Marshall Memo 1070

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
January 13, 2025

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"When students speak, they learn more."

Jennifer Gonzalez and Marnie Diem (see item #6)

"Community service, whether it's feeding the poor, sitting with the homeless, or championing a cause, is not just to make society better; it is done to usher a transformation in the person doing the service."

David Brooks (see item #1)

"Tell me who your heroes are, and I'll tell you how you're going to turn out."

Warren Buffett (quoted in *ibid*.)

"Students are given little independence in school and, when they gain it in college, are overwhelmed rather than relieved, unmoored rather than motivated. After years of having their education treated as a performance, it's asking a lot of students to trust that it might be more fulfilling to approach it as a process."

Beckie Supiano in "Some Assembly Still Required: How K-12 Reforms and Recent Disruptions Created Gen Z's Baffling Habits" in *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* December 20, 2024

"Using AI well requires holding opposing ideas in mind: it can be transformative yet must be approached with skepticism, powerful yet prone to subtle failures, essential for some tasks yet actively harmful for others."

Ethan Mollick in "15 Times to Use AI, and 5 Not To" in *One Useful Thing,* December 9, 2024

"Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."

Viktor Frankl, Austrian psychiatrist, author of *Man's Search for Meaning*

1. David Brooks on Young People Becoming the Best Versions of Themselves

In this *New York Times* column, David Brooks says he believes that for individuals, character is destiny, and for a healthy society, moral formation is essential. At a recent meeting hosted by the Making Caring Common project at Harvard, Brooks took note of some key ideas for teachers, parents, and "anyone who wants to build a society in which it is easier to be good":

• *A communitarian ethos* – A common belief today, says Richard Weissbourd, faculty director of Making Caring Common, is that young people's ultimate goal is individual achievement and happiness, versus the common good and caring for others. "Schools that focus on moral education," says Brooks, "stand athwart that tide. They have a sense of moral mission, that who you become is more important than what career track you pursue… They have rituals to mark transitions. They have retreats and group travel so that people can see one another before the makeup goes on."

• *Moral skill-building* – "Treating people well involves practicing certain skills, which can be taught just as the skills of carpentry and tennis can be taught," says Brooks. They include:

- The skills of understanding – listening well, eliciting people's life stories so we accurately see them and they feel seen;
- The skills of consideration and treating people well – offering criticism with care, asking for and offering forgiveness, breaking up with someone without crushing their hearts.

Brooks fears that many young people aren't learning these skills.

• *Exemplars* – "Admiration is one of the most powerful moral emotions," he says. Nelson Mandela revered Mahatma Gandhi; Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Standon admired each other. Kids need to study examples of true greatness. In the words of Warren Buffett, "Tell me who your heroes are, and I'll tell you how you're going to turn out."

• *Moral traditions* – "We are the lucky inheritors of many rich and varied moral traditions," says Brooks. "Schools can teach these traditions and students can decide which seem true to them. People become their best selves as they begin to embody the values of a specific moral tradition."

• *Self-confrontation* – Everyone has core faults they must confront and conquer, says Brooks. Dwight Eisenhower had a terrible temper; some people are egotistical, judgmental, or people pleasers. Parents and schools can help young people to acknowledge and try to fix their shortcomings.

• *Public service* – "Community service, whether it's feeding the poor, sitting with the homeless, or championing a cause, is not just to make society better," says Brooks; "it is done to usher a transformation in the person doing the service." This kind of service fosters emotional understanding – "the ability to be made indignant by injustice, outraged by cruelty, to know how to gracefully do things *with* people, not *for* people. That kind of knowledge comes through direct contact with the problems."

"The Character-Building Tool Kit" by David Brooks in *The New York Times*, January 10, 2025; Brooks can be reached at dabrooks@nytimes.com.

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2. Adam Grant on the Limits of Effort

In this *New York Times* article, Adam Grant (University of Pennsylvania) says that over 20 years of teaching he's heard many students make the case for a higher grade. But recently, supplicants have a new argument: *My grade doesn't reflect the effort I put in*. Students seem to believe they should be rewarded for how hard they tried, not their final level of mastery.

"This isn't Gen Z's fault," says Grant. It's a misunderstanding of Carol Dweck's work on growth versus fixed mindset. Yes, we need to praise kids' effort rather than innate ability, and the idea of malleable skills versus being a "natural" is important. But Grant believes the emphasis on hard work has been taken too far. "We've gone from commending effort to treating it as an end in itself," he says. "We've taught a generation of kids that their worth is defined primarily by their work ethic. We've failed to remind them that working hard doesn't guarantee doing a good job (let alone being a good person). And that does students a disservice."

How so? Because students who overvalue perseverance often keep plugging away at an ineffective strategy instead of working smarter and finding a better approach. An example: pulling an all-nighter just before an exam versus implementing retrieval practice and spacing out review over several days.

Grant acknowledges that when students argue about a low grade, it could be the teacher's fault: the pedagogy, expectations, workload, grading policies. But assuming those key elements are reasonable and well executed, students need to make sure they're using the most effective study strategies – and that might mean working *less* hard. "The true measure of learning is not the time and energy you put in," he says. "It's the knowledge and skills you take out."

"There's a reason we award Olympic medals to the athletes who swim the fastest, not the ones who train the hardest," Grant concludes. "What counts is not sheer effort but the progress and performance that result. Motivation is only one of multiple variables in the

achievement equation. Ability, opportunity, and luck count, too, yes, you can get better at anything, but you can't be great at everything."

"No, You Don't Get an A for Effort" by Adam Grant in *The New York Times*, December 26, 2024; Grant can be reached at grantad@wharton.upenn.edu. Here are five letters printed in the January 12, 2025 *New York Times* in response to this article.

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3. Peter Liljedahl on Giving Students a "Navigation Instrument"

In this chapter in *Building Thinking Classrooms in Mathematics*, Peter Liljedahl (Simon Fraser University) says he and his research colleagues frequently ask students this question:

> *So, you just finished a unit on ---. Was that unit just one big topic, or was it a collection of a bunch of smaller topics?*

"I have never asked a question that is so predictive of student performance on a unit test," says Liljedahl. Typically, about 15 percent of students answer that the unit was made up of subtopics and can name and describe those chunks; those students score above 90 percent on the upcoming test. Students who know there are subtopics but can't fully describe them score between 75 and 90 percent on the unit test. And students who say the unit is one big topic score below 75 percent.

Why the big difference? Because students who know the subtopics of the unit have a grasp of the content similar to the teacher's and can see specific areas where they are doing well and others where they have work to do. This is a key insight about formative assessments, says Liljedahl: "Information communicated from a teacher to a student who sees the topic as one big unit will only inform that student of *what it is that they can do*; but because they don't have a clear picture of the whole unit and all its subtopics, they cannot see what is still left to learn."

The missing piece in many classrooms, he believes, is finding a way "to help students see mathematical topics as collections of subtopics, sections, and/or special cases the way teachers do, and use this knowledge to inform themselves about what it is they can and cannot yet do." The analogy in navigating on land and sea is knowing where you are and where you are going. For students, "where they are is what they understand, know, and/or are able to do. And where they are going, within the scope of a unit of study, is what they have not yet learned, don't yet understand, and/or are not yet able to do."

To accomplish this, Liljedahl says, we need to give students a *navigation instrument* with the subtopics of a unit, including specific examples of what they are expected to learn in each one. After a lot of trial and error, he and his colleagues came up with a grid that looked like this for a unit on fractions, with examples of fractions problems. On this chart, only the first row is filled in, showing addition of fractions at the basic level (like denominators), the intermediate level (unlike denominators where one is a multiple of the other), and the advanced level (students need to find a common denominators):

FRACTIONS	BASIC	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED
Add and subtract proper fractions	1/5 + 3/5	1/4 + 3/8	3/5 + 1/7
Add and subtract mixed fractions			
Multiply and divide proper fractions			
Multiply and divide mixed fractions			
Solve order of operation tasks with proper and mixed fractions			
Solve contextual problems involving fractions			
Estimate solutions for problems involving fractions			

Linking specific questions to the outcomes of each row "turned out to be vital," says Liljedahl. "Although the language in the left-hand column is clear to us, students needed to see specific questions to fully understand what many of the outcomes meant." This was especially important in the primary grades, where students' reading proficiency was still developing, but was important right through high school.

The real power of navigation instruments comes when students have taken an end-of-unit review assessment prior to the final test. Students compare their answers to correct answers and mark each one on the navigation grid with these symbols:

- A check if it was correct;
- S if it was mostly correct but there was a silly mistake;
- H if it was answered correctly with help from the teacher or a classmate;
- G if it was answered correctly with a collaborative group;
- X if it was attempted and answered incorrectly;
- N if it was not attempted.

Having students do this after an interim assessment and then use the results to study for the final test, Liljedahl and his colleagues saw "astonishing results:" 50 to 70 percent of students saw immediate improvement of 10-15 percent; knowing where they were and where they were going was all they needed to improve. "I mean, now I know exactly what I need to work on," said one student. "I finally get what we are doing," said another. A third: "Are you kidding me? This is great. I know what we are doing now." This was especially helpful for low-achieving students; they made significant progress by focusing on the basic-level questions.

Why didn't all students improve? Some of them (about 15 percent) already knew what the subtopics were, so the navigation grid was redundant information and produced no

improvement. Another subgroup really didn't care about their learning or their grade. They already knew where they were (in the lower achievement range) and didn't have any ambition to improve. "That is not to say they couldn't be helped," says Liljedahl. "Just not in this way."

There was a third group of students who didn't benefit from getting specific information on their practice test: students who were achieving at a B level, and thought that was good enough. "Hey, I got a B," said one student, "without doing anything. Why would I want to put in a bunch of work to try to get an A?" Another: "A B is good enough for my mom." A third: "I'm not one to go the extra mile."

Isn't it enough for teachers to give students written feedback on their quizzes and tests? For students who understand the details of curriculum units, yes, but for the 85 percent of students who don't, says Liljedahl, this is not enough; they need to know where they are and where they are going, in detail.

Why the categories *Basic, Intermediate, Advanced*? Liljedahl and his colleagues started with *Easy, Medium, Hard*, and students found those were clearest. But teachers preferred *Basic/Intermediate/Advanced*, and students had no difficulty with it, so that's what was chosen. Another option considered was *Novice, Emergent, Expert*, but the researchers realized that those labels describe the abilities of the students rather than the complexity of the tasks.

What about students who see the three levels and are happy to do just the Basic level? This is a problem, says Liljedahl, "but the problem is with the students, not with the navigation instrument. And for this reason, the solution lies not in the instrument, but within the students." The teacher's challenge is working on students' basic motivation so they care about learning.

Does splitting up each curriculum unit into subtopics and levels of complexity keep students from seeing the bigger picture of mathematics? "This is a very good question," says Liljedahl. "We were concerned about this as well." But it turns out that for students to see math as a connected whole, they must first see the subcomponents. This was especially important for students who answered the initial question saying that the unit was one big topic: "They needed to see the distinctions to see the connections."

Doesn't stating the learning goal at the beginning of a lesson (as many teachers are required to do) take care of students understanding what they're doing? "In theory, yes," says Liljedahl. "In reality, however, it doesn't." Students need to see the detail and dive into assessing their own work and taking responsibility for improving it.

Isn't this the same as self-assessments that students are sometimes asked to do? The difference, says Liljedahl, is that most assessments ask students for their *opinion* of their abilities. Here, students are looking at their actual *achievement*. He and his colleagues found that students took the data seriously – and most of them rolled up their sleeves and went about improving their learning.

How can teachers know if they're doing a good job helping students know where they are and where they're going? At the end of a unit, suggests Liljedahl, have students make a review test on which they will get 100 percent. If they can do this, they know what they know. Then ask them to make a review test on which they will get only 50 percent. If they can do that, they know what they know *and* what they don't know.

"How We Use Formative Assessment in a Thinking Classroom" – Chapter 13 of *Building Thinking Classrooms in Mathematics* by Peter Liljedahl (Corwin, 2021); Liljedahl can be reached at liljedahl@sfu.ca; see Memo 992 for a summary of chapters 1-3 of the book, Memo 1013 for a summary of chapter 5.

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4. Can Teacher Evaluation Be a Positive Experience?

"The door clicks open," says Texas high-school teacher Elizabeth Chapman in this *Edutopia* article, "and I hear the jangle of a large set of keys and maybe the muted beep of a walkie-talkie before an administrator with a clipboard takes a seat in the back of my classroom. It's an observation." There's a ping of anxiety as Chapman readies herself for a possible critique – ironic, she muses, since she gives critical feedback to students every day.

Given teachers' anxieties and what is often a top-down, bureaucratic process, can supervision and evaluation be helpful? Yes, Chapman believes, if supervisors:

• *Follow up with a face-to-face conversation*. "When an appraiser takes the time to talk to me," she says, "I feel like they're investing in my success rather than just ticking an item off their to-do list. I appreciate the opportunity to check my understanding of the feedback and ask for additional support and suggestions." Even a short conversation can be helpful – and it needs to take place as soon as possible to allay the teacher's natural anxiety about what the observer thought and, if there are good suggestions, being able to put them to work right away.

• *Approach the process with humility and mutual respect*. "The challenges our students face are different from those of previous generations," says Chapman, "and what worked when an appraiser was teaching five or more years ago might not today" – plus, supervisors aren't experts in every subject area. But teachers can get valuable insights on pedagogy and curriculum if supervisors show they understand the complexity of teaching, are genuinely curious about a lesson, ask clarifying questions, listen to the teacher's insights, link feedback to the teacher's goals – and say thank you at the end of a debrief. It's also helpful if supervisors are in classrooms a lot and keep their presence low-key, putting students and teachers at ease.

• *Acknowledge the non-academic dimension*. Chapman remembers a time when a student stuffed his backpack and a soccer ball into his sweatshirt and arranged it on a desk to make it look like he was asleep. "He crouched on the floor out of sight, and when I went over to wake him up, he popped up and shouted, 'Surprise!' giggling gleefully." An assistant principal was in the room and Chapman braced herself for a critical comment on classroom management, but the AP complimented her on what was obviously a warm relationship with this student, an essential ingredient for learning. Whew!

• *Understand effective differentiation*. A student who isn't speaking up might have an IEP that has him participating in a different way, says Chapman, and a student who seems checked out might have overcome a lot just to be in school that day. An important part of post-observation conversations is sharing information about students like these, and whether their accommodations are working well.

• *Make feedback a two-way process*. "When an observer checks in with me to see if their advice is helpful and allows me to respond with honesty," says Chapman, "we both get

better at what we do." Better yet, teachers might take the lead, suggesting what supervisors should look for in a lesson and the feedback that would be most helpful. The potentially fraught evaluation process also benefits when supervisors acknowledge their own challenges and struggles. "Sometimes teachers feel resistant to the process of coaching because the dynamic implies that one person has all the problems and the other all the solutions," says Chapman. "Establishing the norm that everyone in the school community is working to get better can defuse that tension… Teachers and observers are on the same team."

"Collaborative Classroom Observations" by Elizabeth Chapman "Collaborative Classroom Observations" by Elizabeth Chapman in *Edutopia*, January 7, 2025; Chapman can be reached at echapman@houstonisd.org. For more insights on teacher performance evaluation, see this Best of Memo collection of 14 article summaries.

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5. How Good Are People at Estimating Population Groups?

In this *YouGov* article, Taylor Orth reported on two YouGov polls in which a representative sample of Americans were asked to estimate the percent that various groups represent in the U.S. population. Here's what emerged:

• People tend to vastly overestimate the size of minority groups:
- African Americans – estimate 41%, actual 12%
- Native Americans – estimate 27%, actual 1%
- Asian Americans – estimate 29%, actual 6%
- Jewish Americans – estimate 30%, actual 2%
- Muslim Americans – 27%, actual 1%
- Gay and Lesbian Americans – estimate 24%, actual 3%
- Bisexual Americans – estimate 21%, actual 4%
- Transgender Americans – estimate 21%, actual 0.6%

• People tend to underestimate the relative size of majority groups:
- Christian Americans – estimate 58%, actual 70%
- Americans with at least a high school degree – estimate 65%, actual 89%

• The most-accurate estimates were for groups whose real proportion is around 50%:
- American adults who are married – estimate 55%, actual 51%
- American adults who have at least one child – estimate 58%, actual 57%

• Members of minority groups weren't more accurate at estimating their own percentages:
- African Americans' estimate of their percent – estimate 52%, actual 12%
- First-generation immigrants' estimate of their percent – estimate 40%, actual 14%

• Americans are just as likely to be off the mark with less widely discussed groups, for example, U.S. adults who are left-handed – estimate 34%, actual 10-12%. Similar disparities emerged for estimates of adults who own a pet, have read a book in the last year, or reside in various cities and states (click the article link below for details).

"Why is demographic math so difficult?" asks Orth. One study found that when people are asked to make an estimate they are uncertain about, they tend to rescale based on their lived experience. A person who has met few people who are Muslim and many who are Christian, for example, tends to assume that their experience is not a true representation and scale their estimate toward what they perceive is the mean group size – 50%. This process leads people to systematically overestimate the size of small values and underestimate the size of large values.

Does correcting people's misperceptions of group size change their attitudes on related issues? A series of studies found that it does not. One example: indirectly and directly correcting people's erroneous estimates of the immigrant population of the U.S. (showing them that it was much lower than they thought) didn't make them more supportive of immigration.

"From Millionaires to Muslims, Small Subgroups of the Population Seem Much Larger to Many Americans" by Taylor Orth in *YouGov*, March 15, 2022; Orth can be reached at taylor.orth@yougov.com.

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6. Intriguing Technology Tools for Teachers

In this *Cult of Pedagogy* article, Jennifer Gonzalez joins with Marnie Diem in spotlighting these educational technology platforms:

• SchoolAI – Provides a "mission control" to give teachers full oversight of student interactions, including real-time insights on their progress, exit tickets, and tutoring help. The free version has a robust set of tools for teachers and students.

• Snorkl – "When students speak, they learn more," say Gonzalez and Diem. This platform prompts students (in more than 50 languages) to verbally and visually explain their thinking, then gives quick, personalized feedback. The teacher-facing section provides insights on students' strong and weak areas.

• Deck.Toys – Teachers create interactive lessons called Decks – visual pathways for students to follow as they complete different activities to understand the topic or skill being taught.

• Read&Write – When this toolbar is added to the Chrome browser, it makes available an array of features – for example, highlight any text and hear it read aloud at different speeds, transcribe speech to text, find the right word with a prediction tool, listen to a talking dictionary, view a picture dictionary.

• WeVideo – This cloud-based platform helps teachers assign video projects to students and support them as they create and edit videos individually or in groups, drawing on a library of video, image, and audio files.

• NotebookLM – The teacher can upload documents, slides, websites, videos, and text and this platform asks students questions, creates study guides, FAQs, summaries, and quizzes to check and reinforce their understanding. NotebookLM can also create a podcast from the uploaded sources.

• Padlet – The popular video app Flip (originally Flipgrid) has been retired by Microsoft, and Gonzalez and Diem recommend Padlet as a replacement. This "visual corkboard" can be used to post videos as well as images.

Gonzalez is now sharing a comprehensive set of tech recommendations on a continuously updated subscription site, Teacher's Guide to Tech.

"6 Ed Tech Tools to Try in 2025" by Jennifer Gonzalez and Marnie Diem in *Cult of Pedagogy*, January 8, 2025

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7. Look-Fors in Ed Tech Purchases

In this article in *Principal*, Jean-Claude Brizard (Digital Promise) suggests five criteria to keep in mind when shopping for ed technology. Products should be:

- Safe – Robust data privacy and security features to protect students' and educators' data and safeguard against unauthorized access and data breaches;
- Evidence-based – Grounded in rigorous research, empirical validation, and demonstrated effectiveness;
- Inclusive – Designed to allow equitable access for learners of diverse backgrounds and levels of preparation; not promoting stereotypes or creating new ones;
- Usable – Designed to provide a seamless digital experience for educators and students;
- Interoperable – Can be connected to other technologies in the school's digital ecosystem to inform instruction and personalize learning.

"Digital Transformation Demands Quality Tech Tools" by Jean-Claude Brizard in *Principal*, January/February 2025 (Vol. 104, #3, pp. 16-20)

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8. Recommended Young Adult Novels on African-American Kids in Love

In this *School Library Journal* article, Florence Simmons and Ellen Williams recommend these young adult novels about African-American youth in romantic relationships:

- *Till the Last Beat of My Heart* by Louangie Bou-Montes, grade 8 and up
- *Spells to Forget Us* by Aislinn Brophy, grade 9 and up
- *Reggie and Delilah's Year of Falling* by Elise Bryant, grade 8 and up
- *Whiteout* by Dhonielle Clayton, Tiffany Jackson, Nic Stone, Angie Thomas, Ashley Woodfolk, and Nicola Yoon, grade 8 and up
- *Twelfth Knight* by Alexene Farol Follmuth, grade 9 and up
- *Highly Suspicious and Unfairly Cute* by Talia Hibbert, grade 9 and up
- *Love Radio* by Ebony Ladelle, grade 9 and up
- *Escaping Mr. Rochester* by L.L. McKinney, grade 9 and up
- *The Davenports: More Than This* by Krystal Marquis, grade 8 and up
- *Pritty* by Keith Miller Jr., grade 10 and up

- *Twenty-Four Seconds from Now…: A Love Story* by Jason Reynolds, grade 9 and up
- *Chaos Theory* by Nic Stone, grade 10 and up

"Great Books: Young, Black, and in Love" by Florence Simmons and Ellen Williams in *School Library Journal*, January 2025 (Vol. 71, #1, pp. 36-38)

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9. Short Item

Integrating GenAI with Literacy Instruction – This detailed guide suggests how ChatGPT and other large language models can be used in K-12 reading and writing instruction in a way that maximizes productive struggle and minimizes unproductive struggle.

"A Guide to Integrating Generative AI for Deeper Literacy Learning" by AI for Education and Student Achievement Partners, November 21, 2024

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If you have feedback or suggestions, please e-mail kim.marshall48@gmail.com

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 HTMI 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
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
English Journal
Exceptional Children
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)
Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Principal
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