Marshall Memo 1101

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
August 25, 2025

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Learn the stories behind your staff and students. At the same time, stay curious about the status quo – especially who holds power in shaping systems and outcomes."

Vermont principal Jean Berthiaume (quoted in item #1)

"There will be moments when parents yell, teachers vent, and kids say wild things you couldn't make up if you tried. Remember that people are reacting from a place of stress, confusion, or pain. Don't take it personally. Be the calm."

Connecticut middle-school principal Kristy Zaleta (see item #1)

"Better readers are better at understanding the multiple points of view that might be held about a civic or a moral issue. They're less likely to think that if you disagree with them, it's because you're stupid."

Catherine Snow (see item #3)

"Curriculum in the United States has long been a battleground where different interest groups compete to establish whose knowledge is counted as legitimate."

Ryan Cowden and Kyle O'Brien (see item #5)

"We have to move from seeing curriculum just as a set of packaged materials to curriculum as storytelling, curriculum as the world around me, curriculum as the legacy I'm leaving. That's what artists do. They leave timeless legacies."

Gholdy Muhammad in "Bringing Joy Into Our Schools: A Conversation with Gholdy Muhammad" in *Cult of Pedagogy*, August 17, 2025

"While digital tools are efficient, not all of them are always effective. That's why, amid this communication revolution, there are times when the oldest tool – a face-to-face, in-person, knee-to-knee meeting – is still necessary at times."

T.J. Vari and Joseph Jones in "How to Hold Intentional Conversations with Educators" in *Edutopia*, August 15, 2025

1. Words of Wisdom from Veteran Principals

In this *Edutopia* article, Alex Shultz shares the advice that ten experienced U.S. principals have for rookie school leaders – and it's not "hit the ground running." Here's a distillation of their thoughts:

• *Don't rush, be a thoughtful observer, and be patient*. "As a new leader, there's a natural urge to prove yourself, to fix things quickly, and to implement change," says New Jersey high-school principal Tony Cattani. "But real, lasting improvement comes from understanding the culture you're stepping into, building trust with staff and students, and recognizing that meaningful change takes time and partnership."

• *Be visible, vulnerable and authentic*. "You were chosen for your role for a reason," says California middle-school principal Belinda Averill, "so let people see who you are. Be present, be human, and let staff, students, and families feel your authenticity." That includes being out and about, making frequent classroom visits, and listening to feedback.

• *Lend an ear and find your people*. "Learn the stories behind your staff and students," says Vermont secondary principal Jean Berthiaume. "At the same time, stay curious about the status quo – especially who holds power in shaping systems and outcomes." That includes hearing the voices of those who might be on the fringes: "Too often," says Georgia elementary principal Stephanie Morrow, "we have intelligent young staffers who are not provided with the opportunity to share their gifts and talents."

• *Gather information*. "It's important to have transparent and meaningful ways to learn what's going on around the school," says Washington elementary principal Alexandria Haas, and to establish that although you may not have immediate answers, "you have the know-how, commitment, and willingness to devise and seek solutions."

• *Resist the tendency to overthink the minutiae*. "Don't allow management tasks to take you away from providing strong support and guidance for those around you," says Indiana high-school principal Kyle Nix. "Lead with purpose and passion, and manage where necessary." It's also important to build a support network outside the school, including other school leaders who can help keep things in perspective.

• *Admit mistakes and learn from them*. "You don't have time to overanalyze every misstep or replay every conversation," says Connecticut middle-school principal Kristy Zaleta. "The work is too important. There will be moments when parents yell, teachers vent, and kids say wild things you couldn't make up if you tried. Remember that people are reacting from a place of stress, confusion, or pain. Don't take it personally. Be the calm."

"What School Leaders Would Say to Themselves If They Could Go Back in Time" by Alex Shultz in *Edutopia*, August 21, 2025
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2. Dealing with Four Reasons Leaders Aren't Better at Delegating

In this *Harvard Business Review* article, Elsbeth Johnson (MIT Sloan School of Management) says a key skill for leaders is handing off less-important tasks to colleagues to free up time and attention for big-picture, high-leverage work. "But both my experience and my research," says Johnson, "show that leaders too often find themselves mired in the details of their teams' efforts, with debilitating consequences for their organizations." The results of poor delegation:

- A leader is doing work that could be done more cost-effectively – and probably better – by someone who is closer to the action.
- Subordinates get frustrated by micromanagement and stagnant because they're not being given enough responsibility.
- The leader is mired in legacy issues and not focused on new work, people management, self-development, and strategic planning.

What discourages Johnson is that when people complete her courses, they know they must delegate, but when her team follows up with them six months later, a third admit they're still bogged down in lower-level tasks. The problem is twofold: not distinguishing between the work they should be doing and what they should hand off, and not following through once they make that distinction.

It's clear that many leaders need a refresher on the basics of delegation, but Johnson realizes they also need to deal with four perennial challenges:

• *The dopamine hit of personal productivity* – Cognitive science has shown that when we accomplish something, pleasure chemicals are released in our brain. The problem for leaders, especially those new to the job, is that short-term, low-level activities are more likely to have this effect than longer-term, cognitively difficult work. "Ultimately," says Johnson, "leaders need to accept that their work will yield fewer and less frequent chemical rewards associated with productivity." Her suggestions:

- Create different types of checklists. Break down the components of a meeting – clear direction, what needs to be accomplished, the behaviors that will help reach the goal – and check them off one at a time. Also pat yourself on the back for items you've delegated.
- Routinize good practices. For example, structuring every check-in meeting around three questions: What is your most pressing challenge right now? What steps are you taking to overcome it? And what's one thing I can do to support you?
- Reframe your purpose. "Train your focus on longer-term goals," says Johnson. "Remind yourself that you are helping your organization to scale by staying out of activity-based work, and you're encouraging your employees to grow by giving them more responsibility."

• *Employees' requests for help* – Many leaders' best intentions are derailed when colleagues come to them asking for guidance and advice, which often leads right back into the weeds. Johnson suggests these steps:

- Re-explain the context. For example, "Let's remember why we're doing this, what outcomes we need to deliver, and how we need to show up differently."
- Give the work back. "So given that context, what do you think the priority is?"
- Teach with examples, not answers. This might be describing how you made a similar decision in the past and asking your colleague how that applies here.
- Establish accountability and support. End a conversation with, "Let me know how that goes and when you'd like to check in with me again."

People often don't like this approach at first, says Johnson, "But if you keep at it, over time you'll discover who is willing and able to exercise good judgment and who isn't."

• *The expectations of people above and below* – The leader's boss might want every detail, and this can lead to micromanagement at every level. The key is asking the boss (politely) to hold you accountable for outcomes. Here's how:

- Start small – with the outcomes you're most likely to achieve and seek permission to take full responsibility for those.
- Be accountable. Show that you'll deliver what you promise to do.
- Give visibility to team members. Bring your colleagues into as many conversations as possible so the boss knows what they're doing and appreciates that you have a strong command of the details.
- Over time, target the more-complex work. As trust is established, gradually wean your boss from dictating your level of involvement.

• *A limited definition of "work"* – "What derails many leaders from effective delegating is their belief that real work is activity-based," says Johnson. "The challenge is especially problematic for people who are skilled at highly technical work that constitutes a part of their identity." She's found that lawyers, surgeons, research scientists, and salespeople have the most trouble delegating. Here's her advice to leaders:

- Recognize the limits of what you can do – and what teams can accomplish together.
- Decide if you really want to manage. If what you love is *doing*, leadership positions might not be the best fit.
- Spread the mindset. Build an organization where everyone understands the kind of work leaders do.

"Why Aren't I Better at Delegating?" by Elsbeth Johnson in *Harvard Business Review*, September-October 2025 (Vol. 103, #5, pp. 135-139); Johnson can be reached at elsbethj@mit.edu.

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3. Does the Literary Canon Need to Be Refreshed?

In this *Harvard Gazette* article, Max Larkin lists some seismic changes of the last four decades: the end of the Cold War, new conflicts around the world, shifting paradigms around

gender and sexuality, the internet, smartphones, and most recently, artificial intelligence. What are students in secondary-school English classes reading to make sense of all this? According to a recent report from the National Council of Teachers of English, they're assigned many of the same books as their parents:

- *The Great Gatsby*
- *Of Mice and Men*
- *To Kill a Mockingbird*
- *Hamlet*
- *Macbeth*

Great Expectations, Silas Marner, and *Our Town* have been dropped, *Night* and *The Crucible* have been added, but a number of old faithfuls remain.

"Classics are 'classic' for a reason, of course," says Larkin. "But that English-class inertia coincides with a trend that troubles educators, authors, and many parents: a long-term slide in the habit of reading among young Americans. Some worry that – in a diverse and polarized nation – books that once felt accessible now feel remote and impenetrable, or that cultural conservatism or education bureaucracies have kept the curriculum from a healthy evolution."

Which of the classics should we hold onto and which should we let go? Rosette Cirillo, a Harvard education professor who used to teach at a diverse Massachusetts high school, believes that arriving in college without having read Shakespeare puts students "at a serious disadvantage" with gaps in cultural literacy and intellectual challenge. With Shakespeare and *Gatsby*, says Cirillo, "We're thinking about building a language and culture of power and building access for our students."

But there's been pushback on the classics that remain in the high-school canon. In his interviews, Larkin heard some scathing critiques:

- *To Kill a Mockingbird* – the "white savior" archetype;
- *Of Mice and Men* – a cognitively disabled man is probably going to commit a murder;
- *The Great Gatsby* – "Here's a chance to learn about some really boring, worthless people," joked retired professor Catherine Snow, "and how badly they've screwed up their lives."

Snow suggests adding newer books like *Harry Potter* and *The Hunger Games* that are not easy reads and include "big, inherent, cultural themes and memes," challenging students to build cognitive skills like deconstructing a difficult text and analyzing tone and symbolism. Cirillo says authors like Toni Morrison and Junot Diaz should by now be part of the new canon, read alongside the best of the old classics. English professor Stephanie Burt believes that Frederick Douglass's first autobiography is "one piece of American prose literally everyone should have to read."

And there's another dimension, says Snow, "Better readers are better at understanding the multiple points of view that might be held about a civic or a moral issue. They're less likely to think that if you disagree with them, it's because you're stupid."

Getting students to read good books is more important than ever because of the smartphone and its powerful hold on their attention. "We're living through a change in media that comes from a change in technology that is – unfortunately – at least half as consequential as the printing press," says Burt. "I hate it; it makes me sad. But it's not something we can wish away." What needs to be fostered starting in the early grades is immersion in books, says researcher M.G. Prezioso, "story-world absorption – a virtuous cycle of joy in reading that might lessen the need for external motivators."

That doesn't mean letting go of all the classics, Prezioso believes. "There tends to be this dichotomy, first of all, between classic, canonical books versus books that are fun, as if canonical books can't be engaging or dramatic or enjoyable to read." In her surveys in high schools, students said they found a wide range of books engrossing, and among them were *Of Mice and Men* and works by Edgar Allan Poe.

"Reading Like It's 1989" by Max Larkin in *Harvard Gazette*, August 15, 2025

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4. An Instructional Coach Tries to Create a Bond with a Teacher

In this *Teachers College Record* article, Evra Baldinger (San Francisco State University) and Nicole Louie (University of Wisconsin/Madison) ask how instructional coaches can establish "solidarity, mutuality, and connection" – *togetherness* – with teachers they're supporting. The authors studied how Baldinger, as instructional coach for Heather, a middle-school math teacher, dealt with the everyday messiness of building an effective relationship over four coaching cycles.

Heather seemed reluctant to be coached at first, grousing about frequent observations, meetings, and the time it could take. "Sometimes I just want to teach," she said. The complexity of teacher-coach relationships is the focus of Baldinger's and Louie's case study.

In the first coaching session with Baldinger, Heather said she had a difficult class and was struggling to implement a confusing new curriculum. She described her students as "strong," "really smart," "slower," and "struggling," said that two of her ELs were way behind, and described two students as "totally lost." Baldinger was shocked and disappointed to hear this pigeonholing of students' math ability; it went against her deep commitment to rectifying untrue and unjust ability hierarchies.

But she kept her feelings to herself. "I felt overwhelmed," she wrote later, "seeing it as my responsibility to 'fix' this broken aspect of her thinking, while at the same time seeing that we had not yet established the relational safety necessary to take up challenging conversations directly."

Baldinger suggested ways that Heather could group students, support them, and make clear that there were more than a few "smart" students in the class, emphasizing how she and Heather could work together to address students' learning problems and mindsets. But her strong feelings kept her from fully tuning in to what Heather was saying about her attempts to help students take on team roles in their groups, and to Heather's enthusiastic description of

how one of the EL students she had described as "lost" explained an answer really well – "I was like wow!"

Baldinger's suppressed disapproval of Heather as one of "those" teachers who needed fixing created a distance between them. In subsequent coaching conversations, Baldinger praised specific things she observed in Heather's class without really believing it, and used humor and small talk – for example, complimenting Heather on a bracelet. As a result of this tension, Baldinger didn't see and appreciate some positive aspects of Heather's teaching: she loved her students and invested considerable time and energy in getting to know them and supporting their learning. "I had made some decision about what kind of person she was," says Baldinger, "that left me unavailable to a more authentic experience of being impressed by her teaching."

Interestingly, Heather said she really appreciated the (phony) praise Baldinger had conveyed, saying, "Thank you for all that… God, after the week I've had, that was really nice to hear. Like it reminds me of why I am doing this."

In another coaching session just before spring vacation, after an awkward exchange in which Baldinger tried to draw Heather out on ways she'd like to be supported, the teacher unloaded for eight minutes about how she resented being required to be coached. "You gotta do this and you gotta do this, you gotta jump through this hoop, you gotta do this," and her feeling of not getting any appreciation or support. "It's frustrating," she concluded.

Baldinger could have reacted defensively, since she really had tried to appreciate Heather's strong points, but she was relieved that the teacher had been honest and vulnerable. She felt closer to her. "This moment called me to do some challenging personal work outside of what I generally considered to be part of my coaching practice," she wrote later, "set aside my defensiveness or the possibility for hurt feelings to be present for someone who was struggling." She said the coaching was voluntary and Heather could wrap it up right then, and expressed her own frustrations with how things were going. She offered to teach one of Heather's classes, using a different approach than the required curriculum.

Heather could have taken this as an attempt to show her how to teach, but instead, she eagerly accepted the offer, took notes during Baldinger's lesson, and after they debriefed, said, "That was awesome. I wish you could be here every day."

What does this mean for instructional coaching? Baldinger used a number of what seemed like good coaching practices, but Heather triggered her with the way she talked about her students' ability, creating what the researchers call *messiness*. "In particular," they say, "we call for recognizing coaches' humanity. Like teachers, coaches are not robots who can be programmed to mechanically implement 'best practice.' And like teachers, coaches have messy human experiences that play out in their work, are consequential for learning, and should be investigated and better understood… This suggests that coaches should treat teachers' experiences, perceptions, and emotions as integral to their work together, not on the periphery of 'real' coaching (e.g., calmly and rationally planning lessons or analyzing student work)."

"The Messy, Human Work of Constructing Togetherness in a Coach's Interactions with a Teacher" by Evra Baldinger and Nicole Louie in *Teachers College Record*, May 2025 (Vol. 127, #5, pp. 67-89); Baldinger can be reached at evrabaldinger@sfsu.edu.

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5. Teacher Agency, Gatekeeping, and the "Critical Race Theory" Debate

"Curriculum in the United States has long been a battleground where different interest groups compete to establish whose knowledge is counted as legitimate," say Ryan Cowden (Gordon College) and Kyle O'Brien (Indiana University/Bloomington) in *Teachers College Record*. Since 2020, 44 states have proposed legislation designed to restrict teaching about race and racism, especially "critical race theory." These efforts, say the authors, "have led many social studies teachers to avoid discussing race and controversial issues in the classroom." In a number of states, including some that don't yet have legislation, teachers and principals have been fired for "divisive" classroom content.

The origins of anti-CRT restrictions can be traced to the aftermath of the 2020 murder of George Floyd, when many schools tried to address racial issues and right-size the curriculum, including widespread adoption of the *1619 Project* curriculum. There was significant backlash, including attacks on "critical race theory" – although surveys have shown that the actual tenets of CRT are not taught in K-12 schools. Chris Rufo, a conservative activist, was explicit about weaponizing this term. "The goal," he said in 2021, "is to have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and immediately think 'critical race theory.' We have decodified the term and will recodify it to annex the entire range of cultural constructions that are unpopular with Americans." Many legislators and parent groups joined the fray.

The CRT debate is about two narratives of U.S. history, say Cowden and O'Brien. "Proponents of anti-CRT legislation often espouse the notion that there is no longer systemic racism in the United States and argue that CRT belies racial progress in U.S. history. Opponents of this legislation counter that students need to engage in meaningful conversations about the role of race and racism in U.S. history in order to disrupt the status quo and the current order of racial hierarchy. Thus, it appears that social studies curriculum is, once again, serving as a lightning rod for cultural war issues, revealing deep ideological divides within the nation."

Anti-CRT laws and regulations differ widely in what they say and how explicit and restrictive they are, say Cowden and O'Brien. They analyzed the laws that have been passed in 18 states and zeroed in on states that exemplify three different approaches, listing all states in each category:

- *Explicit* – clearly identifies the theories and sources that are prohibited: North Dakota.
- *Implicit* – not as explicit on what is prohibited, listing "divisive topics": Georgia, Alabama, Iowa, Kentucky, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Utah.
- *Mixed* – explicit and implicit criteria: Florida, Arkansas, Idaho, Mississippi, Montana, South Dakota, Texas, Virginia.

Of course, educational policy is never implemented with complete fidelity because teachers have some autonomy in their classrooms – often driven by strong beliefs about what they think students must learn. But official and unofficial gatekeeping are in play, especially when there's widespread surveillance and online activism around a hot topic like this. The result is many teachers self-censoring in an attempt to avoid controversy.

How can teachers navigate real (and imagined) restrictions and continue to teach important and appropriate topics? Cowden and O'Brien have comments on each of the three types of legislation:

- Explicit legislation (only North Dakota so far) has what the authors describe as "weak framing," leaving the greatest degree of teacher autonomy because it gives a detailed, narrow definition of critical race theory.
- Implicit states like Georgia have "strong framing," using broader language, which imposes greater limits on teacher autonomy teaching U.S. history. Georgia's law also has a parent complaint provision that has parents bypass teachers and go directly to administrators, who are required to resolve the issue within days.
- Mixed states have an even more-restrictive framing, hemming in teachers to the greatest degree by imposing explicit and implicit restrictions.

To one degree or another, all these states leave less room for teacher decision-making. Confusion about what is allowed and what's not further narrows classroom discussions because it leads teachers to self-censor and avoid controversy.

"Although the laws in these states represent an unprecedented intervention into teacher decision making," conclude Cowden and O'Brien, "teachers who carefully consider the text in their state's law may retain some agency. This necessarily begins with a close reading of the laws themselves, rather than relying on reporting of the laws… Scholars have a responsibility to minimize confusion and ambiguity in these laws, where possible, to provide the clarity teachers need to reduce their self-imposed restrictions and renew engagement with the controversial issues."

"A Content Analysis Investigating the Framing of Anti-CRT Laws and Their Impacts on Social Studies Teacher Agency" by Ryan Cowden and Kyle O'Brien in *Teachers College Record*, May 2025 (Vol. 127, #5, pp. 123-151); Cowden can be reached at ryan.cowden@gordon.edu.

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6. Hard-Copy versus Digital Reading – Does It Make a Difference?

In this *Review of Educational Research* article, Lidia Altamura, Cristina Vargas, and Ladislao Salmerón (University of Valencia) report on their meta-analysis comparing students' leisure reading of print and digital texts. The researchers found that at the elementary and middle-school level, students' reading comprehension was better when they read hard-copy texts, but at the high-school and college level, comprehension was better with digital texts.

Why? Altamura, Vargas, and Salmerón suggest the *shallowing hypothesis* – that in the earlier grades digital texts detract from students developing a strong foundational base in

reading because there's less academic vocabulary and syntax and students have less practice focusing on reading. "The superficial way in which people tend to interact with new forms of digital reading," they say, "may not support readers' engagement or further development of higher-order cognitive skills."

With older students who are doing leisure reading with digital and print texts, this dynamic appeared to reverse.

"Do New Forms of Reading Pay Off? A Meta-Analysis on the Relationship Between Leisure Reading Habits and Text Comprehension" by Lidia Altamura, Cristina Vargas, and Ladislao Salmerón in *Review of Educational Research*, February 2025 (Vol. 95, #1, pp. 53-88); Salmerón can be reached at ladislao.salmeron@uv.es.

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7. A U.K. Schoolteacher's Advice to Colleagues

Willie Jones, who taught me with extraordinary passion and skill when I was at Shrewsbury School in England in the early 1960s, died in May at 94. He left behind these maxims for fellow teachers:

1. *Believe in yourself*. But never impose yourself on anyone else.
2. *Be natural*. But never act the *part* of the teacher.
3. *Be warm and loving*. But never expect (or ask) your students to love you; and though gratitude may be a virtue, never expect gratitude.
4. *Never overreact* – Remain calm. But if attacked, play the ball back gently, light-heartedly, but with good direction.
5. *Do not attempt to be over-familiar*. Respect students' privacy and do not try to be 'one of them'; keep a *modest* distance.
6. *Be modest and do not show off your knowledge*. Let it appear naturally, in the course of events.
7. *Be open and accept that you may be hurt*.
8. *Never anticipate trouble*. If you trust them, they will trust you.

"On Being a Schoolmaster" by Willie Jones, date unknown

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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 early Tuesday (there are 50 issues a year). Every week there's a podcast and HTMI 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
English Journal
Exceptional Children
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Educational Review
Independent School
Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Kappan (Phi Delta Kappan)
Knowledge Quest
Language Arts
Language Magazine
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