Marshall Memo 771

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
January 28, 2019

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"To what extent are illiteracy and incarceration linked, not because one causes the other, but because they have common root causes?"

David Kirkland (see item #2)

"It's my job to support my teachers as they create literacy-rich classrooms… We do this by ensuring that all students, every day, are given explicit literacy instruction, read to, read with, allowed ample time to practice reading and writing independently, coached on that reading and writing, talking about their thinking and learning, and working with language."

Chicago principal Fatima Cooke in "Leading the Literacy Charge" in *Literacy Today*, January/February 2019 (Vol. 36, #4, p. 16-17); Cook is at fycooke@cps.edu.

"Giving students a text that meets their grade-level reading metrics is not enough. Giving students a text with characters who look like them, love like them, or worship like them is not enough. The texts we place in front of our learners must be appropriately complex in addition to being culturally responsive. Equally important: a carefully chosen task that makes the text engaging and relevant."

Zackory Kirk in "Beyond the Illusion of Division" in *Literacy Today*, January/February 2019 (Vol. 36, #4, p. 38-39); Kirk can be reached at zackory.kirk@atlanta.k12.ga.us.

"The evidence base for learning styles isn't just thin, it's been as thoroughly debunked as phrenology and astrology. Yet according to some studies, over 90 percent of teachers still believe it."

Robert Pondiscio in "Thinking About Classroom Practice: Five Ideas for Ed Reformers" in *The Education Gadfly*, January 23, 2019 (Vol. 19, #4), https://bit.ly/2SanANG

1. A Downstream Report on Boston High-School Valedictorians

Each spring, *The Boston Globe* publishes a full-page spread of color photos and brief bios on the valedictorians from the city's high schools. Reporters Malcolm Gay, Eric Moskowitz, and Meghan Irons tracked down 93 of the 113 valedictorians from the classes of 2005, 2006, and 2007 to see how they did after graduating at the top of their classes. In an extensive *Globe Magazine* report, these findings stand out:

• *Disappointing trajectories* – Although there were some success stories, the general picture was one of underachievement. For many students, their high-school coursework didn't prepare them for college classes, and the valedictorians struggled academically. One quarter did not finish college within six years. Although a quarter of the Boston valedictorians aspired to be medical doctors, not one has earned an M.D. Today, 40 percent of the Boston valedictorians earn less than $50,000 a year. By comparison, valedictorians from public high schools in the Boston suburbs were about two-and-a-half times as likely to get an advanced degree and earn more than $100,000 a year.

• *Doubly disadvantaged* – When they got to college, many of the valedictorians dealt with "culture shock, social isolation, and a deep disconnect with college classmates, sometimes going so far as to switch schools or drop out," report the authors. "Thrust into an alien, privileged world, they try to get through classes while holding down jobs, coping with crises back home, or even struggling with limited English." In addition, many said they didn't get adequate academic and social-emotional support from their colleges. Four of the former valedictorians became homeless, one after graduating from Dartmouth College. This young woman was "done in by a combination of a new baby, lack of a job, and an extended family unable to provide a temporary bed."

• *Exam school advantage* – Valedictorians from Boston's three selective-admission exam schools, with far more rigorous curriculum offerings, did much better. Over the three classes covered by the study, five of nine exam-school valedictorians attended Harvard; by comparison, only three of the 80 non-exam-school valedictorians went to Ivy League schools, none to Harvard. "The starkly different outcomes raise questions of basic fairness," say Gay, Moskowitz, and Irons; "the majority of students at the exam schools are white and Asian in a system where most students are black and Latino." (Boston's three exam schools make up 25 percent of the city's public high-school students, compared to only 5 percent in New York City.)

• *No regrets* – Despite the obstacles and setbacks, the valedictorians interviewed

"generally did not complain about their disadvantages," say the reporters. "The overwhelming majority said they were better off than their parents and nearly 9 out of 10 felt they had a 'fair shot.'" One who dreamed of being a doctor is now a U.S. Army staff sergeant in Japan. He looked at his high-school graduation photo and said, "I forgot that face a long time ago."

• *Better prospects ahead?* After the students featured in this article graduated from high school, Boston city and school officials and leaders of private organizations launched Success Boston, a major effort to raise the bar in public schools and improve college graduation rates. The program, which involves career-oriented jobs and mentoring, boosted college graduation rates by more than 50 percent. However, college graduation rates have plateaued in recent years, leaving city officials seeking new ideas.

"The Valedictorians Project: A Globe Investigation" by Malcolm Gay, Eric Moskowitz, and Meghan Irons in *Globe Magazine*, January 20, 2019, https://bit.ly/2DCq8fi

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2. Is There an Illiteracy-to-Prison Pipeline?

In this article in *Literacy Today*, David Kirkland (New York University) says there's a widespread belief in a causal link between low literacy and incarceration. The evidence?

- Two-thirds of students who can't read proficiently by the beginning of fifth grade end up in jail or on welfare.
- More than 60 percent of prison inmates and about 85 percent of systems-involved youth are "functionally illiterate."
- 70 percent of incarcerated adults read below the fourth-grade level.

Statistics like these have spurred remedial programs in schools and communities and literacy initiatives in prisons.

But Kirkland questions the logic. "To what extent are illiteracy and incarceration linked, not because one causes the other, but because they have common root causes?" he asks. "Poverty, family distress, and external conditions have an impact on schools and student achievement… Persistent patterns of low literacy among vulnerable children are clear signs that current approaches that respond to the surface issues and ignore deeper systemic tensions are not working."

What would a more systematic attack on the problem of illiteracy look like? Kirkland suggests some possible elements:

- Addressing low expectations for marginalized children that normalize school failure – "being black, brown, or poor is neither a learning disability nor a crime," he says.
- Improving learning conditions for vulnerable children in ways that respond to their needs at "structural (as opposed to individual) levels."
- More effectively addressing societal issues of poverty, racism, violence, and community resources.

"This process isn't about illiteracy or incarceration," Kirkland concludes. "It's about a larger set of social, political, and historical forces that shape and maintain them both."

"The Truth Behind the Pipeline" by David Kirkland in *Literacy Today*, January/February 2019 (Vol. 36, #4, p. 10-11), no free e-link; Kirkland can be reached at davidekirkland@gmail.com.

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3. Assumptions About Children's Background Knowledge

In this article in *Literacy Today*, Molly Ness (Fordham University) describes reading *Knuffle Bunny* by Mo Willems with a kindergarten class. In the book, a girl leaves a beloved stuffed animal behind in a laundromat. After hearing the story, a student asked, "What's that place where Trixie and her dad went?" Ness flipped back to the page with the laundromat and the boy asked, "Why did they have to go somewhere to wash their clothes? Why didn't they just do the laundry in their house?"

Ness realized that she'd assumed that all students were familiar with laundromats. "Without the background understanding of this experience, they missed a significant piece of the comprehension puzzle of *Knuffle Bunny*," she says. "As we consider the important role of background knowledge in comprehension, we must consider the diverse worlds from which our children come." Clearly it's not just disadvantaged students who have gaps in their knowledge.

Ness suggests that teachers do a quick inventory of a book's vocabulary, illustrations, story elements, and text structure to see what assumptions the text makes about children's knowledge and which students might need some background information – or use the text to teach about unfamiliar information. For example:

- *Last Stop on Market Street* by Matt de la Peña – children living in rural areas who have never ridden a municipal bus;
- *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* by Bill Martin Jr. – children who have never seen a palm tree;
- *The Snowy Day* by Ezra Jack Keats – children who have never seen snow;
- *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle – children unfamiliar with the life cycle of butterflies;
- *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* by Betty Smith – children who don't know what a tenement is;
- *The War That Saved My Life* by Kimberly Brubaker Bradley – children who haven't learned about life in England during World War II.

"As one teacher in a classroom of at least 20 students," says Ness, "we may never be able to overcome each student's knowledge deficit. Because of its highly personal nature, it often feels impossible to level the playing field of background knowledge for all students. But once we realize the pervasiveness of background information – and become increasingly capable of investigating our texts for the knowledge they assume the reader brings to the page – we are better suited to supporting our readers."

"Leveling the Playing Field" by Molly Ness in *Literacy Today*, January/February 2019 (Vol. 36, #4, p. 36-37); Ness can be reached at mness@fordham.edu.

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4. What It Means to Be a Social Justice Educator

"If we truly want to change the world we live in, education is the best place to start," says Crystal Belle (Rutgers University/Newark) in this article in *Education Week*. U.S. public schools can live up to their purported role as social equalizers, but Belle believes this happens only through the work of front-line social justice educators. Here's what happens in their classrooms:

• Acknowledging who is there. Effective teachers take the time to learn about students' families, cultures, and communities.

• Starting with the knowledge students have. Kids walk into school with a rich fund of personal and cultural knowledge, but also with gaps that need to be filled. Wise teachers build on what students already know, incorporate it into the curriculum, and address what's missing.

• Creating a curriculum map and unit plans for the year. Social-justice teacher teams start with the desired outcomes and plan backwards from there so that students finish the year with essential knowledge, skills, and habits of mind.

• Being honest about oneself. This means acknowledging and healing the implicit biases that are part of growing up in the U.S.

• Encouraging students to question everything. Students need to develop their critical faculties, and classroom dynamics and curriculum are a great place to start.

"What Is Social Justice Education Anyway?" by Crystal Belle in *Education Week*, January 23, 2019 (Vol. 38, #19, p. 18-19), https://bit.ly/2sSgD5E; Belle can be reached at crystal.belle@rutgers.edu.

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5. The Results of More-Equitable Grading Practices

In this *Education Week* article, consultant Joe Feldman (Equitable Grading Project) says that "traditional grading practices result in grades that provide unclear and often misleading information to parents, students, and postsecondary institutions. Teachers often combine a range of unrelated student information into a grade, compressing a bucket of information into a thimble-sized container." This kind of grading tends to have the most negative effects on students identified as misbehaving and those without access to books, resources, and the Internet at home, perpetuating and amplifying social inequalities.

Feldman suggests the following ways to make grading more accurate, bias-resistant, and motivational for students:

- Shift from a zero-to-100 to a zero-to-4 grading scale. 100-point grading is "mathematically oriented toward failure," says Feldman.
- Stop giving zeros for missing work.
- Give more weight to recent performance and growth versus averaging performance over time.
- Allow students to retake tests and projects with a chance to improve on previous scores.
- Grade work on required academic content and standards, separately assessing effort, homework, and class participation.

- Lift the veil on what students need to learn and what it takes to get good grades by providing standards-aligned syllabi, rubrics, and simplified grade calculations.
- Facilitate students' understanding, ownership, and power over their grades by encouraging self-assessment and peer evaluation.

Working with teachers in California schools, Feldman and his colleagues found that implementing these shifts decreased the number of D's and F's, produced grades that more accurately reflected the quality of student work, and resulted in a closer correlation between grades and standardized test scores. These improvements were most pronounced with students who qualified for free and reduced-price meals.

What's more, says Feldman, these changes resulted in improvements in school climate: "[T]eachers and students reported that classrooms are less stressful, teacher-student relationships are stronger and more trusting, and students are more motivated to learn after these interventions."

"It Is Time to End Inaccurate, Inequitable Grading Policies" by Joe Feldman in *Education Week*, January 23, 2019 (Vol. 38, #19, p. 18-19), https://bit.ly/2UoTwvf; Feldman can be reached at info@crescendoedgroup.org.

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6. Effective Classroom Quizzes

"Quizzes are not just assessments," says Youki Terada in this *Edutopia* article. "When designed well, they can be effective learning tools, reinforcing a student's comprehension of the material." This is important, since most people tend to quickly forget what's taught.

But if quizzes are poorly designed, they miss an opportunity to help students process and retain information, and can even lead students astray by exposing them to incorrect information (in the distractors), which then gets remembered.

Drawing on a recent research review by Washington University professor Andrew Butler (in *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*), Terada shares these tips for designing good quizzes:

• *Limit the number of answer options*. "The more answers students see, the more likely they are to remember the wrong one," says Terada. Also, they'll get bogged down and not cover as much material. He believes that three answer options is the optimal balance between quality and efficiency.

• *Avoid trick questions*. Riddles, brainteasers, or gimmicky questions that try to stump or confuse students often do more harm than good.

• *Avoid tricky answer formats*. Curve-balls like "All of the above," "None of the above," and multi-answer questions can be gamed by students, artificially inflating test performance.

• *Don't make tests too challenging*. An overly difficult test can lead students to commit incorrect information to memory. A good rule of thumb is that students who are working hard in the class should get 70-80 percent of questions correct.

• *Follow up!* "Going over a quiz afterward not only gives the teacher insights on skills the class may be struggling with," says Terada, "but provides students with another chance to master the tested material."

"5 Tips for Designing Multiple-Choice Quizzes" by Youki Terada in *Edutopia*, December 14, 2018, https://www.edutopia.org/article/5-tips-designing-multiple-choice-quizzes

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7. Fountas and Pinnell Push Back on Some Schools' Use of Reading Levels

In this article in *Literacy Today*, literacy gurus Irene Fountas (Lesley University) and Gay Su Pinnell (Ohio State University) say that in the real world, people don't choose reading matter by checking the Lexile or F&P level. "They explore favorite genres and series and seek out types of stories they love to read," say Fountas and Pinnell, "– adventures, mysteries, romances, fantasies. They investigate topics that are important to them at a particular point in time, pulling together fiction and nonfiction texts that connect in deeply personal ways. Readers look into their lives and find books that speak to them."

So what is the appropriate use of readability measures in schools? Of the five types of reading in an effective elementary classroom, say Fountas and Pinnell, only one – guided reading – involves leveled texts. In the other four, students should have access to a rich variety of texts at different reading levels:

- Independent reading – Student choice, low teacher involvement;
- Book clubs – Choice by student groups, some teacher involvement;
- Guided reading – Small-group work with leveled texts geared to students' levels;
- Shared reading – Less student choice, more teacher support;
- Interactive readalouds – Low student choice, high teacher support.

In other words, say Fountas and Pinnell, outside of guided reading, "students should have access to a multitude of books that speak to them as readers and help them to build their reading identity. With any reading activity, that is the ultimate goal."

How is guided reading different? The goal of these small-group tutorials is to scaffold instruction so students make "small shifts in processing power every day," say the authors. This happens when teachers choose a text that is just beyond the level that this group of students can read independently, but not so difficult that students can't understand and aren't able to figure out difficult words. Ongoing assessment is key so the teacher knows students' strengths and needs and can choose texts with just the right level of challenge.

"A 'level' stands for hundreds – even thousands – of in-the-head strategic actions that readers need at any given time to read with accuracy, fluency, and understanding," say Fountas and Pinnell. "The demands increase as readers progress to greater text complexity and they learn new ways of problem-solving and thinking." Expert teaching is essential for guided reading to fulfill its powerful potential.

Should children's text reading levels be reported to parents? No, say Fountas and Pinnell. Parents certainly need to be told how their children are progressing and whether they need acceleration or intervention, but "levels have no place in conferences, on report cards, or

in discussions with a parent… A level is a teacher's tool. It isn't a 'score,' and it certainly isn't a child's label. Families should not be worried if, within a given week, students read at several different text levels for different reasons."

"Level Books, Not Children: The Role of Text Levels in Literacy Instruction" by Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell in *Literacy Today*, January/February 2019 (Vol. 36, #4, p. 12-13), no free e-link; the authors can be reached at fountasandpinnell@heinemann.com; ideas for working with families are at https://www.fountasandpinnell.com/resourcelibrary/resource?id=432.

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8. Can the "Matthew Effect" Be Turned Around in Kindergarten?

In this article in *Exceptional Children*, Michael Coyne (University of Connecticut) and five co-authors ask whether the widening vocabulary gap between students who enter school with reading advantages and those who don't can be neutralized. Vocabulary development has been identified "as perhaps the best illustration of this powerful and self-perpetuating mechanism," say Coyne et al. Here's how it operates:

- Students who have been exposed to rich oral language develop larger vocabularies.
- They leverage the words they know to pick up and retain new knowledge in school.
- They also tend to engage in lots of independent reading.
- These successful learning experiences build confidence to seek out opportunities to read and interact in ways that use and expand their vocabularies.
- Students who enter school knowing fewer words have less "velcro" to pick up new words in the classroom and in other interactions.
- These students often have negative learning experiences and may avoid independent reading and oral language activities.
- Vocabulary growth in the primary grades happens almost entirely through incidental learning (there is very little intentional vocabulary instruction before fourth grade). Incidental learning favors students who enter school with bigger vocabularies.
- When explicit vocabulary instruction does happen in all-class settings, the Matthew effect still operates, with vocabulary-rich students soaking up more words than their vocabulary-poor classmates.

The researchers describe this process as a *reciprocal causal relationship*: "individual differences in overall vocabulary knowledge cause differential efficiency in acquiring new vocabulary during learning opportunities, and this differential vocabulary learning in turn causes further individual differences in vocabulary knowledge." The bottom line: in most schools the vocabulary gap widens every year, most rapidly in kindergarten, first, and second grade.

Can this powerful process be reversed? Coyne and his colleagues designed and implemented an intervention in 284 kindergarten classes in a diverse group of 48 U.S. elementary schools. Instructors directly and explicitly taught new words in pullout groups of 3-4 kindergarten students identified as having difficulty after Tier-1 instruction. The challenge with this kind of intervention is that direct vocabulary instruction can't teach nearly as many

words as students are exposed to every week. But the researchers theorized that by carefully choosing the words they taught, they could make a difference. Here were the key elements of the intervention:

- Focusing on high-utility academic vocabulary taught to the whole class in Tier 1;
- Using student-friendly definitions;
- Differentiating between examples and non-examples of the words;
- Linking words to pictures, personal experiences, and other words and concepts;
- Getting students involved in conversations with peers about the target words;
- Exposing students to new words multiple times across different, meaningful contexts;
- Using extensive teacher modeling;
- Giving students extended opportunities to interact with words to promote deep processing.

Trained teachers and paraprofessionals met with intervention students 30 minutes a day outside the classroom, four days a week over the course of 22 weeks; these students received twice the amount of vocabulary instruction as their peers.

What were the results? Intervention students made significant gains in their knowledge of the target words and comprehension of those words in passages, actually outperforming a control group of not-at-risk students in their knowledge of target words. However, the program did not have an impact on standardized measures of vocabulary knowledge, and didn't close the substantial gap among students on overall vocabulary knowledge. "Although small-group Tier-2 intervention may be enough to close learning gaps for some students," the authors conclude, "results of this study suggest that students with lower overall language abilities may need highly intensive Tier-3 intervention to accelerate broader language development… Therefore, schools and teachers will be constantly engaged in a race against the Matthew effect – continually having to make hard decisions about how to leverage time, personnel, and resources to intensify instruction and intervention."

"Racing Against the Vocabulary Gap: Matthew Effects in Early Vocabulary Instruction and Intervention" by Michael Coyne, Betsy McCoach, Sharon Ware, Christy Austin, Susan Loftus-Rattan, and Doris Baker in *Exceptional Children*, January 2019 (Vol. 85, #2, p. 163-179), Available for purchase at https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0014402918789162; Coyne can be reached at mike.coyne@uconn.edu.

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9. Key Insights About Dyslexia and the Brain

In this article in *Teaching Exceptional Children*, Devin Kearns (University of Connecticut) and four co-authors share insights from recent neurological research on dyslexia. Here's their summary:

• People with less-effective reading skills have different patterns of brain activation when they read than people who read more easily. These different patterns show up when people with dyslexia try to recognize familiar print, link letters and sounds, and process

phonemes. "In other words," say the researchers, "their brains are not working more slowly – they are working differently."

• Thoughtfully planned and well-executed word-reading interventions will help students with dyslexia read better. However, their brains will still work differently than those of non-dyslexic children.

• Neuroimaging studies support the use of phonics-based word-recognition programs that many teachers have used for decades.

• Educators "should continue to stay tuned," say Kearns and colleagues. In the next few years, researchers will be refining their understanding of activation patterns with different reading interventions, and new approaches may very well emerge that produce significant gains.

• "There are many unfounded claims about the 'brain science,'" say the authors. "Therefore, separating fact from fiction is important."

"The Neurobiology of Dyslexia" by Devin Kearns, Roeland Hancock, Fumiko Hoeft, Kenneth Pugh, and Stephen Frost in *Teaching Exceptional Children*, January/February 2019 (Vol. 51, #3, p. 175-188), https://bit.ly/2G7RQmz; Kearns can be reached at devin.kearns@uconn.edu.

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10. Coaching Conversations with Resistant Teachers

In this article in *Education Week Teacher*, California leadership consultant Elena Aguilar shares these suggestions for working with teachers who are not embracing feedback from a well-meaning coach:

• *Work from a place of empathy and humility*. "Try to imagine what their day has been like," says Aguilar. "And remember – we've *all* been cranky at some point."

• *Unpack the affect*. Could it be defensiveness? Anger? Sadness? Fear? Frustration? Feeling unappreciated? Feeling uncomfortable with the visitor? Probe with some active listening: "It sounds like you're…" or "Talk to me about what's going on."

• *Don't take it personally*. "Ninety-seven percent of the time, it's not about you," says Aguilar. "Three percent of the time it could be about you – it could be your way of being and the way you're coaching." The slightest hint of being judgmental or self-righteous can set a teacher's teeth on edge.

• *Be gentle and curious*. "Empty your mind of what they should be doing and how they should teach," says Aguilar. "Be a fanatical observer of what's going well, of his or her strengths and assets, of their passions and interests. Draw those out." The most important information may be buried under exhaustion, burnout, or despair.

• *Be persistent but not annoying*. Aguilar remembers a time when her tenacity with a coachee was in fact a power struggle; she was seeing if she could prevail over the teacher's resistance, and nothing good was accomplished for a whole year. "So what does it mean to be productively persistent?" she asks. "Consistently communicate your belief that your cranky teacher is truly a beautiful person and a committed teacher (maybe deep down inside) and that you truly believe that they can change and grow. Because everyone can. Be consistent in your

curiosity about this teacher. Be unwaveringly kind and gentle. This is a very hard world in which to be a human being, and being a teacher is really, really hard. There's a lot to be cranky (sad, angry, disappointed, hurt, fearful) about. Stand with someone persistently. Help them see other ways of being and help them see how they can take other actions in the classroom."

"How to Coach a Cranky Teacher" by Elena Aguilar in *Education Week Teacher*, January 23, 2019, https://bit.ly/2RnqHgC; Aguilar can be reached at pfranz@epe.org.

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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 48 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.

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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
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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 Teaching in the Middle School
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