

Marshall Memo 877

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education

March 8, 2021

In This Issue:

1. [Making the best of imperfect teaching technology during the pandemic](#)
2. [What will change when we're back to regular school?](#)
3. [Some recommendations for the fall](#)
4. [Tweaking the hiring process to improve diversity](#)
5. [What happens in middle school when adults aren't looking?](#)
6. [Teachers' commitment to social justice: necessary but not sufficient](#)
7. [Using the Goodreads online platform in high-school English](#)
8. [Bringing science instruction up to speed in Omaha](#)
9. [The surprising impact of a small compliment](#)

Quotes of the Week

“Parents everywhere, clinging to their very last shred of sanity, report that, in fact, children with laptops *cannot* learn anything by themselves, and can't even go more than about five blessed minutes without needing a snack or help with a password.”

Justin Reich (see item #1)

“What's the equivalent of the chat box when we go back to in-person learning?”

Jal Mehta (see item #2)

“If you count something interesting, you will learn something interesting.”

Atul Gawande (quoted in item #6)

“As the world races to combat a pandemic, slow climate change, and solve many other public health challenges, it's clear that developing young people's scientific knowledge should be an urgent priority in schools.”

Justin Andersson, Daniel Sitzman, Amy Arneson, and Elizabeth Gandhi (see item #8)

“Give greater consideration to candidates who are most likely to challenge assumptions, interrupt default ways of thinking, force difficult debates over complex issues, and ask ‘Why?’ over and over again.”

Allison Vaillancourt (see item #4)

“A few kind words can go a long way.”

Eric Boothby (see item #9)

1. Making the Best of Imperfect Teaching Technology During the Pandemic

In this *Kappan* article, Justin Reich (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) says that for more than a century, evangelists of educational technology have been promising game-changing breakthroughs. In 1913, Thomas Edison predicted that within ten years, all instruction would be conducted by motion picture and books would be “obsolete in the public schools.” In 2008, Harvard Business School professor Clayton Christensen said that by 2019, all secondary-school courses would be replaced by adaptive online learning at one-third the cost. Others have predicted that students would soon be learning independently on the Internet, making schools obsolete.

Then in 2020, educational technology was thrust center stage when the coronavirus closed schools for 1.6 billion students. “Parents everywhere,” says Reich, “clinging to their very last shred of sanity, report that, in fact, children with laptops *cannot* learn anything by themselves, and can’t even go more than about five blessed minutes without needing a snack or help with a password.” Yes, a few students have thrived with remote learning, but for most kids and families, “the results have ranged from disappointing to disastrous.”

Why? Because rather than using emerging technologies like adaptive tutors, open online courses, virtual reality, or artificial intelligence, schools have mostly tried to replicate regular school routines by using two of our oldest technologies:

- Learning management systems (like Google Classroom, Canvas, Moodle), developed in the 1960s and 70s, which basically involve teachers and students passing documents back and forth, like what’s carried between school and home in students’ backpacks;
- Video conferencing, dubbed video telephony in the 1930s, which allows people at a distance to take turns speaking while appearing onscreen.

The result of this, says Reich, is “a Kabuki theatre version of a school day... Teachers can shout lectures through the video keyhole, respond to student questions in the Zoom chat, and collect worksheets through the learning management system.” But most remote classrooms relying on these two technologies “cannot support the range of interactions that are possible in a classroom with a human teacher who has access to chairs, desks, paper, blackboards, and a cart of laptops... For most students, it’s boring and uninspiring, and for most teachers, it’s frustrating and unrewarding.”

Schools have added apps and remote learning tools that improve teacher-student interactions – Dreambox, STMath, ASSISTments, Khan Academy – but these are mostly in math and work best with motivated students who have strong parent support and a good Internet connection. Another problem: few of the apps get students explaining their reasoning

in oral and written language. Similarly, there currently aren't programs that can provide high-quality support in science, social studies, literature, persuasive writing, and other subjects where students learn to reason from evidence. "In addition," says Reich, "while some learning apps may be valuable, every new app or tool comes with overhead costs. And every app that a school adds to its suite of online tools means one more password for students to forget, one more login for families to keep track of, and one more technology platform for teachers to master." The simple truth: it takes time to begin to teach well with technology. Reich gives lots of credit to teachers who have poured energy and creativity into making these technologies work for their students.

One positive outcome of the pandemic, he says, is that we're much less likely to trust "charismatic" proponents of classroom technology. The right approach, he believes, is a "tinkering" approach: seeing the potential of what we have and making small improvements. "If technology isn't transformative," says Reich, "that doesn't mean it can't be useful. If we adopt a tinkerer's mindset, then we can learn important lessons from school closures." To wit:

- In order to use technology effectively, teachers need intensive training, coaching, and lots of practice.
- To support teachers, school leaders must tinker with the curriculum, schedules, and assessments.
- All this will be put to use again, because there are likely to be other interruptions in schooling caused by disease outbreaks, fires, poor air quality, floods, and extreme weather events.

"The good news," concludes Reich, "is that millions of teachers have come up with new teaching tricks and classroom routines, and tens of millions of students have deepened their skills in technology-mediated communication and self-regulated learning. These are valuable assets, and our schools can and should build on them, continuing the process of learning how to teach, learn, and use our digital tools more effectively."

["Ed Tech's Failure During the Pandemic, and What Comes After"](#) by Justin Reich in *Phi Delta Kappan*, March 2021 (Vol.102, #6, pp. 20-24); Reich can be reached at jreich@mit.edu.

[Back to page one](#)

2. What Will Change When We're Back To Regular School?

In this interview with Suzanne Bouffard and Elizabeth Foster in *The Learning Professional*, Jal Mehta (Harvard University) says the disruption of the pandemic has spurred new thinking about schooling – for example, teachers using "flipped" instruction, with students listening to recorded mini-lectures at night and having lively synchronous discussions about them the next day. As schools return to in-person instruction, says Mehta, "it might be a really positive opportunity to incorporate what's working and let go of what's not working." To jump-start that process, he suggests asking questions like these:

- What have you learned about your students and their families this year?
- How could that shape the way you connect with families and students next year?

- What has worked well this year, and how could you amplify those things as you transition out of emergency education mode?
- What are you not looking forward to about going back to “regular” school?

During remote schooling, educators have really missed the informal connections with colleagues in hallways and lunchrooms but appreciated the slower pace of life, not commuting, and having more time with family. Mehta says we need to allow for a period of “hospicing” as we let go of things that have been important to us but now seem less helpful.

Gearing up for a “new normal,” timing is important. “Teachers are not going to have the bandwidth for significant reimagining during the school year,” says Mehta. This June and July, during paid professional time, will be the best opportunity for teachers and administrators to brainstorm about what worked well and do some initial planning for the school year ahead. “Then, in August,” he says, “when there is fresh energy, a lot of schools have at least a few days of professional learning time, and that would be a natural time to talk about what will be different in the coming school year.”

School and district leaders have a vital role in orchestrating these conversations. The research points to four tasks:

- *Naming* practices that have worked well during the pandemic, like better connections with families;
- *Nourishing* practices that are starting to take root and helping them grow;
- *Connecting* educators with similar instincts and interests so they can think things through, which means scheduling common time and using remote connections;
- *Growing* expertise by drawing on the best thinking inside and outside the school.

“But overall,” says Mehta, “we don’t currently have the time we need for adults in schools, and that’s a huge barrier to everything else we’re trying to do. That needs to be addressed.”

In that regard, he describes how educators in Chelsea, Massachusetts negotiated an extra 10 days for professional learning at the beginning of the school year. After reflecting on their own experiences as students, teachers conducted “trust visits” with families on sidewalks outside students’ homes, elsewhere outside the school buildings, and on Zoom. Then the district convened nine “working tables” in which teachers, educators, and families across different schools focused on an issue (with parents doing most of the sharing and educators most of the listening) and made recommendations for the upcoming year.

Mehta closes with a question: “What’s the equivalent of the chat box when we go back to in-person learning? I don’t have a good answer yet, but I’m hoping some teachers will have a good answer.”

[“Crisis Creates Opportunity. Will We Seize It?”](#) Jal Mehta interviewed by Suzanne Bouffard and Elizabeth Foster in *The Learning Professional*, February 2021 (Vol. 42, #1, pp. 32-35); Mehta is at jal_mehta@gse.harvard.edu, Bouffard at suzanne.bouffard@learningforward.org, and Foster at elizabeth.foster@learningforward.org.

[Back to page one](#)

3. Some Recommendations for the Fall

In this *Education Gadfly* article, Michael Petrilli shares a preliminary set of crowd-sourced recommendations for the hoped-for reopening of fully in-person instruction:

- Aim for acceleration, not remediation.
- Build everything around a set of high-quality, content-rich instructional materials.
- Ensure that tutoring and other extended-learning opportunities are closely tied to regular classroom instruction and curriculum.
- Offer beefed-up mental health services.
- Work hard at getting the school's culture right "since a great culture is what's going to largely determine whether kids get the social and emotional support they most need," says Petrilli.

He continues to advocate for schools to insert a "second 2nd grade" to accommodate the unfinished learning of many students in the wake of the pandemic.

["Personalized Learning for the Wee Ones in the Wake of the Pandemic, Part I"](#) by Michael Petrilli in *Education Gadfly*, March 4, 2021

[Back to page one](#)

4. Tweaking the Hiring Process to Improve Diversity

In this *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, Allison Vaillancourt (University of Arizona) says many university hiring committees began using objective rubrics to prevent members' "gut" feelings from introducing biases into the process; the goal was greater gender and racial diversity in leadership positions. For screening résumés, reports Vaillancourt, the rubrics were helpful, producing a more-diverse slate of first-round candidates. But in one-hour on-camera interviews, white male candidates outperformed women and people of color on every criterion of the rubric, including "strong public speaking skills" and "comfort with conflict."

What was going on? Vaillancourt says that even using an objective rubric, "committee members often rely on narrow visions and demonstrations of leadership to assess candidates. Candidates who do not look or sound like the leaders we have come to expect end up being evaluated less favorably. White male candidates score well against the evaluation criteria because they act in accordance with the visual and auditory expectations that come to mind when we think about the majority of higher-education leaders we have seen for as long as we can remember."

What can be done? Vaillancourt suggests keeping five things in mind during the hiring process to level the playing field:

- *Examine rubric scores.* The criteria may not be as objective as they seem, or the scores given by committee members may be influenced by unconscious biases. "While initial assessment scores can be useful in getting a sense of how candidates compare against one another," says Vaillancourt "be sure to take time to discuss why each candidate scored well or poorly."

- *Beware of “likeability.”* It’s natural to favor candidates with whom we’re comfortable: *It would be fun to work with her, I felt an immediate connection.* “Make it a practice to both name and analyze how candidates make you feel,” says Vaillancourt.

- *Is charisma really what you need?* When hiring for leadership positions, she says, committees tend to be impressed by candidates who “have a strong sense of self, make bold declarations, and discuss visionary plans.” During an interview, a candidate who reflects for a moment before answering a question or seems quiet and reserved might be screened out. But once hired, those attributes might be exactly what’s needed to get results.

- *Reconsider “professionalism” and “gravitas.”* In committee members’ minds, these qualities may be unconsciously aligned with the leaders they’ve worked with in the past – usually white males.

- *Be open to new ways of thinking about old problems.* “Give greater consideration to candidates who are most likely to challenge assumptions, interrupt default ways of thinking, force difficult debates over complex issues, and ask ‘Why?’ over and over again,” says Vaillancourt. “While it may not be easy or even pleasant, constructive conflict typically yields better analysis and results than comfortable conversations do.”

[“Why Your ‘Objective’ Rubric Got Biased Results”](#) by Allison Vaillancourt in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 5, 2021 (Vol. 67, #13, pp. 42-44)

[Back to page one](#)

5. What Happens in Middle School When Adults Aren’t Looking

In this article in *Middle School Journal*, Benjamin Wellenreiter (Illinois State University) reports on his field research on middle-school students using – and misusing – the areas in their school intermittently supervised by adults – bathrooms, hallways, water fountains, cafeterias, locker rooms, buses, and dances. “The opportunities and risks of these places deeply influence young adolescents’ middle-school lives,” says Wellenreiter. As one student put it, “The only thing I look forward to is the passing periods. And art.”

Interactions in semi-autonomous spaces include friendship-formation, flirtation, and self-discovery – and also bullying, sexual harassment, and illegal activity. The challenge this poses for educators, says Wellenreiter, is avoiding two extremes: being aloof and clueless on the one hand, and implementing inappropriate and antagonistic policies on the other. The goal is the “creation and maintenance of more flexible, equitable, just, safe, and developmentally appropriate policies and procedures.” Three insights from his observations and interviews:

- *Spaces that are student “playgrounds”* – Bathrooms, only occasionally visited by adults, were especially active social venues. Students dove into social media, created Tic-Toc videos, primped, gossiped, and got into fights. Students were adept at quickly shifting to acceptable activities when an adult entered, sometimes using lookouts. Ideally, adults supervise enough to ensure students’ safety, while respecting privacy and allowing a degree of autonomy.

- *Adults enforcing trivial rules while not seeing (or choosing not to see) bad stuff* – To students, it seemed that adults intervened when they saw students wearing hoodies, cursing,

using their phones, and talking about teachers – but not with bullying, intimidation, or ostracizing. As one student put it, “They care more about what you doing than what someone else is doing to you.” Another student: “It’s like the opposite stuff of what they are supposed to see, they see.” Students also believed adults were more likely to reprimand students of color than white students.

• *The tricky balance between supervision and autonomy* – “It’s like they smother us,” said one student. “It’s like they’re all up on you, wanting to know what you’re doing every second.” But students did recognize the need for adults to monitor what was going on and prevent harmful activities. The middle ground, says Wellenreiter, is “more-meaningful conversations with adults regarding root causes of behaviors and social processes.” That means adults being less concerned with the trivial and more observant and perceptive about social dynamics among students. The best quality: genuine interest in students as individuals and understanding of the difficulties and complexities of their lives.

[“Where the Action Is: Exploring Adolescents’ Perspective of Middle-School Social Venues”](#) by Benjamin Wellenreiter “in *Middle School Journal*, March 2021 (Vol. 52, #2, pp. 5-13); Wellenreiter can be reached at brwelle@ilstu.edu.

[Back to page one](#)

6. Teachers’ Commitment to Social Justice: Necessary but Not Sufficient

(Originally titled “What Counts as a Social Justice Educator?”)

In this article in *Educational Leadership*, veteran teacher Henry Seton describes several classroom interactions in which teachers committed to social justice did not teach well:

- A middle-school teacher asks her students to define *universal human rights* and for 20 minutes allows students to flounder with guesses about aliens from outer space.
- A high-school teacher uses an auto-play PowerPoint for most of a class period – an ironically disempowering form of instruction for a lesson about colonialism.
- An outspoken feminist frequently ejects young men of color from her classroom.
- A teacher who prides himself on including material on the Black Power movement never reads his students’ IEPs.
- A vocal advocate of transgender rights takes months to give his students feedback on their essays.

Equally dismaying to Seton was a *Social Justice for Educators* conference with many “woke” topics but nothing about high-quality instruction.

Seton is quick to admit his own teaching errors, including mistaking a student’s gender and making inconsiderate assumptions about students’ home lives. But he’s concerned when educators don’t see, and aren’t working to remedy, major flaws in their work with students. “Sometimes it seems we are focused so much on social inequity beyond our classroom,” he says, “that we forget about our instructional responsibility as teachers to ensure that all students are learning. We highlight structural forces yet lose sight of the souls directly in front of us. We speak out against social injustice yet at times end up reproducing societal inequalities and

opportunity gaps among our own students. We say we care about change yet we at times ignore the locus of control where we likely have the most leverage – our own classroom.”

In the daily work of making classrooms places where “all students can be safe, known, valued, loved, and engaged,” Seton suggests two steps to guide teachers’ continuous improvement:

- *Adopting a listening stance* – This includes inviting colleagues, parents, and community members to observe and offer constructive feedback, especially on the “blind spots in our practice.” It might include setting up a student advisory group that meets regularly over lunch to offer suggestions, and conducting anonymous student surveys.

- *Looking at data* – Seton quotes Boston surgeon/writer Atul Gawande: “If you count something interesting, you will learn something interesting.” Teachers can gain important insights by disaggregating student assessment results, patterns of classroom interactions (who gets called on, who is silent), and discipline referrals. Seton sometimes asks his more-restless students to keep track of classroom interactions and clue him in on what he’s missing.

“We must adopt culturally sustaining curriculum,” Seton concludes, “and also ensure that our instruction equips all students to be readers, writers, mathematicians, and scientists. We need to be as passionate about data-driven instruction as we are about teaching Latinx history, as attentive to research on effective literacy practices as we are to bringing diverse voices into our texts. With this more-expansive vision, we can better move toward justice in both our classrooms and our broader society.”

[“What Counts as a Social Justice Educator?”](#) by Henry Seton in *Educational Leadership*, March 2021 (Vol. 78, #6); Seton can be reached at hseton@gmail.com.

[Back to page one](#)

7. Using the Goodreads Online Platform in High-School English

In this article in *English Journal*, Matthew Duvall (Vista Autism Services) describes how he teamed up with a high-school teacher to introduce literature students to [Goodreads](#), a social network site that encourages its 80 million users to communicate about books. On the site, says Duvall, users can “review books, add other users as friends, read reviews, get system-generated reading recommendations, participate in polls and message boards, and follow authors.” The plan was for students to treat literacy not as an academic exercise but to engage in authentic literacy practices.

Students read *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Sherman Alexie) and *Eleanor and Park* (Rainbow Rowell). Rather than doing the usual reading quizzes, short written reflections, and presentations, students used the Goodreads platform to communicate with each other, their teacher, and a global audience. For starters, students read a short story in class and discussed it using the class’s private Goodreads discussion board. Next they found reviews of the two texts and worked in groups to identify and discuss favorable and unfavorable reviews. Finally students wrote and published their own reviews of *Eleanor and Park*. Students who usually had difficulty handing in work were right on time posting their online reviews. Compared with reviews students had written before starting to use Goodreads,

the teachers found their online efforts were almost twice as long, and included more elaboration and evidence that they understood the book.

More importantly, says Duvall, “Reading Goodreads reviews with the perspectives of real, everyday readers around the world gave the students a different view of literary criticism.” Students noticed that some 5-star reviews didn’t have much detail and some 1-star reviews included more evidence and insights. One student said that if he were deciding whether to buy a book online, he might read a longer 1-star review that had lots of details. “This idea,” says Duvall, “– that the supporting evidence in a book review is more important than the subjective rating of the book’s quality – is a valuable understanding for high-school students.”

[“Using Goodreads to Create Authentic Classroom Experiences”](#) by Matthew Duvall in *English Journal*, January 2021 (Vol. 110, #, pp. 13-15); Duvall can be reached at matthew.duvall@vistaautismservices.org.

[Back to page one](#)

8. Bringing Science Instruction Up to Speed in Omaha

“As the world races to combat a pandemic, slow climate change, and solve many other public health challenges, it’s clear that developing young people’s scientific knowledge should be an urgent priority in schools,” say Justin Andersson and Daniel Sitzman (Omaha Public Schools) and Amy Arneson and Elizabeth Gandhi (Education Northwest) in this article in *The Learning Professional*. They believe the Next Generation Science Standards show the way, but say that many schools are having difficulty embracing an inquiry-based approach.

The Omaha Public Schools took on this challenge by launching a district-wide initiative that included in-depth coaching and other professional learning experiences. Over a 15-month period, evaluators observed classes, interviewed teachers, looked at achievement data, and surveyed students, and reported marked improvements in teaching and learning. The most interesting data came from comparing teachers’ self-assessments with what their students said in anonymous surveys. Here are some of the questions students were asked:

- My teacher thinks mistakes are okay as long as we are learning.
- My teacher wants us to understand our work, not just memorize it.
- My teacher gives us time to really explore and understand new ideas.
- In my science lessons, I get a better understanding of the world outside of school.
- In my science lessons, I explain my ideas to other students.
- In my science lessons, other students explain their ideas to me
- During science lessons, my teacher asks me questions.
- In my science lessons, we learn by doing experiments rather than being told the answer.

[“With New Science Standards, Coaching Is Key”](#) by Justin Andersson, Daniel Sitzman, Amy Arneson, and Elizabeth Gandhi in *The Learning Professional*, February 2021 (Vol. 42, #1, pp. 44-48); the authors can be reached at jandersson@huskers.unl.edu, daniel.sitzman@ops.org, amy.arneson@educationnorthwest.org, and Elizabeth.gandhi@educationnorthwest.org.

[Back to page one](#)

9. The Surprising Impact of a Small Compliment

In this article in *Psychology Today*, David Ludden reports the results of five studies published in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. It turns out that people underestimate the impact of a small compliment – saying something as simple as “I love your scarf” – and overestimate the psychic effort involved in giving it. The researchers had people take a few seconds to pay an out-of-the-blue compliment to a same-gender stranger. Some details:

- Just before giving the compliment, participants were anxious that the recipient would feel awkward and annoyed.
- Those predictions significantly underestimated how flattered, happy, and pleased most recipients felt.
- After the compliment, the mood of those who gave it improved significantly.
- But blinded by their own discomfort, they didn't see the impact on the other person.
- Third-party observers could see the positive impact of the compliment.

“The biggest challenge is getting out of our own head,” says Erica Boothby, one of the researchers (University of Pennsylvania). “We tend to be overly focused on our own ability to give a compliment effectively, or worried about what the other person will think of us.” Better to think about how we would feel receiving a positive comment, and realize that most other people will have the same reaction. “A few kind words can go a long way,” she says.

“The Power of a Kind Word” by David Ludden in *Psychology Today*, April 2021 (Vol. 54, #2, p. 17)

[Back to page one](#)

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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
Cult of Pedagogy
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
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)
MathemWhyatics 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 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
Urban Education