

Marshall Memo 861

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
November 9, 2020

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Quotes of the Week

“One of the top motivators for people is making progress on a meaningful goal. That doesn’t mean fast progress. It means that if you have a goal that speaks to you and you can see that your work is contributing to forward movement, that can be as motivating as a raise, as motivating as praise from the boss or vacation time. What we really want, as human beings, is to do something that matters.

Dan Heath (see item #1)

“Celebrating diverse holidays or honoring cultural heroes won’t close achievement gaps; educators must understand students’ cultural backgrounds, connect with their experiences, and create meaningful learning goals that meet students’ needs.”

Carol Larson and Tyrone Martinez-Black (see item #2)

“The ultimate goal of education is to prepare students to be independent and resourceful, to take action when parents or teachers are not around to intervene or offer help, and to find ways to handle issues or problems that they encounter in daily life. We want children to become self-directed learners, set their own goals, and be responsible for their behavior.”

Fang Gao (see item #4)

“If you’re lost in the desert and in need of fresh water, you should look for animal tracks. That’s the expert consensus – follow the tracks, and they’ll lead you to a water source. Similar advice might apply to the search for good schools: perhaps we just need to follow the tracks, specifically those of teachers who’ve left one school to work in another.”

Jeremy Glazer in [“The Schools Teachers Choose”](#) in *Phi Delta Kappan*, November 2020 (Vol. 102, #3, pp. 14-17); Glazer is at glazer@rowan.edu.

1. Dan Heath on Preempting Problems

In this *School Administrator* feature, Wisconsin superintendent Joe Sanfelippo interviews Dan Heath (Duke University) about his new book, *Upstream: the Quest to Solve Problems Before They Happen* (Simon & Schuster, 2020). Heath talks about “problem blindness” – a fatalistic belief that a problematic situation is what it is. For example, in the 1990s only 52.4 percent of Chicago high-school students graduated. Educators were trying, often doing heroic work, but they were trapped in a short-term problem-solving mindset and not addressing larger forces that were at work. Heath uses the time-honored story about pulling drowning children out of a river and not going upstream to deal with the source of the problem. He suggests several steps:

- *Do significant work up front.* “In the daylight hours, you fish kids out of the river,” says Heath, “then you moonlight with some upstream forays... to get ourselves out of emergency mode.” He gives the example of getting his two young daughters into their shoes as the family struggles to leave the house in the morning. It’s quicker for the adults to just do it for them, says Heath, but “at some point, I’ve got to start doing the harder work of teaching them to put their own shoes on. Downstream is fast, but upstream is permanent.”

- *Start small.* A researcher observing nurses in a hospital noticed they were constantly scrambling to improvise solutions to unexpected problems – equipment malfunctioning, a medication not available. “They actually prided themselves on those skills, that resourcefulness,” says Heath. “They didn’t need to run to the boss for answers; they could handle things themselves.” But they were stuck in that mode; in fact, the researcher didn’t observe a single instance where nurses addressed the systemic nature of their frantic daily routine, which meant they were on the same treadmill week after week, month after month.

The solution: carving out a brief period every day when nurses and doctors had a “safety huddle” in which they reviewed a near-miss from the previous day – a patient who almost got the incorrect medication dose, a procedure that came close to going wrong. “It might be a quick 20-minute meeting,” says Heath. “But that brief escape from firefighting mode often can be enough to start making progress at solving problems rather than merely reacting to them.”

- *Motivate people around a long-term goal.* It’s important to realize that downstream work is obligatory – you have to jump in and save a drowning child, or put out a fire in your house. “By contrast,” says Heath, “upstream work – preventive work – is often chosen. Upstream work is a kind of enlightened volunteer activity, in the sense that it’s probably not in the explicit job description of any of the people who will do the work.” The trick is to find the

small number of people who are motivated to go above and beyond a few hours a week and focus on more systemic, long-term change that will make everyone's life better. Sanfelippo says that in his high school, a team of teachers tackled the problem of sophomores falling behind and having to retake classes as juniors. Faculty members focused on the freshman year, pinpointed where students began to fall behind, and provided personal support to prevent the dominoes from beginning to fall.

- *Analyze root causes.* Heath describes how Chicago high schools managed a 25-26 percentage point increase in high-school graduation rates. It started with an attitude shift among teachers and administrators from fatalism to agency: *Yes, these students' lives are complicated. Yes they face disadvantages, but we want them to graduate. We're going to do something about it.* Thought leaders in the district realized it was possible to predict with 80 percent accuracy which ninth graders were going to drop out and which would graduate. It also became clear that certain discipline policies, especially two-week suspensions for relatively minor infractions, were putting students on the road to failure. "Did any of those assistant principals who were doling out suspensions have any inkling that they might have just doomed that student to never graduating from high school?" asks Heath. "Of course not. But this is the thing about systems: you've got to get really close to them before you understand their true consequences. So they fixed a lot of those discipline policies to be more graduation-friendly."

- *Get close to the problem.* In Chicago, the key to improvement was "freshman success teams" that met once or twice a month and looked at students one by one to see who was off track for graduation. *Okay, what's the story with Kevin? Well, last time we met, Kevin was failing math, but we got him some extra tutoring and he got a C on his last exam. That's great, he's making progress. What about Keisha? Well, we learned that every morning, Keisha has to walk her little sister to school, and that's making her late almost every day. So we're going to try to get her switched out of English first period to P.E., so if she ends up failing it, she doesn't fail a core course, which is one of the components of Freshmen on Track.* "Student by student, school by school, meeting by meeting, they started to make slow progress on these metrics," says Heath. "Four years later, those students they'd kept on track as freshmen started graduating in higher and higher numbers." Of course it's also important for administrators to be a frequent presence in classrooms, corridors, and cafeterias, establishing relationships and keeping their eyes open.

- *Use data for learning.* Doing that is much more productive than using data for inspection – to judge, punish, or reward people. Test scores are a classic example; we get the results and are often disappointed, so we start planning how to raise them next time. Chicago high schools used a better way, says Heath, giving a front-line team "the fresh, real-time data it needs to improve. The data come without a sense of judgment." Teams had week-by-week information on students' grades, attendance, and conduct, and were able to track progress toward a goal that was several years over the horizon.

- *Convey urgency without impatience.* Leaders' posture is important, says Heath. They need to be *impatient for action but patient for outcomes.* "One of the top motivators for people," he believes, "is making progress on a meaningful goal. That doesn't mean fast

progress. It means that if you have a goal that speaks to you and you can see that your work is contributing to forward movement, that can be as motivating as a raise, as motivating as praise from the boss or vacation time. What we really want, as human beings, is to do something that matters. And upstream work is really the only engine for permanent improvement in schools and communities.”

[“Problem Blindness: A Conversation with Dan Heath”](#) by Joe Sanfelippo in *School Administrator*, November 2020 (Vol. 77, #10, pp. 17-23),
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2. Developing a Theory of Change to Close the EL Achievement Gap

In this article in *Principal*, Carol Larson (Christel House Schools/Indianapolis) and Tyrone Martinez-Black (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) say that too many schools make the mistake of identifying a problem or a goal and going straight to action planning. “This approach is like throwing pasta at the wall to see what sticks,” say Larson and Martinez-Black. What’s missing, with complex challenges, is an analysis of the root causes of the problem and a well-thought-out theory of change.

On the issue of inequitable outcomes for English learners, school leaders might start by asking questions like these:

- Why are there achievement differences between English learners and non-ELs?
- Why are there fewer ELs in Advanced Placement classes?
- Why are there fewer ELs applying to college?

Research and careful observation help unpack the problem and develop a comprehensive theory of change. For example, ELs’ lower college application rate might be the result of a tracking policy that limits ELs’ access to college-ready curriculum content, which indicates the need for changes in scheduling, student placement, and academic content. As the theory of change is implemented, progress needs to be monitored so educators can respond to unexpected challenges; the theory evolves as new information and circumstances dictate.

An essential tool for understanding problems like this is the *equity audit* – an in-depth assessment to see whether resources, learning outcomes, and other factors are out of kilter for certain groups of students. An equity audit looks into whether all students have similar access to effective teaching, are over- or under-represented in special education and other programs, whether there are achievement differences among student subgroups, as well as stakeholder groups’ participation on school boards, parent-teacher groups, and other decision-making bodies. An equity audit should also survey students’ perceptions of school climate, family involvement, classroom practices, and access to resources.

It’s important, say Larson and Martinez-Black, to understand the specific needs of each school’s English learners. “EL students are a heterogeneous group that varies by native language, culture, socioeconomic status, English fluency, birthplace, and more,” they say. “Examination of student development within these contexts helps identify barriers that might interfere with learning and equitable outcomes.” A robust theory of action needs to take into account the community’s beliefs about learning English, family members’ ability to help

children with homework, and the “funds of knowledge” that students acquire outside of school – where they’ve traveled, their families’ routines, and their interests, activities, and cultural and religious beliefs.

Having done an equity audit and formed an accurate picture of the English learners in a school or district, it’s possible to formulate a theory of change. Three areas of focus:

- *The school environment* – This includes school policies, funding, programming, curriculum, instruction, assessments, school culture, and, say Larson and Martinez-Black, “structural discriminatory practices that might have been institutionalized over time, such as the *de facto* segregation of some EL students.” An example: what steps can be taken to increase ELs’ participation in gifted and accelerated classes?

- *Professional learning* – PD should be informed by the needs assessment, addressing unconscious biases against EL students and the type of culturally responsive approaches that will lead to successful learning in classrooms. “Celebrating diverse holidays or honoring cultural heroes won’t close achievement gaps,” say Larson and Martinez-Black; “educators must understand students’ cultural backgrounds, connect with their experiences, and create meaningful learning goals that meet students’ needs.”

- *Family and community engagement* – A key part of an effective theory of change is the participation of multiple stakeholders. This means involving community agencies, engaging local libraries, organizing translators, and eliminating barriers to EL parents participating in the educational effort. “You must know your parents to find effective ways to encourage participation,” say Larson and Martinez-Black. “Communicate the benefits of parent involvement while providing a welcoming school culture.”

“Speaking Their Language” by Carol Larson and Tyrone Martinez-Black in *Principal*, November/December 2020 (Vol. 100, #2, pp. 54-57)

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3. Personalizing Instruction for Students in a Remote Environment

For this *Education Week* article, Mark Lieberman asked dual-language English teacher Tricia Proffitt to explain how she personalizes instruction, and Proffitt gave details on how she’s dealt with three quite different students in her all-remote Illinois middle school this year.

- *Student #1: Very limited English* – This first student arrived from South America less than a year ago with very limited English speaking skills, not yet able to read English. At first, the student was overwhelmed by the instructions for daily lessons, so Proffitt began using Google Translate to e-mail assignments and clarify expectations. The girl’s work plan is aimed at the same standards as the rest of the class, but geared to her current achievement level; if the class is reading a short story, the girl reads a short story in her native language. Proffitt uses *Learn That Word*, an online vocabulary platform, to focus on specific English skills for this student while the rest of the class works on different exercises in the platform. There are hyperlinks to online assignments to streamline finding materials in the student’s Chromebook. “She’s working on the skills that she can handle, and she’s doing great,” says Proffitt.

• *Student #2: Ahead of the class* – From the first day of school, this student stood out with her vocabulary and grammar knowledge, high-quality work, and enthusiasm for learning and helping classmates. Proffitt used online programs to provide assignments that allow advanced students to move ahead in the curriculum. She says to the class, “If you know what you’re doing and you want to move ahead, you can,” and this student (and others who have mastered basic assignments) get the message. High-achieving students are also pulled into separate videoconferences for more in-depth discussions, and there’s a website where they can privately publish written work, add graphics, and supplement the text with a read-aloud. Proffitt reports that her advanced students are thriving.

• *Student #3: Not engaged* – In the early weeks of school, this student participated minimally, then stopped taking part in class activities. After confirming that this was also true in the boy’s other classes, Proffitt communicated with his mother and learned that the family was overwhelmed. “He felt that he had already dug such a big hole, so what was the point,” said Proffitt. She reassured the boy that making progress was what counted, even if his pace was slower than the rest of the class. She picked out two important assignments and asked him to focus on those, skipping practice exercises he’d missed. Then she sat with him in a video conference and worked through some of the material with him. Six weeks into the school year, the boy was requesting meetings with Proffitt, participating in synchronous sessions, and e-mailing on no-school days to clear up confusion and request additional assignments.

[“Tailored Teaching”](#) by Mark Lieberman in *Education Week*, November 4, 2020

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4. Three Ways to Extend and Deepen the Education of Young Children

(Originally titled “Beyond Counting Apples”)

In this article in *Educational Leadership*, Fang Gao (Shenyang Pharmaceutical University, China, and Purdue University) remembers an end-of-semester math test question when she was a first grader in China (this one question counted for 20% of the grade): *There are 14 apples on the tree. A hungry monkey eats 5 apples. How many apples are left?* Gao said there was no clear answer, silently reasoning that when the monkey plucked apples from the tree, other apples might fall to the ground. She flunked the test, scored last in the class, and her parents were summoned by the teacher and told that Gao might have a learning disability.

“Although 30 years have passed, I can still recall that gloomy night,” she says, “how my parents blamed me for not understanding the intention of such a simple question to test subtraction skills. No one asked me to explain the reasoning behind my answer, and no one admired my creative interpretation.” Gao began to rein in her active imagination and work in ways that produced “correct” answers, got high grades, and pleased adults. What a shame, she says, because the primary grades “are an exciting time of rapid growth and cognitive and emotional development, and of building a solid foundation for independence, self-confidence, and self-reliance.”

Gao believes there are three domains that nurture students' emerging literacy and math development and build key social-emotional competencies:

- *Unconstrained skills* – Constrained skills are straightforward to teach and measure – the alphabet, phonics, spelling rules, sentence mechanics – and often take up most classroom time. These skills are necessary but not sufficient to mastering the deeper and ultimately more important unconstrained areas – background knowledge, critical reading, meaning making. “Research shows that in the long run, it is the unconstrained capacities that most influence children’s cognitive, academic, and social-emotional development,” says Gao. “They aid in cultivating students’ problem-solving skills and help them take more initiative, ownership, and responsibility.” If unconstrained skills are shortchanged in the early grades, children pay the price in the years ahead.

- *Recognition, action, and reflection literacy* – Recognition literacy is basic decoding and comprehension. Action literacy links language to particular contexts – for example, being able to retell a story in their own words. Reflection literacy is being able to produce new knowledge, imagine, critique, inquire, analyze values and understandings, and apply knowledge in new situations. Teachers need to work on all three kinds of literacy simultaneously.

- *Empowering autonomy* – Teachers and parents want kids to listen to directions and follow rules, which is reasonable. “Nevertheless,” says Gao, “the ultimate goal of education is to prepare students to be independent and resourceful, to take action when parents or teachers are not around to intervene or offer help, and to find ways to handle issues or problems that they encounter in daily life. We want children to become self-directed learners, set their own goals, and be responsible for their behavior... Self-discipline can only be learned through empowering autonomy. Sufficient amounts of autonomy in decision making and time control are indispensable for students and should be taught and fostered at a young age.”

[“Beyond Counting Apples”](#) by Fang Gao in *Educational Leadership*, November 2020 (Vol. 78, #3); Gao can be reached at Gao400@purdue.edu.

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5. Rethinking Class Rank and High-School Graduation Honors

In this article in *Principal Leadership*, Craig Kesselheim says he realized quite late in his career as an educator that for a student to be the valedictorian or salutatorian in most U.S. high schools, they must begin ninth grade with excellent grades, continue to earn A’s in every course, and enroll in the school’s highest-level courses. In addition, to earn top honors, students probably:

- Were recommended for AP or honors sections from the beginning;
- Cared deeply about grades, assiduously followed their GPA, appealed less-than-stellar grades, and did work for extra credit;
- Chose courses based on the highest ratings or the “easiest A;”
- Learned how to game their school’s rules and norms;
- Benefited from books in the home, tutors, and educational vacations;

- Had the support of at least one well-educated parent or mentor;
- Were privileged (and often white).

This is all part of our culture’s desire to celebrate excellence and declare winners – and its caste structure.

Kesselheim argues that there are significant downsides to calculating class rank and awarding top honors based on such narrow criteria:

- *Lots of losers* – The clear implication of spotlighting valedictorians and salutatorians at graduation time is that everyone else is less worthy. “I am not arguing that everyone needs the proverbial participation award,” says Kesselheim. “Still, it is true that in every graduating class there are at least dozens of honorable stories of achievement, adversity conquered, success over time after a shaky start, and excelling in nonacademic ways.”

- *Ignored stories of value-add* – In every class, there are students for whom high school “has had a demonstrably more powerful influence” than it had for students who arrived in ninth grade at the top of their game, he says. There are students who struggled at first and through hard work, and support from attentive teachers and other staff, made dramatic progress; students who discovered a new passion; and those who excelled in career and technical courses.

- *An upside-down focus* – The 2017 valedictorian of a Colorado high school had this to say in his graduation remarks: “I am able to speak to you today solely as a result of my GPA, a fact I bring up not out of pride but out of concern. The number that put me on the stage today has played a sizable role in suppressing passion for myself, for my fellow graduates, and for high school students across the country.” In other words, the anxiety and competitiveness inherent in the current system can undermine relationships, bonding, and peer support.

Kesselheim suggests several ways to change this culture and broaden who is honored and what is celebrated at high-school graduations:

- Honor more students with histories of high achievement, identifying and celebrating measures of excellence beyond grades.
- Stop weighting classes, which narrows top honors to those in AP and honors courses.
- Find another way to indicate courses’ rigor. One idea for juniors and seniors is to put the average grade for the class beside the student’s grade, which is a rough indication of the course’s level of challenge for each student.
- Address flaws in our grading practices. The precision implied by calculating GPAs to the third decimal place is belied by the idiosyncratic way grades are given across the same high school.
- Rethink the metrics used for community scholarship awards. “Don’t let outdated understanding of honorable achievement limit your options,” says Kesselheim.
- Discontinue or redefine the practice of ranking students. This will reduce pressure and unhealthy competitiveness and increase the chances of students choosing courses based on their interests, needs, and aspirations.

“Class Rank: Examining the System” by Craig Kesselheim in *Principal Leadership*, November 2020 (Vol. 21, #3, pp. 24-25)

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6. Is It Time to Retire *The Catcher in the Rye*?

In this article in *School Library Journal*, Amanda MacGregor says that when she read *The Catcher in the Rye* years ago, it “captured my teenage heart.” She found Holden Caulfield’s “simultaneous hatred of and nostalgia for everything very relatable.” But this fixture in the U.S. secondary-school literary canon “teems with homophobia, misogyny, and racist stereotyping,” she says. Nearly 70 years after its publication, some current YA literature offers more-contemporary perspectives. MacGregor suggests ten books that might claim *Catcher’s* place in the syllabus. “I can picture the characters sitting down with Holden,” she says, “connecting over grief, depression, cynicism, identity, and maybe even hope.”

- *Charming as a Verb* by Ben Philippe – A Haitian American tries to find his place in a New York City prep school.
- *The Closest I’ve Come* by Fred Aceves – An adolescent wrestles with the question, *Who am I?* amid bleak circumstances, loneliness, violence, and friendship.
- *Darius the Great Is Not Okay* by Abid Khorram – A story of identity, family, and unexpected connections for a Persian-American teen.
- *Felix Ever After* by Kacen Callender – A transgender African-American boy explores love, friendship, and retribution.
- *History Is All You Left Me* by Adam Silvera – A boy explores his “quirks,” which are really symptoms of deep grief and mental illness.
- *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* by Erika Sánchez – Fifteen-year-old Julia recently lost a sister and is at once blunt, funny, sneaky, and miserable.
- *The Memory of Light* by Francisco Stork – An honest look at mental illness, treatment, and recovery set in a hospital and in-patient mental health treatment center.
- *Someday This Pain Will Be Useful to You* by Peter Cameron – James, experimenting with a phony online identity, is cynical, sad, witty, and disenchanting.
- *We Are Okay* by Nina LaCour – Marin is isolated in an empty dorm in New York dealing with love and grief, learning to heal.
- *We Are the Ants* by Shaun David Hutchinson – A nihilistic boy wrestles with depression, grief, guilt, and bullying.

“Reconsidering *Catcher*” by Amanda MacGregor in *School Library Journal*, November 2020 (Vol. 66, #11, pp. 42-43)

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7. One Teacher’s Serendipitous Beginning

In this article in *Phi Delta Kappan*, Kim Marshall describes how the Vietnam draft – and true love – were responsible for his start in education, and relates what happened after his rocky start in a Boston middle school.

“[Reporting for Duty](#)” by Kim Marshall “Reporting for Duty” by Kim Marshall in *Phi Delta Kappan*, November 2020 (Vol. 102, #3, pp. 58-59)

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8. Short Items:

a. Eight Brief Videos on Slavery and Its Aftermath – In [Descendants](#), Nicole Ellis of *The Washington Post* investigates the lasting impact of slavery on American life, the debate on reparations, and tracing one’s family tree.

“Descendants” by Nicole Ellis in *The Washington Post*, October 2020

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b. Useful Websites – In this article in *All Things PLC*, Kathleen Kryza recommends websites that support differentiation in remote classrooms, including:

- Epic! www.getepic.com/educators - A library of 40,000 free e-books and videos
- Unite for Literacy www.uniteforliteracy.com with books in multiple languages
- National Library of Virtual Manipulatives <http://nlvm.usu.edu/en/nav/vlibrary.html>
- Bookshare www.bookshare.org a free online library for students with dyslexia

Spotted in “Differentiating Instruction in the Time of Covid-19” by Kathleen Kryza in *All Things PLC*, Fall 2020

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*If you have feedback or suggestions,
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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 50 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 HTML version as well.

Subscriptions:

Individual subscriptions are \$50 for a year. Rates decline steeply for multiple readers within the same organization. See the website for these rates and how to pay by check, credit card, or purchase order.

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- A free sample issue

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- The current issue (in Word and PDF)
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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

District Management Journal

Ed. Magazine

Education Digest

Education Next

Education Update

Education Week

Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis

Educational Horizons

Educational Leadership

Educational Researcher

Edutopia

Elementary School Journal

English Journal

Essential Teacher

Exceptional Children

Go Teach

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

Knowledge Quest

Language Arts

Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)

Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12

Middle School Journal

Peabody Journal of Education

Phi Delta Kappan

Principal

Principal Leadership

Reading Research Quarterly

Responsive Classroom Newsletter

Rethinking Schools

Review of Educational Research

School Administrator

School Library Journal

Social Education

Social Studies and the Young Learner

Teachers College Record

Teaching Children Mathematics

Teaching Exceptional Children

The Atlantic

The Chronicle of Higher Education

The Education Gadfly

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 Magazine