Marshall Memo 1077

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
March 3, 2025

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"We've gone from a world in which mental health was never discussed and mental illness was shameful to one in in which mental health is openly discussed and disclosed to, more recently, one in which mental illness can serve as a badge of pride and a hallmark of identity. This is a huge cultural reversal."

Kaja Perina in her editor's note, "Choosing Strength Over Victimhood," in *Psychology Today*, April 2025 (Vol. 58, #2, p. 3); Perina is at kaja@psychologytoday.com.

"Delegating isn't selfish or lazy; often, it's an act of kindness. When you trust someone with an important task, you're saying, 'I believe in your ability to handle this.' This creates space for skill-building, ownership, and innovation in a team."

Nadav Klein (INSEAD) in "Why a Nice Boss May Not Actually Be a Great One" in *Psychology Today*, April 2025 (Vol. 58, #2, p. 30)

"Victimization comes from the outside world, but victimhood comes from the inside."

Scott Barry Kaufman in "Don't Be a Victim of Your Past" in *Psychology Today*, April 2025 (Vol. 58, #2, pp. 32-37, 45)

"Comprehending while reading is a different game than comprehending while listening. They both have value, but they are not the same thing."

Timothy Shanahan (see item #5)

"Are you educating your students so that they can build a better establishment?"

David Brooks (see item #1)

1. David Brooks on Building a Better Establishment

"Every society on earth has a leadership class of one sort or another," says David Brooks in this *New York Times* column. The U.S. needs a better "establishment," he believes, and educators play a key role. His questions for us (quoted verbatim):

- Are you educating your students so that they can build a better establishment?
- Are you arming them with sensible views about authority so that they don't childishly dismiss all forms of it?
- Are you training them to be in touch with their fellow citizens, so that they don't rule imperiously from above?
- Are you training them to embrace the obligations that fall on them as leaders, to serve the country and not their own kind?
- Are you trying to inculcate in them both the humility to know what they don't know and the audacity to reach for abundance?

"We Can Achieve Great Things" by David Brooks in *The New York Times*, February 28, 2025; Brooks can be reached at dabrooks@nytimes.com.

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2. Letting Go of Widely Embraced "Neuromyths"

In this *Teacher Quality Bulletin* article, Ashley Kincaid suggests strategies for dislodging persistent misconceptions about how the learning brain works, including:

- The Mozart effect – listening to classical music can make children smarter.
- People are either right-brained – creative and better at spatial awareness – or left-brained – analytical, better at languages.
- People are visual, auditory, or kinesthetic learners, absorbing new information better by seeing, hearing, or doing.

Education is a field, says Kincaid, where intuitive thinking and common sense are reinforced by anecdotal evidence for the seeming effectiveness of not-so-effective practices.

The challenge for school leaders is how to help teachers unlearn neuromyths that don't enhance student learning. "As it turns out," says Kincaid, "the science of unlearning is just as complicated as the science of learning." Because researchers keep coming up with new findings, teachers tend to be skeptical of the latest new thing.

Research by Luc Rousseau (Laurentian University) identified two approaches to changing teachers' pedagogical beliefs that *don't* work:

• Refutation texts – Teachers read material debunking a neuromyth and seemed to change their mind, but within a few months, the mistaken belief returned and teachers went back to their former practices. Why? Because the debunking material created cognitive dissonance and posed a threat to teachers' professional integrity. Without a viable alternative, they went back to their previous beliefs and classroom practices.

• Personalized refutation texts – Teachers took a survey on pedagogical beliefs and practices and if their answers were in line with current research, they got a commendation. If teachers' answers revealed a neuromyth, they were directed to research showing that the practice wasn't effective for students. Again, teachers had a short-term mindshift, but the researchers cautioned that the exercise might create shame rather than empowerment.

What *does* work is promoting self-reflection by giving teachers key "science of learning" material and asking them to think about how the ideas could enrich their classroom practices. "This approach," says Kincaid, "encourages teachers to view themselves as expert professionals in the ever-evolving field of learning, framing their work as making scientific progress rather than fostering guilt about what they had done wrong." Researchers found that using this approach, teachers let go of neuromyths and new beliefs and practices were still there 2-3 months later.

"How to Unlearn Problematic Teaching Practices" by Ashley Kincaid in *Teacher Quality Bulletin* from National Council on Teacher Quality, February 27, 2025; Kincaid can be reached at akincaid@nctq.org.

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3. Jim Knight Pushes Back on Common Myths About PD

(Originally titled "Five Myths About Teacher Professional Learning")

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Jim Knight (Instructional Coaching Group and the University of Kansas) says that as he's worked in schools around the world over the past 25 years, he's moved on from five incorrect beliefs about PD:

• *Myth #1: Workshops change practice*. In fact, says Knight, teachers rarely implement what they learn in workshops. That's because workshops are usually one-size-fits-all and don't speak to teachers' unique situations, they're top-down and prescriptive, and the stream of new initiatives fosters a cynical "this too shall pass" attitude. Workshops can provide important insights on effective teaching, says Knight, "but they are insufficient on their own." The key is following up with coaching and peer support.

• *Myth #2: Teachers resist change*. Early in his career, Knight noticed that a lot of teachers weren't implementing his ideas and concluded that resistance to change was hard-wired. In fact, the issue is misalignment. "When someone is offered a chance to implement something they think is worthwhile and they think they can do it," says Knight, "they'll do it." The key is partnering with teachers to identify what's going on in their classrooms, set student learning goals, and find an effective strategy.

• *Myth #3: People are motivated by goals that others set for them*. Knight says that for years, he underestimated the importance of teachers' emotional commitment to change. "The research is quite clear," he says, "that when a person doesn't care about a goal or feel ownership for it, they most likely won't attain it." Teachers might seem compliant – *Just tell me what to do and I'll do it* – but things don't change. The key is working with teachers to identify their biggest issues and collaborating with them to set goals that address actual classroom problems and then win teacher' personal commitment.

• *Myth #4: Coaches and leaders don't need to have a deep understanding of the teaching strategies they present*. Not true, says Knight. PD providers need to know the details of new strategies and how they'll look in the classroom. Without that, teachers won't trust them. Knight says PD providers should compile an instructional playbook with these elements:

- A list of 15-20 high-impact strategies that teachers can use to reach goals;
- One-page summaries of each strategy and the research behind it;
- A checklist with the specific elements of the strategy and how to implement them.

Consultants and coaches can create this only if they have a deep and nuanced understanding of an initiative; that's the way to earn credibility and get teachers on board.

• *Myth #5: Teacher improvement begins with proven practices implemented with fidelity*. Here's the logic model of PD that Knight used to embrace:

- Research shows what improves student learning;
- Consultants present it;
- Teachers implement with fidelity;
- Students do better.

There are lots of ways this can go wrong, most notably when the intervention doesn't take into account classroom variation and teachers' ideas about what's best for their students. "The emphasis on strategies being implemented the same way in all classes underestimates the complexity of classroom," says Knight. "The focus of professional development shouldn't be that every box on a checklist has been ticked and the teachers have taught with absolute fidelity. The real focus should be to ensure there are powerful improvements in student learning, achievement, and well-being." That means consultants must constantly make adjustments to their model to fit each situation. A key success factor is formulating student learning goals and keeping those in view as adjustments are made to the instructional strategy.

"Five Myths About Teacher Professional Learning" by Jim Knight in *Educational Leadership*, March 2025 (Vol. 82, #6, pp. 22-27)

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4. The Debate on the Role of Knowledge in Learning to Read

In this *Education Gadfly* article, Robert Pondiscio describes four skeptical points that have been raised about emphasizing knowledge in K-12 schools:

- Forcing students to memorize a specific set of facts and topics isn't good pedagogy.
- The research linking knowledge to improved reading outcomes is inconclusive.
- Existing research on this link shows correlation, not cause-and-effect.

- Advocates of knowledge-rich curriculum overstate the strength of empirical evidence.

The first argument, says Pondiscio, is a straw man. Those who advocate for the importance of knowledge in the curriculum (most recently in the online book *Developing Curriculum for Deep Thinking: The Knowledge Revival* by Tim Surma et al.) want "carefully and democratically selected, coherent, well-sequenced, and interconnected knowledge" that is taught in the context of literature, history, science, and art.

On the other three points, Pondiscio says it's difficult to design a randomized controlled study isolating the causal impact of knowledge in the curriculum, especially since most studies look at only a few weeks or months of classroom evidence, while the impact of knowledge occurs gradually over a period of years.

But there is "a wealth of evidence," says Pondiscio, "supporting the role of knowledge in learning… for a coherent curriculum that systematically builds students' background knowledge to facilitate deeper understanding and better reading comprehension… The benefits of having broad background knowledge may not be immediately apparent, but they are crucial for long-term reading success." It's simply not in dispute, he says, pointing to the widely-cited "Baseball Study," that background knowledge is one of the key building blocks to reading proficiency.

"For years," he says, "we have tried to raise reading achievement by teaching students 'what good readers do' – encouraging them to adopt and emulate habits associated with effective reading. But this approach has fallen short because reading comprehension is not just a matter of habits; it depends on knowledge… In sum, instead of merely teaching students what good readers do, knowledge-rich curriculum instills over time what good readers *know*."

"There Is Proof That Knowledge Works. And It's Overwhelming" by Robert Pondiscio in *Education Gadfly*, February 27, 2025

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5. Should Students with Reading Difficulties Listen to Audio Texts?

In this online article, Timothy Shanahan (University of Illinois/Chicago) addresses the question of accommodations that allow students who struggle with decoding to listen to a recording of the text. "There is no question that providing audio versions of text will make those texts more accessible to many students with reading difficulties," says Shanahan. "What such an accommodation cannot do is help these students read any better. Comprehending while reading is a different game than comprehending while listening. They both have value, but they are not the same thing." And success in one doesn't automatically carry over to the other.

Shanahan says that some reading accommodations are helpful and appropriate – for example, large-print texts for students with vision problems. The point of accommodations is to give people with disabilities full access to regular activities in school and life, scaffolding participation and success. Accommodations also protect kids from being excluded or penalized because of a disability.

But allowing students who are struggling with reading to avoid the hard work of decoding and making sense of print text won't help them become better readers. "Just the opposite," says Shanahan. "It is an act of exclusion. Replacing reading with listening may seem protective, but it is protecting kids against learning."

What about tests? Isn't it fair to allow students with reading disabilities to take an audio version? If the purpose of the test is to measuring a child's reading proficiency, says Shanahan, then measuring listening comprehension will not provide the information that teachers and parents need. Research shows a clear difference between reading and listening skills, so a listening test will not be an accurate measure and won't fully inform future instruction.

There is another accommodation that can be helpful in testing situations: allowing students to read the text aloud, which, according to researchers, significantly increases reading comprehension. Students can also use this strategy in non-testing situations. The great advantage of this approach is that it puts the accommodation under students' control, empowering them to minimize or overcome a barrier to success.

"Accommodating Reading Comprehension with Listening: Good Idea?" by Timothy Shanahan in *Shanahan on Literacy*, March 1, 2025; Shanahan can be reached at shanahan@uic.edu.

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6. The Art and Science of Interactive Readalouds

(Originally titled "A Better Way to Read Aloud")

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey (San Diego State University and Health Sciences High and Middle College) say that reading aloud to students has great potential for learning – if it's done well. Here are the key factors they noticed when they observed and interviewed 25 highly effective grade 3-8 teachers:

- A well-chosen text that will capture students' interest and address a learning need;
- Preparing and practicing beforehand to formulate questions and be able to read fluently;
- Establishing a clear purpose with students – a concept or skill they will learn;
- Reading with accuracy, correct pronunciation, appropriate rate, fluency, expression, phrasing, and enthusiasm;
- Engaging students with facial expressions and hand gestures;
- Discussing the text before, during, and after the readaloud – ideas, the author's style and choice of words, key vocabulary, predictions;
- Connecting the text to reading and writing that students are doing – for example, writing a letter to one of the characters in the story or comparing the text to something else students have read.

For primary-grade students, Fisher and Frey suggest the additional element of print referencing – drawing attention to letters, words, punctuation, and print concepts like left-to-right directionality.

"A Better Way to Read Aloud" by Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey in *Educational Leadership*, March 2025 (Vol. 82, #6, pp. 10-11)

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7. Policy Debate Team Competitions in Boston Middle and High Schools

In this article in *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, Beth Schueler (University of Virginia) and Katherine Larned (Harvard University) report on their study of the impact of extracurricular policy debate teams in Boston middle and high schools. Two-person student teams did an in-depth study of one issue – for example, immigration, criminal justice, arms sales – for an entire academic year. Students mastered the details of the issue and then their school team competed with other schools, alternating between affirming and negating a resolution. Debate consisted of eight speeches and four cross-examination periods – several rounds of back-and-forth between the teams as each side refuted initial arguments and posed counterarguments, working within strict time limits.

The Boston Debate League (affiliated with the National Speech and Debate Association) launched in 2005 and now includes 40 public middle and high schools in Boston, Chelsea, and Somerville, Massachusetts. Schueler and Larned focused on Boston Public Schools debate teams between 2007 and 2017 and found that participating students had a number of positive outcomes compared to a control group:

- Significant gains in ELA achievement on standardized tests;
- ELA gains were concentrated in reading subskills on analytical thinking;
- A positive effect on the likelihood of high-school graduation (by 12 percentage points);
- A similar boost in the likelihood of postsecondary enrollment (12 percentage points);
- Especially positive gains by students of color and those with lower achievement;
- No evidence of negative effect on math achievement, attendance, or discipline issues.

"Researchers have uncovered very few interventions," say Schueler and Larned, "that generate impacts of this magnitude for secondary school students, especially on literacy outcomes." They note that the annual cost of the Boston Debate League was $1,360 per student, delivering twice the impact on ELA test scores per dollar spent than a well-regarded Boston tutoring program.

What explains this remarkable impact on student achievement and downstream success? Schueler and Larned suggest the following:

• Policy debate develops the skill of constructing and delivering a compelling argument that is well-supported by reasoning and evidence. Students who develop this skill do better in class discussions, non-fiction writing, and standardized ELA tests.

• Preparing for each debate builds the skills of reading and interpreting non-fiction texts to find evidence that supports a position. Students also need to evaluate the credibility of the texts they're reading. Confronted with counterarguments during debates, students need to find evidence to refute their opponents in a limited amount of time.

• Participating in a debate team is far more engaging and motivating than regular classes. "Rather than passively listening to an adult deliver a lecture," say Schueler and Larned,

"in a debate, students are at the front of the room, taking ownership of their learning, and teaching the adult judge (a teacher, debate coach, or community volunteer) as well as peers on the opposing team about their own policy proposals." Topics are also of high interest.

• Debate teams' success in competitions was similar to the effect of athletic team victories, energizing the school population as a whole and contributing to a positive culture. This in turn boosted debaters' effort and engagement.

• There's also evidence that the skills involved in debate carry over to regular K-12 and college subjects. "Debate does this," say Schueler and Larned, "by asking students to master a unique skill, to become experts in a particular policy area, and to identify with a group and culture. It also encourages significant creativity given the nearly infinite number of arguments and proposals that can be marshaled to win any given debate and the strategic advantage that comes with surprising an opponent with an unexpected argument or novel piece of evidence."

• The structure of debates and strict time limits help students master the skills of critical analysis, thinking on their feet, and time management under pressure.

• Debate requires students to think independently, often making decisions on their own without the guidance of a teacher or coach. "Students must develop the ability," say the researchers, "to effectively listen to their opponents' arguments, to respectfully cross-examine (question) their opponents, and to work as a team toward a shared goal" – in a format that combines cooperation and competition.

• Debate encourages academic success by exposing students to a college-going culture. There's high-level content, research, lots of feedback, and pressure to perform in win-or-lose contests, with tournaments often held on college campuses.

"Interscholastic Policy Debate Promotes Critical Thinking and College-Going: Evidence from Boston Public Schools" by Beth Schueler and Katherine Larned in *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, March 2025 (Vol. 47, #1, pp. 108-134); Schueler can be reached at bs6bv@virginia.edu.

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8. Using Artificial Intelligence to Craft High-Quality Lesson Plans

"Mitigating teacher workload is one of my core values as an instructional leader," says Amir Taron Ayres in this *Edutopia* article. He remembers the countless hours he spent as a new teacher trying to write good lesson plans, and believes Gemini and other new chatbots can save teachers huge amounts of time as they create high-quality learning experiences for their students. From his current work supervising New Jersey ELA and social studies teachers, Ayres suggests the following steps to make the best use of AI. Click the article link below for his actual prompts and Gemini's responses step by step.

• *Reflect on the purpose of your lesson plan*. This includes the curriculum standards, the academic needs of your students, and a lesson that is engaging, challenging, and effective.

• *Use AI to unpack the curriculum standards and learning expectations*. Ayres uses the ACDQ prompt: what the chatbot should *act* as, the *context* for the query, asking it to consider the lesson in some *depth*, and then asking the teacher *questions*. His prompt was for a 10th-

grade ELA lesson in a unit on making an argument, argumentative texts, and argumentative writing. Gemini broke the lesson into three learning objectives: crafting precise claims, distinguishing claims, and organizing academic writing.

• *Choose the goal you want to teach*. Ayres prompted Gemini to revise the learning goals to ensure higher-order thinking based on Bloom's taxonomy and measurability of knowledge, concept, and skill, focused on analyzing claims and counterclaims. Gemini responded with a revised set of goals reflecting the refined learning target.

• *Use AI to provide options for assessment*. Ayres prompted Gemini: "For each goal, think deeply and create a choice of three assessments per goal. Ask me any relevant questions including but not limited to my class, student demographics, reading proficiency levels, student disabilities, and languages spoken by students." Gemini responded with three assessment options and six questions about student choice, technology access, collaboration, grading rubrics, assessment timeline, and specific examples of topics or issues that would be particularly engaging for this group of students. Ayres responded to each, and Gemini revised the assessments to reflect his preferences.

"Now that you have a great objective and aligned assessment," Ayres concludes, "you can use AI to further assist in planning your instruction, or do that on your own. Rather than simply prompting the program to create the rest of the plan, think about each part of the lesson and tap your assistant when needed."

"A Curriculum Supervisor's Guide to AI-Assisted Lesson Planning" by Amir Taron Ayres in *Edutopia*, February 25, 2025

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9. A Non-Perfectionist Approach to the First Year of Teaching

(Originally titled "Redefining Success for First-Year Teachers")

In this *Educational Leadership* article, veteran teacher Erin Nerlino says she came very close to quitting during her first year. Looking back, she realizes that all her pre-service training didn't prepare her for a "lingering and pervasive feeling of failure." She has these first-year suggestions:

• *Identify lesson shortcomings*. Seeing what went wrong and adapting is the first step. "For now," says Merlino, "it's enough that you recognize areas for improvement as the basis for growth."

• *Get lots of feedback*. Asking supervisors and fellow teachers to visit and give informal advice pays dividends, including helpful tips and less discomfort with observations.

• *Observe other teachers*. This is the best way to find solutions to common issues, model openness, and find kindred spirits.

• *Get help in specific areas*. New teachers need to not be too hard on themselves, focus on a few areas, read relevant articles and books, and reach out to trusted mentors.

• *Show care for students*. Asking about their lives and well-being (including their pets) "is fundamental," says Merlino. "This emotional connection forms the basis of a positive learning environment and can compensate for areas where you're still developing expertise."

• *Celebrate small victories*. This might be a shy student participating in a discussion or a student expressing pride in a piece of work.

• *Keep believing in students' potential*. Teachers' dogged faith in all students' ability to make progress and achieve is crucial.

• *Engage in difficult conversations*. Stepping up to the plate with discipline problems is vital, says Merlino: "Creating a climate of respect is as much a part of teaching as content delivery."

• *Listen to student feedback*. Periodic surveys, asking students about a lesson or unit, and informal chats provide valuable ideas.

• *Plan for the next year*. "If you have a list of new classroom management techniques and lesson ideas you want to implement," says Merlino, "you've finished the year strong."

"Redefining Success for First-Year Teachers" by Erin Nerlino in *Educational Leadership*, March 2025 (Vol. 82, #6, online only)

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10. Ideas for Supporting "Floating" Teachers

In this *K-12 Dive* article, Briana Mendez-Padilla empathizes with the "nomadic" life of floating teachers – those who don't have their own classroom and need to lug all their materials as they teach all over a building. She suggests some steps school leaders can take to make their lives easier and more productive:

- Limit the number of different classrooms they teach in, ideally not more 2-3.
- Assign rooms based on the subjects they teach.
- Schedule floating teachers' planning periods before or after lunch, giving them more time to get from place to place.
- Consider making passing times longer; one school went from five to nine minutes.
- Make sure floating teachers know their concerns will be heard by administrators.
- Check in during planning periods to see if they need anything.
- Establish protocols for rooms being used by more than one teacher – for example, a desk and bulletin board space for floating teachers and access to the smartboard.

"What Can School Leaders Do to Ensure 'Floating Teachers' Feel Supported?" by Briana Mendez-Padilla in *K-12 Dive*, February 26, 2025

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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 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