Marshall Memo 41

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
June 7, 2004

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"[M]eetings should never end without an agreement on what next step each participant is expected to take."

James Fallows (see #1)

"If educators can learn anything from more than two decades' worth of efforts to 'restructure' schools, it is that structural changes alone are not enough to improve schools for the students who attend them or the professionals who work in them."

Michael Copland and Elizabeth Boatright (see item 2)

"If, because of inadequate descriptions of what's to be measured by a state's NCLB tests, the tests turn out to measure one set of skills and knowledge, but the state's teachers aim their instruction at a different set of skills and knowledge, then students' test performances will surely not be indicative of how well the state's teachers have been teaching."

James Popham (see item 5)

"I am sick and tired of being called names. Can I be myself? I do not know COUNTRY. I do not know Africa anymore and I can't talk to Black kids. I can't talk to White kids. I can't talk to my teachers. They can't stand me because I have a strong accent and a difficult name. Each time the teacher calls me, my classmates laugh. I am sick and tired. My parents are worst. They do not understand me. I hate the whole thing."

A suicide note written by an immigrant teenager (see item #6)

1. Mastering Workflow

James Fallows, a political writer for the *Atlantic*, admits that he was a highly disorganized person who nonetheless got things done. A few years ago, he heard about David Allen, a consultant on time management and personal organization, and was intrigued enough to read his book, *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity* (2001), attend several seminars, and interview Allen and a number of people who had been through his program. Despite initial skepticism, Fallows found Allen's ideas very helpful, and he even dug through the archeological layers of stuff on his own desk.

Allen's aim is not to help people get more work done but to get them to feel less anxious and racked with guilt about what they can and cannot do. This comes from his belief that the difference between done and undone tasks is more stressful than we realize. When our ancestors worked (harvesting wheat, chopping wood, etc.) there was a sense of completion and work produced visible results every day. For modern people "each day is a fog of constantly accumulating open-ended obligations, with little barrier between the personal and the professional and few clear signals that you are actually 'done.' E-mail pours in. Hallway conversations end with 'I'll get back to you.' The cell phone rings. The newspaper tells you about movies you'd like to see, recipes you'd like to try, places you'd like to go. There are countless things that everyone really 'should' do more of – exercise, read, spend time with the family, have lunch with a contact, be 'better' at work. The modern condition is to be over-whelmed… to feel not just tired but chronically anxious, because so many things you have at some level committed to do never get done." (Fallows paraphrasing Allen)

This stress is made worse by a foible of the human mind: it has trouble remembering everything, but it also can't forget: (Fallows) "[A]t some deep and not very efficient level it is always stewing about the things you should have done but haven't, and it tends to remind you of them at the worst time – typically, 3:00 A.M. A vague but powerful awareness of all these uncompleted promises… is what Allen sees as the basic source of work-related stress." Many professionals today have this endless undone to-do list on their minds all the time, and it saps their energy and creativity. "The more something is on your mind," says Allen, "the less it is usually getting done." Ideally, we wouldn't be wasting time and energy worrying about all our undone stuff and could concentrate (like an athlete "in the zone") on meeting every challenge as it occurs. But (Fallows) "each heap of papers on a desk or clutter of e-mails in an in-box takes a person further away from the desired state, because every

single element represents something left unfinished." Allen notes that "People usually feel great about their jobs just before they go on vacation. It's not really about the vacation, it's about all the loose ends they're forced to tie up before they go."

Here is Fallows's summary of six key points from Allen's program:

• *Get everything out of your head by making a complete list of everything you want to, have to, or are expected to do*. Only when you are sure that all your obligations are written down and retrievable can you stop waking up at 3:00 a.m. A small-scale example of this principle is a date-book. Most people don't worry about forgetting appointments because they write them in their date-books and know that they will check their books frequently. Allen says that busy people need a "leak-proof collection system" for *all* their obligations – a way in which all the old stuff and any new thoughts, chores, and plans get *written down*. He recommends carrying a pad, Palm Pilot, or some other device and recording ideas the minute they pop into our heads – the video to rent, the call to make, etc. Fallows has started doing this himself, thinks it's helped a lot and reduced his anxiety level, and says he now gets nervous when people tell him they're going to do something and don't write it down.

• *Identify the "next action" toward a demanding goal*. This is Allen's version of the homily about a journey of a thousand miles beginning with a single step. (Fallows) "The more important a goal is (fix your marriage, get a better job), the easier it is to procrastinate, because people don't know just where to start. Allen emphasizes that almost any undertaking involves a specific and manageable *next* thing to do." Often this is as simple as making a phone call or setting up an appointment. Thinking in terms of next actions and listing them all "reduces each new challenge or commitment to a series of specific steps. As a corollary [Allen] says that meetings should never end without an agreement on what next step each participant is expected to take."

• *Set up reminders and tricks to increase the chances that all the little to-dos actually get done*. What do people do when they want to be *absolutely* sure they don't forget to bring something with them in the morning? They put it in front of the door so can't miss it on the way out. Here are two Allen tricks in the same vein:

- Have 43 "tickler" file folders set up on your desk, one set numbered 1 to 31 for each day of the month, the other twelve labeled January through December, and put to-do's in the appropriate folder (e.g., something you need to do on the 15th, something that needs to be done in December, etc.). Of course it's key to have a sure-fire system for looking in each folder on the right day and month!
- Keep lists near the places where you do things – e.g., the phone, the computer.

- Organize your shopping lists (paper or electronic) by location (e.g., drug store, hardware store, supermarket) so that when you're near one of those places, you'll have the complete list for that store at your fingertips.

Grouping tasks by context (where and when you might actually do them) rather than by their importance to you is a basic difference between Allen's system and Stephen Covey's "four quadrants" approach. Covey recommends that we match our long-range goals with our hour-by-hour activities in order to spend as much time as possible doing the most important tasks. Allen says that his system is more flexible and less likely to be swamped by e-mail, phone calls, interruptions, and new tasks.

• *Develop the habit of review*. This means continually scanning the various lists you've set up to make sure you are doing them (or planning when to do them). Allen recommends a regular "weekly review" of an hour or so to go over the list of all long-term projects and short-term next actions. "[I]f you apply the habit of looking over everything once a week, you can feel comfortable about never being more than a week behind in tending to important matters." (Fallows)

• *Apply the "two-minute rule" to over-the-transom stuff*. When you are going through mail, phone messages, e-mails, etc., do immediately the things that can be completed in less than two minutes. Allen explains: "[T]hat's more or less the point where it starts taking longer to store and track an item than to deal with it the first time it's in your hands. In other words, it's the efficiency cutoff. If the thing's not important enough to be done, throw it away. But if it is important enough that you are *ever* going to do it [and it can be done in less than two minutes], the efficiency factor should come into play, which means doing it right now. This rule is magic."

• *Get your e-mail in-box back to "empty" each day*. This doesn't mean that every single e-mail is fully dealt with by the end of the day. It means that those that could be done in under two minutes are answered and filed, that the Viagra ads are thrown away, and that important items are printed out or stored in an "Action" folder on the desktop – some place where you're sure you'll get to them at a time you've blocked out. Allen says that this approach is the key to keeping e-mail under control.

The goal of Allen's overall system is to reduce stress, and Fallows says it works (as did the people he interviewed who had been through the program). Fallows also likes Allen's recommendation to look at life from different vantage points at different points in the day and week: the "runway level" at times when we're applying the two-minute rule, the 50,000-foot level, where we're contemplating the meaning of life. The loftiest level interests Allen the most at this point in his life: "My perspective is

that until you have fully fulfilled your destiny as a human spirit on the planet, you'll probably be in some level of stress." Fallows describes himself shying away from this line of thinking in a conversation with Allen and returning to the safer realm of e-mail management. "You want to operate just at the runway level?" replied Allen. "That's fine! Let's see how things can get done with the least effort. But if you're interested in where all this came from, where we came from, then we can have another conversation." Fallows's reaction: "I'll put it on my list."

"Organize Your Life!" by James Fallows, *The Atlantic Monthly*, July / August 2004 (p. Vol. 294, #1, p. 171-176)

2. Small High Schools: Keys to Effective Leadership

In this well-written and persuasive piece, two University of Washington educators make the case for small high schools (by which they mean 200-400-students). Noting that structural changes are not enough to ensure a high-quality school (see quote above), the authors present eight lessons from research and experience for leading successful small learning communities.

- *Focus on a clear learning agenda*. This means guaranteeing a core academic curriculum to all students, sticking to a manageable number of measurable goals, and making sure that students achieve them by providing the necessary support.
- *Know and be known*. This means taking full advantage of smallness to ensure that every student is known personally and knows teachers and administrators personally. It also means making rigorous academic demands (an "academic press") in conjunction with strong social support. "Leaders in high-performing small schools know that caring for students means caring for their intellectual development."
- *Walk the talk of social justice and equity*. This means not sorting and labeling students and taking full advantage of the opportunity that a small community offers to give a real chance for success to every student. The authors note that disadvantaged students gain most from small schools because of the expectations and personal attention they can get. But they caution that smallness does not guarantee a personalized, equitable learning environment.
- *Share power to get results*. Leaders should foster a culture of shared decision-making and shared leadership, while still reserving the right to make solo decisions when necessary.
- *Lead through inquiry, not by edict*. "In successful small schools, the student body is small enough for teachers to quickly collect data on learning gaps, and faculty

members are few enough to gather around a table to establish school-wide priorities for teaching and learning. Size matters because it determines the feasibility of holding frequent, pointed discussions that focus on collective improvement in teaching and learning."

• *Approach problems as opportunities*. "Regardless of the school's size, staff members are routinely frenzied because of the workload, and students demand near-constant attention. Administrators and teachers rarely have time to prepare for the next surprise or catastrophe. At times, there simply isn't enough energy or imagination to spend trying to guess where the next blow will come from." So staff members are constantly reacting to problems. Effective small-school administrators must take advantage of smallness to get community-wide consensus about bedrock "ways we do things around here" and constantly discuss norms and values with students and staff.

• *Nurture, build, and support professional community*. This means having staff constantly reflect on their work using formats like critical-friends groups and peer coaching and working on continuous improvement.

• *Foster deeper, more robust connections with families and community*. This means touching every parent and every family and involving them in ways that take full advantage of smallness.

The article concludes with a call to apply these principles to high schools of any size. "Teachers and administrators who inhabit traditional large comprehensive high schools can no longer excuse failure on the part of significant numbers of students within their schools. They might do well to pay attention to the leadership lessons that can be learned from close examination of their small-school counterparts."

"Leading Small: Eight Lessons for Leaders in Transforming Large Comprehensive High Schools" by Michael Copland and Elizabeth Boatright in *Phi Delta Kappan*, June 2004 (Vol. 85, #10, p. 762-770), no e-link available.

3. How is Leading a Small School Like Running a Bodega?

In another *Kappan* piece, Larry Myatt (a Boston administrator and former small-school principal) makes some additional points about small schools:

• He hopes that we've learned from recent experience not to simply do a "Honey, I shrunk the school" act: "[T]hese new models," he says, cannot and should not simply be miniature comprehensive high schools. Smallness, in and of itself, is not a recipe for excellence."

• Myatt things small schools should not sacrifice extracurricular activities, which he considers as the "social glue" that holds large high schools together. Small schools can and should have sports, clubs, and cultural activities on campus.

• He likens running a small school to being a bodega owner, who "shows up early to unlock the grate, spritzes the fruit, puts up the sale signs, meets the delivery drivers, chases the cats away from the dumpster, and relates intimately and knowledgeably with anyone and everyone concerned with his or her business in the neighborhood."

• Myatt believes it's crucial to have instructional coaches working closely with teachers in their classrooms and team meetings.

• He believes that school district budget folks should think in terms of cost per *graduate* rather than cost per student. "Small high schools cost a bit more up front, but there is no shortage of data and experience showing that funding a completed education is much more cost-effective than dealing with the poverty, unwanted pregnancies, crime, and unemployment that too often accompany life on the margins… Small, responsive schools are, quite simply, more likely to keep students until they finish the coursework required for a diploma and to help them leave high school with authentic skills and realistic plans for the future."

"Fulfilling the Promise of Small High Schools" by Larry Myatt in *Phi Delta Kappan*, June 2004 (Vol. 85, #10, p. 770-772), no e-link available.

4. Making Good Use of Technology for Teacher and Principal Training

In this lead *Kappan* article, Richard Murnane and Frank Levy (of Harvard and M.I.T.) examine IBM's use of a combination of on-line tutoring and face-to-face training to bring a new generation of managers up to speed, and ask whether a similar approach would work in schools.

In the first phase of the IBM system, newbie managers log on to an interactive computer network while still at their job sites and complete a series of two-hour tutorials on basic IBM policies and management practices (starting with "keep out of jail" topics like business conduct and sexual harassment). Each module has short summaries of best-practice strategies and tips for dealing with things like running a meeting, conducting an evaluation, or coaching an employee. Some of the modules have text-based simulations of common situations in the workplace. The new managers have hyperlink access to full IBM policy documents and are given quizzes and monitored on their progress, getting reminder e-mails or calls if they fall behind

schedule. They also have a chance to collaborate on line with colleagues going through the same program.

The reward for completing Phase 1 is an invitation to a one-week training session at the IBM learning center in Armonk, New York. New managers are divided into groups of 25 and go through a series of intense discussions, simulations, and role-plays facilitated by experienced IBM managers. Part of the agenda for this week is to "discuss the undiscussable." Toward the end of the week, each manager must write an individual development plan and an organizational action plan.

In the third phase, each new manager (back on the job) goes through more online learning modules, and 90 days after the retreat, has a formal meeting with his or her supervisor and members of their team to monitor the goals set at Armonk.

Murnane and Levy felt that IBM had learned four lessons its hybrid model:

• *Know the audience and the curriculum*. The learning being conveyed to novices reflected the values and best practices of IBM and was appropriate to new employees.

• *Get the right mix of teaching skills*. Instructors were usually veteran IBM executives chosen for their grasp of the curriculum they were teaching.

• *Get the technology right*. Organizers knew the types of computers and modems (versus high-speed access) that IBM managers all over the world were using so there were no problems connecting with to the on-line curriculum.

• *Create the right incentives*. This included the "tickler" e-mails and calls to keep stressed-out new managers on track in Phase I, as well as close monitoring of performance in Phase 3.

Thinking about applying these principles to schools, Murnane and Levy considered the lack of time, the lack of capacity, and the information deluge in many districts. They took the four IBM principles and made these transfer suggestions:

• Rather than having principals and school staffs sit through beginning-of-the-year meetings tediously going over district policies, why not do this online, with key information posted on a website and educators required to answer questions and collaborate with colleagues online. This would free up face-to-face meeting time for real interaction and improve the quality of those personal encounters.

• The format of professional development could be changed. For example, on their first day back from the summer, principals (having read policies, watched a 30-minute video of a math lesson online, and written a simulated evaluation of the teacher over the summer) could meet in small groups to discuss the video and their evaluations. Principals could then role-play the feedback conversation with the

teacher and devise an improvement plan.

• As at IBM, it would be important to work out computer incompatibilities [and phobias] and make sure that everyone had access to online material.

• Because it is difficult to get the full staff to after-school meetings and retreats because of family and other obligations, it is critical to set aside time during the school day for the crucial face-to-face interactions that are essential to improving instruction.

"A Role for Technology in Professional Development" by Frank Levy and Richard Murnane in *Phi Delta Kappan*, June 2004 (Vol. 85, #10, p. 728-734), no e-link available.

5. What James Popham Means by "Instructionally Sensitive" Tests

Last week's Marshall Memo summarized an *Education Week* article by James Popham in which he criticized state tests that do not accurately measure teachers' instructional activities and students' learning gains (see #2). I exchanged several e-mails with Popham, and he sent me a paper spelling out three attributes that he considers essential for a test to be instructionally sensitive:

• *Teachers have a clear description of assessment targets*. State tests are supposed to be aligned to state learning standards, but these are sometimes vague and ambiguous. Teachers need clear, specific benchmarks and performance indicators of what state standards are being tested. To find out if this is true in your state, Popham recommends sitting six teachers down, presenting them with a selection of relevant state standards and assessment benchmarks, and having them separately write down in their own words their understanding of the documents. If all six teachers have essentially the same understanding and the implications of the standards for their classroom teaching, then the state's communication of standards is seamless. If the teachers have different understandings of the benchmarks, there's a problem.

• *There is a manageable number of assessment targets*. "Too many targets can overwhelm," writes Popham. "That's true with hunters. That's true with teachers." He is highly critical of any NCLB test that contains 30 or 40 curriculum targets, because this number of goals cannot be measured thoroughly in any test and teachers will have far too many to teach well and will be reduced to guessing which goals will be assessed. Popham recommends a much smaller number of curriculum targets (six or seven per subject) and suggests another way to see if there are too many: ask teachers if they can tell you (without looking at a curriculum guide) what the main state assessment targets are. If they can't list them, it's a pretty good sign that there are too many.

• *Teachers get detailed reports of test results*. State tests need to give teachers and principals item-by-item reports of how each student and classroom did on the tests so they can tell how effective instruction was in every part of the curriculum. Without this, schools can't improve their teaching and students' performance won't improve.

• *State curriculum goals are appropriately ambitious*. If state tests are measuring what Popham calls "low-aspiration" curriculum aims, they will not be helpful. Even if a test has the first three attributes, if the curriculum being assessed is anemic, the tests are worthless.

"Are Your State's NCLB Tests Instructionally Insensitive? Here's How to Tell!" by James Popham (paper prepared for the National School Boards Association, February 2003)

6. Meeting the Needs of ESL Students

This *Kappan* article by two Midwestern university educators describes the struggles of immigrant students in many American schools (including the suicide note quoted above) and then makes specific recommendations on how teachers can help:

• *Reduce the cognitive load*. Teachers should choose assignments and activities that allow students to draw on their prior knowledge and life experiences and not make classroom success depend on having grown up in America.

• *Choose teaching strategies and approaches carefully*. For example, some foreign-born students consider it boastful and conceited to volunteer answers in class and think it's rude to speak without being asked a direct question by the teacher. In addition, many immigrant students take a while to get used to classrooms with student-centered activities. Teachers should vary their instructional style and make sure that ELS students have written as well as oral avenues for class participation.

• *Reduce the cultural load*. Teachers should learn to pronounce students' names correctly, find out where they are from, and learn a little about their countries. They should also treat immigrant students' language and culture with respect and build a personal relationship with students and their families.

• *Reduce the language load*. Teachers should minimize the use of arcane words, speak in straightforward sentences (without dumbing down the level of instruction or insulting students' intelligence), and provide context clues and resource materials that help ELL students learn the challenging vocabulary.

• *Value the use of native language*. While recognizing that mastery of English is a top-priority goal for immigrant students, teachers should say nothing that discourages

immigrants from speaking and reading in their native language at home and in appropriate contexts in school. Being proficient in two languages is a plus!

• *Involve families*. There are five ways teachers can do this: (a) encourage parents to tell their children indigenous stories in the native language at home; (b) be sensitive to and talk to parents about how difficult, sometimes traumatic, it is to enter a new school in a new country; (c) be on the lookout for negative forces in the lives of immigrant children (gang activity, for example); (d) encourage students to get involved in community cultural events and keep the language and culture of the home country alive; and (e) welcome parents as a resource in the classroom and school, including describing their native culture, helping as interpreters, and serving as mentors.

"Understanding and Meeting the Needs of ESL Students" by Paul Chamness Miller and Hidehiro Endo Davison in *Phi Delta Kappan*, June 2004 (Vol. 85, #10, p. 786-791), no e-link available.

7. The Roots of the Achievement Gap

In this lengthy *Kappan* article, a team of five researchers explores the origins of the racial and economic achievement gap in American schools. They note the major differences in vocabulary and other preparation with which students enter school and make the case for trying to intervene at the preschool level to prevent the gaps from emerging in the first place. Citing research that found that early childhood programs are often "diffuse and uncoordinated," they strongly advocate providing a seamless transition for disadvantaged students. This would involve "a clear concept of readiness and a determination to align early childhood programs with the goals of K-12 education." They note the challenges posed by administratively separate preschool programs and the fuzziness that exists in some preschools around the importance of ELL students learning English. Learning to speak English, they say, is vital.

Looking at the regular K-12 program, they present a series of graphs that show the extraordinary persistence of the achievement gap through the grades. Efforts must be made to improve the efficiency of the existing school day, they say, but as long as the school day and school year are the same for all students, the gap will not be closed. Students who are behind need high-quality instruction *and* extra time.

"When Do Children Fall Behind? What Can Be Done? by Mark Davison, Young Seok Seo, Ernest Davenport, Jr., Donna Butterbaugh, and Leslie Davison in *Phi Delta Kappan*, June 2004 (Vol. 85, #10, p. 752-761), no e-link available.

8. Short Items:

a. Web-based portfolios – This article by a Michigan vice principal tells of her school's shift from paper-based student portfolios to electronic versions. What precipitated this change was the sheer tonnage of portfolios and what she saw as a deterioration in quality, to the point that many students were throwing away their finished portfolios rather than taking them home and the school was consigning old ones to the recycle bin.

Over five 90-minute class periods, this school leads students through the process of constructing portfolios following specific guidelines:

- A cover page that introduces the student, explains the portfolio, and shows creativity;
- A table of contents;
- A specific number of hyperlinked pages that represent the student's best work; these pages have illustrations, borders, special fonts, and other qualities that highlight the student's talent and effort).
- The portfolio is user-friendly, allowing the reader to proceed in sequence or jump to areas of interest.

The author has found that students take great pride in their portfolios. There were three distinct advantages to electronic portfolios, she feels: (a) they are a lively, creative format for students to show off their best work; (b) they make students aware of a larger audience (portfolios can be published on the intranet and used for college applications or job interviews); and (c) electronic portfolios can evolve and grow over a student's entire high-school career.

"From Worn –Out to Web-Based: Better Student Portfolios" by Celeste Diehm Davison in *Phi Delta Kappan*, June 2004 (Vol. 85, #10, p. 792-794), no e-link available.

b. Help choosing a good adolescent literacy program – The Alliance for Educational Excellence just released a set of criteria for choosing a secondary-school literacy program. The guide contains a set of probing questions on how a possible program deals with student motivation, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, phonics, writing, and assessment.

"How to Know a Good Adolescent Literacy Program When You See One: Quality Criteria to Consider" available at: http://www.all4ed.org/press/pr_060204.htm (spotted in *PEN Weekly NewsBlast*, June 4, 2004)

Do you have feedback? Is anything missing?

If you have comments or suggestions, if you saw an article or web item in the last week that you think should have been summarized, or if you would like to suggest additional publications that should be covered by the Marshall Memo, please e-mail: kim.marshall8@verizon.net

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo aims to keep busy principals, teachers, and other educators very well-informed on important research, ideas, and developments in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, a former Boston teacher and administrator, is your "designated reader," searching through a wide range of publications the week they come out, zeroing in on the articles that are most relevant and useful to improving teaching and learning at the school level, and summarizing them in a brief e-mail. Target topics include the following:

• *School leadership* – Building a professional learning community; effective teamwork; effective schools practices; supervision and evaluation of teachers; time management.

• *Effective teaching* – Key variables associated with high student achievement; professional development of teachers; teacher leadership and career ladders; multiple intelligences and brain research.

• *Curriculum* – Alignment and planning with the end in mind; teaching for understanding; new ideas in reading, writing, and math.

• *Assessment* – Aligned formative and summative assessments; using data and student work for continuous improvement; graphic display of student achievement data; standardized testing and the debate on standards.

• *Closing the gap* – Effective strategies to close the racial/economic achievement gap; the innate-ability/intelligence/effective effort debate; safety-net programs.

• *Positive school culture* – Student discipline; social-emotional learning; moral development; parent involvement; and community partnerships.

• *And…* – New areas of research; upcoming television and radio programs on education.

Publications covered:

(those read this week are underlined)

American Education Research Journal
American Educator
American School Board Journal
ASCD SmartBrief
Atlantic Monthly
Bay State Banner
Boston Globe
Commonwealth Magazine
Curriculum/Education Update (ASCD)
Ed. Magazine (Harvard School of Education)
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Elementary School Journal
Harpers
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Education Review
Journal of Staff Development
Middle School Journal
NAASP Bulletin
New York Times
New Yorker
Newsweek
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
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Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Review of Educational Research
Teachers College Record
Teacher Magazine

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