Marshall Memo 978

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
March 20, 2023

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"To wake up without a purpose is a dangerous place to be."

Jamie Lee Curtis, quoted in "Arnold's Last Act" by Mark Leibovich in *The Atlantic*, April 2023 (Vol. 331, #3, pp. 38-49)

"A lot of teenagers are trying to be happy, but sometimes they're going about it the wrong way or putting effort into the wrong things."

Laurie Santos (quoted in item #3)

"For six weeks, every lesson feels like a mini practice test… The curriculum may have four modules, but teachers are lucky to get through two because all attention flips to test prep – limiting students' opportunities to deeply learn the very content coming on the test."

Emily Freitag (see item #1)

"The professional lives of educators are, for the most part, predicated on predictability… Consequently, changes in schools that deviate from that predictability are hard to acknowledge, accept, or appreciate."

Lew Smith, author, professor, and school leadership guru, who died early this month

"The principals I studied had an unwavering focus on teaching and learning and student success. They were visionaries. They understood change. They were communicators, relational, strategic, learners, empowering, and courageous."

Lew Smith

"Have we created critical thinkers, team players, and problem solvers? Have we addressed social and emotional growth? Have we instilled a concern for social justice? For ethics? Have

we created a love for lifelong learning?"
Lew Smith

"Send teachers to visit schools with comparable populations and exemplary programs. If they can do it, why not us?"
Lew Smith

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1. Test Prep – What Works and What Doesn't

In this *Education Gadfly* article, Emily Freitag (Instruction Partners) says that in her work in K-12 schools, she's been struck by how test prep takes over in March and dominates a large chunk of the instructional year. "For six weeks," she says, "every lesson feels like a mini practice test… The curriculum may have four modules, but teachers are lucky to get through two because all attention flips to test prep – limiting students' opportunities to deeply learn the very content coming up on the test."

Is it helpful to focus so heavily on preparing students to score well on high-stakes exams? It might be, says Freitag, if test preparation followed these broader research-based guidelines:

- Teach in ways that help students get a deep understanding of the content that will be tested.
- Develop higher-order cognitive skills – for example, have students answer "why" questions and explain their thinking.
- Have students take one full-length practice test to tamp down anxiety, become "test-wise," and then use a post-mortem to learn from their mistakes.
- Teach students about stereotype threat and how to counteract it.
- Help students understand who they are as test takers and reduce their jitters.

"Most of the test prep I see goes against these findings," says Freitag. "I see few calming strategies and many hyping strategies. I see more instruction on test format and testing strategies (e.g., lessons on process of elimination) than deep sessions on content… And I see very little attention to stereotype threat or explicitly helping students consider themselves as test takers and how their identity might impact the way they experience a test."

It's time to push back against the culture of test prep, says Freitag – a culture that has been shaped by folklore about what works, marketing by companies that produce prep materials, and pressure to raise scores. District and school leaders should follow the research

findings listed above, taking the leap of faith that high-quality, well-aligned instruction is the best test prep, accompanied by a few specific short-term practices that don't gobble up too much instructional time. Adults should also talk to students about testing in ways that model calm, confidence, and awareness of what has been accomplished during the school year.

It's also important that school leaders help students and teachers understand the mechanism of stereotype threat – how some people's fear of confirming negative beliefs about their ability leads them to "over-effort" and do less well – and ensure that teachers, administrators, and test proctors talk about tests in ways that counteract this dynamic – e.g., *This is a test to see how much you've learned* versus *This is a test to see how smart you are*. [See Memos 629 and 914 for details on neutralizing stereotype threat.]

Freitag concludes with a call for more research on test prep "to help build the case for moving away from practices based on lore that may not be serving students well," and, more immediately, creating a "new normal" about test prep. "Students and families would love it if we did," she says.

"Keep the Tests, but Reform the Test Prep" by Emily Freitag in *Education Gadfly*, March 17, 2023

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2. Effort and Attention to Detail as Powerful Drivers of Achievement

In this *Education Gadfly* article, Eva Moskowitz, leader of a charter school network in New York City, says that during the pandemic, students' "effort muscle" atrophied. As schools have reopened, she's noticed that kids are putting less effort into re-reading and double-checking. Moskowitz and her colleagues came to that conclusion when they noticed that up to 70 percent of students' errors on classwork, homework, and tests were the result of carelessness and lack of attention to detail.

Many teachers don't realize what's happening, believing instead that when students perform poorly in the classroom, it's because of knowledge gaps and limited understanding. This leads to a lot of reteaching, which is frustrating for teachers when students don't put in any effort because they find it boring (they already know it) – creating an unfortunate cycle, says Moskowitz: "Students come to expect re-teaching and don't exert themselves when they learn things the first time."

A key post-Covid priority, she believes, is "rebuilding students' effort capacities," which requires a mindset shift among teachers. An example: reviewing students' homework, a teacher notices that many students got a two-step fractions problem wrong. The usual response is to re-teach the fractions concept, but looking more closely at students' errors reveals that students impulsively answered the first part (correctly) and didn't take the time to see what the question was asking in the second part. With this understanding, the teacher's strategy the next day would be to affirm what students did correctly (*You know how to do this!*) and teach them how to read more closely and understand the whole question before jumping to solve it.

Helping students apply this level of attention to detail and careful problem-solving is

going to be hard work, says Moskowitz: "Teachers must live and breathe the expectation that scholars can get right what they already know how to do, and be absolutely consistent in holding them accountable. The formula sounds simple, but it is challenging." An underlying problem may be teachers' low expectations, but when teachers "go for it," students rise to the occasion, teachers' beliefs change, and achievement soars.

"Going for it," says Moskowitz, "means not only having routines for double-checking and re-doing careless work, but also asking students to rethink and try again in classroom discussions when they don't respond to the question asked, don't use evidence and reasoning, or repeat exactly what their peers said instead of building on an idea. In such classrooms, students' behavior shifts quickly and dramatically. They rise to meet the expectation and become focused and highly engaged. They come prepared because they know their lesson moves fast and builds on what they've already learned."

"We Know Student Effort Matters, So Let's Start Acting Like It" by Eva Moskowitz in *Education Gadfly*, March 16, 2023

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3. An Online Course for Teens on Happiness

In this *Washington Post* article, Lindsey Bever reports on how the most popular course at Yale – *Psychology and the Good Life* – has been retooled into a free, online, six-week course for teenagers. It uses TikTok-length videos to highlight common misconceptions about happiness and teach about the behaviors, feelings, and thoughts that produce mental well-being.

There's an urgent need for this kind of intervention, say mental health professionals, because U.S. adolescents are in a mental health crisis. It was in full swing before the pandemic; in 2019, 44 percent of high-school students reported persistent sadness or hopelessness, with nearly 20 percent saying they had considered suicide, and 9 percent attempting to end their lives. Covid-19 made things worse, with elevated levels of anxiety, depression, loneliness, self-injury, and suicidal ideation. "The rites of passage for teenage-hood were disrupted," says psychologist/author Mary Alvord. Young people missed out on parties, homecoming dances, graduation ceremonies, and everyday interactions with their peers.

"We're not taking care of our young people today if we're not giving them strategies to navigate all the complex societal pressures that they face," says Laurie Santos, the Yale psychology professor who taught the original happiness course. "We need to know the appropriate ways to listen to them and to react to them, so that we can understand the message that things like sadness or anxiety or anger might be sending and then channel them in an appropriate direction."

Santos filmed the lectures for the updated version of her Yale course before a group of high-school students and asked for their reactions and questions. Here are some of the key concepts in the teen course she and her colleagues created:

• *Rethink what happiness means.* Many teens believe they'll be happy when they have

the right partner, perfect grades, admission to the right college, popularity on social media, and money. "A lot of teenagers are trying to be happy," says Santos, "but sometimes they're going about it the wrong way or putting effort into the wrong things."

• *Get out of yourself*. The course focuses on the true sources of happiness for teens, which include making social connections, having a sense of free time ("time affluence"), being less self-centered and more other-oriented, volunteering their time, giving money to worthwhile causes, and doing random acts of kindness like opening a door for another person.

• *Learn self-compassion*. Teens need to be taught how to tune out their inner critic – the thoughts that make them feel inferior and lead to self-sabotaging behaviors like procrastination – and think of themselves in more self-compassionate ways.

• *Slow down the anxious voices in your head*. The course provides tools to regulate emotions, such as intentionally engaging the senses. Santos asks, "What are five things you can see right now? What are four things you can hear right now? What are three things you can feel right now?"

The response to the course has been enthusiastic, with hundreds of thousands of teens clicking on the link and mental health professionals giving a thumbs-up. "If we can teach children and teens and adults to try to make changes to things they can control," says Alvord, "they feel more empowered. If they feel more empowered, they feel more in control of their life. And if they feel more in control of their life, they're not feeling helpless. Then they don't tend to be depressed."

"Yale's Hugely Popular Happiness Course Is Revamped for Teens" by Lindsey Bever in *The Washington Post*, January 29, 2023

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4. Perfectionism versus "Excellencism"

In this *Science of Creativity* article, Annie Murphy Paul lists some of the downsides of perfectionism: anxiety, less creativity, depression, and burnout. This must be why we're told, *Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good*, she says. But does that mean settling for mediocrity? Shouldn't we be holding ourselves to the highest standards?

The good news is that there's a viable alternative to perfectionism. It's called *excellencism*. Proposed by Patrick Gaudreau, a psychology professor at the University of Ottawa, it's quite distinct from its over-the-top cousin:

- Perfectionism is the relentless pursuit of extremely high and strict standards of perfection – and evaluating oneself by those standards.
- Excellencism is striving toward high yet attainable standards in an effortful and flexible manner – and being satisfied once they're reached.

Excellencism is a "qualitatively different mindset," says Paul, and it produces very different results. In a study conducted by Gaudreau and two colleagues, people with an excellencism mindset showed much greater creative potential than perfectionists. Paul believes that's because:

- Excellencism is rooted in an accurate sense of reality and a capacity for flexibility, both of which are essential to creativity.
- Excellencism appears to protect against anxiety, stress, and burnout by allowing people to strive for high standards without pushing themselves too hard.
- Excellencism puts a bigger and healthier space between us and our work, says Paul, "between what we *do* and who we *are*."
- Excellencism allows us to savor rewarding experiences at every stage of the process, versus the perfectionist needing the highest level to feel satisfaction.
- Excellencism generates an upward spiral, with strength building on strength, while perfectionism can produce a downward spiral of self-criticism and negativity.

Here are parallel self-assessments on perfectionism (on the left) and excellencism (on the right) designed by Patrick Gaudreau and Benjamin Schellenberg:

As a Person, My General Goal in Life Is To:

Have perfect performance	*Have very good performance*
Be a perfect person	*Be a competent person*
Accomplish great things perfectly	*Accomplish great things*
Be exceptionally productive all the time	*Be very productive*
Be a flawless person	*Be a skillful person*
Produce error-free work	*Produce high-quality work*
Attain perfection	*Attain difficult but realistic goals*
Perfectly learn difficult things	*Successfully learn difficult things*
Reach perfection	*Reach excellence*
Perform perfectly	*Perform very well*
Work relentlessly until I reach perfection	*Work very hard until I reach excellence*

"If you score high on perfectionism," concludes Paul, "consider whether you might be able to move toward an excellencist perspective."

"The Alternative to Perfectionism" by Annie Murphy Paul in *Science of Creativity*, February 22, 2023

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5. Using ChatGPT and Other Bots to Teach Better

In this SSRN paper, Ethan Mollick and Lilach Mollick (Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania) say that in the current debate on the uses and abuses of ChatGPT and other large language models (LLMs), educators haven't paid enough attention to some important classroom applications. The authors identify five pedagogical strategies that are not used enough in classrooms because they are time-consuming and hard to implement – and show how the new bots can be helpful:

• *Generating examples to help students understand difficult and abstract concepts* – The best way to explain new and challenging material is to give students a number of examples. "If students are presented with only one example," say Mollick and Mollick, "they may focus on the superficial details of that example and not get at the deeper concept. Multiple examples of a single concept can help students decontextualize the idea from the example, leading to better recall and understanding."

Ideally, examples provide a real-world context, anchor abstract ideas in an analogy or story, ground concepts in engaging details, reveal complexity, highlight nuances, help students think critically, and support the transfer of learning to new situations. These demanding criteria show how difficult it is for teachers to generate enough high-quality examples. That's where the bots come in. All a teacher needs to do is specify the concept, ask for varied examples, and describe the grade level of students and the style of writing required. Click on the full article below for examples on the concept of opportunity costs.

Of course the teacher needs to evaluate the examples generated: Are they factually correct? Are they relevant? Do they have enough detail? Will students find them interesting? Do they connect the abstract to the concrete? Having narrowed down to a good list of examples and presented them to a class, the teacher might then ask students what the examples have in common, have them compare and contrast several, and ask which different aspects of the concept each example highlights.

• *Providing varied explanations and analogies to address student misconceptions* – Clear explanations are central to good teaching, helping students build mental maps and achieve deeper understanding. But good explanations must be built on students' prior knowledge, take into account likely misconceptions, plan a step-by-step approach with organizational cues so students can follow along, and provide concrete details and analogies. LLMs can tackle these exacting demands, quickly generating explanations and analogies for a specific grade level and level of understanding. See the article link for a suggested explanation of the concept of photosynthesis for elementary students.

• *Producing low-stakes tests so students can practice retrieving information* – Checking for understanding is a proven method of cementing material in long-term memory. But generating high-quality tests, quizzes, and mid-lesson "hinge" questions (to see if students are ready to move on to a new topic) is "an effortful task," say Mollick and Mollick. LLMs can quickly generate diagnostic retrieval exercises. See the article link for examples of quizzes on U.S. history and high-school biology.

• *Assessing students' knowledge gaps to guide instructors' next steps* – The best way for teachers to know what to do next is asking students questions like these:

- *What is the most important idea or concept covered in class today?*
- *Why do you think this idea is important?*
- *What is the most difficult class concept so far?*
- *What did you struggle to understand?*
- *What concept or problem would you like to see explored in more detail?*

LLMs can be asked to digest students' responses to questions like these (perhaps in the middle of a class) and quickly generate an analysis of responses. See the article below for key points and areas of confusion on a lesson on BATNA (Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement).

• *Creating distributed practice exercises to reinforce learning* – "Students need to practice retrieving information not just once but multiple times during a course," say Mollick and Mollick. It's also important for students to continuously make connections among the different concepts and skills they've learned. But even when students know about the value of distributed practice, they continue to "cram" for tests at the last minute, which means teachers must be intentional about distributing practice. To do so, teachers need to know:

- *What are the most important topics for students to remember?*
- *Which connections between topics are critical and should be practiced often?*
- *How often and when should students retrieve previously learned material?*
- *What is the best spacing of assessments to allow just the right amount of forgetting?*
- *When have students had enough practice?*

LLMs can be very helpful designing and scheduling quick quizzes spread out over days, weeks, and months, providing an effective way to lodge concepts and skills in students' long-term memory. See the article link for examples of distributed practice during a unit on the Enlightenment and the American Revolution.

"Using AI to Implement Effective Teaching Strategies in Classrooms: Five Strategies, Including Prompts" by Ethan Mollick and Lilach Mollick in SSRN, March 17, 2023; the authors can be reached at emollick@wharton.upenn.edu and lmollick@gmail.com.

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6. The Value of a Content-Specific Teacher Evaluation

In this *Mathematics Teacher* editor's note, Utah ninth-grade math teacher Travis Lemon says after 20 years in the classroom, the way supervisors evaluated him had begun to feel "mundane and insignificant." His current supervisor, the school's assistant principal, didn't have a math background, and her annual evaluations used a generic instructional framework that didn't provide mathematics-specific feedback.

Lemon decided to take action. He met with his AP, shared several math frameworks, including the eight Mathematics Teaching Practices in the NCTM's 2014 *Principles to Actions: Ensuring Mathematical Success for All*, and asked if she would be willing to use them for his next evaluation. She agreed and they scheduled an observation.

The classroom visit followed the usual pattern, with the administrator sitting at the back taking notes. But two days later, Lemon was stunned to receive feedback that was "powerful and exciting… the best evaluation experience I have had!" What made it special? The assistant principal made detailed comments on each of the Mathematics Teaching Practices:

- Establish mathematics goals to focus learning
- Implement tasks that promote reasoning and problem-solving
- Use and connect mathematics representations
- Facilitate meaningful mathematics discourse

- Pose purposeful questions
- Build procedural fluency from conceptual understanding
- Support productive struggle in learning mathematics
- Elicit and use evidence of student learning

The AP had lots of appreciation in these areas, and said, "I wish I'd had a math teacher like you in my past; I would probably be much better at math!" She had several specific suggestions on the way he grouped students during the lesson and might more effectively support productive struggle.

"I left the follow-up conversation motivated, empowered, and with some clear direction as to how I might improve," says Lemon. "My next steps had been co-crafted with my supervisor and as such caused both of us to be committed and bought into their realization in my classroom." He urges teachers in all subject areas to make a similar request to their supervisors so classroom supervision, coaching, and evaluation become more subject-specific and helpful.

"Seeking Quality Feedback to Improve Practice" by Travis Lemon in *Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12*, March 2023 (Vol. 116, #3, pp. 158-161); Lemon can be reached at tlemon@alpinedistrict.org.

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7. Why School Arts Programs Are a Must

In this Solution Tree article, author/consultant Elliott Seif makes the case for strong arts programs in K-12 schools (following up on his case for science and social studies, summarized in Memos 974 and 976):

- Enjoyment of arts programs fosters student engagement in school.
- The arts can instill a growth mindset and other positive attitudes and behaviors.
- The arts help students develop skills that carry over to other subjects, including observation, perspective-taking, interpretation, analysis, and synthesis.
- The arts enhance creativity and creative thinking.
- As students read musical notes, play an instrument, learn dance steps, create a painting, act in a drama, or interpret a script, they learn new concepts, vocabulary, and literacy skills.
- The arts help students learn mathematics skills, including measurement, patterns, manipulating numbers, spatial and geometric relationships, and proportional reasoning.
- The arts can broaden and enrich learning in history, literature, and STEM subjects.
- Arts education helps students discover and develop talents, interests, hobbies, and careers.
- The arts develop teamwork, collaboration, and an understanding of differences.
- Aesthetic learning is important in its own right. "The power of the arts," says Seif, "is in their wondrous ability to give us joy, help us understand tragedy, promote empathy, and make the written word come alive. They help students examine conflict, power, emotion, and life itself."

"Ten Reasons Why Strong Arts Programs Are Critical for Living in Today's and Tomorrow's World" by Elliott Seif, Solution Tree, March 14, 2023; Seif can be reached at elliottseif4@gmail.com.

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8. Shifting Public Attitudes on Career and Technical Education (CTE)

In her Editor's Note in *Kappan*, Teresa Preston reports on a Populace survey revealing a dramatic shift in public opinion on the importance of career preparation versus college preparation by K-12 schools. Asked to rank-order 57 priorities for public schools, here's the change from the 2019 to the 2022 survey:

• 2019:
- College preparation ranked 10th
- CTE ranked 27th

• 2022:
- College preparation ranked 47th
- CTE ranked 6th

"Prepared for What?" by Teresa Preston in *Kappan*, March 2023 (Vol. 104, #6, p. 4)

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9. Recommended Children's Books Written in Verse

In this *School Library Journal* feature, Heidi Grange recommends books written in verse. "Similar to music in its ability to touch the soul," says Grange, "the best verse stories convey a world of feeing in a limited number of carefully crafted words, phrases, and sentences. Even the spaces play a vital role in how the story unfolds." Here's her list:

- *The Door of No Return* by Kwame Alexander, grade 6-9
- *Odder* by Katherine Applegate, grade 3-6
- *Iveliz Explains It All* by Andrea Beatriz Arango, grade 4-8
- *Hidden Powers: Lise Meitner's Call to Science* by Jeannine Atkins, grade 5-8
- *The Magical Imperfect* by Chris Baron, grade 3-6
- *Rez Dogs* by Joseph Bruchac, grade 3-6
- *Worst-Case Collin* by Rebecca Caprara, grade 5-8
- *Golden Girl* by Reem Faruqi, grade 4-8
- *Starfish* by Lisa Fipps, grade 4-8
- *Alone* by Megan Freeman, grade 4-8
- *Everywhere Blue* by Joanne Rossmassler Fritz, grade 4-8
- *The Deepest Breath* by Meg Grehan, grade 4-6
- *Garvey in the Dark* by Nikki Grimes, grade 3-6
- *Alias Anna: A True Story of Outwitting the Nazis* by Susan Hood with Greg Dawson, grade 6-9
- *In the Beautiful Country* by Jane Kuo, grade 3-7

- *Red, White, and Whole* by Rajani Larocca, grade 4-8
- *The Road to After* by Rebekah Lowell, grade 4-8
- *A Seed in the Sun* by Aida Salazar, grade 4-8

"Books in Verse" by Heidi Grange in *School Library Journal*, March 2023 (Vol. 69, #3, pp. 60-62)

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10. Short Item:

A Graphic Narrative on How Memory Works – This clever cartoon presentation by Nicky Case presents what brain science has learned about committing important information to memory.

"How to Remember Anything Forever-ish" by Nicky Case, NCASE, October 2018

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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 HTMI 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
Ed. Magazine
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 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