Marshall Memo 399

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
August 29, 2011

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"A family with five television sets doesn't have to negotiate which program to watch because everyone can watch the show he or she wants. The result is the kind of self-sufficiency that kills family life."

Yves Morieux (see item #1)

"To be successful, managers must see themselves more as catalysts for problem solving than as problem solvers per se."

Charalambos Vlachoutsicos (see item #2)

"When students know how to ask their own questions, they take greater ownership of their learning, deepen comprehension, and make new connections and discoveries on their own."

Dan Rothstein and Luz Santana (see item # 4)

"If the standard is learning to drive, no matter how long it takes to get there, everyone gets the same license."

Barbara Mondloch (see item #7)

"If I taught it and they didn't get it, I probably hadn't taught it well."

Jerry Weast, former Montgomery County (MD) superintendent, reflecting on his years as a classroom teacher (in "Leading a System Where Everyone Gains" by David McKay in *Harvard Education Letter*, September/October 2011, Vol. 27, #5, p. 3)

"Children need to be both prepared and inspired."

Jerry Weast (*ibid*.)

1. Six Rules for Fostering Cooperation in the Workplace

In this thoughtful *Harvard Business Review* article, consultant Yves Morieux describes how much more complicated and stressful the business world has become in recent years, and how some companies have responded: adding performance measures and incentives, which they try to soften by making the workplace more collaborative and enjoyable. Morieux has a better answer: get employees working smarter by implementing six rules. Might these apply to K-12 schools?

• *Rule #1: Observe colleagues as they work.* "To respond to complexity intelligently," says Morieux, "people have to really understand each other's work: the goals and challenges others have to meet, the resources they can draw on, and the constraints under which they operate… The manager's job is to make sure that such learning takes place. Without this shared understanding, people will blame problems on other people's lack of intelligence or skills, not on the resources and constraints of the organization… Real cooperation is not a matter of getting along well; it's taking into account the constraints and goals of others."

For example, a hotel chain had falling occupancy rates and poor customer satisfaction. The finger was pointed at the receptionists, but when several managers closely observed day-to-day work at the front desk, they discovered what was really going on: unhappy customers were badgering the receptionists, who weren't getting adequate support from housekeeping, room service, and maintenance and gave refunds or upgrades to angry customers and often ran up to rooms to try to fix things themselves – leaving the front desk unattended. "Exhausted and discouraged, the young clerks would often quit after a few weeks," says Morieux, and it wasn't a lack of commitment or motivation. In fact, the least committed and motivated receptionists were the ones who *stayed*.

"Indeed, when managers rely on traditional metrics and peer feedback," continues Morieux, "they may end up rewarding people who actually avoid cooperation… In many cases, just a day on the ground watching the interplay among people from different functions will provide insights into where and how cooperation is breaking down. Once you identify that moment of truth and some simple root causes, you can move on to applying the other rules."

• *Rule #2: Empower key "integrators."* When companies get larger, they tend to add another layer between front-line and back-office people or impose new procedural requirements like computerized job requests. Morieux says this doesn't work. A better solution is to identify existing staff who interact with both worlds – in the struggling hotel chain, it was the receptionists – and give them a stronger voice. When the receptionists in the hotels were given a say in the job status of housekeepers and maintenance staff, those people's

performance improved dramatically – they checked all equipment and appliances during the day and customers were no longer discovering problems at night. "The change had a snowballing effect on customer satisfaction," says Morieux, "…Within 18 months, the company's gross margin had increased by 20%."

• *Rule #3: Expand the amount of power available*. "Usually, the people with the least power in an organization shoulder most of the burden of cooperation and get the least credit," says Morieux. "When they realize this, they often withdraw from cooperation and hide in their silos. Companies that want to prevent this and increase cooperation need to give these people more power so that they can take the risk of moving out of isolation, trusting others, showing initiative, and being transparent about performance."

• *Rule #4: Increase the need for reciprocity*. People need to need each other, says Morieux, giving the example of an airline that increased profitability – the percent of time airplanes were in the air – by making cabin crews responsible for cleaning and loading their plane before takeoff: "They cannot blame someone else – like the cleaning subcontractor – when customers grumble about a messy plane or a slow boarding crew."

Morieux adds a counterintuitive twist: sometimes *reducing resources* results in greater cooperation. "A family with five television sets doesn't have to negotiate which program to watch because everyone can watch the show he or she wants. The result is the kind of self-sufficiency that kills family life. Removing resources is a good way to make people more dependent on, and more cooperative with, one another, because without such buffers, their actions have a greater impact on one another's effectiveness."

• *Rule #5: Make sure employees feel the shadow of the future*. The problem with long-range plans and targets (3-5 years into the future) is that many employees know they won't be around for the day of judgment. Smart managers create performance targets much closer to the present and hold employees' feet to the fire in real time.

• *Rule #6: Put the blame on the uncooperative*. A railway company couldn't get its on-time performance over 80% no matter how hard it tried. Improving traffic-control mechanisms, hiring more agents, monitoring delays, and skimping on cleaning and equipment checks – nothing they tried improved punctuality, and there were increasing problems with cost, quality, and safety.

Then the company applied Rule #1 and focused on the way train drivers, conductors, station crews, and maintenance workers were interacting. It turned out that most delays could be avoided – but only if workers in different units cooperated. But everyone was more concerned with getting blamed for delays than with reducing them, so they didn't cooperate. It turns out that a perverse accountability system put the blame for delays only on the unit responsible for the root cause. "So, when Unit A had a problem, Units B and C did not feel impelled to help solve it," explains Morieux. "Why would they? If they didn't cooperate, only Unit A got the blame." People tried to make up for the lost time themselves, often without success.

Realizing this, the company incentivized transparency and cooperation. Once a unit told others about a problem, the units that *failed* to cooperate were blamed for the delay by station

managers, who were on the scene to make the judgment. In just four months, the railroad's on-time performance increased to 95%.

Morieux sums up: "Smart rules allow companies to manage complexity not by prescribing specific behaviors but by creating a context within which optimal behaviors occur – even though what is optimal cannot be defined in advance… Voluntary frontline cooperation breeds creative, customized solutions to problems… Problems are solved entirely by leveraging, through cooperation, the skills and ingenuity of employees… Employee satisfaction rises along with performance, as companies remove the complicatedness that causes both frustration and ineffectiveness." In a sidebar, Morieux gives his list of what *not* to do:

- Never add a process or a layer unless you absolutely have to: "Adding or keeping what is unnecessary is at least as damaging as lacking what is needed."
- Never blame a problem on someone's mentality or mindset: "This reflects only the limitations of your analysis. Instead, look at the goals, resources, and constraints people face."
- Don't let people escalate decisions to you: "Push them back to those who failed to cooperate on a solution. But if you must take on a decision, hold the local people accountable and make it a learning experience: 'What will you guys do differently the next time so I don't have to arbitrate?'"
- Don't rely on financial incentives: "The counterproductive side effects are too severe. Instead try to embed feedback loops into people's tasks."
- Don't try to measure specific behaviors: "The most valuable behavior – cooperation – cannot be measured… Focus instead on results, and use judgment rather than measurement when cooperation is required."

"Smart Rules: Six Ways to Get People to Solve Problems Without You" by Yves Morieux in *Harvard Business Review*, September 2011 (Vol. 89, #9, p. 78-86), no e-link available

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2. Suggestions for Managers

In this *Harvard Business Review* article, Athens University professor Charalambos Vlachoutsicos describes how to create "mutuality" between boss and employees. He believes these lessons are especially important for managers who cling to the old style of top-down leadership and rigid hierarchy. "The rewards are huge," he says, "when you stop trying to control your subordinates and instead engage, empower, and motivate them to contribute their knowledge and experience to a consensus approach."

• *Be modest*. Bosses who pontificate and tell stories of their successes are just showcasing their insecurities, says Vlachoutsicos. Share mistakes as well as successes and focus on the challenges faced by your colleagues.

• *Listen seriously – and show it*. He tells how an employee in an eastern European flour mill once accused him of not listening because Vlachoutsicos was taking notes on loose sheets of paper. "If you were taking our input seriously," said the man, "you'd be using a bound

notebook, as you see me do." When Vlachoutsicos showed him notes from previous meetings carefully filed in a three-ring binder, the man did a 180 and accepted why certain decisions had been made. "People tune in to your body language," says Vlachoutsicos, "where you look, what you do with your hands… Whatever you do, don't look at your watch or check the time on your mobile device while someone else is talking."

• *Invite disagreement*. Sometimes this can be as easy as holding meetings at a circular rather than a rectangular table, says Vlachoutsicos. But more often people need explicit encouragement to speak up. "Managers should view every interaction with subordinates… as a chance to tap their expertise and encourage them to express what they really think," he says. And some people, for cultural, generational, or professional reasons, will speak up only if they are asked in a private, one-on-one meeting.

• *Focus the agenda*. Vlachoutsicos tells how a regional manager in his family business's office in northern Greece allowed meetings to ramble on and often didn't get to the most important items. When the man learned how to put the most important agenda items first, limit discussion time on each item, and handle as much as possible before and after meetings, things picked up – and the manager enjoyed his meetings more.

• *Don't try to have all the answers*. "To be successful, managers must see themselves more as catalysts for problem solving than as problem solvers per se," says Vlachoutsicos. It's a sign of managerial skill to say, "I'm not sure what the answer is. Let's have a team toss some ideas around."

• *Don't insist that a decision be made*. "If you can't get agreement on a decision, don't rush to impose one," says Vlachoutsicos, recalling how in his early days he made lots of bad decisions because of a misplaced need to bring closure to discussions. When he asked subordinates why they didn't speak up, they said they figured he knew things they didn't know or had already made up his mind and didn't want to hear dissent. He changed his management style and got better decisions. Sometimes they took longer and sometimes they weren't unanimous, but they were better and maintained people's goodwill.

"How to Cultivate Engaged Employees" by Charalambos Vlachoutsicos in *Harvard Business Review*, September 2011 (Vol. 89, #9, p. 123-126), no e-link available

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3. Developing Theories of Action

In this helpful article in *The District Management Journal*, consultant Nicholas Morgan describes theories of action as "If… then…." statements that embody testable hypotheses about how change will occur. Answering three questions helps create a good theory of action:

- What do we believe?
- What do we look like now and what do we want to look like?
- How do we get there? What needs to change?

Ideally a school district has several theories of action linked together in a causal pathway to improvement. Incomplete or illogical chains do not produce results. For example, a district

leader who says that "professional learning communities" or "response to intervention" are the theory of action is not going to get results.

Losing weight provides a classic example of good and bad theories of action. Saying, "I will eat less and thus will lose weight" is not a theory of action – it's just hope. Here is a real theory of action from a weight-loss program:

- Create a baseline – know your starting weight;
- Set a goal – decide on the desired end weight;
- Tightly control calorie intake;
- Adhere to an exercise schedule – physical activity is required for success;
- Have a weekly weigh-in – this provides motivation and monitors progress;
- Adjust as needed – mid-course corrections are based on weekly weigh-ins;
- Celebrate success – plan for end of services.

The program is revised based on successes and failures of all participants and new program improvements are rolled out each year.

Here are some examples of possible school-district theories of action that hang together as an overall strategy:

- Teacher quality – By setting expectations for what is "effective teaching" and providing frequent feedback to teachers through classroom observations and verbal feedback, teacher instructional practice will improve and student achievement will rise.
- Principal autonomy – By shifting resource allocation and decision-making to the building level – where employees are most equipped to make decisions that benefit children – student achievement will increase.
- Earned autonomy – By allowing principals to earn autonomy over certain domains when they are successful in their buildings, the district can continue to hold all building leaders to certain standards but reward successful practices. As a result, the district will focus attention where it is needed most, and student achievement will rise.
- Professional learning communities – Frequent collaboration among teachers in a grade or subject, coupled with clear standards and measuring progress through common interim assessments and frequently reviewing student achievement data, will improve instructional practice and student achievement will rise.
- High expectations – By increasing and standardizing expectations for students and staff, they will be pushed harder to achieve great things, creating a culture of high performance and increasing teacher effectiveness and student achievement.

Morgan concludes with one theory of action that seems to make sense – *If we hold class sizes down, then individual attention between teachers and individual students will increase and student learning will improve* – and shows how it can ripple into some unarticulated theories of action, given finite resources. In effect, the implementation of the class-size theory of action means: "Cutting professional development, reducing support for principals to be instructional leaders by having fewer assistant principals, and decreasing teachers' access to data by having fewer staff members in IT and the accountability office will not harm student learning."

"Theories of Action: Aligning Priorities and Resources" by Nicholas Morgan and Nathan Levenson in *The District Management Journal*, Fall 2011 (Vol. 8, p. 38-46), http://www.dmcouncil.org; Morgan can be reached at nmorgan@dmcouncil.org.

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4. Students Asking Their Own Questions

"When students know how to ask their own questions," say Dan Rothstein and Luz Santana of the Right Question Institute in this *Harvard Education Letter* article, "they take greater ownership of their learning, deepen comprehension, and make new connections and discoveries on their own." Questioning is usually seen as the teacher's province, but Rothstein and Santana believe that students can be taught how to do it themselves, in the process fine-tuning their divergent, convergent, and metacognitive skills.

Here are the six steps of the Question Formulation Technique, which takes 45 minutes the first time students use it but can be cut down to 10-15 minutes with practice:

• *The teacher suggests a focus*. For example, a class studying the 1804 Haitian revolution was provoked into formulating questions by the statement, "Once we were slaves; now we are free."

• *Students brainstorm questions*. They begin after learning four rules: (a) Ask as many questions as you can; (b) Do not stop to discuss, judge, or answer any of the questions; (c) Write down every question exactly as it is stated; and (d) Change any statements into questions.

• *Students fine-tune their questions*. The teacher helps students see the difference between an open-ended and single-answer question and gives them time to edit theirs so as to elicit the maximum depth, quality, and information.

• *Students prioritize their questions*. The teacher suggests criteria for picking the most important questions – for example, "Choose the three questions you most want to explore further."

• *Students and teacher decide on how to use the questions*. For example, one class decided that their Socratic Seminar question would be, "How do poverty and injustice lead to violence in *A Tale of Two Cities*?"

• *Students reflect on what they have learned*.

Rothstein and Santana say this process improves group participation, classroom management, and equity of outcomes. Using this process, teachers realize that just asking, "Do you have any questions?" elicits very little, but teaching students how to generate and use their own questions is a powerful spur to high-level learning.

"Teaching Students to Ask Their Own Questions" by Dan Rothstein and Luz Santana in *Harvard Education Letter*, September/October 2011 (Vol. 27, #5, p. 1-2, 5-6), http://www.edletter.org

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5. Getting to Know Students As the Year Begins

In this touching article in *Middle Ground*, Bowling Green State University professor Angela Falter Thomas frets as her daughter starts middle school. When she taught in a middle school, Thomas prided herself on knowing her students by giving questionnaires at the beginning of the year and chatting between classes, at lunch, at assemblies, and after school. Now she wonders:

- Will someone at the school be there for her daughter if she needs help?
- Will they do something if she is bullied?
- Will they know that she switched elementary schools the year before (due to her mom's job change) and found the transition difficult?
- Will they find out that she has spent hundreds of hours volunteering in Ronald McDonald Houses and hospitals, "which has made her the sweetest and most compassionate young lady, but has also robbed her of her innocence"?
- Will they learn that she has lost hearing in one ear but doesn't want the school to know so she won't be treated differently?
- Will they find out that her older (and only) sibling died a few years ago and she's never had counseling because she seemed to be okay?
- Will they learn that she wants to be a writer when she grows up and live in New York City, 500 miles from home?
- Will they nurture her love for writing?
- Will they give her "a gentle kick in the pants" if that's what she needs?

"This beloved and treasured young lady is all I've got," says Thomas. "She's far from perfect, but I hope you will love her too and expect from her what you would from your own son or daughter."

"Know Thy Students – Including My Daughter" by Angela Falter Thomas in *Middle Ground*, August 2011 (Vol. 15, #1, p. 19-20), http://www.amle.org; Thomas can be reached at AngThom@bgsu.edu.

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6. Supporting Students Who Have an Incarcerated Parent

In this article in *Middle Ground*, Boston University professor Megan Sullivan focuses on the 2 million students in the U.S. who have a parent in prison. A recent study found that 45 percent of children with an incarcerated parent had failing grades (compared with 20 percent of other students) and they are three times more likely to be involved in violence, drug abuse, and other forms of antisocial behavior. "Even though the emotional, financial, and academic consequences of a parent's arrest and imprisonment can be devastating to the child, schools are often unaware of the family situation," says Sullivan. Here are her suggestions:

• *Be aware and be sensitive*. The school may notice a different parent, family member, or foster parent dropping off the child at school, or may be notified by social services. Some children have contact with the incarcerated parent, others don't. Some want to talk about their

situation, others definitely don't. Some feel stigmatized by having a family member in prison and are highly sensitive on the subject; confidentiality is vital.

• *Provide support*. These children have done nothing wrong but their world has been turned upside down. They need a listening ear, support, and perhaps counseling.

• *Use books*. *My Mom Went to Jail* by Suzanne Bergen and Kathleen Hodgkins (The Rainbow Project, 1997), *Mama Loves Me from Away* by Pat Brisson and Laura Caple (Boyds Mills Press, 2004), and *Everything You Need to Know When a Parent Is in Jail* by Stephanie St. Pierre (Rosen, 1994) are helpful resources. In addition, the Barnard Center for Research on Women website http://www.barnard.edu/sfonline/children has valuable resources.

• *Build bridges*. Some schools videotape parent-teacher conferences and take photos of class projects and activities and make them available to incarcerated parents. Others send the titles of the books children are reading in school so the parent in prison can read them and discuss the content with their child.

• *Suggest a mentor*. Amachi and Public/Private Ventures help mentor children with a parent in prison: http://amachimentoring.org and http://www.ppv.org.

• Know students' rights. The San Francisco Partnership for Incarcerated Parents has resources on rights at http://www.sfcipp.org/intro.html.

"Reaching Students Whose Parents Are Incarcerated" by Megan Sullivan in *Middle Ground*, August 2011 (Vol. 15, #1, p. 22-23)), http://www.amle.org; Sullivan can be reached at msullvan@bu.edu.

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7. Lessons Learned on Standards-Based Grading

"I get it," says former foreign-language teacher Barbara Mondloch about standards-based grading in her President's Message in *The Language Educator*. "I'm a believer." But she confesses that when she taught, her grading wasn't standards-based. Here's her analysis of the mistakes she made and what she would do differently now:

• *Lesson #1* – As a teacher, she chunked students' grades into types of evidence – homework, projects/performance assessments, tests/quizzes, and class participation – averaging and weighting each category (for example, homework counted for 10% of the overall grade) and basing grades on combined percentages earned. Now, she realizes, she was grading students on "a hodge-podge of indicators, all wrapped into one… I should have been documenting progress toward a given concept based on pieces of evidence collected (e.g., performance, projects, tests) for each specific standard."

• *Lesson #2* – As a teacher, Mondloch deducted points for late work and often gave zeroes for missing work. Now she realizes that some students take longer to learn material than others. "While accepting late work is inconvenient for the teacher," she says, "docking late work is not standards-based. When a student receives a zero for a missing assignment and that grade is averaged with the other grades, the overall grade is disproportionately affected and does not reflect the student's ability to demonstrate acquisition of the teaching target."

Mondloch likens it to getting ready for a driver's test: "If the standard is learning to drive, no matter how long it takes to get there, everyone gets the same license."

• *Lesson #3* – As a teacher, she counted class participation as part of students' grades, and she still believes it's important: "Workplace skills, such as coming to class on time and being prepared, actively engaging and participating, and complying with teacher directions are important and essential for success in school and the world of work." But now she realizes that students can excel in participation without mastering standards – and master standards without being A+ class participants. She believes teachers should give a separate, clearly-labeled grade for participation while reserving the main grade for mastery of the material.

"Standards-Based Grading: Are We Ready for the Leap?" by Barbara Mondloch in *The Language Educator*, August 2011 (Vol. 6, #4, p. 7), http://www.actfl.org.

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8. Websites:

a. Library of Congress materials for teachers – This site has classroom materials, primary source sets, including material on Japanese-American internment during World War II, children's lives at the turn of the 20th century, Hispanic exploration of America, and westward expansion: http://www.loc.gov/teachers

Spotted in "News to Use" in *Middle Ground*, August 2011 (Vol. 15, #1, p. 6-7)

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b. National and state-by-state school data – This new website has extensive information on education in the U.S. and each state: http://www.eddataexpress.ed.gov

Spotted in "Web Watch" in *The Language Educator*, August 2011 (Vol. 6, #4, p. 60-61)

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c. Children's stories in Spanish – This website has familiar stories, including Thumbelina, The Three Little Pigs, Little Red Riding Hood, and Peter and the Wolf: http://www.milcuentos.com.

Spotted in "Web Watch" in *The Language Educator*, August 2011 (Vol. 6, #4, p. 60-61)

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d. Online games about France – This website has games about major rivers, mountains, regions, cities, dialects, vineyards, artists, cuisine, and heritage: http://www.france.learningtogether.net

Spotted in "Web Watch" in *The Language Educator*, August 2011 (Vol. 6, #4, p. 60-61)

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e. French children's songs – This website has songs for children ages 6 to 9, including karaoke, exercises, and games: http://www.jeuchanteenclasse.com.

Spotted in "Web Watch" in *The Language Educator*, August 2011 (Vol. 6, #4, p. 60-61)

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f. The virtual body in Spanish and English – This website gives a tour of the human body – the brain, skeleton, heart, and digestive tract: http://www.medtropolis.com/VBody.asp.

Spotted in "Web Watch" in *The Language Educator*, August 2011 (Vol. 6, #4, p. 60-61)

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g. Virtual tours of cities around the world – The online magazine Arounder offers 360-degree tours of many cities. Gorgeous photos! http://www.arounder.com.

Spotted in "Web Watch" in *The Language Educator*, August 2011 (Vol. 6, #4, p. 60-61)

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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.marshall48@gmail.com

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and others very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 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:

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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
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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