Marshall Memo 960

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
November 7, 2022

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Middle school is where these kids are starting to get their moral compass and to back that compass up with logic. So middle school is a classic opportunity to have more focus on climate change."

Michael Padilla (quoted in item #4)

"Sadly, the academic lives of many learners are completely directed by teachers. Always being told what to do and how to do it undercuts self-direction and can lead to students becoming increasingly passive and disengaged."

Jay McTighe and Catlin Tucker (see item #1)

"There is simply too much for any one of us to know, never mind teach to dozens of students in a crowded day. Such a tragic fact leads to a liberating realization: wisdom matters more than knowledge."

Grant Wiggins (see item #2)

"The aim of the modern curriculum ought to be to use selected content as a vehicle for developing in students an unwillingness to accept glib, unwarranted answers from any source. They must leave school with the passion to question, without the fear of looking foolish, and with the knowledge to learn where and how the facts can be found."

Grant Wiggins (*ibid*.)

"When viewed as a tool for bolstering communication with students and parents, standards-based grading can be resoundingly effective."

Laura Link and Thomas Guskey (see item #3)

"Good writing is not the product of a formula, but the result of reading, discussion, drafting, head-scratching, and revision."

Michelle Kenney (see item #5)

1. Helping Students Become Increasingly Independent Learners

(Originally titled "Developing Self-Directed Learners by Design")

In this *Educational Leadership* article, author/consultants Jay McTighe and Catlin Tucker say that for students to thrive in the 21st century, they must be able to take charge of their own learning. Here are four ways schools can support that outcome:

• *Make autonomous learning a priority*. "The skills required for self-directed learning are unlikely to develop on their own," say McTighe and Tucker. "Nor will these skills fully blossom from the actions of one or two teachers working alone." Being an independent learner must be part of a school's profile of a graduate and widely promoted among students, staff, and families.

• *Map independent learning goals*. Each grade level should focus on appropriate skills and habits of mind that are part of a preK-12 plan, assessed by a rubric showing levels of mastery. Some possible elements: students setting learning goals, developing a learning plan, self-assessing, making adjustments, getting feedback, and persevering in the face of challenges and disappointments.

• *Explicitly teach and reinforce those skills*. McTighe and Tucker say the best way to teach self-directed learning is to break it down to bite-sized chunks, model each one, have students practice with helpful scaffolding, and gradually release responsibility. By middle and high school, students might be setting SMART goals with specific outcomes, planning how to reach them, and reflecting on the process.

• *Provide opportunities for self-direction*. "Sadly," say McTighe and Tucker, "the academic lives of many learners are completely directed by teachers. Always being told what to do and how to do it undercuts self-direction and can lead to students becoming increasingly passive and disengaged." Common questions: *How many words do you want? How many points is this worth?*

To counteract this, students need to be given the chance to make decisions about content, process, and product. This might start with a simple choice of learning options: *Would you rather listen to this podcast or watch a video?* More ambitiously, students might take on a performance task at the end of a curriculum unit, including the GRASPS elements:

- A real-world **g**oal;
- A meaningful **r**ole for the student or group;
- A target **a**udience, preferably outside the classroom;
- An authentic or simulated **s**ituation involving real-world application;
- A culminating **p**roduct or **p**erformance that shows evidence of learning;

- Success criteria in the form of a rubric.

A performance task with these ingredients gives students lots of choice while holding them accountable for measurable learning outcomes. For example, a performance task involving argumentation might be judged on a claim, sound reasons to support it, relevant evidence cited, opposing claims rebutted – all appropriate to the target audience.

"Developing Self-Directed Learners by Design" by Jay McTighe and Catlin Tucker in *Educational Leadership*, November 2022 (Vol. 80, #3, pp. 58-64); McTighe can be reached at jay@mctighe-associates.com.

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2. Grant Wiggins on the Limits of Curriculum Coverage

(Originally titled "The Futility of Trying to Teach Everything of Importance")

In this classic 1989 *Educational Leadership* article, the late Grant Wiggins wrote that the aim of K-12 education cannot possibly be learning "everything of importance." Some students might not know where Mexico is, how to read a timetable, or the solution to an algebra problem with two variables, but that's not necessarily an indictment of their schools. "How easy it is to feel indignant when some student doesn't know what *we* know," said Wiggins, "but somewhere out there, in this highly specialized world, is a well-educated adult who also neither knows it nor deems it essential."

So what should we teach – in hopes that students will learn it? A good education, Wiggins believed, consists of "developing the *habits of mind and high standards of craftsmanship* necessary in the face of one's (inevitable) ignorance… In short, the aim of curriculum is to awaken, not 'stock' or 'train' the mind. That goal makes the basic unit of a modern curriculum the *question*" – for example, *What is a "great" book? What is an adequate proof? Does art imitate life or vice versa? Are there really heroes and villains? Is "history" the same as "progress"? In what sense is the body a "system"*? As students explore questions like these, they begin to ask questions themselves, and their progress should be assessed by the quality of their questions and their ability to explore the answers.

Wiggins used to ask educators what "bad habits" get in the way of student learning. The answers came quickly: the inability to delay gratification, not listening, inattention to detail. Asked to think about how schools might change those habits, educators realized that didactic lessons wouldn't work – and that teachers' habits were part of the problem, especially curriculum "coverage" and short-answer tests. It would take a different approach, implemented systematically over time, to make a difference.

In that vein, Wiggins listed some "intellectual virtues," "moral habits of mind," that go beyond mere knowledge:

- Knowing how to listen to someone who knows something one doesn't know;
- Seeing which question to ask to clarify an idea's meaning or value;
- Being open and respectful enough to imagine that a new and strange idea is worth considering;

- Being inclined to ask questions about pat statements that may hide assumptions or confusions.

"There's no 'critical thinking,'" said Wiggins, "without substantive ideas and criteria for distinguishing between exemplary and slipshod work, no matter what the age or experience of students." Students must know basic facts before engaging in higher-order thinking.

"The aim of the modern curriculum," he concluded, "ought to be to use selected content as a vehicle for developing in students an unwillingness to accept glib, unwarranted answers from any source. They must leave school with the passion to question, without the fear of looking foolish, and with the knowledge to learn where and how the facts can be found. The sign of a poor education, in short, is not ignorance. It is rationalization, the thoughtless habit of believing that one's unexamined, superficial or parochial opinions and feelings *are* the truth, or the habit of timid silence when one does not understand what someone else is talking about." Wiggins suggested these principles (quoted verbatim):

- The most essential habit of mind we can provide students is the ability to suspend disbelief or belief as the situation may warrant.
- The deep acceptance of the painful realization that there are far more important ideas than we can ever know leads to a liberating curricular postulate: *all students need not learn the same things*.
- If everything taught is said by teacher to be important, then nothing will seem important to students. Of all the "important" things students are learning, some are more important than others.
- Curriculum is inseparable from assessment: the tests set standards of exemplary performance… Craftsmanship and pride in one's work depend on "tests" that enable us to confront and personalize authentic tasks.
- The "essentials" are not the "basics."

"The dilemmas of curriculum and instruction are real," Wiggins concluded, "the problems increasingly intractable. There is simply too much for any one of us to know, never mind teach to dozens of students in a crowded day. Such a tragic fact leads to a liberating realization: wisdom matters more than knowledge."

"The Futility of Trying to Teach Everything of Importance" by Grant Wiggins in *Educational Leadership*, November 1989 (Vol. 47, #3, pp. 44-59)

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3. Standards-Based Grading – What It Is and What It Isn't

In this *Theory Into Practice* article, Laura Link (University of North Dakota) and Thomas Guskey (University of Kentucky) say there is lots of confusion about standards-based grading: how it's defined, how it should be evaluated, and whether it's effective. Here are their clarifications:

• *A definition* – Standards-based grading is a way of evaluating students' progress and achievement based on their mastery of clearly articulated learning standards. For example,

rather than reporting students' grades in traditional gradebook fashion – Chapter 2 quiz, Act III test, U.S. map activity – students get scores for:

- Simplifying square roots;
- Identifying elements of a play;
- Using cardinal and intermediate directions on a map.

Successful implementation of standards-based grading, say Link and Guskey, depends on all stakeholders being clear on *the problem to which standards-based grading is the solution*: that traditional grading lumps cognitive and non-cognitive elements together into a single grade that is a "hodgepodge" of elements and doesn't clearly communicate how students are learning what they are supposed to be learning.

• *Sources of confusion about standards-based grading* – Link and Guskey have seen evidence of these seven, and others:

- Not clearly defining learning outcomes;
- Differing opinions on which constitute "power standards;"
- Schools revising report cards before clarifying learning standards;
- Uncertainty about whether non-cognitive factors will count toward student grades;
- Lack of clarity on levels of performance and how they are labeled;
- Allowing students unlimited retakes of assessments;
- Teachers not using assessment results to fine-tune instruction.

These can lead to "confusion, frustration, inconsistent implementation, and eventually abandonment," say the authors.

• *Criteria for effective grading and reporting* – The primary purposes of grading, say the authors, are to (a) provide information to students on their learning progress, and (b) let parents know how their children are doing in school. Given those goals, the way to evaluate any grading and reporting system is how well it communicates key information to students and parents – the bottom line being how well they *understand* what's communicated. Traditional grading does not meet this standard because what's contained in a student's grade is unclear.

Looking at student achievement, say Link and Guskey, is not an appropriate way to evaluate any grading system. True, classroom assessments can (and should) be used to improve teaching and the choice of instructional materials, but student outcomes are not the way to evaluate grading and reporting.

• *Key elements of standards-based grading* – Link and Guskey suggest three criteria that describe standards-based grading and should be used to assess implementation:

- Students' performance is reported based on clear learning standards for the grade or course – what students should know and be able to do – rather than a single content-area grade that averages points and percentages from multiple assignments.
- Teachers use a small number of performance levels – for example, *Beginning, Progressing, Proficient, Exemplary* – to describe students' progress toward the learning goals, versus a 100-point scale, which "offers only the illusion of precision."

- Academic grades are reported separately from effort, behavior, homework, work completion, and class participation. Students and parents get a clear and useful "dashboard" of information in three areas: product, process, and progress.

"When viewed as a tool for bolstering communication with students and parents," conclude Link and Guskey, "standards-based grading can be resoundingly effective." By reporting on students' progress on specific learning targets, communicating in simpler terms, and separating cognitive and non-cognitive factors, this approach has great potential to improve teaching and learning.

"Is Standards-Based Grading Effective?" by Laura Link and Thomas Guskey in *Theory Into Practice*, Fall 2022 (Vol. 61, #4, pp. 406-417); the authors are reached at laura.link@und.edu and guskey@uky.edu.

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4. Teaching About Climate Change

In this *New York Times* article, Winston Choi-Schagrin describes teachers' efforts to teach about climate change in states whose curriculum standards barely mention the subject. More than 40 states have standards with only one explicit reference. Meanwhile, our planet is undergoing dramatic change – increased flooding, wildfires, hurricanes, sea-level rise, and more over the horizon.

Bertha Vazquez, a seventh-grade science teacher in Miami, said, "I have to find a way to sneak it in." Florida's elementary and middle-school standards, adopted in 2008, do not include the words *climate change*. She uses the standard on energy transfer to teach about wind turbines and the ecology standard to discuss the consequences of deforestation. "This is the topic of the century," says Vazquez, "and not just because of the potential disasters ahead, but because this is the future of the economy."

"Middle school is where these kids are starting to get their moral compass and to back that compass up with logic," says Michael Padilla, a Clemson University professor and former president of the National Science Teachers Association. "So middle school is a classic opportunity to have more focus on climate change." Surveys show that around 80 percent of American parents say schools should teach the subject, and most students agree. The challenge is providing solid information about the problem – and possible solutions so students don't get depressed about it.

The Next Generation Science Standards, released a decade ago, have significantly influenced the curriculum in 45 states and the District of Columbia. But NGSS has only one standard (out of 60) explicitly focused on climate change; 17 others have a connection, and it's up to states, school districts, and teachers to knit them together into a coherent curriculum unit. This points to the key role of teacher training. One exemplary program is ClimeTime, which has so far trained 14,000 teachers nationwide.

Textbooks are of mixed quality on climate change, sometimes outdated and misleading, which prompts teachers to forage for material online. But in a recent analysis, the Climate

Literacy and Energy Awareness Network found that only 700 of the 30,000 free online materials on climate change were accurate and appropriate for schools.

Climate change denial is at work in some areas. A 2020 study graded states on how well their standards dealt with climate change: half got a B+ but 10 got a D or worse, including Texas and Florida. Last year, a Texas Board of Education member (a Shell Oil lawyer) succeeded in cutting the requirement that eighth graders can "describe efforts to mitigate climate change." New Jersey is at the other end of the spectrum, with standards touching on climate change at every grade band and every subject.

Jerry Walther, a natural resources teacher in the Quinault Indian Nation, takes his students outside to look at the ocean and rivers and study the impact of climate change. He tells his students, "This is your responsibility to your community. You are supposed to leave the land, if not the same, then better than it was, for your grandchildren."

"Teaching Climate Change When the Curriculum Avoids It" by Winston Choi-Schagrin in *The New York Times*, November 2, 2022

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5. Problems with Formulaic Student Essays

In this article in *Rethinking Schools*, Oregon high-school teacher Michelle Kenney remembers a star student who was distraught because her essay wasn't conforming to the five-paragraph format. "You're supposed to have three ideas, right?" she said. "How can I write a thesis statement with four or five? You're only supposed to have three body paragraphs, so I'll have to mush all my ideas together, and then I won't get a good grade because I'll have too many sentences and too many ideas. I don't know what to do." When Kenney told her it was okay to add more paragraphs if that's what it took to develop a strong argument, the girl was astonished: "Really, I can do that?"

Over the years, Kenney has seen a number of simple formulas to help students write essays, sometimes packaged as easy-to-remember acronyms:

- TEETH – Topic, Example, Explanation, Tie to thesis, Hook to the next paragraph;
- TISAS – Topic sentence, Introduction to supporting evidence, Supporting evidence, Analysis, Summary;
- Jane Schaffer's formula: attaching two pieces of brief commentary to a concrete detail to produce a 2:1 ratio of opinions and facts.

"Systems like these encourage students to produce shallow, fast-food versions of paragraphs that don't allow much elbow room for creativity or critical thinking," says Kenney, "yet lend themselves to speed grading by a standardized test scorer or an overworked instructor only 50 essays into a stack of 160 on a Sunday night."

Kenney didn't use a formula when she taught students how to write narrative, expository, or persuasive paragraphs and essays. Instead, she helped students:

- See each paragraph as providing evidence or commentary to support a thesis;
- Help a reader see, hear, feel, and understand the writer's message;
- Use graphic organizers to gather thoughts and evidence;

- Craft thesis statements to provide focus;
- Mine articles, stories, and academic essays for insights on how they are organized and how good writers communicate.

"My students spent as much time discussing and sharing their writing as they did drafting their pieces," says Kenney. "I spent as much time as I could meeting one-on-one with students for writing conferences."

But then the Smarter Balanced Assessment (SBAC) was implemented in her state, and teachers feared that their students wouldn't be able to pass a test that involved reading several texts and writing an analytical essay. "There was pressure on everyone to come up with a fix," says Kenney, "to find a shared method that would get our students through the mad scramble that had become the path to graduation for all students across the state."

After much thought, she and her colleagues came up with a formula for teaching analytical paragraphs to ninth graders – PEAS:

- Point
- Evidence
- Analysis
- So what?

Everyone learned the formula, posters were hung in classrooms, and some teachers provided sentence frames. Kenney didn't love the formula but feared that if she didn't use it, 10th-grade teachers would think less of her as a teacher – and her students would never graduate. "So I taught PEAS," she says, as did teachers around the school. Students, especially those who struggled with writing, appreciated the common expectations and consistency from classroom to classroom. "It helps me know what to do," said one.

But Kenney had difficulty finding authentic passages that could serve as models for PEAS essays. Writers in top-flight magazines like *The Atlantic* and *The New Yorker* didn't follow the formula. "A lot of the pros," says Kenney, "wrote entire paragraphs with nothing but analysis; some adopted a narrative approach to develop their arguments; very few had classic topic sentences at the beginning of a paragraph. Some paragraphs were only a few words long." So Kenney created her own model essays, and in subsequent years used essays created by students who had mastered the formula.

As the PEAS formula went into its second year, Kenney noticed a decline in essay quality: "Students had more confidence in their writing," says Kenney, "but they were also less invested in their ideas. Writing paragraphs and essays was now a set of hoops to jump through, a dry task only slightly more complex than a worksheet. Sentence frames helped some kids, but only functioned as a substitute for thinking for other students. It was also more difficult to get many students to revise skimpy paragraphs if all the pieces of PEAS were already present." Some students found the formula constricting – and they tended to be the best writers who should have been producing exemplars for their classmates.

There was a lively debate about PEAS in Kenney's school, with some teachers arguing that students needed the "training wheels" of the formula before they could develop higher-order writing skills. "You need to learn the rules before you can break them," said one

colleague. Over time, doubts emerged. Kenney wondered if they were wrong to assume "that student writing will blossom in depth and creativity after years of being squeezed into the confines of a writing genre that doesn't exist outside of school?"

But what was the alternative? Kenney didn't have a good answer, but she believes that none of the formulas "actually teaches writing or even acknowledges the reality of the writing process – an unavoidably messy, sometimes painful business that students need to be carefully guided through with wisdom and care from a young age. Good writing is not the product of a formula, but the result of reading, discussion, drafting, head-scratching, and revision."

And that's expensive. Which means that first-rate writing instruction is inequitably distributed, with poorer schools and districts getting by with cheaper, formula-driven approaches.

Kenney concludes with a plea for better funding of early childhood programs, reduced class size, expanded school libraries, and time for teacher collaboration and one-on-one tutoring and conferencing with student writers. "Good-enough writing isn't good enough for our children," she says. "I look forward to the day when all teachers can banish the canned formulas and have discussions about schoolwide writing programs based on their shared knowledge, experience, and expertise as professional educators."

"The Politics of the Paragraph" by Michelle Kenney in *Rethinking Schools*, Summer 2016 (Vol. 30, #4); Kenney can be reached at mkenney45@gmail.com.

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6. Can Third-Grade Retention Work for English Learners?

In this *Journal of Public Economics* article, David Figlio (Northwestern University) and Umut Özek (American Institutes for Research) report on the impact of a Florida program that retained third graders who did not score at Level 2 or above on the state reading test. The policy allowed below-level students to take summer school and had a number of "good cause exemptions" for students previously retained, ELLs who had been in the English learner program for less than two years, some students with learning disabilities, and students who could demonstrate reading proficiency on an alternative assessment.

The Florida program required that third graders who were retained would have the following in their repeat year:

- An academic improvement plan;
- Instruction using proven teaching strategies;
- Working with high-performing teachers;
- At least 90 minutes of reading instruction each day.

Retained students who could demonstrate the required reading level during the retained year were eligible for mid-year grade promotions.

Figlio and Özek analyzed the data on retained English learners in 12 Florida districts from 2001 to 2012 and found the downstream results were very positive. Retained students:

- Significantly improved their reading test scores;
- Reduced their time to English proficiency by half;

- Reduced their need for remediation in middle school;
- Reduced the likelihood of being involved in disciplinary incidents in middle school;
- Doubled the likelihood of taking advanced math and science courses in middle school;
- Tripled the chance of taking college credit-bearing courses in high school.

These benefits were larger for recent immigrants who were born in another country and relocated to the U.S. The retention-plus-support program might be cost-effective, say the authors, because of downstream reductions in remediation.

Figlio and Özek conclude with a cautionary note about retention, which was only one component of the Florida program. "Mandatory grade retention is far from a 'silver bullet,'" they say, "and any policy that is implemented, especially pertaining to vulnerable populations such as English learners, should be carefully monitored to gauge both the potential areas of success as well as the potential areas of risk."

"An Extra Year to Learn English? Early Grade Retention and the Human Capital Development of English Learners" by David Figlio and Umut Özek in *Journal of Public Economics*, March 2020 (Vol. 186, pp. 1-16); Figlio can be reached at figlio@northwestern.edu.

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7. The Keys to Trust and Loyalty

In this *Harvard Business Review* article, Ashley Reichheld and Amelia Dunlop (Deloitte Digital) say that trust in an organization is built on people's sense of its positive intent and overall competence. "Through thousands of hours of research, exhaustive literature reviews, and countless regression analyses," say Reichheld and Dunlop, "we broke intent and competence down into their foundational elements":

• *Humanity* – The organization demonstrates empathy and kindness toward me and treats everyone with fairness.

• *Transparency* – It openly shares information, motives, and choices in straightforward and plain language.

• *Capability* – The organization creates quality services, experiences, or products for people like me.

• *Reliability* – The organization consistently and dependably delivers on the promises it makes.

The researchers then created a questionnaire – TrustID – and validated it by collecting 200,000 scores from thousands of customers and employees. A key finding: when an organization scores high on these indicators, people are more loyal, talk it up among friends, stick with it (if they're employed there), and are more forgiving when it makes mistakes.

"4 Questions to Measure – and Boost – Customer Trust" by Ashley Reichheld and Amelia Dunlop in *Harvard Business Review*, November 1, 2022

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8. Recommended Children's Books on Diversity

In this *Learning for Justice* feature, Crystal Keels, Courtney Wai, and Coshandra Dillard recommend these children's books featuring diverse characters and themes (click the link below for cover images and brief summaries):

- *Juna and Appa* by Jane Park, illustrated by Felicia Hoshino
- *Unspeakable: The Tulsa Race Massacre* by Carole Boston Weatherford, illustrated by Floyd Cooper
- *It Feels Good to Be Yourself: A Book About Gender Identity* by Theresa Thorn, illustrated by Noah Grigni
- *Separate Is Never Equal* by Duncan Tonatiuh
- *Rap a Tap Tap: Here's Bojangles – Think of That!* by Leo and Diane Dillon
- *Jo Jo Makoons: The Used-to-Be Best Friend* by Dawn Quigley, illustrated by Tara Audibert
- *Healer of the Water Monster* by Brian Young
- *Sisters of the Neversea* by Cynthia Leitich Smith
- *Nia Skye's Friend on Wheels* by Keylonda Wheeler, illustrated by Steffi Stanley
- *My Maddy* by Gayle Pitman, illustrated by Violet Tobacco

"What We're Reading" by Crystal Keels, Courtney Wai, and Coshandra Dillard in *Learning for Justice*, Fall 2022 (#3, pp. 62-63)

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If you have feedback or suggestions,
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About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly publication keeps principals, teachers, instructional coaches, superintendents, and other educators well-informed on current K-12 research and ideas. Kim Marshall, drawing on 53 years 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 150 articles each week, and selects 8-10 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 Tuesday (with occasional breaks; there are 50 issues a year). Every week there's also a podcast and HTML version.

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Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

All Things PLC
American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
AMLE Magazine
ASCA School Counselor
ASCD SmartBrief
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
English Journal
Exceptional Children
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Educational Review
Independent School
Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Kappa Delta Pi Record
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Language Arts
Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance)
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Social Education
Social Studies and the Young Learner
Teachers College Record
Teaching Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Journal of the Learning Sciences
The Language Educator
The Learning Professional (formerly Journal of Staff Development)
The New York Times
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Time
Urban Education