

Marshall Memo 348

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
August 23, 2010

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Quotes of the Week

“The job of mentors is to support protégés as they create better versions of themselves. The best mentors are powerful allies who provide friendship, emotional support, resources, and reflective discussion.”

Kathleen Sciarappa in “Mentor Connections” in *Principal*, September/October 2010 (Vol. 90, #1, p. 38), no e-link available

“Tests now being touted as suitable for judging teacher quality are accompanied by not one lick of evidence that they are instructionally sensitive. Should we evaluate teachers on the basis of tests whose suitability for this evaluative mission has not been verified? The answer is obvious.”

James Popham (see item #1)

“*Professional community* is regarded by some teachers as a code term for an administratively initiated program designed to encourage teachers to analyze student achievement data and turn it into improved test scores.”

Wallace study of instructional leadership (see item #2)

“Districts are encouraged to spend less time ensuring that schools have large amounts of data and more time helping principals and teachers figure out how such data might help them do the job they are trying to do.”

Wallace study (*ibid.*)

1. James Popham on Using Test Scores to Evaluate Teachers

In this timely *American School Board Journal* article, UCLA testing guru James Popham addresses the much-discussed idea of using student test scores to evaluate individual teachers. “The quality of students’ learning should, in my view, be a key determinant of judgments of a teacher’s skill,” he says. “Indeed, it should be far and away the most significant criterion for appraising teachers.” However, he continues, “absolutely no evidence exists that the tests to be used in such evaluations are capable of differentiating between effectively and ineffectively taught students... If we allow the wrong tests to be used when judging our teachers, we are certain to make many mistakes about which teachers are doing well and which teachers aren’t. The most significant consequence of those mistakes is that – over time – our students will surely be less well taught.”

What we don’t know, says Popham, is whether the tests in question are “instructionally sensitive” – that is, do their items accurately measure what teachers are teaching? “Here’s the astonishing reality,” says Popham. “Tests now being touted as suitable for judging teacher quality are accompanied by not one lick of evidence that they are instructionally sensitive. Should we evaluate teachers on the basis of tests whose suitability for this evaluative mission has not been verified? The answer is obvious.”

What should we watch out for in tests? Popham says there are at least six ways an individual test item can be instructionally insensitive:

- Poor alignment – If an item doesn’t accurately measure students’ mastery of the specified curriculum objective, then no matter how well the teacher teaches that objective, the item won’t be a fair measure of the teacher’s effectiveness.
- Too easy – If even badly-taught students can correctly answer an item, then it won’t accurately measure the difference between effective and ineffective teachers.
- Too difficult – Conversely, if a test item is so tricky that even well-taught students get it wrong, the item won’t discriminate between effective and ineffective teachers.
- Confusing – If items have mangled syntax or ambiguous answer choices, even well-taught students will do poorly.
- SES issues – Test items that give an unfair advantage to children from higher-income families measure those advantages, not teachers’ effectiveness.
- Aptitude issues – Items that measure aptitude rather than what students learn in school are also poor measures of teacher effectiveness.

Popham says that if a test has even one of these flaws, it is instructionally insensitive and therefore poorly suited to evaluating teachers.

So are current state tests up to snuff? Popham says “we simply have no evidence, one way or the other, confirming the ability of today’s tests to accurately measure teachers’ instructional quality. Such evidence is desperately needed.”

What would it take to identify instructionally insensitive test items and fix them? First, individual items would have to be checked by assessment experts for alignment and validity. Second, experts would have to see if item-by-item student results lined up with teachers’ previous track records in bringing about (or not bringing about) higher student achievement over time. If effectively taught students answered an item correctly and ineffectively taught students answered it incorrectly, it would indicate that the item was instructionally sensitive.

Wouldn’t this process be enormously time-consuming and expensive? Not so, says Popham: “Because the data needed for such analyses are already available in most states’ test-data repositories, and because the identity of teachers does not need to be revealed, this empirical work can be carried out both inexpensively and unobtrusively.”

So where does this leave us? “The mismeasurement of our teachers constitutes an enormous social blunder – chiefly because of the adverse impact this mistake will have on the students our schools serve,” concludes Popham. “Nonetheless, test-based teacher evaluation is currently careening toward us with precious few impediments in its way. So, if teachers are going to be judged on the basis of their students’ test scores, let’s make certain that the tests being used are appropriate.”

“(Mis)Measuring Teachers” by James Popham in *American School Board Journal*, September 2010 (Vol. 197, #9, p. 36-38), no e-link available

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2. The New Wallace Study on Leadership Effects on Teaching and Learning

This voluminous six-year study by researchers from the University of Minnesota and the University of Toronto supported by the Wallace Foundation attempts to pinpoint the key leadership factors linked to student achievement. Its three chapters address leadership at the school, district, and state level and how leadership interacts with student and family background, school conditions, classroom conditions, and major stakeholders. Here are their major points, drawn mainly from the first two chapters, including a number of direct quotes from the study:

- “Leadership can be described by reference to two core functions,” say the authors. “One function is providing direction; the other is exercising influence... Leadership is all about organizational improvement; more specifically, it is about establishing agreed-upon and worthwhile directions for the organization in question, and doing whatever it takes to prod and support people to move in those directions... Creating a vision for instructional improvement is not enough.” District leaders and principals must get involved in the nuts and bolts of improving teaching and learning.

- Districts contribute most to school leaders' effectiveness by focusing on improving teaching and learning, providing access to good professional development, emphasizing teamwork and professional community, maximizing the stability and continuity of leadership (keeping principals in their buildings a minimum of four years, preferably five to seven years), and "ensuring that personnel policies support the selection and maintenance of the best people for each school."

- "Collective leadership has a stronger influence on student achievement than individual leadership... Higher-performing schools award greater influence to teacher teams, parents, and students... When principals and teachers share leadership, teachers' working relationships are stronger and student achievement is higher... District-level and state policy makers must assume the responsibility for nurturing principals' dispositions toward the distribution of leadership."

- When others gain influence in schools with high levels of stakeholder involvement, principals don't lose influence. They remain the key actors in schools, and one of their most important roles is creating a schoolwide focus on goals and expectations for student achievement.

- "Leadership effects on student achievement occur largely because effective leadership strengthens professional community – a special environment within which teachers work together to improve their practice and improve student learning." Principals accomplish this by setting a tone and culture that supports professional learning and by engaging with individual teachers to foster their own growth.

- "The link between professional community and student achievement may be explained by reference to a school climate that encourages levels of student effort above and beyond the levels encouraged in individual classrooms."

- The researchers say that micromanaging classrooms is not an effective leadership strategy. "Classroom practices occur within larger organizational systems which can vary enormously in the extent to which they support, reward, and nurture good instruction," they write. "School leaders who ignore or neglect the state of this larger context can easily find their direct efforts to improve instruction substantially frustrated."

- The researchers found that principals' direct observations of and conversations with teachers in their classrooms and team meetings were key to improving teaching quality.

- "Leaders in high data-use schools have clear purposes for analyzing data. They engage their staff collectively in data analysis, build internal capacity for this work, and use data to solve problems, not simply to identify them... Districts are encouraged to spend less time ensuring that schools have large amounts of data and more time helping principals and teachers figure out how such data might help them do the job they are trying to do."

- "One of the most productive ways for districts to facilitate continual improvement is to develop teachers' capacity to use formative assessments of student progress aligned with district expectations for student learning, and to use formative data in devising and implementing interventions during the school year."

- “*Professional community* is regarded by some teachers as a code term for an administratively initiated program designed to encourage teachers to analyze student achievement data and turn it into improved test scores.” The researchers found that the reality is more complex – principals must be involved with teachers for interim assessment analysis to have any impact on teaching and learning.

- Principals’ impact on student achievement comes primarily through their influence on teachers’ motivation and working conditions. Their influence on teachers’ knowledge and skills has less impact on student achievement.

- The study found that leadership was considerably more challenging at the secondary level. “Secondary school teachers rarely report that school-level leaders engage in instructional action; this is the case for their principals, department heads, and other teacher leaders.”

- “The role of department head in secondary schools should be radically redefined,” say the authors. “Department heads should be regarded, institutionally, as a central resource for improving instruction in middle and high schools.”

- One strong injunction the researchers have for district leaders: “Spend time in schools. Most principals report that the administrators who evaluate them rarely visit their schools.”

“Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning” by Karen Seashore Louis, Kenneth Leithwood, Kyla Wahlstrom, Stephen Anderson, Michael Michlin, Molly Gordon, Emanda Thomas, Blair Mascall, Tiiu Strauss, and Shawn Moore, commissioned by the Wallace Foundation. The full study is available at:

<http://www.wallacefoundation.org/KnowledgeCenter/KnowledgeTopics/CurrentAreasofFocus/EducationalLeadership/Documents/Learning-from-Leadership-Investigating-Links-Final-Report.pdf>

Spotted in “Study: Effective Principals Embrace Collective Leadership” by Christina Samuels in *Education Week*, Aug. 11, 2010 (Vol. 29, #37, p. 14-15)

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3. Ten-Minute Screening Interviews (an “Oldie but Goodie”)

“Have you ever interviewed a teacher for a job opening and, after 10 minutes, knew you would not hire the candidate?” asks veteran school administrator Paul Ash (currently superintendent in Lexington, Massachusetts) in this helpful 1992 article in *The Executive Educator*. The problem is that, out of professional courtesy, most administrators feel they must go through with the full 30-40-minute interview, which is not a good use of anyone’s time. Over the years, Ash came to believe that the normal interview process was triply inefficient: it reduces the number of candidates who can be interviewed, it misses some high-quality candidates, and it wastes valuable time interviewing candidates who aren’t a good match for the position in question.

Ash proposes a better process: screening resumes, inviting a larger number of plausible candidates for 10-minute screening interviews, and then getting the most impressive candidates back for full-length interviews. This allows administrators to broaden their pool, discover high-quality candidates whose resumes aren’t stellar, and eliminate candidates who look good on paper but aren’t a good match when interviewed in person. This is especially good for finding

inexperienced teachers with real talent and promising candidates with non-traditional backgrounds – two groups that might never get an interview under normal circumstances.

When Ash launched this process in Wellesley, Massachusetts, the district was getting 50-250 applicants for each teaching vacancy. The central office asked principals and department heads to select 15-25 candidates for 10-minute screening interviews. When candidates arrived, the two-person team reminded the candidate that the interview would be brief and then asked six or seven questions, which might include:

- A question clarifying something on the resume;
- A question to tap the candidate's sense of mission and enthusiasm;
- A question about curriculum knowledge;
- What the candidate thinks students should learn by June;
- What instructional strategies a visitor might see in his or her classroom in November.

Ash and his colleagues found that with questions like these, ten minutes was enough to get a sense of communication skills, knowledge of pedagogy, attitude toward children, ability to establish objectives and priorities, and beliefs about teaching. The candidates invited back for full-length interviews were higher-caliber, and interview committees rarely felt they were wasting their time. Then the finalists went through additional checks and reference calls.

Although this two-part interview process takes extra time, Ash believes strongly that it improves the quality of teachers ultimately hired.

“The 10-Minute Interview” by Paul Ash in *The Executive Educator*, March 1992 (p. 40), no e-link available

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4. Working with Children of Alcoholics and Addicts

In this thoughtful *Middle Ground* article, Radford University professor Anne Mary Roberts describes what she learned as a middle-school principal about the children of alcoholics and addicts (COAs). These youngsters live with constant uncertainty – will they come home to a fight or an empty house? – and tend to take on roles in their families that spill over into school:

- *The hero or perfect child* – “These children try to fix the family by doing good works,” says Roberts. “They are driven to do their best, are dedicated, can be overly responsible, and often emerge as leaders... The parents point to these ‘stars’ as proof their family can’t be that bad.”

- *The scapegoat or rebel* – These kids take the attention off alcohol or substance abuse by creating crises and drawing attention to themselves. “They are the truth tellers in the family,” says Roberts. “Other members may not address the situation, but the rebels will confront the abuser directly. They challenge authority, may experiment with drugs and sex at an early age, and often do poorly in school.”

- *The loner or lost child* – “The gift that lost children bring to their dysfunctional families is one less child to worry about,” says Roberts. “They are attuned to their surroundings and know when a crisis is about to happen. They know how to be scarce emotionally and

physically so none of the conflict is directed toward them. These loners don't make friends, preferring to keep to themselves."

- *The mascot or clown* – They are the comic relief of the family, distracting people from a crisis with laughter. "They know how to entertain people," says Roberts, "but they don't know when it is time to stop." They can be disruptive in the classroom but usually have the savvy and charm to avoid getting into serious trouble.

Many teachers, when they become aware of a student's troubled home life, believe the best thing they can do is make allowances and give them a break on expectations. "Actually," says Roberts, "one of the best gifts you can give a COA is clear, consistent boundaries and routines, especially during adolescence when so many things are changing in their lives. Let your classroom be the safe haven they need. Maintain your expectations and rules." It's helpful if teachers can get good at being "emotion detectives," she says, being a safe, strong adult model to whom these students express and perhaps begin to understand their feelings. "I do not advocate that you counsel the students," says Roberts, "– that is the role of guidance counselors – but you can establish a rapport that helps students recognize the unexpressed feelings they have."

"Different Families, Different Dances: Helping Children of Substance Abusers" by Anne Mary Roberts in *Middle Ground*, August 2010 (Vol. 14, #1, p. 11-13), no e-link available; Roberts is at aroberts@radford.edu.

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5. Ideas on "Blended" Foreign-Language Courses and Scheduling

In this article in *The Language Educator*, University of Wisconsin/Oshkosh professor Susan Cramer shares ideas on how to maintain low-enrollment, upper-level foreign language courses in tough economic times by using online learning and creative scheduling.

First, she suggests taking advantage of online learning to teach "blended" courses. Cramer cites a recent U.S. Department of Education study, *Evaluation of Evidence-Based Practices in Online Learning: A Meta-Analysis and Review of Online Learning Studies* (available at <http://www.educase.edu/Resources/EvaluationofEvidenceBasedPract/174235>), one of whose findings was that, among three ways of teaching courses, the order of effectiveness was: first, blended instruction (combining online and face-to-face); second, purely online instruction; and third, purely face-to-face instruction. Blended and online instruction have the potential to be more effective, says the report, because students are more likely to get the additional learning time they need, have access to more and better materials, and collaborate with other students. All three factors are constrained in traditional face-to-face classes.

Clearly, blended instruction requires special training and preparation. The teacher's role shifts from direct provider of instruction to orchestrator of direct and indirect instruction, and time expands beyond the traditional school day. "In a blended learning environment," Cramer explains, "the teacher crafts learning opportunities and then locates and organizes associated resources which are presented electronically to the students via a webpage or within a content

management system such as Moodle.” Some experiences will be Internet-based, others will take place in collaborative groups. “The key,” says Cramer, “is that students (a) are then given control over their learning, (b) can access the instructional materials as often as is necessary, and (c) must also reflect on their learning and progress to maximize learning potential.”

Second, Cramer suggests several creative adaptations in high-school schedules to allow teachers to reach more students and maintain staffing and low-enrollment courses:

- *Alternating days/same hour* – Two different courses can meet during the same class hour on alternative days of the week. For example, a teacher teaches four traditional face-to-face courses and two low-enrollment blended courses; the traditional courses might be offered during Hours 1, 3, 4, and 6, and the low-enrollment courses (perhaps French IV and French V) during Hour 2 (with a teacher prep period during Hour 5). On Monday and Wednesday, the teacher might meet with the French IV class face-to-face while the French IV group worked online. Friday, both the French IV and V groups might work online while the teacher followed up with individualized instruction or other tasks associated with online teaching. Both courses could meet in the same room or in separate learning spaces.

- *Alternating days/different hours* – This option mirrors the first, except that the French IV and V groups meet in different hours (2 and 5). The teacher would teach one group during Hour 2 on Monday and Wednesday, another group during Hour 5 on Tuesday and Thursday, then work individually with students as necessary during Hours 2 and/or 5 on Fridays (with the teacher’s prep period alternating based on the day of the week). Supervision during face-to-face time could be provided by other teachers or staff in a study hall.

- *Alternating days/alternating buildings* – In this option, the teacher covers two buildings (perhaps in different school districts), spending half a day in one building and the second half in the other, or, if travel time is an issue, weeks could be split so entire days were spent in one building or the other. For example, face-to-face courses like French I and II might be offered in Building A during Hours 1 and 2 and Building B during Hours 6 and 7; Hours 3, 4, and 5 would be available to accommodate a low-enrollment blended French III course offered at both schools, travel time, lunch, and prep time. A second option would be for all instruction to be in blended format, with the teacher spending Mondays and Wednesdays in Building A and Tuesdays and Thursdays in Building B. That would leave Friday as a flex day to be used as needed with instruction primarily online, but it could also be used for face-to-face instruction depending on student needs.

“Using Alternative Scheduling and Blended Courses to Reach and Teach Upper-Level Courses” by Susan Cramer in *The Language Educator*, August 2010 (Vol. 5, #4, p. 44-48), no e-link; readers are invited to share information and experiences about blended courses for teaching foreign language in the ACTFL Online Community at <http://community.actfl.org>.

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6. A Report on Effective Use of Technology in Classrooms

This *Reading Today* column summarizes a new study, *Educators, Technology and 21st Century Skills: Dispelling Five Myths*, commissioned by the Richard W. Riley College of

Education and Leadership at Walden University. Drawing on a survey of more than 1,000 elementary and secondary teachers and school-based administrators in the U.S., the study found:

- New-to-the-profession teachers and those with greater access to technology don't necessarily use computers more often in their classrooms.
- It isn't just high-achieving students who benefit from using technology.
- Just because today's students are comfortable with technology doesn't mean that teachers should ease off on classroom use of computers.
- Teachers and administrators don't always have the same understandings about classroom technology use and 21st-century skills.
- Many new teachers don't feel well prepared to use technology in their classrooms and foster 21st-century skills.

The report addresses each of these problem areas and then makes these recommendations to teachers:

- Be as fearless as your students with technology.
- Seek out and create opportunities to collaborate with and learn from your peers.
- Find the best ways to integrate technology and 21st-century skills into the curriculum.
- Communicate with parents.

“Research New to Use: Dispelling Technology Myths” in *Reading Today*, August/ September 2010 (Vol. 28, #1, p. 33) no e-link available; the report: <http://www.WaldenU.edu/fivemyths>.

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7. Children's Book Recommendations

In this regular *Reading Today* feature, Illinois children's librarian Susan Dove Lempke recommends six new books, all of which deal with following (or not following) rules:

- *In the Wild* by David Elliott, illustrated by Holly Meade (Candlewick 2010), ages 4-8 – Short, evocative poems about a series of wild animals, each pictured in its native habitat.

- *Ling & Ting: Not Exactly the Same!* by Grace Lin (Little, Brown, 2010), ages 5-8 – An amusing easy reader about two identical twins, showing the subtle differences between them.

- *Instructions: Everything You'll Need to Know on Your Journey* by Neil Gaiman, illustrated by Charles Vess (HarperCollins, 2010), ages 6-10 – An imaginative fantasy/fairy tale about a series of instructions that a catlike creature in boots must follow (“If any creature tells you that it hungers, feed it.”)

- *Meanwhile* by Jason Shiga (Amulet, 2010), ages 10-14 – This graphic novel with Simpson-like characters gives a series of choices and gets the reader flipping back and forth in the book (there are 3,856 possible options). For example, on the first page, the reader must decide between vanilla ice cream or chocolate; vanilla leads to a dull ending, but chocolate could lead to the accidental destruction of the world.

- *The Birthday Ball* by Lois Lowry, illustrated by Jules Feiffer (Houghton Mifflin, 2010), ages 8-12 – In this amusing tale, 16-year-old Princess Patricia Priscilla must choose

among several less-than-satisfactory suitors, but really wants to trade places with her chambermaid and go to school in the town.

• *As Easy as Falling Off the Face of the Earth* by Lynne Rae Perkins (Greenwillow, 2010), ages 11 and up – A 15-year-old boy steps off a train in Montana and is left behind when the train leaves, leading to a series of adventures as he travels on foot, by car, by rickety plane, and by sailboat.

“Rules Rule When Authors Say So” by Susan Dove Lempke in *Reading Today*, August/September 2010 (Vol. 28, #1, p. 32), no e-link available

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8. Short Items:

a. Thinkfinity – This website – <http://www.thinkfinity.org> – was recently upgraded and now has numerous curriculum resources and a community feature that allows educators to organize materials, share ideas, and connect with colleagues.

“Making Connections with Thinkfinity Community” in *Reading Today*, August/September 2010 (Vol. 28, #1, p. 43)

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b. Online health activities in Spanish and English – The *Eat Smart, Play Hard* website from the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service has activity sheets, bookmarks, comics, and stickers to encourage students to stay healthy and exercise. The resources are in English on one side and Spanish on the other:

<http://teamnutrition.usda.gov/Resources/eatsmartactivitysheets.html>

“Web Watch” in *The Language Educator*, August 2010 (Vol. 5, #4, p. 62)

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c. High-school French resources online – Indiana teacher Deborah Blaz hosts this website with resources for teachers of French – lessons for French I, II, III, IV, and V, grammar and culture review, comics, and sudokus:

<http://www.msdssteuben.k12.in.us/dblaz>

“Web Watch” in *The Language Educator*, August 2010 (Vol. 5, #4, p. 62)

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d. Arabic calligraphy website – This website has four lessons on reading and writing Arabic, as well as information about styles of Arabic calligraphy, examples of calligraphic art, and links to information on Arabic calligraphy:

<http://www.al-bab.com/arab/visuals/calligraphy.htm>

“Web Watch” in *The Language Educator*, August 2010 (Vol. 5, #4, p. 63)

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e. Cloze test creation tool – This website makes it easy to create a cloze test – a test with missing words, with or without clues: <http://l.georges.online.fr/tools/cloze.html>

“Web Watch” in *The Language Educator*, August 2010 (Vol. 5, #4, p. 63)

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f. Voices of middle-school Latinos – *You Don’t Know Me Until Now* is a website with writing and photography from middle-grade Latino students in Austin, Los Angeles, and Oakland illustrating how they connect to the concepts of place, identity, and culture:

<http://sn.im/latino-ms-voices>

“News to Use” in *Middle Ground*, August 2010 (Vol. 14, #1, p. 6)

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g. Science fair resources – This website has project suggestions, shopping lists, presentation guidelines, and resources for parents and science fair coordinators:

<http://school.discoveryeducation.com/sciencefaircentral>

“News to Use” in *Middle Ground*, August 2010 (Vol. 14, #1, p. 6)

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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 is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and others very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 37 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, and writer, lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 44 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 about 50 issues a year).

Subscriptions:

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- A database of all articles to date, searchable by topic, title, author, source, level, etc.
- How to change access e-mail or password

Publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
ASCD, CEC SmartBriefs, Daily EdNews
Catalyst Chicago
Ed. Magazine
EDge
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
Essential Teacher (TESOL)
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Educational Review
JESPAR
Journal of Staff Development
Language Learner (NABE)
Middle Ground
Middle School Journal
New York Times
Newsweek
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
Teachers College Record
The Atlantic Monthly
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Language Educator
The Learning Principal
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Tools for Schools