Marshall Memo 377

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
March 14, 2011

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"To deny urban children arts education is societal child abuse."

Dennis Creedon in "Fight the Stress of Urban Education with the Arts" in *Phi Delta Kappan*, March 2011 (Vol. 92, #6, p. 34-36) http://www.kappanmagazine.org

"The first thing students need to learn is what they're supposed to be learning."

Connie Moss, Susan Brookhart, and Beverly Long (see item #5)

"Only through reading what is great, what's partially great, and what some people think is great (whereas others do not) can young readers develop the ability to evaluate, compare, and think critically about what they read."

Barry Gilmore (see item #6)

"Going to a hybrid school is just like going to work. The kids go to their desks, they turn on their computers, they read things, they read e-mails, they go online, they go to meetings – only these meetings are classes designed for them."

Mark Kushner, a "hybrid" school leader (see item #7)

"We reserve teacher time for all those wonderful things that only teachers can do – guided instruction, group discussion, helping kids learn to listen to each other and challenge each other, helping higher-order critical thinking."

Judith McGarry, another "hybrid" school leader (*ibid*.)

1. Making Good Decisions Amidst Too Much Information

In this sobering *Newsweek* article, Sharon Begley reports on recent research showing how the torrent of information in our lives changes the way we make decisions. People "start making stupid mistakes and bad choices because the brain region responsible for smart decision making has essential left the premises," says Begley. At the same time, anxiety spikes.

Of course information is essential to making decisions, but too much information in the form of face-to-face conversations, phone calls, phone messages, e-mails, text messages, social networking, and tweets is a problem; "trying to drink from a firehose of information has harmful cognitive effects," says Begley. "And nowhere are those effects clearer, and more worrying, than in our ability to make smart, creative, successful decisions." Here's what happens:

• *Paralysis* – "Every bit of incoming information presents a choice," says Begley: "Whether to pay attention, whether to reply, whether to factor it into an impending decision. But decision science has shown that people faced with a plethora of choices are apt to make no decision at all." At a certain point, people get overwhelmed and opt out, or they make bad choices.

• *Second-guessing* – "In a world of limitless information," says Begley, "regret over decisions we make becomes more common. We chafe at the fact that identifying the best feels impossible." People end up being dissatisfied even with good decisions.

• *Sorting and remembering* – The brain's working memory can hold only about seven pieces of information; anything that's important has to be shifted to long-term memory, which requires extra effort – not to mention the work of deciding what's most important.

• *The pressure to decide now* – The rate at which new information comes at us subtly pushes us to make decisions more quickly than is really necessary. "We're being trained to prefer an immediate decision even if it's bad to a later decision that's better," says Stanford psychologist Clifford Nass.

• *Responding to the most recent* – "The brain is wired to notice change over stasis," says Begley. "An arriving e-mail that pops to the top of your BlackBerry qualifies as a change; so does a new Facebook post. We are conditioned to give greater weight in our decision-making machinery to what is latest, not what is more important or more interesting." Pace University professor Eric Kessler says, "We're fooled by immediacy and quantity and think it's quality. What starts driving decisions is the urgent rather than the important."

• *Evaluating information* – The brain isn't good at giving only a little weight to a new piece of information, says Begley – reflecting and putting things in perspective. With so much information coming at us, it's very difficulty to discount or downgrade one particular item. "Especially online," says psychologist Joanne Cantor, "it is so much easier to look for more and more information than sit back and think about how it fits together."

• *Not using the unconscious* – "One of the greatest surprises in decision science is the discovery that some of our best decisions are made through unconscious processes," says Begley. "Creative decisions are more likely to bubble up from a brain that applies unconscious thought to a problem, rather than going at it in a full-frontal analytical assault." This is why we often have brilliant ideas in the shower. Decisions requiring creativity benefit from letting the problem incubate below the level of awareness for a while. This allows the brain to integrate new information with existing knowledge, make connections, and see hidden patterns.

• *Too much rationality* – "If emotions are shut out of the decision-making process," says Begley, "we're likely to overthink a decision, and that has been shown to produce worse outcomes on even the simplest tasks."

Begley closes with several pieces of advice:

- Don't try to keep up with e-mails and text messages in real time; deal with them in concentrated bursts at designated points of the day.
- Analytical reasoning is only one part of a good decision; remove yourself from the flow of information and let your unconscious kick in.
- Set priorities; if a decision hinges on a few factors, focus on them.
- If you are a "maximizer" – someone who finds it hard to say no to more information – work especially hard at turning information off and taking the time to reflect.

"I Can't Think!" by Sharon Begley in *Newsweek*, Mar. 7, 2011 (p. 28-33)
http://www.newsweek.com/2011/02/27/i-can-t-think.html

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2. David Brooks on the Rational Versus the Emotional Self

In this thoughtful *New York Times* column, David Brooks says that since the Enlightenment, the western world has been dominated by a simplistic view of human nature: reason versus emotions, with reason being more important and trustworthy. This mindset has led to policy errors in international relations (we've often been clueless about other cultures), finance (who would have thought bankers would do such stupid things en masse), and education (restructuring initiatives like charters, vouchers, and small schools have "skirted the core issue: the relationship between a teacher and a student").

But thanks to recent discoveries in neuroscience, psychology, sociology, and behavioral economics, says Brooks, a more balanced view of human nature is coming into focus. Among the new insights:

• Our emotions aren't the opposite of our rational faculties; rather, he says, "emotions assign value to things and are the basis of reason."

• The unconscious part of the mind is tremendously important; that's where some of our most impressive thinking takes place.

• Humans are social animals, not autonomous, isolated individuals. Our personalities are constantly being shaped by relationships.

Looking at the world this way, says Brooks, gives us a different perspective on our fellow humans: "You pay less attention to how people analyze the world but more to how they perceive and organize it in their minds. You pay a bit less attention to individual traits and more to the quality of relationships between people." And you become aware of a number of deeper talents, all of which bridge the supposed gap between reason and emotion:

- Attunement – "the ability to enter other minds and learn what they have to offer."
- Equipoise – "the ability to serenely monitor the movements of one's own mind and correct for biases and shortcomings."
- Metis – "the ability to see patterns in the world and derive the gist from complex situations."
- Sympathy – "the ability to fall into a rhythm with those around you and thrive in groups."
- Limerence – the ability to enjoy "moments of transcendence when the skull line falls away and we are lost in love for another, the challenge of a task, or the love of God."

"The New Humanism" by David Brooks in *The New York Times*, Mar. 8, 2011 (p. A23), http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/08/opinion/08brooks.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=%22The%20New%20Humanism%22%20by%20David%20Brooks&st=cse . Brooks's new book is *The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character, and Achievement* (Random House, 2011)

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3. Five Questions for Education Leaders

In this *Education Week* article, Louisiana's state school superintendent Paul Pastorek and U.K. education expert Michael Barber suggest a series of "deceptively simple" questions that help policymakers deliver results. Might these apply equally well at the school level?

• *What are you trying to do?* It's essential to clarify priorities, define what success looks like, and set student learning goals. If you don't do this, you'll spend your time overseeing bureaucratic and regulatory processes and responding to crises.

• *How are you trying to do it?* This involves mobilizing the leadership team and everyone else around the priority goals, calling in the best experts on literacy, math, and other subjects, and systematically implementing a carefully considered theory of action.

• *How will you know at any given moment whether you are on track?* You can't rely on data that has a long lag-time – or on gut instinct. It's essential to have real-time data on student learning, failures, and planned next steps – and get it all to decision-makers in a manageable form.

• *If you are not on track, what are you going to do about it?* "Armed with data and routines, you are much more likely to be able to solve problems effectively," say Pastorek and

Barber. "Nagging questions signal leaders that something needs attention, reflection, and ultimately, action. Don't automatically give the benefit of the doubt. Instead, ask, 'Why am I so doubtful?'"

• Those in charge of implementation should always ask goal leaders, How can we help? Pastorek and Barber advocate for a "delivery team" – smart people with a positive attitude who develop good relationships with their colleagues – that's responsible for quality implementation and keeping leaders focused on outcomes.

"Making School Reform Real: What the Bayou State Learned from the United Kingdom" by Paul Pastorek and Michael Barber in *Education Week*, Mar. 2, 2011 (Vol. 30, # 22, p. 36, 29) http://www.edweek.org

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4. A Critique of the Workshop Model for Teaching Reading

(Originally titled "Let Strategies Serve Literature")

In this *Educational Leadership* article, former New York City teacher Diana Senechal criticizes the common practice of teaching generic reading skills (main idea, making predictions, etc.) in an initial mini-lesson and then having students apply them as they independently read different books around the classroom. Here are her concerns:

- The usual reading strategies are too generic to be applied to a variety of books.
- Generic reading strategies downplay the role of content knowledge in comprehension; before background knowledge can be activated, it must be built.
- This approach treats different works of literature as interchangeable, which they aren't.
- Because the teacher doesn't know all the books in depth, it's difficult to check for rigor and accuracy, leading to errors in literary analysis.
- Letting students select their own books deprives them of going into more depth on shared, high-quality works of literature.
- The workshop model isn't well suited to rich, complex literature and the kind of in-depth reading students should be experiencing.

Senechal strongly prefers close reading of one work of literature at a time, which she says can be both rigorous and enthralling. "To make sense of a text," she says, "one must take in its structure, details, rhythms, sounds, and more… When strategies illuminate a literary work, students become alert to unusual elements that puzzle and challenge them. They start to find their way around literature the way one finds one's way around an unfamiliar town – through looking at maps, but also exploring, spending time in its rainy park or its alleys under the streetlights."

What should literature instruction be like? Senechal says the literature should be at the center, not the skills. Teachers should choose passages carefully, moving to works of increasing complexity, and returning to earlier readings to get more and more from them. "Readability levels should be taken with a grain of salt," she says. The key factors are "the richness of the works, their meanings, their importance, their difficulty, and their relation to

other parts of the curriculum." Basic reading skills should be taught briefly, and complex strategies should be taught in the context of specific works of literature.

"One of the great things about enduring literature," concludes Senechal, "is that it can be read at many levels, and all students should learn to persist with things they don't immediately understand. Students may not like or comprehend certain books at first, but they may seek them out later, recalling phrases and ideas that slowly sank in."

"Let Strategies Serve Literature" by Diana Senechal in *Educational Leadership*, March 2011 (Vol. 68, #6, p. 52-56), http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership.aspx; Senechal can be reached at dsenechal@earthlink.net.

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5. The Power of Clear Learning Targets

(Originally titled "Knowing Your Learning Target")

"The first thing students need to learn is what they're supposed to be learning," say Duquesne University director Connie Moss, researcher/consultant Susan Brookhart, and Armstrong (PA) curriculum leader Beverly Long in this *Educational Leadership* article. "Students who don't know the intention of a lesson expend precious time and energy trying to figure out what their teachers expect them to learn. And many students, exhausted by the process, wonder why they should even care."

A student learning target is different from the teacher's instructional objective, say Moss, Brookhart, and Long. The learning target tells students why this chunk of information needs to be learned, on this day, in this way. It states in student-friendly language the precise content students will learn, how well they're expected to learn it, and how they will be asked to demonstrate their understanding. Here are some elementary examples:

- I can compare sets of more and less.
- I can say the letter and its sound.
- I can read and spell my words.
- I can count to 50.

Here's a high-school example:

- Today we will learn more about how Brontë uses her characters to explore the theme of being unwanted… At the end of class, use your notes to draft a short paragraph that answers the question, How does the character of Adele deepen Brontë's theme of being unwanted in the novel *Jane Eyre*?

With a clear learning target, students should know where they are on the way to mastery and what it will take to get there.

The teacher's first step is explaining the learning target at the beginning of the lesson, often accompanied by modeling. The next step is telling students specifically how they will demonstrate understanding at the end of the class. The third step is spelling out the success criteria with a rubric and exemplar. Finally, the teacher returns to the target as the lesson progresses and then brings closure at the end.

The teachers in Long's district have been using learning targets for over a year, making them a centerpiece of lesson planning, assessment, and classroom visits. Moss, Brookhart, and Long report that the targets have been extremely helpful. The most impressive change, they say, is that students are full learning partners: "Now that students know where they are going, they are more motivated to do the work to get there."

"Knowing Your Learning Target" by Connie Moss, Susan Brookhart, and Beverly Long in *Educational Leadership*, March 2011 (Vol. 68, #6, p. 66-69), http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership.aspx; the authors can be reached at moss@castl.duq.edu, susanbrookhart@bresnan.net, and bal@asd.k12.pa.us.

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6. Mixing Contemporary Books with the Literary Canon

(Originally titled "Worthy Texts: Who Decides?")

"Only through reading what is great, what's partially great, and what some people think is great (whereas others do not) can young readers develop the ability to evaluate, compare, and think critically about what they read," says Tennessee high-school humanities chair Barry Gilmore in this *Educational Leadership* article. "As we discuss diverse works with students, showing respect for what they have to say and how they think, teachers can help them claim that crucial ability."

Gilmore believes the trick is mixing books from the literary canon with more contemporary works. Here are his suggestions:

• Pair a nontraditional with a traditional text – for example, *Tortilla Curtain* by T.C. Boyle with *Grapes of Wrath*, or *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini with *Pride and Prejudice*.

• Use as many as eight reading circles with a choice of books instead of one canonical text for the whole class – or if you use one text, have students read it in groups.

• Highlight outside reading choices. "Sometimes, getting students to read more broadly is simply a matter of suggesting the right works," says Gilmore – books like *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins and *Life As We Knew It* by Susan Beth Pfeffer.

• Choose books linked to history, science and math classes and work with colleagues in those subjects to get students discussing scenes, background information, and learning activities from the shared books.

"Worthy Texts: Who Decides?" by Barry Gilmore in *Educational Leadership*, March 2011 (Vol. 68, #6, p. 46-50), http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership.aspx; Gilmore can be reached at bgilmore@hutchisonschool.org.

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7. A "Bricks and Clicks" Hybrid School in Arizona

In this *Harvard Education Letter* article, reporter Brigid Schulte describes Carpe Diem, a grade 6-12 charter school that combines face-to-face with online learning for 273 students. In

a Learning Center separated into cubicles, students work individually on computers in 55-minute intervals, using an adaptive online program geared to Arizona standards. Each student's screen indicates progress on the curriculum. Paraprofessionals circulate, answering questions and solving computer glitches.

As the day progresses, teachers use computer data to move students to small- and large-group remedial and enrichment lessons, conventional classes, and schoolwide projects. Students spend between 30 and 50 percent of their time in face-to-face instruction with teachers, the rest in front of computers. The school is in session from 7:15 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Monday through Thursday; students who are absent can keep up with their computer work online. Those who fall behind must attend "Friday school."

Carpe Diem has been open for five years and is doing well: it leads the state in student test-score growth, was designated a "highly performing" school by the state, and won a bronze-star rating from *U.S. News and World Report*.

The theory behind hybrid schools (which include the School of One in New York City, Flex Academy in San Francisco, and two Rocketship Education elementary schools in San Jose), is to take advantage of computers to get students working at their own pace through the core curriculum while teachers do higher-order work. "We reserve teacher time for all those wonderful things that only teachers can do," says Rocketship's Judith McGarry, "– guided instruction, group discussion, helping kids learn to listen to each other and challenge each other, helping higher-order critical thinking."

"The era of factory-model instruction is over," says Mark Kushner of Flex Academy. "No more going to classes all day in large groups whether the students need that class or not… Going to a hybrid school is just like going to work. The kids go to their desks, they turn on their computers, they read things, they read e-mails, they go online, they go to meetings – only these meetings are classes designed for them."

"Hybrid Schools for the iGeneration: New Schools Combine 'Bricks' and 'Clicks'" by Brigid Schulte in *Harvard Education Letter*, March/April 2011 (Vol. 27, #2, p. 1-3, 6), http://www.edletter.org

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8. What's Essential for Mathematical Success

(Originally titled "In Defense of Mathematical Foundations")

"Like it or not, arithmetic is the foundation of mathematics," says Johns Hopkins University mathematics professor Stephen Wilson in this *Educational Leadership* article. He bemoans the fact that many current state standards don't emphasize addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, and fractions strongly enough. He criticizes the amount of time many curriculum standards force teachers to spend on various geometry objectives – slides, flips, and turns – and how little attention they pay to fractions. College math teachers agree, says Wilson, that mastery of basic operations is essential to success in college – and lack of mastery is correlated to failure.

What does Wilson think of the Common Core State Standards? He has a few small quibbles but believes they do a *much* better job with arithmetic. "With Common Core Standards," he concludes, "we have embarked on a major change of expectations for education in the United States."

"In Defense of Mathematical Foundations" by Stephen Wilson in *Educational Leadership*, March 2011 (Vol. 68, #6, p. 70-73), http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership.aspx; the author can be reached at wsw@math.jhu.edu.

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9. How Solid Is the Research on RTI?

In this article in *Education Week*, Sarah Sparks cautions that Response to Intervention may be "far outstripping its research base." There's been research on the effectiveness of some components of RTI – universal screening tools, daily small-group Tier 2 instruction – but other components have little or no research support. "For good or bad," says Vanderbilt professor Douglas Fuchs, "the research has proceeded in a way that chunks or atomizes aspects of RTI, not [investigating] RTI as a system." To date, there have been no randomized, controlled trial studies of an entire RTI model.

Yet many practitioners believe they can take RTI to the bank. University of Washington/Seattle professor Joseph Jenkins often hears school people say, "We already know RTI works; don't even talk to me about that question."

Another problem is disagreement about the real purpose of RTI. "Does RTI implementation raise all boats?" asks Jenkins. "Or is it really about the struggling learners?" Some schools and districts focus on the latter, using RTI to decide which students should get special-education services. This disturbs Cecil Reynolds of Texas A&M University. "People are taking what was intended to be an early-intervention-and-prevention model and trying to make it into a diagnostic model, and it's not," he says. "We make a mess out of it."

Stay tuned!

"RTI: More Popular Than Proven?" by Sarah Sparks *Education Week*, Mar. 2, 2011 (Vol. 30, # 22, p. S16) http://www.edweek.org

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10. A Value-Added Formula's Nightmare Consequence for a Teacher

In this *New York Times* article, Michael Winerip reports on a troubling anomaly in New York City's program to evaluate teachers based on their contribution to student achievement. Winerip profiles a seventh-grade humanities teacher in Queens who shows every sign of being a dedicated, creative, and highly effective instructor (her principal, colleagues, and students raved about her classroom performance, 65 or of her 66 students scored proficient or above on state tests in her first year, and more than two dozen of her previous students gained admission to the city's most competitive high schools). But based on the city's complex formula (click

the link below to view it), this teacher was rated in the 7th percentile of teachers citywide. As a result, she faces a strong possibility of being denied tenure and laid off at the end of this year.

The value-added formula is part of New York's attempt to make granting tenure to teachers after three years less routine (in the past more than 90 percent got tenure). Principals' decisions are based on three factors: classroom performance, professional contributions within the school, and gains in student achievement. The Queens teacher profiled by Winerip did well on the first two, but the city's formula pulled her down on the third. However, statisticians concede that there is a margin or error: this teacher's value-add could be anywhere from zero percentile to the 52nd percentile; the higher possibility would earn her tenure.

"Evaluating New York Teachers, Perhaps the Numbers Do Lie" by Michael Winerip in *The New York Times*, Mar. 6, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/07/education/07winerip.html?_r=1&ref=nyregion&page

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11. The Fate of Teacher Incentive Pay in New York City

Beginning in 2007, New York City conducted a $75 million study of teacher incentive pay in more than 200 schools. In a paper just published by the National Bureau of Economic Research, Harvard professor Roland Fryer, who led the study, sums up the findings: "I find no evidence that teacher incentives increase student performance, attendance, or graduation, nor do I find any evidence that the incentives change student or teacher behavior. If anything, teacher incentives may decrease student achievement, especially in larger schools." The city quietly dropped the program in 2010.

"Teacher Incentives and Student Achievement: Evidence from New York City Public Schools" by Roland Fryer, National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper #16850, March 2011 (spotted in *PEN Weekly NewsBlast*, Mar. 11, 2011; for access to the full study, please see http://www.nber.org/papers/w16850. The original article in *Gotham Schools* is at: http://gothamschools.org/2011/03/07/study-75m-teacher-pay-initiative-did-not-improve-achievement/

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12. Short Items:

a. Internet picture dictionary in five languages – The Internet Picture Dictionary site has animals, clothing, colors, numbers, sports, school, transportation, fruits, vegetables and more in English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish – also flash cards, word scramble, and other resources: http://www.pdictionary.com

"Web Watch" in *The Language Educator*, February 2011 (Vol. 6, #2, p. 60)

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b. Classic stories and fairy tales in Spanish – Each week, the mascot of this free podcast from Spain, Mexico, or Argentina presents a classic children's story from a professional storyteller, with a transcript of the words: http://www.codyscuentos.com

"Web Watch" in *The Language Educator*, February 2011 (Vol. 6, #2, p. 60)
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c. Free French lessons – The FrenchtasticPeople site has classroom exercises, grammar lessons, a talking dictionary, French proverbs and poetry, audio of French verbs, and YouTube downloads: http://frenchtasticpeople.com

"Web Watch" in *The Language Educator*, February 2011 (Vol. 6, #2, p. 60)
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d. Free German lessons – This site has ten lessons for beginners, 24 grammar lessons for advanced learners, tests, quotes, jokes, and study tips: http://www.deutsch-lernen.com

"Web Watch" in *The Language Educator*, February 2011 (Vol. 6, #2, p. 61)
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e. Game for learning Mandarin – Zon, sponsored by Michigan State University, is a multiplayer, interactive online site designed to teach Mandarin Chinese language and culture: http://enterzon.com

"Web Watch" in *The Language Educator*, February 2011 (Vol. 6, #2, p. 61)
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Do you have feedback? Is anything missing?

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

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and others very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 41 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, and writer, lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 44 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through more than a hundred articles each week, and selects 5-10 that have the greatest potential to improve teaching, leadership, and learning. He then writes a brief summary of each article, pulls out several striking quotes, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the Memo to subscribers every Monday evening (with occasional breaks; there are about 50 issues a year).

Subscriptions:

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

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

Marshall Memo subscribers have access to the Members' Area of the website, which has:

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- How to change access e-mail or log-in

Publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

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