragraphs, they should be clear that their writing should use adjectives that describe by telling what something looks, sounds, tastes, smells, or feels like, and that readers feel like they are "there," experiencing whatever is described. Clear directions give students a self-assessment checklist for their writing:

- Are my adjectives descriptive?
- Do they conjure up sight, sound, taste, smell, or touch?
- Will my readers feel like they're really experiencing what I'm describing?

"The best feedback on student writing," says Brookhart, "tells students what they want to know to get closer to the particular vision of writing they are working on."

- *Notice and name at least one thing students did well.* "Even the poorest paper has something to commend it," says Brookhart. "Find that and begin your feedback there" so students can build on their strengths. Don't assume that students know which of the success criteria they're meeting.

- *Suggest one or two immediate improvement steps for the next draft.* "Your feedback does not need to 'fix' everything possible," says Brookhart. "It only needs to take the student's work to the next level."

- *Learn something yourself.* Every opportunity to give feedback is also a chance for the teacher to learn something about what students are thinking, the status of their writing skills, and what they need to learn next.

- *Give students an immediate opportunity to put the feedback to work.* Absent this, a lot of feedback will go to waste because kids don't have a file drawer in their head that they'll access the next time this kind of writing is assigned. "No matter how well-intentioned the student," says Brookhart, "this just isn't how it works."

"Q&A with Larry Ferlazzo" in *Education Week Teacher*, November 17, 2018,
<https://bit.ly/2E9PKSr>

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7. The Effect of Year-to-Year Classmate Continuity on Student Attendance

In this *Elementary School Journal* article, Jacob Kirksey and Michael Gottfried (University of California, Santa Barbara) report on their study on whether elementary students who have more classmates from the preceding year might have better school attendance. Kirksey and Gottfried looked at three years of data from 13 public elementary schools in a small, diverse, urban district and compared the percent of classmates who carried over from the previous year to the number of unexcused student absences and the level of chronic absenteeism (missing 10 percent or more of school days for any reason). The percent of familiar faces varied from zero (for students who transferred in from another school and those

who were promoted and placed in a different classroom than previous classmates) to 100 percent (for situations where an entire class moved up together).

The results? Having more of the same classmates from the previous year was correlated with slightly fewer unexcused absences. On chronic absenteeism, the correlation was much stronger: students with more familiar faces from the previous year had much lower odds of being chronically absent – as much as 62 percentage points lower and on average 18 points lower.

“Familiar faces may serve as a reference for children attending school from one year to the next,” conclude Kirksey and Gottfried. “Such consistency may influence positive attendance behaviors in elementary children, as these children begin to value peers and assign a higher value to schooling. Additionally, familiar faces may act as an added layer of peer networks that serve as a buffer for other changing aspects to the learning context for young children. Within this base of familiarity, children could experience stronger connections to school amid changing grades and changing teachers.” The implications are clear: schools and districts should maximize year-to-year continuity of student groups as one of a number of ways to improve student attendance.

“Familiar Faces: Can Having Similar Classmates from Last Year Link to Better School Attendance This Year?” by Jacob Kirksey and Michael Gottfried in *Elementary School Journal*, December 2018 (Vol. 119, #2, p. 223-243), <https://bit.ly/2Q11WxH>; the authors can be reached at mgottfried@education.ucsb.edu and jjkirksey@ucsb.edu.

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8. Maximizing Teachers’ Contribution to Their Students’ Futures

In this article in *Education Next*, Kirabo Jackson (Northwestern University) reports on his study of the impact of teachers on their North Carolina ninth graders’ academic and non-cognitive attainment. Jackson analyzed English and math grades and test scores, student attendance, grades, behavior, suspensions, and on-time promotion to tenth grade. He also looked at downstream data: whether students took the SAT and graduated from high school on time, their grade-point average at graduation, and plans to attend a four-year college.

“I find that, while teachers have notable effects on both test scores and non-cognitive skills, their impact on non-cognitive skills is 10 times more predictive of students’ longer-term success in high school than their impact on test scores,” says Jackson. “These results provide hard evidence that measuring teachers’ impact through their students’ test scores captures only a fraction of their overall effect on student success.” Some additional findings:

- Teachers who are effective at raising test scores aren’t always effective at producing good behavior measures, and vice-versa.
- Thus, knowing which teachers get good academic results tells very little about their ability to improve behavior, and vice-versa.

“Teachers are more than educational-outcome machines,” concludes Jackson; “they are leaders who can guide students toward a purposeful adulthood.”

Jackson identifies a possible problem: making high-stakes teacher-evaluation decisions based on test scores or behavior data could lead some educators to game the system – for example, inflating grades and not reporting negative behavior data. Several remedies: identifying classroom practices that improve behavior and academic achievement; tapping into student and parent surveys for insights; improving teacher training on those practices; making classroom observations accurate and helpful; and, of course, basing teacher evaluation on more than students’ test scores.

“The Full Measure of a Teacher” by Kirabo Jackson in *Education Next*, Winter 2019, <https://bit.ly/2OLka39>; Jackson can be reached at kirabo-jackson@northwestern.edu.

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9. Getting a Foot in the Door with Text Messages to Parents

In this article in *Education Week*, Sarah Sparks reports on a study of a school program that sent parents text alerts when a child was in danger of failing, or was frequently absent. A study found that how parents were recruited into the program made a big difference. Here’s what researchers from Columbia and Harvard discovered in a study in a dozen Washington D.C. middle and high schools:

- When schools asked parents to go to a website and sign up for alerts, fewer than half of one percent did so.
- When parents were sent a text with a link to the signup, 11 percent signed up.
- When parents were asked if they wanted *not* to get the information, 95 percent stayed in.

Lisa Gennetian of New York University comments that opting parents into a program by default may seem contrary to the spirit of parent agency and empowerment. “We are a country that embraces choice,” she says, “and I think things like opt-out fly a little in the face of this idea of choice.”

But even though parents enrolled in the program only passively, the text alerts benefited their children: overall course failure rates fell by 25 percent and grade-point averages improved by a third of a letter grade. What’s more, at the end of the school year, these parents were more likely to want more information about their children’s schooling in the future. “Parents don’t know what they don’t know,” said study co-author Todd Rogers; “if you give them actionable information, they act on it.” What’s more, he added, “Parents don’t get the choice to receive report cards.”

“Make One Change to Parent Outreach, and Study Finds Fewer Students Fail Classes” by Sarah Sparks in *Education Week*, November 12, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2KQzhTq>

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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 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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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
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
Essential Teacher
Exceptional Children
Go Teach
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 Teaching in the Middle School
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Reading Research Quarterly
Responsive Classroom Newsletter
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Social Education
Social Studies and the Young Learner
Teachers College Record
Teaching Children Mathematics
Teaching Exceptional Children
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 Magazine