

Marshall Memo 1103

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
September 8, 2025

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Quotes of the Week

“I’m so glad my dad can’t text me all day.”

A student in a school that banned cellphones, quoted in [“To Ban or Not to Ban: Two Experts Sound Off on School Cellphone Restrictions”](#) by Emily Boddy and Annette Campbell Anderson in *Education Week*, September 2025 (Vol. 45, #2, pp. 28-29)

“Listen more. Judge less. Help us navigate this world.”

Young people’s response when asked what they needed from adults, quoted in [“Bots for Belonging?”](#) by Michelle Culver and Alison Lee in *Educational Leadership*, September 2025 (Vol. 83, #1, pp. 10-15)

“I’m giving you these comments because I have very high expectations, and I know you can reach them.”

David Yeager et al.’s suggested prelude to critical feedback to students, quoted in [“Feedback That Teaches and Connects”](#) by Andrew Housiaux (*ibid.*, pp. 22-27)

“Teaching students with below-grade books ensures that they never catch up.”

Timothy Shanahan (see item #7)

“Young people are easily deceived on the internet because they judge content by how it looks and sounds. With AI, the deception can be even greater because large language models are so good at making information feel persuasive even when it fabricates content and ignores context.”

Sam Wineburg and Nadav Ziv in [“What to Know About AI Misinformation: A Primer for Teachers \(Downloadable\)”](#) in *Education Week*, November 7, 2024

“Just because students have entered middle school doesn’t mean they no longer need recess. The need for breaks, connection, and play is a human need, not a child’s need.”

Catherine Ramstetter and Charlene Woodham Brickman (see item #2)

“All of us go off track now and then, in ways large and small. What usually saves us are real friends who won’t put up with our BS. An AI companion, by design, is likely to just go along for the ride.”

Paul Bloom in [“Losing Loneliness”](#) in *The New Yorker*, July 21, 2025

“If you don’t have supportive relationships at work, you feel alone half your life. But personal friendships with direct reports feel awkward.”

Dan Rockwell (see item #10)

“Think about it this way: people are doing the best they know how to do, and if you want them to do something different, they need to know what that is and they need to know how to do it, and if they don’t know either of those things, that’s your fault and not theirs.”

Isobel Stevenson in [Coaching Letter #219](#), September 6, 2025

1. Handling the Transition from Middle to High School

In this *Principal Leadership* article, Pittsburgh administrator Dan Beck describes five ways his 1,300-student high school supports incoming ninth graders:

- *Admin and counselor looping* – Students and their families are assigned to one of two assistant principals based on students’ last names and stay with the same AP through graduation. Two 9th-grade counselors also split their student caseloads by students’ last names, and students connect with a new counselor for grades 10-12. Relationship-building begins with 8th-grade orientation meetings before students arrive, and the assistant principals conduct personal visits for students with IEPs and service arrangements.

- *Junior-freshman mentoring* – Juniors apply and 60 are selected to act as mentors for incoming ninth graders. On Move Up Day, mentors wear red shirts and greet their mentees with the message, *We Got Your Back*, and also support them during Freshman Rush, when students are introduced to clubs and activities they can join. During the year, ninth graders meet with their mentors once a week during homeroom periods. Periodically there are social gatherings when mentors focus on teamwork, collaboration, and school spirit. There are also four senior student mentors who identify individual ninth graders who might need a stronger connection, support the junior mentors, and consult with teachers on questions and concerns.

- *Modified block schedule* – Tuesday through Friday, there’s a flex block in the middle of the day (dubbed Academic Resource Time) when students can get remediation or enrichment in a content area or on a specific assignment, connecting with teachers and counselors throughout the school year.

- *Ninth-grade homerooms* – First-year students are assigned to 20-student homerooms that meet Mondays (or Day One) for 25 minutes, the other days of the week for 10 minutes. Homeroom teachers get to know students and deliver a set of lessons on themes, including “High School 101,” study strategies, test-taking skills, and relationship-building.

- *Freshman seminar* – Incoming ninth graders meet in groups with their counselor during a period on their Day One schedule to address common transitioning challenges and connect with other students assigned to that counselor. Topics include handling the demands of high school, good study habits, social media awareness, and postsecondary planning. In the latter part of the year, students meet individually with their counselor (parents are invited to join) to discuss their sophomore schedules and long-term plans.

[“When the Only Constant Is Change”](#) by Dan Beck in *Principal Leadership*, September 2025 (Vol. 26, #1, pp. 22-25); Beck can be reached at dbeck@uscsd.k12.pa.us.

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2. Should Middle Schools Have Recess?

“Just because students have entered middle school doesn’t mean they no longer need recess,” say Catherine Ramstetter and Charlene Woodham Brickman (Successful Healthy Children) in *Principal Leadership*. They point to these research-based reasons:

- The American Academy of Pediatrics says that breaks from cognitive work help consolidate newly acquired information for later retention and retrieval.
- Recess helps adolescents deal with puberty’s biological, social, and academic stressors, and is especially helpful for students who’ve experienced adverse childhood events.
- Kids need time to engage in student-directed activities that promote social competence and protect against victimization, substance abuse, and poor mental health.
- Face-to-face time with peers is especially important given pervasive cellphone use and the decline in time spent socializing with peers outside of school.
- Time for informal interaction can contribute to an inclusive, positive school culture and a sense of connection to the school, which extends to academic learning.

But with middle schools’ tight bell schedules and the common recess-is-for-elementary-school mindset, recess often doesn’t happen in middle schools. Ramstetter and Brickman have these suggestions for school leaders:

- Present the evidence and seek staff buy-in, making the case that unstructured breaks support students’ growing need for autonomy, balanced with the need for safety.
- Provide multiple locations that are conducive to social interaction.
- Include students in planning, asking for their interests and ideas.
- Explore having recess before lunch, which reduces food waste.

- If recess is right after lunch, let students transition when they're finished eating, versus dismissing them by table.
- Set age-appropriate expectations on what students can and cannot do during recess.
- Get students involved in managing equipment – for example, are soccer balls inflated and where are they stored?

[“The Case for Middle School Recess”](#) by Catherine Ramstetter and Charlene Woodham Brickman in *Principal Leadership*, September 2025 (Vol. 26, #1, pp. 19-21)

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3. Dealing with Microaggressions in the Workplace

In this *Academy of Management Review* article, Summer Jackson (Harvard Business School) and Basima Tewfik (MIT Sloan School of Management) say workplace microaggressions happen all too often – seemingly innocuous statements made by a person holding a dominant social identity toward another person with a marginalized social identity – for example:

- A white person asks a Hispanic colleague how they learned to speak English so well.
- A man casually refers to female colleagues as “girls.”

“The person saying these things might not know they’ve done anything wrong,” says Jackson, “but for the recipient, it’s like a lightning bolt that calls into question their social identity, makes them feel subordinate, and makes them wonder, ‘How could this person say this to me?’” Microaggressions can sever relationships, cause chronic stress, hurt morale, and push colleagues to quit.

Jackson and Tewfik say that despite people’s best intentions, cultural blind spots and implicit beliefs inevitably lead people to unwittingly say offensive things. “It’s really hard to know how people’s social identities are going to be salient to them and all the different historical stereotypes that might be associated with them,” says Jackson.

Because of that reality, she and Tewfik believe prevention is the wrong approach. Instead they offer a framework for using the aftermath of a microaggression to address the issue and form a stronger connection, build trust, and actually strengthen relationships. This is analogous to *kintsugi*, the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery with a golden lacquer, making it even more beautiful than before. Their suggestions:

- The object of the microaggression assesses the relationship. “You have to move out of the ‘fight or flight’ reaction into curiosity,” says Jackson. “Yes, protect yourself in the moment, but then reflect on whether the relationship is worth preserving.”

- *How much has this person valued an equitable workplace culture?*
- *How close and connected did I feel to this person beforehand?*
- *How likely am I to work with this person in the future?*

If the relationship is worth working on, the next step is...

- Approach the person with a clear and honest explanation focusing on the words spoken and feelings they raised – not an attack on the person’s character – for example, “When

you said X, it made me feel Y. And it made me wonder if you see me the same way you see others on the team.”

- Then it’s time for the other person to go through a similar assessment of the value of the relationship and engage in some introspection. They may feel uncomfortable and inclined to defend or justify the behavior, says Jackson. “It can be confusing to someone who may not realize how their comment would be interpreted. Most people like to think they are good people, and so it can cause a threat to someone’s self-image.” They need to get past the fight-or-flight reaction and say something like, “I didn’t realize it landed that way. Help me understand.” Under the right conditions, a productive conversation can take place. “It’s a real opportunity,” says Jackson, “to learn something new about another person and incorporate that understanding into your own ability to be a better colleague.”

- Managers can help heal microaggressions – at the right moment and with curiosity and deference. “If you try to intervene in the moment,” says Jackson, “it can escalate the situation. Whereas if you meet the person later, you can ask, ‘I noticed in the meeting that you reacted to so-and-so’s behavior. What was going on then, and how can I help?’” Such conversations aren’t easy, she says, but they can lead to breakthroughs in restoring and transforming relationships, even unleashing creativity and collaboration.

[“It Takes Two to Untangle: Illuminating How and Why Some Workplace Relationships Adapt While Others Deteriorate After a Workplace Microaggression”](#) by Summer Jackson and Basima Tewfik in *Academy of Management Review*, March 10, 2025; the authors can be reached at sjackson@hbs.edu and btewfik@mit.edu.

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4. A Different Kind of Special Education Classroom in Nebraska

(Originally titled “From Stigma to Strength in Special Education”)

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Megan Pitrat describes her difficult start as a teacher in rural Nebraska. “I was gobsmacked when students didn’t even want to enter my special education classroom,” she says. “Why did students loathe being in my super fun and adorably decorated classroom?” Talking to students, she learned that being labeled “SpEd” stigmatized them with their peers and kept them “from getting the help they needed to grow academically, socially, emotionally, and behaviorally.”

To her great chagrin, Pitrat realized she was perpetuating the same deficit thinking she herself had experienced as a child with disabilities. “In trying to uphold students’ rights to a free and appropriate education,” she says, “schools have embraced the medical model of disability as a way to label and swiftly connect students to services. But this model views difference as deficit, casting disability as a problem for teachers to fix.”

She was determined to change this dynamic, and had two lucky breaks. First, Covid-19 spurred the school to purchase Chromebooks for all students. Second, the arrival of two wheelchair-using students meant Pitrat had to move to a more accessible and spacious unused space. She called her new classroom the Learning Lab and reconfigured it “as a welcoming

space for all students that values inclusion, creativity, collaboration, and student-driven inquiry.” Here’s how it was used every week:

- Periods 1-4: A flexible drop-in space available to any teacher to bring students for co-taught creative learning activities, student-driven inquiry projects, and assessment accommodations, assisted by paraprofessionals. “Students with IEPs receive their special education supports seamlessly within these collaborative activities,” says Pitrat. “This open access means students with disabilities learn alongside peers who choose to be there, normalizing the space as one for all learners.”

- Period 5: A resource study hall, with students with disabilities getting focused academic support. Students from general education can join if they have a pass from their teacher, and it’s a welcoming place for homework help, executive functioning skill-building, makerspace projects, or independent reading. Students often don’t know who has special needs.

- Period 6: Specialized math and skills support – Students work on organizing creative writing, preparing speeches and presentations, and get help managing time so they finish assignments.

- Periods 7-8: Social-emotional regulation and specialized instruction – This period begins with a check-in, work on the Zones of Regulation framework, and spiral math review and literacy work, including project-based learning.

Can other teachers implement this kind of program? Pitrat encourages special educators to start small, take advantage of unused spaces (as she did), and work closely with general education teachers to create a flexible, inclusive program. “Above all,” she says, “keep an eye on how students feel about belonging, connection, and whether they choose to use the space for support. These signs show the real impact of breaking down stigma and creating a place where all learners feel welcome and empowered.”

[“From Stigma to Strength in Special Education”](#) by Megan Pitrat in *Educational Leadership*, September 2025 (Vol. 83, #1, pp. 50-55)

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5. Classroom Desk Arrangements for a Variety of Teaching Goals

In this *Edutopia* article, Youki Terada says student desk configurations can have a profound effect on classroom dynamics – and can help keep students engaged and out of mischief. He suggests eleven different arrangements (click the article link below for diagrams) and describes the pedagogy each can enable:

- *Desks in rows* – All students facing the front may seem old-fashioned, but it’s the best layout when students need to pay attention to all-class instruction, teacher modeling, or the first few moments of independent practice. The downside is that students at the back may feel distant and become disengaged – a reason for a strategic seating chart.

- *Horseshoes* – A curved, U-shaped layout improves lines of sight and encourages classwide discussion and student-to-student connections, because kids can see their classmates.

The teacher can also circulate more freely, gaining proximity to all students with fewer steps. The only drawback of this arrangement is that it takes up a lot of space and, with a large class, an inner loop may be necessary.

- *Clusters* – Groups of desks, usually four facing inward, are best when students are doing cooperative work. This layout helps build social-emotional skills. Students need to practice shifting from one configuration to another (*Move to your quads*) so that reconfiguring is quick and minimally chaotic.

- *Jigsaw groups* – This layout is for two-part cooperative learning lessons, where students move from their home group to “expert” groups for part of the class, learn about their segment, then move back to their jigsaw groups and teach groupmates their specialty content.

- *L-shaped clusters* – Students face the teacher for direct instruction and then can see and hear their groupmates for collaborative work. This configuration works for many different activities across subjects and grade levels – direct instruction, group work, team quizzes, student presentations, even whole-class discussions. It’s a good choice for classrooms with heavy desks that are more difficult to move.

- *Socratic circles* – Desks are in two concentric circles for Socratic seminars, with the outer group observing a discussion among inner-circle students and then providing feedback. An enhancement is having a “hot seat” in the inner circle to which students in the outer ring can move if they want to add to the conversation or move it in a new direction.

- *Conference/banquet seats* – Forming two rows of facing desks is helpful for class debates, where teams compete at making reasoned arguments. This configuration sends a message that all students’ opinions matter and everyone is invited to participate.

- *Technology stations* – When some or all students are working at computers, it’s important for the teacher to be able to see all screens and head off the temptation for students to sneak to YouTube and TikTok.

- *Kinesthetic seats* – “Sitting for hours isn’t just unhealthy,” says Terada; “it also can erode a student’s ability to stay focused.” Some classes have bouncy balls, standing desks, kneel-and-sit seating, which, studies show, can significantly improve on-task behavior.

- *Flexible seating* – Some classrooms have couches, beanbag chairs, standing desks, floor cushions, and coffee tables in addition to traditional desks. These add a “homey” feel to the classroom, accommodate certain students’ needs, and allow for independent activities that aren’t part of a traditional lesson.

- *Learning zones* – The class is divided into areas for different kinds of learning – a discovery zone, arts and crafts, supplies, manipulatives, a quiet zone, computers, games, puzzles, and fun books and magazines.

[“11 Smart Student Desk Layouts”](#) by Youki Terada in *Edutopia*, August 22, 2025

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6. Jennifer Gonzalez on Answering Student Questions with a Question

“One of our main goals as teachers should be to build students’ independence,” says Jennifer Gonzalez in this *Cult of Pedagogy* article/podcast. “The more we do for our students and the less they do for themselves, the more we perpetuate a cycle where they become helpless and dependent on us.”

Gonzalez kicks herself for answering too many student questions when she was a teacher. “I used to think of them as baby birds in a nest, with all of their beaks open, waiting for the mother bird to feed them,” she says. “I remember feeling like I was constantly racing around trying to meet everyone’s needs.” It’s quicker to answer the question than to push students to do more of the work, but “that short-term efficiency comes at a long-term cost,” she says. “It keeps us working harder than we need to and prevents students from developing the habits that will make them more independent.”

Gonzalez’s suggestion to her former haggard self and many other overextended teachers: when students ask a certain kind of question, pause and answer them with questions that build self-sufficiency. And pose your questions with the right tone of voice and a smile, not in a way that embarrasses kids. Some examples:

- *Where might you find that information?*
- *Where on the handout could you look for that?*
- *What resource could help you answer that question?*
- *What is our task completion routine?* (when students ask what to do when they’re finished).

The last question-and-answer exchange points to an important facet of classroom organization: an established routine and resources that will engage students when they finish early. For many other student questions, a redirecting question assumes clear instructions and readily available resources.

[“EduTip 22: Answer More Questions with Questions”](#) by Jennifer Gonzalez in *Cult of Pedagogy*, September 7, 2025; Gonzalez can be reached at gonzjenn@cultofpedagogy.com.

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7. Timothy Shanahan on Boosting Middle-School Literacy Skills

In this online article, Timothy Shanahan (University of Illinois/Chicago) responds to a question on disappointing middle-school reading scores. Phonics instruction in K-2 can produce good reading scores in grades 3 or 4, he says, but that alone doesn’t produce good readers in middle school. His recommendations:

- Increase the amount of high-quality literacy instruction in grades 3-8. Students need a full two hours a day of reading and writing. It’s a mistake to cut back on literacy time in the upper elementary grades, says Shanahan, which many schools do. Students in those grades need explicit instruction in fluency, comprehension, vocabulary, morphology, spelling patterns, and multi-syllable words.

- Invest in good literacy PD for teachers in grades 3-8. It's not enough to focus on primary-grade literacy instruction, he says. Middle and upper grades need an equally strong push on reading, writing, speaking, and listening, supported by well-trained educators.

- Use grade-level texts with scaffolding. Too many teachers are using texts at below-level students' reading levels, says Shanahan: "Research shows that to be a bad idea... Teaching students with below-grade books ensures that they never catch up."

- For middle-school students who are deficient in phonics, teach it in Tier 2 pullout classes. But don't stop there, he says: "Identifying kids who fail to reach the decoding threshold makes sense. So does providing targeted instruction aimed at improving more-advanced reading skills. Too often when remedial programs focus on phonics, they just keep teaching and reteaching those basic decoding skills – not what the research says is missing."

["Our Middle School Reading Scores Are Dropping – Help!"](#) by Timothy Shanahan in Shanahan on Literacy, September 6, 2025; Shanahan can be reached at shanahan@uic.edu.

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8. The Power of a Brief Social-Belonging Intervention

(Originally titled "The Power of Student-to-Student Advice")

In *Educational Leadership*, Bryan Goodwin (McREL International) describes the power of a very short intervention with high-school students. Here's what University of Virginia researchers presented to 9th graders at a summer orientation:

- A brief video of juniors and seniors explaining how their initial anxieties about not fitting in at school dissipated over time.
- Researchers emphasized that such anxieties are widely shared and temporary.
- Students wrote a letter to future 9th graders reassuring them that they, too, would find their place in the school.

The intervention boosted students' attendance, academic performance, behavior, and sense of belonging at school (compared to a control group). Black and Hispanic students had especially positive gains.

["The Power of Student-to-Student Advice"](#) by Bryan Goodwin "The Power of Student-to-Student Advice" by Bryan Goodwin in *Educational Leadership*, September 2025 (Vol. 83, #1, pp. 6-7); Goodwin can be reached at bgoodwin@mcrel.org.

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9. AI to the Rescue in a Strategic Planning Impasse

In this article in *School Administrator*, retired superintendent David Engle describes working with a Washington school district's strategic planning team. The participants were at loggerheads over rival goal statements on teaching and learning, and neither side would budge. "Small-group discussions led nowhere," says Engle. "The debate dragged on, and I could feel

frustration mounting. As the district’s consultant, I was starting to feel desperate. We were wordsmithing ourselves into a standstill.”

Then he made a bold suggestion: use artificial intelligence. The group assented and he snapped a photo of the two goal statements and fed them into ChatGPT with the following prompt: *Combine these into a single, coherent statement that captures the strengths of both.* A few seconds later, “an elegantly crafted summary appeared on my screen,” says Engle. “The AI-generated statement was seamless, resolving the exact points the committee had been struggling with for hours. It wasn’t just functional. It was better.”

The group was impressed, but wanted to add some local color. In just a few more minutes, the teaching and learning goal statement was done – a process that had seemed out of reach a short time earlier. Engle asked the group what they thought about using AI in other K-12 contexts. One teacher on the committee said this experience had changed her entire view of her work; AI wasn’t replacing her – it was *amplifying* her thinking. “Many in the room,” says Engle, “began to see AI not as a threat or even a tool but as an extension of their human intelligence.”

[“Busting a Stalemate in Strategic Planning”](#) by David Engle in *School Administrator*, September 2025 (Vol. 82, #8, p. 12); Engle can be reached at dsengle@gmail.com.

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10. Leaders Setting Limits on Personal Friendships

“If you don’t have supportive relationships at work, you feel alone half your life,” says Dan Rockwell in *Leadership Freak*. While it’s important to seek out friendships with peers, having friend-type links with direct reports causes at least four problems:

- Favoritism – If you have personal ties with some, others will feel left out. And if a friend is promoted, you’ll be accused of playing favorites. “Perception is reality,” says Rockwell.
- Feedback – With a friend, there’s a tendency to tolerate flaws, not step up to mediocre performance, and hold back on sharing “hard truths.” This is bad for the organization, and people notice. You have to be able to give tough feedback when necessary.
- Venting – “Don’t spill your guts out to someone who reports to you,” says Rockwell. “Work friends aren’t personal confidants.”
- Power gaps – “Power changes relationships,” he says. “You have authority; they don’t. Power invites manipulation from both directions. Sometimes it hides in supportive relationships.”

Accept that you’re not one of the gang, Rockwell concludes. “But you can lead with warmth. You can care deeply. You can be approachable, kind, and clear.”

[“Can the Boss Have Friends At Work?”](#) by Dan Rockwell in *Leadership Freak*, September 3, 2025; Rockwell can be reached at dan@leadershipfreak.com.

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11. Short Item:

A Video on Venting Anger – Following up on item #7 in last week’s Memo, here’s a [BBC video](#) in which Sophie Kjaervik vividly explains the research that she, Brad Bushman, and colleagues did on the fact that venting anger isn’t the best way to defuse it.

“Feeling Angry? Venting Actually Doesn’t Help” by Sophie Kjaervik, BBC, April 16, 2024; Kjaervik can be reached at sophie.lyngesen.kjervik@nkvt.no.

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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 early Tuesday (there are 50 issues a year). Every week there's a podcast and HTML version. Artificial intelligence is not used.

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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