Marshall Memo 890

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
June 7, 2021

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"To navigate all the junk on the Internet, you need powers of critical thinking – but also critical ignoring."

Sam Wineburg in *Nieman Journalism Lab* article with that title, May 17, 2021

"Rather than exhorting that coaches should not be involved in evaluation, researchers and leaders should consider how coaches are enmeshed in the structures and activities of evaluation."

Sarah Galey-Horn and Sarah Woulfin (see item #2)

"We can't teach our students of color without accounting for racism, and we can't prepare white students for a better world without an antiracist approach in the work we do."

Simon Rodberg (see item #1)

"At school you are not engaged so much in acquiring knowledge as in making mental efforts under criticism. A certain amount of knowledge you can indeed with average facilities acquire so as to retain, nor need you regret the hours you spend on much that is forgotten, for the shadow of lost knowledge at least protects you from many illusions. But you go to a great school not so much for knowledge as for arts and habits: for the habit of attention; for the art of expression; for the art of assuming at a moment's notice a new intellectual position; for the habit of submitting to censure and refutation; for the art of indicating assent or dissent in graduated terms; for the art of working out what is possible in a given time; for discrimination; for mental courage and mental soberness."

William Johnson Cory, 1875

"There are but two kinds of people in the district: Those who teach and those who support those who teach."

Alvin Wilbanks, recently retired superintendent of Gwinnett County Schools (Georgia)

1. Ways for Leaders to See What They're Missing

(Originally titled "What Am I Missing?")

In the first chapter of his book *What If I'm Wrong?*, veteran educator Simon Rodberg says a perennial challenge for school leaders is captured in the acronym WYSIATI: What You See Is All There Is. Principals know they're not seeing everything, but because there's never enough time, they act as if they're omniscient: a short visit to a classroom reveals enough to be representative of a teacher's overall performance; a student's discipline infraction represents who they are. "The key challenge for school leaders," says Rodberg, "is to know that our information is limited and to ask… What am I missing?" And that means slowing down and using these strategies:

• *Surveys* – Polls of teachers, students, and families are the best way to get accurate data on questions like: *How are teacher-student relationships? What locations in the school are hot spots for bullying? Did back-to-school night work for parents?* Schools can create their own polls by using free tools like Google Forms, or use commercial surveys, which have the added benefit of giving a sense of how one's school compares to others. A few examples: TNTP has a survey on parent attitudes, Panorama Education on student opinions, Making Caring Common on school climate. Getting enough survey responses takes work, such as placing tables with computers near the school's front door during a parent meeting. Rodberg once took a low-tech student survey of secondary-school students: he stood in the cafeteria holding a sign asking, *How well do you feel we're preparing you for college?* and had students jot their answers on sticky notes.

• *Focus groups* – These are easier than surveys – just convene a small, representative group and spend 20 minutes (or two hours) asking for their opinions on a key issue. Rodberg tells how a principal used a less elaborate approach, stopping three teachers in the corridor and asking them how the staff bulletin could be improved. The process took three minutes, built three relationships, and led to three specific improvements: consistent sections in each issue of the newsletter, formatted so people could more easily read the bulletin on a phone, and always starting with shout-outs for staff members. "More importantly," says Rodberg, "the principal shed her reputation for go-it-alone isolation; teachers noticed that she asked, listened, and changed."

• *Stack audits* – These are best for answering questions like, *How challenging is the homework we assign? Are Do Nows in the school a valuable use of time? Are we communicating efficiently with all-staff e-mails?* The principal collects a day's worth of the item in question (hard copies or electronic), puts them in a stack, and a team goes through them

looking for patterns and answering the key question. Having looked at a representative sample, the team addresses questions that have been raised, for example:

- Why does all the homework consist of low-level practice?
- Why are *Do Nows* not serving as a segue to the lesson about to be launched?
- Why do so many people send a large number of e-mails that are relevant to only a few colleagues?

[See Memo 636 for an article by Doug Lemov describing stack audits.]

Instructional Rounds (a.k.a. Learning Walks) are another form of stack audit, providing a quick glimpse of instructional practices throughout a school. With these, as with audits of artifacts, says Rodberg, it's important to jot notes throughout the process to counteract the tendency to remember the last item, rather than overall takeaways.

• *Compensating for blind spots* – The ways we want to see the world are often not the ways we actually see it, says Rodberg. "Race screws up vision. It creates bias, stereotypes, and blindness… We can't teach our students of color without accounting for racism, and we can't prepare white students for a better world without an antiracist approach in the work we do." School leaders who are white, he says, need "racial humility: to accept that we may not see manifestations of racism that really are there, and that different perspectives, including those that disagree with or attack us, really are important."

• *Understanding non-teaching staff* – When Rodberg became an assistant principal in the D.C. public schools, the principal assigned him to supervise the custodial team. The custodians and this wet-behind-the-ears administrator could not have been more different, and the experience was transformative – for Rodberg. Administrators, he says, need to "understand that there are different ways of looking at the world of the school, with reasons and experience behind them. This is a recognition of our own limitations."

• *Shifting from either/or to multiple options* – For a while, Rodberg was at an impasse with the custodians: he wanted them to walk around the school after lunch picking up milk cartons, food wrappers, and soda cans dropped by thoughtless students. The custodians had settled on a routine of working as a team to do a thorough job cleaning the cafeteria at the end of each lunch. After a lot of discussion, another option emerged: the chief custodian walked the building with students who had been caught littering (they picked up the trash), and the other two custodians cleaned the cafeteria. Everybody grew: the chief custodian mentoring challenging students; the kids, learning the impact of their actions; the other custodians from handling the cafeteria without their boss; and Rodberg, finally getting why the custodians had resisted his original idea.

• *Getting past magical thinking* – "We'll institute this program, announce this initiative, update this system, and the teachers will teach better, the students will learn better, the school will improve," says Rodberg. "If we put motivational signs on the walls, students will be better motivated. (Why?) If we give interim assessments, teachers will more successfully target instruction to student strengths and weaknesses (How?)." The problem is that in each case, there's a gap in the logic model; some crucial steps are missing. The solution: principals need to have a solid theory of action for each bright idea – an *if-then* statement that makes explicit

the connection between actions and the desired results. A good theory of action can shift magical thinking into specific steps that actually produce results.

"What Am I Missing?" a chapter in Simon Rodberg's book, *What If I'm Wrong? and Other Key Questions for Decisive School Leadership* (ASCD, 2020); Rodberg can be reached at simonr@gmail.com.

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2. Instructional Coaches: Developers of Teachers or Agents of Reform?

In this *American Journal of Education* article, Sarah Galey-Horn (University of Edinburgh) and Sarah Woulfin (University of Connecticut) report on their study of the "muddy waters" that instructional coaches must navigate between supporting teachers in their classrooms and the school's formal teacher-evaluation process. Some dilemmas: *How should coaches use teacher-evaluation rubrics as they work with teachers? Should coaches get involved in prepping teachers for formal evaluations? How should a coach respond when a principal asks how a particular teacher is doing?*

Drawing on observations, surveys, and interviews in three traditional districts and two charter management organizations in the U.S., Galey-Horn and Woulfin describe how coaches spent their time:

- Conducting classroom walkthroughs with an eye to specific instructional practices;
- Supporting the implementation of a new curriculum;
- Facilitating grade-level team meetings focused on curriculum materials, assessments, and classroom strategies;
- Working with teachers to analyze student work and plan to improve instruction and student outcomes;
- In some cases, helping teams share data and take collective rather than individual responsibility for improving teaching and learning;
- Helping teachers make sense of new digital learning models and plan lessons;
- Leading PD sessions on curriculum and pedagogy;
- Meeting regularly with school administrators on schoolwide goals and priorities;
- Taking part in decisions on programs and curriculum.

Coaches in the two charter organizations were directly involved in the teacher-evaluation process, conducting classroom observations and giving teachers feedback based on rubric criteria. Coaches in the three traditional districts avoided these activities and told teachers there was a firewall between their support and the evaluation process.

However, the role of coaches in the traditional districts wasn't totally divorced from teacher evaluation. Galey-Horn and Woulfin describe "micropolitical" ways in which coaches were part of the process. "Coaches did not want to be seen as spies," they say, but they bought into their systems' policies and "took up the principles and practices of evaluation systems" in specific ways. While they didn't do classroom observations followed by one-on-one feedback to teachers (which resembled administrators' formal evaluations), coaches:

- Explained and modeled teaching behaviors described in the rubrics;

- Helped teachers set student learning goals and fill out required forms;
- Explained the process and principals' stance on performance and goal-setting (saving administrators time);
- Shared with principals information on teachers' dispositions and practices;
- Downplayed certain parts of the evaluation rubric.

The bottom line: coaches' work can't be separated from the teacher-evaluation process. "Rather than exhorting that coaches should not be involved in evaluation," say Galey-Horn and Woulfin, "researchers and leaders should consider how coaches are enmeshed in the structures and activities of evaluation. By acknowledging and, in turn, legitimizing coaches' enactment of facets of evaluation, leaders can improve the design and enactment of coaching and evaluation systems."

The implication: coaches' role should be made explicit so they can be supporters of better instruction *and* of schoolwide improvement. Specifically, conclude the researchers, traditional school districts and charter management organizations "should consider when, where, and how system leaders, principals, coaches, and teachers conduct the work of evaluation, ranging from facilitating professional development on observation rubrics and drafting student learning objectives to observing instruction and providing feedback to teachers."

"Muddy Waters: The Micropolitics of Instructional Coaches' Work in Evaluation" by Sarah Galey-Horn and Sarah Woulfin in *American Journal of Education*, May 2021 (Vol. 127, #3, pp. 441-470); Woulfin can be reached at sarah.woulfin@uconn.edu.

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3. A Survey to Measure Inclusion in the Workplace

In this *Harvard Business Review* article, Lauren Romansky, Mia Garrod, Katie Brown, and Kartik Deo (Gartner) note the increased importance of advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). "Unfortunately," they say, "many organizations still struggle to measure the impact of their strategies and communicate that impact to a growing number of stakeholders." Diversity isn't always easy to track (*What does "good" look like?*), but even more challenging is measuring an inclusive work environment, "where all people feel respected, accepted, supported, and valued." Getting a handle on that is vital, say the authors, since it's inclusion "that unlocks the potential of a diverse workforce."

Romansky, Garrod, Brown, and Deo believe they have the answer: a quick survey that measures key aspects of an inclusive culture, based on the thinking of 30 DEI experts. Here is the Gartner Inclusion Index, with responses recorded on a scale from Agree to Disagree. The more employees agree with each statement, the more inclusive the organization is:

- Fair treatment: Employees at my organization who help the organization achieve its strategic objectives are rewarded and recognized fairly.
- Integrating differences: Employees at my organization respect and value each other's opinions.

- Decision making: Members of my team fairly consider ideas and suggestions offered by other team members.
- Psychological safety: I feel welcome to express my true feelings at work.
- Trust: Communication we receive from the organization is honest and open.
- Belonging: People in my organization care about me.
- Diversity: Managers at my organization are as diverse as the broader workforce.

The authors recommend doing a baseline survey, analyzing the data, and looking for "pockets of inconsistency" – variation within teams and across the organization. With the data in hand, the leadership team should promptly share the results and engage in:

- Listening – using meetings and focus groups to get more-detailed insights, including insights on the work of high-performing teams;
- Self-reflection – considering management styles and ways to improve;
- Vigilance – being on the lookout for exclusionary behavior, microaggressions, and cultural violations;
- Changing processes – recruiting, performance evaluation, and succession planning.

"How to Measure Inclusion in the Workplace" by Lauren Romansky, Mia Garrod, Katie Brown, and Kartik Deo in *Harvard Business Review*, May 27, 2021

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4. What is the Impact of a Four-Day School Week?

In this article in *Education Next*, Paul Thompson (Oregon State University) reports on four-day school weeks in the U.S. Some background:

- The earliest known four-day week was in South Dakota in the 1930s.
- More than 1,500 schools now have four-day weeks, mostly in the rural North and West (Oregon, Idaho, Colorado, New Mexico, and South Dakota have the most).
- Four-day weeks are almost always instituted because of a budget crunch, to avoid teacher layoffs and increases in class size and reduce transportation costs.
- Four-day schedules average 148 school days, versus 175-180 for traditional schools.
- Four-day schools lengthen school hours to meet their state's minimum requirements, averaging 7 hours 45 minutes a day, versus 6 hours 54 minutes in five-day schools.
- However, students in four-day schools typically get 3-4 hours less instructional time each week.
- About half of the schools Thompson surveyed were fully closed on the fifth day; about 30 percent offered remedial or enrichment activities for students, including teacher office hours and field trips.
- About 25 percent used the fifth day for educator professional development.
- Four-day weeks save 1-2 percent in operational costs – about $350 per pupil.

What differences does a four-day week make? Looking at 15 years of data from Oregon, Thompson found that having fewer hours of instruction resulted in math test scores dropping 5.9 percent of a standard deviation and reading scores dropping 4.2 percent of a standard deviation. In a typical school, this translated to 7-10 fewer students passing state tests. "These

impacts," says Thompson, "are comparable to those associated with other cost-saving measures, such as increasing class sizes and cutting student-support programs." The most negative effects were in grades 7 and 8, and the reduction in student achievement increased with the number of years of four-day schooling. Schools that returned to a five-day schedule gained back their losses in student achievement quite quickly. Other insights:

- Four-day weeks are appealing to many educators, but squeezing the required curriculum into fewer instructional hours can be challenging.
- Students' learning loss is mitigated in schools that use the fifth day to offer remediation and other instructional opportunities.
- Some students are harmed by not having access to nutritious meals one day a week, as well as less organized physical education, less time with teachers and counselors, and less peer interaction.
- One day a week, students are less sheltered from possible stresses and adult-size responsibilities at home.
- One study found four-day school weeks were associated with lower workplace participation for women who had to supervise children on the non-school weekday.
- Lack of supervision on the non-school day was associated with higher rates of juvenile crime and risky behaviors, including marijuana use, bullying, and sexual activity.

Thompson's bottom line: "A four-day school week that reduces instructional time has a negative and statistically significant impact on student learning."

"The Shrinking School Week" by Paul Thompson in *Education Next*, Summer 2021 (Vol. 21, #3, pp. 60-65); Thompson can be reached at Paul.Thompson@oregonstate.edu.

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5. Improving High-School Students' Attitudes About Poetry

In this article in *English Journal*, Illinois teacher Kyle O'Daniel says that every winter his ninth graders used to groan when he announced a unit on poetry. Asked why, students said:

- *It's stupid and a waste of time.*
- *I don't know. I just don't like it.*
- *It's too confusing… like c'mon, just say what you mean!*
- *In seventh grade, we had to write this poetry book and it was awful! So many rules!*

O'Daniel hoped he could change these attitudes by picking engaging poems and conducting lively discussions, but the negativism persisted. He realized that kids had learned to hate poetry because of teachers' unrelenting focus on analyzing each poem for its *meaning*, and a steady diet of poems from the traditional canon.

O'Daniel decided to try something new. He kicked off each lesson in his one-month poetry unit by having students listen to a poem from a diverse array of living writers (read aloud, or a video of the poet performing the poem) and then spend five minutes jotting their reactions. The goal was to keep things relaxed, low-stakes, enjoyable, and brief, and immediately move on to the rest of the lesson (sometimes he took a moment to answer a student's question or read a response). Here are some of the prompts O'Daniel provided:

- What is your immediate reaction to the poem? Do you like or dislike it?
- What did the poem make you think of or remind you of?
- What personal connections can you make?
- What is your favorite line? Why?
- What confuses you about this poem? What questions do you have after reading it?
- Why do you think the poet wrote this?
- If we're watching/listening to the poet perform the poem, how did the spoken poem differ from the one on the page? Did you like reading or listening better? Why?
- If you write poetry, is there anything about this poem you'd like to emulate?
- Try writing a poem inspired by this one, perhaps using its opening as a starting point.

"By asking students to experience a poem first, rather than analyze it," says O'Daniel, "we allow them to interact with the poem in a way that is simultaneously more authentic and less intimidating – two factors necessary to improve students' opinions." He spot-checked students' responses and provided written feedback in their journals or one-on-one conferences. Students' responses also gave him feedback on the poems he was choosing and how the activity was going.

O'Daniel offers these suggestions for selecting high-quality poems-of-the-day, drawing on books, the Internet (www.poetryfoundation.org, www.teachlivingpoets.com), www.poets.org), and social media (#TeachLivingPoets):

- Use living poets from a variety of backgrounds, and give a brief bio.
- Tailor choices to students' interests and to current events – sports (for example, "Game Player" by Al Ortolani), farming ("The Brinkmeiers" by Austin Smith), the LGBTQ experience ("When I Was Straight" by Julie Marie Wade), and more.
- Choose poems that are "accessible and approachable," with which students "can experience some immediate success," versus "scaring them off."
- Provide definitions or translations when needed.
- Make pop culture connections to classic poems – O'Daniel had students read "O, Were My Love Yon Lilac Fair" by Robert Burns, followed by the *Parks and Recreation* episode in which Ron Swanson reads the poem and weeps at its beauty.

Of course not every student likes every poem, but O'Daniel is delighted to see positive comments – sometimes even a desire to read more poems by the writer. Prior to launching Poem a Day, he says, "a student considering reading more poetry felt much like a child asking for more veggies – not likely – but this activity has made this experience far more common."

For teachers thinking about implementing the idea, O'Daniel has these cautions and suggestions:

• It's important to read widely to find engaging, approachable poems. Finding the right poem is a matter of trial and error; some won't work, and the trick is to figure out why. Some poems may get pushback from students, administrators, and parents, and O'Daniel urges teachers to be prepared to defend their diverse choices.

• There might be concerns about the daily classroom time spent responding in a "nonacademic" way to a poem. O'Daniel believes the passion and engagement are well worth

the time, plus there's real academic value in the daily regimen of writing about a piece of poetry.

• For maximum impact, the poem-a-day activity should take place in more than one classroom. O'Daniel suggests inviting colleagues in to observe and showing them a selection of student responses.

"Poem-a-Day: Remedying Students' Aversion to Verse" by Kyle O'Daniel in *English Journal*, May 2021 (Vol. 110, #5, pp. 51-57); O'Daniel can be reached at kodaniel@ms.k12.il.us.

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6. Shakespeare Meets Facebook

In this article in *English Journal*, Singapore teacher Faith Kaylie Ong describes how she taught *Romeo and Juliet* during the pandemic. This was especially challenging because it was a remedial course, students were struggling to understand Shakespeare's language, and the text seemed alien to their everyday lives. Here's how Ong proceeded:

- She set up a Facebook page for the class.
- Students read the play offline and each chose a character they liked.
- Taking the role of their character, students got on the Facebook page and engaged in conversations and role-plays.
- As they did so, Ong helped unpack the vocabulary and explain the text.
- Some students spoke their lines directly from the play, while others riffed in creative ways, sometimes capturing the spirit of Elizabethan language.
- Ong reports that the online interactions worked remarkably well, and were especially helpful for reticent and reluctant students and those who were having difficulty with the language.
- "Online," says Ong, "the students did not have the classroom pressure of 'wait time' but were instead free to take their time behind the screen to craft a response."

"As a teacher," concludes Ong, "I was reminded to have more faith in students, even in the most challenging linguistic situations… I found that when the students were given room to experiment with the text, they were able to showcase their understanding of character relationships through playful adaptation of the language of the script."

"Star-Crossed Profiles: Romeo and Juliet in a Singapore Classroom" by Faith Kaylie Ong in *English Journal*, May 2021 (Vol. 110, #5, pp. 112-114); Ong can be reached at faith_kaylie_ong@moe.edu.sg.

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7. Recommended Multicultural Books

In this *School Library Journal* feature, Cathy Camper recommends books to broaden students' cultural and historical horizons:

- *What Is Hip-Hop?* by Eric Morse (grade 2-5)

- *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You* by Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi (grade 7 and up)
- *Beast Rider: A Boy's Journey Beyond the Border* by Tony Johnston and Maria Elena Fontanot de Rhoades (grade 4-7)
- *We Are Here to Stay: Voices of Undocumented Young Adults* by Susan Kuklin (grade 5 and up)
- *Stormy Seas: Stories of Young Boat Refugees* by Mary Beth Leatherdale (grade 4-7)
- *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan (grade 4 and up)
- *Undocumented: A Worker's Fight* by Duncan Tonatiuh (grade 2-5)
- *Other Words for Home* by Jasmine Warga (grade 4-8)
- *Front Desk* by Kelly Yang (grade 4-6)
- *Dreaming in Indian: Contemporary Native American Voices* edited by Lisa Charleyboy and Mary Beth Leatherdale (grade 6 and up)
- *An Indigenous People's History of the United States for Young People* by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz (grade 9 and up)

"Great Books: More to the Story" by Cathy Camper in *School Library Journal*, June 2021 (Vol. 67, #6, pp. 35-37)

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8. Short Item:

Summer Reading for Middle-School Students – *School Library Journal* has these online suggestions for summer reading; click for brief reviews and cover images:

- 12 Riveting Middle-Grade Adventures
- Summer Camp and Beyond: 24 Middle-Grade Graphic Novels

School Library Journal, June 2021 (Vol. 67, #6, online)

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If you have feedback or suggestions,
please e-mail kim.marshall48@gmail.com

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and other educators very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 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
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Update
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
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
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
Teaching Tolerance
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