Marshall Memo 1072

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
January 27, 2025

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Schools were built for a time that no longer exists, and school leaders must widen their perspectives from the constant and specific demands they're facing to consider bigger questions – *much* bigger questions."
Will Richardson and Homa Tavangar (see item #2)

"Good ideas are not adopted automatically. They must be driven into practice with courageous patience."
Hyman Rickover

"Students want to be released from the pressure to be perfect."
Beth McMurtrie (see item #4)

"A robust foundation of knowledge is not merely the raw material for thought, it is the scaffolding that makes higher-order thinking possible."
Robert Pondiscio in "The Knowledge Revival" in *Education Gadfly*, January 23, 2025

"Why do we read imaginative literature if not to better understand the human condition and develop empathy?"
A New Hampshire high-school teacher quoted in "Does Social-Emotional Learning Really Work? Educators Have a Lot to Say" by Kevin Bushweller in *Education Week*, January 22, 2025 (Vol. 44, #14, p. 6)

"Leaders will never have time on their hands. All the good ones will always be exceedingly busy, and more demands on their time are continually lurking."
A.G. Lafley and Roger Martin (see item #1)

1. Applying the Theory of Comparative Advantage to Time Management

"Leaders will never have time on their hands," say A.G. Lafley (former Procter & Gamble CEO) and Roger Martin (former Rotman School of Management dean) in this *Harvard Business Review* article. "All the good ones will always be exceedingly busy, and more demands on their time are continually lurking." Many of the leaders they advise think they can get better results by working longer hours, but in the long run that leads to burnout.

Lafley and Martin's advice for overwhelmed leaders is based on the theory of comparative advantage, formulated by 19th-century political economist David Ricardo. His insight was that countries should only export goods for which they have a comparative advantage – for example, Portugal selling wine to England, which doesn't have the right climate for growing grapes, but not to Italy, which does. Meanwhile, England, with a better climate for raising sheep, should export wool to Portugal.

How does this apply to managing time? Many leaders prioritize their activity by how important each task is to the organization, working down the list until they run out of time and energy. According to Ricardo's theory, this is inefficient. Leaders should spend their precious time on activities that nobody else in the organization can do as well as they can, and delegate other items to colleagues who can do them as well or better. Here is Lafley and Martin's step-by-step process for putting this principle to work:

• *Remove all tasks for which you don't have an absolute advantage*. When Martin arrived as dean at Rotman, a struggling business school whose professors were derisively referred to as the "Faculty of *Mis*management," he was told that the most important task was hiring tenure-stream professors. That would take about 50 days a year, and although upgrading the faculty was important, Martin decided the associate dean was just as capable of running the process. Martin put him in charge of hiring, made sure they were on the same page on hiring criteria and process, and focused on other aspects of the turnaround – with great success.

• *Delegate tasks for which you have little comparative margin*. "Having reassigned tasks for which they have no advantage at all over other people," say Lafley and Martin, "leaders should consider shedding those for which they have only a modest advantage in favor of those for which their advantage is distinctive." When Lafley started at Procter & Gamble, it was customary for the CEO to lead the process of brand reviews and advertising strategy. He was good at this, but believed his advantage over others in the company was modest, and when he put them in charge, they felt empowered and performed superbly.

• *Take on tasks for which you have a strong comparative advantage*. The payoff from offloading and delegating tasks for which the leader doesn't have a strong comparative

advantage is having time to focus on the things at which he or she excels. At Procter & Gamble, Lafley focused on innovation and translating consumer insights into successful products. He insisted on interacting personally with customers and product innovators, staying in close touch with people's actual experience with new products and providing advice on design, communication, and commercials.

• *Make sure you have enough time for the tasks that only you can do*. At Rotman, Martin began meeting individually with professors once a year to build trusting relationships and give them a clearer view of how they could contribute to the school's success. At first this took two weeks every year, but as the school grew, he needed eight weeks to meet with 120 professors – plus 50 adjunct faculty who clamored to meet with him as well. "He and his professors felt that it was one of the most valuable uses of his time as dean, during which turnover among professors and faculty grievances were at historical lows," say Lafley and Martin. "No one else could have accomplished that task."

"Leaders Shouldn't Try to Do It All" by A.G. Lafley and Roger Martin in *Harvard Business Review*, February 2025

Back to page one

2. Twelve Questions for Deeper Strategic Planning

"Schools were built for a time that no longer exists," say Will Richardson and Homa Tavangar (Big Questions Institute) in this article in *Independent School*, "and school leaders must widen their perspectives from the constant and specific demands they're facing to consider bigger questions – *much* bigger questions… Social media have upended the way we consume and create the news, allowing influencers without traditional credentials to gain large followings and impact. Trust in institutions is at an all-time low everywhere we look. The traditional story of 'success' and how we attain it is increasingly irrelevant."

Given all this, how can schools plan an educational experience that prepares students for a rapidly changing world? "Traditional strategic planning isn't enough," say Richardson and Tavangar. "Technical fixes to curriculum, assessment, or business development won't save us. Designing an experience of school that is more relevant, just, healthy, and sustainable calls for courage and fearless inquiry into challenging questions." They suggest starting with these:

- What is sacred?
- What is learning?
- Where is the power?
- Why do we ____?
- Who is unheard?
- Are we literate?
- Are we OK?
- Are we connected?
- What's our story?
- What is success?
- What's next?

- What is our legacy?

Notice that none of the questions start with *How*… Richardson and Tavangar believe that before schools address practical issues – "falling into tactical rabbit holes or arguing about details" – they must dig into broader questions of vision and purpose, who they serve, and what kind of society they wish to foster.

They have a four-word motto for strategic planning – *Face reality. Imagine harder* – and believe the following dispositions will accelerate the process:

• An explorer's mindset – Seeking new possibilities "with tools that help them shine light in the darkness and navigate challenges, while maintaining humility amid fearlessness and vulnerability."

• Hope – Positive expectations need to be "fueled by research, action, a sense of belonging, safety to iterate, and, most of all, the lives we directly impact."

• Radical acceptance and imagination – Planners see things as they are, listen well, and stretch their imaginations to visualize "the futures for which we yearn."

• Sense-making – This involves grappling with the unknown through data collection, conversations across differences, and doing the difficult "inner work" essential for deep change.

"Moment of Clarity" by Will Richardson and Homa Tavangar in *Independent School*, Winter 2025 (Vol. 84, #2, pp. 62-67)

Back to page one

3. What's Going On With College Kids Today?

In this *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, Beckie Supiano reports on what many professors are saying about Generation Z's struggles, including:

- Difficulty reading longer texts;
- Lack of preparation for writing college-level essays;
- Engaging with academics less than earlier cohorts, including doing required reading;
- Expecting to get detailed instructions for each assignment;
- Asking that their grades include the effort they've put in;
- Needing more time and support to get through smaller amounts of course content.

"It's abundantly clear," says Harvard professor Daniel Koretz, "that test-based accountability is a plausible contributor to this."

Supiano examines this explanation – that the K-12 accountability movement, kicked off with the No Child Left Behind legislation in 2002, was responsible for these problems. The intent was to raise the floor on standards and not allow schools to hide poor performance by subgroups – students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities. But there have been a number of unintended consequences:

- A narrowing of the ELA and math curriculum to mirror state tests, which cover only a subset of the curriculum;
- Drill and practice in reading and math, skimping on higher-order thinking;
- Reading short passages versus whole books;

- Writing with a rubric in mind, versus the more holistic approach used in college;
- Frequent interim assessments and time spent re-taking missed questions to boost test scores;
- Formulaic writing assignments (five-paragraph essays) geared to state and AP exams;
- Reduced time on history and science content and skills.

"Some of the things that got cut are things that would require substantial reading, substantial thinking, and analytic thought," says Koretz.

Another contributor to the disappointing performance of many college students, Supiano reports: the Common Core State Standards. Widely adopted around 2010, these ELA and math standards were intended to set national curriculum expectations that would prepare high-school graduates for college success. "However its authors meant for it to be interpreted," says Morton Polikoff of the University of Southern California, "it was really focused on, among other things, close reading and textual evidence." This is an important skill for the real world, but it contributed to teachers assigning short passages versus longer texts and whole books. "Maybe we didn't think about how," says Polikoff, "just because that's the end goal, doesn't mean that's how you should be teaching children along the way."

Cellphones and social media are another factor undermining academic performance, contributing to a marked reduction in the time students read for pleasure. Leisure reading time is directly correlated to reading proficiency, and the decline has not been uniform: the Matthew Effect is at work, with those who begin with an advantage in vocabulary and background knowledge accumulating more advantage over time, widening economic and racial achievement gaps.

And then there's the pandemic, which set back student achievement by an average of almost half a year and severely disrupted students' social lives and mental health, followed by the racial reckoning in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder. Add to this the sheer volume of information at students' fingertips, the challenge of figuring out what can be trusted, too much digital instruction, eroding the personal side of school, staff shortages undercutting the quality of pedagogy in many classrooms, and the changing nature of teachers' jobs, with more standardization and less autonomy.

"We keep telling K-12, Let's fix K-12 so it's better," says Elena Silva at New America. But K-12 educators say (she conjectures), "Fix everything around you, and then maybe we can do our jobs. Because we can't even teach you all to read and write and do math right now, because we're basically the only social safety net that this country has."

"Some Assembly Still Required" by Beckie Supiano in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 17, 2025 (Vol. 71, #10, pp. 16-21); Supiano is at beckie.supiano@chronicle.com.

Back to page one

4. Pointers for Educating Generation Z

Teaching Generation Z students (age 13-28) can be challenging, says Beth McMurtrie in this *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, "but they can also be inspiring, if you know what

makes them tick." Among reported Gen Z characteristics:

- Desperate to find meaning and purpose;
- Don't do much of the reading outside class;
- May freeze in the face of difficulty;
- Hyper-focused on grades;
- Emotionally acute, authentic, and creative;
- Blasé about cheating;
- Willing to question authority.

"The attitudes of Gen Z may not always be pleasant to deal with," says Enze Chen, a science and engineering professor at Stanford, "but a small shift in perspective can make a large difference." Here are some suggestions that emerged in McMurtrie's interviews with Chen and other instructors:

• *Students want to know why they need to learn what's being taught*. This has always been true, but Gen Z students are more impatient and assertive about knowing how the curriculum will be useful in their lives, and seem to have a sense of urgency about getting "quick wins" in classrooms. Students appreciate real-world connections, and are willing to respect instructors' expertise.

• *Students respond to a personal approach*. It's helpful to conduct a survey at the beginning of the year, learn about students' stories and strengths, present material as vividly as possible, and check in with students to find out what's on their minds – perhaps how the pandemic affected them and clues on why they're not doing the assigned reading.

• *Students want to be released from the pressure to be perfect*. Gen Z students, immersed in social media, are more attuned than previous generations to their image and how their performance is seen. This can be "mentally crippling," says a Texas history professor. She's found that getting students to role-play historical scenarios – the trial of Socrates, confrontations in the French Revolution – helps students get out of their own heads, get immersed in intellectual play, and "engage in the messy business of learning."

• *Students care more about authenticity than credentials*. Instructors' degrees and awards are less important to Gen Z than a teacher's personal *why*. Students want fewer classroom lectures and more about teachers' passions and concerns. A music professor at Colorado State University shared that she grew up in South Central Los Angeles, learned the piano while her father was incarcerated, and linked syncopation to the music students loved. Students said her classes were the ones they most wanted to attend.

• *Students have changed and so should pedagogy*. A criminology professor at the University of Dayton uses music and Jeopardy as instructional tools and allows some students to use Tik Tok and YouTube to present their ideas. But fun is not the same as easy, he says, and he hasn't dialed back expectations as his teaching style has evolved over a 36-year career. He's amazed at how intensely students prepare for a Jeopardy game, and how seriously they ponder and write about a Johnny Cash lyric: "I shot a man in Reno just to watch him die."

• *Some students put work and school on equal footing because they have to*. A history and labor studies professor at UCLA helps students connect their economic struggles to the

larger story of the labor movement in the U.S. "The idea that there's this stark distinction between skills and knowledge or training versus education," he says, "that's bogus. Students want both." He bemoans the lack of civic education and community connections that seem to be prevalent with this generation and tries to fill the void in his courses.

"The Gen Z Puzzle" by Beth McMurtrie in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 17, 2025 (Vol. 71, #10, pp. 10-14); McMurtrie can be reached at beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com.

Back to page one

5. With Word Problems, Looking Beyond Math Vocabulary

In this article in *The Reading Teacher*, Julia Hagge and Aina Appova (Ohio State University) say many elementary students, even those who are proficient at arithmetic, struggle with math word problems. In their research, Hagge and Appova found that many teachers tell students to focus on key math terms, but kids still have difficulty with word problems. Why? Because the story elements are often "unrelatable" to students lacking background knowledge and schema (*kayaking, gymnastics, MP3 player*), and when students are coached to focus on math vocabulary, they often overlook non-mathematical words that are key to solving the problem.

To address these common challenges, Hagge and Appova created the Technical, Subtechnical, Nontechnical (TSN) vocabulary model. Math word problems usually have three types of vocabulary: *technical* words specific to mathematics, *subtechnical* words that are used in math and other contexts (often with more than one meaning), and *nontechnical* words that are vital to making sense of word problems. Some examples of each:

- Technical – isosceles, integer, quadrant, axes, polyhedron, numerator, denominator
- Subtechnical – volume, table, foot, yard, degrees, similar, positive, negative, even, odd, expression, operation, power, product, simplify, evaluate
- Nontechnical – miles per hour, how many, which one, half of, fewer or more than, compare, isolate, ice cream, kayaking

Hagge and Appova have found that getting students to pay attention to all three types of vocabulary gets better results than looking only at math terms.

They recommend four steps as teachers prepare to work with students on a math story problem: (a) preview the language in the problem to identify technical, subtechnical, and nontechnical vocabulary; (b) consider the questions that need to be addressed for each type of word; (c) decide which words should be taught and/or discussed with students prior to working on the problem; and (d) plan appropriate scaffolding to support students as they solve the problem. Key questions for each type:

Technical words:

- Do students understand the meaning of each word?
- How does each word contribute to making sense of the problem and solving it?
- What instruction or support is needed to understand the word?

Subtechnical words:

- Do students understand each word?
- Which words could be confusing or require schema understanding?
- If there are multiple meanings, do students understand which one applies?
- If the word has math implications affecting solving the problem, do students understand those implications?
- What instruction or support is needed to understand the word?

Nontechnical words:

- Do students understand each word?
- Which words could be confusing or require schema knowledge?
- Which words contribute to making sense of the problem?
- Which words contribute to solving the problem?
- What instruction or support is needed to understand pivotal words?

The authors give examples of word problems at three grades applying this approach:

• Grade One:

> *For Halloween, Mara and her friend Josey went trick-or-treating. Mara got 9 Tootsie Rolls. Her friend Josey gave her some more Tootsie Rolls. Mara now has 11 Tootsie Rolls. How many Tootsie Rolls did Josey give to Mara?*

This problem contains mostly nontechnical language, but some students may not know about trick-or-treating and have never had a Tootsie Roll, so the teacher needs to fill in that background knowledge for them to make sense of the problem. One way to do that would be reading *Zen Ghosts* by Jon Muth to the class (it includes trick-or-treating), and explain that a Tootsie Roll is similar to the bamboo-flavored candy given to the main character in the story. After students solve the problem, the teacher gives feedback and assigns another one with similar vocabulary but different numbers.

• Grade Three:

> *How much space is taken up by a book that is 12 inches long, 10 inches wide, and 1 inch thick? Record your answer on a grid and fill in the bubble.*

Like the first-grade problem, this one contains minimal technical language, but there are subtechnical words – space, long, wide, and grid – and some nontechnical words – *how much, taken up, book, thick, record* – that might require explanation. In addition, four words – *space, record, bubble, answer* – could be confusing and need context and explanation, especially for English learners. The teacher models the key concepts, has students solve the problem, gives feedback, and assigns a similar problem to see if they can apply what they learned in a new context.

• Grade Five:

> *A farmer builds a metal trough to fit in a corner. The diagram [provided as a picture] of the L-shaped trough shows the*

dimensions of the trough where all the sides meet at right angles.
What is the total volume of the trough?

Right angles is a technical term, *diagram, dimensions,* and *volume* are subtechnical, and *L-shaped metal trough, farmer, to fit in a corner, all sides, meet, total, provided,* and *picture* are nontechnical. The L-shaped trough might be confusing to students who are not familiar with farms, so the teacher provides a visual and an explanation of a trough, explains other words as needed, has students solve the problem, gives feedback, and assigns a similar problem with different numbers.

Hagge and Appova recommend using this approach with word problems related to students' everyday lives, cultures, and interests. This should build their skill and confidence for tackling problems in high-stakes tests that may not be as familiar.

"The Technical Subtechnical Nontechnical Vocabulary Model: Helping Students to Make Sense of Math Story Problems" by Julia Hagge and Aina Appova in *The Reading Teacher*, January 22, 2025; the authors can be reached at hagge.1@osu.edu and appova.1@osu.edu.

Back to page one

6. Leisure Reading, Digital Devices, and Reading Comprehension

In this *Review of Educational Research* article, Lidia Altamura, Cristina Vargas, and Ladislao Salmerón (University of Valencia) report on their meta-analysis of the impact of leisure reading in digital formats on reading comprehension. Drawing on data from multiple studies involving 469,564 people, the researchers found that among elementary and middle-school students, digital reading had a negative impact on comprehension, but at the high school and university level, the impact was positive.

Over people's full lifespans, the impact of digital reading on comprehension was positive – but not as positive as the lifelong impact of print reading, as shown by earlier studies. "All in all," conclude Altamura, Vargas, and Salmerón, "these results allow us to untangle the relationship between reading habits and reading comprehension when it comes to the digital context, revealing that leisure digital reading habits do not pay off as much as traditional print reading."

Why? The authors agree with the "shallowing hypothesis," which suggests that "the superficial way in which people tend to interact with new forms of digital reading may not support readers' engagement or further development of higher-order cognitive skills." The key elements in digital texts producing these results: short passages, fast-paced stimuli, and lower linguistic quality.

"Do New Forms of Reading Pay Off? A Meta-Analysis on the Relationship Between Leisure Digital 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.

Back to page one

7. Promising Research on Virtual Tutoring

In this article in *The 74*, Greg Toppo reports on two recent studies showing that virtual tutoring can be almost as effective as in-person tutors – provided the same safeguards and standards are in place. Among the success factors:

- Well-trained tutors with ongoing coaching;
- Live virtual sessions;
- Pairing English learners with tutors who speak their language (tutoring is mostly in English, but having a same-language tutor is helpful);
- A highly structured program with milestones and goals;
- A clear instructional process with high-quality materials synched with classroom instruction;
- Addressing students' individual needs;
- Regular review of students' progress and addressing gaps;
- Making sure students actually attend the sessions, which is more challenging with virtual instruction.

"These studies show how important that human tutor continues to be," said Jennifer Krajewski at Johns Hopkins University. "We're learning that that human tutor, virtual or in person, is driving the instructional process."

"New Research: Done Right, Virtual Tutoring Nearly Rivals In-Person Version" by Greg Toppo in *The 74*, January 15, 2025

Back to page one

8. Short Item:

Help Dealing with Controversy – This toolkit provides step-by-step guidance for navigating contentious issues (think book banning, teaching controversial subjects) in K-12 schools. The tools: values, vision, determining areas of agreement and disagreement, active listening, empathetic hearing, identifying core elements, developing your overall stance, balancing benefits for all, pivoting in real time, and putting it all together.

"Leading Successfully When Viewpoints Differ: A Set of 20-Minute Tools" by Jody Spiro, Lucas Bernays Held, Aiesha Eleusizov, and Carl-Anthony Watson, January 2025

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 every Monday evening (with occasional breaks; there are 50 issues a year). Every week there's a podcast and HTMI version as well.

Subscriptions:

Individual subscriptions are $50 for a year. Rates decline steeply for multiple readers within the same organization. See the website for these rates and how to pay by check, credit card, or purchase order.

Website:

If you go to http://www.marshallmemo.com you will find detailed information on:

- How to subscribe or renew
- A detailed rationale for the Marshall Memo
- Article selection criteria
- Publications (with a count of articles from each)
- Topics (with a count of articles from each)
- Headlines for all issues
- Reader opinions
- About Kim Marshall (including links to articles)
- A free sample issue

Subscribers have access to the Members' Area of the website, which has:

- The current issue (in Word or PDF)
- All back issues (Word and PDF) and podcasts
- An easily searchable archive of all articles so far
- The "classic" articles from all 20 years

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