Marshall Memo 1111

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

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"I can't give you a sure-fire formula for success, but I can give you a formula for failure: try to please everybody all the time."

Herbert Bayard Swope, first recipient of the Pulitzer Prize

"I often use an analogy of a group photograph to explain what I mean by affirming identity. Let's imagine we're in a room with a hundred people, and at the end of our gathering, there's a group photograph. Each person who gets a copy of that photograph is going to do one thing immediately and that is look for themselves in the picture. Where am I in this picture, and then how do I look in this picture? Any good photographer will work to be sure that everyone is visible; that's really what affirming identity is all about. Unfortunately, historically, there are groups of people whose regular experience is getting a copy of the photograph and not seeing themselves. They get moved to the edge and cut out of the frame, and if you are one of those people, you will first say, What's wrong with this photograph? But over time you might say, What's wrong with me? Why am I always being left out of this picture? Everyone wants to feel seen, heard, understood, and if we are paying attention, we can ask ourselves, in meetings, in planning sessions, who's missing from our photograph."

Beverly Daniel Tatum in "Traveling the 'Arc of Discomfort'" in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 31, 2025 (Vol. 72, #5, pp. 28-30)

"When a student has invested time to put together their presentation, they want their parents to come. You can even see that in the hallway; they're kind of dragging their parents toward the room, as if to say, 'Pay attention to me. I did this work. I want to show you what I learned.'"

Megan Hall, a teacher at Open World Learning, quoted in "These Schools Let Students Lead Parent-Teacher Conferences – with Big Results" by Elizabeth Heubeck in *Education Week*, October 24, 2025

1. What GenAI Can and Cannot Do

"My interactions with artificial intelligence feel both miraculous and profoundly empty," says John Kaag (University of Massachusetts/Lowell) in *The Boston Globe*. In the world of information, GenAI is remarkable, able to produce coherent, detailed answers to questions ranging from the causes of the Thirty Years' War to a summary of Kant's categorical imperative. Pulling from a vast database, large language models are "an unparalleled tool," says Kaag, "a superhuman research assistant capable of working at the speed of light. It is the perfect servant for a world that increasingly prizes the efficient management and retrieval of data."

But when it comes to the world of meaning – questions like *How can I live a meaningful life?* or *Why must I suffer?* – GenAI comes up short. It will churn out a well-organized synthesis of philosophical thinking, says Kaag, but for three reasons, "the answer is hollow, a ghost of an insight."

First, GenAI has no lived experience. "It has never felt the sting of loss, the warmth of love, or the quiet awe of witnessing a sunset. Its knowledge of these things is purely textual, an abstraction gleaned from our own descriptions. It can tell you about suffering, but it has never suffered."

Second, artificial intelligence has no embodiment. "Its pronouncements come from a placeless, passionless intelligence with nothing to gain and nothing to lose," says Kaag. "True wisdom is always paid for with the currency of a life; it carries the weight of choices made and consequences endured." That's the biggest barrier to thinking in a truly human way.

Third, large language models lack an authentic position. "A satisfying answer to a deep human question comes from a being with a genuine point of view, a set of values forged in the crucible of existence," says Kaag. "[GenAI's] response is an echo of a thousand different voices, signifying nothing of its own."

Artificial intelligence uses deductive and inductive reasoning but is incapable of *abductive* reasoning – proposing a novel solution to a problem, an original idea that emerges in light of surprising or anomalous data, which is what happens when a scientist comes up with a new theory. "Here the LLM's architecture reveals its fundamental constraint," says Kaag. "It is, in essence, backwards-looking, confined to the universe of text upon which it was trained. It can tell you what has been said, but it cannot perform the abductive leap to what *might be* a new and better way of explaining things." It deals in probabilities, not possibilities.

The danger, Kaag says, is believing that the machine's way of answering questions is the only way – "that their articulate, seemingly intelligent nonanswers will slowly convince us that these are the only kinds of answers available. We risk forgetting that the most important questions are not those that can be answered by synthesizing what is already known but those that must be lived. The challenge is not to build a machine that can better simulate wisdom but to preserve the distinctively human spaces – of silence, reflection, and lived experience – where meditative thought can occur, and where meaning, however elusive, can be found."

"What AI Can Never Understand" by John Kaag in *The Boston Globe*, October 19, 2025; Kaag can be reached at John_Kaag@uml.edu.

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2. U.S. Teachers' Unappreciated Patriotism

In this *Education Next* article, Brian Kisida (University of Missouri), Colyn Ritter (EdChoice), James Shuls (Show Me Institute), and Gary Ritter (Saint Louis University) say the accusation that U.S. schools are indoctrinating students with anti-American ideas is just plain wrong. They cite polls showing that most teachers believe schools should instill a sense of patriotism, teach that America is basically good, and teach about the Constitution and its core values. In fact, teachers are more patriotic and politically moderate than the general public and politicians. "While isolated incidents of teachers voicing inflammatory positions may make headlines," say the authors, "they do not reflect the views of the vast majority of teachers."

It's true, say Kisida, Ritter, Shuls, and Ritter, that public trust in the presidency, Congress, and the Supreme Court are at historic lows, as is citizens' pride in the U.S. A 2025 poll found that only 41 percent said they felt extremely or very proud of the country. "For many Americans," say the authors, "especially young people, this disenchantment and loss of pride may not stem from disdain for America and its ideals but from frustration that our nation increasingly fails to live up to those ideals… Today, due process, the rule of law, free speech and expression, and the defense of democracy at home and abroad are often treated as expendable obstacles to wielding political power."

There is a partisan divide, with fewer Republicans than Democrats feeling that way. The starkest disagreement is on reciting the Pledge of Allegiance in schools, with 84 percent of Republicans supporting it, versus 24 percent of Democrats. But there's near-unanimous agreement across party lines on the importance of teaching the U.S. Constitution and the ideals it embodies. The polls also showed a nuanced understanding of how American history should be taught – inculcating pride and a belief in the basic goodness of the nation but also telling the full story, complete with flaws, tragedies, and wrong turns.

"Should Schools Teach That America Is Good?" by Brian Kisida, Colyn Ritter, James Shuls, and Gary Ritter in *Education Next*, Summer 2025 (Vol. 25, #3, pp. 1-17); Kisida can be reached at kisidab@missouri.edu.

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3. Building Thinking Classrooms in Elementary Science

In this article in *The Reading Teacher*, Joshua LaFleur (Western University, Canada) says that teaching vocabulary in the elementary grades has two challenges: limited instructional time and spotty student engagement. In his grade 3-4 classroom, he decided to try the Building Thinking Classrooms approach he'd been using in math with a science unit (randomized groups of three students standing up at erasable whiteboards).

Preparing for a lesson on the Voyager 2 space probe, LaFleur had students brainstorm words about satellites and outer space (orbit, desolate, isolate, spin, rotate, hurtle, whip…) and then asked each group to rank-order the words on their whiteboards, with the weakest shade of meaning at the bottom to the strongest at the top.

Conversations in each group "exploded," he says. He circulated, providing hints and suggestions and an extra challenge for students who were finished. "Even students who rarely volunteered during whole-class lessons were arguing fine distinctions between *spin* and *rotate* because the task demanded consensus." Students also looked at other groups' sequence. "The public nature of the boards let strategies and language hop from one group to another," says LaFleur. "A student who overheard 'hurtle sounds faster than whip' quickly borrowed the phrasing for her own explanation." This 10-minute exercise in *semantic gradients* helped students explore shades of meaning and provided a lively segue to the rest of the lesson.

In a grade 2-3 classroom studying animals, the teacher tried a different twist. Students were asked to draw the horizontal and vertical axes of a graph on their whiteboards, then label the horizontal for animals' speed and the vertical for animals' size. Groups then discussed where to place the following animals on the graph: elephant, snail, turtle, hummingbird, cheetah, dog, rabbit. The teacher snapped photos of the whiteboards and used them for quick retrieval practice in future lessons.

LaFleur notes the ways in which the Building Thinking Classrooms structure enhances learning for groups (three is the ideal size for grade 3 and above, two for younger students):

- Randomized groups prevent students from assuming who is "smarter" and will do all the work.
- Working in small groups positions each child as both learner and teacher.
- Group interaction around content expands each student's linguistic repertoire.
- Writing and gesturing at the whiteboards externalizes thought and allows students to manipulate spatial representations of language.
- Gestural movement lightens cognitive load, freeing working memory resources for semantic elaboration.
- Compared to working at desks, research has found that whiteboard work produces a 30 percent increase in on-task persistence.
- Working with vocabulary in this format helps the words stick in students' long-term memory.

LaFleur believes this approach to vocabulary instruction has two additional benefits:

• Vocabulary as a collective endeavor – "Traditional word study often positions vocabulary as private acquisition," he says "– flashcard drilling, look-up-and-copy tasks. By contrast, this routine turns learning vocabulary into a negotiated social product."

• More-equitable participation – Students with limited English skills participate far more than in conventional classrooms. Random grouping leads students to view classmates as valued contributors regardless of prior achievement.

• Risk-taking – Working on an erasable surface where mistakes can be revised publicly and quickly, students are more adventurous with their thinking.

"In my classes," LaFleur concludes, "this routine has produced stickier word knowledge, better inferences in dense informational texts, and a shared sense that every voice moves the thinking forward. Coupling random grouping with wordplay makes rigorous vocabulary work both inclusive and doable tomorrow."

"Building Thinking Classrooms in Literacy: Collaborative Semantic Gradients for Grades 2-7 Content Reading" by Joshua LaFleur in *The Reading Teacher*, January/February 2026 (Vol. 79, #4, pp. 1-17); LaFleur can be reached at jlafleu3@uwo.ca.

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4. How to Get High-School Students Reading More Closely

In this *Cult of Pedagogy* article, Jennifer Gonzalez says that with so much text reading in schools, "sometimes, in some classes, with some students, it can get pretty boring. Pretty dry." She interviewed high-school English teachers Brian Sztabnik and Susan Barber, who have an online presence (Much Ado About Teaching) and recently published a book of strategies for getting students more engaged with texts. Here are three of their ideas:

• *Reconstructing poems* – A poem is cut up (into lines, phrases, or individual words) and students put the poem back together, annotate their version, and compare it with the original. "It's forcing students to do a close reading of the poem," says Barber. "If I would have passed out this poem and said, *I want you to do a close reading*, their eyes would be glazed over." Putting the pieces together gets them slowing down and thinking about lines, phrases, words, punctuation, and meaning.

• *Inferential timeline* – Each student is assigned a few pages from a section of the novel being read by the class and writes on an index card or sticky note the most important thing that happened on those pages, with a quote that illustrates it. "This is all about decision-making and cutting out the extraneous details and just focusing on what's really important," says Sztabnik. "Often it's either character development or increasing conflict or maybe a symbol finally emerges." Students post their cards on a timeline on a wall.

Students then stand up, choose another student's card, and add a new card under it with an explanation of why they believe that moment was significant in the grand scheme of the novel. Finally, students do a gallery walk of the whole timeline, taking notes on the inferences their classmates made.

• *Text rendering* – The class reads a passage and each student chooses the sentence or line they think is most important, then the most important phrase within that sentence, then the most important word in that phrase. Students defend their choices to the full class, then small groups work together to draw general conclusions about the passage. Barber says she came up with this idea because students were often vague about where they got an idea from a text (*It's just there*, they'd say). Text rendering gets them reading much more closely and zeroing in on specific language and meaning.

"3 Fresh Strategies That Get Students Engaged with Texts" by Jennifer Gonzalez, Brian Sztabnik, and Susan Barber in *Cult of Pedagogy*, October 26, 2025; Gonazlez can be reached at gonzjenn@cultofpedagogy.com. Sztabnik and Barber's book is *100% Engagement*.

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5. Using – and Misusing – Elementary Reading Assessments

In this article in *The Reading Teacher*, Andrea Truckenmiller, Eunsoo Cho, Samantha Bourgeois, and Ellie Friedman (Michigan State University) have five recommendations on the best use of commercial reading assessments:

• *Use assessment data for what each assessment is designed to measure*. Principals and teachers often look at assessment results with different purposes in mind: administrators for staffing and purchasing materials, teachers for diagnosing and meeting students' needs. Here are some widely used reading assessments and their intended purpose:

Identifying *who* needs supplemental instruction:

- MAP Growth (NWEA)
- iReady (Curriculum Associates)

Determining *what* learning needs to target during instruction:

- A2i (Connor)
- Lexia RAPID (Foorman et al.)
- Reading inventories

Curriculum-based assessments to see if students are making *progress* in skill development:

- aimsweb (Pearson)
- DIBELS (University of Oregon)
- easyCBM (University of Oregon, Behavioral Research & Teaching)
- FastBridge (Christ & colleagues)

Many of these assessments, say the authors, have evolved to include other functions, which can cause confusion on how they're used in schools.

An example of misuse: assessing students' ability to read nonsense words is a good way to see *who* needs additional instruction in decoding, but some teachers use the assessment results to determine *what* they teach – having students memorize nonsense words.

• *Understand the question that each assessment score is designed to answer*. Vendors provide multiple scores from a single assessment, and there's a tendency for educators and families to focus on the scores that are the easiest and most intuitive to understand. For

example, a MAP report on a fourth grader says (a) Johnny can read a grade 1 text independently, and (b) Johnny has a scaled score of 120, which means there is a 15% likelihood that he will achieve grade-level proficiency by the end of the year. The scaled score is much more informative about Johnny's progress and a better guide for what he needs.

• *Acknowledge that no test is 100 percent accurate*. Commercial assessment vendors share reliability data on three dimensions:

- Test-retest – differences when given on a different day;
- Inter-rater reliability – when given by different assessors;
- Internal consistency – with different items from the same assessment.

"When presented with a report of assessment scores," say Truckenmiller, Cho, Bourgeois, and Friedman, "we have observed that many teams spend a lot of time pointing out which scores they think are likely not accurate. Sometimes this leads to the team losing confidence in any of the scores from the assessment." The way to deal with this is being transparent upfront that no assessment is perfect and there will be anomalies, but most scores are informative and helpful.

The key is avoiding these incorrect decisions: missing students who need extra instruction (false negatives) and identifying students for extra help who don't need it (false positives). The solution is keeping a close eye on students' performance and retesting or quickly exiting a student from remedial instruction that isn't needed.

• *Use assessments with appropriate levels of reliability, validity, and fairness for the decisions you are making*. High-stakes decisions like special education eligibility require more accuracy than lower-stakes decisions like classroom grouping. For example, using the Benchmark Assessment System (BAS) for screening would be inappropriate since it takes so much instructional time. For that purpose, a computer adaptive assessment would be more appropriate. But for diagnostic and instructional purposes, the BAS is informative.

• *Make sure to use assessments that cover the important domains of reading*. Some schools use one assessment to make two decisions: which students need supplemental instruction and what supplemental instruction those students need. Assessments like MAP and CBM can't do both of these things – they give a reading level but not what students need instructionally. In this case, an additional assessment is required to see where students need help – perhaps it's decoding or language comprehension and subdomains in each.

Truckenmiller, Cho, Bourgeois, and Friedman conclude with the questions educators should ask about scores from commercial reading assessments:

- What are we going to do with the data?
- Who needs a deep understanding of the score-to-decision connection?
- Is the score reliable, valid, and fair to make that decision?
- How can educators have a voice in informing vendors, researchers, and policymakers?

"Uses and Misuses of Commercial Reading Assessment: An Applied Framework for Decision Making in Grades K Through 6" by Andrea Truckenmiller, Eunsoo Cho, Samantha Bourgeois, and Ellie Friedman in *The Reading Teacher*, March/April 2024 (Vol. 77, #5, pp. 1-29); Truckenmiller can be reached at atruck@msu.edu.

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6. The Science of Reading and Equity

In this article in *Reading Research Quarterly*, JaNiece Elzy-Palmer, Alexandra Babino, and Tee Hubbard (Texas Woman's University) report on their analysis of research surrounding the "science of reading" movement. They note quite different definitions of equity – a narrow view focused on access and opportunity and a broader view embracing historical roots of inequality and students' life aspirations beyond basic reading skills. The authors found that science of reading advocates "largely function from vastly different epistemological, theoretical, and methodological worlds than those whose scholarship centers on commitments to equity and justice."

" Segregated in their own scholarly communities," the authors continue, "these camps rarely engage in empirical research that spans their paradigmatic differences, resulting in missed opportunities to build more-holistic, responsive, and justice-oriented understandings and practices of literacy development. Bridging this divide will require more than just collaboration and dialogue; it will require a willingness to reconsider what counts as evidence, whose voices are centered, and how we can synthesize and apply each camp's affordances to minimize their limitations in how literacy and reading are defined and enacted."

Elzy-Palmer, Babino, and Hubbard close with several policy and practical implications of their findings:

- Rethink legislation that emphasizes compliance, fidelity, and standardization in favor of culturally and linguistically responsive practices and greater teacher autonomy.
- Protect local adaptations of science of reading approaches.
- Expand narrow definitions of reading success beyond basic skills and test scores to include assessments that account for the full range of students' literacy capabilities.
- Move beyond technical implementation to sustainable structures that support both foundational skills and students' literate identities.
- Resist deficit framing in favor of viewing students' heritage languages, literacies, and cultural ways of knowing.

"Dimensions of Equity in the Science of Reading Research: A Systematic Review of Actual, Artificial, and Absent Uptakes of Equity" by JaNiece Elzy-Palmer, Alexandra Babino, and Tee Hubbard in *Reading Research Quarterly*, October/December 2025 (Vol. 60, #4, pp. 1-75); Elzy-Palmer can be reached at jelzy@twu.edu.

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7. Reflecting on Key Principles of Adult Learning

This article in *The Learning Professional* lists six time-honored desiderata of adult learning and suggest reflection/discussion questions for professional development experiences in schools. Adults

• *Need to know why they are learning what they're learning and how it will benefit their work, their relationships, or other aspects of their lives.*

• Learn by building on their own past experiences and previous learning.

• Are often self-directed learners who learn best when they take responsibility for their own learning decisions.

• Focus on learning that is directly and immediately related to their work and can help them solve an immediate, urgent problem.

• Focus on task-oriented learning and problem solving, rather than information-focused learning or memorization.

• Learn best when they are intrinsically motivated, not motivated by external factors.

These principles can be used to spark discussion among educators focusing on their own PD experiences and how adult learning is handled in their settings:

- Which of these apply to K-12 student learning? Which are unique to adult learning?
- How well have your PD experiences as a participant embodied these principles?
- As a leader of PD, which of these have you found the most challenging?
- How can you foster a sense of agency and ownership in teacher PD sessions?
- How can PD tap into colleagues' existing knowledge and past experiences?
- In PD, what's the best balance of guidance/support and teacher initiative?
- What are some ways adult learning experiences can encourage problem-solving?
- How can you monitor the implementation of these principles throughout the year?

"Apply Adult Learning Principles in Your Work" by Learning Forward in *The Learning Professional*, October 2025 (Vol. 46, #5, pp. 48-50)

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8. Prevention 101

"Every school has problems lurking in classrooms," says former Seattle principal Justin Baeder (The Principal Center) in this online article. "It's our job as leaders to address those problems, but if we don't get into classrooms regularly, we will find out about them the hard way." Here's the range of possibilities:

- Best-case scenario – The problem never surfaces because it's prevented.
- Second-best – It's caught and addressed immediately.
- Third-best – The problem is caught and addressed before anyone notices.
- Fourth-best – You wait until it can't be avoided and everyone knows.
- Worst-case scenario – The problem is not addressed.

"Improving teacher practice, student behavior, and school operations is often long-term work," says Baeder. "But that work can't begin until you know about it." He recommends setting a target for a certain number of short classroom visits each week so every teacher is observed frequently and problems are prevented or nipped in the bud.

"Confronting the Brutal Facts with 15-Walkthrough Weeks" by Justin Baeder in *The Principal Center*, October 29, 2025

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9. Comparing Virtual and Brick-and-Mortar Charter High Schools

In this article in *Educational Researcher*, Joseph Ferrare (University of Washington/ Bothell), Joseph Waddington and Mark Berends (University of Notre Dame), and Ron Zimmer (University of Kentucky/Lexington) report on their study comparing students who attended virtual charter high schools in Indiana and students in brick-and-mortar charter high schools in the same state. Looking at high-school graduation, dropout rates, and college enrollment, the researchers found that attending a virtual school had "substantial negative impacts" on students in all three areas compared with the control group.

What drove these disappointing results? Ferrare, Waddington, Berends, and Zimmer believe the main causes were that students in the virtual high schools took less-rigorous courses and were in larger classes than students in brick-and-mortar charter schools.

"The Impacts of Virtual Charter High Schools on Secondary and Postsecondary Outcomes: Opening Up the Black Box" by Joseph Ferrare, Joseph Waddington, Ron Zimmer, and Mark Berends in *Educational Researcher*, November 2025 (Vol. 54, #8, pp. 449-460); Ferrare can be reached at jferrare@uw.edu.

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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 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 HTML 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