Marshall Memo 1118

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
December 29, 2025

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Librarians and improv actors both play many roles. We're teachers, tech support, emotional support humans, furniture movers, data analysts, and part-time magicians. We're part educator, part therapist, and full-time chaos coordinators."

Hallie Rich in "Humor, Hope, and the Humble Brag" in *School Library Journal*, December 2025 (Vol. 71, #12, p. 6)

"If I had to live my life again, I would have made a rule to read some poetry and listen to some music at least once every week."

Charles Darwin

"The critical insight is that professional learning, on its own, rarely produces significant changes in teachers' attitudes, beliefs, or dispositions. Teachers don't fully commit to new practices or feel genuine buy-in until they see clear evidence that those practices are positively impacting their students' learning. In other words, experience – not theory, logic, or confrontation – shapes teachers' attitudes and beliefs."

Thomas Guskey in "School Leaders Struggle with Teacher Buy-In. What to Do About That" in *Education Week*, December 11, 2025; Guskey is at guskey@uky.edu.

"When teachers get in trouble, it's rarely bad intentions. It's bad boundaries."

Brooklyn Raney (see item #6)

"If a team is fortunate enough to include problem-solvers, pattern recognizers, empathizers, and analyzers, there will be few challenges that the team is unable to match."

Dana Rosberg and Bridget McNamer (see item #2)

"While foundational decoding skills such as phonological awareness and fluency are essential,

reading comprehension depends equally on children's ability to construct meaning beyond the words on the page."

Jen O'Sullivan (see item #5)

"Getting the correct answer is not necessarily evidence of understanding."

Delise Andrews (see item #4)

"To improve student outcomes, boards must stop trying to be the superintendent and start acting like the community's representatives. Board members must be clear about the problem, focused on the result, and serious about accountability, while delegating and providing oversight when it comes to choosing the tools… Strategies should be selected by experts closer to the children and classroom which, by definition, isn't the board."

A.J. Crabill in "Board-Savvy Superintendent" in *School Administrator*, December 2025 (Vol. 82, #11, p. 10)

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1. A Constructive Approach to Regrets in the Middle of the School Year

In this online article, Michigan high-school teacher/author Dave Stuart Jr. says the mid-point of the school year is a good time to reflect on moments of regret – not to berate ourselves and feel guilty but to plan a better path forward. Here are four types of regret described by Dan Pink in his book *The Power of Regret*, with examples from K-12 schools:

- Basic regrets – skipping a parent phone call or letting grading pile up;
- Boldness regrets – avoiding a difficult conversation with a colleague;
- Moral regrets – using sarcasm to "handle" a student behavior problem;
- Connection regrets – the kid whose name we know but is still a stranger.

Stuart confesses that so far this year, he can check all of those boxes.

A deeper way of looking at regret, he believes, is asking how we're doing at fostering five key beliefs in our students' minds (from his book, *The Will to Learn*). Some possible shortcomings in each area:

• *Credibility: My teacher is good at his or her job*. Times when we weren't fully prepared, sending signals that we weren't really invested in our craft.

• *Value: This work matters; it's worth my time*. Lessons that felt disconnected from content that was meaningful to students, leaving them wondering why they should care about an assignment.

• *Effort: I can improve by working hard and smart*. Moments when students couldn't make the connection between their work and how they were doing academically.

• *Efficacy: I can succeed at this*. Times when we implied that grades were equivalent to

success or didn't take the extra time to unpack the results of a test for students.

• *Belonging: People like me do work like this*. Times when a student felt left out, or failed despite our best efforts.

"Again, I check all those boxes," says Stuart. "This job's got a lot of breadth and depth to it, and that pretty much guarantees that there are times where we'll miss the mark." He feels bad thinking about these moments – "But our regrets don't define us," he says. "Next month is a new month of school." And the fact that teachers have these regrets speaks to "the values we hold, the things that called us to teaching in the first place."

The key to pivoting from regret is to briefly reflect on it, reframe it as a learning opportunity, and extract a lesson that can be applied going forward. Some possible questions pointing to changes in the new year:

- What's one student interaction that can be changed to build credibility, value, effort, efficacy, or belonging?
- What's a teaching risk you want to take? What would boldness look like in your classroom?
- What's a situation where you've taken the easier path so far? What would moral courage look like with your students? Your colleagues?
- In which relationship with a student, colleague, or parent can you re-invest?

"The path to the head truly does go through the heart," Stuart concludes. "And sometimes, the heart speaks loudest through the things we wish we had done differently."

"Got Regrets Yet?" by Dave Stuart Jr., December 16, 2025; Stuart can be reached at dave@davestuartjr.com.

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2. Tapping the (Sometimes Hidden) Potential of Neurodiverse Leaders

In this article in *The International Educator*, Diana Rosberg (Financing While Female) and Bridget McNamer (Sidecar Counsel) say it's clear "that when schools are made better for neurodiverse students, they are also better for all students." Similarly, they believe, when schools are made better for neurodiverse leaders, they "will also be made better for all within the school community."

Rosberg and McNamer say neurodiverse people make up about 15-20 percent of the total population; that neurodiversity "is a normal and beneficial reality of the human condition;" and that research has shown how certain characteristics of neurodiverse individuals can be valuable assets for leaders rather than "conditions in need of cures" – specifically:

- ADHD – problem-solving, creativity, and resourcefulness;
- Autism – detail orientation, systematizing, analytical skills, ethics;
- Bipolar disorder – creativity, ambition, and sociability;
- Dyslexia – logical reasoning, cognitive flexibility, judgment, and decision-making;
- HSP (Highly Sensitive Person) – empathy, deep processing, and sensory intelligence.

Qualities like these "should be welcome on any school's leadership team," say Rosberg and McNamer. "Indeed, they should be deliberately sought, recruited, nurtured, and supported. If a

team is fortunate enough to include problem-solvers, pattern recognizers, empathizers, and analyzers, there will be few challenges that the team is unable to match."

In classrooms, neurodiverse teachers are better able to plan for and meet the needs of neurodiverse students, say the authors. "By extension, neurodiverse leaders – both through role-modeling and decision-making – can nurture an environment where the needs of neurodiverse students and faculty are met, and indeed where community members of all neurosignatures can thrive."

Despite these positive insights, there's evidence that when neurodiverse individuals compete for jobs, disclosing certain attributes can work to their disadvantage. Indeed, their unemployment rate is about eight times that of individuals without a disability. "What are schools and students missing out on," ask Rosberg and McNamer, "when well-qualified candidates with unique neurosignatures, and concomitant leadership skills, are left behind? When biases are overcome, schools become more diverse, and neurodiverse leaders can let their particular strengths shine while getting the support they need to thrive – and schools can expect to see positive changes in climate and culture."

How can schools support neurodiverse leaders – and everyone else? From interviews with neurodivergent adults, the authors have these suggestions:

- Provide choice and flexibility in how tasks are done, separating elements that are non-negotiable from those that allow for different approaches and timelines.
- When allocating tasks, allow for strengths in solo performance versus teamwork, especially for those who struggle with social interaction or group-imposed work pace.
- Where possible, allow for balance of physical and virtual attendance in meetings or classes.
- Monitor the sensory environment, especially lighting and noise levels, and where possible allow individuals control over their personal environments.
- Make clear the expectations and relevance of roles and requests (this is most effective when done in collaborative communication with the neurodivergent leader).
- Create support groups and/or provide coaches for ongoing dialogue about the needs, achievements, and possible accommodations for neurodiverse colleagues.
- Create or designate a space whose sole function is to serve as a quiet recovery place, where overstimulated senses and emotions can get back to baseline.

Rosberg and McNamer also suggest strategies for improving a school's overall adult culture:

- Provide training across all school constituencies around neurodivergence.
- Presume good intentions around irregular behavior of neurodiverse individuals, recognizing their strengths.
- Ensure that key teams are built with an appropriate balance of neurosignatures.
- Inquire about the learning, processing, and communication styles and preferences of the leadership team to optimize performance.
- Normalize conversations about all this so neurodiverse individuals don't feel intimidated about expressing their needs.

And when hiring leaders, the authors suggest:

- Demonstrate a commitment to access and inclusion in all job advertisements, including specifying neurodivergence in the school's inclusivity commitment.
- It's unnecessary to request formal diagnoses of neurodivergence from applicants.
- Avoid listing requirements that aren't actually needed for the job, and make clear which skills are preferred and those that are essential.
- Avoid subjective or figurative language in job postings – for example, rather than saying that a role involves "wearing many hats," list the range of responsibilities a successful candidate might take on.
- During interviews, consider sensory needs – for example, bright lights or a noisy environment might work to the disadvantage of some candidates.

"Better Together: Neurodiversity in International School Leadership" by Diana Rosberg and Bridget McNamer in *The International Educator*, April 23, 2025; the authors can be reached at diana.rosberg1@gmail.com and bridget@sidecarcounsel.com.

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3. Advice for When an Organization's Founder Rides Into the Sunset

In this *Harvard Business Review* article, leadership consultant Samantha Hellauer and four colleagues at ghSMART say that when a founding leader leaves, the stakes are often high, with a lot depending on how the transition is handled. Based on their study of a variety of organizations, the authors offer advice on how to navigate the departure of a leader who may have been wonderful, who could be burned out, or whose management style might no longer be a good fit.

"From a psychological perspective," say the authors, "the optimal timing for a transition is when a founder recognizes the need for a change but still has the energy to participate actively in succession planning." The tricky part is orchestrating the founder's ongoing role – if any. They often want their legacy to be honored and maintain a meaningful degree of influence and control, and letting go might threaten their identity and sense of efficacy.

The person who steps into a founder's shoes needs a special set of skills and attributes, say Hellauer et al., among them:

- Low ego, high confidence – "The best successors focus on building trust over time and making thoughtful moves, not loud ones," they say.
- Cultural empathy – Successors need to tune in to the organization's rituals, symbols, unwritten rules, and shared mythology.
- Stakeholder savviness – Successors have to carefully navigate various power centers, steering between crisp decision-making and second-guessing themselves.
- Relevant strengths – Rather than trying to emulate or complement the founder's style, successors should focus on what the organization needs at that particular moment.
- Respectful change leadership – Seeing what to preserve and what needs to evolve.

- Emotional resilience – A successor may feel lonely, and needs to build trust and camaraderie – and ideally check in regularly with the founder.

Hellauer and her co-authors describe five big mistakes they've observed as organizations go through a founder transition:

• *Picking a successor without careful deliberation* – "Even when a successor feels like the obvious choice, founder transitions demand rigor, objectivity, and time," they say. "Getting the founder transition right means building in the space to test, learn, and, if needed, change course."

• *Successors immediately declaring a clean slate* – "Moving too quickly risks eroding the trust and energy that fueled early success," they say. "Before asking, 'What should I change?' ask 'What should I preserve?' Successors should spend their first 90 to 120 days listening, observing, and decoding the unwritten rules. They should shadow the founder, seek input from long-tenured team members, and understand the culture's operating code before rewriting it."

• *Underestimating the founder's continuing influence* – Even if they're not on the scene, they can exert "cultural authority and emotional power," say the authors. Successors need to figure out the founder's ongoing role, seek their blessing, and identify founder loyalists who can smooth the transition.

• *Failing to engage the founder as a strategic ally* – The "emotional and relational dynamics" of a transition can't be ignored, say the authors. "The most successful transitions integrate the founder's legacy and institutional knowledge into the new leadership narrative and forge a relationship built on mutual respect."

• *Overlooking founder idiosyncrasies* – These might be an aversion to certain metrics or other leadership quirks, and successors need to take the time to figure out whether or not they're functional.

"Leading After the Founder" by Samantha Hellauer, Sanja Kos, Julie Vermoote, Sapna Sadarangani Werner, and BJ Wright in *Harvard Business Review*, January-February 2026 (Vol. 104, #1, pp. 56-65)

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4. Words of Wisdom for Novice Teachers of Mathematics

In her editor's note in *Mathematics Teacher*, Delise Andrews (a grade 3-5 math coordinator in Lincoln, Nebraska) time-travels back to her early years in the classroom and shares some things she wishes she had known:

• *Getting the correct answer is not necessarily evidence of understanding*. Students who passed her tests often didn't show mastery a week later. "I came to understand that students need to know more than just how to use mathematical algorithms," says Andrews. "They also need to know *why*. Why does an algorithm work? Why (and when) should I use it? Does my answer make sense?" She also found that more drill and practice and the "slower and louder" approach didn't improve understanding.

• *Students need to do mathematics to develop understanding*. The best analogy is how we learned to drive: behind the wheel of a car with a "trusted someone" in the passenger seat offering encouragement and timely feedback. "To engage students in *doing mathematics*," says Andrews, "I had to stop asking them to just follow along and replicate my thinking… *Teaching isn't telling. Told isn't taught*."

• *Tricks and mnemonics don't support meaning-making*. "It is hard to ignore clear evidence of how ineffective these devices are," she says. "Over and over again, I saw students overgeneralize or misremember tricks or rhymes I had taught them. I wish I could tell my younger self to throw away my snazzy keyword posters (among other things)!"

• *The success of mathematics lessons is directly tied to the quality of my planning*. "Giving up quick tricks and putting students in the driver's seat required a new level of planning for instruction," says Andrews. "My mathematics lesson plans shifted from not-so-useful lists of topics, pages, and problem numbers to thoughtful plans for ways to leverage students' prior, possibly incomplete conceptions and anticipate ways they might try to solve problems, and considerations of how I could facilitate meaning-making through discussion of student work."

"Reflections on a Professional Journey" by Delise Andrews in *Mathematics Teacher*, December 2025 (Vol. 118, #12, pp. 898-900); Andrews can be reached at dandrews@lps.org.

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5. Inferencing – A Vital Skill for Beginning Readers

"While foundational decoding skills such as phonological awareness and fluency are essential," says Jen O'Sullivan (Marino Institute of Education, Ireland) in *The Reading Teacher*, "reading comprehension depends equally on children's ability to construct meaning beyond the words on the page… Skilled reading is not simply a matter of recognizing words on the page; it requires the ability to understand, interpret, and engage with meaning… One key component of this meaning-making process lies in the ability to make inferences."

What does that involve? Making inferences is the ability to combine textual information with background knowledge, says O'Sullivan, allowing the reader to go beyond what's explicitly stated and draw conclusions, make predictions, and understand implications. "This cognitive process is crucial to reading comprehension," she says, "and requires children to integrate what they read with what they already know and, just as importantly, to pay close attention to clues within the text itself."

Inferencing is a process rather than a single skill, and is not something that can be taught in a lesson and checked off. It needs to be taught over time, starting with non-reading activities like:

- A "mystery bag" with students guessing the occupation of someone with a lunchbox, crayon, and library card (a student) or an adult with a stethoscope, notebook, and ID badge (a doctor);

- Looking at the Norman Rockwell painting *Going and Coming* and answering questions about what's going on, where people are going, and the time of year;
- Using wordless picture books like *The Snowman* (Raymond Briggs) and *Journey* (Aaron Becker) to answer questions about why a character did something and how they are feeling;
- Using oral language games and role play like "What's my emotion?" and using puppets to act out everyday situations and pose questions about what might happen next.

All this culminates with reading aloud from high-quality texts with emotional depth and implied meaning and using the BUILD framework to help children connect the content to what they know, laying the foundation for skilled comprehension:

- **B**uild background knowledge. Introduce content-rich topics across the curriculum, exposing children to a variety of concepts, experiences, and worldviews.
- **U**npack vocabulary and context. Identify and pre-teach essential words and concepts.
- **I**nfer meaning through modeling. Pause to ask questions like *What do you think is happening here?* and *Why might the character be acting this way?*
- **L**ink texts to real-life experiences. Connect stories to familiar routines, emotions, or experiences children have had.
- **D**eepen understanding through extension activities. Reinforce inferencing skills through discussion, writing, and creative projects.

How can inferencing skills be assessed? The best way, says O'Sullivan, is through formative observations as children talk, play, and share reading, watching to see if they are:

- Using background knowledge to fill in information that's not directly stated;
- Identifying clues in visual or written texts that support an idea;
- Linking their insights or responses to those clues from the reading;
- Connecting story events to their own experiences or to world knowledge;
- Inferring a character's feelings, motives, or intentions from actions, words, or illustrations.

"When we nurture both word recognition and language comprehension from the earliest years," O'Sullivan concludes, "we give children more than the ability to read words on a page. We open the door to understanding, curiosity, and lifelong enjoyment of reading."

"From Decoding to Understanding: Building Background Knowledge and Inferencing Skills in Early Readers" by Jen O'Sullivan in *The Reading Teacher*, January/February 2026 (Vol 79, #4, pp. 1-21); O'Sullivan can be reached at jennifer.osullivan@mie.ie.

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6. Respecting Boundaries in a Boundary-Critical Profession

In this *Education Week* article, Brooklyn Raney (One Trusted Adult) says educators receive "little or no training on the everyday boundary decisions that shape healthy, professional, trust-building relationships with other people's children." Her advice:

• When interacting with students, act as if your supervisor is on one shoulder, a child's caregiver is on the other, and you're being filmed and a 20-second clip might go viral.

• Offer care, connection, and coaching within your role; if you're not a therapist, social worker, parent, or friend, don't try to be one.

• Don't freelance on the school's rules. "If you disagree with a policy," says Raney, "raise it in the right forum – not in front of students."

"When Teachers Get in Trouble, It's Rarely Bad Intentions. It's Bad Boundaries" by Brooklyn Raney in *Education Week*, December 16, 2025

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7. Low-Key Mindfulness Exercises

"Starting classroom lessons or individual counseling sessions with a brief mindfulness practice helps students reset and prepare for learning," say Michaela Avila and Danielle Maida in this article in *ASCA School Counselor*. "At its core, mindfulness helps students strengthen attention and self-regulation – the very skills that drive success inside and outside the classroom."

Here's how a teacher might introduce mindfulness as a voluntary beginning-of-class exercise with students – or for themselves before launching into another school day:

- *Notice your feet grounded on the floor, your hands resting.*
- *Your body and mind settling gently into the here and now.*
- *Inhale slowly, exhale fully.*
- *Repeat for five breaths.*

Cognitive scientists have shown that this simple process has a remarkable effect on focus and learning – as described in this widely viewed 60 Minutes segment with Anderson Cooper.

The language used to describe mindfulness is important, say Avila and Maida. Avoid terms like *yoga, meditation, breathing Buddhas,* and *namaste*, and mention that many professional athletes, actors, and musicians use mindfulness as they prepare for performances.

"Mindfulness Mondays and Beyond" by Michaela Avila and Danielle Maida in *ASCA School Counselor*, November-December 2025 (Vol. 63, #2, pp. 34-37); the authors can be reached at michaelanavila@gmail.com and dmaida20@forsyth.k12.ga.us.

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8. How to Ask for Feedback

"Giving feedback is easier than seeking it," says Dan Rockwell in this *Leadership Freak* article. "Humility fuels transformation." He suggests questions that leaders might ask their colleagues:

- *What should I do more of?*
- *What should I do less of?*
- *What's one thing I could do to help you move forward?*

- *What worked in our meeting?*
- *What could I try next time?*

"Why Leaders Don't Seek Feedback" by Dan Rockwell in *Leadership Freak*, December 8, 2025

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9. The Best Children's Books of 2025

This *School Library Journal* section lists the best children's books of 2025 (click the link for cover images and brief descriptions): picture books, transition books, middle grade, young adult, poetry, nonfiction elementary, nonfiction middle and high school, graphic novels, and manga. Here are those the editors consider "stars" in various categories:

Holidays:

- *The Golden Eid* by Hiba Noor Khan, illustrated by Singgih Cahyo Jadmiko
- *Ling & Ting's Lunar New Year: Two Times Lucky* by Grace Lin
- *Upside-Down Iftar* by Maysa Odeh, illustrated by Nadine Issa
- *Ramadan Rain* by Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow, illustrated by Aliaa Betawi

Spanish:

- *Lucy López: Programadora Estrella* by Claudia Mills, translated by Ana Izquierdo, illustrated by Grace Zong

Picture books:

- *We All Love* by Julie Flett
- *Pizzasaurus* by Tammi Sauer, illustrated by Kyle Beckett

Middle grade:

- *Eureka* by Victoria Chang

Young adult:

- *Sibylline* by Melissa de la Cruz
- *Queen of Faces* by Petra Lord
- *Postscript* by Cory McCarthy
- *According to Plan* by Christen Randall
- *Love, Sivvy: A Novel Inspired by the Life, Letters, and Diaries of Young Sylvia Plath* by R.L. Toalson

Graphic novels:

- *Fustuk* by Robert Mgrdich Apelian
- *Inbetweens* by Faith Erin Hicks

Nonfiction:

- *When Twilight Comes: The Animals and Plants That Bring Dawn and Dusk to Life* by Marcie Flinchum Atkins, illustrated by Michelle Morin
- *The Secrets of the Jellies: Amazing Jellyfish and Their Surprising Talents* by Karen Jameson, illustrated by Marie Hermansson
- *Troubled Waters: A River's Journey Toward Justice* by Carole Boston Weatherford, illustrated by Bryan Collier

Audio:

- *Nobody in Particular* by Sophie Gonzalez, narrated by Imani Jade Powers and Gain Shalan
- *Soundtrack* by Jason Reynolds, narrated by Nile Bullock and others.

"Best Books 2025" in *School Library Journal*, December 2025 (Vol. 71, #12, pp. 20-50)

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10. Short Item:

An Infographic on Humanity in Motion – This interactive *New York Times* data display covers migration around the world from 2019 to 2022. Click here to see migration to and from several countries.

"To Understand Global Migration, You Have to See It First" by Kathleen Kingsbury in *The New York Times*, April 17, 2025

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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 other educators very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 54 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, writer, and consultant 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 early Tuesday (there are 50 issues a year). Every week there's a podcast and HTML version. Artificial intelligence is not used.

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- The current issue (in Word or PDF)
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- The "classic" articles from all 20 years

Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

All Things PLC
American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
AMLE Magazine
ASCA School Counselor
ASCD SmartBrief
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
Ed Magazine
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
English Journal
Exceptional Children
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Educational Review
Independent School
Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Kappan (Phi Delta Kappan)
Knowledge Quest
Language Arts
Language Magazine
Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance)
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Principal
Principal Leadership
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Social Education
Social Studies and the Young Learner
Teachers College Record
Teaching Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Journal of the Learning Sciences
The Language Educator
The Learning Professional (formerly Journal of Staff Development)
The New York Times
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Time
Urban Education