

# Marshall Memo 805

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education  
September 30, 2019

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## Quotes of the Week

"Silence emboldens bullies."

Allison Vaillancourt (see item #6)

"Savvy women learn that they must often do a masculine thing (which establishes their competence) in a feminine way (to defuse backlash)."

Joan Williams in "How Women Escape the Likability Trap" in *The New York Times*, August 18, 2019, <https://nyti.ms/2KQDpna>; Williams is at [williams@uchastings.edu](mailto:williams@uchastings.edu).

"Education is a form of social policy – a means by which society distributes power and privilege. Superintendents are held professionally accountable and morally responsible to fine-tune district programs and practices to ensure all students have access to a quality education."

Demond Means, Clarke County, Georgia superintendent, in "The Perils of Equity-Focused Leadership" in *Education Week*, September 18, 2019 (Vol. 39, #5, p. 16), <https://bit.ly/2m3pdyr>; Means can be reached at [superintendent@clarke.k12.ga.us](mailto:superintendent@clarke.k12.ga.us).

"I used low-level books for students with low reading levels, and when we finished, nothing had changed. Something seemed off."

Laura Beth Kelly (see item #4)

"Of course, a teacher's passion, charisma, warmth, and humor influence the way students experience a class. But teachers aren't really 'born' knowing how to connect and inspire children in a classroom setting. Instead, they must grow these capacities by continually developing pedagogical and social-emotional skills. The idea that a great personality makes a great teacher is fantasy."

Ariel Sacks (see item #1)

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## 1. The Art and Science of Effective Teaching

“Of course, a teacher’s passion, charisma, warmth, and humor influence the way students experience a class,” says teacher/instructional coach/author Ariel Sacks in this article in *Education Week Teacher*. “But teachers aren’t really ‘born’ knowing how to connect and inspire children in a classroom setting. Instead, they must grow these capacities by continually developing pedagogical and social-emotional skills. The idea that a great personality makes a great teacher is fantasy.”

Early in her career, Sacks saw a vivid example of this. An experienced teacher launched a seventh-grade summer school class by telling students that she was learning how to ride a motorcycle and loved the experience. She was from the same neighborhood and ethnicity as her students and they liked her immediately, diving into a writing assignment describing something they loved to do.

But after this strong debut, the teacher began assigning hum-drum worksheet packets every day, and students became bored and started acting out. Personality, affinity, and pizzazz weren’t enough as this teacher struggled with the class; she didn’t have the tools and curriculum substance to engage kids on a daily basis. “Likewise,” Sacks continues, “when a teacher is successful, we can’t just attribute it to personality... Teaching methods are critical to educational outcomes for students.”

Sacks cites the work of former New York City teacher Vanessa Rodriguez on five teacher “awarenesses,” each of which exists on a continuum and is developed by teachers at different rates over time:

- Awareness of one’s own identity as a teacher;
- Awareness of the teaching process;
- Awareness of the learner;
- Awareness of interactions in the classroom;
- Awareness of context.

“The vibrancy we notice in an excellent teacher,” Sacks concludes, “may really be a combination of skilled pedagogy, a highly developed awareness of the teacher’s presence, emotions, and needs, and the conscientiousness to attend to them as well as we all want to do for our students.”

“What Makes a Great Teacher: Pedagogy or Personality?” by Ariel Sacks in *Education Week Teacher*, September 25, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2nIj0IM>

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## **2. Two History Teachers Try to Counter Students’ “Rags to Riches” Beliefs**

“One of the roles of formal education – and particularly social studies education – has been to transmit the social norms and cultural values necessary to ensure the nation remains one unit, bound together for the purposes of democratic governance and maintaining domestic peace,” say Hillary Parkhouse and Bryan Arnold (Virginia Commonwealth University) in this *Teachers College Record* article. An enduring component in history textbooks has been an embrace of the “rags to riches” American Dream ideology that anyone can succeed through hard work.

Given the increasingly uneven distribution of wealth in recent decades, this ideology is a less and less accurate description of our economy. “Barriers to the realization of the American Dream,” say Parkhouse and Arnold, “include discrimination, inequitable education, the effect of wealth inheritance on future life outcomes, the decline of manufacturing, and the effects of corporatization on the potential for self-employment. The ideology remains strong, however, because it promotes a unifying and pacifying sense that the current system justly rewards those who are most deserving.”

At the heart of this belief system is the conviction that the nation is a meritocracy – that people make progress because of talent, ambition, and hard work rather than inherited wealth and other unearned advantages. This view is widespread, but so is the realization that family wealth, connections, and race play a role in getting ahead. This “dual consciousness” exists across the population, say the authors, but the less advantaged and people of color are more likely to embrace the latter belief, while the advantaged and white Americans embrace the former.

The authors report that national and state curriculum standards for economics totally fail to address issues of inequality, social class, or poverty, and many local curriculum standards focus on personal finance skills, with even less attention to macroeconomic topics. “In terms of social studies education as a whole,” they say, “inequality is almost entirely absent from the curriculum.” One study in California found that 60 percent of teachers address these issues on their own, but they are swimming against the tide of textbooks, standards, and state assessments.

Parkhouse and Arnold conducted a study of two social studies classrooms in a public high school in the Southeast to see what happens when teachers try to address the causes of economic inequality and get students thinking about possible remedies. The researchers found that while teachers’ efforts “did not immunize these students from the American Dream ideology, it may have helped them to identify flaws in that ideology through providing language and context for making sense of the counterevidence they had witnessed in their own lives... The ideologies of colorblindness and post-raciality were rejected by all students, regardless of cultural background, in their acknowledgements of the different obstacles that people of color face.”

But the bottom line was that fully dissuading students of the rags-to-riches ideology was a struggle. “The American Dream ideology,” conclude Parkhouse and Arnold, “may be particularly hard to dismantle because it is part of the cultural curriculum that shapes student

understanding as much as the school curriculum does. It is also highly susceptible to motivated reasoning as it is much more appealing than the alternative (i.e., that we are, to a large extent, not in control of our own economic fates). Thus, rather than fully demystifying the American Dream ideology, critical history pedagogy seems to have bolstered dual consciousness, and in particular the top layer of awareness, that non-meritocratic elements such as race, language, and religion, drive differential access to upward social mobility... Students need more language to help them make sense of their dual consciousness of the myth of meritocracy alongside their lingering hope that their personal efforts will allow them to go from rags to riches.”

“‘We’re Rags to Riches’: Dual Consciousness of the American Dream in Two Critical History Classrooms” by Hillary Parkhouse and Bryan Arnold in *Teachers College Record*, September 2019 (Vol. 121, #9, pp. 1-40), <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1225413>; Parkhouse can be reached at [hparkhouse@vcu.edu](mailto:hparkhouse@vcu.edu), Arnold at [btarnold@vcu.edu](mailto:btarnold@vcu.edu).

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### **3. Where Did the Idea of Teaching to Students’ Learning Styles Originate?**

In this article in *Educational Researcher*, Thomas Fallace (William Paterson University) explores the genesis of the belief that students will learn better if instruction is tailored to individual learning styles (visual, auditory, or kinesthetic). Some assume that it sprang from the self-esteem movement of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Not true, says Fallace. He found that the idea originated in the 1960s notion that there was a distinct African-American learning style associated with this group’s economic disadvantages and cultural deprivation (the 1965 Moynihan report, *The Negro Family*, referred to the black experience as “a tangle of pathology”). Cognitive psychologists (notably Frank Reissman) coined the term “learning styles” and suggested that the lower academic achievement of African-American youth was partly explained by the mismatch between white middle-class pedagogy and black students’ learning preferences. This idea was criticized for implying that the theorized black learning style was inferior to its mainstream counterpart. Attempts to match instruction to learning style were not widely implemented.

But the idea of learning styles persisted, and as inventories of learning preferences were developed in the 1970s (notably by Rita and Kenneth Dunn), the language of deficits and race disappeared and the theory of matching instruction and learning styles was applied to students of all races.

Fallace doesn’t address the efficacy of teachers matching instruction to students’ learning styles. “Nevertheless,” he concludes, “advocates should be aware of its problematic early history.” Specifically:

- The existence of learning styles was assumed before it was thoroughly explored and empirically established.
- Many researchers conflated the culture of groups with the psychology of individual students.

- This led researchers to fail to distinguish where individual psychology ended and the enculturation of social groups began, especially in relation to students of color.
- “This,” says Fallace, “created a paradoxical construct wherein ethnicity/race explained everything when it came to the alleged learning style of low-income students of color, yet race/ethnicity explained nothing when it came to the alleged learning styles of middle-class white students because white students’ race was regarded as irrelevant.
- “As a result, scholars paradoxically perceived students of color to have a particular collective learning style tied to their culture while they perceived white students to have individual learning styles completely independent of culture.
- “Both views reflected a conceptual inconsistency that reflected the ethnocentrism of the period.”

“The Ethnocentric Origins of the Learning Style Idea” by Thomas Fallace in *Educational Researcher*, August/September 2019 (Vol. 48, #6, pp. 349-355), available for purchase at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.3102/0013189X19858086>; Fallace can be reached at [fallacet@wpunj.edu](mailto:fallacet@wpunj.edu).

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#### **4. What Text Level Is Best for Struggling Readers in Small Groups?**

In this article in *The Reading Teacher*, Laura Beth Kelly (Rhodes College) ponders the question of how difficult the books used in small reading groups should be. This is an especially important question since there’s recently been a push (encouraged by Common Core ELA standards) for all students to be reading texts at grade level some of the time.

“I had not found that following the conventional wisdom about matching books to readers accelerated learning for my students,” recalls Kelly from her days as an elementary teacher. “I used low-level books for students with low reading levels, and when we finished, nothing had changed. Something seemed off... Simple text can limit students.”

What is the rationale for having students read texts matched to their current levels? That they need practice working with material they can read successfully. One researcher said “no one ever learned how to be good at anything (especially reading) by doing it poorly every day” (Cunningham, 2013). The rationale using more-challenging texts is that, with strong instructional support in small groups, texts up to two grade levels above students’ current levels can stretch and motivate them.

Kelly conducted a study in which below-level third graders read matching and more-challenging books as they worked in small groups with their teacher. The findings:

- Students reading more-difficult material talked more about print and more about ideas.
- Students reading difficult books had a much higher percentage of inferential talk.
- Students reading matched books produced literal talk that often addressed the pictures in the text.
- Text difficulty didn’t consistently affect any students’ comprehension.
- Students retold ideas from difficult and matched books at similar rates.

- Half of students read matched texts more fluently than harder texts; the other half, after spending 30 minutes reading and discussing difficult texts, were equally fluent as they were with easier texts.

Kelly's conclusion is that the optimal level of text difficulty "depends on the student and the purpose of the reading... and teachers must use their judgment to provide a variety of texts for students across and beyond the school day... Neither matched texts nor difficult texts represent a panacea for students reading below grade level, but both have their place in promoting different aspects of literacy." Specifically:

- *How hard for what* – Among the considerations, which will vary with different students: fluency, discussion, comprehension, curiosity, critical thinking, appreciation of author's craft, imagination, writing, critical consciousness, building content knowledge, and love of reading.
- *How hard for whom* – Kelly found significant variation even within small groups, depending on students' background knowledge, experience, interest in the subject matter, motivation, and, of course, reading level. Again, choosing the right difficulty of text is a matter of teacher judgment.

"How Hard Should the Books Be in Small-Group Reading? It Depends" by Laura Beth Kelly in *The Reading Teacher*, September/October 2019 (Vol. 73, #2, pp. 173-183), <https://bit.ly/2nEJo6l>; Kelly can be reached at [kellyl@rhodes.edu](mailto:kellyl@rhodes.edu).

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## 5. Bite-Sized Lessons in Social-Emotional Learning

In this *Education Week* article, Arianna Prothero reports that many educators feel overwhelmed by the scope and expense of full-blown social-emotional learning curriculum packages. Stephanie Jones and her colleagues at Harvard University's EASEL laboratory (Ecological Approaches to Social-Emotional Learning, <https://easel.gse.harvard.edu/people>) saw this as an impediment to important SEL skills being taught in schools. "Folks wanted to do it," she says, "but they wanted it to be integrated in the instructional work they are already doing. We began to think about the problem of implementation by brainstorming ways to do SEL in little bites, in small, routine, structure-based ways you could imbed in a school in a way that is harder to do with a curriculum."

What emerged were 10-minute "kernels," brief routines that teachers could squeeze into their busy days when the need arose – for example, students bringing recess conflicts into the classroom. Three examples:

- *Magic 8 Ball*, a discussion strategy building problem-solving skills (all grades) – The teacher asks, "If a person does X, what might happen?" Students then look into their imaginary magic 8 balls and give potential consequences of the action, as well responses in other situations. The teacher follows up by asking students if they see these actions as positive, negative, or neutral, and in which other situations they might need to imagine an outcome.

- *Dear Abby*, a discussion strategy that helps students make responsible, ethical, healthy choices in difficult situations (fifth grade) – Students read a real-world dilemma from an advice

column and discuss solutions in small groups or in a role-play. Students are asked if they need additional information to better understand the dilemma, and how other characters in the scenario might see the situation.

- *Belly breathing*, a calming technique for emotion/behavior management (all grades) – Students breathe deeply through their noses, notice their bellies expand, then exhale through their mouths and notice how their bellies contract. Do they feel differently? When might this be a useful strategy?

“Bite-Sized Lessons Aim to Make SEL Easier for Schools to Teach” by Arianna Prothero in *Education Week*, September 11, 2019 (Vol. 39, #4, p. 1, 8), <https://bit.ly/2mEX8Om>  
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## 6. Meeting Management 101

In this *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, Allison Vaillancourt (University of Arizona) bemoans the fact that many meetings are unpleasant and unproductive. Why? Because of agenda hijacking, loquacious colleagues dominating discussions, some participants being ignored or silenced, and people not listening. Here are her suggestions for breaking these all-too-common problems:

- *Establish ground rules*. Doing this is often met with “heavy sighs and eye-rolling,” says Vaillancourt, but she encourages leaders to persist because “an agreed-upon set of discussion rules is a powerful expression of values that significantly improves meeting dynamics.” Some possibilities:

- Raise your hand to speak.
- Be civil and assume positive intent.
- Don’t revisit agenda items that have been decided.
- Call out credit-stealing and interrupting.
- Ensure that everyone who wants to speak can do so before others participate again.
- Debrief at the end: *Did we follow our ground rules? Did we stay on track? Who talked? Who didn’t? Did each of us feel heard? Did we make necessary decisions? Was this meeting a good use of our time?*

“The beauty of ground rules is that they create a structure for assessing a meeting’s effectiveness,” says Vaillancourt.

- *Respect different thinking styles*. “Some people think on the fly and rarely know what’s going to come out of their mouths until the words have been uttered,” says Vaillancourt; “they think by talking. Others need time to consider possibilities and are uncomfortable voicing opinions or sharing ideas without extended reflection.” To accommodate both styles, it’s helpful for everyone to have a detailed agenda in advance.

- *Track who’s talking*. A simple strategy is making a list of participants and checkmarking every time someone participates. When Vaillancourt first started doing this, she was chagrined to see too many checks by her own name; the data made her talk less. There’s also a helpful app, *Are Men Talking Too Much?* that tracks gender differences in participation.

- *Rotate meeting leadership*. This is wise because (a) it’s difficult for the facilitator to

be a full participant, and (b) if the leader is running the meeting and expresses an opinion, it can discourage other views from being heard. Sharing meeting leadership “not only gives the powerful people a chance to listen,” says Vaillancourt; “it also encourages broad participation and builds the meeting-facilitation muscles of everyone on the team.”

• *Gather ideas creatively.* Liberating Structures <http://www.liberatingstructures.com> is a collection of meeting tools designed to harness collective intelligence. One example is 1-2-4-All; here’s how it works:

- A question is posed to the group and people work solo, jotting down their thoughts.
- People pair up, discuss what they wrote, and come up with a common response.
- Pairs of pairs put their heads together and seek a common opinion.
- The full group reconvenes to hear thoughts from each group of four.

Vaillancourt has found this an excellent way to involve everyone and refine multiple approaches in a supportive way.

• *Manage interruptions.* Energetic, opinionated, loud participants are hard to manage, she says, but doing so is essential to productive meetings and collegiality. Two possible approaches that are discussed and established in advance: (a) The person who was interrupted leans forward, looks at the interrupter, holds up an index finger, and says, “I want to finish this thought.” (b) The person who was interrupted says, “Carl, you interrupted me. Let me pick up where I left off.”

• *Enlist allies.* Leaders may want to chat privately with certain colleagues and ask them to be on the lookout for problematic behaviors in meetings and speak up – for example: “Hey, Cecilia was in the middle of making a point.” “We haven’t heard from Sam yet – let’s get his thoughts before we move on.” “I like how you are building on Adele’s idea.” (The last one subtly calls out credit-stealing.)

• *Stand up to bullies.* Civility needs to be a ground rule, but if there are violations, they need to be bluntly called out because, says Vaillancourt, “Silence emboldens bullies.” *Javier, it’s fine to disagree, but Clarise is not an idiot.* and *Marla, seriously.*

• *Allow people to contribute afterward.* Even with good protocols, some ideas may not be heard. A possible door-opener for shy people or late-blooming ideas: “Thank you for sharing your perspectives today. If you have additional thoughts, send me an e-mail by Tuesday and I’ll include your input in the meeting minutes.”

• *Consider that you might be the problem.* Vaillancourt says a colleague once told that his leadership team never came up with new ideas or proposed solutions. When she accepted his invitation to sit in on a meeting, the cause was immediately apparent: “He dominated the conversation, answered questions that others could have easily tackled, and talked over people who attempted to share a different point of view. He had unwittingly trained his team *not* to speak up.” There was a simple solution.

“10 Ways to Better Manage Your Meetings” by Allison Vaillancourt in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 27, 2019 (Vol. LXVI, #4, pp. A37-38), <https://bit.ly/2mPQNzH>; Vaillancourt can be reached at [vaillana@email.arizona.edu](mailto:vaillana@email.arizona.edu).

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## 7. Which College Majors Earn the Most Over Time?

In this *New York Times* article, David Deming (Kennedy School at Harvard University) reports that computer science and engineering majors earn an average of \$61,744 right out of college, compared to \$45,032 for history and social science majors. But liberal-arts majors who graduated twenty years ago now average \$131,154 annual income in careers like business, law, and management, compared to \$124,458 for STEM majors. The story was slightly different for women: applied STEM graduates make 50 percent more than liberal-arts majors right out of college and 10 percent more by age 38-40. What's going on here?

First, technical skills that are “hot” today can become obsolete as technology evolves. “Skill obsolescence and increased competition from younger graduates work together to lower the earnings advantage for STEM degree-holders as they age,” says Deming.

Second, at its best, a liberal-arts education prepares young people with “soft” skills like problem-solving, critical thinking, collaboration, and adaptability that may not land a high-paying first job, but pay off over time in a wide variety of careers.

“To be clear,” Deming concludes, “I am not suggesting that students should avoid majoring in STEM fields. STEM graduates still tend to have high earnings throughout their careers, and most colleges require all students – including STEM majors – to take liberal-arts courses. But I do think we should be wary of the impulse to make college curriculums ever more technical and career focused. Rapid technological change makes the case for breadth even stronger. A four-year college degree should prepare students for the next 40 years of working life, and for a future that none of us can imagine.”

“In the Salary Race, Engineers Spring but English Majors Endure” by David Deming in *The New York Times*, September 20, 2019, <https://nyti.ms/2krRGgR>; Deming can be reached at [david\\_deming@harvard.edu](mailto:david_deming@harvard.edu).

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## 8. Children's Books About Nontraditional Families

In this feature in *Language Arts*, Grace Enriquez and Erika Thulin Dawes (Lesley University), Katie Egan Cunningham (Manhattanville College/Purchase), Gilberto Lara (University of Texas/San Antonio), and Laura Jiménez (Boston University) recommend novels, picture books, and graphic novels about families that don't fit conventional stereotypes. Images of each book's cover and capsule reviews are available at the article link below.

- *Carmela Full of Wishes* by Matt de la Pena, illustrated by Christina Robinson (Putnam's Sons, 2018)
- *A Different Pond* by Bao Phi, illustrated by Thi Bui (Capstone, 2017)
- *A Gift from Abuela* by Cecilia Ruiz (Candlewick, 2018)
- *A Most Unusual Day* by Sydra Mallery, illustrated by E.B. Goodale (Greenwillow, 2018)
- *Grandma's Purse* by Vanessa Brantley-Newton (Alfred Knopf, 2018)
- *Night Job* by Karen Hesse, illustrated by Brian Karas (Candlewick, 2018)

- *My Beijing: Four Stories of Everyday Wonder* by Nie Jun, translated by Edward Gauvin (Graphic Universe, 2018)
- *Ana Maria Reyes Does Not Live in a Castle* by Hilda Eunice Burgos (TU/Lee & Low, 2018)
- *My Father's Words* by Patricia MacLachlan (Katherine Tegen/Harper Collins, 2018)
- *The Dollar Kids* by Jennifer Richard Jacobson, illustrated by Ryan Andrews (Candlewick, 2018)
- *Love Like Sky* by Leslie Youngblood (Disney/Hyperion, 2018)
- *Running on Empty* by S.E. Durant (Holiday House, 2018)
- *Ashes to Asheville* by Sarah Dooley (G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2017)
- *Hey, Kiddo* by Jarrett Krosoczka (Graphix/Scholastic, 2018)

“Family Stories and Diverse Children’s Literature” by Grace Enriquez, Katie Egan Cunningham, Erika Thulin Dawes, Gilberto Lara, and Laura Jiménez in *Language Arts*, September 2019 (Vol 97, #1, pp. 42-50), <https://bit.ly/2nHQHtX>,

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*If you have feedback or suggestions,*  
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# About the Marshall Memo

## ***Mission and focus:***

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and other educators very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 50 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, writer, and consultant lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 60 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through more than a hundred articles each week, and selects 5-10 that have the greatest potential to improve teaching, leadership, and learning. He then writes a brief summary of each article, pulls out several striking quotes, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the Memo to subscribers every Monday evening (with occasional breaks; there are 50 issues a year). Every week there's a podcast and HTML version as well.

## ***Subscriptions:***

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

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- Headlines for all issues
- Reader opinions
- About Kim Marshall (bio, writings, consulting)
- A free sample issue

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- The current issue (in Word and PDF)
- All back issues (Word and PDF) and podcasts
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- The "classic" articles from all 14+ years

## ***Core list of publications covered***

Those read this week are underlined.

All Things PLC  
American Educational Research Journal  
American Educator  
American Journal of Education  
American School Board Journal  
AMLE Magazine  
ASCA School Counselor  
District Management Journal  
Ed. Magazine  
Education Digest  
Education Next  
Education Update  
Education Week  
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis  
Educational Horizons  
Educational Leadership  
Educational Researcher  
Edutopia  
Elementary School Journal  
English Journal  
Essential Teacher  
Exceptional Children  
Go Teach  
Harvard Business Review  
Harvard Educational Review  
Independent School  
Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy  
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)  
Kappa Delta Pi Record  
Knowledge Quest  
Language Arts  
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)  
Mathematics Teacher  
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