

Marshall Memo 970

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
January 23, 2023

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Quotes of the Week

“Writing is intrinsically important for all students to learn – after all, it is the primary way beyond speech that humans communicate. But more than that, research suggests that teaching students to write in an integrated fashion with reading is not only efficient, it’s effective.”

Stephen Sawchuk in [“How Does Writing Fit Into the ‘Science of Reading’?”](#) in *Education Week*, January 17, 2023

“We thought things would get better once we were back to ‘normal,’ but what we learned is that the pandemic merely shined a brighter light on the mental health challenges facing our youth.”

Nicole Weber (see item #9)

“Engagement isn’t something you can infer from smiling faces or a classroom arrangement. Engagement is what the brain attends to.”

Dave Stuart Jr. (see item #5)

“Critical thought requires knowledge. For our students to think well, we must give them something to think about.”

Daniel Buck (see item #7)

“I can be on Twitter or listen to podcasts all night, but if I’m not getting feedback from somebody I have a connection with, I can only get to a certain level... One thing I’ve learned is that no matter how experienced you are, you always can use coaching. And what I mean is having somebody watch you professionally and having some real dialogue.”

Jerod Phillips, Delaware principal, quoted in “The Collegial Coach” in *Principal*, January/February 2023 (Vol. 102, #3, pp. 42-43)

1. Health and Psychological Benefits of Controlled Breathing Exercises

In this paper from *Cell Reports Medicine*, Melis Yilmaz Balban and five colleagues say that mindfulness meditation, often practiced for 20 minutes or longer, “involves bringing attention to the breath for the purpose of increasing awareness of the present moment.” Meditation has a proven track record for reducing stress and improving mental health, immunity, and other physiological indicators.

The researchers wondered if “breathwork” – shorter sessions of controlled breathing exercises – might produce the same benefits as meditation, and perhaps do even better. Their hypothesis:

- Breathwork provides positive mood and physiological benefits during the intervention.
- Breathwork provides “a sense of direct control over one’s physiology as opposed to passively attending to the presence of one’s breath during mindfulness meditation.”
- Breathwork is more time-efficient, encouraging more-frequent practice and better adherence over time.
- Regular practice will therefore produce superior and longer-lasting benefits.

Balban and colleagues recruited 114 subjects and over a one-month period, compared different types of five-minute controlled breathing exercises with five-minute mindfulness meditation, carefully measuring the impact of each on mood, anxiety, resting heart rate, heart-rate variability, respiration rate, and sleep. (Because the pandemic, the study was conducted remotely.) Here are the three breathwork methods they studied:

- Cyclic sighing – Deep breaths each followed by relatively longer exhales;
- Box (or tactical) breathing – Equal-length inhales, breath retentions, and exhales (this has been used by members of the military for stress regulation and performance);
- Cyclic hyperventilation – Longer inhales, retention, and shorter exhales.

What were the results? “Both mindfulness meditation and breathwork groups showed significant reductions in state anxiety and negative affect and increases in positive affect,” say the authors. On physiological measures, there were no significant differences in heart rate, resting heart rate, nighttime sleep, or daytime sleepiness. However, the breathwork groups did better than the meditators on reduced respiratory rates, with the cyclic sighers producing the most positive effects.

In addition, the breathwork groups were better at keeping up daily practice than the meditators, and those using cyclic sighing were the most adherent of all, showing a significantly higher rate of positive affect. The sighers also had the most improvement in

positive affect at the end of the one-month study, with meditators bringing up the rear. “The physiological and psychological effects of cyclic sighing appear to last over time,” say Balban and colleagues.

These results, they conclude, confirm their hypothesis, most importantly that “intentional control of breath” in controlled breathing exercises is more effective than “passive attention to one’s breath” in mindfulness meditation.

What is the mechanism? They speculate that regular practice of breathwork affects heart-lung-gut functioning and other physiological factors, as well as psychological self-regulation. “Slowing down the breathing rhythm with sighs,” they say, “can signal higher-order brain structures associated with behavioral arousal and promote a sense of calm... Voluntary breathing exercises can also enhance the general sense of control over one’s internal state, contributing to the increase in positive affect observed.”

The authors conclude with a call for more research in this intriguing area.

[“Brief Structured Respiration Practices Enhance Mood and Reduce Physiological Arousal”](#) by Melis Yilmaz Balban, Eric Neri, Manuela Kogon, Jamie Zeitzer, David Spiegel, and Andrew Huberman in *Cell Reports Medicine*, January 17, 2023; Spiegel can be reached at dspiegel@stanford.edu.

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2. The Best Ways to Support an Upset Person

In this *New York Times* article, Melinda Wenner Moyer asks what might be the best way to console someone who’s distraught: “Let them vent? Offer a chocolate bar? Give them space so they can have a good cry?” Actually, says Moyer, there’s a growing body of research pointing to a different approach: starting a conversation. Some specific suggestions:

- *Validate emotions.* Telling someone not to feel so bad, “calm down,” “relax,” or “try to focus on the glass half-full instead of half-empty” often makes things worse. That’s because these statements imply that the person’s feelings are inappropriate or overblown, which seems to make their emotions more intense. Researchers have found that, as a starting point, statements like, “I can imagine that was difficult” or “That sounds really hard” are much more helpful.

- *Offer to help strategize.* If the person is open, you might enlist them in resolving their negative emotions, getting control of a situation, figuring out how to clear a tricky hurdle, or engaging in problem-solving. But not everyone wants this kind of help. The clue, says Moyer, is often discernible in the way they express their angst. If they say, “I feel like they don’t care about me,” they’re probably looking for validation. If they say they want a solution, it’s time to strategize together. If they’ve helped you problem-solve in the past, they’re more likely to want your practical suggestions.

- *Ease into problem-solving.* Again, start with emotional support, perhaps saying you’d have the same reaction if you were in this situation. Then get into unpacking the problem and discussing possible solutions. One technique is *temporal distancing* – helping the person see that while things are bad now, they’re likely to get better at some future time, and here’s how.

For reasons that researchers don't fully understand, temporal distancing seems to work better than the "glass half full" or "see the problem from the other person's perspective" approach.

- *Alternatively, state the brutal facts.* "Perhaps a friend is in denial about an abusive relationship," says Moyer, "and you want to help them recognize the gravity of the situation." That's probably a time to challenge their perspective – because you care about them and want a better outcome.

- *At least try.* "What matters most," says Moyer, "is not that you say the right thing, but that you are present and trying to help." Fear of not having the perfect solution can make us hesitant to help a person who's in distress. Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good, she advises. She quotes Stanford social psychologist Jamil Zaki: "We can make a difference to other people with relatively little effort. Sometimes just being there is all that you need to do."

["The Best Ways to Soothe Someone Who's Upset"](#) by Melinda Wenner Moyer in *The New York Times*, January 3, 2023

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3. Choosing an Inclusive Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Program

In this article in *Principal*, Lindsay Kubatzky (National Center for Learning Disabilities) says that social-emotional learning can be especially beneficial for students with disabilities. That's because SEL's focus on relationships and social interactions "helps students develop a sense of safety and belonging."

But a recent meta-analysis by the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence found that most SEL programs fail to take into account the needs of students with disabilities, as well as those of other historically marginalized groups. To help schools use ESSER and other funding to choose and implement an SEL program that is equitable and inclusive, Kubatzky and his colleagues suggest using the following selection criteria:

- *Agency* – The SEL program develops students' awareness of barriers to achievement – including those in their own minds – and empowers students to advocate for themselves and make choices that help them grow and succeed.

- *Differentiation*– The program provides Tier 1 instruction for all students on key SEL factors, and recognizes students' unique assets and needs – including age, skills, executive function, race, EL status, disability, previous trauma – providing experiences that build on strengths and address areas of need.

- *Family and community connections* – The program extends beyond the classroom to after-school providers, community partners, case managers, and the home, including activities that all families can use with their children.

- *Data-driven* – The SEL program regularly measures school climate and conducts student surveys, measuring students' developing skills several times each school year. Data are collected in a way that doesn't increase students' anxiety, informs the SEL approach, and helps to build a positive and inclusive climate.

- *Personalized* – The program's instructional and support components are individualized to account for students' identity and needs. Kubatzky's organization has

developed a comprehensive list of the aspects of students' identity, often overlapping: age, appearance, relationships, geography, talents, socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, gender identity, language, religion/spirituality, and ability/disability.

- *Support for educators* – The program fosters a positive work environment and includes professional development with choices that take into account adults' social and emotional needs, building staff capacity to deliver high-quality instruction for all students.

- *Well-being* – The program checks on students' holistic needs – including nutrition, exercise, sleep, safety, adverse childhood experiences, and belonging – and ensures they are being met.

[“Inclusive SEL Helps Students Thrive”](#) by Lindsay Kubatzky in *Principal*, January/February 2023 (Vol. 102, #3, pp. 28-32)

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4. A Strategy to Improve Note-Taking Skills in High School

In this *Edutopia* article, Pennsylvania teacher Benjamin Barbour says that for years, his social studies students were not very diligent about taking notes. Why didn't they understand the value of taking thorough, well-organized notes to study for tests – and developing this important skill for college and the workplace? But most students resisted, unwilling to make the effort to improve; perhaps they were confident they didn't need detailed notes to remember what he taught and what they read.

Then Barbour had an idea: having students take a test *twice* – the first time without their notes, the second time with their notes – and having each student's final grade on the test be the *average* of the two grades. This strategy has been successful at improving both note-taking and academic performance, he says, because:

- Knowing that their final test grade will be an average of the grades on both tests, students have an incentive to do well on the first test to maximize the composite grade.
- They realize that to do well on the first test, it's helpful to have good notes to study the night before.
- Knowing that they'll be able to use their notes on the second test, students have an additional incentive to keep high-quality notes.
- All this has made students more attentive to Barbour's lectures on how to take good notes, the exemplars he shows them, and his feedback on their notes (which are sometimes graded).
- Taking a test twice provides an extra review of the content, which is especially helpful for struggling students.

Barbour introduced another element: he requires that notes be written by hand in old-fashioned notebooks. He was influenced by research pointing to better retention with handwritten notes.

Barbour doesn't use the two-test approach with all tests – only for several each semester that involve challenging historical content – but students know what's coming and the incentives kick in. He crafts his tests with a combination of multiple-choice and short-answer

questions; with the latter, he gives students the option of keeping what they wrote on the first test or doing a rewrite on the second test using their notes.

Barbour recommends using a learning management system like Schoology for this approach; it makes it easier to give parallel assessments, multiple-choice items can be quickly graded (he grades open-response answers), and the LMS can automatically average the two test grades.

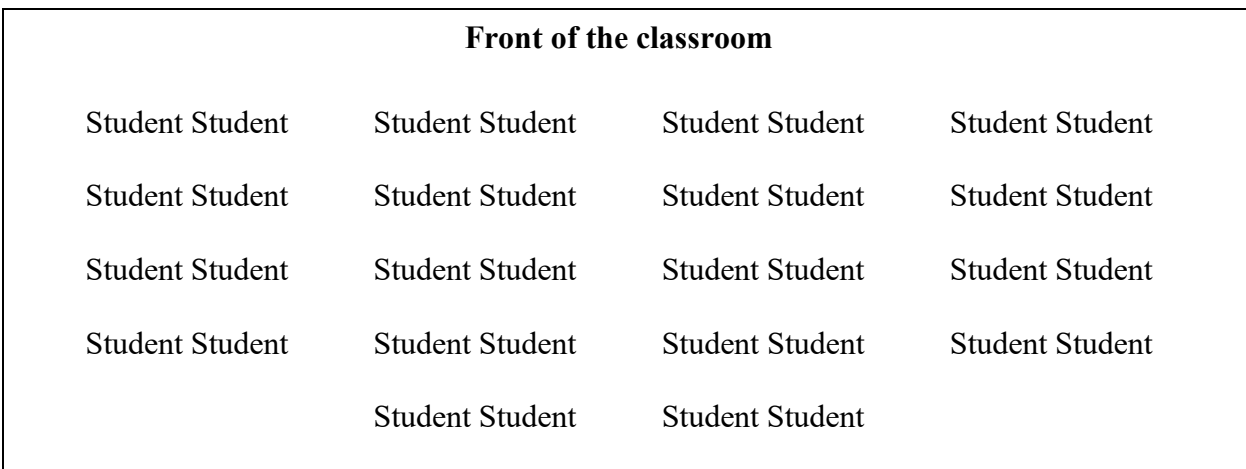
[“A Testing Strategy That Promotes Good Note-Taking”](#) by Benjamin Barbour in *Edutopia*, December 8, 2022; Barbour can be reached at barbourb@fairviewschools.org.

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5. A Classroom Desk Arrangement That Maximizes Learning

“Engagement isn’t something you can infer from smiling faces or a classroom arrangement,” says teacher/author Dave Stuart Jr. in this online article. “Engagement is what the brain attends to.” But is there a desk arrangement that gets students more engaged? Stuart used to have his high-school students sitting in groups of four facing inward, but he found there was a major disadvantage: it took a lot of cognitive effort for kids to avoid being distracted by the faces and bodies across from them and focus on the listening, reading, writing, or speaking they were supposed to be doing.

Stuart finally decided that the most “learning-conducive” arrangement was having desks in in the following configuration, with pairs of students in rows facing forward:



Stuart used to think that classrooms with desks in the traditional grid were militaristic, too teacher-centered, treated kids as widgets, and couldn’t possibly support good communication among students. But he’s found the opposite is true of his double-student rows: the setup has produced a “highly engaging, warmly communal, deeply humanizing” classroom culture. He believes it’s because:

- Students have less to tune out when they’re working independently.
- They don’t have to crane their necks when he’s teaching at the front of the room or showing something on the screen.

- They can interact with the student they're paired with during a think-pair-share, conversation challenge, or pop-up debate.

“So, should your students sit in rows?” Stuart asks. “My answer is that it depends on what kind of work they're most often going to be doing. But in my room, yes: students should.”

[“Should Students Sit in Rows?”](#) by Dave Stuart Jr. on his website, January 19, 2023; Stuart can be reached at dave@davestuartjr.com.

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6. The Benefits of Reading Your Writing Out Loud

In this *New York Times* article, Sarah Bahr reports that a number of *Times* journalists read their drafts out loud as part of the writing process and say it always makes their writing stronger. “I like that it forces me to slow down for a minute,” says reporter Julia Jacobs, who usually reads her articles to her dog, Harley. The process helps her focus amidst the distractions of her work and untangle an overwritten sentence (if she starts to run out of breath reading one, she knows it's too long).

Reporter Dan Barry reads his *About New York* column aloud to his wife just before the 6:00 p.m. deadline (she's often in the car waiting to pick up their daughter from ballet class). Hearing his words read aloud, says Barry, allows him to immediately notice an overworked alliteration, missing words, and gaps in logic – and also attend to the overall rhythm of the article. “When you're reading aloud to someone else and know the material,” he says, “you will hear falseness...”

Alissa Rubin started reading her writing aloud in college and continued as a fiction writer, using it to see if her characters' dialogue sounded realistic. Now, as the *Times* bureau chief in Baghdad, it helps her delete superfluous adverbs in her articles – *very* and *really* – break up unwieldy paragraphs, and see where a sentence is confusing. Reading aloud, she says, “heightens your acuity as an editor.”

Jacobs, Barry, and Rubin do their readalouds when they are almost finished with a piece, to do final polishing and catch errors they missed as they wrote. “It allows me to get out of my head and imagine how the reader takes in information,” says Jacobs. “A lot of times I get so caught up in the minutiae of a story that I forget how it sounds to a person who doesn't know anything about what I'm talking about.”

[“How the Spoken Word Shapes the Written Word”](#) by Sarah Bahr in *The New York Times*, December 11, 2022

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7. In Praise of Memorization

In this *Education Gadfly* article, Daniel Buck says that every year, his students memorize a wonderful poem – perhaps Robert Frost's *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* or Langston Hughes's *A Dream Deferred*. Buck avoids using the word *memorize* because of its rote connotations; instead, he asks students to *learn it by heart*. He is convinced of the

educational value of this process, as well as the lasting emotional impact: poems learned by heart “become something we hold dear in our hearts and minds,” he says, “growing almost into a mental keepsake.” He’s delighted when students return years later and proudly recite a passage to him.

Through history, says Buck, creative people – William Shakespeare, Augustine, Charlie Parker – have used memorization as part of their work. In jazz, players transcribe famous solos and learn them by heart. Writers develop their palette by internalizing the rhythm, imagery, and cadences of those who came before them. “Creative imitation” is at the heart of many great works, says Buck. “In memorizing literature, our students implicitly adopt the best that is in authors and can begin to employ these skills, patterns of thought, lines of argumentation, and knowledge in their own thinking and academic work.”

Children learn nursery rhymes by heart before they fully understand them, but love their rhythm, symmetry, and sing-song quality. “These words, locked in their memory for recall,” says Buck, “allow them later to compare and analyze when they have gained the capacity to fully understand them. If ‘critical thought’ is a process of making connections, as Rousseau contends, then students need nodes to connect, and memorized verse forms powerful nodes that can supercharge thinking later when connected.”

Is memorization indoctrination, telling students *what* to think, not *how* to think? Not at all, says Buck: “Critical thought requires knowledge. For our students to think well, we must give them something to think about. Like a painter and their paints, our students need intellectual supplies to think with.” New vocabulary, vivid imagery, provocative arguments, pithy lines, complex syntax, powerful phrases – all these are absorbed when students learn well-chosen texts by heart.

“Memorization does not stifle freedom,” Buck concludes, “but, through difficulty now, allows students to make better use of that freedom later on. It enlarges, strengthens, and frees the self.”

[“For the Love of Memorization”](#) by Daniel Buck in *Education Gadfly*, December 15, 2022

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8. How Do Earlier School Start Times Affect Elementary Students?

In this AERA paper, Kevin Bastian and Sarah Fuller (University of North Carolina/Chapel Hill) report on their study of earlier school start times for elementary students in North Carolina. The researchers looked at the impact of start times on student absences, suspensions, and standardized test scores, using statewide data and the experience of one district that flipped its elementary and secondary start times, with elementary students starting earlier.

Key findings: earlier start times for elementary schools resulted in students getting less sleep and slightly increased the absence rate. There was a “near zero” negative effect on student achievement –and significantly higher math test scores, especially for economically

disadvantaged students, students of color, and those in rural communities (those students also had modest increases in reading scores).

This implies, conclude Bastian and Fuller, that there is no downside to having elementary students start school earlier, with secondary schools taking the later time slot and reaping the proven benefits of getting in synch with adolescent sleep rhythms. “Many states and school districts are seeking low-cost, evidence-based approaches to improve student achievement and engagement with school,” they say. This may be one of them.

[“Early Birds in Elementary School? School Start Times and Outcomes for Younger Students”](#) by Kevin Bastian and Sarah Fuller, American Educational Research Association (AERA), October 12, 2022; the authors can be reached at kbastian@email.unc.edu and sarah.fuller@unc.edu.

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9. Picture Books to Support Suicide Prevention in the Elementary Grades

In this article in *ASCA School Counselor*, Georgia counselor Nicole Weber says the challenges of Covid-19 opened her eyes to the need for suicide prevention at the elementary level. “We thought things would get better once we were back to ‘normal,’” says Weber, “but what we learned is that the pandemic merely shined a brighter light on the mental health challenges facing our youth.” Elementary students are struggling with suicidal ideation as never before.

Weber was part of a group of school counselors in Cobb County, Georgia that developed suicide prevention lessons, in the process “becoming comfortable with the uncomfortable.” They chose a number of picture books to recommend to schools, including:

K-2:

- *Little Mole Finds Hope* by Glenys Nellist
- *A Little Spot of Sadness* by Diane Alber
- *Sometimes When I’m Sad* by Deborah Serani
- *When Sadness Is At Your Door* by Eva Eland

Grades 3-5:

- *You’re Here for a Reason* by Nancy Tillman
- *A Flicker of Hope* by Julia Cook
- *You Matter* by Christian Robinson

“It’s Okay to Say ‘The S Word’” by Nicole Weber in *ASCA School Counselor*, January/February 2023 (Vol. 60, #3, pp. 16-17); Weber can be reached at nweber@marietta-city.k12.ga.us.

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10. Short Items:

a. A Teacher’s Guide to Using ChatGPT – This [collection of applications](#) has suggestions for using the new writing bot for communicating high expectations, explicit

teaching, effective feedback, using data to inform practice, assessment, classroom management, and collaboration.

“A Teacher’s Prompt Guide to ChatGPT” from CESE NSW “What Works Best in Practice,” January 2023

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b. A Gloomy Take on the New Bot – [This article](#) by author Sean Thomas in *The Spectator* is one of the most pessimistic on the impact of the recently released artificial intelligence bot that can generate plausible essays, poems, quizzes, and lesson plans on pretty much any topic.

“AI Is the End of Writing” by Sean Thomas in *The Spectator*, January 10, 2023

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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 48 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
ASCD SmartBrief
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
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
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