Marshall Memo 272

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
February 9, 2009

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Principal evaluation of teachers is a low-leverage strategy for improving schools, particularly in terms of the time it requires of principals."

Richard DuFour and Robert Marzano in "High-Leverage Strategies for Principal Leadership" in *Educational Leadership*, February 2009, p. 64; article can be purchased at http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership/current_issue.aspx.

"The principal's highest priority is getting a whole-school perspective on teaching and learning, and this is incompatible with doing a significant number of full-lesson observations."

Kim Marshall (see item #2)

"How often have we said, 'We'll check e-mail, it'll only take a minute,' and three hours later we're still on it?"

Timothy Pychyl (see item #1)

"We know that 50 percent of the time people are online, they are procrastinating."

Timothy Pychyl (*ibid.*)

"Mediocre schools make decisions that are based on what is convenient for secretaries and administrators. Great schools make decisions that maximize and guard instructional time."

Tim Healey in "Creating Greatness" in *Principal Leadership*, February 2009, p. 31, after observing a secretary making an all-school PA announcement on a trivial matter

1. Insights on Procrastination – and Ways to Avoid It

In this thoughtful *New York Times* article, Alina Tugend reports on recent research and insights on procrastination, confessing that she and her husband have been putting off updating their will "for years." Piers Steel, a professor at the University of Calgary, has created a diagnostic "Measure My Procrastination" survey (at http://www.procrastinus.com), which I just took (not that I was procrastinating or anything). It's thorough and informative, producing an immediate score on a 100-point scale and an analysis of your tendencies.

Professor Timothy Pychyl of Carleton University in Ottawa says it's normal to dawdle sometimes, and staring out the window or taking a walk may be exactly what we need to do. "All procrastination is delay," he says, "but not all delay is procrastination." The difference between a quick break and real procrastination is like the difference between sadness and depression, says Pychyl. Problem procrastination is delaying doing something in favor of more immediate gratification even though the delay has negative consequences. Calling himself a "reformed procrastinator," Pychyl says, "People procrastinate when they're not confident that they can complete a project, when they find it boring or distasteful and when they're impulsive."

Joseph Ferrari, a psychology professor at DePaul University, takes this analysis a step further, dividing putter-offers into three types:

- *Arousal procrastinators* get an adrenaline rush from waiting till the last minute;
- *Avoidance procrastinators* put off difficult or boring tasks so they can blame lack of time rather than incompetence for not being successful;
- *Decisional procrastinators* are chronically indecisive in many areas of their lives.

Problem procrastination is a complex issue of self-regulation similar to obesity, gambling, and excessive debt, says Steel – an irrational, self-defeating tendency to delay in more than one area of one's life, wasting time and money, producing guilt and lower self-esteem, and harming relationships with colleagues and relatives. Interestingly, he says, procrastination is not closely linked to perfectionism. Studies have not found that the desire to do things just right correlates with the tendency to put things off.

Procrastination has been around since ancient times, but e-mail, cell phones, and social networking sites have made it easier to succumb. "How often have we said, 'We'll check e-mail, it'll only take a minute,' and three hours later we're still on it?" asks Pychyl. "Technology provides us with immediate rewards without moving from our seats. We know that 50 percent of the time people are online, they are procrastinating."

What are the secrets to overcoming procrastination? Research by Sean McCrea at the University of Konstanz in Germany suggests that the more concrete (versus abstract) a task is, the easier it is to get started. Professor Steel says that breaking larger projects into immediate tasks is helpful. Another step is putting temptations and distractions out of sight – for example, turning off the alert beep for new e-mails – and structuring time to fend off distractions – for example, establishing a ritual of doing e-mail in concentrated bursts at particular points in the day, not in inefficient dribs and drabs.

But these tricks won't work for people who have the deeper, decisional type of procrastination. "It could be a symptom that you're leading an inauthentic life," says Pychyl. "You should take a look at the goals in your life and say, 'Is this what you want to do?'"

"Read This Today, or, If You Prefer, Tomorrow" by Alina Tugend in *New York Times*, Jan. 31, 2009 (p. B6) http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/31/your-money/31shortcuts.html?_r=1&scp=3&sq=Shortcuts%20-%20Read%20This%20Today,%20or,%20If%20You&st=cse

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2. Doing Mini-Observations Right

"Short, unannounced classroom visits are the best way for principals to see representative slices of teaching (not the dog-and-pony show), give credible feedback to teachers, and be players in improving teaching and learning," says former Boston teacher and administrator Kim Marshall in this *Education Week* article. To get the most out of mini-observations (a better term than "walk-throughs," he says, which has the connotation of *walking through* a classroom rather than pausing and observing thoughtfully and is often confused with the "learning walk," a tour of an entire school with general feedback to the staff), Marshall believes that principals need to make good decisions on seven key questions:

• *How long to stay in each classroom* – As principal of a large elementary school, he found that visits of less than five minutes yielded superficial insights but staying longer meant that each classroom would be visited less frequently. Marshall settled on five minutes and found he was able to see a surprising amount in every classroom. Full-lesson observations are still important and all teachers should have at least one every year, he says. But these are best done by instructional coaches, peer observers, or by the teacher watching a videotape of the lesson with a critical friend. "The principal's highest priority is getting a whole-school perspective on teaching and learning," says Marshall, "and this is incompatible with doing a significant number of full-lesson observations." He believes that principals should do full-lesson observations only for unsatisfactory teachers who need a diagnosis and prescription from the boss.

• *How to keep up the pace* – Getting into classrooms is a constant struggle for busy principals, and fuzzy goals won't work, says Marshall. He suggests setting a numerical target for classrooms to visit each day and pushing doggedly to meet it. His goal was five a day, and with predictable ups and downs, he averaged about three and did around 450 mini-observations a year.

• *What to look for* – "During mini-observations, the principal needs to slow down, breathe, observe the kids, look at their work, and listen carefully to the teacher," says Marshall. He believes it's impractical to use a lengthy checklist or rubric during short visits, and suggests a five-letter acronym that's easy to keep in mind: SOTEL – Safety, Objectives, Teaching, Engagement, and Learning. Each of these can be stretched from the proficient to the advanced level:

- Safety: Physical safety → psychological safety → a climate conducive to intellectual risk-taking;
- Objectives: The lesson has a clear purpose → it's part of an aligned curriculum unit;
- Teaching: Learning is being skillfully orchestrated → and it's artfully differentiated;
- Engagement: Students are paying attention → there is active, minds-on involvement;
- Learning: On-the-spot assessments are used to fine-tune teaching → interim assessment results are used, too.

Principals who work with teacher teams on unit planning and interim assessment data have keener insights when they visit classrooms looking for Objectives and Learning.

• *Whether to take notes during visits* – Conscientious principals want to capture important details and dialogue during visits, but Marshall recommends against taking hand-written or electronic notes, which adds to teacher anxiety, seems bureaucratic, and makes what happens in the classroom less authentic. His method was to jot brief notes later in the day on a single-page checklist with a line for each teacher, and add a check in front of each teacher's name after he followed up.

• *How to deliver feedback* – What's the best way to communicate the "teaching points" observed during each classroom visit? Post-it notes, checklists, handwritten comments, programmed Palm Pilots and iPhones, and e-mails all convey feedback, but Marshall is concerned that these formats limit what's said, raise the stakes, and almost never lead to a real dialogue between teacher and administrator. "Face-to-face feedback works much better," he asserts, listing seven advantages to informal, stand-up conversations with teachers within 24 hours of each mini-observation:

- A lot of feedback can be conveyed quite quickly;
- Teachers are more likely to be open to it because it's informal and unwritten;
- The principal can get a sense of whether the teacher is open to critical feedback and hold off if the vibes are wrong;
- The teacher can supply additional information to put the lesson and unit in perspective;
- The teacher can push back if the principal misunderstood something;
- The conversation can segue into a more general talk about how the year is going and ideas for the future
- There is no paperwork.

"These are powerful advantages," concludes Marshall.

• *Whether to give feedback to every teacher* – "All teachers, including superstars, are hungry for feedback," says Marshall. "They spend most of their working days with students and are intensely curious about what other adults think – especially the boss." Tracking down

every teacher for a feedback chat is not easy, he concedes, but it really matters: "It's a question of priorities. What's more important than conversations about teaching and learning?"

• *Whether to use data from mini-observations in year-end teacher evaluations* – In Marshall's school, teachers quickly became comfortable with mini-observations and gave formal union permission for them to be aggregated into year-end evaluations. "In other words, we dispensed with the dog-and-pony show," he says. "This happened because there was plenty of honest feedback during the year – and trust." Of course if a teacher is showing signs of being unsatisfactory, the principal needs to shift gears and do full-lesson observations and use the district's protocol for diagnosis, prescription, and opportunities to improve.

"Like any good idea, mini-observations can be mishandled," concludes Marshall. "Thoughtlessly implemented, they can be unfair to teachers and even harm instruction." But if they're done right, he says, "they can transform supervision and evaluation into a powerful tool for improving teaching and learning for all students."

"'Mini-Observations' – Seven Decision Points for the Principal" by Kim Marshall in *Education Week*, Feb. 4, 2009 (Vol. 28, #20, p. 24-25), available at: http://www.marshallmemo.com/articles/Ed%20Week%20Mini.pdf

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3. An Outstanding Middle School in Boston

In this *Education Week* article, Catherine Gewertz reports on Roxbury Prep, a 230-student, grade 6-8 charter school in Boston now in its tenth year serving primarily low-income, African-American and Latino students. The school has very high student achievement and downstream success – students outscore most suburban students on Massachusetts tests, almost all students go on to college-oriented high schools, and 78 percent of graduates of the first two cohorts are now enrolled in college. Its secrets appear to be:

• *Rigorous academics in an extended school day* – Between 7:45 and 4:05, students have two math classes (one on procedures, the other on problem-solving), English, reading, science, social studies, and enrichment choices (including soccer, debate, and knitting). Students have three hours of homework each night.

• *An urgent focus on being on track for college admission and graduation* – Classrooms are named after colleges, the curriculum is college preparatory, students learn how to analyze their transcripts, track grade-point averages, and write admissions letters, and Roxbury Prep graduates who are in college return to give advice. "These kids have just three years, not just to get to grade level, but to be at the level where they can thrive at the most rigorous high schools, because that is that is their ticket to college," says Dana Lehman, the school's co-director.

• *"Warm-strict" discipline* – This includes silent filing between classes, Do-Nows at the beginning of every class, detention for misbehavior, and 12-person advisory groups that meet once a week for mentoring, trouble-shooting, and support. Advisors also have biweekly talks with family members.

• *Carefully chosen, hard-working teachers* – Candidates who pass an initial interview must design a lesson, teach it to a Roxbury Prep class, analyze its strengths and weaknesses,

and teach it to another class. Teachers typically work 60 hours a week and are available for tutoring and office hours. The school gives teachers considerable autonomy on how the curriculum is taught.

• *Counseling and support* – A three-person counseling team works with students and their families through all three years with the goal of getting every child into a college-oriented high school. During the summer before eighth grade, counselors work with students and their families to assess students' transcripts and decide which high schools to target, then make visits to size up the climate. Counselors also follow graduates through all four years of high school, visiting more than 70 schools and using a Facebook social network to keep more than 200 students in touch with each other. The counselors are also staying in touch with the first two cohorts of graduates who are now in college.

• *Spirit and fun* – Every Friday afternoon, the entire school meets to celebrate school values and high aspirations, watch skits on vocabulary words (*sophomoric* was a recent word of the week), hear recommendations of good novels, and celebrate birthdays.

"High School and Beyond" by Catherine Gewertz in *Education Week*, Feb. 4, 2009 (Vol. 28, #20, p. 20-23) http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2009/02/04/20counselors_ep.h28.html

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4. Getting Students Involved in Self-Assessment and Self-Improvement

"[M]ost students get little informative feedback on their work," say University of Albany researchers Heidi Andrade and Anna Valtcheva in this article in *Theory Into Practice*. Why? Because "few teachers have the luxury of regularly responding to each student's work." The solution? Getting students involved in assessing their *own* work rather than relying entirely on their teachers for evaluative feedback. "Research suggests that self-regulation and achievement are closely related," say Andrade and Valtcheva. "Students who set goals, make flexible plans to meet them, and monitor their progress tend to learn more and do better in school than students who do not."

For the process of self-assessment to work effectively, say the authors, teachers need to follow these steps:

• *Articulate clear expectations*. The goal is for the student to have the same criteria for quality work as the teacher. Simply handing out a rubric is not enough; co-constructing rubrics with students is ideal, but not always possible. The most important thing is for students to have a thorough understanding of the criteria for success before they begin work.

• *Directly teach students the steps of self-assessment*, showing them models of how it works and explaining its benefits.

• *Have students self-assess*. Students create a rough first draft of an assignment (for example, an essay, word problem, lab report, speech, or volleyball serve) and check its quality against the criteria. Andrade and Valtcheva suggest that students might use a marker to highlight key phrases of the rubric and examples of this criterion in their draft; for example, in

a rubric for persuasive essays, highlighting in blue *clearly states an opinion* and then highlighting their essay's opinions in blue.

• *Have students revise*. Students use what they learned from the self-assessment to improve their draft, with guidance from the teacher. It's important that students are given enough time for this process – perhaps two class periods. These self-assessments are formative, not for final grades.

Most of the research on self-assessment has been done in two curriculum areas: writing and mathematics. In writing, studies show the benefits are not in mechanics and usage but in other areas, including plot development. In math, the benefits are mainly in solving word problems.

"Promoting Learning and Achievement Through Self-Assessment" by Heidi Andrade and Anna Valtcheva in *Theory Into Practice*, Winter 2009 (Vol. 48, #1, p. 12-19), no e-link; Andrade is available at handrade@uamail.albany.edu.

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5. Gradual Release of Responsibility in Classrooms

In this *Principal Leadership* article, San Diego State University professors Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher describe the gradual release of responsibility to student – and the ways principals should monitor and support this vital process. "Unfortunately," say the authors, "in all too many classrooms releasing responsibility is too sudden and unplanned and results in misunderstandings and failure." For example, some teachers expect all students to be prepared to discuss a topic after reading textbook chapters at home, do a problem set after watching a single demonstration, or pass a test after listening to a lecture.

To release responsibility properly, Frey and Fisher believe teachers need to do four things well:

• *The focus lesson* – Lasting 10-15 minutes, this establishes the purpose of the class (perhaps it's written on the board and reiterated to students) and gives students a model of expert thinking and vocabulary – the *why* in addition to the *how*. "Daily modeling is essential if students are going to understand complex content," say the authors. Focus lessons should include "I" statements to model thinking, questioning that scaffolds instruction (not just interrogating students), ideas on when to use the skill or strategy, and indicators of successful learning.

• *Guided instruction* – This consists of cues, prompts, and questions to help the teacher understand students' thinking, provide scaffolding, get students doing some of the cognitive work, and gradually increase their understanding. The challenge here is dealing with the individual differences within each classroom. Students should be working in groups, with the teacher actively guiding dialogues as students begin to apply the skill or strategy and, when a student makes a mistake, not immediately supplying the right answer.

• *Collaborative tasks* – "To learn, to really learn, students must be engaged in productive group tasks that require interaction," say Frey and Fisher. "They have to use the language and replicate the thinking of the discipline with their peers to really grasp it." The

challenge with collaborative tasks is making sure that every student participates and is accountable for learning and not freeloading off the work of others.

• *Independent learning* – Ideally, students apply what they have learned in class through "quickwrites" and other independent assignments, so the teacher can monitor understanding before students do homework on their own. "The practice of assigning homework for missed class content will not result in student learning," say Frey and Fisher. "In fact, it is more likely to reinforce misunderstanding because in many cases students are practicing ineffectively and incorrectly." The key to successful independent work is effective purpose-setting and modeling, guided instruction, and collaborative tasks, as well as the teacher conferencing with individual students about how their work is going.

Principals should look for these four components in classrooms, say the authors, to make sure that students are being "apprenticed" in the ideas and language of the discipline. And they should coach teachers in these ways:

• Clarity on learning goals – If teachers don't agree with the principal on what students are supposed to be learning, the principal's feedback will be worthless. The ideal situation is when teams of teachers collaboratively agree on learning goals that are aligned with standards.

• Objective feedback – A principal's observations are most helpful when they deal in observable facts – for example, students sitting passively at their desks listening to the teacher for an extended period of time.

• Looking forward – With these two in place, the principal and teacher can talk about *what's next* or *what if*, thinking collaboratively about how to improve instruction and learning. "Principals should encourage teachers to try things out, to experiment, and to think deeply about what works and what doesn't work," say Frey and Fisher.

"Releasing responsibility to students is not easy," conclude the authors. "Finding the time to spend in classrooms is difficult. So is having honest conversations with teachers about instruction, especially when students appear engaged and the teacher seems to have things under control. But the high expectations that educators and the community have for students will not be realized unless every instructional minute is purposeful and designed to increase student responsibility."

"The Release of Learning" by Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher in *Principal Leadership*, February 2009 (Vol. 9, #6, p. 18-22), no e-link available; the authors can be reached at nfrey@mail.sdsu.edu and dfisher@mail.sdsu.edu.

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6. Clearing Up Myths About Advanced Placement Courses

In this *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, former California high-school teacher Patrick Mattimore tries to clear up some misconceptions about AP courses:

• *Misconception #1: AP is about memorization and does not require students to think critically*. It's true that to do well on an AP exam, students have to memorize a great deal of material, says Mattimore. But that's necessary to be able to understand the material at a deeper level. AP multiple-choice questions ask students to apply the facts, make inferences, and

analyze patterns, and essay questions require them to marshal arguments and use higher-order thinking skills.

• *Misconception #2: High-school teachers lack the expertise to teach college-level courses*. This might be true of upper-level college courses, but Mattimore says that qualified high-school teachers, with the support of textbooks, workshops, and college-aligned tests, are capable of teaching introductory-level courses well.

• *Misconception #3: Awarding college credit reduces students' chances for wider intellectual exploration in college*. On the contrary, says Mattimore, getting AP credits broadens students' college experience by allowing them to place out of survey courses and delve more deeply into subject matter.

• *Misconception #4: College courses provide greater intellectual breadth and depth than AP courses*. The opposite is true, says Mattimore: high-school AP courses are broader and deeper than corresponding college courses, which tend to be large lecture classes skimming the surface of the subject matter in 1-3 hours a week.

"Five Fundamental Misconceptions About AP Courses" by Patrick Mattimore in *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Feb. 6, 2009 (Vol. LV, #22, p. A33), no e-link available

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7. Preparing Seniors for College and Work

In this *Principal Leadership* article, former Illinois school administrators Larry Rehage and Janice Dreis describe the process they used at New Trier Township High School to make the most of senior year and prepare students for success in college. They convened a senior guidance committee (seniors and faculty members), distributed a survey to all seniors to learn their priorities, analyzed the survey, conducted a senior assembly to announce the results, and planned a series of events and an all-day senior institute in the spring. Based in input from students, these were some of the topics in the spring event:

- Your college roommate did what? A panel of graduates in college talked about roommates, homesickness, money management, studying, campus safety, fraternities, and other issues.
- On your own – a panel of non-college-going graduates shared their experiences;
- Making college count – Using the book *Making College Count* by Patrick O'Brien to create a "success map" for college (http://www.makingcollegecount.com).
- Staying out of the poorhouse – An introduction to financial and money issues, including ATM/cash cards, checking accounts, and common pitfalls.
- The world is your classroom – Looking at travel, work, social service, and alternative educational experiences.

Other topics raised in the survey were: Eating disorders, diversity awareness, mental and physical health, drugs and alcohol, coping with stress, time management, AIDS and STD awareness, gambling, dormitory life, voting and citizenship, date rape, personal safety, conflict

management, identity theft, college alternatives, sexual harassment, making new friends, and résumé building.

"Beyond Academics: Conquering Senioritis" by Larry Rehage and Janice Dreis in *Principal Leadership*, February 2009 (Vol. 9, #6, p. 34-37), no e-link available

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8. Figuring the Cost of an Out-of-School Program

This Wallace Foundation website has a "cost calculator" for determining how much an after-school or summer program will cost. Based on a study of 111 high-quality out-of-school programs in six cities, the foundation calculated that after-school programs average $24 per student and summer programs average $32 per student. To check out the cost calculator, go to http://www.wallacefoundation.org/cost-of-quality/cost-calculator/Pages/cost-calculator.aspx.

"Study Tallies Costs of Out-of-School Programs" by Debra Viadero in *Education Week*, Feb. 4, 2009 (Vol. 28, #20, p. 4)

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9. The Virtues – and Limits – of Recess

Recess breaks around 15 minutes long produce better classroom behavior, according to a study of 10,000 eight- and nine-year-olds reported in the journal *Pediatrics*. Longer recesses don't produce better behavior. Here's an abstract of the article: http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/content/abstract/123/2/431

"Recess and Behavior" by Christina Samuels in *Education Week*, Feb. 4, 2009 (Vol. 28, #20, p. 4)

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10. Short Items:

a. Cyberbullying websites – This site defines the different types of online bullying for different age groups; visitors can download a Megan Pledge kit to use in their schools: http://www.stopcyberbullying.org. A second website serves as a clearinghouse of information about cyberbullying: http://www.cyberbullying.us.

"Bulletin Board: Resources on Cyberbullying" in *Principal Leadership*, February 2009 (Vol. 9, #6, p 10)

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b. Old newspapers online – The Library of Congress now has a database of newspapers from 1880-1910, searchable by keyword, state, etc.: http://www.loc.gov/chroniclingamerica.

"Bulletin Board: That's Old News" in *Principal Leadership*, February 2009 (Vol. 9, #6, p 11)

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c. Real-world math applications – This website from the Society for Industrial and Applied Mathematics (SIAM) has 20 pages on career fields, jobs, and professional stories of people who are in math-related fields: http://www.siam.org/careers/thinking.php.

"Bulletin Board: I Like Math, But I Don't Want to Teach It" in *Principal Leadership*, February 2009 (Vol. 9, #6, p 11)

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Do you have feedback? Is anything missing?

If you have comments or suggestions, if you saw an article or web item in the last week that you think should have been summarized, or if you would like to suggest additional publications that should be covered by the Marshall Memo, please e-mail: kim.marshall8@verizon.net

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and others very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 37 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, and writer, lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 44 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 about 50 issues a year).

Subscriptions:

Individual subscriptions are $50 for the school year. Rates decline steeply for multiple readers within the same organization. See the website for these rates and information on paying by check or credit card.

Website:

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- About Kim Marshall (including links to articles)
- A free sample issue

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- The current issue (in PDF or Word format)
- All back issues (also in PDF or Word)
- A database of all articles to date, searchable by topic, title, author, source, level, etc.
- How to change access e-mail or password

Publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
ASCD, CEC SmartBriefs, Daily EdNews
Catalyst Chicago
Changing Schools (McREL)
Ed. Magazine
EDge
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
Essential Teacher (TESOL)
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Educational Review
JESPAR
Journal of Staff Development
Language Learner (NABE)
Middle Ground
Middle School Journal
New York Times
Newsweek
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
Teacher Magazine (online)
Teachers College Record
The Atlantic Monthly
The Language Educator
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Tools for Schools/The Learning Principal