# Marshall Memo 1078

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
March 10, 2025

## In This Issue:



## Quotes of the Week

"We missed you and we want you here."

> A message sent to absent students in the Arlington, Virginia Public Schools, quoted in "Bringing Back the Kids: Compassionate Approaches to Reducing Absenteeism" by Sophi Zeman in *School Library Journal*, March 2025 (Vol. 71, #3, pp. 37-39)

"As challenging as this state of affairs is, with crisis comes opportunity. This is a chance for schools to clarify their understanding of culturally responsive teaching that goes beyond just talking about implicit bias. It is our chance to go beyond performative acts of equity and get focused on strengthening the instructional core so that every child is educated to use their minds well, regardless of Zip code or mother tongue."

> Zaretta Hammond in "6 Ways to Uphold Culturally Responsive Teaching" in *Education Week*, February 28, 2025

"You should recognize that working on your teaching will be a threat to your ego. Teaching is very personal, so taking a close look at it is scary."

> Daniel Willingham (quoted in article #1)

"Teachers need to know the 'why' behind a new strategy, before being asked to implement the 'how.'"

> M-J Mercanti-Anthony (*ibid*.)

"The goal is to create a space where assessments serve their true purpose: to help students grow and deepen their understanding without adding unnecessary stress to their educational journey."

> Robert Talbert (see item #3)

"Among the most central and deeply rooted features of most American classrooms is a grading

system that is designed to rank, sort, and evaluate students *as learners*, but is not optimally designed to *help students learn*."

Steven Kramer et al. (see item #4)

"Teachers on their own cannot make students learn mathematics; students must become partners in their own learning in order for effective teaching and learning to occur."

Edward Mills and Valerie Silver (*ibid*.)

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## 1. How Instructional Leadership Teams Can Catalyze Effective Practices

(Originally titled "How Teacher Teams Can Transform School Practices")

"The time is ripe for faculty-wide conversations around strengthening instructional practice," says New York City principal M-J Mercanti-Anthony in *Educational Leadership*. This is important, he believes, because many teachers are unaware of recent research findings and continue to use outmoded and, in some cases, discredited practices with their students.

Mercanti-Anthony lists four reasons why the best thinking on teaching and learning is not being implemented more widely:

- Teacher and administrator training programs have gaps, especially in cognitive science.
- Educators' egos are caught up in their work, and feedback can be taken personally.
- Schools' egg-crate culture often prevents highly effective practices from being shared.
- Many teachers are wise to the "faux discovery" process: they're asked to try out a new practice and gather data, only to learn they're being manipulated into adopting it.

How can principals address these impediments and foster sincere, productive discussion of best practices?

Mercanti-Anthony believes the key is good use of a school's instructional leadership team (ILT). Members should be recruited based on their capacity and willingness to explore the research, take a fresh look at teaching and learning in the school, and commit to weekly meetings. It must be clear that other groups in the school will deal with discipline policies, the bell schedule, planning school events, and test data, allowing the ILT to be laser-focused on *instruction*. A step-by-step roll-out of an ILT's work over time:

• *Studying the science of how people learn* – Mercanti-Anthony suggests that the ILT spend several months exploring often-untapped research findings, including:

- Retrieval practice;
- Spaced review;
- Interleaving;
- Connecting abstract concepts with concrete examples;
- Building metacognitive skills so students self-monitor and learn from mistakes;

- Asking questions that get students thinking deeply and elaborating.

During this exploration phase, some ILT members may begin experimenting with new ideas in their classrooms. [See this Marshall Memo summary of *The ABCs of How We Learn: 26 Scientifically Proven Approaches, How They Work, and When to Use Them* by Daniel Schwartz, Jessica Tsang, and Kristen Blair.]

• *Choosing one strategy* – The ILT organically chooses a strategy to introduce to the faculty – for example, putting retrieval practice to work with the "brain dump" plan. "ILTs should resist the temptation of introducing more than one strategy at a time," says Mercanti-Anthony.

• *Taking the practice to scale* – To get the idea widely adopted, the key is peer-to-peer discussion groups, lesson study teams, and teachers visiting classrooms trying the new practice.

• *Repeating* – Once the initial strategy is launched, the ILT chooses another, studies it in depth, and follows the same dissemination strategy.

If the ILT follows these steps, says Mercanti-Anthony, colleagues won't see subsequent ideas as "one more thing." He sees this as a multi-year process, "providing resources, suggestions, and assistance in keeping the process moving forward."

"How Teacher Teams Can Transform School Practices" by M-J Mercanti-Anthony in *Educational Leadership*, March 2025 (Vol. 82, #6, pp. 28-34)

Back to page one

## 2. Mike Schmoker on Three Practices That Produce Dramatic Results

(Originally titled "It's Time to Do the 'Right Things'")

Only about a third of U.S. students are getting a high-quality education in math, literacy, science, art, and music, says writer/consultant Mike Schmoker in *Educational Leadership*. "This doesn't have to be the case," he argues. "The fact is, if we create a disciplined culture of academic and instructional priority, record numbers of students will acquire a rich, robust education."

Schmoker points to examples in other fields where the adoption of specific practices brought about dramatic improvement:

- The 1910 Flexner report, which catalyzed science-based medical practices;
- Hospital checklists for routine procedures, which dramatically reduce infections;
- The Fosbury Flop, which allowed high jumpers to shatter previous records.

What are similarly high-leverage practices in K-12 schools? Schmoker believes there are three:

• *Coherent, content-rich curriculum* – Teachers build a standards-aligned, week-by-week learning plan (Linda Darling-Hammond defines curriculum as "what to teach and when") for every course, refining it in regular grade-level team meetings.

• *Structured, interactive whole-class instruction* – The key elements are a clear learning target, chunking of content, checks for understanding, and real-time adjustments to teaching. These elements, says Schmoker, "ensure that the highest number of students will succeed on daily lessons."

• *Authentic literacy* – Every course is infused with purposeful in-class reading, discussion, and writing – as well as instruction in good writing. "That means more whole books, literature, articles, and textbook selections," says Schmoker.

These practices aren't rocket science, he believes, and cites several high-poverty schools and districts that achieved dramatic gains in student learning by putting them to work:

- Tempe High School in Arizona;
- Mather Elementary School in Boston;
- Flowing Wells School District in Arizona;
- Brockton High School in Massachusetts.

Studying these and other turnaround stories, Schmoker believes, can guide principals in taking an honest look at their school's status, steering away from ineffective practices (he mentions unguided discovery learning, early-grade literacy centers, small-group literacy instruction, and overuse of technology in personalized learning), focusing on the basics of good curriculum and pedagogy, setting measurable goals and deadlines, implementing effective PD, and (as Sue Szachowicz, the turnaround principal of Brockton High School puts it), "monitoring like crazy."

"It's Time to Do the 'Right Things'" by Mike Schmoker in *Educational Leadership*, March 2025 (Vol. 82, #6, pp. 42-48); Schmoker can be reached at schmoker@futureone.com.

*Back to page one*

## 3. Finding a Happy Medium Between Too Much Assessment and Too Little

In this *Grading for Growth* article, college math professor Robert Talbert says all teachers face a Goldilocks dilemma with testing and grading. Assess too *infrequently* and tests become high-stakes, anxiety-producing drama (in some U.K. universities, the final exam can be 100 percent of a student's grade). Assess too *frequently* and learning becomes "a joyless march from one quiz to another" (Talbert tried giving a 25-minute mini-test every Friday in his course and it overshadowed the learning experience for students – *Will this be on the quiz?*).

The first step in finding a middle ground, says Talbert, is distinguishing between assessment and grading (which are often seen as synonymous):

- *Assessing* is finding out what students know and what misconceptions they might have.
- *Grading* is evaluating students' work and giving it some kind of mark.

"These are not the same," he says. "We can assess students without grading them… the basic human act of coming alongside a student to see what they know."

In addition to student anxiety, Talbert sees two other problems with infrequent tests-for-grades. First, each test is "worth" more, so the consequence of students making mistakes is higher and they're less likely "to take even the most basic risks that are attendant with learning." Second, less-frequent testing reduces opportunities to do re-takes, meaning there are "fewer iterations of the feedback loop that drives all learning."

Talbert believes frequent, low-stakes assessments of learning improve the learning dynamic in four ways:

- Students are getting regular retrieval practice, reinforcing learning by regularly pulling material from memory.
- There are more opportunities to get corrective feedback on mistakes and misconceptions and praise for mastering material, which "translates into more opportunities to iterate and build a strong framework of understanding," says Talbert, "one that truly represents understanding, not just a one-time performance result."
- Frequent feedback "builds the specific mental muscle of knowing how to convert feedback into improvement, a meta-skill that is highly valuable…"
- Frequent informal feedback makes the classroom "more failure-tolerant and less brittle," telling students they can make a mistake, even have a bad day, and still be on a positive learning trajectory.

In his own teaching, Talbert moved away from weekly quizzes, which were also time-consuming to grade, resulting in students not getting timely feedback. Now he gives less-frequent, informal quizzes with re-takes, provides lots of formative feedback, and tells students he'll allow alternative assessments such as one-on-one oral quizzes.

"The key," he concludes, "is to design a thoughtful and flexible approach that allows both frequent feedback and the opportunity for students to reflect and improve without feeling overwhelmed… The goal is to create a space where assessments serve their true purpose: to help students grow and deepen their understanding without adding unnecessary stress to their educational journey."

"Navigating the Challenges of Assessment Frequency" by Robert Talbert in *Grading for Growth*, March 3, 2025; Talbert can be reached at robert.talbert@gmail.com.

*Back to page one*

## 4. A Proficiency-Based Grading Initiative in Ninth-Grade Math Classes

In this *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness* article, Steven Kramer and five co-authors start with this observation: "Among the most central and deeply rooted features of most American classrooms is a grading system that is designed to rank, sort, and evaluate students *as learners*, but is not optimally designed to *help students learn*." The reason, say the authors, is that we've continued to use a meritocratic grading system developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This system "was designed so that more-naturally talented and quicker learning students would receive higher grades than those with less natural talent or who learned more slowly, and only those with high grades would be encouraged or even permitted to progress to the next level."

Clearly the old rationale for grading – sorting students by their inherent intellectual abilities – is at odds with today's more egalitarian and idealistic ethos: all students learning. But certain practices persist in schools, say Kramer et al., undermining our aspirational goals:

- Not enough chances for students to demonstrate learning;
- Heavy emphasis on summative tests;

- Limited feedback on assessments;
- Little or no opportunity for re-takes;
- Averaging grades across a semester or year.

The last "can discourage persistence in the face of initial difficulty," say Kramer et al., "because no matter how well students eventually learn the material, they will be evaluated partly based on their initial difficulties."

In the 1960s, there was increasing recognition of the potential of formative assessments – low-stakes checks for understanding that give teachers and students feedback on learning so far and support improvements in pedagogy and achievement. Benjamin Bloom advocated mastery learning, in which students scoring below 80 percent on formative assessments received targeted assistance, improving their performance on summative tests.

More recently there's been a shift from formative assessment results being mostly for teachers to getting students involved in using the data to improve. "Teachers on their own cannot make students learn mathematics," say Edward Mills and Valerie Silver; "students must become partners in their own learning in order for effective teaching and learning to occur."

Kramer and colleagues studied the PARLO program (Proficiency-based Assessment and Re-assessment of Learning Outcomes), an adaptation of mastery learning and proficiency-based grading developed by Dylan Wiliam and the Math Science Partnership of Greater Philadelphia. Here are the key elements of the program:

- Teachers share 10-15 detailed semester learning outcomes with students and parents.
- Teachers spell out success criteria at two levels; proficient and high performance (the latter to challenge students to go beyond mastery to deeper understanding).
- Students take a number of low-stakes formative assessments (e.g., end-of-class exit tickets) to check on progress and show who needs additional feedback and support.
- Grades over a semester are not averaged; rather, final grades are based on the best work students show at the end of the semester: high performance, proficient, or not-yet-proficient.
- Students can re-take assessments for full credit, but only after engaging in error analysis, remediation contracts, and intensive feedback from teachers and peers.
- Final letter grades are based on students' ultimate performance on the semester's learning outcomes.
- Attendance, homework, and attitude are separate from academic grades.

The study was conducted over two years in ninth-grade algebra and geometry classes in 29 urban, suburban, rural, public, charter, and religious high schools (14 treatment, 15 control) during the 2011-12 and 2012-13 school years. Teachers in the PARLO-implementing schools took part in 88 hours of training sessions and PLC meetings. Intervention teachers were trained in the use of a tracker that kept tabs on students' progress on learning outcomes. All participating teachers got a stipend. Here are the main results:

- PARLO students improved their math performance compared to the control group, effect size 0.33 – the equivalent of moving from the 50$^{th}$ to the 63$^{rd}$ percentile.
- The program was effective across all subgroups – race, gender, prior achievement.

- Students with stronger math skills did especially well.
- In interviews, teachers pointed to several key factors, including students focusing on learning outcomes, lots of formative feedback, and the opportunity to do re-takes.
- Some teachers worried that students might be content with proficient results rather than striving for high achievement.
- Some teachers thought the system might encourage students to procrastinate studying, believing that if they did poorly at first, they could always catch up later.
- In interviews, teachers said PARLO improved students' engagement and motivation.
- However, students didn't report improvement in motivation.

Surprised by this last finding, the researchers examined their data and interviews and noticed that during each semester, PARLO teachers were not giving students a sense of where they stood in terms of their final letter grade, holding off on assigning A, B, C, D, and F until the semester was finished. The researchers hypothesize that this created anxiety in students, undermining their sense of motivation and efficacy. Students were getting lots of granular feedback on their mastery of each learning goal, but not where they stood relative to a final math grade and what they needed to do to improve it. This suggests the need for a specific modification in the program.

In addition to students not reporting gains in motivation, they also didn't report an improvement in how much they valued mathematics. "While we hypothesized that changing the assessment system to focus less on quick learning and ranking and more on mastery of course content would positively impact students' value of mathematics," say Kramer et al., "this expectation may have been unreasonable. Making mathematics more enjoyable (i.e., increasing intrinsic value) or increasing the perceived utility value of mathematics may be more directly impacted by designing engaging instructional activities or by explicitly connecting curriculum to potential applications, neither of which was a focus of PARLO."

Here are some teacher comments from the researchers' interviews, providing additional detail on the changes that took place:

- *Last year all they were concerned about were points and grades This year they are talking about math more than my students last year. They know their content.*
- *They are coming to me with better questions. They're not just coming to me and saying, "What can I do?" They come in knowing where they need to focus and knowing what they need to work on.*
- *Students are taking ownership in what they are learning… They are learning how to organize and keep up with it; each marking period they are getting better at it.*
- *They have ownership for their grade now. It's no longer, "What can he give me?" So, the ball is in her court now. It's no longer, "You failed me, or you gave me this grade." They talk about getting their grade up to where they want it to be.*
- *They are finally, really understanding that knowledge is gained and built over time, you don't just know something, you don't just get something and that's it. You have to work at it, and if you want to keep it you have to continue to work at it.*

"The Impacts of a Standards-Based Grading System Emphasizing Formative Assessment, Feedback, and Re-assessment: A Mixed Methods, Cluster Randomized Control Trial in Ninth Grade Mathematics Classrooms" by Steven Kramer, Michael Posner, Alexander Browman, Nancy Lawrence, Jennifer Roem, and Kathleen Krier in *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, January-March 2025 (Vol. 18, #1, pp. 56-87); Kramer can be reached at skramer@21pstem.org.

*Back to page one*

## 5. A Study of Grade Retention in New York City

In *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, Louis Mariano (RAND Corporation Virginia), Paco Martorell (University of California/Davis) and Tiffany Berglund (RAND Corporation Santa Monica) report on their analysis of grade retention data in New York City from 2004-2016. They start by noting that it's hard to establish a causal link between retention and a student's future performance. There is "a strong correlation between grade retention and a wide array of negative academic and social outcomes," say Mariano, Martorell, and Berglund. "However, this association may simply arise because of selection bias. Students tend to be retained precisely because of their poor academic performance, and hence would be expected to have worse outcomes than promoted students regardless of being retained or promoted."

The researchers believe they found a way around this challenge: looking at students' performance over time and comparing students who were just above and just below the test score cutoff for retention. Here are the results of the study:

- Repeating a grade led to significant reduction in students' credit attainment, staying in high school, and the likelihood of taking Regents exams in Algebra 1 and ELA.
- For students retained in earlier grades, there was no indication that retention improved graduation rates or reduced the chance of dropping out.
- For students in 7th and 8th grade, retention increased the chance of dropping out once students reached their original on-time graduation year, and reduced the likelihood of passing enough Regents exams to graduate from high school.
- Retention in early grades appear to be associated with improved scores on the Regents Algebra 1 exam.
- However, since the authors also find that retention reduces the likelihood of taking the exam in the first place, it is difficult to determine if the improvements in scores reflect a causal effect of retention or that retained students who actually take the test are stronger academically than promoted students who take the test.

"The Effects of Grade Retention on High School Outcomes: Evidence from New York City Schools" by Louis Mariano, Paco Martorell, and Tiffany Berglund in *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, January-March 2025 (Vol. 18, #1, pp. 1-31); Mariano can be reached at loum@rand.org, Martorell at pmartorell@ucdavis.edu.

*Back to page one*

## 6. How to Get Helpful Advice

"You build relationships and gain support when you seek another's wisdom," says Dan Rockwell in *Leadership Freak*. But he cautions against using these opening lines when asking for advice:

- *I need some advice.*
- *What do you think I should do?*
- *I don't know what to do.*
- *I'm at the end of my rope.*
- *I want to improve.*

Rockwell says it's better to start with a specific, "forward-facing" goal – for example, *I'm working to build supportive relationships on the team* – which is more likely to elicit actionable advice – and then follow up with questions like these:

- *How did you build a mutually supportive team?*
- *I'm gathering ideas on this. What suggestions do you have?*
- *What are some things leaders should avoid with colleagues?*

"The Leaderly Pursuit of Advice" by Dan Rockwell in *Leadership Freak*, March 6, 2025; Rockwell can be reached at dan@leadershipfreak.com.

Back to page one

## 7. Graphic Novels About Immigration

In *School Library Journal*, Brigid Alverson recommends these graphic novels on the joys and challenges of the immigration experience:

- *Speak Up, Santiago! A Hillside Valley Graphic Novel* by Julie Anta, illustrated by Gabi Mendez, grade 3-7
- *Uprooted: A Memoir About What Happens When Your Family Moves Back* by Ruth Chan, grade 3-7
- *How to Draw a Secret* by Cindy Chang, grade 3-7
- *History Comics: Ellis Island, Immigration, and the American Dream* by Felipe Galindo Feggo, illustrated by Tait Howard, grade 4-9
- *Just Another Story: A Graphic Migration Account* by Ernesto Saade, grade 7 and up
- *This Land Is Our Land: A Blue Beetle Story* by Julio Anta, illustrated by Jacoby Salcedo, grade 8-12
- *Unaccompanied: Stories of Brave Teenagers Seeking Asylum* by Tracy White, grade 10 and up

"Coming Home" by Brigid Alverson in *School Library Journal*, March 2025 (Vol. 71, #3, pp. 47-49)

Back to page one

## 8. Short Item:

***Embattled DEI*** – In this *Cult of Pedagogy* article, Jennifer Gonzalez suggests eight ways K-12 educators can continue teaching well at a time when diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives are under attack: listening to students, language-affirming pedagogy, media literacy, identity work, well-chosen classroom games, mnemonics and "story-ifying" content, UDL lessons, and building partnerships with parents.

"How to Keep Teaching Well When DEI Is Under Attack" by Jennifer Gonzalez in *Cult of Pedagogy*, March 6, 2025; Gonzalez can be reached at gonzjenn@cultofpedagogy.com.

*Back to page one*



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