Marshall Memo 668

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
January 9, 2017

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Time and energy are precious, *limited* resources, and if we squander them on too many initiatives or on the wrong ones, we will fail."

Mike Schmoker (see item #1)

"It's not just effort, but strategy. Students need to know that if they're stuck, they don't need just effort. You don't want them redoubling their efforts with the same ineffective strategies. You want them to know when to ask for help and when to use resources that are available."

Carol Dweck (see item #2)

"Nobody has a growth mindset in everything all the time. Everyone is a mixture of fixed and growth mindsets. You could have a predominant growth mindset in an area but there can still be things that trigger you into a fixed mindset trait. Something really challenging and outside your comfort zone can trigger it, or, if you encounter someone who is much better than you at something you pride yourself on, you can think, 'Oh, that person has ability, not me.'"

Carol Dweck (*ibid*.)

"If students do not form a positive connection with their teacher, it is within their control to minimally learn core content or refuse to learn anything at all."

Tanner LeBaron Wallace, Benjamin Kelcey, and Erik Ruzek in "What Can Student Perception Surveys Tell Us About Teaching? Empirically Testing the Underlying Structure of the Tripod Student Perception Survey" in *American Educational Research Journal*, December 2016 (Vol. 53, #6, p. 1834-1868), http://bit.ly/2i8DHp1

"Responsible inclusion means placing students with disabilities in general education when – and only when – that's where they'll receive the most effective instruction in the skills most important to their futures. Feelings of belonging, acceptance and dignity are important, but these aren't available only to those taught in general education."

James Kauffman and Jeanmarie Badar in "It's Instruction Over Place – Not the Other Way Around!" in *Phi Delta Kappan*, December 2016/January 2017 (Vol. 98, #4, p. 55-59), www.kappanmagazine.org; Kauffman is at jmk9t@eservices.virginia.edu.

1. Mike Schmoker on Three Focus Areas

In this article in *Principal Leadership*, consultant/author Mike Schmoker says the key to schools succeeding with all students is *prioritizing* – isolating and focusing on "only the most vital, game-changing actions that ensure significant improvement in teaching and learning" and then sustaining a disciplined, laser-like focus for a significant amount of time. "Time and energy are precious, *limited* resources," he says, "and if we squander them on too many initiatives or on the wrong ones, we will fail… Less is more."

Where should the focus be? Schmoker believes three areas have the strongest track record of success, are easy to understand when presented in professional development, and lend themselves to being continuously refined as they are implemented by teacher teams:

• *Consistent, schoolwide implementation of a coherent, content-rich curriculum* – Teachers should have clear, specific direction on which skills and concepts to teach – the *what* and *when* – with discretion on the *how to* and some room each week for teachable moments and personal passions. Curriculum focus "may be the single largest factor that affects both student achievement and reading proficiency," says Schmoker.

• *Mastery by every teacher of the components of effective, explicit instruction* – Of paramount importance is ongoing checking for student understanding (minute by minute, day by day, week by week) and adjusting instruction based on assessment insights. This is especially important for project- and problem-based learning.

• *An intensive, curriculum-wide emphasis on fairly traditional literacy* – "We have overcomplicated instruction in reading, speaking, and writing," says Schmoker. "To succeed, students simply need vastly more time to purposefully read, discuss, and write about worthy, substantive literature and nonfiction across the curriculum (as often as possible, in the interpretive and argumentative mode)."

Only a small fraction of schools are implementing these practices, but those that are (like Brockton High School in Massachusetts) are making dramatic gains. The common factor in Brockton and other successful schools is a leadership team working with colleagues in a way that is highly focused and relentless and provides plenty of opportunity for review and practice. "To the greatest extent possible," says Schmoker (who is critical of the way teacher-evaluation rubrics are being implemented in many districts), "this should occur in a climate that emphasizes helpfulness and growth, rather than evaluation."

"The Power of Focus" by Mike Schmoker in *Principal Leadership*, January 2017 (Vol. 17, #3, p. 42-45), e-link for NASSP members; Schmoker can be reached at schmoker@futureone.com.

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2. Carol Dweck on Fine-Tuning the Growth Mindset

In this article in *The Atlantic*, Christine Gross-Loh reports on an interview with Carol Dweck (Stanford University) about Dweck's concern that some teachers and parents are implementing what she calls a "false growth mindset." Some excerpts:

• "Nobody has a growth mindset in everything all the time," says Dweck. "Everyone is a mixture of fixed and growth mindsets. You could have a predominant growth mindset in an area but there can still be things that trigger you into a fixed mindset trait. Something really challenging and outside your comfort zone can trigger it, or, if you encounter someone who is much better than you at something you pride yourself on, you can think, 'Oh, that person has ability, not me.' So I think we all, students and adults, have to look for our fixed-mindset triggers and understand when we are falling into that mindset."

• Teachers can get discouraged when a student isn't learning and believe the student's failure is a reflection on their teaching ability (adopting a fixed mindset about themselves). At moments like this, they might be tempted to conclude the student has a fixed mindset rather than seeing is as their challenge to change the student's mindset as well as their own.

• Some parents and teachers try to buck up struggling students with comments like, "Wow, you tried really hard!" – which is a misunderstanding of the praise-effort mantra. When adults do this, it turns praising effort into a consolation prize and can be interpreted by children as a statement that the adult doesn't believe they can do any better. "It's not just effort, but strategy," says Dweck. "Students need to know that if they're stuck, they don't need just effort. You don't want them redoubling their efforts with the same ineffective strategies. You want them to know when to ask for help and when to use resources that are available. All of this is part of the process that needs to be taught and tied to learning." When students fail, teachers and parents should say things like, "Okay, what is this teaching us? Where should we go next?"

• With praise, focus on the process that led to success – hard work, good strategies, effective use of resources. "Be matter-of-fact," advises Dweck, "with not too strong or too passive a reaction… Effective teachers who actually have classrooms full of children with a growth mindset are always supporting children's learning strategies and showing how strategies created that success."

• Dweck describes an experiment conducted by her former graduate student, David Yeager, with 18,000 incoming ninth graders:

- The researchers took a humble posture with the students, saying, "We're experts on the brain and how students learn, but you're the experts on being a freshman in high school and we'd like your input for a program we're developing for future freshmen."
- The researchers then taught students how the teenage brain is especially open to learning – it's a time of great plasticity that they can take advantage of to grow their brains by taking on hard tasks in school and sticking to them.
- Students were given testimonials from public figures talking about how a growth mindset was key to their accomplishments.

- Students were then asked to write a letter to a struggling freshman counseling him or her on the growth-mindset principle.
- Finally, students were asked about an area where they'd like to contribute to making the world a better place – their family, community, or society – and how they might develop their intellectual abilities to maximize their impact.

"We're excited about this," Dweck concludes, "because we know the world of the future is going to be about taking on ill-defined, hard jobs that keep changing. It's going to favor people who relish those challenges and know how to fix them. We are committed to creating a nation of learners."

"How Praise Became a Consolation Prize" by Christine Gross-Loh in *The Atlantic*, December 16, 2016, http://theatln.tc/2hFrqJC

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3. Maximizing High-Quality Teacher Planning Time

"Students aren't the only ones who need more time to learn," says Eileen Merritt (Arizona State University) in this *Kappan* article; "teachers also need more and better time for learning and planning." U.S. elementary teachers spend an average of about 32 hours a week with their students, secondary teachers about 30 hours, out of a 38-hour contractual week. Daily planning time ranges from 12 to 80 minutes for elementary teachers, from 30 to 96 minutes at the secondary level. The paucity of contractual planning time in most schools pushes a lot of teachers' work into late afternoons, evenings, and weekends; including that time, the typical teacher's work week is about 52 hours. It's not surprising that when researchers ask teachers what changes would be most helpful, most put planning time at the top of their wish list, ranking it higher than increased pay and better-behaved students.

Merritt remembers that when she was a teacher and didn't have enough planning time, several things suffered:

- Locating the math manipulatives that would have enhanced a lesson;
- Reading students' journal responses and giving meaningful feedback;
- Reviewing notes about a new curriculum she was trying to implement;
- Finding a colleague to address a concern she had about one of her students;
- Reflecting on how a reading lesson went and how she should adjust instruction the next day.

"These missed or afforded opportunities accumulate over time," says Merritt, "undoubtedly affecting student learning."

Teachers need two types of planning time, Merritt believes: (a) Individual time every day to prepare materials for upcoming lessons, assess student work, and communicate with specialists and parents about their students; and (b) common planning time once or twice a week with same-grade/same-subject colleagues to plan, implement, reflect on, and modify instruction.

The 30-32 hours U.S. teachers spend with their students each week compares to about 20-21 hours in other countries. Many of these countries have higher student achievement than

the U.S., and Merritt clearly believes that's because teachers abroad have much more planning time every week. How can other countries' teaching/planning ratio be so much better? Mostly because they have larger class sizes or a shorter student day. Merritt suggests three ways U.S. schools might increase the amount of planning time:

• *Shorter days for students* – Late-arrival and early-dismissal days can open up time for substantive teacher meetings. For example, students in the Mason Public Schools in Michigan come in one hour later every Wednesday to allow time for PLC meetings, and parents can register their children for before-school activities including computer instruction, independent reading, math games, and homework help.

• *No-student days embedded within the school year* – Full days are ideal for reviewing student progress, drafting comments on report cards, planning curriculum units, mapping out service-learning projects and field trips, learning about new technology, and talking with school psychologists, counselors, and social workers about students with problems. The number of such days ranges from two to 18 per school year.

• *Increased staffing* – Core subject teachers can be given more planning time within the school day if their students go out to additional physical education, art, music, science, environmental education, and other specialty subjects – and also by increasing supervised recess and using instructional assistants and parent volunteers.

All of these cost money and must compete with other priorities such as reducing class size, increasing educator compensation, and improving or building facilities. Merritt believes a strong case can be made to families and the community that with more planning time for teachers, students and teachers will benefit. However, she concedes that solid research backing up the efficacy of increased teacher planning time hasn't been done. She concludes by calling for high-quality studies that demonstrate the positive impact on student achievement and teacher morale and effectiveness that she believes will come from increasing planning time.

"But while we're waiting for evidence to accumulate," she says, "we should trust teachers who are asking for more time, and make planning time a high priority in budgeting decisions. Instead of implementing costly interventions that yield minimal results in schools, we should pay more attention to the repeated requests from teachers about how to support them in their daily work… They need more time to identify problems they see in their schools or classrooms and work individually and collectively on solutions."

"Time for Teacher Learning, Planning Critical for School Reform" by Eileen Merritt in *Phi Delta Kappan*, December 2016/January 2017 (Vol. 98, #4, p. 31-36), www.kappanmagazine.org; Merritt can be reached at Eileen.Merritt@asu.edu.

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4. Effective and Ineffective Teacher Teamwork on Common Core

In this *American Educational Research Journal* article, Elizabeth Leisy Stosich (Stanford University) reports on her study of teachers in three elementary schools in the same district as they implemented Common Core standards. The district asked all schools to get collaborative teacher teams analyzing student work, adjusting teaching practices to meet the

new standards, planning Common Core aligned units, and adjusting their lessons, units, and classroom assessments to address the gap between the new standards and their students' current achievement. All three schools, says Stosich, "had basic structures and processes in place to support the work of teacher teams, including a weekly meeting time, a team leader on every grade-level team, student assessment data available to inform instruction, and training in inquiry practices. On the surface, teachers all engaged in similar collaborative work." What could possibly go wrong?

Initially, teachers in all three schools believed the new standards were not that different from what had guided their teaching before – even though Common Core represented significant changes in content and rigor. But as Stosich observed teacher teams and classroom instruction, she noticed major differences. In two of the schools, almost all teacher teams engaged in "sharing" – superficial discussions about the topics and resources they would use – and then teachers went back to their classrooms and had considerable autonomy in how they implemented the curriculum. Often, they plugged Common Core standards into existing lesson plans without making appropriate changes in content and rigor.

The result, says Stosich, was that "these teachers adopted new practices and resources in ways that reinforced rather than contested their existing beliefs about what was appropriate for their low-income students. They were observed and described simplifying complex problems, assigning tasks that required merely recall of information, and matching low-level questions and texts to low performing students." In other words, these teachers implemented the new standards in ways that reinforced their beliefs about their students' abilities and were constrained by their limited pedagogical content knowledge. Stosich noticed another phenomenon: teachers who were struggling with the curriculum were marginalized rather than supported by their teams.

But in one of the schools (and in a 4th-grade team in one of the others) teacher teams took a quite different approach to the new standards: joint inquiry. When these teams looked closely at the standards, they realized that Common Core required "a really different way of teaching" to get their students to higher levels of procedural fluency and conceptual understanding. In fact, they needed to "totally revamp" the way they planned instruction. Stosich describes how these teams worked:

- Using inquiry protocols, they asked each other *What do we want students to get out of the curriculum?* and *How can we get them there?*
- They collaboratively developed model curriculum units and adapted them as needed;
- They used a fishbowl approach to observe colleagues teaching new curriculum materials;
- They watched outside curriculum experts modeling appropriate classroom strategies.
- They looked together at student work as students grappled with the new expectations and thought about the implications for unit and lesson planning;
- They jointly figured out ways to support students in material that at first seemed too hard.

In short, these teachers went well beyond superficial sharing and allowed input from

colleagues and experts to penetrate deeply into their classrooms. In the process, they sacrificed some autonomy but gained rich insights on instruction, assessment, and what their students could accomplish.

The key to making this happen, says Stosich, was the principal, who made the inquiry process a major school goal, organized training, brought in outside experts, and closely monitored the work of teacher teams. By contrast, the principal in one of the other schools said all the right things about team collaboration, standards implementation, and curriculum unit development but didn't follow through. As a result, said one observer, teachers in the school would "do the work, but they were not really doing it as they should." Interestingly, the 4th-grade team in this school took the initiative and implemented many elements of the inquiry process on their own. The principal tried to get this team to model their process and influence other teams, but there was little carry-over.

In the third school, the principal placed great emphasis on using data to inform instruction, holding teachers accountable for giving weekly assessments, posting the results in their classrooms, and grouping students based on their performance. This school even had a data specialist who facilitated all grade-level team meetings. But privately, the principal believed the Common Core standards were too hard for students and encouraged teachers to use "practice" workbooks and test prep materials in addition to (or instead of) core curriculum materials. Teachers in this school liked each other, said they were collaborating, and shared ideas, but they weren't doing any of the things necessary to bring their students up to the new standards. Stosich noticed that their weekly team meetings were often cancelled or ended early.

This study is a stark reminder that superintendents and principals can espouse effective practices, but without attention to detail and on-the-ground leadership and supervision, things can go badly awry.

"Joint Inquiry: Teachers' Collective Learning About the Common Core in High-Poverty Urban Schools" by Elizabeth Leisy Stosich in *American Educational Research Journal*, December 2016 (Vol. 53, #6, p. 1698-1731), http://bit.ly/2i8LoLJ; Stosich is at stosich@stanford.edu.

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5. What Gets Professional Learning Communities Working Well?

"In schools across the country, time is set aside for teachers to examine data together in PLCs," say Jolley Bruce Christman (Research for Action), Caroline Ebby (University of Pennsylvania), and Kimberly Edmunds (Equal Measure) in this *Teachers College Record* article. "However, research increasingly demonstrates that giving teachers access to data and scheduling time for them to meet is not sufficient to generate the kind of professional learning and instructional improvement that are likely to result in improved learning opportunities and deeper understanding of mathematics for students."

One of the main concerns with PLCs working with assessment data, say the authors, is that teachers are using the meetings primarily to decide on changes in instructional management (e.g., grouping students, assigning them to tutoring, re-teaching concepts and skills using the same methods, teaching test-taking skills). "These limitations," say the authors,

"have resulted in data analyses that remain superficial and often do not support processes of teachers' collective inquiry and knowledge-building that might contribute to their professional growth."

To improve on this unfortunate dynamic, the authors designed Linking Model for Data Use, an intervention that involves three tweaks to the standard PLC data-driven instruction model:

- Classroom-embedded data that make visible students' mathematical thinking as they engage in lessons;
- Skilled facilitation of PLC meetings to enrich teachers' interpretation of the data;
- Recurring feedback cycles to continue the focus on the linkages between instruction and students' thinking.

The Linking intervention also makes use of written feedback on math lessons (by observers who are not teachers' formal evaluators), student solutions to open-ended assessment items, and video clips of classroom interactions.

To explore how the intervention was working, the authors did an in-depth study of one 3rd-grade teacher, Ms. Walker, who showed impressive gains in teaching when observers sat in on her classes at several points in the year and whose students showed marked improvement on math assessments. The researchers observed that Ms. Walker "became increasingly curious and reflective about her own and her colleagues' teaching. She frequently engaged in reasoning about her practice and became more articulate about mathematics instruction."

Ms. Walker began the year as a quite conventional elementary math teacher: she demonstrated standard procedures and taught her students how to follow them. In PLC meetings, Ms. Walker expressed skepticism about the value of students coming up with different solutions to problems (one of the core approaches in the curriculum). On her first observation, she got critical feedback. Then she watched a video of a grade-level colleague using a different process that had students thinking about strategies and understanding the mathematics at a deeper level.

By the time Ms. Walker had her second observation, she was making progress in three areas: incorporating questioning strategies that elicited students' mathematical thinking; gradually releasing authority for mathematical thinking to students; and incorporating pedagogical moves that pushed students to think more deeply about important mathematical concepts. In PLC meetings, she shared what she was doing in her class, described how students were reacting, and watched videos of her own teaching and that of colleagues working with the curriculum.

What brought about these changes? The researchers suggest it was "dissonance" – a delicate way of describing a 1-2-3 punch that Ms. Walker experienced: the critical feedback she received after her first observation; viewing a video of more-effective instruction by one of her colleagues; and discussing all this publicly in PLC meetings. "If the feedback remained private, Ms. Walker might have ignored it," say the authors, "but seeing and discussing her colleague's practice in relation to that feedback made it harder to dismiss and gave it new meaning, steering the dissonance into a more productive direction… Having the opportunity to

view video clips of her colleagues teaching the common lessons offered her a glimpse across classroom boundaries, something that is not often available to teachers but can help to break the norms of privacy in teaching. These video clips not only provided teachers with inspiration, but also gave them a common artifact from which to explore student thinking in ways that were grounded in practice… It is likely that the openness and curiosity of her colleagues reinforced Ms. Walker's willingness to pay attention to her feedback and try to incorporate it into her practice… Additionally, the presence of pedagogical expertise within her PLC allowed Ms. Walker to view more skilled instructional practice and make sense of the feedback she had received on her own instruction."

Christman, Ebby, and Edmunds conclude with the three key factors they believe make or break the effectiveness of PLCs:

• *Meaningful data* – Static assessment results from benchmark assessments are not enough. To have truly high-quality discussions about their work, teachers need (a) open-ended assessment items from their ongoing instruction to identify student strategies and uncover their mathematical reasoning; (b) feedback from classroom observations; and (c) video clips of their own instruction and that of colleagues.

• *Supportive tools* – These include classroom observations and videos and having a facilitator with deep pedagogical content knowledge. It's also crucial that the PLC sinks its teeth into one or two substantive and actionable math concepts or strategies. "When this kind of concrete guidance is tied to the specific mathematics content under study," say the authors, "it can generate instructional improvement that goes beyond the surface (e.g., asking more open-ended questions) to deeper substantive change (e.g., helping students transition from repeated addition to multiplicative strategies through the use of an array)."

• *Supportive colleagues* – Dissonance is not enough, say the authors. To truly improve instruction, teachers also need a collegial group that will hold their hands as they deal with their students' struggles and criticism from observers: "Collective sharing and discussion of instructional practice and student work in the PLC engendered a collective responsibility for improving student learning in relation to grade-level goals and expectations, making the dissonance that was created more difficult to dismiss."

• *Repeated feedback* – During the three cycles that Ms. Walker's PLC went through, teachers weren't thinking about instructional practice at a general level, but rather grappled with two key ideas about mathematics pedagogy: eliciting students' math reasoning and using questioning to press student thinking toward important concepts. "It is likely," say the authors, "that repeated video recording and written feedback motivated Ms. Walker and other teachers to try out new instructional strategies and continuously assess and refine them so that they could demonstrate improvement in subsequent observed lessons."

"Data Use Practices for Improved Mathematics Teaching and Learning: The Importance of Productive Dissonance and Recurring Feedback Cycles" by Jolley Bruce Christman, Caroline Ebby, and Kimberly Edmunds in *Teachers College Record*, November 2016 (Vol. 118, #11, p. 1-32), https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1114899

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6. Research Findings on Ability Grouping and Acceleration

"Ability grouping has been one of the most controversial educational practices for more than a century," say Saiying Steenbergen-Hu and Paula Olszewski-Kubilius (Northwestern University) and Matthew Makel (Duke University) in this *Review of Educational Research* article. "[T]he practical implications of ability grouping are profound. Ability grouping policies and practices affect students' experiences in school, including the courses they take, the curricula they receive, the peers with whom they learn, and the teachers who provide instruction."

In this article, the authors summarize 100 years of research on the effect of acceleration and four kinds of ability grouping on student achievement. Their conclusions:

- Within-class grouping (teachers differentiating instruction among several small groups) had moderately positive effects.
- Cross-grade grouping (students from different grade levels brought together to learn a particular subject or unit – e.g., the Joplin Plan for reading) had small-to-moderate benefits.
- These two forms of grouping benefited students with high, medium, and low achievement.
- Special grouping for gifted students (pullout or honors programs) was very helpful for those students.
- Between-class grouping showed only small benefits for students, but the authors believe previous studies underestimated its positive potential. (They note the vigorous critique of this kind of grouping, focused on negative effects for students in the lower achievement groups.)
- Acceleration (students skipping a grade or taking courses at a younger age than their peers) was the most beneficial of all.

"If such a long history of research shows the effectiveness of most types of ability grouping and acceleration," conclude Steenbergen-Hu, Makel, and Olszewski-Kubilius, "the question of why it is not more universally implemented looms large for educators, parents, and policy makers. Such questions are apt, especially given how eager we are as a society to find educational interventions that are effective and can be implemented on a large scale for relatively low costs."

"What One Hundred Years of Research Says About the Effects of Ability Grouping and Acceleration on K-12 Students' Academic Achievement: Findings of Two Second-Order Meta-Analyses" by Saiying Steenbergen-Hu, Matthew Makel, and Paula Olszewski-Kubilius in *Review of Educational Research*, December 2016 (Vol. 86, #4, p. 849-899), http://bit.ly/2jwpnMb; Saiying Steenbergen-Hu can be reached at hu@northwestern.edu.

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If you have feedback or suggestions, 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 45 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 60 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through more than a hundred articles each week, and selects 5-10 that have the greatest potential to improve teaching, leadership, and learning. He then writes a brief summary of each article, pulls out several striking quotes, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the Memo to subscribers every Monday evening (with occasional breaks; there are 50 issues a year).

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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
Communiqué
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Update
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
English Journal
Essential Teacher
Exceptional Children
Go Teach
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Educational Review
Independent School
Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Journal of Staff Development
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Knowledge Quest
Literacy Today
Mathematics in the Middle School
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Responsive Classroom Newsletter
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Teacher
Teachers College Record
Teaching Children Mathematics
Teaching Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The District Management Journal
The Journal of the Learning Sciences
The Language Educator
The New York Times
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Time Magazine