Marshall Memo 456

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
October 15, 2012

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Homework should have a purpose, and that purpose should be to increase knowledge and understanding."

Lee Jenkins (see item #4)

"Teachers should convey the attitude that they have such relevant and meaningful truths to impart about the academic content, as well as about how to succeed in life, that they and the class have no time for foolishness."

Laurie Boyd (see item #6)

"No one has the right to waste a day in the life of a child."

Valarie Lewis, New York City principal (see item #2)

"The success of the educational enterprise requires that students are able to transfer what they have learned to future classes as well as to their professional, personal, and civic lives. Otherwise instruction is wasted."

Randi Engle in "The Resurgence of Research Into Transfer: An Introduction to the Final Articles of the Transfer Strand" in *The Journal of the Learning Sciences*, July-September 2012 (Vol. 21, #3, p. 347-352); Engle is at raengle@berkeley.edu

"It is surely important to have safe facilities, adequate resources, and sufficient time for preparation, but if teachers are to achieve success with their students – particularly low-income and high-minority students who rely most on the school for their learning – they also must be able to count on their colleagues, their principal, and the organizational culture of the school to make success possible."

Susan Johnson, Matthew Kraft, and John Papay (see item #1)

1. How School Working Conditions Affect Teachers and Students

In this important *Teachers College Record* article, Susan Johnson and Matthew Kraft (Harvard Graduate School of Education) and John Papay (Brown University) report on their study of the impact of working conditions in Massachusetts public schools on teachers' professional satisfaction, the likelihood that they would transfer from their school or leave the profession, and their students' achievement. Here are the findings:

• First, school working conditions have a strong impact on teachers' job satisfaction and career plans. In fact, professional conditions are more important than students' socioeconomic background. "This finding," say Johnson, Kraft, and Papay, "suggests that much of the apparent effect of student demographics really derives from differences in schools' work environments." Here are the nine working conditions the authors examined (in alphabetical order):

- Colleagues – teachers have productive working relationships with their colleagues and work together to solve problems in the school;
- Community support – families and the broader community support teachers and students in the school;
- Facilities – teachers work in a safe, clean, and well-maintained school environment that enables them to be productive;
- Governance – teachers are involved in decision-making within the school;
- Principal's leadership – school leaders provide feedback on instruction, create an orderly and safe instructional environment, and address teachers' concerns about issues in the school;
- Professional expertise – teachers are recognized as educational experts and are given the flexibility to make professional decisions about instruction;
- Resources – teachers have access to sufficient instructional materials, instructional technology, and support personnel in the school;
- School culture – there is mutual trust, respect, openness, and commitment to student achievement;
- Time – teachers have sufficient time to meet their instructional and noninstructional responsibilities.

• Second, working conditions are important predictors of student achievement growth in mathematics and English language arts.

• Third, some school working conditions are more important than others. Specifically,

three variables had the strongest correlations with teachers' job satisfaction and desire to remain where they are teaching:

- Collegial relationships;
- Principal's leadership;
- School culture.

The magnitude of these effects is almost twice as large as that of school resources and facilities. "It is surely important to have safe facilities, adequate resources, and sufficient time for preparation," comment Johnson, Kraft, and Papay, "but if teachers are to achieve success with their students – particularly low-income and high-minority students who rely most on the school for their learning – they also must be able to count on their colleagues, their principal, and the organizational culture of the school to make success possible."

For student achievement in math and ELA, these four working conditions had the strongest correlation:

- Community support – "This finding makes sense," comment Johnson, Kraft, and Papay, "because positive relationships between teachers and parents may well improve students' attendance and effort in school."
- Collegial relationships;
- Principal's leadership;
- School culture.

"Thus," the authors conclude, "colleagues, principals, and culture matter, not just for teachers, but for their students as well."

"How Context Matters in High-Need Schools: The Effects of Teachers' Working Conditions on Their Professional Satisfaction and Their Students' Achievement" by Susan Johnson, Matthew Kraft, and John Papay in *Teachers College Record*, October 2012 (Vol. 114, #10, p. 1-39), http://www.tcrecord.org

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2. Key Characteristics of Beat-the-Odds Principals

In this article in *American Educator*, Karin Chenoweth and Christina Theokas of the Education Trust summarize the specific leadership traits and actions they have found in their research on very successful high-poverty schools. "To begin with, these principals are deeply steeped in the classroom and the world of instruction," say Chenoweth and Theokas. Most were teachers for many years before becoming principals and had specialized training in special education or working with second-language learners. But this is true of plenty of less-successful school leaders, in the same way that many teachers in middling and failing schools work hard every day. What do these beat-the-odds principals do that makes their experience and their colleagues' hard work pay off?

• *They set the vision that all children will be successful*. Success means more than high test scores, although these principals push hard for high academic achievement, knowing that without it, students won't have access to future opportunities. But they also believe that children need to be curious, confident, and joyful about learning.

• *They establish a climate and culture of respect*. "All of these principals know that many of their students are under great stress at home," say Chenoweth and Theokas, "and they strive to make school a place where students feel comfortable, safe, and welcome." The profiled principals didn't come in with a fixed program. Instead, they built a sense of efficacy in teachers and convinced them to let go of authoritarian, punitive, fear- and sarcasm-based discipline techniques and show genuine respect for students. "How kids function is an absolute consequence of how adults function," says Deb Gustafson, one of the principals.

• *They focus on instruction*. These principals grapple successfully with what Chenoweth and Theokas call "the essential paradox of instruction: reaching all students is highly dependent on expert teachers, yet no teacher can possibly be expert enough to teach all things to all children." So good leaders "deprivatize" teaching by getting teachers working with their colleagues to unpack standards, map out units, develop lessons and assessments, study interim assessment results, and share best practices. Effective principals also take hiring very seriously (often requiring candidates to teach model lessons), training new teachers (often assigning mentors), arranging for expert teachers to work with particularly challenging groups of students, and continuously supervising classroom instruction – supporting and redirecting struggling teachers where necessary but not imposing their personal teaching style on teachers.

• *They manage the building to support instruction*. Chenoweth and Theokas noticed that the most successful principals delegate significant responsibility to their colleagues, making a smooth-functioning building everyone's job and empowering teachers and others to make appropriate decisions. Principals design the schedule to maximize uninterrupted learning time and provide teachers with regular team meeting blocks. "No one has the right to waste a day in the life of a child," says Valarie Lewis, a New York City principal. Effective leaders also ensure that team and faculty meetings don't waste time on routine matters.

• *They inspect what they expect*. Effective leaders are frequently in classrooms, data meetings, curriculum planning meetings, and professional development sessions looking for high-quality performance. "They are, in other words, holding everyone accountable for their jobs and helping those who need help to improve," say Chenoweth and Theokas. "But, more than that, they are helping all their staff members develop an evaluative sense about their work."

"Leading for Learning" by Karin Chenoweth and Christina Theokas in *American Educator*, Fall 2012 (Vol. 36, #3, p. 24-29, 32-33), http://bit.ly/SjAUEF; this article is drawn from the authors' book, *Getting It Done: Leading Academic Success in Unexpected Schools* (Harvard Education Press, 2011)

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3. The Impact of Teacher Self-Efficacy on Student Achievement

In this *Elementary School Journal* article, Ying Guo (University of Cincinnati), Carol McDonald Connor, Yanyun Yang, and Alysia Roehrig (Florida State University), and Frederick Morrison (University of Michigan) report on a study of the impact of teacher self-efficacy on 1,043 fifth graders' literacy achievement. The authors define self-efficacy as "the

individual's perceived expectancy of obtaining valued outcomes through personal effort." It's important because teachers who believe they will be successful with students are more likely to take responsibility, invest significant effort, persist, and manage negative events. The authors studied time on academic activities, teacher sensitivity and warmth, and classroom climate (including teacher feedback).

The study found that students' incoming literacy skills were the best predictor of their achievement at the end of fifth grade. Among school variables, teacher self-efficacy had more impact than teachers' education and level of experience. Self-efficacy had its impact via specific classroom practices that support learning – warmth, responsiveness, and frequent feedback to students.

Intriguingly, experienced teachers with high self-efficacy spent less classroom time to get better student outcomes. "Further investigation is needed," say the authors of this paradoxical finding.

"The Effects of Teacher Qualification, Teacher Self-Efficacy, and Classroom Practices on Fifth Graders' Literacy Outcomes" by Ying Guo, Carol McDonald Connor, Yanyun Yang, Alysia Roehrig, and Frederick Morrison in *Elementary School Journal*, September 2012 (Vol. 113, #1, p. 3-24), http://bit.ly/Qof59x

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4. Making Homework Meaningful – and Less of a Burden

"Is homework a subject or a method?" asks former superintendent Lee Jenkins in this thoughtful article in *Middle Ground*. "If it is a subject, shouldn't teachers request that homework grades be included on the report card alongside other subjects? If it is a method, how can teachers justify grading students on instructional methods?"

Jenkins likes the approach used by Minnesota teacher John McDonald, who doesn't collect or grade homework but gives a short quiz at the beginning of class on what the homework covered. This approach is efficient and fair. "Think about it," says Jenkins. "With this strategy, homework is no longer about writing something down to hand in; instead, it is about learning… The final goal is to know the answer to the questions." This solves a number of perennial problems:

- Students who know the content can skip the burden of doing redundant homework since the focus is on mastery, whether that comes from completing the homework assignment, paying attention in class, or background knowledge.
- Nothing is gained by copying another student's homework or having a parent do the assignment.
- Lots of teacher time that would be used correcting homework is freed up to do more effective, creative things for students.

Jenkins has shared this idea with many educators and passes along two stories: A middle-school math teacher has early-arriving students roll dice to see which two homework problems will be featured in the quiz. This teacher says the percent of students getting D and F in his classes has dropped from 27 to 9 percent. And the parent of a high-achieving student reports

that he spends part of his evenings fielding calls from classmates who need help with their math homework rather than doing assignments himself.

"Homework should have a purpose," concludes Jenkins, "and that purpose should be to increase knowledge and understanding."

"Tackling the Homework Dilemma" by Lee Jenkins in *Middle Ground*, October 2012 (Vol. 16, #2, p. 22), http://bit.ly/QnszSY; Jenkins is at Lee@LtoJConsulting.com.

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5. Dealing with Boredom in the Classroom

In this *Education Week* article, Sarah Sparks reports on a study in the October issue of *Perspectives on Psychological Science* on student boredom in the classroom (about 65 percent of students say they are bored in school at least once a day). "I think teachers should always try to be relevant and interesting," says lead author John Eastwood of York University in Toronto, "but beyond that, there are other places to look. By definition, to be in the state of boredom is to say the world sucks out there in some way. But often that's not the case; often it's an interior problem…"

In other words, being "bored" might be a proxy for other things – finding the work too difficult, thinking about a fight with Mom last night, being distracted by a loud air conditioner, ADHD, or thinking about that D in math last year. All these can interfere with the brain's executive function, which resides in the prefrontal cortex just behind the student's furrowed brow, allowing the emotional center, the amygdala, to take over – hence the feeling of being tired, anxious, or depressed or the desire to act out or zone out. Students who feel bored may doze off and then try to keep themselves alert by doodling (which is actually helpful).

What should teachers do to minimize student boredom? A study conducted in Germany by Ulrike Nett of the University of Konstanz compared coping strategies used by grade 5-10 students confronted with a math problem that was difficult and potentially boring:

- Avoiding the task by studying a different subject or talking with friends;
- Criticizing the task and asking for more interesting material;
- Reappraising the situation, thinking about how to make it relevant, and fighting boredom.

The third approach produced more enjoyment, less stress, higher academic achievement, and less boredom down the road.

"Although teachers try to create interesting lessons, they must be aware that despite their best intentions, some students may still perceive interesting lessons as boring," says Nett. "What is imperative to underscore at this point is that both teachers and students must take some responsibility for boredom, and both must be involved in finding an adequate way to reduce this emotion in their classrooms."

"Researchers Argue Boredom May Be 'A Flavor of Stress'" by Sarah Sparks in *Education Week*, Oct. 10, 2012 (Vol. 32, #7, p. 1, 16), http://bit.ly/RjyjPF

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6. Major Misconceptions About Classroom Discipline

(Originally titled "Five Myths About Student Discipline")

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Kansas principal Laurie Boyd says educators need to challenge five common myths about student discipline:

• *Myth #1: If your lessons are engaging, you won't have discipline problems*. Of course good teaching helps, but no learning activity is guaranteed to engage all students all the time. Besides, boring instruction is only one reason students misbehave; others include disliking the teacher, negative peer dynamics, hunger, thirst, depression, sleep deprivation, fears and worries, and how successful they feel with the subject matter. And keep in mind, says Boyd, that being able to learn from less-than-stellar teaching is an important skill for future success.

• *Myth #2: Teachers need to find their own discipline style*. Teachers who are highly effective "naturals" can use their own style and even ignore parts of schoolwide policies, says Boyd. But for others, finding their style may be an excuse for avoiding confrontations and not being the adult authority figure in the classroom. These teachers tend to address the disruptive behavior of a few students by making general comments to the whole class, overlook side conversations and interruptions, joke about bad behavior, and discipline the whole class for the actions of a few. Boyd asks these teachers, "What exactly is your style, and is it the best approach for all kids?"

• *Myth #3: Effective teachers do not have power struggles with students*. Nonsense, says Boyd. Teachers have to be prepared to be unpopular and even hated at times. "Expert teacher-disciplinarians do not fear conflict or avoid confrontation," she continues. "Teachers should convey the attitude that they have such relevant and meaningful truths to impart about the academic content, as well as about how to succeed in life, that they and the class have no time for foolishness." But they are also skillful at handling misbehavior and preventing escalation.

• *Myth #4: A school leader's attention needs to be on instruction, not discipline*. On the contrary, this is a core leadership task, says Boyd: "It is a school leader's responsibility to ensure a consistent, schoolwide system for preventing misbehavior, for responding to misbehavior in the classroom and elsewhere on school grounds, and for removing chronically disruptive students from the classroom." It's also important for principals to clarify what the office should handle and what teachers are responsible for, and to train all teachers to deal with their part of the job of student discipline.

• *Myth #5: The school code of conduct is an adequate building discipline system*. Not true, says Boyd. The schoolwide code is what administrators use to deal with serious offenses, but teachers and other staff must be empowered to discipline students for the bulk of misbehavior that falls below this threshold – with the backing of administrators.

"Five Myths About Student Discipline" by Laurie Boyd in *Educational Leadership*, October 2012 (Vol. 70, #2, p. 62-66), www.ascd.org; Boyd is at laboyd@sunflower.com.

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7. Understanding Students with Tourette Syndrome

(Originally titled "Tourette Syndrome in the Classroom")

In this helpful *Educational Leadership* article, Pittsburgh educator Amanda Coffman (mother of two children with Tourette Syndrome) says the challenge for teachers is seeing children with the syndrome as *having* a problem rather than *being* a problem. This condition, which is believed to be genetic and occurs in at least 3 of 1,000 school-age children (most often boys), manifests itself in tics – involuntary sniffing, throat clearing, blinking, words or phrases, hopping, or body contortions. The tics can occur frequently for a while, fade, then reappear, often changing from one to another.

Tourette Syndrome usually develops when children are 5-9 years old and becomes more prominent from 10-15. For two-thirds of children, symptoms resolve by early adulthood and don't interfere with daily living. About one-third continue to have significant issues as adults. Tourette Syndrome carries a stigma, which is why some parents don't inform the school about a diagnosis.

The most important thing for educators to understand, says Coffman, is that the tics are involuntary. "If we view the child as the class clown, someone lacking in social skills, or a poor reader, then our responses are going to be inconsistent with the truth of the situation and are not going to be helpful," she says. Tics do not respond to standard behavior modification plans, and children suppress them with great difficulty, which interferes with concentration in school. The most dreaded word for kids with Tourette Syndrome is "Stop" since that increases anxiety and makes the tics worse. Teachers or peers who are overly solicitous or overprotective don't help either. Coffman believes that elimination of tics is not an appropriate goal for an IEP and is not something school personnel can accomplish. So what can schools do? Coffman suggests the following:

• *Purposefully ignore tics*. This is easier said than done, but knowing that tics are involuntary really helps. Teachers set an example to other students by controlling their facial expressions and body language.

• *Place students strategically*. The best spot for children with Tourette Syndrome is with no students behind them.

• *Make accommodations you and the student can live with*. Some teachers allow students with the syndrome to get up and move around in specific areas of the class, or even leave the room when they feel the need.

• *Increase wait time, use prompts*. Students with Tourette Syndrome often need a few more seconds to process a question. Some teachers leave sticky notes on a student's desk providing prompts.

• *Be open with families*. Some tics are socially inappropriate or disrupt learning and require a frank discussion with parents. Isolation should not be the default setting, but during tests it may be necessary.

• *Use resources*. Coffman recommends http://www.tsa-usa.org, the website of the Tourette Syndrome Association. Teachers who have children with the syndrome in their classes can help enlighten their colleagues – and other students. "Children cannot be

accountable for what they don't understand," she says, "and education can be a valuable way to prevent teasing or to encourage students to tune out distracting behaviors. It's amazing how much children can learn to ignore when they understand the tic is not deliberate."

"Tourette Syndrome in the Classroom" by Amanda Coffman in *Educational Leadership*, October 2012 (Vol. 70, #2, p. 46-49), www.ascd.org; Coffman can be reached at amandakcoffman@gmail.com.

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8. Robert Marzano Suggests Ideas for Exit Tickets

(Originally titled "The Many Uses of Exit Slips"

In this *Educational Leadership* article, author/consultant Robert Marzano lists four types of prompts for exit slips given at the end of a class:

• *Prompts to check for understanding* – The teacher might ask students, "What are you most confused about regarding what we did in class today?" The slips might lead the teacher to re-teach a particular concept, break students into groups for help in different areas, and perhaps use expert students to run some of the groups.

• *Prompts to promote reflection* – The teacher might ask students, "How hard did you work today and why?" or "What could you have done today to help yourself learn better?" and then follow up accordingly.

• *Prompts on instructional strategies* – For example, "How did the group work today help you understand the content? What are some things you'd like to see during group work in the future?"

• *General teaching suggestions* – For example, "What is something I should be doing to improve your understanding of the content?" Marzano says this sends an important message to students – "that everyone is a learner, even the teacher – and that there's no shame in admitting you're not doing well at something and seeking help."

"The Many Uses of Exit Slips" by Robert Marzano in *Educational Leadership*, October 2012 (Vol. 70, #2, p. 80-81), www.ascd.org

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9. How to Be Discerning About New Educational Products

In this article in *American Educator*, University of Virginia cognitive psychologist Daniel Willingham says, "The field of education is awash in conflicting goals, research 'wars', and profiteers." How can we tell good classroom products and practices from flim-flam and outright junk? Most of us don't have time to read and analyze all the data on textbooks, software packages, new teaching strategies, or school restructuring plans, so Willingham suggests a four-step shortcut:

• *Strip it and flip it*. The underlying content of a sales pitch is usually, "If I do X, then there is a Y percent chance that Z will happen." Get to these basics by pruning all the emotional, fear- or hope-based language, claims that the persuader understands your struggles,

appealing analogies, and ornamentation. Then flip the claim to see if it has an inverse – for example, "90 percent fat free" implies "10 percent fat." Then ask yourself what is likely to happen if you don't buy this product. Are you being pushed to buy it by fear of falling behind? Often, the distilled essence of a claim is straightforward and obvious – or quite vague. Willingham gives several examples of elaborate "brain-based" claims that boil down to very simple stuff. Here's one: "There is massive brain plasticity during the early years of life. Brain plasticity is the process by which the physical structure of the brain changes, based on experience. New networks are formed, and unused networks are 'pruned' away – that is, are lost." The basic message: "Little kids learn a lot."

• *Trace it*. Find out who the lead person is and look at his or her qualifications and motivations.

• *Analyze it*. Look at why we are being asked to believe something. "If the claims about an education product fly in the face of what you know to be true, there is a problem," says Willingham. Look at whether the research design included a control group.

• *Decide*. Adopt a program only when you have all the relevant information.

"Measured Approach of Magical Elixir? How to Tell Good Science from Bad" by Daniel Willingham in *American Educator*, Fall 2012 (Vol. 36, #3, p. 4-12, 40), http://www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/fall2012/Willingham.pdf

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10. Short Items:

a. Classroom library organizer – This free software http://classroom.booksource.com creates a web-based inventory of classroom libraries. Teachers can enter a book's ISBN by scanning it or adding it manually, and then use custom data fields to organize and display titles. Students can use the system to check books out and return them, and can also view the entire library list. Teachers can look at students' checkout history and see patterns by Lexile levels.

"News to Use: Taming the Library" in *Middle Ground*, October 2012 (Vol. 16, #2, p. 6)

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b. STEM website – This site https://www.jlab.org created by Jefferson Lab in Newport News, VA has Element Hangman, instructions on building a star tracker, a video on polar molecules, hands-on activities, worksheets, puzzles, games, and instructional videos.

"News to Use: Doing Some Lab Work" in *Middle Ground*, October 2012 (Vol. 16, #2, p. 7)

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c. Kennedy Center ArtsEdge – This digital resource has lesson plans, audio stories, video clips, and interactive online modules. Teachers can search for activities by grade level, type of art, and content area: http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/educators.aspx.

"News to Use: For Art's Sake" in *Middle Ground*, October 2012 (Vol. 16, #2, p. 7)

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d. Knowmia tutoring website – http://www.knowmia.com is a new online tutoring website for high-school students with more than 7,000 videos on topics from algebra to microbiology.

"News to Use: New on the Web" in *Middle Ground*, October 2012 (Vol. 16, #2, p. 7)

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e. Election websites – These online tools help students understand the U.S. election process, focusing on this year's presidential contest:

- Rand McNally's Play the Election: http://education.randmcnally.com
- S-SPAN Classroom: http://www.c-spanclassroom.org
- Scholastic Magazine: http://magazines.scholastic.com/election-2012
- Time for Kids: http://www.timeforkids.com/minisite/election-2012

"News to Use: Teaching About the Election" in *Middle Ground*, Oct. 2012 (Vol. 16, #2, p. 7)

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f. Common Core website – ASCD has launched EduCore http://educore.ascd.org to provide support on the Common Core State Standards. The math resources come from the Shell Centre and include ideas on formative assessments. The literacy resources come from the Literacy Design Collaborative and include a template task bank that content-area teachers can use to work toward literacy standards.

"ASCD Community in Action: Product Spotlight" in *Educational Leadership*, October 2012 (Vol. 70, #2, p. 95)

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Do you have feedback? Is anything missing?

If you have comments or suggestions, if you saw an article or web item in the last week that you think should have been summarized, or if you would like to suggest additional publications that should be covered by the Marshall Memo, please e-mail: kim.marshall48@gmail.com

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and others very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 43 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, and writer, lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 44 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through more than a hundred articles each week, and selects 5-10 that have the greatest potential to improve teaching, leadership, and learning. He then writes a brief summary of each article, pulls out several striking quotes, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the Memo to subscribers every Monday evening (with occasional breaks; there are 50 issues a year).

Subscriptions:

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Publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
ASCD, CEC SmartBriefs, Daily EdNews
Better Evidence-Based Education
EDge
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Elementary School Journal
Essential Teacher (TESOL)
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Educational Review
JESPAR
Journal of Staff Development
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Language Learner (NABE)
Middle Ground
Middle School Journal
New York Times
Newsweek
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
Teachers College Record
Teaching Children Mathematics
The Atlantic Monthly
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Language Educator
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
The School Administrator
Theory Into Practice