

Marshall Memo 592

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

June 22, 2015

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Quotes of the Week

“I never failed. I just found 1,000 ways that didn’t work.”

Thomas Edison on his invention of the light bulb (quoted in item #2)

“Some teachers gave a lot of homework, some gave none, some graded homework and those grades counted heavily towards the students’ final grades, while others did not grade homework or gave little or no weight to homework grades... Some teachers were giving some effective assignments that encouraged thinking and others were assigning busywork that promoted very little learning.”

Ross Kasun (see item #1)

“The homework assigned should be so meaningful that students need to complete it.”

Ross Kasun (*ibid.*)

“Just because people are busy doesn’t mean they don’t care.”

Peter DeWitt (see item #5)

“Every time I loop, I see boys who were angry and mean become calm and gentle. I see once-timid girls become confident and assertive. I also see a community of 25 students become more than the sum of its parts. I see that annual alchemy of personalities, interests, and talents working its gradual magic. The children become better readers, writers, thinkers, artists, scientists, and mathematicians, and I become a better teacher.”

Justin Minkel (see item #4)

“Our job is not to shape students to fit the system, but to shape the system to fit students – their needs, strengths, and interests.”

Justin Minkel (*ibid.*)

1. Making Sense of Homework

In this article in *School Leader*, New Jersey superintendent Ross Kasun describes how his views on homework evolved as he dealt with teachers and parents and read the research. “For the most part, as a practice, it is completely outdated and largely misused as a means of impacting student learning and achievement,” says Kasun. “...yet homework is assigned at almost every level, it is rarely questioned, and some people think our students should get more of it.” When he was a teacher, he remembers not knowing much about the rationale for homework, rarely discussed it with colleagues, and gave his students “many ineffective assignments.” As a principal, Kasun didn’t devote many brain cells to thinking about homework, taking action only when parents complained. Yet he assumed, along with most others, that “if homework was assigned, learning must be occurring.”

When Kasun became a superintendent, he had to pay more attention. For starters, there were problems when teachers weren’t given clear guidance. “Some teachers gave a lot of homework,” he says, “some gave none, some graded homework and those grades counted heavily towards the students’ final grades, while others did not grade homework or gave little or no weight to homework grades... Some teachers were giving some effective assignments that encouraged thinking and others were assigning busywork that promoted very little learning.” He was especially concerned with how many teachers assigned word search puzzles, mindless copying of spelling words, and intellectually empty projects.

Parents seemed to be evenly split between those who thought their children were getting too much homework and those who believed they weren’t getting enough. With some homework assignments, parent help (and purchases) were vital, which would seem to widen achievement gaps based on the level of home resources different students had.

What brought the issue to a boil in Kasun’s first summer as superintendent was a slew of parent calls about children who had straight As on their report cards but were assigned to Basic Skills because they’d done poorly on New Jersey state tests. There were also students with the opposite problem: excellent scores on state tests but Cs and Ds on their report cards. The common factor? Homework was counted as a major portion of students’ grades. Some low-performing students were able to get high grades by always doing their homework, and some high-performing students didn’t do homework and were dinged on their report cards.

Kasun convened a group of colleagues and they quickly concluded that “homework performance is not an accurate portrayal of final proficiency or mastery. It’s the path to

learning, so it's a formative assessment. We grade students against standards, not the routes by which they achieve them. Homework is practice and not a determination of mastery and grades are saved for declarations of mastery... When students fail to complete homework, we tend to approach the problem more like a discipline problem than a learning issue." This led the group to question how much homework should count in students' grades.

The committee also looked into the disproportionate impact of giving zeroes to students for not doing homework or failing to turn in assignments. "Traditional practices of giving zeroes and not accepting late assignments allow students to escape accountability for learning," says Kasun. "Learning is not about compliance, and we do not teach responsibility with a stick and carrot... We are faced with the irony that a policy that may be grounded in the belief of holding students accountable (giving zeroes) actually allows some students to escape accountability for learning." Here are the changes the district decided to implement:

- *Homework can be counted as only 5 percent of a student's final grade.* "Once the threat of grades is taken away from homework," says Kasun, "homework becomes a safe place to try out new skills without penalty, just as athletes and musicians try out their skills in practice or in rehearsals."

- *No zeroes.* The lowest grade is 50. "It is not about control," he says; "it is about learning. We need to assign work that is relevant and connected to the classroom, so that students see a reason to complete it, and not solely because they fear getting a bad grade. The homework assigned should be so meaningful that students need to complete it."

- *Time limits on homework* – The guideline was 10 minutes per grade level per night – in other words, third graders get 30 minutes, seniors get 120 minutes. Consistency across the district was important, says Kasun. In addition, "The quality of the task is as important as the amount of time required."

As the new policies were implemented, there was some push-back. Kasun addresses the major objections:

- Students won't do homework if it isn't a big part of their grade. In fact, he says, grades aren't the factor that determines who does homework and who doesn't; it's the *usefulness* of homework.
- Homework teaches responsibility and time management. "This is also an incorrect idea," says Kasun, "as homework does not reinforce time management if adults have to coerce children into doing it; if children are coerced, they are not in charge of making decisions about the use of time."
- Giving students 50 for doing nothing is wrong. Kasun went back to the unfairness of giving zeroes on a 100-point scale (it's virtually impossible to recover from a zero), and pointed out that teachers' evaluations on the Danielson rubric were on a 4-point scale with 1 being the lowest possible score.

Kasun concludes with the key principles addressed in the district's professional development:

- The purpose of homework is to foster learning.
- Flipped learning is an efficient way to make homework more meaningful.
- Teachers need to assign homework that students can complete on their own.

- Collaboration and personalized learning are paramount. Tools like Google Docs and blogs can foster teamwork in the classroom and beyond. “Best learning practices should not end at the end of the school day,” he says. “The same intuitive software that we use in our classrooms can be assigned at home to create personalized learning that meets each student where he or she is... Students use these tools as part of their daily life, so it is often how they learn best.”

“Busy Work or Home Learning? One District’s Journey to Remake Homework for the 21st Century” by Ross Kasun in *School Leader*, May/June 2015 (Vol. 45, #6), <http://www.njsba.org/news/school-leader/05062015/busy-work-or-home-learning.php>; Kasun can be reached at rkasun@freeholdtwp.k12.nj.us.

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2. Thomas Guskey on the Difference Between Making Mistakes and Failing (Originally titled “Why Glorify Failure to Enhance Success?”)

In this *Education Update* article, assessment guru Thomas Guskey (University of Kentucky) notes that some standards advocates are putting too positive a spin on failure, for example, “Failure is the best way to learn.” Guskey draws a distinction between failing and making mistakes. “Failure implies a complete breakdown, disaster, and disappointment,” he says. “[T]here is an important qualitative difference between ‘I made a mistake’ and ‘I failed.’”

Thomas Edison had this to say about his struggle to make the first light bulb: “I never failed. I just found 1,000 ways that didn’t work.” And the same attitude should apply to K-12 students as they stumble their way to mastery. “Acquiring new knowledge or skills always involves errors, mistakes, and occasional setbacks, especially when learning challenging material or complex tasks,” says Guskey. “But to see these setbacks as failures invokes unnecessary negativity and pessimism.”

Fixing mistakes is relatively easy, but recovering from failure is complicated. One critical factor is *attribution* – whether people blame external factors (a mean teacher, an unfair test) or take personal responsibility. Another factor is people’s mindset: fixed (*I’m just not good at math*) versus growth (*I can improve by working hard*). All this has three implications for teachers:

- Anticipate learning difficulties and address them directly during instruction.
- Constantly check for understanding to identify problems as early as possible and then present material in new ways.
- Help students understand “that the conditions for success are within their control and that we will help them remedy their learning errors when they occur,” says Guskey. “In other words, we, as teachers, must have a growth orientation to learning, and we must help our students develop the same orientation.”

“Why Glorify Failure to Enhance Success?” by Thomas Guskey in *Education Update*, June 2015 (Vol. 57, #6, p. 2-3), <http://bit.ly/1GvhYfG>; Guskey can be reached at guskey@uky.edu.

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3. Using the Retrieval Effect to Improve Vocabulary Learning

In this article in *Foreign Language Annals*, Joe Barcroft (Washington University/St. Louis) says that over time, researchers have examined four different approaches to helping students learn new vocabulary:

- Students picking up words from context without explicitly trying to learn them;
- Providing direct instruction of target words during reading;
- Providing students with translations of target words within a text;
- Getting students to retrieve the target words from memory as they read for meaning.

The first approach has been found to be quite ineffective, and copying words has a *negative* effect. Barcroft decided to conduct an experiment comparing the third and fourth approaches, working with Spanish-speaking university students in Mexico City who were at the intermediate level learning English. Here's how it worked.

- Both the control and experimental group were asked to read an English passage for meaning (it was about hunting and the dangers of meat contamination).
- The passage contained five target words (*skeet, vermin, pellets, smidgen, and carcass*), each of which was used three times. Students were unlikely to know the words and would benefit from adding them to their vocabularies.
- Students weren't told that they were supposed to learn the target words, nor that they would be tested on them afterward.
- The control group's passage provided the Spanish translation right next to each target word all three times it was repeated.
- The experimental group's passage gave the Spanish translation of each target word the *first* time it appeared, but with the second and third repetition, gave only the Spanish translation and asked students to remember and write the English word on a blank line.
- After they finished reading, students were tested on their mastery of the target words, first translating from English to Spanish, then from Spanish to English, and were also quizzed on their understanding of the passage.

What were the results? Students who used the retrieval method did significantly (51 percent) better than the control group – retrieval students averaged 4.33 words correct (out of 5) compared to 2.87 in the control group. “This finding is particularly important because it demonstrates that a specific task, in this case, opportunities for target word retrieval, can increase substantially incidental L2 vocabulary learning,” says Barcroft. “The greater gains in the retrieval group over the control group suggest that the act of attempting to retrieve target words, successfully retrieving them, or both, serves to strengthen the developing mental representation of novel word forms and mappings between these forms and their referents.”

Why is the retrieval effect so powerful? Brain research tells us that pulling information from memory enhances (rather than simply accessing) existing knowledge, making it easier to retrieve in the future. Barcroft reviews the long history of studies on the retrieval effect (going back to 1914), all showing that when we try to pull up an existing memory, or are tested on something we've learned, we strengthen the memory. The more difficult it is to access something in memory, the stronger the retrieval effect.

The implications of this finding for instruction are obvious: teachers should give students an opportunity to understand a new word in context, perhaps with an explanation or translation, and then challenge them to retrieve the word when it's used subsequently. This can work with hard-copy text, electronic versions, and also spoken discourse, with the teacher pausing and asking the student to retrieve the word.

“Can Retrieval Opportunities Increase Vocabulary Learning During Reading?” by Joe Barcroft in *Foreign Language Annals*, Summer 2015 (Vol. 48, #2, p. 236-249), available for rent or purchase at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/flan.12139/pdf>; Barcroft can be reached at barcroft@artsci.wustl.edu.

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4. The Benefits of Looping

In this article in *Education Week*, award-winning Arkansas teacher Justin Minkel sings the praises of looping, which he says is “both amazing and largely free” and is responsible for the best academic growth he’s ever seen in his second and third graders (he says researchers have found it can add six weeks of instruction over two years). Here’s Minkel’s analysis of why staying with the same students for two years is so powerful:

- *Getting to know students really well* – “I knew their needs,” says Minkel. “I knew their strengths. I knew their interests, their personalities, and how they learned best. I knew that Joel needed tough love, LeeAnn really was paying attention even when she was sprawled sideways on the rug, and Caleb responded better to positive affirmation than threats or consequences... I knew Josie wanted to be a vet and Francisco loved trucks, so I could connect the standards to what they cared about.” He knew about math learning preferences, book choices, and specific tutoring needs, all of which helped him tailor instruction more effectively.

- *Knowing parents better* – The level of trust and communication is much deeper the second year, says Minkel. This is especially important with parents who are uncomfortable in schools because of their own negative experiences as students.

- *More time to build rapport and routines* – “I usually reach a point with my students around the middle of the year when suddenly everything is clicking,” he says. “The behavioral issues have been mostly resolved, the kids trust me, and they’re comfortable with each other... In a normal year, that golden period lasts about five months. When I loop with a class, it lasts 14... Every time I loop, I see boys who were angry and mean become calm and gentle. I see once-timid girls become confident and assertive. I also see a community of 25 students become more than the sum of its parts. I see that annual alchemy of personalities, interests, and talents working its gradual magic. The children become better readers, writers, thinkers, artists, scientists, and mathematicians, and I become a better teacher.”

- *A second chance to fill the gaps* – Each summer, Minkel kicks himself about weak spots in the year that just ended. Looping gives him another bite of the apple. One year he was able to follow up on a less-than-effective writing program, another on weak technology integration. Every year there are a few students who don’t make the progress they should, and

the second year is a golden opportunity to set new goals, work better with their parents, and try more-effective approaches.

Minkel addresses two arguments against looping. The first is that students shouldn't be stuck with a bad teacher for two years. This is an issue of supervision and evaluation, he says: "A school should not let a bad teacher remain in the classroom. That teacher should either improve or leave the profession." The second concern is that teachers find it difficult to learn the curriculum at two different grade levels. "I understand the desire to truly master a particular grade level," he says, "but I also see the benefit of teaching multiple grades. Much of what I do with my 1st and 2nd graders comes out of my understanding of what they'll need in 3rd grade, which I learned firsthand by teaching that grade."

Looping helps teachers be more student-focused, he concludes: "True, teachers need to be content experts in literacy, science, and math. But we are better teachers when we're also experts on the individual children in our class. Our job is not to shape students to fit the system, but to shape the system to fit students – their needs, strengths, and interests."

"Why Looping Is a Way Underappreciated School-Improvement Initiative" by Justin Minkel in *Education Week*, June 17, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1GvVV8z>

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5. "Flipping" Staff and Parent Meetings

In this article in *Principal*, former principal Peter DeWitt describes how he began to "flip" his faculty and parent meetings by asking teachers and parents to watch a brief video beforehand and using that as a jumping-off point for substantive discussion. After overcoming some initial challenges, DeWitt found this worked really well. The first time he sent parents a link to a 5-minute video (on the Common Core and new state policies on bullying), many parents viewed it and the meeting was standing room only, with many parents commenting favorably on the format. Here are DeWitt's take-aways on the benefits of flipping:

- *Getting the most out of staff meetings* – When teachers are primed by watching a content video before a meeting, precious time is spent more effectively – on lively discussion rather than routine business.

- *Increasing parent involvement* – DeWitt started sending parents videos of students on field trips, engaged in new programs, and a-day-in-the-life montage, and parents were enthusiastic. Even those without Internet access at home were able to watch videos on their smartphones. He and his secretary realized they could downsize their 5-page parent newsletter to a single page, and the feedback was that parents were actually reading it.

- *Making better use of time* – "Just because people are busy doesn't mean they don't care," says DeWitt. The advantage of online videos is that overscheduled teachers and parents can fit in watching them at odd times, creating better connections with school policies and innovations.

- *Focusing on learning* – DeWitt found that he was able to target videos to the heart of the school's mission, getting everyone focused on what students were learning and how they were learning it.

• *Figuring out the logistics* – When DeWitt first tried to create a video, he discovered that his school computer didn't have the necessary bandwidth and software, so he used his home computer. After experimenting with Screenr, a paid service that creates a box around PowerPoint or Prezi slides, he decided it was too expensive and lacked a pause button, which meant he had to get the video right the first time or start again. Touchcast proved to be a better app – free and with a pause button and a green screen where he could include pictures and a script display for a narrative behind the video.

• *Getting people to watch* – “The videos have to be engaging and focus on topics that stakeholders want to know about,” says DeWitt. He quickly got the knack of conferring with colleagues, picking good topics, and keeping the videos lively and short.

“Flip Your Leadership” by Peter DeWitt in *Principal*, May/June 2015 (Vol. 94, #5, p. 12-15), <http://bit.ly/1H8NJ4G>

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6. The Quality of Writing Prompts in Middle-School ELA Classes

In this *Teachers College Record* article, Chandra Alston (University of Michigan/Ann Arbor) and Michelle Brown (Southeastern Louisiana University) compare the intellectual content of everyday writing tasks given by two tiers of middle-school ELA teachers: those whose students show impressive gains on standardized tests, and those whose students perform less well. Alston and Brown also examine the kinds of support teachers give their students and the quality of writing students produce.

The conclusion: the first group of teachers consistently gave more-challenging writing assignments, followed up with more support, gave their students opportunities to revise their work, and got much better writing. The second group of teachers often assigned fill-in-the-blanks worksheet writing assignments, provided less follow-up and fewer second-draft opportunities, and got lower-quality writing from their students.

Here are some of the characteristics of higher-performing teachers' assignments and support:

- Writing prompts were intellectually challenging, requiring students to analyze and think critically, sometimes comparing two pieces of writing;
- Prompts required extended writing, interpretation, analysis, synthesis, or evaluation of evidence rather than simple recall or statement of facts;
- Teachers provided scaffolding to support students in unpacking the prompt and responding at a higher level – for example, writing five paragraphs of which three were about character, setting, and theme;
- Teachers provided graphic organizers, models, checklists, rubrics, and other supports to help students stay on track and critique their own writing;
- Students were required to edit and revise through multiple drafts;
- Feedback was detailed and specific, focusing on content as well as conventions;
- Teachers pushed their students to do better – for example, “be specific and give examples.”

“This push toward revision or clarification is rarely documented in the lower-quartile sample,” say Alston and Brown, “and when it is, it is often on the final draft, when students are unlikely to revise.”

The authors conclude with a suggestion on teacher evaluation. Classroom observations, videotaping teachers, and test scores are informative, they say, but supervisors should also look at everyday writing assignments and students’ work in progress, which provide important insights about the level of rigor, intellectual demand, and support teachers are giving their students.

“Differences in Intellectual Challenge of Writing Tasks Among Higher and Lower Value-Added English Language Arts Teachers” by Chandra Alston and Michelle Brown in *Teachers College Record*, May 2015 (Vol. 117, #5, p. 1-24), <http://bit.ly/1K6H5ek>; the authors can be reached at calston@umich.edu and michelle.brown-4@selu.edu.

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7. A California School Puts Students to Work Solving Technology Problems

In this article in *Principal*, principal Aaron Brengard describes the daunting challenge of introducing \$500,000 worth of tablets, laptops, and interactive whiteboards in his urban K-6 school as part of an ambitious turnaround effort. In the first year, the technology component floundered because of inadequate support for teachers, and the school considered putting tech on a back burner. “And then it hit us,” says Brengard. “The resource we needed was in front of us the whole time. Our students were digital natives, and they are an incredible resource ready to be empowered in any 21st-century classroom.”

That summer, the school’s technology coordinator ran a program to train students as Tech Geniuses to troubleshoot classroom technology issues (like connecting the whiteboard or installing a printer) and creating modules to get students integrating technology into projects (e.g., taking pictures and making movies). That fall, a Tech Genius was assigned to every classroom and the group began to meet every Tuesday after school to discuss the issues they were encountering and learn new skills. “It was hard to fix,” said one student of a teacher’s whiteboard problem, “but I searched on her computer and made a change on the system preferences. I figured it out. I felt proud of myself.”

In the third year of the school’s turnaround, the student tech helpers started to lead professional development sessions for teachers, including how to build digital portfolios. “We were all lined up on the side of the room,” said one Tech Genius. “Then, Mrs. Malmin introduced us and we went and sat with teachers. I worked with a fifth-grade teacher. He asked a lot of questions I was able to answer. I felt like the tables had turned.” The idea of student helpers spread to other areas of the school, including reading buddies for younger students and tour guides for visitors to the school.

“The tech geniuses are true, empowered leaders on our campus,” concludes Brengard. “Our school’s technology integration thrives with them. We regularly see these confident students walking the campus during breaks with their badges and cool, black T-shirts. The front of the shirt says it all: *GENIUS. I’ve got this.*”

“Build Tech Success with Students’ Help” by Aaron Brengard in *Principal*, May/June 2015
(Vol. 94, #5, p. 16-19), <http://bit.ly/1GiebDI>

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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 others very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 44 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, and writer, lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 64 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).

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Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
AMLE Magazine
ASCA School Counselor
ASCD SmartBrief/Public Education NewsBlast
Better: Evidence-Based Education
Center for Performance Assessment Newsletter
District Administration
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
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Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
Essential Teacher
Go Teach
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Educational Review
Independent School
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Journal of Staff Development
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Knowledge Quest
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Perspectives
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Responsive Classroom Newsletter
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Teacher
Teachers College Record
Teaching Children Mathematics
Teaching Exceptional Children/Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The District Management Journal
The Journal of the Learning Sciences
The Language Educator
The Learning Principal/Learning System/Tools for Schools
The New York Times
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Time
Wharton Leadership Digest