

Marshall Memo 847

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
July 27, 2020

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Quotes of the Week

“If you find it hard to say no, don’t become an administrator.”

David Perlmutter (see item #5)

“The trust forged between teachers and students inspires learners to do their work, enables teachers to offer candid feedback and criticism, and helps teachers learn to find the keys that unlock student potential and learning.”

Justin Reich and Jal Mehta (see item #1)

“Culture eats strategy for breakfast.”

Peter Drucker (quoted in item #1)

“Boredom presents an opportunity to learn lessons that can be in short supply these days. It teaches us that life is not always fun or entertaining, and that it is up to us to decide how we spend our time. It’s part of adulthood, and the sooner kids get used to it, the better. Just as importantly, boredom opens the doors to creativity and fantasy, essential aspects of child development that are too often closed by TV and smartphone screens.”

Nicholas Mian in “The Beauty of Boredom” in *The Boston Globe Magazine*, July 19, 2020

“Every time an adult removes an obstacle that is emotionally challenging for a child, they are depriving that child of an opportunity to learn to cope with that obstacle.”

Nicholas Mian (*ibid.*)

“When am I going to quit? When racists quit. Do I have a job for a lifetime? I’m afraid so.”

Jane Elliott quoted in [“‘Blue Eyes, Brown Eyes,’ a ’60s Lesson Revived”](#) by Brianna Holt in *The New York Times*, July 19, 2020

1. Principles for Successful School Reopening

In this MIT Teaching Systems Lab report, Justin Reich (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) and Jal Mehta (Harvard Graduate School of Education) draw on extensive outreach to students, teachers, principals, parents, district administrators, state officials, and other stakeholders to suggest seven principles for reopening schools this fall. Reich and Mehta assume that most schools will be operating with a hybrid or remote learning plan for at least the first part of the 2020-21 year.

These principles are not intended to address the all-important planning that's being done to keep students and staff safe. Rather, Reich and Mehta focus on helping schools think through their core values and provide access to the best resources to support work with students and families. Several insights guided their research:

- The coronavirus has created a highly complex and uncertain situation with very few known solutions.
- In situations like this, the best approach is lots of experimentation in the field, with teams looking at the results to figure out what works.
- To avoid incoherence, experimentation must be implemented with shared values so local innovators are rowing in the same direction.
- It's important to decide on a few common structures – for example, a shared technology platform – to facilitate communication and collaboration.
- A culture of trust and inclusion is vital; as Peter Drucker once said, “Culture eats strategy for breakfast.”

Here are Reich's and Mehta's design principles, each with a few examples of how it might play out in schools and districts.

• *Find ways to build relationships.* “The trust forged between teachers and students,” say Reich and Mehta, “inspires learners to do their work, enables teachers to offer candid feedback and criticism, and helps teachers learn to find the keys that unlock student potential and learning.” When the coronavirus disrupted the 2019-20 school year, educators already had six months of interactions under their belts. 2020-21 will be different, making it essential to find ways to build strong relationships.

Ideas: (a) a “call a teacher” button on the school's website that makes it easy for students to ask questions and get help from a staff member (perhaps the librarian) designated to be available all day long; (b) advisories in which small groups of students (perhaps 10) meet regularly with a staff member on Zoom; (c) looping, with the teachers from 2019-20 moving

up with their students to the next grade; and (d) eSports and Rec leagues with online games like Valorant.

- *Rethinking instruction with equity in mind.* “Inequity is structurally baked into the system,” say Reich and Mehta, “and thus we need to directly address it if it is going to enable all students to succeed.” In addition, studies show that average- and lower-achieving students take the biggest hit with remote learning, widening the achievement gap. The implication: schools need to take a hard look at systems, culture, and pedagogy, include stakeholders in decision-making, give children of color and poverty a fair shake, and make classroom experiences “relevant, purposeful, and meaningful for all learners.”

Ideas: (a) reaching out to selected students to take part in planning instruction and activities for the 2020-21 school year; (b) designing curriculum units on race, protests, and the pandemic; and (c) building in time with the most vulnerable students, who might be designated to be in school every day.

- *Amplify student agency.* With less direct educator supervision over several months, students have been pushed to become more responsible for their own learning. Schools have tried to replicate the regular structures from afar, but it hasn’t always worked. Reich and Mehta believe we’ll be more successful if we “lean into students’ growing sense of agency, and find ways to build on and amplify it.” The more choice and involvement students have with the curriculum, the more motivated and engaged they will be.

Ideas: (a) start the year with a celebration of what students learned in the spring months and special things they created; (b) use school as a “base camp” for virtual trips to explore careers, scientific topics, history, and more; and (c) devote senior year to volunteering – for example, helping out with a first-grade class.

- *Marie-Kondo the curriculum.* This is essential because of lost time during the spring of 2020 and the built-in inefficiencies of remote learning. Schools should retain what creates joy and deprioritize what’s non-essential, say Reich and Mehta, “making sure students study a rich array of topics, but they study fewer of them and more deeply.”

Ideas: (a) have teacher teams take inventory and decide on essential topics and skills and those that spiral and are sequential and cumulative; (b) develop a competency-based set of assignments, rubrics, and assessments; (c) implement block scheduling to reduce transitions and clutter within each school day; and (d) maximize virtual visitors.

- *Take full advantage of in-person time.* Being in a school building with face-to-face contact with educators will be a scarce and precious resource next year, and schools need to be intentional about what’s best done in person and what’s better at home.

Ideas: (a) launching clubs, electives, and extracurriculars in the school, so when students attend, they’re experiencing something they really enjoy; (b) flipping the curriculum so home is for lecture-type instruction and projects, school for discussion, sharing, and relationships; and (c) home is for projects, school is for tutoring and small-group work.

- *Nurture home and community learning.* “The coronavirus fundamentally shifts the relationship between home and school,” say Reich and Mehta. Schools improvised this spring, asking parents to monitor school learning, but for the opening months of the coming school

year, educators need to build stronger partnerships with families and communities so students can get their work done away from school. “Whenever possible,” say Reich and Mehta, “parents, neighbors, family members, and caregivers need to plan to devote a substantial amount of time next year to providing supervision and learning support to students.” Schools play a key role in orchestrating support for students whose families are not able to provide it – for example, if parents are first responders.

Ideas: (a) encourage “family learning victory gardens” – for example, a father who is a Vietnam War buff studying that topic with a teenager during a U.S. history course; (b) support micro-schools – clusters of families that have created a safe bubble and can go to school together; and (c) allow students who thrive with online learning to remain at home.

- *Build in reflection time.* “Continuous learning and improvement is likely to be critical for success,” say Reich and Mehta. Some teacher teams quickly figured out virtual collaboration in the spring, but others did not. School leaders need to orchestrate the time, space, and support for grade-level and departmental teams to continuously reflect, learn, and adapt; get teams networking laterally across classrooms, teams, and schools to share emerging ideas and learn from each other; and make organizational changes to translate new insights into regular practice.

Ideas: (a) trading student contact time for teacher collaboration time, following the practice of high-performing Asian schools that have a higher ratio of staff-to-staff time versus staff-to-student time; and (b) empowering teachers to work with students to figure out the best learning configuration – for example, flipping lectures and hands-on time and using high achievers as student tutors.

[“Imagining September: Principles and Design Elements for Ambitious Schools During Covid-19”](#) by Justin Reich and Jal Mehta, MIT Teaching Systems Lab, July 2020; the authors can be reached at jreich@mit.edu and jal_mehta@gse.harvard.edu.

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2. Mapping Students’ Support Networks in Preparation for the Fall

“Despite educators’ valiant efforts this past spring, too many students still struggled to connect to their peers, teachers, and counselors,” say Mahnaz Charania and Julia Freeland Fisher (Clayton Christensen Institute) in this article in *The 74*. In some cases, especially at the middle- and high-school level, this stemmed from “a troubling lack of people to turn to for academic and emotional help.” Given the uncertainties of the coming school year, Charania and Fisher believe three things are essential: (a) that all students have a well-connected support network at school and at home; (b) that each student is surrounded by “an interconnected web of positive relationships;” and (c) that every student has at least one “person on the ground” – a mentor, tutor, parent, or neighbor who is physically present to offer support if needed.

To ensure that students have these vital connections, it’s wise for schools to gather reliable information on students’ links at school, in their communities, and at home. To map relationships in school, Charania and Fisher suggest the Relationship Mapping Strategy developed by Harvard’s Making Caring Common Project. On a list of students sorted by grade,

teachers and other staff members are asked to put an X by the name of students who they believe would approach them if they had a personal problem, and another mark by students they believe are at risk, either personally or academically. This exercise reveals students who get lots of Xs and those who don't have a single strong connection in the school and/or have serious challenges. A good follow-up is to ask students to identify the adults with whom they feel connected and then compare the adult and student lists. "Armed with that set of data," say Charania and Fisher, "schools can then consider how best to ensure that every student has at least one strong connection."

The next step is to use social network mapping to gather information on students' relationships outside of school – siblings, extended family, friends, neighbors, members of their faith community, and others. This gives educators a better picture of where students can turn for academic and emotional support, and whom the school might contact in a moment of need. Older students can learn to identify and keep track of their own support networks. iCouldBe <https://www.icouldbe.org> is a free virtual mentoring portal that guides adolescent students through activities to build relationships at school and in their community, based on their academic and career interests.

"Schools that understand the quantity and quality of relationships at their students' disposal," conclude Charania and Fisher, "will be well positioned to sustain their well-being and academic progress in the coming year, whether campuses open or remain closed... Districts can't have a complete back-to-school road map without a relationship map. Students' success depends on it."

["Analysis: Mapping Students' Support Networks Is Key to Supporting Their Remote Learning Success. How Schools Can Make That Happen"](#) by Mahnaz Charania and Julia Freeland Fisher in *The 74*, July 14, 2020

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3. Building Relationships in an Online World

In this article, teacher/author Dave Stuart Jr. says a big challenge this fall will be building relationships with students who haven't been met in person. "Before the hyperventilation kicks in," he says, "let's center on a few grounding principles:"

- *Do the things you always do to build relationships at the beginning of the school year.* Memorize all students' names within a week; create a brief "moment of genuine connection" with each and every student within the first week (by office hours, videos, or phone calls) and systematically track them; survey students on their interests outside of school and the kinds of people they want to become; project a warm, authoritative, trustworthy presence; and start a regular routine of 3-5 positive parent phone calls a week.

- *Relationships are fun and affirming and surprising and beautiful.* The bonds teachers create in the opening weeks of school "will stoke the fires that keep us going," says Stuart, and "will be helpful as we help our students stoke the fires that keep them going."

- *Relationships can be nurtured online.* The work will be different remotely, and a little harder, but it's not impossible, says Stuart. The key is to "remotify" what works in person and

then make sure you ask for needed technology and pedagogical support with specific questions in mind. “This is a way of training yourself to become a pro in an area of teaching that you’re currently a novice at.”

• *Relationships are about motivation, engagement, and productivity.* Motivation is turbocharged by positive relationships; engagement can mean students getting “lost in the joy or thrill or peace or fulfillment of learning,” says Stuart. And the end product is academic and character mastery.

• *Do it right.* Stuart shares several ideas from *The Distance Learning Playbook* by John Hattie, Doug Fisher, and Nancy Frey:

- Dress and groom professionally.
- Project an optimistic demeanor about your students and about you.
- Weave what you’ve learned about kids into your lessons.
- Begin lessons with a positive affirmation like a favorite quote, a silly joke, or a short video.
- Ask questions that draw on students’ thinking (versus leading questions).

[“How to Build Strong Relationships with Students if You’re Starting the Year Online: Principles and Practices”](#) by David Stuart Jr., July 21, 2020; Stuart can be reached at dave@davestuartjr.com.

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4. A School Shifts to Online Standards-Based Assessments

In this *Better Lesson* article, elementary administrator David Saltzman says that when his school went virtual at the beginning of the pandemic, he and his colleagues found themselves rethinking how they assessed student learning. For one thing, they realized their four-point grading scale (Excellent, Very Good, Good, and Unsatisfactory) was holistic and overly subjective: each grade encompassed students’ test performance, homework completion, class participation, and behavior and teachers had their own individual criteria for grading. It also became clear that the school’s report card was confusing and inaccurate. In staff meetings, teachers worried about how they were going to assess students authentically and give meaningful grades. In addition, they were concerned about students getting help on tests from family members and peers.

The school decided to shift to standards-based grading, following these steps: identifying specific standards, teaching them, giving an authentic assessment of each standard, and communicating progress to students and parents. This involved two major changes:

• Designing a standards-based report card – Working in weekly Zoom meetings, teacher teams chose 4-5 salient skills for math, reading, and writing, went into breakout rooms to write mastery progression rubrics, and then came back together to review the rubrics. Teachers decided on a three-point scale – Meets Standard, Approaching Standard, and Needs Improvement – and designed a report card and spreadsheet to keep track of each student’s most-recent proficiency level for each standard.

- Designing targeted, synchronous assessments – For reading and math, teachers crafted assessments that could be given virtually. For reading, all the grade 1-4 teachers met online with each student for about five minutes gauging their fluency, accuracy, and comprehension with a quick reading assessment tool (these meetings took a week to complete). For math, teachers met with students in small groups in a Zoom breakout room; the teacher assigned a problem, students solved it on small whiteboards, then held theirs up for the teacher to assess. Students orally described how they solved the problem and got feedback from classmates. Each of these groups took 10-15 minutes.

Saltzman reports several positive outcomes from the shift to standards-based assessments and report cards.

- Report cards were aligned with specific skills and were more accessible and more accurate.
- Students and parents had a clearer picture of progress and areas that needed work.
- Collaboration among grade-level teacher teams improved – and bore fruit.
- Teachers saw the benefits of standards-based assessment and grading and decided to continue in the 2020-21 school year.

In the fall, the school intends to continue this process and pursue the long-range goal of empowering students to pace themselves and use rubrics to track their own progress toward mastery. The school will also tackle writing assessments, which are trickier than reading and math.

[“Distance Learning Pushed Us to Standards-Based Grading. We’ll Keep It”](#) by David Saltzman in *Better Lesson*, July 21, 2020; Saltzman can be reached at dsaltzman@flatbush.org.

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5. Saying No with Class

“How you say no as a campus leader can be as important as the decision itself,” says David Perlmutter (Texas Tech University) in this *Chronicle of Higher Education* article. “The challenge is how to say no while maintaining a long-term positive relationship, a bond of trust, an atmosphere of professionalism, a feeling of mutual respect, and a sense of fairness.” All this is especially important with pandemic-induced budget cuts, cultural tensions, and personal stress. Perlmutter’s suggestions:

- *Show you care in tone and manner.* “As an administrator, you are expected to treat people decently, no matter the circumstances. That’s just part of the job,” says Perlmutter.

“Give people your full attention, and make them feel valued. Even when you oppose the idea, show you care about the person.”

- *Let the data say it for you.* The administrator usually has access to important facts and analysis that are driving the decision, but it’s possible that new data will come to light, changing the decision.

- *Don’t be mysterious about your reasons.* Transparency – and a firm foundation in logic and fairness – will win over reasonable people. And it’s not just tactics, says Perlmutter: “It’s the only option if you don’t want your decisions to be seen as arbitrary or unwarranted.”

• *Look for an alternative pathway to yes.* Colleagues may submit a proposal and insist that there's only one way to pay for it, basically making two demands. "Handle such cases by disaggregating method from outcome," advises Perlmutter. "Even in tough times, leaders should try to find ways to get good things done via creative but possibly circuitous routes."

• *Don't say no if somebody above you will say yes.* It's a good idea to check with superiors, because those below may go around you and win; "managing up" is always a good way to cover your flank. "Consulting those above you may result in good news," says Perlmutter: "Someone higher up may find one of those creative, alternative pathways to get to yes that you hadn't thought of."

• *Be dispassionate.* Your colleagues may be passionate in what they advocate – for example, pushing for a particular hiring choice – but they expect leaders to be devoid of passion, favoritism, or prejudice. "The impression you make in saying no is almost as important as the decision itself," says Perlmutter. "Play it straight, and let the process move forward fairly."

One more thing, he concludes: "If you find it hard to say no, don't become an administrator."

"The Art of Saying 'No'" by David Perlmutter in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 24, 2020 (Vol. 66, #34, pp. 33-34); Perlmutter can be reached at david.perlmutter@ttu.edu.

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6. Being a Coach, Not a Micromanager

In this article in *Gallup Workplace*, Ben Wigert and Ryan Pendell report that most people say they don't get enough feedback from their superiors and sometimes feel at sea. At the other extreme is micromanagement. It's possible to identify a micromanager with one simple question, say Wigert and Pendell: are subordinates focused on doing their jobs or are they obsessed with what the boss thinks? In a boss-centered organization, everything has to go through that person, people feel constantly evaluated, they're afraid to share their opinions and be honest, nobody wants to take responsibility, and innovation, risk-taking, and creativity are stifled. Micromanagers can even do their thing in a remote work environment, swooping in on an e-mail chain or Zoom call to make demands without the context of what's happening.

Why does micromanagement exist? Gallup's analysis is that it stems from a lack of basic training in how to manage people. Micromanagers may be trying to "play manager," acting out their idea of a boss: "withholding information, making snap decisions, pointing out errors, taking control."

Wigert and Pendell conduct a virtual intervention, suggesting how a micromanager might be transformed into an effective coach. "You can't flip a switch and turn on trust," they say. "It must be nurtured over time through conversations and actions." Here are the characteristics they're looking for:

- Clear on the "why" of the enterprise, what success looks like;
- Shared accountability; everyone owns the organization's success;
- Frequent two-way conversations;

- Constructive candor;
- A focus on strengths, prioritizing development;
- Support to achieve goals;
- Credit given where credit is due; there's public praise of good work;
- Respectful of the opinions and contributions of colleagues;
- Letting go, trusting colleagues to make decisions within reasonable bounds;
- Open to new ideas and different ways of doing things;
- Curious, empowering others to ask questions;
- Accommodating of different work styles;
- An ally and an advocate;
- Roadblocks are removed;
- Has people's back;
- Especially supportive when new tasks are being learned;
- Responsive to direct requests for help.

“The truth is that when a manager has a trusting, two-way relationship with an employee,” say Wigert and Pendell, “it’s nearly impossible to be too involved. You’re not bossing. You’re working together. And that makes all the difference.”

[“The Ultimate Guide to Micromanagers: Signs, Causes, Solutions”](#) by Ben Wigert and Ryan Pendell in *Gallup Workplace*, July 17, 2020

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7. Short Items:

a. Visualizing Virus Transmission – This [3-minute video](#) filmed in the Sacred Hearts Hospital Laboratory makes graphically clear how respiratory droplets containing bacteria or a virus can spread from one person to another – and what prevents spread.

“KHQ Teams with Providence to Test Mask Effectiveness,” Dr. Rich Davis, KHQ, Washington, July 6, 2020

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b. Online UDL Resources – The School Virtually website <https://schoolvirtually.org> has numerous resources for educators and families, including step-by-step Universal Design for Learning (UDL) suggestions and tech resources.

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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 50 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 HTML 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
District Management Journal
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
Education Next
Education Update
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
English Journal
Essential Teacher
Exceptional Children
Go Teach
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
Knowledge Quest
Language Arts
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Reading Research Quarterly
Responsive Classroom Newsletter
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Social Education
Social Studies and the Young Learner
Teachers College Record
Teaching Children Mathematics
Teaching Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Education Gadfly
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 Magazine