



Pathways

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

March 22, 2015

Volume 1, Number 27

Upcoming Dates

- March 30 – April 2 – PARCC Assessment for Grades 3-8
- March 24 – (7:00 p.m.) Parker Middle School 5th Grade Parent Night
- March 25 – (2:30 p.m.) RMHS Building Meeting; (2:45 p.m.) Middle School Building Meetings
- March 26 – (3:15 p.m.) Elementary Building Meetings; (7:00 p.m.) Parker Middle School 5th Grade Parent Night; School Committee Meeting in the Superintendent's Conference Room
- March 27 – (7:00 p.m.) Mr. RMHS in the RMHS Endslo PAC
- March 28 – MICCA Choral Festival; (10:00 a.m.) RMHS Drama Set Build; (7:00 p.m.) RMHS Band – Night in New Orleans on Main St./PAC
- March 29 – (2:00 p.m.) RMHS Formal Recital in the Endslo PAC
- March 30 – (3:15 p.m.) Expanding the Boundaries of Teaching and Learning Class;
- March 31 – (2:30 p.m.) Five Star

Timothy Shanahan on *Real* Test Prep

“The idea of having students practice answering test questions is ubiquitous and ineffective in raising test scores,” says Timothy Shanahan (University of Illinois/Chicago) in this article in *The Reading Teacher*. He understands the pressure to raise scores on the new generation of more-challenging ELA tests coming down the pike – PARCC, Smarter Balanced, and others. But the time-honored approach of analyzing sample test items and having students answer questions on main idea, supporting detail, providing evidence, describing a character, identifying a theme, and drawing conclusions doesn’t work, he says. “It has never worked. And it won’t work any better with the new assessments on the horizon. It’s as ineffective as pushing the elevator button multiple times to hurry it along or turning the thermostat to 90° to make a room warm up faster.”

So why are so many principals and superintendents and teachers wasting valuable instructional time on an ineffective strategy? “There is a kind of logic to it,” says Shanahan: “The students are practicing something that at least *looks like* it could improve test scores.” But the fundamental problem is that many educators are not sure what *will* improve test scores and make students better readers. It’s not students’ ability to answer questions on specific skills, says Shanahan – “performance on various question types explains none of the variance in student performance on standardized comprehension tests... Analyses of test performance suggest that outcome variance is due not to the questions but to the passages. On reading comprehension tests, it matters how well students read the passages that they will be questioned about. If you want higher test scores, then teach your students to read the test passages better.” How do teachers do that? Here are Shanahan’s suggestions:

- *Teach students how to figure out unknown words.* When they take the new tests, students are going to encounter some words they don’t know – there’s no way they will have learned all the possible words. If instruction during the year has focused on learning as many words as possible, students will be up the creek without a paddle. But if instruction has focused on learning words *and* strategies for figuring out unknown words, students will be able to manage. Shanahan believes that during the year, too many teachers are pre-teaching words. That’s okay if the words’ meaning can’t be figured out from context clues. But if there are context clues, as there usually are, students should be required to do the work of figuring out the word – and explicitly taught how to struggle successfully.

- *Making sense of sentences.* Consider this sentence from a fourth-grade text and how difficult it would be for many students to decipher its dependent clauses:

The women of Montgomery, both young and older, would come in with their fancy holiday dresses that needed adjustments or their Sunday suits or blouses that needed just a touch – a flower or some velvet trimming or something to make the ladies look festive.

Theatre Auditions in the Music Suite and PAC

- April 1 - (4:00 p.m.) RETELL Session 7 in Distance Learning Room; (5:00 p.m.) Parker School Council Meeting; (7:00 p.m.) Parker PTO meeting
- April 3 – Good Friday No School; Passover begins at sundown

Students need explicit instruction in how to close-read this sentence, break it down to its basic elements by taking out parenthetical phrases, and make sense of it. The same is true of sentences that use the passive voice (*It was determined by Roosevelt that the Chancellor's message did not require an immediate response from the State Department*). "There is a substantial research base showing the effectiveness of sentence combining and sentence reduction in improving students' writing and reading comprehension," says Shanahan. "Such lessons, at one time, were commonplace in many American classrooms. Perhaps it's time for their rediscovery."

• *Silent reading with real understanding* – Reading comprehension tests require students to read lengthy passages without prompting or assistance. How much practice are students getting at this demanding task? Shanahan wonders. He sees silent reading periods in schools he visits, but he's unclear: "I just can't tell, from what I see, whether the students are really improving in that essential reading skill or whether they are languishing. In many situations, I doubt whether the teacher knows, either. Sadly, I'm finding that few teachers have any idea how to teach students to engage successfully in this kind of extended silent reading." Shanahan believes many students need to be asked to read one sentence silently and be quizzed on it, then two sentences, then a paragraph, then a page, then a chapter. "This kind of build-up reading with intensive questioning can take place beyond the reading book," he says – in science, social studies, *Weekly Reader*, *Time for Kids*. And students need to be able to do it without picture clues.

If we teach these three things well – figuring out unknown words, breaking down difficult sentences, and sustaining concentration and comprehension when reading long passages silently – Shanahan believes we will see improved test performance, and students will be better readers as well.

"Let's Get Higher Scores on These New Assessments" by Timothy Shanahan in *The Reading Teacher*, March 2015 (Vol. 68, #6, p. 459-463), available for purchase at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/trtr.1329/pdf>; Shanahan can be reached at shanahan@uic.edu. Reprinted from Marshall Memo 578.

Does the Common Core Promote Moral Relativism?

In this *Education Gadfly* article, Kathleen Porter-Magee says most schools teach fact and opinion in a way that leads to squishy moral reasoning: facts exist or can be proven, opinions are subjective, so there are no absolute "moral facts" that can or should be imposed on others. In short, to each his or her own. According to philosopher James McBrayer in a recent *New York Times* blog, his fellow professors report that "the overwhelming majority of college freshmen in their classrooms view moral claims as mere opinions that are not true or are true only relative to a culture."

Porter-Magee believes the binary fact/opinion approach, which she says is reflected in the pre-Common Core curriculum standards of all but five states, is missing an important third category: moral judgments – for example, murder is wrong. "If moral facts exist," says Porter-Magee, "then saying that murder is wrong isn't merely an opinion. Most Americans accept that 'murder is wrong' is a moral fact. Therefore, we have no problem imposing that moral law on society and holding all people, regardless of their personal beliefs and opinions, to that moral standard. Of course, moral facts aren't provable the same way objective facts are. They are

Kudos and Accolades

- Kudos to the RMHS Girls Ice Hockey team for winning the Division 1 girls hockey state championship defeating Acton-Boxborough 3-0.
- To Lou Caputo, Andy Strutt, Kathy Santilli, Marcia Grant, Janet Dee, and Meg Powers for all of their efforts in preparing for the technology infrastructure and setup of the PARCC.
- To A.P. Photography student, Lauren Walsh (senior), who won two prestigious Gold Keys regionally in this year's Scholastic Art & Writing Awards, one for the photograph of her parents as clowns (seen in a previous edition of the Journey), and a second for a portfolio of eight self-portraits. This was an outstanding accomplishment, as it is very rare for a student to win two Gold Keys in one year. Her work moved on to national competition and we are pleased to report that the photograph of Lauren's parents was one of only three photographs in Massachusetts to win a national gold medal.

arrived at through reasoned judgment. I can 'prove' the table is hard. I can 'prove' that vaccines prevent disease. But I can't 'prove' murder is wrong, or that it's wrong to steal. I accept that murder is wrong and that stealing is wrong through reasoned judgment."

McBrayer's blog attracted a lot of attention because he said that Common Core standards continue the fact/opinion fallacy. In truth, says Porter-Magee, the grade 6-12 Common Core standards specifically require that students "distinguish among fact, opinion, and reasoned judgment in a text." Middle and high school, she argues, is the appropriate stage for students to make this kind of moral argument. McBrayer's thesis is even weaker, she says, because he cited curriculum materials that were developed by an independent group that is not affiliated with Common Core.

"So what would a reasoned judgment conclude about McBrayer's attack on Common Core?" Porter-Magee concludes. "Rather than reinforcing the prevailing moral relativism in our schools, Common Core actually provides a path forward for students themselves to find their way back to moral facts."

"Moral Facts and the Common Core" by Kathleen Porter-Magee in *Education Gadfly*, March 11, 2015 (Vol. 15, #10), <http://edexcellence.net/articles/moral-facts-and-the-common-core> . Reprinted from Marshall Memo 578.

Reading Public School Happenings

Parker Science Olympiad Team

Last weekend, Parker Middle School participated in the Massachusetts State Science Olympiad Tournament held at Assumption College. Below is a picture of two Parker students participating in the bridge building event. Thanks to Parker teachers Sarah Gilbert, Matt Williams, and Jaime Walsh for coaching the team this year.



RMHS Girls Hockey Team-Division 1 State Champions!

Last Sunday, the RMHS Girls Hockey Team won the Division 1 State Championship with a thrilling 3-0 victory over Acton Boxboro at the TD Garden in Boston. Below are some photos of the exciting game.



Quote of the Week....



“Always give without remembering and always receive without forgetting.”

Brian Tracy



Parker Presents *Just So*

The picture below is a picture of the cast of “Just So”, Parker’s musical from last weekend, 3/12-14. Over 110 Parker students, as well as dozens of parents and staff worked hard to make this challenging show an excellent experience for both audience and participants alike. Special thanks to Jenny DiMuzio and Stephen MacDonald for all of their efforts on this show.

Disney Tweet of the Week



"No matter how difficult a situation we are in, we must never give up."

Mickey Mouse



Stepping Stones...

- **Congratulations** to Parker teacher **Chris Twomey** on the birth of his son Liam Craig on March 16th, 6 lbs. 11 oz., 20.5" long.
- **Our thoughts for a speedy recovery** go out to RMHS secretary **Illena Napoli** who is recovering from recent surgery.
- **Our thoughts for a speedy recovery** go out to Director of Nurses **Lynn Dunn** who is recovering from an injury.
- We welcome the following new hires to our school district:
 - ✓ Allyson Kennedy-Spencer, Substitute, District
 - ✓ Kristi Locke, Substitute, District
- **We have posted** a position on School Spring. If interested, please visit www.schoolspring.com to view the job details.

Facilities Operations Manager, Reading Public Schools	JOB ID #1345602
School Psychologist, Parker Middle School	JOB ID #1352592

- **Demystifying the Common Core** – This GreatSchools site aims to make the new K-5 standards accessible to parents and others via brief videos for each grade level: <http://www.greatschools.org/gk/milestones/>
- **Duolingo for Schools** – In this *School Library Journal* review, Melissa Techman (school librarian in Albemarle County, Virginia) recommends this foreign-language learning tool for grades 6 and up: www.duolingo.com. It has free, interactive instruction in Spanish, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, and several other languages.
- **A consumer guide to Common Core math materials** – EdReports is a new nonprofit that has teachers, principals, and instructional coaches analyzing the quality of curriculum materials on three criteria: focus and coherence, rigor of mathematical practices, and instructional supports and other usability indicators: <http://www.edreports.org>. So far, very few commercial programs are getting good reviews: of the twenty K-8 math series reviewed, only one, *Eureka*, met EdReport's criteria for alignment in all grades, with another, *My Math*, meeting criteria only in grades 4 and 5. *Eureka* was created from scratch for New York State's website, EngageNY.

Blazing Trails....

"Communication: Does It Have To Be Face-to-Face?" "In school districts across the United States, educators are trying to improve K-12 education, but they are relying on face-to-face meetings rather than utilizing free technology which allows for communication and brainstorming in real time," writes ASCD EDge community member Steven Weber. In a recent blog post, Weber shares seven tools to assist with time, efficiency, collaboration, communication, planning, and supporting student achievement. [Read More](#)

"What Do Students Think of Grading Practices?" "In an ideal world, school quality would be measured by assessing how closely each school's reality matches the ideals of the Whole Child approach to education," writes educator Matthew Mingle. In a recent ASCD Inservice post, Mingle discusses how to turn a school's quality back to the Whole Child. [Read More](#)

"Proposed Bill Calls for Research on Later School Start Times." The U.S. Department of Education would be required to conduct a study on the effects of later school start times on high-school students' academic performance under a proposed bill. The American Academy of Pediatrics has said later start times could lead to academic improvements for high-school students. [Read More](#)

"What Do Students Think of Grading Practices?" High-school teacher Brianna Crowley recently used a technology tool to ask her students for feedback on grading practices and found their views mixed. While some saw grading as negative and used solely to help universities measure their academic ability, other students said they valued the feedback they get from grades. Crowley also has solicited comments from fellow teachers. [Read More](#)

"The 10 Happiest Jobs in America. School Principal, Number 1?" What makes one career path ultimately "happier" than the next is certainly subjective. According to writer and explorer Dan Buettner, it's not a huge salary, but rather plenty of social interaction that makes for a satisfied worker. "The happiest people in America socialize about seven hours a day," Buettner explains. Some might claim that other factors, such as flexibility, security, and prestige have more of an impact on overall satisfaction. One might be surprised what the "happiest job" is [Read More](#)

"8 Essential Elements of Project Based Learning." Project-based learning can have different meanings to different people, but it has eight essential elements, first-grade teacher Meghan Everette writes. In this blog post, she notes that PBL is defined by elements, including significant content, a need to know, a driving question and the use of 21st-century skills. [Read More](#)

"Illinois Educator Takes Global Perspective to Teaching 'Hamlet.'" An Illinois teacher is participating in Teachers for Global Classrooms, an international program that teaches educators how to integrate global education into their classrooms. In one of his projects, Faisal Mohyuddin is using Twitter to help teach William Shakespeare's "Hamlet," with students creating Twitter handles and writing posts for the characters. [Read More](#)

Contact Us

The Pathways newsletter is published weekly for Reading Public School Staff. 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!