Marshall Memo 182

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
April 23, 2007

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"A harried leader is not a helpful leader."
Mike Connolly (see item #4)

"They focus on possibilities. They see the glass as half full and try to find ways to add water to the glass."
Jerry Patterson on principals who are "realistic optimists" (see item #3)

"The brain resists assimilating isolated bits of information. It prefers to integrate information by recognizing and incorporating patterns."
Nancy Protheroe (see item #2)

"It appears that comparatively little of what is written and thought about by scholars and policy makers actually has any appreciable impact on classrooms or drives durable systemwide reform efforts."
Stephen Davis (see item #1)

"Since silver bullets are extremely rare in the education business, practitioners must rely on modest experiments and incremental 'wins.' They must understand that making progress in the education of children is rarely linear and more often recursive, episodic, and even idiosyncratic.
Stephen Davis (*ibid.*)

"If we could institute only one change to make students more college ready, it should be to increase the amount and quality of writing students are expected to produce."
David Conley (see item #8)

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1. The Brutal Facts About Educational Research

In this strikingly candid *Kappan* article, Stanford education professor Stephen Davis casts a withering eye on the chasm between educational research and the world of schools. "It appears that comparatively little of what is written and thought about by scholars and policy makers actually has any appreciable impact on classrooms or drives durable systemwide reform efforts," he writes. He ascribes this to the "arrogance of academe" and has the following bill of particulars:

• *Many academics have lost touch with the day-to-day complexity of human interactions in schools*. To researchers, what happens in schools is often an abstraction, a plot on a regression line. "Too many of us have buffered ourselves and our work from the subtleties, nuances, and untidiness of human behavior in schools," he writes.

• *Academics often write for the wrong audience*. They are writing for academic peers, not for educators on the front lines, and they write in a language that's often alien to practitioners.

• *Academics frequently use "hit and run" tactics*. Researchers harvest data, look at narrow issues, and rarely stay very long in one place, says Davis.

• *Academics can be an arrogant bunch*. "Swathed in egos plumped up by the untouchable status that comes with lifetime tenure," says Davis, "academics love to pontificate to the masses with unshakable certainty of the righteousness of their beliefs."

• *Not all research is good research*. "The literature is rife with half-truths, popular myths, contradictions, poorly designed studies, misinterpreted findings, and conclusions soaked in the personal biases and deeply held assumptions of researchers," writes Davis. In particular, he questions the research on small high schools (attractive in theory, but does it really work?) and what makes an effective principal.

In short, Davis advises school people to be quite skeptical of educational research. He believes qualitative research is more helpful and understandable than quantitative research to practitioners, but even that should be read with a critical eye.

Davis goes on to argue that practitioners are part of problem. He lists the following weaknesses that many school people share:

• *The longing for silver bullets and gurus*. Principals and other front-line educators are often seduced by quick fixes and charismatic experts who offer "visions, wisdom, and certainty" – especially when the silver bullets or gurus go along with their own preconceptions, values, and beliefs. Davis uses Madeline Hunter's Seven-Step Lesson Plan template as an example, and tells a story of one of the first evaluations he did when he was a young assistant

principal in a district that used Hunter's model religiously. His victim was Richard Loftus, a popular high-school economics teacher whose teaching style consisted almost entirely of lectures – brilliant lectures. Loftus was loved by students and got incredibly good results. On AP exams, his students outperformed students across the state, and many of his former students reported that his course was excellent preparation for college-level economics. But when Davis observed a class, he gave Loftus an unsatisfactory rating because the teacher hadn't included any of Madeline Hunter's seven steps in his lesson. In the post-lesson conference, Loftus listened to this judgment, stormed out of the office slamming the door behind him, and rarely spoke to Davis again. "Although Loftus wasn't much of a 'scientist' in his approach to teaching," comments Davis ruefully, "he was an exceptional 'artist,' a quality that was completely overlooked by the rigid application of the district's evaluation protocol."

• *Exaggerated attributions of causality and misconceptions about change*. School people tend to overestimate the effects of reform efforts and underestimate the effect of pure chance. But even the best programs rarely produce large or dramatic effects, says Davis, and schools are such complex places that it's rare that effects can be ascribed to one particular cause.

• *Presumed associations*. Practitioners tend to assume that because a program or intervention works in one place, it will work in theirs. But often a good reading program or discipline policy will not "travel" well from one setting to another.

• *Wishful thinking*. School leaders are under pressure to produce results and anxious to see programs work, which makes them prone to see what they want to see. "When we want something bad enough," says Davis, "it's easy to throw caution to the wind while ignoring disconfirming evidence and common sense."

• *Generalizing from nonrandom and small samples*. As an example, Davis cites Jaime Escalante, the legendary Los Angeles teacher whose inner-city students did exceptionally well on AP Calculus exams. Countless inner-city teachers have tried to replicate Escalante's success, but few have matched his track record. Why? Because Escalante's methods were unique to him and were used on very small samples of students. "The qualities and behaviors that make a successful teacher are far more complex than the instructional methods used in the classroom," says Davis. "The moral of the story is that what works in Ms. Doe's classroom may or may not work in yours. There is no way to reliably predict success. However, what works in the classrooms of a thousand randomly selected Ms. Does is far more likely to work in yours as well."

• *Generalizing from perceptions and self-reported data*. Much educational research is based on self-reported experiences, judgments, and perceptions of reality – all of which are prone to three problems: our fallible memories (which are distorted by time, new stimuli, and emotions); our mental models (a person's world view, assumptions, beliefs, and core values, which filter what we see); and narrow frames of reference (our tendency to see the world through our own eyes and not consider other interpretations and possibilities).

Davis concludes with four pieces of advice to practitioners as they try to apply educational research to the messy world of schools:

• First, look at research as a road map, not a destination.

• Second, context matters. Look for research relevant to your situation.

• Third, don't dismiss the usefulness of anecdotal evidence. "Firsthand accounts of what works and what doesn't are important sources of information," says Davis. "Since silver bullets are extremely rare in the education business, practitioners must rely on modest experiments and incremental 'wins.' They must understand that making progress in the education of children is rarely linear and more often recursive, episodic, and even idiosyncratic. Practitioners must develop a 'nose' for possibilities, imaginative strategies, and potential pathways that may lead to improved educational practice. The findings of published research alone probably won't get you to the promised land."

• Fourth, trust your gut. "If an empirically tested strategy or program doesn't feel right for your school or district," says Davis, "it probably isn't right."

"Bridging the Gap Between Research and Practice: What's Good, What's Bad, and How Can One Be Sure?" by Stephen Davis in *Phi Delta Kappan*, April 2007 (Vol. 88, #8, p. 568-578), no e-link available

2. How Children Learn

In this article in *Principal*, Nancy Protheroe of the Educational Research Service sums up research on human learning. "While the knowledge base is both complex and growing," she writes, "a very positive note is its congruence with practices already identified as part of good teaching." Key insights:

• *The brain searches for meaning*. Research tells us that we naturally seek connections between new information and past experiences; when connections are made, new information *sticks*. "The brain resists assimilating isolated bits of information," write Protheroe. "It prefers to integrate information by recognizing and incorporating patterns." This has direct implications for the classroom:

- Build curriculum around what students already know and link new information to real-life experiences, activities, and personal associations.
- Challenge students to find connections between seemingly unconnected pieces of information and fit the pieces of a puzzle together.
- Give students choices about what they learn and how they show their understanding.
- Use journal writing and other devices that help students make connections.
- Whenever possible, teach content across subject areas.

• *The brain is a complex system*. Thoughts, feelings, imagination, and signals from the body are constantly churning around and exchanging information with the environment, says Protheroe. The brain doesn't always take logical steps in one direction; it "can go down a hundred paths simultaneously." This has implications for teachers:

- Realize that students see patterns and extract information in many different ways, so allow learning to take different courses.

- Lesson plans should allow for the fact that some students take longer to make connections.

• *There are many ways to be intelligent*. Howard Gardner's work on multiple intelligences suggests the following:

- Present information and get students involved in ways that tap into more than one kind of intelligence.
- Explicitly teach students about the different kinds of intelligence and get them thinking about what kinds they are using in different classroom activities.
- Give students choices so they can pursue interests using individual strengths.

• *Learning is an emotional activity*. How a child feels while learning has a direct impact on how well it is learned and retained. A punitive, threatening, or critical environment is not conducive to learning. This has obvious classroom implications:

- Work to create a comfortable, non-threatening environment.
- Engage students by using journals, discussion, sharing, and reflection and making links to current events that have personal meaning to students.

• *Learning is a social activity*. How much students learn has a lot to do with interaction with others – and the tenor of those interactions. Implications:

- Create a classroom climate where comfortable interaction with others occurs frequently.
- Get students working in groups.
- Use peer tutoring.

• *Metacognition enhances learning*. A key to successful learning is monitoring how and what we are learning and what our strengths and weaknesses are. Implications:

- Get students talking about the learning process and the strategies they are using.
- Even though some students are less aware of their learning, they can become more reflective.

Protheroe concludes with a list of instructional strategies that take full advantage of what we know about children's learning:

- Thematic, integrated curriculum units;
- Cooperative learning;
- Longer blocks of teaching time;
- Teaching higher-order thinking skills.

"How Children Learn" by Nancy Protheroe in *Principal*, May/June 2007 (Vol. 86, #5, p. 40-44), no e-link, but Protheroe can be reached at nprotheroe@ers.org

3. Resilient Principals – How They Deal with Adversity

In this article in *Principal*, former principal and superintendent Jerry Patterson says that what separates resilient from less resilient principals is how they filter and interpret adversity

when it looms its ugly head. He and his colleagues at the University of Alabama at Birmingham have noticed four leadership styles:

• *Unrealistic pessimists* – These principals interpret difficulties negatively and focus on worst-case outcomes. "They see the glass but they don't see any water in it," writes Patterson. They blame other people or outside forces and greatly overestimate risks. People who adopt this style are rarely successful as principals.

• *Realistic pessimists* – These school leaders have an accurate view of the world, but they don't think their efforts will make much of a difference. "They see the glass as half full and fixate on the empty part."

• *Unrealistic optimists* – These principals are overly sanguine, focus only on perfect solutions, and underestimate or downplay the risks posed by challenging events. They assume they know the causes of problems and don't invest the time to assess them accurately. "They see the glass as perpetually overflowing," says Patterson. "Then, when life's circumstances don't unfold as they expect, they feel their resilience start to drain."

• *Realistic optimists* – This leadership mindset is most conducive to resilience, says Patterson. These leaders "interpret reality in a way that allows them to fully understand what is really going on, including how they might have contributed to the adversity… They see the glass as half full and try to find ways to add water to the glass… They focus on possibilities."

Based on their analysis of resilient principals, Patterson and his colleagues have the following advice:

• Accurately assess past and current realities. "When adversity strikes," writes Patterson, "resilient leaders want to know as thoroughly as possible what is truly going on – the bad news as well as the good news." They seek multiple perspectives, listen to people who don't agree with them, and develop a high tolerance for ambiguity and complexity.

• Be positive about future possibilities. "In other words," says Patterson, "when bad things happen to you, expect that good things have a chance of coming out of the bad, and that you can influence this prospect." It's vital to look beyond immediate events and keep your eye on your long-range game plan. Also keep in mind that not taking action is an option.

• Remain true to your personal values. "Stay focused on being a value-driven, not an event-driven, leader in tough times," advises Patterson. "Resilient leaders are clear about what matters most to them, personally and professionally… In times of crisis, your consistent resilient leadership provides predictability and assurance to teachers and staff who rely on you to model the values needed to successfully weather the crisis."

• Maintain a strong sense of personal efficacy. This is a combination of competence and confidence, says Patterson, and you need both. He also advises principals to avoid becoming isolated by reaching out to trusted confidants in troubled times – and to celebrate small wins along the way.

• Replenish your personal energy. Patterson says principals have a "fuel tank" on which they draw in difficult times, filled with four kinds of energy: physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual. "In the thick of adversity," he says, "you must take steps to conserve these vital

sources of energy because you burn your fuel rapidly and the gauge on your tank moves quickly toward empty."

• Act on the courage of your convictions. Talk is cheap, says Patterson. You can have an accurate interpretation of events and a fuel tank filled with the right kind of energy, but you also have to walk the talk. "When it comes to acting on the courage of your convictions," he quotes a principal saying, "I would argue that those who don't act don't have convictions. They only have assertions."

"Strengthening Resilience in Tough Times" by Jerry Patterson in *Principal*, May/June 2007 (Vol. 86, #5, p. 16-22), no e-link available, but Patterson can be reached at jpat@uab.edu.

4. Being a Less Frantic Leader

In this article in *Principal*, Mike Connolly, the principal of an international school in Vietnam, asserts that, "A harried leader is not a helpful leader." Just as important as setting a vision, says Connolly, is being calm and balanced and helping teachers be less frantic. He has five suggestions:

• Gain better control of your own schedule.

• Establish your priorities, write them down, share them with staff, and keep them in front of you every day. What do you want to accomplish this year, this semester, this quarter, this week, and today? "Work backwards," says Connolly, "so that your important priorities don't get nickeled and dimed to death by the urgent (but not necessarily important) demands of each day."

• Write and execute an action plan for each project that includes the objective, action steps, resources needed, who is responsible, completion dates, and evidence of completion.

• Develop patience and perseverance. Important goals take years to accomplish, and you need a long-range perspective to keep at them. Connelly keeps this quote from Samuel Johnson on a bulletin board above his desk: "Great works are achieved not by strength but by perseverance."

• Stop doing things that aren't essential. "There is a lot of jetsam in the cargo of any leader," says Connolly. "It needs to be sorted out from time to time and thrown overboard." Be ruthless, he advises. It's easier to ask for forgiveness than permission. "I'm sorry I had to miss that meeting because…" or "I'm going to have to withdraw from this committee because…"

"Harried Principals Aren't Helpful Principals" by Mike Connolly in *Principal*, May/June 2007 (Vol. 86, #5, p. 32-35), no e-link available

5. Professional Development That Fosters Adaptive Teaching

In this *Kappan* article, University of North Carolina/Greensboro professor Gerald Duffy and doctoral student Kathryn Kear argue that professional development should prepare teachers to be thoughtful, *adaptive* implementers of instructional programs, not thoughtless robots focused only on "fidelity". Effective teachers, they say, are organized, efficient, and

direct, but they also modify their practices to classroom realities. As Catherine Snow has said, the best teachers craft a special mix of instructional ingredients for every child.

Preparing teachers to assume "executive control" of instructional programs requires a different kind of professional development than we sometimes see. Duffy and Kear say it should have five characteristics:

• *Developing a gyroscope* – Effective PD must help teachers articulate and internalize a clear sense of direction to guide them through different situations as they implement an instructional program. "When, as inevitably happens, problematic situations arise in teaching," say Duffy and Kear, "the most effective teachers make decisions based on these goals and ideals; they do not wait passively for directions from an outside authority." Professional development presenters must convey to teachers, "You must have your own ideas about what you are trying to accomplish so you can decide what to do when recommended practices do not work."

• *Promoting independence* – Professional development must actively promote adaptive thinking among teachers and train them to exercise independent judgment.

• *Not one-shot* – Effective PD must last for months, perhaps years. The message to teachers is, "This is difficult, but we will take the time to support you as you learn to be adaptive."

• *Using case studies* – Effective PD should use classroom cases and problems and give teachers practice at adapting to complex situations versus "pat" application of generalizations.

• *Professional learning communities* – PD should be followed up in grade-level or subject-area teams, where teachers collaboratively discuss and adapt instructional programs to real-world situations.

"Compliance or Adaptation: What Is the Real Message About Research-Based Practices?" by Gerald Duffy and Kathryn Kear in *Phi Delta Kappan*, April 2007 (Vol. 88, #8, p. 579-581), no e-link available

6. Ethics 101

In this *Principal* article, Rosa Weaver, a retired school leader who teaches courses and does training on professional ethics in Kentucky, suggests the following ethical guidelines for principals:

• *Help teachers think through ethical dilemmas in advance*. Weaver suggests using case studies to train teachers in basic ethical lessons, including discipline dilemmas, how to handle student cheating, and the need to assess students only on what's taught in class.

• *Know the mores of your school community*. For example, it may be okay for a principal to moonlight as a bartender in one town but not in another.

• *Understand that educators are accountable 24/7*. We are held to a higher standard, and something as mundane as an argument with a neighbor might come back to haunt you.

• *Provide adequate supervision for students at all times*. This means from the time the first student enters the building to the time the last student leaves. Many lawsuits arise from situations where a child was injured or bullied because there was no adult supervision.

• *Tell teachers to avoid being alone with students.* "There have been many accusations of inappropriate action when there were no witnesses to defend the teacher," says Weaver. One-on-one tutoring should take place in a library or some other area where other adults are in sight.

• *Avoid inappropriate relationships with students.* This includes personal phone calls and personal excursions. "There is really no good reason for a student to visit the home of a teacher or principal," says Weaver.

• *Don't ignore situations.* Immediately confront a teacher who bullies, ridicules, or flirts with students, or tells inappropriate jokes. Letting such incidents slide sends the message that you believe such behavior is acceptable.

• *Require proper use of the Internet.* Staff should know that school computers are for school business only, and e-mail messages are open to public scrutiny and should have a professional tone.

• *School equipment is school property.* Principals have to set limits, for example, forbidding the use of a photocopier to run off copies of church or political flyers or loaning laptops for personal use.

• *Be a role model for fairness.* "Faculty, staff, and students need to know that they will be treated fairly when you make a decision," says Weaver.

• *Be consistent.* Making exceptions for a favored few or people with "connections" will undercut everything else you say and do.

"What Principals Need to Know About Ethics" by Rosa Weaver in *Principal*, May/June 2007 (Vol. 86, #5, p. 52-53), no e-link available, but Weaver can be reached at weaverro@nku.edu

7. Accountability Without Tears

In this column in *Principal*, National Association of Elementary School Principals official Cheryl Riggins writes candidly about the assumptions about teaching and learning that prevailed when she began her career as an educator:

- The world was divided between those destined to succeed and those who would not.
- No matter what teachers did in the classroom, some students wouldn't learn: "We taught, they listened, and we could only pray that some of what we wanted to get through to them would."
- As hard as teachers might work, "What will be, will be."

Today's assumptions, of course, are quite different – proficiency for all students, no child left behind, no excuses – which can produce real stress for educators.

But it can also allow school leaders to become true managers of instruction, says Riggins. "Being managers puts us in control and I know of no better antidote to frustration and stress than being in control." Nowadays, data from assessments can give teachers and principals the tools to move students from point A to point B. As one principal put it, "We see ongoing changes with our students and faculty. We can see success. And we're working smarter, not harder."

"Turning the Tables on Accountability" by Cheryl Riggins in *Principal*, May/June 2007 (Vol. 86, #5, p. 10), no e-link available

8. Preparing Students to Be Successful in College

(Originally titled "The Challenge of College Readiness")

In this *Educational Leadership* article, University of Oregon/Eugene professor David Conley reports that, although about 67 percent of American students graduate from high school, only 35 percent who enter a four-year college graduate on time (another 21 percent graduate within six years). Why such high attrition? It's the mismatch between high-school preparation and colleges' expectations, he says. College courses require students to use a number of skills that many didn't learn in high school:

- Drawing inferences;
- Interpreting results;
- Analyzing conflicting source documents;
- Supporting their arguments with evidence;
- Solving complex problems that have no obvious answer;
- Drawing conclusions;
- Offering explanations;
- Conducting research;
- Writing multiple 3-5-page papers that are well reasoned, well organized, and provide evidence from credible sources;
- Thinking deeply about what they are being taught;
- Reading 8-9 books in the same amount of time they read one in high school;
- Working with other students on complex problems and projects;
- Making presentations and explaining what they have learned;
- Being independent, self-reliant learners;
- Recognizing when they are having problems and seeking help from professors, peers, or other sources.

All too many college-bound high school graduates lack these skills. In discussions, they think their personal beliefs are enough and view any challenge as a personal attack. They can't analyze multiple source documents and freeze when asked to delve deeper into subject matter. "For these students," says Conley, "learning has been reduced to a form of sleepwalking, requiring no deep mastery or understanding."

How can this gap be closed? Conley has the following suggestions for improving high-school preparation:

• *Align high-school curriculum and instruction with college expectations*. Working with a nearby college or using some standards that have already been developed, high schools should review the rigor, content, and pacing of courses with an eye to graduating students who can transition smoothly into college, for example:

- Standards for Success - http://www.ous.edu/state_board/meeting/files/ddoc050408-ssppt.pdf
- American Diploma Project - http://www.achieve.org/files/50StateReport-Final_0.pdf

- Several states have developed college readiness definitions linked to their standards; see Washington State's Transition Math Program (2005).

• *Develop high-quality syllabi in all courses.* High-school course syllabi tend to be eclectic and vary from teacher to teacher, with instructors choosing content based on their own interests and skills versus what students need for college. High schools should establish guidelines for syllabi linked to college-ready expectations. Burlington High School in Massachusetts has gone through this process in the last few years.

• *Implement senior seminars.* It's vital that seniors remain engaged and on task through their final year in high school, and senior seminars are an excellent vehicle for bringing a college-like experience into this year. Key elements include rapid pacing, candid feedback from teachers, and developing habits of mind including interpretation, problem-solving, critical reasoning, analytical research, and accuracy.

• *Add missing content to high-school courses.* Strategic reading, expanding vocabulary, and learning word analysis skills are often underemphasized, says Conley. In math, problem-solving and a thorough understanding of the basic concepts, principles, and techniques of algebra are vital. In science, students need to know basic scientific principles, be able to think like a scientist, and know how to use empirical evidence to draw conclusions. In social studies, students need to know how to interpret sources, evaluate evidence and competing claims, and understand historical themes and the importance of key events.

And then there's writing. "If we could institute only one change to make students more college ready," he says, "it should be to increase the amount and quality of writing students are expected to produce."

"The Challenge of College Readiness" by David Conley in *Educational Leadership*, April 2007 (Vol. 64, #7, p. 23-29); to purchase, go to http://www.ascd.org, click on Publications, then April 2007 Educational Leadership, then this article.

9. Violence Prevention

In the wake of the Virginia Tech shootings, many educators are looking for solid advice on identifying students who might commit violent acts. The Center for Mental Health at UCLA suggests that when a student's words or actions cause concern, school officials should gather information from the student, staff members, classmates, family members, health records, etc. on the following:

- The motivation for the behavior that brought the person to official attention;
- Communication about ideas and intentions;
- Unusual interest in targeted violence;
- Evidence of attack-related behaviors and planning;
- Mental condition;
- Level of cognitive sophistication or organization to formulate and execute an attack plan;
- Recent losses (including losses of status);
- Consistency between communications and behaviors;

- Concern by others about the individual's potential for harm;
- Factors in the individual's life and/or environment that might increase or decrease the likelihood of attack.

The information gathered should be used to decide whether to monitor the student, refer him or her for services, or take immediate action. For more information, see:
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/shootings.pdf
In addition, the American Academy of Pediatrics has information that might be helpful:
http://www.aap.org/featured/resourcepage.htm

Spotted in PEN Weekly NewsBlast, April 19, 2007

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 36 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 (with occasional breaks; there are about 50 issues a year).

Subscriptions:

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Publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educator
American School Board Journal
ASCD, CEC SmartBriefs
Atlantic Monthly
Catalyst Chicago
CommonWealth Magazine
Daily EdNews
Ed. Magazine
EDge
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
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Middle Ground
Middle School Journal
NASSP Bulletin
New York Times
New Yorker
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
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