Marshall Memo 1067

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
December 23, 2024

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Many important tasks can be done by other people. Focus on what you can do a lot better than anyone else."

A.G. Lalley and Roger Martin in "Leaders Shouldn't Try to Do It All" in *Harvard Business Review*, January-February 2024 (Vol. 103, #1, pp. 78-85)

"School is a minefield for kids who do not fit our stereotypes of the 'good student.'"

Steven Goldman (see item #2)

"Despair is central to the thoughts and feelings of many people these days, whether young people or adults… Schools must counter this sense of despair – not romantically, not simplistically, but forcefully."

Li-Ching Ho and Keith Barton (see item #3)

"Like any form of wisdom, using AI well requires holding opposing ideas in mind: it can be transformative yet must be approached with skepticism, powerful yet prone to subtle failures, essential for some tasks yet actively harmful for others."

Ethan Mollick "15 Times To Use AI, and 5 Not To" in *One Useful Thing*, December 9, 2024

"The substantial shares of students who need nursing, counseling, and special-education services clearly benefit when specialized staff are onsite at their schools. Policymakers focused on supporting the teaching workforce should address the critical need to increase the supply of individuals who can serve in these roles."

Virginia Lovison and Cecilia Hyunjung Mo in "What's a Special Education Aide Worth? A $9,607 Raise, to the Average Teacher" in *Education Next*, Winter 2025 (Vol. 25, #1, pp. 54-60)

"I do want to be clear. I think the safest job in all of this is that of the teacher… I'm not just saying it because people want to hear it, but it's that human element of it all, being in the room helping guide students, keeping them on task, and you need to be physically there to really,

truly keep them on task, to forge those human connections."

Sal Khan, interviewed by Jeffrey Young in "Should Chatbots Tutor?" in *EdSurge,* June 4, 2024

---

1. Six Steps to Recovering from Workaholism

In this *Harvard Business Review* article, Malissa Clark (University of Georgia) looks back with guilt and regret at the way she prioritized PhD work over her newborn daughter. "A workaholic is not someone who simply works a lot of hours," says Clark. "In fact, there's only a weak correlation between number of hours worked and problematic 'overwork' or workaholism. Instead, the term refers to a deleterious inability to disconnect from your job. When work dominates your thoughts and your activities, to the detriment of other aspects of your life, relationships, and health, you are displaying workaholic tendencies."

The good news, Clark has found in extensive interviewing and research, is that it's possible "to loosen your workaholic tendencies and thrive both on the job and in the rest of your life, without having to choose between the two… I've also found that even small improvements tend to have an outsize and lasting impact." Here are her suggestions:

• *Redefine 'urgent'*. Workaholics tend to see everything in their job as high priority and engage in adrenalin-fueled, stressed-out multitasking. One strategy is to look back at your to-do list from a month ago and reflect on which items were truly urgent – for example, did you need to take a call from a colleague while carrying a melting birthday cake back to your car on a hot day? There's also emergency room doctors' prioritizing code:

- Green – Minor
- Yellow – Serious but not as urgent as Red
- Red – Immediately life-threatening
- Black – The patient cannot be saved.

"Applying this lens to the to-do list," says Clark, "– again, with discipline and honesty – forces you to make decisions about what is truly important rather than treating everything as urgent."

• *Reinvent the to-do list*. For the workaholic, task lists are bottomless and become an "invitation to overwork," says Clark. "We become almost addicted to anticipating – and then getting – the satisfaction of checking things off," with the accompanying dopamine hit. The best strategy is to sort the linear, everything-is-important to-do list into the four categories of the Eisenhower Matrix (popularized by Stephen Covey):

- Urgent and important
- Important but not urgent

- Urgent and not important
- Not important and not urgent

"If you can force yourself to map with some self-reflection and honesty," says Clark, "– and overcome those feelings that all work is all-important – you can start to let go of some tasks… You are the one overestimating the urgency, perhaps because you're afraid that if you treat it as less urgent, others will judge you. Or maybe you're after the adrenaline of having a pressing task to take on." In the greater scheme of things, some urgent-and-important activities should involve life outside of work.

• *Learn to say 'no' and delegate*. Workaholics tend to be bad at delegating because they like to be busy and don't trust others to do things as well. "Overcoming this predisposition takes practice," says Clark. She likes Adam Grant's catechism for what to take on as a professor:

- Who to help? Family first, students second, colleagues third, everyone else fourth;
- When to help? At designated times that don't interfere with his goals;
- How to help? In areas where he has a unique contribution to make.

"Ultimately," says Clark, "this exercise is a reminder that your time is yours."

• *Fix the workaholic clock.* Workaholics tend to underestimate how long tasks will take, leading them to take on too much and drive their subordinates crazy. Clark recommends "resetting the clock" by predicting how long you think a task will take, noting how long it actually takes (usually longer), and learning how to plan work – and delegate – more realistically, and within the normal work day. You may be fearful of letting people down and may be pleasantly surprised at how positively they react when you explain that you're dialing back and taking better care of yourself (and not e-mailing them after hours).

• *Control rumination*. "At the core of workaholism," says Clark, "is something that's a positive: a passion for something. It's the inability to throttle that passion, to turn it off, that is the issue. Passion becomes an all-consuming obsession – to the point that the workaholic actively seeks out ways to fuel it… Rumination is one of the hardest workaholic tendencies to combat because it's one of the most internal. It happens in a place – your mind – where no one sees it." She recommends coming up with a mantra to repeat at times when work is preventing you from enjoying family time or a fun activity – for example, *Who said I should be working every minute? This work can wait. I need downtime to recover.*

• *Embrace rest and recovery*. "Our bodies are not physically able to remain in constant fight-or-flight mode," says Clark. "Research definitively shows that when we rest and engage in recovery activities, we have better well-being, particularly when we have a lot on our plates." She suggests four research-backed strategies:

- Psychological detachment – Deliberately engaging with a non-work-related book, movie, activity, or person;
- Physical activity – Studies show that sports and exercise are especially beneficial for workaholics.
- Relaxation – Yoga, meditation, breathing exercises, and music calm the fevered mind.

- Mastery experiences – Non-work activities that challenge us to learn and grow are ideal counters to workaholism – playing the guitar, woodworking, learning another language, baking, gardening.

It's also helpful to schedule some of these activities during the work day – for example, forcing yourself to exercise or meditate during the lunch break. And for confirmed workaholics, "forcing" is the operative word. Engrained habits are difficult to break, but it can be done, a little at a time.

"It's OK to do something that you find pleasurable for the pure goal of finding joy," Clark concludes. "Remember, this stuff takes work. But that work, I promise, pays off and can get you to a healthier and happier place."

"A Workaholic's Guide to Reclaiming Your Life" by Malissa Clark in *Harvard Business Review*, September 10, 2024; Clark can be reached at clarkm@uga.edu.

Back to page one

2. A High-School Student Schools His Father

In this *Kappan* article, teacher/instructional coach/writer Steven Goldman says that for four years, he commuted to his school in Cambridge, Massachusetts with his teenage son Theo, who attended the school. Since the drive took 60-90 minutes, they had plenty of time to talk (and listen to his son's music selections). Goldman says Theo's observations about the school have been the best professional development of his career. A few examples:

• Teachers slow to return students' work – Theo says teachers shouldn't ask students to take on new tasks until they've given feedback on the previous assignment.

• Student bravado – Theo told his history teacher that he'd blown off studying for a test when in fact he had put in the time. The alternative to lying, he told his father, was "to admit that I'm [expletive] stupid."

• Lesson plan "menus" with fun "dessert" options – "All this means," said Theo, is that I will never get to do anything interesting because I work slowly."

• The "dyslexia tax" – Theo has a mild learning disability and some executive function challenges, and says he is often unfairly marked down on tests. "School is a minefield for kids who do not fit our stereotypes of the 'good student,'" says Goldman.

• Seen as lazy – "I can't begin to count the number of times that teachers have assumed that he wasn't trying or didn't really care based on small mistakes that are a real challenge for him to avoid," says Goldman. "Believing that you know a student well enough to judge them for inadequate 'effort' is arrogance. Unfortunately, it is something I know I did often as a teacher. Theo helped me see that."

• Unhelpful teacher judgments – One wrote "Good grief" in the margin for a spelling error, another took points off for an assignment left at home. "Feedback should be about how someone can improve," says Goldman, "not about making them feel like they aren't measuring up."

• Student support – Four years ago when he moved from middle school to high school,

Theo commented on a difference he noticed in the educators: "The real difference is that some teachers are on your side and some really aren't."

"I don't know of a better definition of what makes someone a good teacher," says Goldman. "If someone is on your side, both of you are working toward the same goal. Being on a student's side is not simply giving help or being sensitive to who they are. It is less about whether they measure up to your standards and more about conveying your belief in their capability of achieving their own. It is a mindset that allows the vulnerability necessary for learning to happen."

Theo went off to college this year and Goldman is making the commute alone. "I feel pretty certain that he will never choose education as a career," he says, "which is fine. But he's been a teacher, nonetheless. We all learn so much from our children. I feel lucky that one of the things I learned from mine was how to be a better teacher."

"The Person Who Taught Me the Most About Teaching Just Graduated from High School" by Steven Goldman in *Kappan*, December 2024/January 2025 (Vol. 106, #4, p. 48); Goldman can be reached at arthurstevengoldman@gmail.com.

Back to page one

3. Centering Hope in the Social Studies Curriculum

In this article in *Social Education*, Li-Ching Ho (University of Wisconsin/Madison) and Keith Barton (Indiana University) worry that the world's problems – political division, mistrust of leaders, racism, poverty, hunger, disease, war, refugees, climate change – may lead K-12 students to be pessimistic, even despairing, about the future. "To counter this," say Ho and Barton, social studies educators "must provide students a sense of hope – a belief that a better world is possible, and that human action makes a difference."

Implicit in history, geography, and civics classes, they believe, is a focus on hope: "Embedded within the curriculum is an assumption that by providing young people with the necessary skills, knowledge, and dispositions, they will be positioned to help their communities address societal issues and imagine a different and better future." But Ho and Barton wonder if this emphasis has been explicit enough: "Even when dealing with potentially hopeful content – such as successful social movements – we may fail to highlight its relevance for today." They believe social studies should embed hopeful content about possibilities, goals, and pathways at a pragmatic and visionary level.

• *Pragmatic hope* – This curriculum strand would embody the belief that a better future can be attained through strategies that are currently available, with a focus on making a positive difference in people's lives today. Students might study:

- Possibilities – Successful social movements such as women's suffrage, civil rights, farmworkers, industrial safety, LGBTQ rights;
- Goals – Ways to target specific areas of progress in a reasonable timeframe – for example, reducing childhood hunger;
- Pathways – Understanding strategies that bring about social change – for example, a coalition that made helped restore the Louisiana coastline.

• *Visionary hope* – "At the core of visionary hope," say Ho and Barton, "is a belief that the world can be very different than it is." Looking far beyond present-day realities, students might engage in big-picture thinking about an ideal future, moving beyond conditions that are taken as givens today:

- Possibilities – Students might study how the Harlem Renaissance affected art and culture in the U.S.
- Goals – Students might consider grand ideals that people have held throughout history – for example, less-exploitative economic arrangements, more-equitable gender relations, greater harmony between people and nature.
- Pathways – "*Utopian* has gotten a bad reputation as synonymous with 'impossible,'" say the authors. "Visionary hope must engage students in thinking about how to achieve a different society. Helping students think through how to get from *here* to *there* is a corrective to feelings of inevitability." Women's suffrage is a good example.

"Without a deeper and more-complete understanding of visionary goals," say Ho and Barton, "students may fail to see what it would mean to apply them. And without exploring the rationales behind such goals, students may abandon their beliefs in the face of public opinion or self-interest."

The authors add three cautionary notes. First, they say, "Centering hope does not mean simplifying or romanticizing social change, whether past or present. Social movements are complicated, and their intricacies cannot be ignored in a misguided attempt to make them more inspirational." The U.S. civil rights movement wasn't linear or straightforward, nor has it been completely successful. A hope-oriented curriculum needs to delve into such complexities lest we leave students with "false hope."

Second, teachers need to make good decisions on the case studies they use to teach about hope – and in the current political climate, some choices will be controversial. "Teaching for hope does not make potential controversies go away," say Ho and Barton; "dedicated teachers still have to be ready to defend their choices."

Finally, the authors believe hope must be central to the curriculum, not an occasional add-on. "Occasional hopeful examples will have limited impact on students' imagination," they say. "Centering hope requires consistently and systematically studying hopeful prospects for addressing many different social issues, at a variety of scales and in different settings."

"Despair is central to the thoughts and feelings of many people these days, whether young people or adults," conclude Ho and Barton. "Schools must counter this sense of despair – not romantically, not simplistically, but forcefully. This means focusing our efforts to provide a foundation for both pragmatic and visionary hope: realistic and successful struggles to improve the world, and the idealistic visions that guide and motivate effective action."

"Centering Hope in Social Studies Education" by Li-Ching Ho and Keith Barton in *Social Education*, November/December 2024 (Vol. 88, #6, pp. 334-340); the authors can be reached at liching.ho@wisc.edu and kcbarton@iu.edu.

Back to page one

4. Using Student Interviews to Probe Kids' Mathematics Thinking

In this article in *Mathematics Teacher*, Nicora Placa (Hunter College) remembers, as a new teacher, looking over a student's shoulder and spotting this problem: 1/3 + 1/4 = 2/7
Here was the ensuing conversation:

- Teacher: I see you added the numerators and denominators. Are those the same size pieces?
- Student: Yes?
- Teacher: Are you sure those pieces are the same size?
- Student: Um. No?
- Teacher: Good! So, what do we do if they aren't the same size?
- Student: Um…
- Teacher: I'll give you a hint. We worked on it yesterday. We need to find…
- Student: The same size?
- Teacher: Yes. We need to find common…
- Student: Ummmmmm… denominators?
- Teacher: Yes. Very good! We need to find common denominators. Why don't you review the notes from yesterday on how to find the common denominator and then redo this?

"I did this with the best of intentions," says Placa, "thinking I was helping the student. I truly believed that with some prompting or a hint, they would remember what to do. I did not understand that I was dragging them through a solution path that made sense to me instead of trying to understand how they were thinking about the task… I was not hearing all the interesting ways students thought about the problem, and I misunderstood their ideas."

A little later in her career, Placa learned the value of *student interviews* and began to approach conversations with students in a different way – even when their answers were correct. "When conducting these interviews, I began listening to students with the goal of *making sense of what they were doing*," she says. "It was eye-opening. I was able to learn about the different strategies that students brought to the problem and, in turn, change my responses in the classroom… I became fascinated by all the ways students thought about problems and started to build on these conceptions to design instruction."

Using this approach, here's how Placa would handle the conversation with a student who had written this incorrect solution: 1/3 + 1/4 = 2/7

- Teacher: Can you tell me how you got your answer?
- Student: Is it wrong?
- Teacher: I don't know. Why don't you explain it to me, and we will try to figure it out together?
- Student: Well, here you have one of three things, and here you are adding one out of four things, so basically you now have two of seven things.
- Teacher: Interesting. Can you try using these manipulatives or a drawing to show me another way to solve it?

"With this change in questioning," says Placa, "I could see how this solution made sense to

students if they thought of a fraction as two distinct whole numbers and not as a quantity itself. Listening to students' thinking made me rethink the 'out of' fractions language I was using when introducing fractions and whether I was sufficiently allowing students to explore a variety of models. I revisited activities that explored the concept of fractions as a quantity before I tried to address the addition of fractions."

When she became a math coach, Placa became an advocate of student interviews, and *Let's ask a kid!* became her mantra. She encourages teachers to anticipate different ways students might solve challenging problems, interview individual students outside of regular class time, and choose effective questions to probe kids about their solutions. She counsels teachers to avoid responses like:

- That's right!
- You know that if you just…
- Remember what we did in class last week…
- And --- is just another way to say ---.
- Do you mean…?

Instead, she helps teachers use interview questions like these:

• General probing questions:

- What did you notice?
- Why did you write (or draw) that?
- You wrote ---. Why? How did that help you?
- I noticed that you stopped what you were doing just now (or erased or crossed something out). What were you thinking?
- I don't know what you mean by that. Can you explain?

• Questions about alternative solution paths:

- Can you solve it in a different way? Tell me about it.
- Can you use a picture (or tool) to represent your thinking? Show me.
- Another student said the solution was ---. Do you agree or disagree? Why?

• Questions about explaining and justifying solutions:

- How do you know?
- How did you figure that out?
- How sure are you of your answer? Why?
- Can you justify your work with these manipulatives?
- Is there another way to justify your work? What is it?

"When teachers carefully listen to and make sense of students' thinking," says Placa, "they can design instruction that is tailored to students' current understanding. Through student interviews, coaches can help teachers to develop these skills in one-on-one situations and then transfer them to their work in the classroom." Some good questions for teacher team meetings:

- What did you notice about the student's thinking?
- In what ways do the student's explanations make sense?
- What different conceptions do you notice the student has?
- What types of questions help uncover the student's thinking?

- What questions are less helpful?
- What instructional moves might be helpful if we notice these ideas in our classrooms?
- What implications does this have as we plan instruction going forward?

"Let's Ask a Kid! Conducting Student Interviews" by Nicora Placa in *Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12*, December 2024 (Vol. 117, #12, pp. 900-906); Placa can be reached at np798@hunter.cuny.edu.

Back to page one

5. Parsing the Awful TIMSS Math Results

In this article in *The Hechinger Report*, Jill Barshay shares her analysis of the troubling performance of U.S. fourth and eighth graders on the 2023 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study assessments. "Is this time to panic?" she asks. Based on interviews with testing experts, here are her takeaways (click the article link below for detailed graphs):

• Growing inequality – The highest-performing U.S. students held more or less steady from 2019. Students at the 50th percentile fell 18 points, students in the 25th percentile fell 29 points, and those in the 10th percentile fell 37 points. "There's a dwindling middle," said Peggy Carr of the National Center for Educational Statistics. Most students below the top level were not proficient in basic grade-level expectations.

• Big drops for even the highest-scoring eighth graders – These students were in fifth grade when the pandemic hit, and all the extra funding and tutoring did not make up for lost classroom time by 2023.

• A returning gender gap – The boy-girl achievement gap in math had disappeared in 2015 assessments, but as scores plummeted, it came roaring back. In 2023, fourth-grade boys outscored girls by the widest margin ever and continued to outpace girls in eighth grade.

• Unusual patterns around the world – Some high-performing countries had drops in performance but stayed on top relative to others. Students in Turkey, which had never performed at high levels, suddenly rose to the upper tier. In England, fourth graders slipped while eighth graders improved.

• The Covid effect – It's difficult, says Barshay, to tell how much of the drop in U.S. scores was caused by the pandemic and how much came from other problems with U.S. math education. Fourth-grade scores have been declining since 2011, eighth graders since 2015, and these trends might have continued even without school closures.

• Two rays of hope – First, there are 360,000 U.S. eighth graders scoring at the most advanced level. That's a lot of high-performing students, and some of them "may eventually develop the skills to cure cancer or find a cost-effective alternative to fossil fuels," says Barshay. "Some will start companies that propel the American economy."

Second, the TIMSS tests were given in the spring of 2023, and since then several states, including New York, Florida, and California, have reported a rebound in math performance. It may be that we bottomed out a year ago and better performance is on the move. "If there is a rebound," says Barshay, "we should be able to detect it on the 2024 National Assessment of

Educational Progress (NAEP) that was administered earlier this year. Those scores are expected to be released in early 2025. I'll be watching for them."

"6 Observations from a Devastating International Math Test" by Jill Barshay in *The Hechinger Report*, December 16, 2024; Barshay can be reached at barshay@hechingerreport.org.

Back to page one

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

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and other educators very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 54 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, writer, and consultant lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 60 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through more than a hundred articles each week, and selects 5-10 that have the greatest potential to improve teaching, leadership, and learning. He then writes a brief summary of each article, pulls out several striking quotes, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the Memo to subscribers every Monday evening (with occasional breaks; there are 50 issues a year). Every week there's a podcast and HTMI version as well.

Subscriptions:

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

Website:

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

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

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

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

Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

All Things PLC
American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
AMLE Magazine
ASCA School Counselor
ASCD SmartBrief
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
Ed Magazine
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
English Journal
Exceptional Children
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Educational Review
Independent School
Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Kappan (Phi Delta Kappan)
Knowledge Quest
Language Arts
Language Magazine
Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance)
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Principal
Principal Leadership
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Social Education
Social Studies and the Young Learner
Teachers College Record
Teaching Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Journal of the Learning Sciences
The Language Educator
The Learning Professional (formerly Journal of Staff Development)
The New York Times
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Time
Urban Education