

Marshall Memo 40

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
May 31, 2004

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Quotes of the Week

"In the years leading up to the *Brown* decision, the challenges to achieving an integrated society were legal. Today they are educational: to loosen the grip of the ability paradigm on the academic fate of African-American, Latino, and poorer students."

Claude Steele (see item #1)

"[S]tandardized tests are to real school performance what free-throw shooting is to basketball playing – not unrelated, but capturing only a small set of relevant skills."

Claude Steele (*ibid.*)

"[E]ducation officials in most states have chosen No Child Left Behind tests, either national exams or state-customized ones, that are essentially insensitive to the detection of instructional improvement. Instructionally insensitive tests simply can't identify instructional improvements – even if such improvements are actually present. How on earth can a school's staff improve its students' test scores enough to reach the school's adequate-yearly-progress goals if the state's No Child Left Behind test is instructionally insensitive?"

James Popham (see item #2)

"Listen first, speak last."

Advice to leaders from Peter Drucker, business guru (see item #3)

"[I]f you fail to plan, you plan to fail."

Old adage quoted by Jody Capelluti and Ken Nye (see item #4)

"We have West Point and we have Berkeley, and the question isn't which has the correct curriculum; the question is which curriculum is the best fit for the student and teacher."

Michael Winierip, *New York Times*, May 26, 2004

1. Claude Steele on Tests that Widen the Achievement Gap

In a powerful article in *The Nation*, Stanford social psychologist Claude Steele argues that some schools are using tests to give a poorer-quality education to less-advantaged students, thereby widening the racial achievement gap. He believes that the chief culprit is the “ability paradigm” – the American belief that intelligence is fixed at birth and can be measured accurately at any point in a person’s life. Rather than using test scores to give more attention and resources to the students with the greatest needs, Steele says many educators have been using tests to triage students: “Based on tests taken early in life, lower-scoring people and groups get less educational attention, or more of a basic-skills education aimed at bringing them to minimal levels of competence, whereas high-scoring people and groups get a richer education supported by more resources – better-trained teachers, more academically challenging curriculums, better opportunities, etc. The rationale for this... has always been a kind of meritocratic efficiency: maximizing the return on society’s investment by investing the most resources in those who, as indicated by test scores, have the ability needed to benefit from those resources.”

Simply being black, Steele argues, results in certain “contingencies” that make school a less rewarding experience. He cites research showing that African-American (as well as Latino and poor children) are more likely to attend schools where:

- Funding is lower and buildings are run-down;
- Fewer teachers are certified and well trained;
- Teachers have lower expectations of minority and poor children;
- Minority and poor students are called on less in class;
- They are invited less to special activities;
- They experience more corporal punishment;
- They get longer and more frequent suspensions for the same infractions;
- They are more often tracked into lower academic and special-education classes;

- They encounter an especially distracting, anti-achievement peer-group culture;
- They are counseled with lower expectations;
- They have access to fewer Advanced Placement classes;
- They have access to fewer tutoring, support, and test-prep opportunities.

Steele says that the impact of these contingencies on black students is magnified by the ability paradigm: "Treating their lower scores as if they were caused by low ability rather than by these contingencies, this paradigm puts African-American students on a track that insures they will not get the education they need to rise to the level of other students. It seals the test-score gap in place."

The key, Steele believes, is the quality of the tests that schools use. If they accurately measure the abilities that students need for school and life success, tests are useful. But unfortunately, this is not true of many tests. This leads Steele to conclude that "standardized tests are to real school performance what free-throw shooting is to basketball playing – not unrelated, but capturing only a small set of relevant skills." Test companies note all this in the caveats in their manuals, as drug companies do in their advertisements for medicines. But Steele feels that "our need for a system to allocate opportunity is such that, like people who need the advertised drug, we tend to ignore the caveats."

Many educators and community leaders are using the much-discussed achievement gap to make the case for directing more resources toward under-achieving students. But Steele fears that those additional resources will not be helpful if they are applied using the assumptions of the ability paradigm: "Minority students will not be given a richer, more compelling education. They will likely be given a skills-focused, remedial education that will itself become a contingency of their identity, virtually guaranteeing the persistence of the race gap..."

Steele has seven recommendations to help loosen the grip of the ability paradigm on the academic fate of disadvantaged students:

- Stop using the word "ability" in schools and replace it with words like "skill level" or "educational readiness."
- Focus high expectations and demanding and enriched schooling on lower-scoring students, especially in the early grades. "Emphasize getting them to identify with and be excited about their schooling."
- When schools find it necessary to achievement-group students, keep it from being a life sentence. "Provide clear curricular pathways to upward mobility and see to it that some students ascend that pathway as role models."

- Use tests based on specific curriculums to which students have access, and discourage the use of ability and aptitude tests.
- Develop and use multiple, low-stakes, cumulative, curriculum-based assessments.
- Find ways to measure students' motivation and desire, breadth of life experience, work discipline, maturity, and other important attitudes, and use the data to help all students achieve.
- Enlist coalitions of school, church, community, and civil rights organizations to extend out-of-school educational learning opportunities (e.g., tutoring, after-school and weekend programs, test-prep courses, etc.) for minority and low-income children.

Steele concludes: "Major changes in society and in organizations happen when everyone starts working on the same thing. Then things tip. This was true of the *Brown* decision itself. It finally happened when lawyers, social scientists, judges and educators all came together to make it happen. To get rid of test-score gaps, the same coming together is necessary. So in this year of commemorating *Brown*, let us remember the resolve that brought it about."

"Not Just a Test" by Claude Steele in *The Nation*, May 3, 2004 (Vol. 278, #17, p. 38-41)
<http://www.thenation.com/doc.mhtml?i=20040503&s=steele>

2. James Popham on Tests That Don't Measure Learning Gains

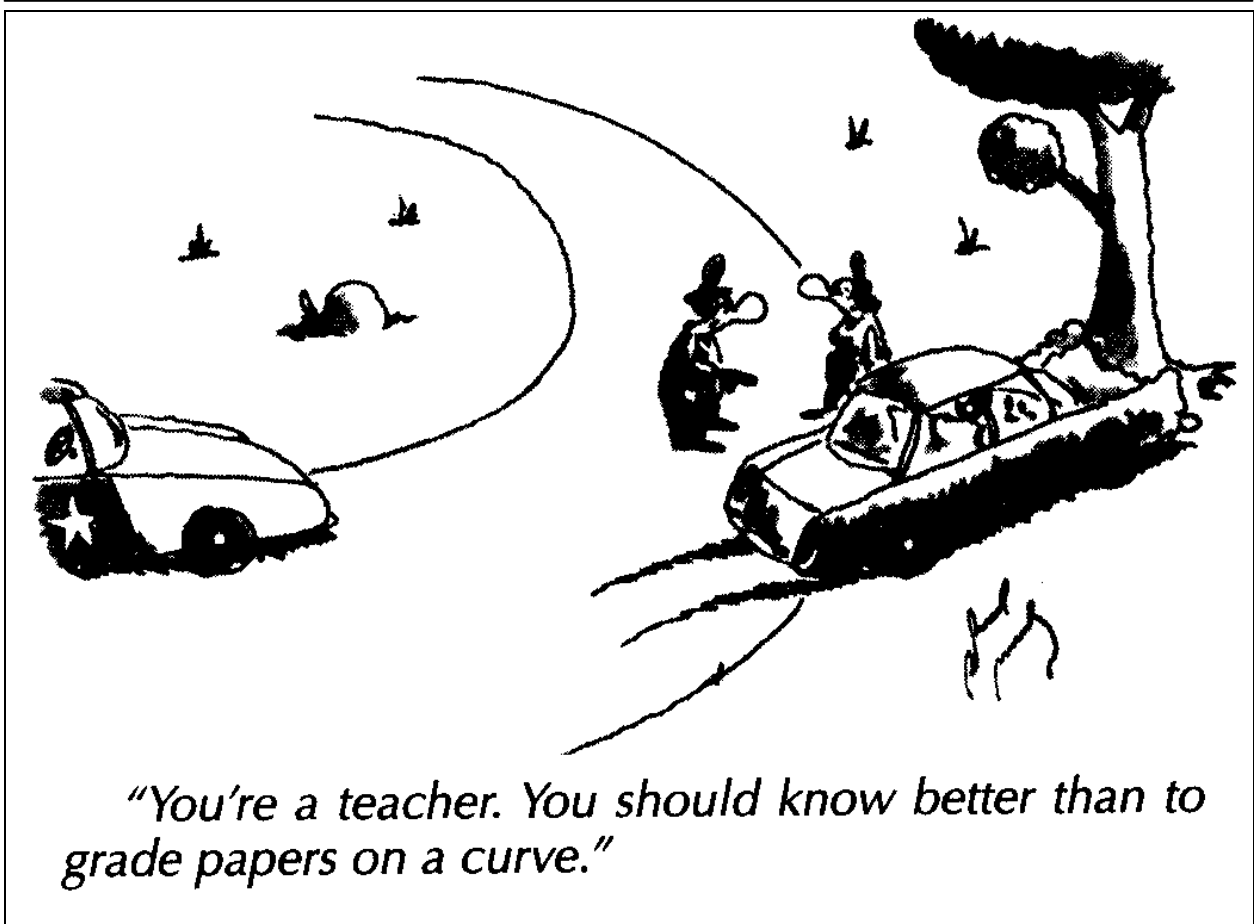
In a sharply-worded commentary piece on the back page of *Education Week*, UCLA testing guru James Popham continues his campaign to persuade schools to use tests that really measure what students have learned and can be used by teachers to improve achievement. He is concerned that most states seem to have adopted the wrong kind of tests: "[E]ducation officials in most states have chosen No Child Left Behind tests, either national exams or state-customized ones, that are essentially insensitive to the detection of instructional improvement. Instructionally insensitive tests simply can't identify instructional improvements – even if such improvements are actually present. How on earth can a school's staff improve its students' test scores enough to reach the school's adequate-yearly-progress goals if the state's No Child Left Behind test is instructionally insensitive?"

The right kind of tests, Popham writes, would allow teachers to tailor instruction to meet every child's needs, would help administrators make better-informed decisions about resources, and would keep parents informed on their children's progress and the overall effectiveness of their school. But these are not the

tests that most states have chosen to use. “Unfortunately,” says Popham, “there’s no chance at all of such dividends taking place as long as federal officials allow states to adopt No Child Left Behind Act tests that will do none of these things.”

“Shaping Up the ‘No Child’ Act: Is Edge-Softening Really Enough” by James Popham in *Education Week*, May 26, 2004 (Vol. XXIII, #38, p. 40)

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=38Popham.h23>



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3. Nine Learnable Skills of Effective Leadership

Business guru Peter Drucker shares advice for a business audience that has direct bearing for educational leaders. He believes that great managers can be charismatic or dull, generous or tight-fisted, visionary or numbers-oriented, but that the key to success is not extraordinary talent but nine learnable skills. Very effective leaders, says Drucker, all follow these simple practices to get the right things done. They:

• Ask “*What needs to be done?*” and set priorities. The question is not “What do I want to do?” but what *needs to be done* in this organization. “Failure to ask this question,” says Drucker, “will render even the ablest executive ineffectual.” Asking the question usually produces a long list of things that need to be done, and the leader’s job is then to choose one or two urgent priorities and focus on them. “I have never encountered an executive who remains effective while tackling more than two tasks at a time,” says Drucker. When the initial goal or goals are met, the “What needs to be done?” question should be asked again to set the new priorities. Another tip: leaders should spend time on the things they do best, and delegate priority projects in their areas of weakness to others.

• Ask “*Is this the right thing for the enterprise?*” This means focusing on the core work rather than obsessing about external stakeholders. If the core work is done well, stakeholders will end up being happy.

• *Develop an action plan.* This means thinking about desired results, probable constraints, future revisions, check-in points, and implications for how the leader will spend time. “Time is the executive’s scarcest and most precious resource,” writes Drucker. “And organizations... are inherently time wasters. The action plan will prove useless unless it’s allowed to determine how the executive spends his or her time... Without an action plan, the executive becomes a prisoner of events. And without check-ins to re-examine the plan as events unfold, the executive has no way of knowing which events really matter and which are only noise.”

• *Take responsibility for decisions.* Drucker says that a decision has not truly been made until people know:

- The name of the person accountable for carrying it out;
- The deadline;
- The names of the people who will be affected by the decision and therefore have to know about, understand, and approve it (or at least not be strongly opposed to it);
- The names of the people who have to be informed of the decision, even if they are not directly affected by it.

• *Take responsibility for communicating.* Effective leaders make sure that their action plans and their information needs are understood throughout the organization, and that people have a chance to comment on what’s being done.

- *Focus on opportunities rather than problems.* Problem-solving is necessary and prevents damage, but it doesn't produce results. Exploiting opportunities produces results. Effective leaders see change as an opportunity, not a threat.

- *Run productive meetings.* A key to good meetings is knowing what kind of meeting it is before it starts – what the goals are and what success will look like. “Effective executives,” says Drucker, “know that any given meeting is either productive or a total waste of time.”

- *Think and say “we” rather than “I.”* Effective leaders know that they have authority only if they have the trust of the organization. “This means that they think of the needs and the opportunities of the organization before they think of their own needs and opportunities.”

- *Listen first and speak last.* Enough said.

“What Makes an Effective Executive” by Peter Drucker in *Harvard Business Review*, June 2004 (Vol. 82, #6, p. 59-63), no e-link available

4. Eight Habits of Highly Ineffective Principals

In this article, two veteran principals from Maine list the characteristics of the principal from hell:

- *Ineffective principals avoid conflict.* They say things like, “Until everyone is on board, we’re not going forward” and foster an environment where intellectual conflict is seen as unhealthy and scary.

- *Ineffective principals don’t follow through.* They don’t finish things or get back to people to whom they’ve promised answers; they propose great ideas in meetings and then don’t make them happen.

- *Ineffective principals measure their success by how the day went.* They lack a vision of where the school is headed and a game plan for getting there. “There is an old adage,” the authors write, “that if you fail to plan, you plan to fail.”

- *Ineffective principals don’t listen.* Instead, they are thinking about what they will say next, and they like the sound of their own voice.

- *Ineffective principals prefer style over substance.* They care about short-term things that put the school or themselves in a positive light, and don’t spend time on things that will really improve teaching and learning.

- *Ineffective principals are not visible.* They rarely leave their offices, and use their desk as a refuge from school issues and problems.

- *Ineffective principals hedge the truth.* They shape their answers to satisfy the person they're talking to. Staff members start saying things like, "Here's what he told me. What did he tell you?"

- *Ineffective principals are unable to complete multiple tasks on time.* They are unfocused, reactive, and undisciplined and don't do first things first.

"The Eight Habits of Highly Ineffective Principals" by Jody Capelluti and Ken Nye in *Principal Leadership*, May 2004 (Vol. 4, #9, p. 8-9)

5. Four Time Management Problems

In this business-oriented article that rings true for schools, Steven Berglas, a UCLA psychologist and executive coach, identifies four types of time-abusing employees and notes that standard time-management advice doesn't work with them. That's because their problems stem from psychological conflicts that need to be addressed differently. Here is Berglas's advice for each type:

- *Perfectionists* are afraid of receiving feedback and work super-hard to be perfect and get a good evaluation (or at least avoid getting a negative one). Advice: "Expose perfectionists to frequent low doses of evaluation – progress reports, updates, and so forth. This lowers their fear of final approval. (Often, however, they won't get relief from their symptoms without therapy.)"

- *Preemptives* try to be in control by finishing tasks far earlier than they need to, making themselves unpopular and unavailable. Advice: "Make preemptives feel in control by putting them in charge of other people. This will enforce socialization, which should make them more comfortable with uncertainty."

- *People pleasers* commit to more work than they can complete because they can't say no. Advice: "Keep a close eye on the workloads of your people pleasers to make sure their time isn't consumed by others' requests. Also, praise your people pleasers for their regular work so they don't take on others' work to get that praise."

- *Procrastinators* make constant (and often reasonable-sounding) excuses to mask a fear of being found inadequate in their jobs. Advice: "Force procrastinators to confront their fears, and help them dissociate their specific output from overall performance evaluation. They'll be less likely to sabotage themselves." Don't praise a procrastinator for doing something on time, because it will only make the problem worse: he or she will fear that your expectations are even higher than before. Some procrastinators need professional treatment.

6. Helping New Teachers Survive and Thrive in Our Schools

In *Finders and Keepers*, a book published this spring (Jossey Bass), Harvard professor Susan Moore Johnson and a team of six doctoral students (all former teachers) studied several effective schools and teachers to find the best ways to welcome new teachers into a school and increase their effectiveness and staying power. The research team found a marked generational shift in recent cohorts of teachers: there is less acceptance of the “egg-crate” ethos in which teachers retreat to their classrooms, work in self-sufficient isolation, and shy away from trying to influence policies in their school or district. The new teachers profiled in *Finders and Keepers* were eager for feedback on their performance, wanted to work with colleagues in their schools, and expected their jobs to expand (and pay more) as they grew more proficient.

Johnson and her colleagues found that conventional one-on-one mentoring programs are not the most effective way to help new teachers get their bearings. This is especially true when the mentor teaches a different subject or grade level and when there isn’t regular, on-going contact. Here are some of their other findings about effective induction:

- Hiring should take place at the school level to ensure a good teacher-school match.
- Induction programs should be school-based, change and improve every year, draw on experienced staff within the school, and not rely on large, district-sponsored meetings.
- Beginning-of-the-year meetings should involve the whole staff and benefit new and veteran teachers.
- Mentors should work at the same grade level and have continuous contact with their mentees. Released time and/or stipends should be provided for regular meetings.
- New teachers should get clear, focused, and detailed curriculum direction.
- New teachers should know the learning continuum – what students were supposed to learn the year before and what the teachers in the next year expect students to know and be able to do.
- New teachers need performance indicators to make state and district standards vivid and understandable.

“Generation Gap” by Linda Jacobson in *Education Week*, May 26, 2004 (Vol. XXIII, #38, p. 24-27) <http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=38Research2.h23>

7. The Grow Report Grows

A number of school districts across the country have contracted with The Grow Network, a New York-based company that presents their test scores and other instructional information in a format that is easily understood by teachers, school administrators, and parents. Grow produces print reports on student achievement in grades 3, 5, 8, and 11 and also has an interactive website where parents can find suggested reading lists and activities in reading and math that students can do at home. Grow’s test reports show a student’s scores on a 4-3-2-1 scale, break scores down by topic, and link them to state standards.

Grow also produces reports for teachers on their incoming students based on the tests they took the previous spring. These reports highlight where students will need help and have links to more detailed information on each student and suggestions for lesson and unit planning and instructional materials. The Grow Reports are resolutely user-friendly: “If the reports require training to read,” says CEO David Coleman, “they should be redesigned.”

Reactions range from enthusiastic among some New York City teachers to moderately positive in Chicago to negative in the case of one Nevada state representative (who didn’t think the \$2.8 million price tag for the Grow Report was worth it). “Most teachers we talk to really like the way the data are presented,” said Dan Bugler in the Chicago Public Schools central office. “If there’s a criticism, it’s that they get the data at the beginning of the year, but we don’t really have a lot of benchmark assessments, so they don’t have any data at the midyear point.”

“User-Friendly Reports On Student Test Scores Help Guide Instruction” by Lynn Olson in *Education Week*, May 26, 2004 (Vol. XXIII, #38, p. 9) <http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=38Grow.h23>

8. Short Items:

a. Touch typing for “untouchables” – In a recent *New York Times* Op Ed column, Thomas Friedman described a privately financed boarding school in India that was set up to serve “untouchables,” the country’s lowest caste. The mission of the school is (in Friedman’s words) to “take India’s most deprived children and prove that if you gave them access to the same technologies and education that have enabled other Indians

to thrive in globalization they could, too.” The students’ parents are mostly rag-pickers and quarry laborers, and the kids arrive at the school at age 4 dressed in rags and having never used a toilet or slept in a bed. But they quickly make up for lost time, socially and academically. When Friedman challenged an eight-year-old student to a speed typing race, she won. Asked about their futures, students said they wanted to be astronauts, doctors, poets, detectives, and authors.

“Making India Shine” by Thomas Friedman, *New York Times*, May 20, 2004 (no e-link, but this article can be purchased at: <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=FA0F15FF3B5B0C738EDDAC0894DC404482>)

b. Meditation for lower blood pressure – An Augusta, Georgia school district is experimenting with meditation to lower the blood pressure of hypertensive high-school students. The program seems to be effective, based on a study reported in the *American Journal of Hypertension*, but further research is needed to confirm the results. “We still have to be careful about generalizing and exaggerating the findings,” said Rita Benn, a University of Michigan researcher. “Yoga or even writing may be just as effective, but we just don’t know that yet.”

“Researchers Explore Ways to Lower Students’ Stress” by Debra Viadero in *Education Week*, May 26, 2004 (Vol. XXIII, #38, p. 8)
<http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=38Stress.h23>

c. Picky parents’ guide to schools – The “Picky Parent Guide: Choose Your Child’s School with Confidence” gives parents a research-based list of “great school factors” to look for when checking out a school. It might be of interest to educators as well!

<http://www.pickyparent.com/pages/six-steps.html> (spotted in *PEN Weekly NewsBlast*, May 28, 2004)

d. San Francisco schools declare war on junk food – Ed Wilkins, the former businessman who is now director of food services in San Francisco, has made some radical changes in school menus: No more empty calories. No more French fries. No more soda. No more Hostess cakes. No more Gatorade. No more ice cream. No more potato chips (not even the baked kind). Nothing battered, nothing fried. No more hot dogs, hot links, or hot wings. Student can only buy food at school that contains less than 30 percent of calories from fat, less than 10 percent of calories from saturated fat,

and less than 35 percent sugar by weight. All snacks and side dishes must contain certain levels of vitamins, minerals, protein, and fiber.

San Francisco Chronicle, May 23, 2004 (spotted in *PEN Weekly NewsBlast*, May 28, 2004)
<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2004/05/23/MNGRC6PTTS1.DTL&type=printable>

e. Sign me up in San Diego! – Rocky Chavez, director of the Charter School of Business and Technology in San Diego (and a member of the San Diego City Council), made the following recruiting pitch to students in a local high school: If you want to flip burgers and drive your mother’s old car, stay where you are. But if you want to drive a Lexus, live in a \$900,000 house, and have a boat in the harbor, transfer to my school! Local officials blew the whistle on Chavez’s tactics, and he’s been enjoined from recruiting (although his school still can).

“Charter school can resume recruiting, but director can’t” by Lola Sherman, *San Diego Union Tribune*, May 25, 2004 (spotted in *Education Gadfly*, May 27, 2004)

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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.marshall8@verizon.net

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo aims to keep busy principals, teachers, and other educators very well-informed on important research, ideas, and developments in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, a former Boston teacher and administrator, is your “designated reader,” searching through a wide range of publications the week they come out, zeroing in on the articles that are most relevant and useful to improving teaching and learning at the school level, and summarizing them in a brief e-mail. Target topics include the following:

- *School leadership* – Building a professional learning community; effective teamwork; effective schools practices; supervision and evaluation of teachers; time management.
- *Effective teaching* – Key variables associated with high student achievement; professional development of teachers; teacher leadership and career ladders; multiple intelligences and brain research.
- *Curriculum* – Alignment and planning with the end in sight; teaching for understanding; new ideas in reading, writing, and math.
- *Assessment* – Aligned formative and summative assessments; using data and student work for continuous improvement; graphic display of student achievement data; standardized testing and the debate on standards.
- *Closing the gap* – Effective strategies to close the racial/economic achievement gap; the innate-ability/intelligence/effective effort debate; safety-net programs.
- *Positive school culture* – Student discipline; social-emotional learning; moral development; parent involvement; and community partnerships.
- *And...* – New areas of research; upcoming television and radio programs on education.

Publications covered:

(those read this week are underlined)

American Education Research Journal
American Educator
American School Board Journal
ASCD SmartBrief
Atlantic Monthly
Bay State Banner
Boston Globe
Commonwealth Magazine
Curriculum/Education Update (ASCD)
Ed. Magazine (Harvard School of Education)
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Elementary School Journal
Harpers
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Education Review
Journal of Staff Development
Middle School Journal
NAASP Bulletin
New York Times
New Yorker
Newsweek
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal Magazine
Principal Leadership
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Review of Educational Research
Teachers College Record
Teacher Magazine

E-links are provided whenever possible.

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