Marshall Memo 985

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
May 8, 2023

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Who's Pearl?"

A high-school student's query when an adult mentioned Pearl Harbor

"The only way to help my students think well that I'm aware of is the same as it's always been. They've got to know things, argue about things, read things, write things, and speak and listen about things."

Dave Stuart Jr. in his April 30, 2023 online article on dealing with ChatGPT

"Knowledge begets reading, which begets knowledge."

KyeJin Hwang, Kristen McMaster, and Panayiota Kendeou (see item #4)

"The goal of reading is to derive meaning from text. Children who learn to effectively 'crack the code' (i.e., decode words) have achieved a necessary, foundational, early reading skill. But word reading alone is not sufficient to support comprehension of larger text units, such as sentences and paragraphs."

Julie Washington, Ryan Lee-James, and Carla Burrell Stanford (see item #3)

"The time to catch at-risk students and guide them back on the track to graduation is not during the late high-school years, but rather in the ninth grade or even in middle school when these students first show signs of disengagement."

Marcia David (see item #2)

"Between tough concepts, long problems, and abstract mathematics, the physical sciences can make a student's brain spin (with great torque!) if you're not clever in how you present the material."

Robert Oñoz (see item #7)

1. The Wisdom of Harry Belafonte

Here are a few quotes from the famed singer and civil rights activist, who died last week at 96. For more about his life, see this *New York Times* obituary.

"When I was born, I was colored. I soon became a Negro. Not long after that I was black. Most recently I was African-American. It seems we're on a roll here. But I am still first and foremost in search of freedom."

"The role of art isn't just to show life as it is, but to show life as it should be."

"My activism always existed. My art gave me a platform to do something about the activism."

"America has never been moved to perfect our desire for greater democracy without radical thinking and radical voices being at the helm of any such quest."

"You can cage the singer but not the song."

"All too often, I'm sorry to say, I relegated my family to the cracks and margins."

"When I was 40 and looking at 60, it seemed like a thousand miles away. But 62 feels like a week and a half away from 80. I must now get on with those things I always talked about doing but put off."

"The human spirit is resilient and truth – no matter how long you abuse it and how long you try to crush it – will, as Dr. King would say, rise up again, and in the final analysis will prevail."

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2. Intervention Coaches Who Help Prevent Dropouts

In this *Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk* (*JESPAR*) article, Marcia Davis (Johns Hopkins University) says high-school educators work hard to keep students from dropping out. That makes sense given the economic high stakes for students: weekly earnings for dropouts average $606 compared to $749 for those with a high-school diploma and $1,281 with a bachelor's degree.

But the decision to drop out is not a sudden, rash impulse, says Davis; it builds over several years. "The time to catch at-risk students and guide them back on the track to graduation is not during the late high-school years," she says, "but rather in the ninth grade or even in middle school when these students first show signs of disengagement."

That requires early warning data, which more than half of U.S. high schools gather, most often on low attendance, problematic behavior, and course failures. The problem, says Davis, is that many schools aren't doing a good job using the data to shape effective supports and interventions, and without those, the glidepath of a disengaged high-school student won't change.

In her two-year study of the Early Warning Intervention (EWI) Team model, Davis identified three intervention coaches who got especially good results, studied how they worked in schools over a two-year period, and deduced key steps that would improve any intervention coach's performance. Her findings:

• *Professional development* – Coaches in the EWI program received a three-day orientation at the beginning of the project and four one-day trainings during the year, plus visits from the development team during both implementation years. Davis's recommendations:

- Get an early start over the summer.
- Involve school administrators from the beginning.
- Build connections among the coaches so they support each another.
- Have experienced coaches run trainings.
- Hold mock team meetings among coaches to clarify how they should be run.
- Accept that building a good early warning system may take two to three years.

• *Looking at student data* – Coaches needed orientation and ongoing training to be able to access information on students' attendance, behavior, and grades. Davis's recommendations:

- Give coaches early access to administrative data on their students.
- Train coaches on their school's data system.
- Ensure that student data are up to date.
- Examine student information every week or every day.
- Monitor students with any early-warning flags and focus on those with two flags.

• *Early warning team meetings* – During their training, coaches were asked to lead an early warning intervention team every other week during the school year. Although this was very challenging in most schools, the three exemplary coaches exceeded this expectation. Davis's recommendations:

- Hold team meetings every week or every other week.
- Work with administrators to set a team meeting time and keep it consistent.
- Make sure ninth-grade teachers and other key school staff members are there.
- Designate a team member to take notes at each meeting.
- Starting with the first meeting, develop resource and intervention lists and add to them as the year progresses.
- Take the time to build trusting relationships with school staff.

• *Whole-grade interventions* – In their PD, coaches were asked to lead interventions that would involve the entire ninth grade of their assigned schools, including visiting classrooms to talk with students about attendance, behavior, and course performance; holding report card conferences; setting up attendance incentives; and running some type of teacher mentoring or coaching. The top-notch coaches did all this and more. Davis's recommendations:

- Work with administrators to run an orientation for incoming ninth graders to orient them to the school's layout and routines and talk about the key data points: good attendance and behavior and passing courses.
- Plan a grade-wide attendance initiative, including incentives, competitions, displays, announcements, parent information, PR to local newspapers, and celebrations.
- Visit ninth-grade classrooms to share information on students' successes on the three measurables as well as graduation and ninth-grade promotion credit requirements, study skills, and making "wise choices."
- Identify adults in the school or community to conduct one-on-one report card conferences with struggling students.
- Conduct teacher professional development for the ninth-grade team. This might include classroom management, grading policies, and teacher book discussion groups. Some coaches visited teachers' classes and offered coaching tips afterward.

• *Group interventions* – Coaches were asked to lead meetings for groups of students with similar needs, which proved to be one of the most challenging requests; of the 20 coaches in the program, only seven were able to comply, including the three star coaches. Davis's recommendations:

- Run tutoring groups, conducted either by the coach or by honors students working with high-risk ninth graders.
- Meet with student groups; one coach met with the football team while others volunteered to work with teachers providing extra-help sessions after school.

• *Individual student interventions* – Some coaches met weekly with high-risk students and contacted parents. Davis's recommendations:

- Provide students with needed materials – index cards, poster board, art supplies, finding funding for eyeglasses.
- Push students to submit missed school work. In most schools students got a zero for missed assignments, so getting in all their work was very important for students' grade average.
- Ask students to list short- and long-term goals for ninth grade and beyond.
- Reiterate graduation requirements and the importance of graduating on time.
- Tutor individual students.
- Keep notes after meeting with each student and use them to follow up with students and provide key insights in team meetings.
- Reach out to parents. Not all coaches were comfortable doing this, but parents who were contacted appreciated it.

"Use of an Early Warning Identification and Student Intervention System: A Case Study of Three Effective Promotion Coaches" by Marcia Davis in *Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk* (*JESPAR*), April-June 2023 (Vol. 28, #2, pp. 204-235); Davis can be reached at marcy@jhu.edu.

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3. Effective Early Literacy Instruction for African-American Students

In this article in *The Reading Teacher*, Julie Washington and Carla Burrell Stanford (University of California/Irvine) and Ryan Lee-James (Atlanta Speech School) say that students who speak African-American English (AAE) need primary-grade teachers to differentiate phonics instruction "while simultaneously affirming African-American children's identities by acknowledging and celebrating the language strengths they bring to the classroom." The same is true of ELLs and children who come to school with regional and cultural dialects that differ from the language of instruction in morphology, syntax, phonology, and more.

Not all African-American children speak African-American English; the degree to which they do is directly linked to the dialect spoken by family members and caregivers. For many African-American children, their first formal encounter with General American English is when they enter school. "This is particularly true," say Washington, Lee-James, and Stanford, "for children growing up in poverty, who may have limited experiences outside of their communities and thus, have been exposed primarily to AAE." They have the task of understanding and learning the school's language in order to be successful in reading, writing, and other academic subjects. That involves becoming bidialectical – or, if they know another dialect from their community, multidialectical.

When children enter school, they already have 4-5 years of oral language experience. "Language is an important means of transmitting linguistic and cultural beliefs and signaling membership in a group that shares the same culture, values, and beliefs as the child," say the authors. "Importantly, school represents a new and separate speech community with its own rules and expectations for how language and meaning will be transmitted. Some children will find that their home language practices integrate seamlessly with the language of school (and text), whereas for other children, including some AAE speakers, the school language context may require acculturation to a new language community and require learning the communication norms that exist within the school environment."

Washington, Lee-James, and Stanford list some of the language differences that present challenges for African-American English-speaking students as they learn to read in school:

- Vowel shifts – for example, *pen* pronounced *pin*
- Consonant cluster reduction – for example, *fist* pronounced *fis*
- Consonant substitution – for example, *bath* pronounced *baf*

These and other features of African-American English differ systematically from the academic language of instruction. "Children must rely on their established knowledge of the sound system to make connections between speech and print," say the authors. "Discrepancies between spoken and written words can be a source of uncertainty for AAE speakers navigating two distinct language systems. Teaching approaches that support children as they navigate these differences, including providing more practice and time, will be important for developing strong phonological representations from oral language to print."

These language/dialect differences are why many African-American children have to work extra hard in school, translating the language of their home and community to academic

proficiency. Dialect speakers "require more practice and exposure to integrate print and oral language to support reading," say the authors, working through the features in print school reading materials that contrast with their oral dialect. This is particularly true for "high-density dialect speakers," for whom there is the greatest difference between home and school language patterns. It's not being a dialect speaker that affects reading achievement, say the authors. "Rather, it is the distance between oral dialect and print that appears to matter most."

Teachers who grasp this see why some students are having difficulty during reading lessons. A white teacher described asking a six-year-old student to say the word *gold* and he said *gol* – but then asked if she was talking about what a leprechaun finds or scoring a *goal* in soccer. The teacher complimented the boy for being a good "word detective" and showed him the difference between the two words and played a "listening game to train our ears to think about all the sounds in words and connect them to meaning." The teacher said this interaction was pivotal in understanding how certain features of African-American English differ from General American English, allowing her to do a better job teaching reading to her students.

Washington, Lee-James, and Stanford conclude with these recommendations for educators teaching reading to African-American students:

• *Learn about African-American English*. Having a detailed understanding of this dialect allows teachers (like the one above) to help students bridge the differences and become bidialectical, proficient readers. It's important for teachers to be "knowledgeable about how to leverage students' existing language strengths to scaffold and support learning," say the authors.

• *Focus on early language milestones*. What should children know about language at age 4, 5, 6, and 7? If students aren't meeting expected benchmarks, why? Is it dialect, learning disabilities, vocabulary, motivation, or something else? "The task for the teacher, and perhaps the speech-language pathologist," say the authors, "is to discern and address early language weaknesses before they negatively affect reading development."

• *Understand that systematic instruction in decoding is necessary but not sufficient*. "The goal of reading is to derive meaning from text," say Washington, Lee-James, and Stanford. "Children who learn to effectively 'crack the code' (i.e., decode words) have achieved a necessary, foundational, early reading skill. But word reading alone is not sufficient to support comprehension of larger text units, such as sentences and paragraphs… Mastering decoding processes allows readers to shift their time and attention away from the need to laboriously decode individual words and phrases toward processing the ideas and gaining meaning from the stories that they read. Current research suggests that in the absence of this time and practice, African-American children may be developing shallow rather than deep knowledge of words and word reading that is not sufficient to sustain them into the older grades."

"Teaching Phonemic and Phonological Awareness to Children Who Speak African American English" by Julie Washington, Ryan Lee-James, and Carla Burrell Stanford in *The Reading Teacher*, April 11, 2023; the authors can be reached at julie.washington@uci.edu,

rjames@atlantaspeechschool.org, and cbstanfo@uci.edu. See Memo #897 for another article on this important issue.

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4. The Strong Relationship Between Content Knowledge and Reading

In this article in *Reading Research Quarterly*, KyeJin Hwang, Kristen McMaster, and Panayiota Kendeou (University of Minnesota) report on their study of elementary students' reading and science achievement. They tested the proposition, "Knowledge begets reading, which begets knowledge" – does students' background knowledge make them better readers, and does being a good reader foster the acquisition of more knowledge?

The answer? Yes and yes. The relationship between science knowledge and reading proficiency "is bidirectional and positive throughout the elementary years," say the authors, "providing empirical evidence that domain knowledge and reading may mutually enhance each other… This finding indicates that students need consistent instructional support for developing both domain knowledge and reading from the beginning of schooling." The study also found that this synergistic relationship was true for bilingual as well as monolingual students.

But the reading-content link isn't perfectly symmetrical. Hwang, McMaster, and Kendeou found that increasing science knowledge contributed more to students' reading proficiency than reading instruction contributed to science achievement. That is an argument, they say, for (a) beefing up science instruction (and other content areas) and (b) coordinating and integrating content instruction with reading lessons through vocabulary, books, magazines, hands-on experiments, and more.

"A Longitudinal Investigation of Directional Relations Between Domain Knowledge and Reading in the Elementary Years" by KyeJin Hwang, Kristen McMaster, and Panayiota Kendeou in *Reading Research Quarterly*, January/February/March 2023 (Vol. 58, #1, pp. 59-77); the authors can be reached at hwang305@umn.edu, mcmas004@umn.edu, and kend0040@umn.edu.

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5. Which Is a Better Way to Learn to Write, Handwriting or Digital?

In this *Education Gadfly* article, Jeff Murray summarizes a study in Norway comparing first graders who were taught to write using a handwriting-on-paper-first approach and students using a digital-writing-on-a-tablet-first approach. Many educators have assumed that for primary-age children, typing on a keyboard is more challenging than writing with a pencil. This has been a concern (especially during the pandemic) when students are asked to take assessments on computers. But over the last decade, students have had lots of experience with keyboards, and it could be argued that typing is more efficient; one keystroke using one finger instantly and accurately captures a letter, whereas writing a letter by hand is slower and requires considerable dexterity, with a greater chance of errors.

When Norwegian state schools were given a choice of teaching writing through handwritten or digital modes going into the 2018-19 school year, researchers took advantage of a natural experiment, comparing first graders in schools that chose each approach. At five points during 900 hours of instruction that school year, students were evaluated on narrative writing tasks, looking at spelling, spacing, punctuation, and syntactic and compositional sophistication.

The results: all students – handwriting and digital – showed strong and quite similar gains in the accuracy and syntactic complexity of their writing, the detail and sophistication of their narratives, and the length of their texts. Students who learned on tablets did better than the handwriting group at spelling and word spacing, which may have been because these students could use a text-to-speech feature that allowed them to hear what they had written, picking up on misspelled, strung-together, and improperly split words. On the other hand, digital students were less accurate with periods, question marks, and exclamation points.

The researchers have three observations. First, the text-to-speech feature is an intriguing variable, giving digital-approach students continuous feedback. Could a similar feature be built into handwriting instruction? Second, they acknowledge that teachers using the digital approach may have had students do some handwriting, so instruction probably wasn't "purely" digital. Third, in terms of the applicability of this study to U.S. classrooms, they note that English involves more irregular word structures than Norwegian.

Murray concludes that "the old mindset that handwriting is an inherently easier learning mode needs to be retired," and suggests that in the future "we can merge all the tools and modalities available to provide the very best learning opportunities for students."

"Handwriting or Computers: Which Is the Superior Way for Children to Learn to Write?" by Jeff Murray in *Education Gadfly*, April 25, 2023. The original study is "Writing by Hand or Digitally in First Grade: Effects on Rate of Learning to Compose Text" by Eivor Finset Spilling et al. in *Computers and Education*, April 2023.

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6. The K-4 Learning Trajectories of Students with Disabilities

In this *Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk* (*JESPAR*) article, Angela Johnson and Elizabeth Barker (NWEA) report on their study of the learning progress of students from kindergarten to fourth grade. The researchers compared reading and math performance (measured by NWEA assessments given three times a year) of students who had not had any special education services (Never-SPED) and those who had special education services at some point (Ever-SPED). Here are the main findings:

- Ever-SPED entered kindergarten with lower skills than Never-SPED students.
- Ever-SPED students made slower progress in kindergarten than Never-SPED peers.
- In grades 1-4, Ever-SPED students often made stronger gains during the school year than Never-SPED students.
- However, Ever-SPED students' gains faded during the summer months each year.

- By fourth grade, the achievement gap between Ever-SPED and Never-SPED students that was present at the beginning of kindergarten had widened considerably.

Johnson and Barker believe their study has the following implications:

- Students with disabilities need to have their learning problems diagnosed earlier so academic interventions and other support services can begin before they enter kindergarten.
- Frequent assessment and analysis of students' academic progress are important so timely interventions can be made.
- Data on students' learning should be disaggregated by subgroups (race/ethnicity, SES, ELL, disabilities, etc.) so timely interventions can target specific areas of need.
- Students with disabilities especially benefit from robust summer learning opportunities so they don't lose the academic gains they make during the school year.
- All this is urgent in the wake of the pandemic, which had a disproportionate impact on vulnerable students.

"Understanding Differential Growth During School Years and Summers for Students in Special Education" by Angela Johnson and Elizabeth Barker in *Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk* (*JESPAR*), April-June 2023 (Vol. 28, #2, pp. 179-203); Johnson can be reached at angela.johnson@nwea.org.

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7. Making Math, Physics, and Chemistry Vivid for High-School Students

In this *NJEA Review* article, Robert Oñoz (Montclair State University) says that "between tough concepts, long problems, and abstract mathematics, the physical sciences can make a student's brain spin (with great torque!) if you're not clever in how you present the material." He describes this mini-lesson for making math and science more intuitive.

He asks students to consider the number 10^{23} – which most can't grasp – and then walks them through these steps:

- One student has ten fingers – call that 10^1
- A class of ten students has 100 fingers – 10^2
- Ten 10-student classes would have 1,000 fingers – 10^3
- To have 10^{23} fingers – ten followed by 23 zeroes – we'd need ten sextillion or 10^{22} people.
- Since there are only eight billion people on our planet, we would need about one trillion equally populated Earths – 10^{12} – to have that number of fingers.
- He pauses and lets students contemplate the sheer magnitude of the number.
- Then he says, "You can hold 10^{23} atoms in the palm of your hand."

"The overwhelming dread of numbers now transforms into shock and awe," says Oñoz. "The enormously large has now transformed into the conceptually small. You haven't told students how small atoms are, you've made them *feel* how small atoms are. You've built an intuition for the physical world. More importantly, you've replaced a fear of numbers for an intuition with numbers – the 'math sense' that students need to be successful in physical science."

"Making Math Intuitive in Physical Science" by Robert Oñoz in *NJEA Review*, May 2023 (p. 43)

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8. Getting Into Problem-Solving Mode Before Problems Occur

In this *Leadership Freak* article, Dan Rockwell lists several reasons ambitious projects might fail: unrealistic planning, poorly defined goals, scheduling problems, communication breakdowns, software bugs, hardware failures, not adapting to changing conditions. While some problems can't be avoided, Rockwell suggests asking this provocative question just before a project is launched: *I want to tap into your problem-solving skills before problems happen. Imagine this project is over and it's a catastrophic failure. What did we fail to do that contributed to the failure?*

Why is a "pre-mortem" effective? First, it taps into problem-solving before problems occur. Second, rather than asking *What went wrong?,* which can lead to excuse-making and finger-pointing, asking *What did we fail to do?* extracts specific actions that anticipate and prevent problems. The question can be asked again at intervals as the project proceeds: *What did we fail to do this month?* "Short timelines require timely action," says Rockwell.

"One Simple Question That Keeps Projects from Going Off the Rails" by Dan Rockwell in *Leadership Freak*, May 3, 2023; Rockwell can be reached at dan@leadershipfreak.com.

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9. Captivating Science Books for Children

In this *Language Arts* review, Aeriale Johnson and Clare Landrigan recommend these nonfiction books on a variety of science topics:

- *When You Breathe* by Diana Farid, illustrated by Billy Renkl
- *The Secret Code Inside You: All About Your DNA* by Rajani LaRocca, illustrated by Steven Salerno
- *Earth Squad: 50 People Who Are Saving the Planet* by Alexandra Zissu, illustrated by Nhung Lê
- *The Last Straw: Kids vs. Plastics* by Susan Hood, illustrated by Christine Engel
- *To Change a Planet* by Christina Soontornvat, illustrated by Rachele Jomepour Bel
- *Curious Comparisons: A Life-Size Look at the World Around You* by Jorge Doneiger, photographs by Guido Chouela, Cristina Reche, Marcelo Setton, and David Sisso
- *Bionic Beasts: Saving Animal Lives with Artificial Flippers, Legs, and Beaks* by Jolene Gutiérrez
- *Classified: The Secret Career of Mary Golda Ross, Cherokee Aerospace Engineer* by Traci Sorell, illustrations by Natasha Donovan
- *Whoosh! Lonnie Johnson's Super-Soaking Stream of Inventions* by Chris Barton, illustrated by Don Tata

- *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* by William Kamkwamba and Bryan Mealer, illustrated by Elizabeth Zunon
- *She Persisted in Science* by Chelsea Clinton, illustrated by Alexandra Boiger
- *Get to Know Your Universe: Science Comics Series* by Molly Brooks, Jacob Chabot, Jon Chad, Anne Drozd, Joe Flood, Zack Giallongo, Andy Hirsch, Falynn Koch, Jason Viola, and Maris Wicks
- *The Thing About Bees: A Love Letter* by Shabazz Larkin

"'I Wanna Learn More About That!' Providing Access to Scientific Literacy for All Through Inclusive Nonfiction Science Texts" by Aeriale Johnson and Clare Landrigan in *Language Arts*, March 2023 (Vol. 100, #4, pp. 338-343)

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10. Short Items:

a. Curriculum Resources from Arab Cultures – In this *Cult of Pedagogy* article, Jennifer Gonzalez draws on four educators to recommend resources in ELA, social studies, math, science, and other areas that can serve as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors to Arab cultures.

"Integrating Arab Narratives Across the Curriculum" by Jennifer Gonzalez, Sawsan Jaber, Reem Fakhry, Fatma Elsamra, and Abeer Ramadan-Shinnawi in *Cult of Pedagogy*, May 2, 2023

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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 HTMI 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
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
Kappan (Phi Delta Kappan)
Knowledge Quest
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
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