

Marshall Memo 1071

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
January 20, 2025

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Quotes of the Week

“When preparing a lesson plan, determining what a student should be able to do is far more effective than determining what that student should know. It then turns out that the knowing part comes along for the ride.”

Anders Ericsson and Robert Pool in *Peak: Secrets from the New Science of Expertise*, p. 251 (Mariner Books, 2016)

“No matter what the sport, it’s the coach’s job to help players fix their mistakes. But how best to correct them, so that instead of feeling wounded or demoralized, the kid feels motivated to improve?”

Linda Flanagan (see item #2)

“If you have to wait until kids can decode everything before they can read a simple story, you’re going to have to wait years, which is silly.”

Timothy Shanahan, quoted in [“Does Teaching ‘Sight Words’ Contradict the Science of Reading?”](#) by Sarah Schwartz in *Education Week*, January 10, 2025

“Self-defeating behaviors persist in low-feedback environments.”

Dan Rockwell (see item #8)

“Simply put, the educational system must adapt – not because AI is flawless or even desirable in every instance, but because it’s here, students are using it, we can’t reliably detect it, and we owe it to them to prepare for a future where AI systems are ubiquitous and its use is expected in the workplace.”

Mike Kentz in “The AI Era Demands Curriculum Redesign: Stories from the Frontlines of Change” in *AI EduPathways*, January 5, 2025

“I’d actually like to focus on all the things we agree on.”

During an argument, a commonly used device to find common ground

1. The Profile of an Effective School from a Different Era

In the epilogue of his book on the persistent failure of efforts to improve urban schools, Charles Payne (Rutgers University) describes a segregated elementary school in West Cape May, New Jersey, where 130 years ago William Moore began a 53-year teaching and administrative career. Payne's father attended this school and vividly recalled the high expectations and skill of the staff, the frequent visits to museums and cultural institutions in Philadelphia, the annual trip to Washington D.C., and the remarkable achievement of its students, many of whom knew algebra and Latin before moving on to the local integrated high school, won academic awards, and seemed to have the highest college attendance and success of any students in the county.

“At first glance,” says Payne, “the issues of contemporary urban education seem far removed from the world of William Moore and his children. I’m not sure that’s really true, though. The search for prescriptions can be dangerous if we let it, but I don’t know that all our work has given us a better model for educating children from the social margins than William Moore seems to have had in 1895:

- Give them teaching that is determined, energetic, and engaging.
- Hold them to high standards.
- Expose them to as much as you can, most especially the arts.
- Root the school in the community and take advantage of the culture the children bring with them.
- Pay attention to their social and ethical development.
- Recognize the reality of race, poverty, and other social barriers, but make children understand that barriers don’t have to limit their lives;
- Help them see themselves as contributing citizens of both a racial community and a larger one.
- Above all, no matter where in the social structure children are coming from, act as if their possibilities are boundless.

I don’t know that all our research and work and experimentation have given us any more clarity than that.”

So Much Reform, So Little Change by Charles Payne, pp. 211-12 (Harvard Education Press, 2022); Payne can be reached at cp840@newark.rutgers.edu.

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2. The Challenges of Coaching and Teaching Teens

“No matter what the sport, it’s the coach’s job to help players fix their mistakes,” says writer/researcher Linda Flanagan in this *Mind/Shift* article. “But how best to correct them, so that instead of feeling wounded or demoralized, the kid feels motivated to improve?” This is especially tricky with teens, who frequently need correction but are highly sensitive to adult judgment and the power imbalance between them and adults – including teens’ relative powerlessness in schools. One coach said, “I’m constantly trying to get young players to take feedback without feeling threatened. It’s fundamentally about the balance between challenge and safety.”

Coaches, teachers, and parents tend to take one of two very different approaches: blunt criticism and correction, or downplaying the problem and trying to boost confidence. A better strategy, says David Yeager, author of *10 to 25: The Science of Motivating Young People*, is to adopt what he calls the mentor’s mindset, cognizant of what’s different about the teenage brain. What adolescents need, he believes, is corrections with encouragement, high standards accompanied by positive expectations, sincere care, and clarity on how to get better.

Yeager, who has coached multiple sports, stresses the importance of focusing on the process rather than outcomes. Coaches who celebrate wins and criticize mistakes convey the idea that results are what matters most, not player growth. Better to focus on what teens can control – form, mechanics, attitude, effort, progress in the weight room – and trust that the results will take care of themselves. Adults also need to show genuine interest in what is going on in kids’ lives, which may be getting into their heads and interfering with performance.

On the playing field and in classrooms, a perennial challenge is getting teens to slog through boring drills and ho-hum activities that are necessary building blocks of good performance, as well as meta-behaviors like supporting peers and teammates. When adults are explicit about these connections, kids are better able to persevere through the unglamorous side of academics and sports.

[“How Knowing Teen Brains a Little Better Can Help Coaches Be Effective Mentors”](#) by Linda Flanagan in *Mind/Shift*, January 8, 2025

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3. AI Bots for College and Career Advice – with Human Connections

In this article in *The74*, Julia Freeland Fisher (Clayton Christensen Institute) says the latest GenAI bots are increasingly human. That, says an August 2024 report from OpenAI, creates “both a compelling product experience and the potential for overreliance and dependence.” Fisher is worried that if kids substitute AI tools for human connections, there are “long-term risks to students’ well-being, their ability to maintain human relationships, and their access to networks that open doors to opportunities.”

Fisher co-authored a recent report on the role of bots in college and career advising. Since high schools average one guidance counselor for 385 students, AI tools can help – but with adult supervision. Based on interviews at more than 30 technology companies, Fisher

says, “Open AI’s warnings about anthropomorphization – attributing human characteristics to non-human things – ring true. For example, most college and career bots have names and are designed to mimic cheerful, upbeat personalities. Many go beyond informational support to offer students emotional and motivational assistance when counselors can’t.”

Will students be so beguiled by these bots that they don’t reach out to their school counselors? We don’t yet have hard data, says Fisher, but there are indications that some students are bonding with and relying on the bots and avoiding human interaction. That’s why she believes IT coordinators, superintendents, principals, and other educators need to look closely at AI tools, purchasing and steering students to those that provide helpful guidance while also promoting in-person connections and expanding students’ human networks.

Fortunately, says Fisher, a number of entrepreneurs are taking steps to build AI tools that foster relationships. Some examples:

- Promoting frequent social interaction offline – [Axio AI](#), which spun out of Arizona State University’s student-led Luminosity Lab, supports students’ personal growth; if students say they are struggling or bored, it suggests reaching out to specific friends or family members. Axio also works to limit students’ time on the app.

- Involving families and friends – [Uprooted Academy](#) is a nonprofit that operates a virtual community center where students can interact with AI-powered coaches that help with college applications. It asks students to identify up to five supportive individuals in their lives when they enroll and automatically updates them with text messages every two weeks with recommendations on how to support students’ college progress.

- Promoting conversations, including hard ones – [CollegeVine](#) Sage is an AI counselor/tutor bot that coaches high-school students through the application process. It keeps track of how students describe their interactions with advisors and teachers, and when it comes time to ask for recommendation letters, it coaches students on whom to ask and how to address any challenges they might face interacting with them.

- Matching students and mentors – [Backrs](#) is a platform that recruits online volunteer mentors to coach high-school students on projects linked to their academic and extracurricular interests. There’s also an AI success coach to help students find the right mentors on the platform and craft messages to them.

- Practicing networking through online role-playing – [Coach by Career Village](#) is a chatbot designed to help students practice for interviews and draft networking and job-hunting e-mails, social media messages, and letters asking for references.

[“Students Need Human Relationships to Thrive. Why Bots May Stand in the Way”](#) by Julia Freeland Fisher in *The74*, January 14, 2025

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4. Students Writing in English Journals Every Day – Is It Manageable?

In this *Teach Writing Tomorrow* article, Adam follows up on an earlier [article](#) in which he described students writing in notebooks for five minutes at the beginning of his class every

day. He believes this lowers mental barriers to writing and increases fluency. Here he recounts what his middle-school students write about day by day and how he grades their journal entries. Evaluating about 144 notebook entries a year for each student (there are days students don't write) sounds daunting, but Adam has a system.

First, what do students write about? He uses two main prompts, retrieving details from the previous day's literature reading and anticipating what might come next. Retrieval might be of big-picture ideas or details that are worth remembering for the day's reading. Anticipation involves previewing major themes that might be relevant to today's reading, including making connections to students' lives. Here are questions he used, one for each of the four days students took to read the novel *Flowers for Algernon*:

- If you could be the best at anything, what would it be and why?
- Why did Charlie get the surgery? What will happen to him?
- What are your reactions to *Algernon* so far? What resonates with you?
- What is something you're no longer good at?

This particular set of prompts alternates between retrieval and anticipation about the book the class is reading, but students don't write about the current work of literature every day.

"Variety prevents boredom," says Adam.

"Alternating between these two topics builds its own ebbs and flows," says Adam.

Sometimes students do creative writing about holidays, goofy ideas, sports, video games, any school-appropriate topic. He also cycles through some standard topics, such as what students' grades are in a particular subject and what they need to do about it, what they're grateful for, something they learned academically that week, or a reflection about the semester so far.

The rule is that students write for the entire journal time. Adam gives the prompt and has other suggestions: "If you have trouble starting, *say* you have trouble starting. If you hate open topics, *say* you hate open topics. If you run out of ideas, narrate and describe what's around you. Go stream of consciousness. Remember the goal is writing the entire time. If you close your journal after two minutes and look around, you're not. You end when the timer ends." Doodles and drawings don't count.

So how does Adam assess and grade all that writing? He doesn't correct every spelling and grammar error. If that strategy worked, he says, "red pens would've made better writers by now." When he conferences with students, he discusses errors and makes students responsible for addressing them going forward. "This selective pickiness brings balance to grading," he says. "Journals offset other assignments. In practice this works because once students lose the fear of writing, they recognize that mistakes happen."

For grading, Adam centers meaning over mechanics, quantity over quality. For middle-school students, his daily quota is a short paragraph or 4-5 sentences. For high school, he suggests two paragraphs or 8-10 sentences. His grading system is more about eyeballing than anything very precise or scientific. It works out roughly as follows:

- 4-5 points – Four or five sentences, excellent detail, fully correct information.
- 2-3 points – Two or three sentences, more detail needed, partially correct information.
- 1 point – One sentence, minimal detail, little or no effort, incorrect information.

- 0 points – No response or off-topic response.

By the second week of school, he starts grading and making deductions for students who aren't following the protocol. The level of precision, says Adam, depends on the context; some parents demand rigid rules and there's little leeway. For students with IEPs or who are learning English, there's flexibility.

He grades the journals in weekly conferences during class time. He discovered early on that infrequent grading, having students submit a portfolio of chosen pieces, and digital journals didn't work. Students need frequent feedback on hard-copy writing. He also learned that trying to grade in his classroom after school or taking the journals home was "disastrous" – way too time-consuming. Having conferences in class takes time, but he believes it's better for students and for him.

Here's the routine: the class works on other assignments or reads while students come up (perhaps one row at a time) and Adam grades the week's entries standing up so he can watch the class. He selectively circles misspellings and other errors, discusses them, and moves on to the overall 5-4-3-2-1-0 grade for the journal.

"As the year follows its natural course," says Adam, "daily writing creates a synergy first unseen and then strongly felt. As if by clockwork, the following dialogue happens as the calendar turns to May:

- Student, re-reading early journal entries: *Woah! I can't believe what I wrote in August.*
- Teacher: *Would you make those same mistakes now?*
- Student: *Of course not!*
- Teacher: *So you've learned something?*
- Student: *Of course!*

Adam's classes have been doing daily journal writing for a decade, and the improvement in their writing – and spelling – never ceases to amaze him. He's not satisfied with his explicit teaching of spelling, but this indirect approach – circling, discussing, gradual improvement – is remarkably effective. And the gains in students' fluency, confidence, and writing quality are what make the whole process worthwhile.

["What to Write Every Day \(and How to Grade It\)"](#) by Adam in the *Teach Writing Tomorrow*, January 12, 2025

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5. How to Scaffold When Students Read Texts Above Their Level

In this online article, Timothy Shanahan (University of Illinois/Chicago) addresses the perennial question of whether below-level students should be reading grade-level texts or material "just right" for their current level. His advice:

- Students who have not yet learned to decode need 30 minutes of phonics and 30 minutes of fluency instruction a day with practice in easier books and lots of word repetition and high decodability. "The complex text prescription is not for them," says Shanahan.

- Elementary students who are reasonably proficient at decoding should be reading on-grade-level texts with extra support. "Doing that not only means that they'll be taught what

your state requires,” says Shanahan, “but you’ll be exposing them to content or ideas more appropriate to their maturity, intellectual functioning, and interests.”

- That said, below-level students should also be reading some easier material. “You should do what athletic trainers do,” he says, “varying the degree of difficulty of the training.” This builds confidence and fluency and helps students see the progress they’re making as they tackle more-difficult texts with support.

- Let students in on the “secret” of what you’re doing. “Make sure they know that instead of teaching them out of easy below-level books (‘baby stuff’), they’ll be taking on grade-level texts,” says Shanahan. “The point isn’t to scare them; instead, make sure they recognize the respect inherent in your approach, and assure them that you’ll do everything you can to help them succeed.”

- For students who are two or more grade levels behind, have them read new passages once or twice with a peer, parent volunteer, tape recorder, or echo reading with the teacher before grappling with comprehension. Studies have shown that this kind of “pre-reading” fluency work can raise students’ reading level with that text by at least one grade level.

- Pre-teach words students aren’t familiar with, but if new words are explained or defined in the text, have students figure them out from the context.

- Chunk texts that are above students’ grade level, asking questions at the end of each paragraph or section, and gradually stretch the length, building stamina and comprehension.

- With sentences that are more challenging (passive voice, multiple clauses, lengthy), question students about the content and if they seem confused, guide them in close reading so they can unlock the meaning.

- Help students with synonyms, pronouns, and other elements that cause confusion – for example, who is this *he* referring to?

[“Eight Ways to Help Kids Read Complex Text”](#) by Timothy Shanahan in *Shanahan on Literacy*, January 18, 2025; Shanahan can be reached at shanahan@uic.edu.

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6. Having Students Rate and Review Worked Math Problems

“In today’s mathematics classroom,” say Maria Nielsen Stewart and four colleagues in this *Mathematics Teacher* article, “it is crucial to elicit students’ thinking and spark conversations.” Adding *explain* or *justify* at the end of a math problem is one way to get students to say more, but over time, this prompt can get repetitive and lose its punch. The authors suggest a different approach that they have found deepens students’ understanding and provides valuable formative information to teachers: asking kids to *rate and review* flawed math solutions. Here’s how it works:

Students are asked to think about online reviews for restaurants, products, and services and imagine themselves in a “customer” role as they assess a mathematics solution. The teacher then presents a hand-written step-by-step solution to a problem that contains an error or inefficiency of some kind. Students scrutinize the solution, give it a zero-to-five-star rating,

and write a “review” justifying their rating. Students then compare their reviews in groups and discuss as a class asking, “What could this student have done to earn more stars?”

This strategy, say Stewart and colleagues, lends itself to many different standards and grade levels. Teachers take a concept students are working on – for example, angle relationships in 7th grade geometry – think of common errors and misconceptions, and create a worked solution to a problem containing that error. Alternatively, students can be presented with two correct solutions to a problem, one of which is more efficient, and asked to compare them. The authors found that *rate and review* was engaging for students, putting them in the role of reviewer, and gave teachers helpful information on students’ level of understanding and pinpointed gaps in their knowledge of concepts and procedures.

Stewart et al. end with some tips for teachers using this strategy. “Having too many errors or trying too hard to hide the errors in preparing your worked example can confuse students and make it too difficult for students to see any errors,” they say. They also advise against creating problems that are too open, “such as putting a strategy in the worked example that is not clear enough for the students to make sense of. When students read the worked example, they should be able to identify the strategy and not have to fill in any gaps.” Some students tend to give either a zero or 5 rating based on the belief that being wrong or right was all they needed to know about a solution. These students need help looking at solution details.

Finally, the authors suggest not using math solutions done by students in the class. Even if names are removed, students may be able to recognize their work and feel embarrassed if classmates give their work a low rating. It’s best for teachers to create their own worked examples or find them elsewhere.

[“Rate and Review”](#) by Maria Nielsen Stewart, Noah Brown, Amber Candela, Samuel Otten, and Zandra de Araujo in *Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12*, January 2025 (Vol. 118, #1, pp. 45-57); Stewart can be reached at mntkd@umsystem.edu.

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7. Multiple Variations on Think-Pair-Share

In this *Edutopia* article, Todd Finley (East Carolina University) says think-pair-share is a time-honored way to get more students engaged, especially those who are hesitant to speak in whole-class discussions and English learners. The teacher poses an intriguing open-ended question, students silently jot ideas for 2-3 minutes, then talk with a partner, then share their ideas with the class.

“Even the most engaging learning strategies can become boring for students if they’re overused,” says Finley. He suggests these variations with an example of each:

- Silent sharing – A history teacher asks pairs – without speaking – to annotate each other’s written description of the causes of the Boston Tea Party.
- Collaborative writing – In an elementary math class, each pair shares its step-by-step strategy for solving a story problem.

- Rotating pairs – Students partner with a student they haven't worked with before and then share predictions of what the novel's protagonist will do next,.
- Pairs working with other pairs – During an ELA class, dyads compare interpretations of character motivations and then form groups of six to identify and refine the most compelling motivations to share with the class.
- T-chart sharing – Pairs discuss the pros and cons of social media use and combine their ideas with another duo on a T-chart.
- Four different partners – Middle-school science students think about reducing marine debris in the Pacific Ocean, then pair up with three additional partners to hear a wide range of ideas.
- Mingle-pair-share – To break up a day of exam preparation, the teacher poses a question and plays music, students mingle around the room discussing it, and when the music stops, they share with the classmate nearest them.
- Visualizing ideas – In a geometry class, student pairs draw and label the parts of a triangle on poster paper, then share with the class.
- Digitize ideas – In a middle-school science class, pairs create an infographic comparing the structure of plant and animal cells.
- Gallery walk – In a high-school history class, student pairs create Harlem Renaissance posters, post them around the room, and the class circulates leaving comments on sticky notes.
- Think-pair-distill-present – Pairs produce a one-sentence summary of a chapter in a Toni Morrison novel and get comments from the class.
- Think-pair-teach – In a health class, pairs review the correct form for planks, then one student demonstrates to the class while the other describes how this engages the core and points out common mistakes.
- Think-pair-defend – In a history class, one student crafts a claim on why the American colonies were justified in declaring independence while the other offers counter-arguments voiced by King George III.
- Think-share-debate – In a literature class, each student is asked to develop a pro or con position on whether a protagonist's actions were justified. Pro students are paired with con students to practice arguing their positions and strengthen their defenses. Then pairs join with another team and the foursomes practice making opening statements, offering rebuttals, exchanging feedback, and making closing statements.
- Rank-pair-share – In a biology class, students individually rank-order a list in terms of environmental harm, then revise the list with a partner, then defend their rankings to the class.
- Think-pair-apply – Pairs prepare and present a better U.S. response to Covid-19 based on scientific evidence.

A common problem, says Finley, is that when students share their results with the whole class, not everyone pays attention. To maintain engagement in this phase, he suggests the ABC strategy (add, build, challenge): the class is asked to watch presentations with three questions in mind:

- Is there anything that should be **added**?

- Can you **build** on what was presented?
- Does anyone want to **challenge** the answer or provide an alternative response?

[“16 Variations to Think-Pair-Share to Keep Students Engaged”](#) by Todd Finley in *Edutopia*, December 6, 2024

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8. Ideas for Difficult Conversations

“Self-defeating behaviors persist in low-feedback environments,” says Dan Rockwell in this *Leadership Freak* article. “People never improve until they know how they’re doing.” But he believes the feedback sandwich – couching criticism between two slices of praise – is ineffective. Better to use this three-step process:

- Get right to the point, describing specifically what isn’t working and why it matters. *I want to discuss something that’s holding you back* (for example):

- *I noticed you look at your feet when you’re speaking with direct reports.*
- *Your voice grew louder when you brought up a difficult topic.*
- *You interrupted people while they were talking.*
- *You delegated tasks that aren’t getting done.*
- *You were five minutes late for our meeting.*

- Describe what success looks like – what will be true when the issue is resolved.

“Adopting new behaviors turns people toward the future,” says Rockwell – for example, *What positive behavior will replace interrupting?*

- Describe genuine strengths and qualities – for example, *I’ve seen you overcome many challenges. I’m confident you’ll succeed here as well.*

[“Fix What’s Broke About Feedback”](#) by Dan Rockwell in *Leadership Freak*, January 20, 2025; Rockwell can be reached at dan@leadershipfreak.com.

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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 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 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 Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
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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)
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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