



Pathways

A Weekly Collection of Information, Thoughts, Reflections and Accolades for the Reading Public School Community

December 7, 2014

Volume 6, Number 16

Upcoming Dates

- December 7 – (10:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.) Annual Festival of Trees at Parker Middle School
- December 8 – (6:30 p.m.) Joshua Eaton Winter Concert
- December 9 – (6:00 p.m.) Parker Grades 6 & 7 Winter Concert
- December 10 – (8:00 a.m.) Coolidge Winter Concert Rehearsal @ RMHS; (2:30 p.m.) High School District PLC Meetings; (3:00 p.m.) Middle School District PLC Meetings; (6:30 p.m.) Birch Meadow Winter Concert
- December 11 – (8:00 a.m.) Coolidge Winter Concert Rehearsal @ RMHS; (3:00 p.m.) Home Grown Writers PLC in North Andover; (3:15 p.m.) Elementary District PLC Meetings; (4:00 p.m.) RETELL Session 9 in Distance Learning Room; (6:00 p.m.) Coolidge Winter Concert @ RMHS
- December 12 – (7:00 p.m.) RMHS Improvosaurus in Endslo PAC

Why Students Avoid Academic Help

By: Max Nissen, Atlantic Monthly

Nearly everybody who went to secondary school remembers being peer-pressured into something—pranks, parties, or cutting class. It's a time when people tend to be most insecure and conscious of what others think of them. That spills over into decisions about the future: Some students make poor decisions about their education because they're worried about how their peers will perceive them.

Depending on the context, the rate at which students sign up for SAT prep can be dramatically different, according to a [new National Bureau of Economic Research working paper](#). Students indicated that they're willing to turn down a free course just because their classmates would find out, the findings suggest.

The researchers offered free access to an online SAT prep course (that normally costs \$200) to juniors at large Los Angeles high schools, making the sign-up list public within some classes, and private in others. The study was done in low-income, low-performing schools, making the decision potentially more significant, both economically and academically.

In non-honors classes, when the sign-ups were made public, participation dropped by 11 percent. The publicity had no visible effect on students in honors classes.

Social pressure is dramatically different depending on the type of class.

To net out the possibility that honors and non-honors students might have different characteristics or priorities, the authors limited part of the study to students who take two honors classes, so that the researchers would catch some of them in non-honors classes as well.

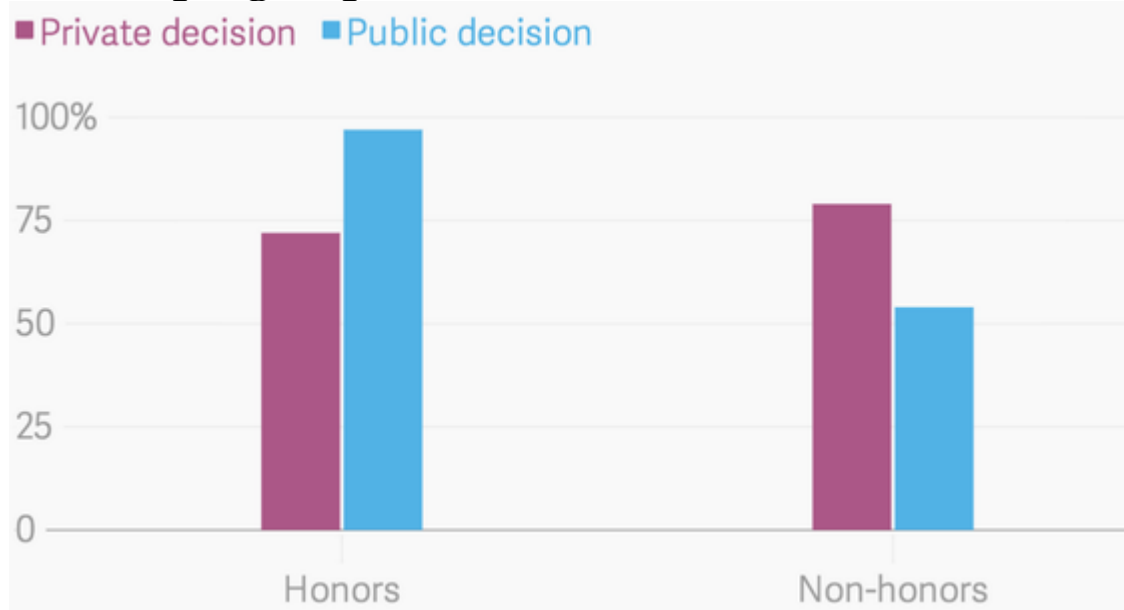
In that case, the students presented with the choice to sign up in the honors class were 25 percent more likely to do so if the decision was public. Those who were in a non-honors class were 25 percent less likely to sign up.

The overall public sign-up rate for these top students was 47 percent when they were in their honors class. The data suggests social pressure is dramatically different depending on the type of class. The graph below shows sign-up rates among

- December 13 – (8:00 a.m.) PSST Dickens Marketplace & Craft Faire @ RMHS; (6:00 p.m.) RMHS Select Chorus Caroling
- December 15 – (2:45 p.m.) Parker Musical Auditions; (3:15 p.m.) Expanding the Boundaries in the Superintendent's Conference Room; (7:00 p.m.) School Committee Meeting in Superintendent's Conference Room; Wood End Winter Concert
- December 16 – (2:30 p.m.) RMHS Select Chorus Rehearsal; (2:45 p.m.) Parker Musical Auditions; (6:30 p.m.) RISE Parent Information Offering – How to help your child love books and reading
- December 17 – (1:30 p.m.) Secondary Building PLC Meetings; (7:00 p.m.) RMHS Band Winter Concert in Endslo PAC
- December 18 – (2:45 p.m.) Parker Musical Auditions; (3:00 p.m.) Elementary Building PLC Meetings; (4:00 p.m.) RETELL Session 10 in Distance Learning Room; (7:00 p.m.) RMHS Choral Department's Winter Songfest in the Endslo PAC
- December 19 – (6:00 p.m.) RMHS Select Chorus Caroling

students in two honors courses and demonstrates that the pupils' decisions to enroll were largely contingent on the kind of class they were in at the time of the offer.

Test Prep Sign-Up Rate for Kids in Two Honors Classes



Leonardo Bursztyn & Robert Jensen/National Bureau of Economic Research

The only difference between the "public" and "private" sign-up offers was a single letter (highlighted in bold below) in the course's announcement:

"Your decision to sign up for the course will be kept completely private from everyone, **except** the other students in the room."

"Your decision to sign up for the course will be kept completely private from everyone, **including** the other students in the room."

It's about popularity: Visible effort can have negative social consequences in some cases. And the perception of popularity really matters. Students who say popularity is important are more likely to conform to the prevailing social pressure.

The authors of the test-prep paper did a **previous study** at a school that used a point system and leaderboard to gauge the achievement of low-performing students in computer-based courses. The top-three performers were publicized to the whole class. As a result, the students closest to ranking among the top three declined significantly in their academic performance.

It just goes to show how powerful social pressure is. This is just test prep, but throughout their careers students are faced with abundant opportunities to raise their hands, seek extra help, or participate publicly in classes. Over time, avoiding

those experiences can have a significant effect.

Teacher Involvement As the Key to Schoolwide Change

In this *Teachers College Record* article, Susan Moore Johnson, Stefanie Reinhorn, and Monica Ng (Harvard Graduate School of Education), Megin Charner-Laird (Salem State University), and Matthew Kraft and John Papay (Brown University) report on their study of teachers' leadership roles in six high-poverty urban schools that were required to implement improvement plans.

Johnson and her colleagues begin with a blunt statement about the loosely-coupled nature of K-12 schools: "Whatever decisions principals make or mandates they issue, teachers remain the 'street-level bureaucrats' who independently decide what their students' true potential and problems are, which of the principals' initiatives deserve their support, and what they think might improve the school." It's virtually impossible, say the researchers, "for principals to closely monitor and direct what teachers do." This means that any schoolwide reforms will rise or fall based on the degree to which teachers believe in and support them.

In all six schools, teachers recognized the urgency of the work they faced, knew that it couldn't be accomplished by working in isolation, were deeply concerned about their students' current well-being and future life chances, and feared the sanctions their school faced if significant improvements weren't made. In other words, teachers weren't hunkered down in their classrooms: they were ready to work with their principals on schoolwide change. Among the challenges: improving classroom instruction, ensuring order and discipline, expanding support services for students, increasing learning, and raising test scores.

Teachers looked to their principals to set the general direction for change and deferred to their positional authority and access to a broad array of information and resources. At the same time, teachers wanted a chance to initiate and contribute to change, rather than being expected to implement the principal's plan. "Their continuing investment in the principal's agenda," say Johnson et al., "depended on whether they thought a proposed strategy was sound and whether the principal took an inclusive or instrumental approach to the teachers' contributions."

The researchers found that when a principal took an "instrumental," top-down approach, marginalized teachers' contributions, and asked for superficial buy-in, teachers were resentful, withdrew to their classrooms, and considered leaving the school – and the school improvement plan was rejected or was implemented in a perfunctory manner. In one school whose principal took this approach, teachers complained about consultants who were brought in to implement an improvement program, micromanagement of team meetings, and administrators' "snoopervision" visits to classrooms. "Formal authority can only go so far in changing day-to-day practice," say Johnson et al.

Kudos and Accolades

- To each of the elementary chorus groups and our elementary music teachers for their performances last week and this week at winter concerts.
- To Reading School Nutrition Staff, Suzanne Joos, Karleen Sayman, Maureen Franey-Passatempo, Katrina Ferrari, Roberta Ferrari, and Maria Morais, who took and passed the Serv Safe exam.
- To all of our staff, students, and parents who participated in this year's Reading Education Foundation Festival of Trees. Thank you for participating in this important fundraiser for our school community.
- Thanks to the Reading Education Foundation, under the direction of Michael Foley, for coordinating this weekend's Festival of Trees.

In another school, the principal took an inclusive approach and teachers actively invested in schoolwide reforms. "When teachers believe the proposed changes are sound and that the principal has taken their views, suggestions, needs, and interests into account," say the researchers, "they are more likely to lend their support and encourage colleagues to do so as well." A veteran teacher in one of the schools with this approach said of the principal, "He's the driving force behind the school, but the teachers are sort of pushing behind him. He's not like pulling us through."

"One of the most interesting puzzles raised by this study," conclude Johnson et al., "is how individuals (such as teachers) who have less formal authority in the organization can lead others (such as principals) who hold more authority. Under what circumstances within schools do principals become followers and teachers become leaders as they exercise organizational leadership? Is it simply a matter of interpersonal influence, for example, when a teacher is unusually articulate or persuasive? Is it the calculated political response of a principal confronting a strong alliance of teachers who disagree with him? Or does active leadership by teachers arise because the principal deliberately seeks their perspective on the problems of the school and how they might be addressed? ... Principals must recognize the leadership that runs throughout their organization and ensure support for teachers who are prepared to take the lead on school improvement beyond their classroom. In doing so, they will see that this does not mean that they have lost authority but rather that they have increased influence and effectiveness as they authorize others to lead on behalf of the school."

"Ready to Lead, but How? Teachers' Experiences in High-Poverty Urban Schools" by Susan Moore Johnson, Stefanie Reinhorn, Monica Ng, Megin Charner-Laird, Matthew Kraft, and John Papay in *Teachers College Record*, October 2014 (Vol. 116, #10, p. 1-50), http://scholar.harvard.edu/files/mkraft/files/ready_to_lead_080513.pdf; Johnson can be reached at susan_moore_johnson@harvard.edu. Reprinted from Marshall Memo 563.

Student-Run Socratic Seminars

In this *Educational Leadership* article, instructional coach Alexis Wiggins describes how her classroom approach was radically altered when she taught English at a high school whose rubric for Socratic seminars included this clause: "Because this is a team effort, there will be a team grade. *The whole class will get the same grade.*" Loquacious students had a powerful incentive to dial back, shy students needed to speak up, and all students had to learn to facilitate broad participation by asking good questions and really listening. "This is a shift in thinking about learning and assessment for many students," says Wiggins, "but I think it targets some major gaps in how we educate students to become ethical, collaborative thinkers and problem solvers."

Wiggins found this approach so effective that she developed a variation that she

Quote of the Week....



"Sometimes, the most important lessons in life are the ones we learn the hard way."

Unknown

calls Spider Web Discussion. First, she explains the process to students, hands out copies of the discussion rubric, says how much time they have, and spells out the goals for the discussion (which is usually on a text they read the night before). For example, here are the criteria for an English class to earn an A:

- *Everyone* participates in a meaningful and substantive way, more or less equally.
- There is a sense of balance and order, focusing on one speaker and one idea at a time.
- The discussion is lively and the pace is neither hyper nor boring.
- Students back up what they say with examples and quotes from their journals and/or the text.
- At least one literary feature, element of writing style, and class vocabulary word is discussed correctly.

For other sample rubrics, see <http://bit.ly/15LWXtI>.

During the discussion, Wiggins sits outside the circle with a map of the class and keeps track of the "web" of talk by drawing lines across the circle as students respond to one another. She also codes what's going on – interruptions, citing the text, insightful contributions, thoughtful questions – and notes student weaknesses for individual chats afterward. For example, she spoke to a girl whose comments were often superficial and urged her to use her journal to develop deeper insights about the reading. "Using this kind of data to help students correct errors in thinking and understanding *before* the big test or paper was one of the most powerful outcomes of my coding system," says Wiggins.

One of the key features of her approach is that students run the discussion. From the beginning, Wiggins insists that they ask the questions, redirect the conversation when it's getting off track, correct misunderstandings, and ensure that the tone is civil. At first, things are awkward as students adjust to an unusually laid-back teacher, but there's a steep learning curve. After each discussion, students debrief and assess themselves on the rubric. They're usually right on target, says Wiggins, providing useful data for improving future discussions. "Students are far better referees and masters of knowledge than we usually give them credit for," she says. "By the middle of the year, they do it very well, and I take great pleasure in seeing how irrelevant I am."

What about schools that don't allow group grading? Wiggins has found that even if the group assessments don't "count," students still care about them and the dynamic is the same.

"Spinning the Web" by Alexis Wiggins in *Educational Leadership*, November 2014 (Vol. 72, #3, p. 78-81), <http://bit.ly/15LWO2g>; Wiggins is at alexiswiggins@spiderwebdiscussion.com. For a short video of Spider Web Discussion in action, see www.authenticeducation.org/alexis. Reprinted from Marshall Memo 563.

Reading Public School Happenings

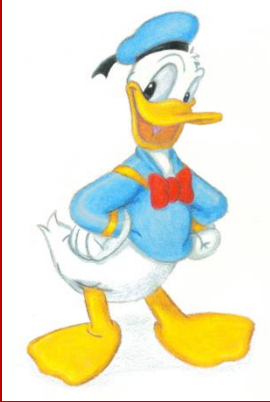
Reading Rotarians promote literacy at our elementary schools

This past week, the Reading Rotary Club, consisting of 35 members, read each day to Kindergarten and Grade 1 students at our elementary schools. The "Rotary Readers" read

at Barrows on Monday, Birch Meadow on Tuesday, Wood End on Wednesday, Joshua Eaton on Thursday, and Killam on Friday. As part of their visit to the schools, each Kindergarten and Grade 1 student received a book bag with two books, courtesy of the Reading Rotary Club. In the photos below, Rotarian Bobbie Botticelli is reading to Grade 1 students at Birch Meadow, Rotarian Kevin Barile is distributing book bags to kindergarten students and Rotarian Mirela Jonuz is reading to Wood End students.



Disney Tweet of the Week



"Live your present so lively and lovely so that in the future you have only a memorable past."

Donald Duck



Killam Chorus

Last week, the Killam Chorus sang in front of a packed crowd at their annual winter concert.



Festival of Trees

This past weekend, the Reading Education Foundation sponsored the annual Festival of Trees to raise funds for our school district. In the photos below, students from Coolidge display their "Night at the Movies" tree, a picture of the trees, and members of the RMHS Chorus perform at the Festival.





Stepping Stones....

- **We have posted** positions on School Spring. If interested, please visit www.schoolspring.com to view the job details.

8th Grade Earth Science Teacher (Long-Term Substitute); Coolidge Middle School	JOB ID #1165672
Substitute Guidance Counselor (Long-Term Substitute), Reading Memorial High School	JOB ID #1169962
Girls Winter Track Coaching Assistant, Reading Memorial High School	JOB ID #1170882

- **Change in Fingerprinting Requirements**-DESE has recently released guidance stating that all required SAFIS background checks for employees hired prior to September 2013 **must be completed no later than June 30, 2016.** The revised schedule is as follows:
 - a. **Those current teachers with ten years or less employment** within the Reading Public Schools will be required to complete the process **before the start of the 2015-2016 school year.** In addition, all administrators, custodians/maintenance, food service, substitute teachers, coaches, advisors, paraeducators, and secretaries will also be required to complete the process at this time.
 - b. **All remaining teachers will be required to complete the process by the end of June 2016.**

This is a departure from the tentative schedule the district released last summer, which stated that teachers with more than 20 years of service with Reading Public Schools would be required to be fingerprinted before the end of the 2016-2017 school year.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact Human Resource Administrator Michaela Saunders.

Blazing Trails....

"Quality Indicators for Productive Student Talk in the Classroom." "Let's change the balance of talk in the classroom so that students speak more and teachers speak less. And when we do, there will be lots to talk about," write professors and ASCD authors Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey. In their November Educational Leadership article, Fisher and Frey explain why productive student talk is essential to teaching and learning. They also provide indicators and strategies educators can use for creating an environment where students do the talking. [Read More](#)

"Two Ways To Practice Mindfulness With Students." Research shows that the ability to calmly focus on what's at hand has long-term benefits for burned-out educators and students. In her November ASCD Education Update article, cofounder of Mindful Schools Megan Cowan explains that in order to reap the benefits of mindfulness in an educational context, educators should practice it on a personal level. [Read More](#)

"Mixed-Set Assignments May Boost Test Scores." Homework assignments in which students study mixed-sets of skills may help boost student performance on tests, according to a recent study. Students using a mixed-set model were able to solve 72% of the items on a surprise test, while students using a more traditional method - one in which they studied skills in isolation -- solved 38% of the problems. [Read More](#)

"Philadelphia School Chief Wants China to Invest in His School System." The head of a Pennsylvania school district intends to visit China to discuss plans for officials there to invest billions of dollars into his district, which is experiencing financial difficulties. State officials, however, have urged caution. [Read More](#)

"10 Ways to Sabotage Your Classroom Management." Teachers may be doing several small things that unknowingly sabotage their classroom-management efforts, writes Jennifer Gonzalez, who has taught middle-school language arts. In this commentary, she shares 10 things to avoid, including smiling at the wrong times, speaking only in "don'ts" and making students choose between reading and listening. [Read More](#)

"Finland to Phase Out Handwriting Instruction for More 21st Century Teaching." Finland has announced plans to phase out handwriting lessons by 2016 and instead teach typing skills. The shift is part of a broader movement away from longhand communications and toward digital communications. [Read More](#)

Contact Us
The Pathways newsletter is published weekly for the Reading Public School Community. If you have anything that you would like to share, please email your information to John Doherty at

john.doherty@reading.k12.ma.us

Have a Great Week!