

Marshall Memo 874

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
February 15, 2021

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Quotes of the Week

“Optimism shouldn’t be seen as opposed to pessimism, but in conversation with it. Your optimism will never be as powerful as it is in that exact moment when you want to give it up. The way we can all be hopeful is to not negate the feelings of fear or doubt, but to ask: What led to this darkness? And what can lead us out of the shadows?”

Amanda Gorman in [“Unity with Purpose,”](#) interviewed by Michelle Obama, in *Time*, February 15 & 22, 2021 (Vol. 197, 5-6, pp. 74-80)

“Any discussion about ‘equity’ in education that is not first and foremost a discussion about literacy is unserious.”

Robert Pondiscio in [“Literacy Is Equity”](#) in *Education Gadfly*, February 22, 2021

“The time and energy teachers invest is too valuable to waste on efforts supported only by blogs, Twitter chats, or the opinions of charismatic consultants.”

Thomas Guskey (see item #1)

“Don’t worry about sounding rehearsed or making your space look Instagram-perfect. Embrace the fun and silly moments when pets and family members make guest appearances. Create an environment where students recognize that turning cameras on means laughter, making silly faces at friends, and being seen for who they are.”

Shevrin Venet (quoted in item #4)

“It turns out, most of us are social nincompoops. We’re friends with whoever happens to be seated next to us at work or school. We go to happy hours to meet new people but end up talking to the three people we already know. We ghost our friends rather than face difficult conversations. And these seemingly small choices, taken together, have a huge impact on our life outcomes.”

Priya Parker in [“Groupthink,”](#) a review of *Social Chemistry: Decoding the Patterns of Human Connection* by Marissa King in *The New York Times*, January 31, 2021

1. Thomas Guskey on Effective PD for New Programs

(Originally titled “Professional Learning with Staying Power”)

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Thomas Guskey (University of Kentucky) says that during the pandemic, educators are being inundated with online learning opportunities and programs. “How do we know what’s worthwhile, makes a difference, and truly works?” he asks. The historical track record for PD is dismal, with little evidence of impact on classroom practices or student learning. “For new instructional practices to be implemented well and continue,” says Guskey, “they must become a natural part of teachers’ repertoire of classroom procedures.” For this to occur, Guskey suggests:

- *Start with the end in mind.* Schools and districts need to do their homework, deciding on specific student learning outcomes and how they will be measured. Too many leaders go to conferences “trolling for talent,” says Guskey – “trying to find reasonably priced speakers who will entertain and motivate,” and not pushing for specifics when people intone, *All the research says*. The key is finding really solid, evidence-based programs that target those student learning outcomes. “The time and energy teachers invest is too valuable to waste on efforts supported only by blogs, Twitter chats, or the opinions of charismatic consultants.”

- *Agree on what success looks like.* Administrators often look at standardized test scores and district assessments to judge an innovation, while teachers put more faith in what they see students doing day by day in their classrooms. Before implementing a new program, it’s important to sit down and agree on the criteria for success, both in assessments and in day-to-day student actions. “When teachers decide the evidence and plan how it’s going to be gathered,” says Guskey, “not only are they more likely to find it, but it also will be more meaningful when they do.”

- *Adapt appropriately.* Whenever a new program is introduced, changes are usually needed in educators’ attitudes and practices, and the program must be tweaked to fit local conditions. “Too much change in either direction can mean disaster,” says Guskey. “If the innovation requires too much adaptation from individuals and departs significantly from their current practice, implementation is likely to be mechanical and ineffective. But too much adaptation of the innovation may result in the loss of elements essential to program impact.” Leaders have to strike just the right balance.

- *Convince teachers that the innovation will make a difference for their students.* “Nearly all teachers have had the experience of working hard to implement programs that promised far more than they delivered,” says Guskey. Teachers will get excited and invested

when they believe that what's being implemented will increase their students' day-to-day engagement and long-term learning.

- *Plan to gather evidence on effects quickly.* Trying something new means extra work for teachers, some bumps in the road, and the risk that it might not work. “To continue using new practices without evidence of positive effects means risking that students might not learn as well,” says Guskey. “And teachers won’t sacrifice their students for the sake of innovation.” Waiting for end-of-year test scores is not a credible approach. “Instead, leaders must find ways to check on success *within the first few weeks*,” says Guskey. “Positive results provide the encouragement teachers need to persist in their efforts.” And if interim results are not good, that means solving the problems – or going back to the drawing board.

- *Provide ongoing support – and pressure.* With any new program, there will be ups and downs. “Day-to-day variations in students’ moods and dispositions confound teachers’ best efforts,” says Guskey. That means front-line educators must receive lots of support, appreciation, early evidence of positive change, and “occasional nudging that some practitioners need to persist in the challenging tasks that are inherent in all improvement efforts.”

“Professional Learning with Staying Power” by Thomas Guskey in *Educational Leadership*, February 2021 (Vol. 78, #5, pp. 54-59); Guskey can be reached at guskey@uky.edu.

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2. Dealing with Controversial Issues in the Classroom

In this *Kappan* article, Wayne Journell (University of North Carolina/Greensboro) says controversial issues have always been tricky for teachers because:

- The open exchange of ideas is a hallmark of democratic classrooms.
- Students and their parents have strong views on a range of topics.
- There isn't time in the school day, or space in the curriculum, to debate every issue.

Being a curricular gatekeeper is especially challenging in the current era because some cable news pundits, talk-show hosts, and politicians are spreading scientifically dubious claims and outright falsehoods with great confidence, amplified on social media. Teachers have to contend with students and community members who sincerely believe information that isn't factual.

“When teachers attempt to broach contested issues in the classroom,” says Journell, “they often find themselves having to address poor information, prejudices, or beliefs that cannot be objectively evaluated.”

Teachers have always had a responsibility, even more so in the current climate, “to turn classrooms into spaces where reason and inquiry trump ignorance and hyperbole,” he says. To accomplish that, teachers need “clear and reasonable guidelines that explain why they will entertain some arguments but not others – including arguments that may be popular with some students and parents.” Teachers have to be able to justify which ideas deserve to be taken seriously in the classrooms, and not be accused of being politically partisan or indoctrinating students. The best approach, he says, is to distinguish between “open” and “settled” issues:

• *Open issues* “are those on which more than one rational or reasonable position can be taken.” When these are raised in classrooms, “all rational and reasonable positions should receive a fair hearing.” The teacher’s role is to referee a debate, not hesitating to say when an argument is not reasonable or isn’t backed up by evidence.

• *Settled issues* are those on which there is only one rational and reasonable position. With these issues, says Journell, “teachers should avoid debates and instead provide students with the settled position and describe any competing beliefs as unreasonable.”

Of course, things are not always clear-cut. For example, some seemingly settled issues can become open – for example, FDR’s executive order directing the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II was considered settled during the war, on grounds of national security, but was fiercely contested in the years that followed. Then, by the mid-1970s, the issue became settled again: the policy was considered immoral, multiple public apologies were issued, and reparations were ultimately paid to living survivors of internment.

Journell cautions against the belief that an issue is open (i.e., worthy of deliberation) just because someone contradicts it. That’s because pretty much any position – including the roundness of the earth, which has been a scientific finding for at least 500 years – has been contradicted. Yes, there are still people who believe the earth is flat, but this is not a situation where a teacher should “teach the controversy.”

Here’s another settled fact that is vigorously contested: that President Obama was born in the United States. “Even in 2016, at the end of Obama’s second term in office, approximately 30% of Americans believed he was born in Kenya,” reports Journell. Working with preservice teachers, he frequently uses the flat-earth and “birther” examples, and finds that teachers-in-training have no problem dealing with the first, but waffle on the second. That’s because they know that some of their prospective students – and their parents – will have strong convictions on the issue. “Yet,” says Journell, “if the goal is to determine whether a topic is worth deliberating, it shouldn’t matter how *strongly* students insist on false beliefs. That’s no way to decide whether a controversial issue belongs in the classroom.” He suggests three approaches for deciding:

• *The epistemic criterion* – Openness is determined solely on empirical data – can it be reasonably proven.

• *The political criterion* – Teachers might entertain some views – such as arguments based on religious beliefs – even though they cannot be empirically proven. Applying this criterion involves judgment, and teachers have latitude to censor extreme or abhorrent beliefs, while permitting arguments based on personal convictions.

• *The politically authentic criterion* – Using this, a teacher could entertain a controversial view that was under active debate – for example, an issue that appears on a ballot initiative. An example is the controversy about mail-in ballots in the aftermath of the 2020 presidential election: “All the available data suggest that mail-in voting is a secure way to cast one’s ballot,” says Journell; “however, it became an open political issue for those who did not want to accept the results of the election.”

These criteria are useful when deciding what issues to raise for discussion, and what kinds of evidence to take seriously, says Journell: “Do the empirical data show that this issue is settled, or is it still open? If it’s not an issue that lends itself to data-driven conclusions, then is it an argument that’s appropriate to consider at all, given our cultural values and laws? And is it an issue that the public and its political representatives are actually debating?” Teachers could use this approach to decide whether to have classroom discussions on issues like legalizing the sale of marijuana, abolishing the death penalty, lowering the voting age, or making assisted suicide legal. A more difficult issue is climate change, where the overwhelming scientific evidence points in one direction, but there’s a lively political debate taking place. Journell suggests that handling this issue depends on the teacher’s subject:

- A science teacher might take the epistemic approach, informing students that it’s a settled issue.
- A civics teacher might treat the issue as open, encouraging students to apply critical thinking skills about the differing types of evidence and sources of beliefs among political decisionmakers.

But Journell draws the line on some issues, including the Obama birther question. “Without legitimate data suggesting that Obama was born outside the United States,” he says, “such claims are grounded solely in racism and xenophobia and do not deserve to be validated in a public classroom.”

[“Taking a Reasoned Stance Against Misinformation”](#) by Wayne Journell in *Phi Delta Kappan*, February 2021 (Vol. 102, #5, pp. 12-17); Journell can be reached at awjourne@uncg.edu.

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3. Racial Disparities in Chicago’s Teacher-Evaluation Process

In this article in *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, Matthew Steinberg (George Mason University) and Lauren Sartain (University of North Carolina/Chapel Hill) report on their analysis of the classroom observation ratings of elementary teachers in the Chicago Public Schools. The study looked at ratings from 2013-2015, the first two years of Chicago’s REACH teacher-evaluation process, with administrators making four classroom visits to non-tenured teachers (fewer for tenured) and rating teachers on a modified Danielson rubric. Teachers’ scores, along with value-added ratings (where applicable), carried significant weight: lower-rated teachers were required to attend professional development sessions and were more likely to be denied tenure or dismissed.

Steinberg and Sartain found a significant racial gap, with black teachers, on average, scoring significantly lower than white teachers (0.63 standard deviations; the Latino/white gap for the same time period was 0.10 standard deviations). What explains the black/white gap? Steinberg and Sartain found that teachers’ assignments to schools across the city were not random. Specifically :

- Black teachers were more likely to teach economically disadvantaged students.

- Black teachers' students were more likely to enter their classrooms with lower achievement and a record of misconduct in previous years.
- This pattern also held within schools, with black teachers more likely to work with more-challenging students.
- Black teachers were more likely to teach in schools with an unfavorable organizational climate – less-effective leadership, fewer opportunities to collaborate with peers, less support for ambitious instruction, and weaker connections to their students' families.

Steinberg and Sartain say that controlling for these school- and classroom-based variables, the black/white gap in teachers' classroom ratings "statistically disappears." In addition, they found that teachers' value-added (VAM) scores did not vary by race, and the race of teachers' evaluators was not a factor, once school assignments were taken into account.

"These findings," say the researchers, "reveal that evaluation systems which do not account for cross-school and cross-classroom differences in teachers' educational settings will generate both misleading and inaccurate ratings of teacher performance based on classroom observation scores." In short, the ratings don't reflect "real differences in teacher performance." By not taking into account important information about teachers' assignments, say Steinberg and Sartain, the district runs the risk of making personnel decisions that reduce racial diversity in schools. In addition, not being aware of the real reason for the black/white differences in teacher ratings can lead to accusations of racial bias.

What is to be done? Steinberg and Sartain suggest adjusting classroom ratings by taking into account teachers' school context. They anticipate two criticisms of this approach. First, that controlling for school-level differences implicitly excuses schools for less-favorable working conditions for teachers and poorer learning conditions for students. Second, that such a policy assumes disadvantaged students will perform less well academically and behaviorally. However, conclude the authors, the current system penalizes teachers for working in more-challenging schools and classrooms, which "will have important consequences for the diversity of the teacher workforce and for a district's ability to recruit and support teachers who represent the students they teach and the community in which its schools are located." They suggest that Chicago, and other school districts with similar issues, "refine new systems of personnel management and evaluation to better account for such factors."

[This study highlights an important problem with Chicago's (and a number of other districts') teacher-evaluation process, and its impact on educator diversity – not to mention teachers' morale and sense of efficacy. Rather than creating a sliding scale for teacher ratings, with the two vulnerabilities identified by Steinberg and Sartain, it might be better to address the design flaws of Chicago's teacher-evaluation process, namely, basing high-stakes teacher ratings on infrequent, pre-announced, formal classroom observations. A more-effective and equitable system: principals making frequent, short, unannounced classroom visits with face-to-face conversations after each one, focusing on improving teaching practices, with end-of-year rubric scores summing up progress toward effective practices – and eliminating the widely discredited value-added component, instead, continuously discussing evidence of student learning after lesson observations and in teacher team meetings. K.M.]

[“What Explains the Race Gap in Teacher Performance Ratings? Evidence from Chicago Public Schools”](#) by Matthew Steinberg and Lauren Sartain in *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, March 2021 (Vol. 43, #1, pp. 60-82); the authors can be reached at msteinb6@gmu.edu and lsartain@unc.edu.

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4. Getting Students to Turn On Their Cameras

In this *Edutopia* article, Youki Terada reports that at the beginning of the pandemic, some K-12 and college instructors had an “optional but encouraged” policy with cameras during synchronous instruction. There were concerns that students might be anxious, even traumatized, if they were embarrassed about the appearance of their homes or couldn’t find a private space for remote classes.

But teachers who have found themselves talking to a grid of blank screens are having second thoughts as they struggle to engage students and check for understanding. “Instructors benefit from receiving nonverbal cues from their students, such as smiles, frowns, head nods, looks of confusion, and looks of boredom,” say Frank Castelli and Mark Sarvary of Cornell University, “so that they can evaluate their teaching in real time and adjust accordingly to improve student learning.” For students, they say, being able to see and hear classmates is important to building trust, rapport, and a sense of community.

Castelli and Sarvary surveyed hundreds of students and were surprised by what students said about having cameras off:

- 41 percent said they were concerned about messy hair, pajamas, being unshowered.
- 17 percent were extremely self-conscious about having other eyes on them.
- Students of color were 12 percent more likely to cite a weak Internet connection.
- 10 percent didn’t turn on their cameras because that’s what everyone was doing.

Allowing cameras to be off can create an unspoken expectation, say Castelli and Sarvary: “If you don’t explicitly ask for the cameras and explain why, that can lead to a social norm where the camera is always off [creating] a spiral of everyone keeping it off, even though many students want it on.”

Castelli and Sarvary recommend including a cameras-on policy in the syllabus and stating it on the first day of class, creating a reason for students to make themselves and their background presentable. Terada shares ideas from instructors:

- “Focus on trust, both teacher to student and student to student,” says Boston teacher Byron Loya. “Students who know they are safe and cared for by their community will be more comfortable having their cameras on.” Make it an issue of community versus compliance.

- Use icebreakers and games like Pictionary and charades to help ease students in by taking the focus off them as individuals.

- Survey students so they can identify barriers that are preventing them from turning on their cameras, and treat issues as problems to be solved. Remind students that they can use a virtual background if they’re self-conscious about their homes.

- Privately encourage students with social capital in the class to use their cameras, creating peer momentum.

- Enable the waiting room and greet students one by one as they enter a virtual class, and use Zoom’s “Ask to Start Video” feature to invite students to turn their cameras on.
- For students who are reluctant to give a live presentation, offer the option of submitting a prerecorded video.
- For students who ask for a camera waiver, hold camera-optional Socratic seminars, with students in the outer circle providing feedback via the Chat function.
- Model mistakes on camera and be authentic, letting students know it’s okay to be themselves. “Don’t worry about sounding rehearsed or making your space look Instagram-perfect,” says Vermont educator Shevrin Venet. “Embrace the fun and silly moments when pets and family members make guest appearances. Create an environment where students recognize that turning cameras on means laughter, making silly faces at friends, and being seen for who they are.”

[“The Camera-On/Camera-Off Dilemma”](#) by Youki Terada in *Edutopia*, February 5, 2021
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5. Making the Most of Breakout Rooms

In this *Edutopia* article, California English teacher Stephanie Rothstein says that sending a class into breakout rooms can foster connections and communication that aren’t possible with the full class. But for teachers, she says, “it can be a scary moment to release control and trust the space.” She’s had the sinking feeling of popping into a breakout room and hearing crickets. Rothstein offers these tips for productive breakouts:

- *Keep them short.* She suggests under five minutes so students focus on the one thing they need to accomplish – conclusions, findings, questions.
- *Provide sentence stems.* “Often, students just don’t know where to begin,” says Rothstein. Open-ended sentence beginnings clarify expectations and get conversations going.
- *Create separate digital room links.* “When I’m using Google Meet and need longer group work time,” she says, “I make separate meetings for each group and reuse these links throughout the project/class. This allows me to open all the rooms and have them available on one computer by resizing the window.” She can mute all but one meeting and focus on it, and also record meetings, keeping them within her domain for privacy.
- *Ask for volunteers.* Rothstein is delighted at how many people want to help out – students’ family members, college students, teacher candidates, former students. She puts them to work in breakout rooms, either facilitating conversations or being interviewed as an expert for a project.
- *Use shared gray space.* Rothstein creates a shared document by reducing a Jamboard or Google Slide by 50 percent, making a gray area around the edge. “That’s usable space!” she says. “It just doesn’t appear when you present, but I think of it as being like scratch paper, a great area for notes, or a place to put images or icons for student use. Students can use a shared slide or Jamboard with draggable icons or sentence stems to express their thoughts or contributions in a discussion.

- *Use a project progress tracker.* If she “owns” all the trackers, Rothstein can have them up while students are in breakout rooms and students report on their progress – *To-do, In progress, Needs feedback, Done* – keeping her up to date and letting her know who needs help.

- *Assign jobs.* Having students take on specific roles helps groups stay on task, and rotating roles gives students different experiences and keeps them on their toes. Possible jobs:

- Leader – Make sure everyone is participating.
- Timekeeper – Keep track of time.
- Scribe – Write the answers in the shared product.
- Technician – Share screen so your group can see what they’re working on.
- Presenter – Present findings to the whole class.
- Other team members – Unmute your microphone, work together.

Reflecting on contributions and group cohesiveness is a worthwhile after-breakout activity. “My favorite part of a reflection,” says Rothstein, “is asking students to give shout-outs to other students on their team for things they did that were helpful or that they learned from. I then share these with each of the students when we meet to review, or in an e-mail.”

[“7 Tips for Breakout Room Success”](#) by Stephanie Rothstein in *Edutopia*, February 9, 2021
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6. Thriving in the Profession, Despite the Challenges

In this online article, Dave Stuart Jr. says that even in the midst of the pandemic, many teachers are experiencing rewarding careers and making a difference. He counts himself as one of them, and would be glad if his own children decided to become teachers. But Stuart points to two “career bottlenecks” on the path to a rewarding teaching career:

- *Reaching the autonomous stage* – That requires solid pre-service preparation (in self-management, classroom management, student motivation, understanding what kids are like and how they learn), effective onboarding and mentoring in one’s first school assignment, and then a couple of years of experience. Because of wide variations in teacher preparation and support for rookies, many teachers never reach the point where they’ve figured out how to do the job well without going crazy.

- *Demoralizing factors* – Having become reasonably self-sufficient, teachers can’t help but notice flaws around them. Stuart reached out to colleagues via Twitter and compiled a list:
 - Policies – problems with high-stakes testing, seat-time requirements, local school board dysfunction, secondary school start times;
 - Parents – enabling, helicoptering, lawnmowing;
 - Leaders – lack of leadership and system skills, lack of knowledge about teaching;
 - Colleagues – negative attitudes, gossip, apathy;
 - Pay – based on experience and master’s degrees, no meaningful opportunity for pay advancement without becoming an administrator;
 - Curriculum – individual teachers having too much or too little autonomy over vertical and horizontal curriculum choices;

- Students – some who are unprepared, apathetic, entitled, with mental health struggles. “So look,” says Stuart, “that’s an unpleasant list. I even cringed writing it... But the thing is, these are real experiences of people who are good at this job. And a lot of times, we feel guilty for even seeing these things – like we’re bad teachers for noticing that some things are broken.”

Still, Stuart is an optimist: “The reality is that there are thousands of smart, passionate, wise career educators who this very day have passed through both bottlenecks. Real people like you and me who are in this work and flourishing, despite its problems... and actually doing things about the problems that they see...”

[“The Two Bottlenecks”](#) by Dave Stuart Jr. on his website, February 11, 2021; Stuart can be reached at dave@davestuartjr.com.

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7. Resources for Critical Thinking About Science

In this article in *School Library Journal*, Lauren Young explores the issue of racial bias in science, including the infamous Tuskegee study from 1932-1972. Here are some of Young’s recommended online resources:

- [Gale in Context: Science](#) helps students see how science relates to real-world issues.
- [STEMscopes](#) is a collection of digital resources, hands-on activities, supplemental print materials, and other items geared to state standards.
- [Catalogue of Bias](#) from the Oxford University Center for Evidence-Based Medicine lists biases that can infiltrate medicine and science.
- [The Cultural Cognition Project](#) at Yale Law School explores how cultural values shape public perceptions and looks at trends in science literacy and communication.
- [Pew Research Center Science](#) conducts polls and analyses of public understanding of science.
- [Retraction Watch](#) from the Center for Scientific Integrity is a free database of retractions published in science journals.
- [Science Literacy Foundation](#) provides tools, programming, and grants to reporters and readers.

[“The Objective: Librarians Help Students Understand Racially Biased Science”](#) by Lauren Young in *School Library Journal*, February 2021 (Vol. 67, #2, pp. 30-33)

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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 50 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 every Monday evening (with occasional breaks; there are 50 issues a year). Every week there's a podcast and HTML version as well.

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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
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
Education Next
Education Update
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
Knowledge Quest
Language Arts
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Phi Delta Kappan
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
Teaching Tolerance
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Education Gadfly
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