Marshall Memo 560

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
November 10, 2014

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Some of my happiest, most rewarding moments as an educator have been hearing what comes out of learners' mouths when I get out of the way."

Elizabeth City (see item #3)

"Schools are supposed to be stopovers in life, not ends in themselves. The information, skills, and understandings they offer are knowledge-to-go, not just to use on site."

David Perkins and Gavriel Salomon (quoted in item #5)

"All too often, we unintentionally keep students in the dark about what we are trying to accomplish in school."

Peter Dewitz and Michael Graves (*ibid*.)

"Information spews from the Internet like water from a burst pipe. The expert school librarian must work to control and direct the flow, turning the raging river into a tamed stream of knowledge suitable for access by students and teachers."

Christopher Harris (see item #6)

"High performance isn't, ultimately, about running faster, throwing harder, or leaping farther. It's about something much simpler: getting better at getting better."

James Surowiecki (see item #1)

"Merit pay is inequitable and divisive. It encourages teachers to emphasize tested material over other content. It often comes in lieu of real wage increases. It encourages teachers to place their own interests ahead of their students' interests. It is anathema to our professional dignity."

Francis Hahn (see item #2)

1. Lessons for Schools from Athletic Training

In this *New Yorker* article, James Surowiecki reviews the advances that have been made in athletic coaching since the 1970s and how they can be applied to improving classroom instruction. Professional athletes used to work out and get in shape but didn't do much weight- and skill training. "Most of the guys had this mental attitude that if you're not good enough the way you are, then you'll never be good enough," said Bob Petrich, a defensive end with the San Diego Chargers in the 1960s. Either you have it or you don't.

Kermit Washington changed that mindset. Recruited by the L.A. Lakers based on his American University record of 20 points and 20 rebounds a game, he was a major disappointment in his first three years in the N.B.A. His skills didn't match those of professional players and he spent more and more time on the bench and thought his pro basketball career was coming to an end.

But Washington didn't accept that his skills were finite, and spent the next summer working with Pete Newell, a Lakers special assistant, getting schooled in the basics of footwork, positioning, and shooting. The following season, Washington improved in all aspects of the game, and after another summer working with Newell, he got even better. By the end of the 1970s, he was an All-Star. The word got out, and more and more professional athletes began to engage in the same kind of intensive skill training.

"Today, in sports, what you are is what you make yourself into," says Surowiecki. "Innate athletic ability matters, but it's taken to be the base from which you have to ascend. Training efforts that forty years ago would have seemed unimaginably sophisticated and obsessive are now what it takes to stay in the game… What we're seeing is, in part, the mainstreaming of excellent habits." Athletes work harder – and smarter.

The same continuous-improvement process has happened among chess players, classical musicians, and in U.S. manufacturing. The quality revolution that began in Japan in the 1970s spread to U.S. industry, and the rate of defective automobiles, televisions, and other products has gone down dramatically. "The ethos that underlies all these performance revolutions is captured by the Japanese term *kaizen*, or continuous improvement," says Surowiecki. "In a *kaizen* world, skill is not a static, fixed quality but the subject of ceaseless labor."

This leads him to examine what's been happening in the world of K-12 schooling, where progress has been agonizingly slow. The problem, Surowiecki believes, is similar to the one other fields had to confront before they improved: a belief in the "natural-born teacher" – either you can teach or you can't. "As a result, we do little to help ordinary teachers become good

and good teachers become great," he says. "What we need to embrace instead is the idea of teaching as a set of skills that can be taught and learned and constantly improved on."

The fact that most Americans don't buy this idea has resulted in weak teacher preparation and training. "If American teachers – unlike athletes or manufacturing workers – haven't got much better over the past three decades," says Surowiecki, "it's largely because their training hasn't, either." Countries whose students far outperform the U.S. – Japan, Finland, Canada – "all take teacher training extremely seriously. They train teachers rigorously before they get in the classroom, and they make sure that the training continues throughout their work lives." Here are some specifics:

- Teachers observing each other at work and discussing what they see;
- Using videos of lessons for close scrutiny of effective and ineffective practices;
- Teachers reviewing curriculum materials and designing lessons together;
- Developing specific classroom techniques that work, like the Japanese *bansho*, the art of writing out a math problem with possible solutions on the board;
- A relentless focus on small details and constant feedback;
- Refining sets of specific practices that work (the Japanese term is *jugyokenkyu*);
- Deploying a staff of full-time trainers and coaches.

Will this cost money? Of course, says Surowiecki – but probably not as much as the cost of continuously replacing failing, discouraged teachers, or the societal costs of churning out mediocre students year after year.

"And there will be some teachers who will find all the feedback intrusive," he says. "But what's happened in sports over the past forty years teaches that the way to improve the way you perform is to improve the way you train. High performance isn't, ultimately, about running faster, throwing harder, or leaping farther. It's about something much simpler: getting better at getting better."

"Better All the Time" by James Surowiecki in *The New Yorker*, November 10, 2014 (p. 81-85), http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/11/10/better-time

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2. A Teacher Turns Down $5,000 in Merit Pay

In this *Kappan* article, New Mexico high-school teacher Francis Hahn explains why he refused to accept a $5,000 bonus awarded by the state's Public Education Department. The money was part of the governor's reform package, with incentive checks going to as many as 300 teachers of Advanced Placement courses who increased the number of students who pass their AP exams. Hahn was eligible because more of his AP literature students scored 3 or higher than his students the year before. This was an exceptional group, he remembers: "It was a good year for me as well. I was on top of things, organized, enthusiastic."

And yet he felt uncomfortable accepting the stipend. "I was not the only person who contributed to their success," he reasoned. The others included:

- Excellent junior, sophomore, and freshman English teachers;
- Middle and elementary school teachers who laid the foundation;

- Parents who instilled the value of education and diligence and presided over literate dinner-table conversations;
- Counselors, custodians, coaches, nurses, librarians, secretaries, cooks, security guards, educational assistants, and administrators who provided valuable support;
- And of course the students themselves, who worked hard and learned a lot.

"My point is obvious," says Hahn: "Education is collaborative and incremental. It requires vertical alignment, coordination, good leadership – and students who care to reciprocate. The success of these students was the work of many hands… To accept the money would be to accept the pretense that I was the sole source of their success."

The well-intentioned goal of the governor's merit-pay program is to increase enrollment in AP classes, especially among minority-group students. But Hahn is worried it will have the opposite effect: "Tempting beleaguered and underpaid teachers with a bonus if their students pass AP tests will encourage them to be more selective with regard to whom they allow into their classes," he says. Hahn is also worried that the state's plan to generate lists of students who do well on the Preliminary SAT and encourage them to enroll in AP classes will have a chilling effect on AP enrollment: "Honest and hard-working students who test poorly but who thrive when given the opportunity to challenge themselves will be left out… New Mexico teachers, armed with lists of students who measure up, will have a $5,000 incentive to leave the rest behind."

"Merit pay is inequitable and divisive," Hahn concludes. "It encourages teachers to emphasize tested material over other content. It often comes in lieu of real wage increases. It encourages teachers to place their own interests ahead of their students' interests. It is anathema to our professional dignity."

"Why I Turned Down a $5,000 Bonus" by Francis Hahn in *Phi Delta Kappan*, November 2014 (Vol. 96, #3, p. 80), www.kappanmagazine.org; Hahn is at frahah@taosschools.org.

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3. Student-Led Discussions

(Originally titled "Talking to Learn")

"Some of my happiest, most rewarding moments as an educator have been hearing what comes out of learners' mouths when I get out of the way," says Elizabeth City (Harvard Graduate School of Education) in this *Educational Leadership* article. "Talking matters to learning. Although it's possible to think without talking – and to talk without much thinking – each can strengthen the other. Talking also provides windows into what students are learning." Rich classroom conversations also go to the heart of democratic schooling, she says: the better students get at thinking, speaking, and listening, the better off we'll all be.

So why do teachers do most of the talking in classrooms? And why is so much student talk unimpressive? City believes there are five reasons:

- We have other priorities. Curriculum coverage. Test preparation. Even if "accountable talk" is in the school-improvement plan, other things push it aside.

- It's hard to step outside the traditional paradigm: the teacher steers discussions, the students follow in familiar roles.
- We're afraid. Teachers fear losing control. Students fear not knowing how to play the game of school. Both fear sounding stupid.
- We believe that only "advanced" learners can drive discussions.
- Everyone thinks silences should be avoided at all costs.

There's no question that having rich, authentic discussions is difficult, says City. It involves balancing each of these elements: safety, challenge, authentic participation, and ownership.

Students must feel safe from being attacked, but discussions shouldn't be *so* safe that no one takes risks. The level of challenge must be just right – not too hard and not too easy. This is tricky, but City believes we often underestimate what students can handle. "Authentic participation means students offer questions or comments that deepen their own and others' understanding and make space for multiple voices and ideas to be heard," she says. And ownership is key: not anarchy, in which students "veer wildly from one side of the intellectual road to another while the teacher sits back like a powerless passenger," nor dictatorship, with the teacher saying, "I want you to discuss…" In a successful discussion, says City, "students ask most of the questions, connecting with and building on one another's ideas, taking responsibility for the tenor of the conversation, and talking with one another… The teacher is valued and respected as a member of the discussion community – albeit one with more experience and expertise – but she or he is not deferred to as the authority." How can this happen?

• *Set the stage*. Students should be in a circle or U so they can see each others' faces.

• *Think-pair-share*. Getting students to think, jot down ideas, and chat with an elbow partner is an excellent way to ramp up participation and authenticity.

• *Use discussion protocols*. In *Save the Last Word*, students read a text in advance and choose a sentence or passage they consider important or striking. A group convenes, one person reads the passage he or she chose aloud, the others have one minute each to respond, then the first person gets "the last word," with 2-3 minutes to explain the choice and connect with what others said. In *Four A's*, students read a text with four questions in mind: What do you *agree* with? What *assumptions* does the author hold? What do you want to *argue* with? And what parts of the text do you *aspire* to?

• *Use texts*. It's possible to have student-driven discussions without texts, says City, but well-chosen texts are very helpful. They provide common ground for a conversation and offer pathways to ideas, experiences, and feelings. They don't have to be print – art, music, maps, primary documents, essays, political cartoons, and math problems are fine. One discussion used two photographs of Abraham Lincoln, one taken shortly before he became president, one shortly before his death.

• *Focus on process*. Content is the central focus, says City, but "a little attention to process can make a big difference in quality." Facilitators and participants can set goals – "Talk more," "Listen more," "Ask a question" – or a collective goal like "Let's try to connect with one another's ideas" or "Let's refer to the text more." And at the end of the discussion,

it's good to reflect on how it went. How did we do on safety? How challenging was the conversation? Who participated and who didn't? How authentic and educative was it?

"Talking to Learn" by Elizabeth City in *Educational Leadership*, November 2014 (Vol. 72, #3, p. 10-16), http://bit.ly/1wMkBce; City can be reached at elizabeth_city@gse.harvard.edu.

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4. Getting Students to Express Substantive Ideas in Class

(Originally titled "Research Alert: High-Press Talk")

This item in *Educational Leadership* gives a short summary of a study of 4th- and 5th-grade teachers who used "high-press" questions to challenge students to think and discuss at a deeper level. The author, Dot McElhone, found that specific classroom conditions were conducive to deeper thinking:

- Teachers positioned students as competent and capable thinkers.
- Students had multiple opportunities to share their ideas in discussions.
- Students felt safe taking risks with their thinking and exploring ideas.
- Teachers conferenced frequently with students.
- Teachers mixed low-press questions (yes/no, either/or) with high-press questions.
- Teachers framed reading as a collaborative endeavor with ambitious goals, versus an individual process of finding correct answers to narrow comprehension questions.

"Research Alert: High-Press Talk" in *Educational Leadership*, November 2014 (Vol. 72, #3, p. 8), http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/nov14/vol72/num03/Double-Take.aspx; the full study is "Pressing for Elaboration in Student Talk About Texts" in the January 2013 issue of *Journal of Classroom Interaction*.

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5. Transfer: Extending What Is Learned in One Context to a New Context

In this article in *The Reading Teacher*, Peter Dewitz (Mary Baldwin College) and Michael Graves (University of Minnesota/Minneapolis) quote David Perkins and Gavriel Salomon (2012): "Schools are supposed to be stopovers in life, not ends in themselves. The information, skills, and understandings they offer are knowledge-to-go, not just to use on site." Dewitz and Graves believe teaching for transfer is critically important in the Common Core era: "As teachers, we hope that what students have learned in today's class will transfer to their work in tomorrow's and next week's classes, to situations they face as they progress through school, to their reading a wide variety of materials both in and out of school, and eventually to their succeeding in their social, civic, and professional lives."

Dewitz and Graves suggest these general principles as teachers carry out this mission in classrooms:

- Recognize where transfer does, and often doesn't, occur. With basic skills like fluent reading, transfer is easy, but it's more challenging when students read complex texts.

- Talk explicitly to students about the importance of transfer. "All too often, we unintentionally keep students in the dark about what we are trying to accomplish in school," say Dewitz and Graves.

They then distinguish between two kinds of transfer:

• *Low-road transfer* (hugging) – This happens when a skill is learned quite thoroughly, it's been practiced in a variety of contexts, and the new context is not that dissimilar.

• *High-road transfer* (bridging) – Here the gap is wider and the instructional challenge is greater. Dewitz and Graves suggest the following steps:

- Construct interesting curriculum units in which applying what's learned is intrinsically interesting – for example, fourth graders are told they'll be applying reading skills (finding the main idea, using text features and structures) as they read about 19th-century immigration to the U.S. in a textbook, a work of historical fiction, and online sources.
- Create positive attitudes and dispositions. High-road transfer requires conscious effort and real work, say the authors: "Students should understand that learning new strategies and building knowledge will lead to even more learning, especially for tasks they find interesting."
- Use bridging techniques. This involves taking direct steps to help apply initial learning in other situations. A fourth-grade teacher might practice transferring a skill with straightforward materials and then push students to work with challenging texts, emphasizing that the strategies are tools, not ends in themselves.
- Repeatedly model and teach the detect-elect-connect process. Addressing transfer as a metacognitive process, students *detect* that past learning may be useful in a new situation; *elect* to pursue the possible link; and *connect* the past learning to the current task.
- Use expansive framing. The teacher frames a lesson as an initial discussion of an issue students will be actively engaging in for the rest of their lives. It's the opposite of learning author's purpose in Week 2, fact and opinion in Week 3, and cause and effect in Week 4.

"Teaching for Transfer in the Common Core Era" by Peter Dewitz and Michael Graves in *The Reading Teacher*, October 2014 (Vol. 66, #2, p. 149-158), http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/trtr.1290/abstract; the authors can be reached at pdewitz@cstone.net and mgraves@umn.edu.

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6. How School Libraries Can Make Optimal Use of Digital Content

"Information spews from the Internet like water from a burst pipe," says Christopher Harris in this *Kappan* article. "The expert school librarian must work to control and direct the flow, turning the raging river into a tamed stream of knowledge suitable for access by students and teachers… While the critical task for libraries used to be collecting enough information,

the true value of the modern school library is limiting the information resources to just the best resources."

Harris believes digital content is the wave of the future, but he sees two challenges. First, not all of the content schools want to use is available in digital form – for example, *Catcher in the Rye* and a number of classic works cannot be accessed as e-books. Second, using content that's available digitally involves dealing with complicated contract terms. Different publishers have different use policies – Harper Collins terminates e-book licenses after 26 loans, while Macmillan offers two-year licenses. A school doesn't really "buy" an e-book, but gets to use it for a limited amount of time with the price-tag eventually exceeding that of hard-copy editions. If individual schools try to buy digital content, costs can become prohibitive. Harris recommends working on a regional or statewide basis to achieve economies of scale, especially with magazines, journals, and online encyclopedias. "Librarians at the school level have to become comfortable working collaboratively with a larger group to identify and acquire content," he says, "decisions that have traditionally been made individually."

Harris's vision of the school library is as a learning commons, with a wide range of content available to students and staff 24/7 and the librarian providing professional development to help teachers and administrators make best use of the content. He mentions online services like TumbleBook Library, TumbleBook Cloud, Scholastic Storia, Brain Hive, the iBook Store, Kindle Store, and Google Play, as well as their limitations. "For this to work," Harris concludes, "we are all going to have to keep working together for the next few years. The models and the market will take some time to stabilize around successful exemplars… Make sure everyone in the school knows the limitations and possibilities for digital content, and create a comprehensive plan for adopting new digital resources."

"Fact or Fiction? Libraries Can Thrive in the Digital Age" by Christopher Harris in *Phi Delta Kappan*, November 2014 (Vol. 96, #3, p. 20-25), www.kappanmagazine.org; Harris can be reached at infomancy@gmail.com.

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7. Choosing the Best E-Texts

In this *Kappan* article, Bridget Dalton (University of Colorado/Boulder) says digital content offers students new possibilities for engaging in texts – especially students who struggle with printed material. Dalton believes digital texts, at their best, fulfill the three principles of Universal Design for Learning:

- Providing multiple means of representing the "what" of learning – for example, students being able to hear the text as they read it and see individual words defined and broken into animated, decodable chunks;
- Providing multiple means of action and expression, the "how" of responding to texts – for example, writing, drawing, or audio-recording;
- Providing multiple means of engagement, the "why" of learning – such as setting a goal of becoming a journalist and investing effort in pursuing that goal.

But not all e-texts are high-quality, says Dalton. She offers the following suggestions for picking the best materials:

• *Look for e-texts with audio narration that provides access to the general education curriculum*. Students who are below grade level can access challenging text and build their vocabulary and comprehension when they listen to voice narration.

• *Select e-books with meaningful enhancements for vocabulary comprehension*. Buyer beware, says Dalton. "Be alert for distracting media enhancements, such as illustration hotspots that conflict with, are irrelevant to the story line, or contain unrelated games." All these interfere with students' focus and comprehension, and make texts less suitable to shared reading with an adult.

• *Teach students how to use e-text features*. Explicit instruction is often necessary for students to get the full value out of digital enhancements.

• *Create an e-reader community*. Get students sharing "good reads" and effective strategies with each other.

• *Organize professional development and technical assistance*. "Teachers need time to collaborate with colleagues on developing grade-level plans to integrate e-books reading into the curriculum and standards," says Dalton. "There is a rich array of online communities and Internet resources including tools for reading e-text and authoring customized e-books."

"E-Text and E-Books Are Changing the Literacy Landscape" by Bridget Dalton in *Phi Delta Kappan*, November 2014 (Vol. 96, #3, p. 38-43), www.kappanmagazine.org; Dalton can be reached at bridget.dalton@colorado.edu.

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8. Accommodating Dyslexia in Regular-Education Classrooms

In this *Edutopia* article (which includes a TED-Ed video), Kelli Sandman-Hurley invites us to read this paragraph and be prepared to answer comprehension questions:

> The bottob line it thit it doet exitt, no bitter whit nibe teotle give it (i.e. ttecific leirning ditibility, etc). In fict, iccording to Tilly Thiywitz (2003) itt trevilence it ictuilly one in five children, which it twenty tercent.

"You have just experienced dyslexia for one minute," says Sandman-Hurley. "During that minute, the passage slowed you down and forced you to pronounce words that didn't seem to make any sense and weren't familiar. You knew you were wrong, but you read them anyway… If you were in a classroom full of your peers and I asked you to read this aloud and then asked comprehension questions, would your heart-rate go up? Would you suddenly have to use the restroom? Or perhaps you'd need to go to the nurse with a stomachache? This is dyslexia."

One in five students has some degree of dyslexia, says Sandman-Hurley, so it's important to unlearn some common myths:

- Dyslexia is not seeing letters or words backwards (which is developmentally normal through first grade).
- It's not something children outgrow.

- It's not the result of laziness or lack of motivation.
- It's not a sign of lack of intelligence; in fact, many students with dyslexia are intellectually gifted.
- It's not a visual issue.

Rather, people with dyslexia have difficulty with accurate and/or fluent word recognition, decoding, and spelling, stemming from deficits in the phonological component of language. These challenges can lead to problems with writing, reading comprehension, the quantity of reading experience, and deficits in vocabulary and background knowledge.

Students with dyslexia should get specialized help outside the regular classroom, but general-education teachers can help in many ways. Here are some helpful accommodations:

• Providing audio versions of books so students don't miss out on good literature and grade-level curriculum content. Two valuable online resources are Learning Ally https://www.learningally.org and Bookshare https://www.bookshare.org.

• Don't require these students to read aloud unless they've had time to practice and/or volunteer.

• Provide lecture notes in advance and allow students to record the lecture, perhaps using the Livescribe pen (http://www.livescribe.com/en-us).

• Allow students to respond verbally to short-answer and essay questions and dictate longer passages.

• Don't take points off for spelling – grade on content.

• Don't give time limits for testing and other assignments.

• Give multiple opportunities for success and celebrate areas of strength.

"Dyslexia in the General-Education Classroom" by Kelli Sandman-Hurley in *Edutopia*, October 23, 2014, http://bit.ly/1wboGTg

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9. What Does "Personalized Learning" Look Like?

In this *Education Week* article, Sean Cavanagh reports that personalized learning is a hot topic that's getting lots of attention from foundations, tech companies, and schools. Cavanagh says it can be seen as differentiation with the added element of student agency – "giving students more power through either digital tools or other means, accounting for how they learn best, what motivates them, and their academic goals." However, says Theresa Ewald of the Kettle Moraine schools in Wisconsin, "Nothing replaces the teacher, and [a] teacher's ability to know a student and what they need. You can't get that from a piece of software."

A consortium of organizations (the Gates Foundation, the Dell Foundation, and EDUCAUSE) has suggested that personalized learning should rest on four pillars:

• *Learner profiles* – Each student has an up-to-date record of her/her individual strengths, needs, motivations, and goals.

• *Personal learning paths* – All students are held to clear, high expectations, but each student follows a customized path that responds and adapts based on his/her individual learning progress, motivations, and goals.

• *Flexible learning environments* – Student needs drive the design of the learning environment. All operational elements – staffing plans, space use, and time allocation – respond and adapt to support students in achieving their goals.

• *Competency-based progression* – Each student's progress toward clearly-defined goals is continually assessed. A student advances and earns credit as soon as he or she demonstrates mastery.

"'Personalized Learning' Eludes Easy Definitions" by Sean Cavanagh in *Education Week*, October 22, 2014 (Vol. 34, #9, p. S2-S4), www.edweek.org

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Do you have feedback? Is anything missing?

If you have comments or suggestions, if you saw san 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.marshall48@gmail.com

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 43 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 64 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).

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Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
AMLE Magazine
ASCA School Counselor
ASCD SmartBrief/Public Education NewsBlast
Better: Evidence-Based Education
Center for Performance Assessment Newsletter
District Administration
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
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Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Teacher
Teachers College Record
Teaching Children Mathematics
Teaching Exceptional Children/Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The District Management Journal
The Journal of the Learning Sciences
The Language Educator
The Learning Principal/Learning System/Tools for Schools
The New York Times
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Time
Wharton Leadership Digest