

# *Marshall Memo 95*

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education  
July 11, 2005

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## **Quotes of the Week**

"[T]eachers should indeed think about the modality in which they present material, but their goal should be to find the content's best modality, not to search (in vain) for the student's best modality. Experiences in different modalities simply for the sake of including different modalities should not be the goal.

Daniel Willingham (see item #1)

"Mental health undergirds everything in adolescent medicine. To prevent things that are killing them, you have to address the way they feel about themselves."

Dr. Barbara Staggers, Oakland, CA pediatrician (see item #4)

"Everyone is going crazy."

Rebecca Leshner, Washington, D.C. student, on sixth grade (see item #6)

"My dad is always trying to make me study – and I fake it. I just go in here and look at the pictures and listen to the radio."

Simon, an elementary-school student about his summer learning (see item #7)

"When students, and school boards, ask, 'Why history? What are we supposed to be getting out of this?' the best answer is still that one word: judgment. We demand it of all professionals: doctors, lawyers, chefs, and quarterbacks. And we need it most in the profession of citizen, which, like it or not, exercise it or not, we are all born into."

Paul Gagnon in *American Educator*, Summer 2005 (from 1988 *Atlantic Monthly*)

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## 1. Should Students Be Taught in Their Preferred Learning Modality?

In his regular column in *American Educator*, cognitive psychologist Daniel Willingham tackles an important issue: If a child is a visual learner, should the teacher strive to present material in a visual format? If a child is an auditory learner, should the teacher present material in auditory form? For kinesthetic learners, should teachers strive to create hands-on experiences? No, says Willingham. The idea of tailoring instruction to children's learning modalities is widely accepted, but it's not supported by the research. Cognitive science has taught us, says Willingham, that "*teaching the child in his best modality doesn't affect his educational achievement*. What does matter is whether the child is taught in the *content's* best modality. All students learn more when content drives the choice of modality."

Willingham describes a series of laboratory tests conducted in recent years that prove his point, and debunks the research of learning styles advocates Rita and Kenneth Dunn, which he says has not been peer-reviewed and does not stand up to critical scrutiny. Here are Willingham's key points:

- Children differ in how good their visual and auditory memories are, but classroom experiments have shown that even when material is presented in their preferred modality, it makes little difference to how much they learn.

- When teachers strive to meet each child's modality, they sometimes make bad decisions by presenting material in a modality to which it's ill suited. "Imposing an ineffective explanation on a child because of a supposed modality fit," says Willingham, "is poor instruction.

- People almost always store memories in their brains by *meaning*, not by the visual, auditory, or kinesthetic modality through which they were perceived. "For the vast majority of education," says Willingham, "vision and audition are usually just vehicles that carry the important information teachers want students to learn... Whether information is presented auditorily or visually, the student must extract and store its meaning."

For example, the concept that a flame needs oxygen to keep burning could be learned visually (by watching a flame die when it is covered by a glass and starved of oxygen) or auditorily (by a teacher's lecture), but the knowledge is stored independent of how it was learned. You may remember what the visual image looked like, but that's a separate memory from the concept. Another

example is a child reading a picture book: the child can remember the story line and characters without remembering the details of all the pictures.

- Different modalities are best for conveying different kinds of information. Even if you are a visual learner, visual memory is not always the most efficient way to store an important idea. A picture of a car driving on a snowy hill could mean that the car is struggling up the hill or slipping backwards down the hill. And some concepts cannot be effectively communicated in pictures, for example, “genius” or “democracy.”

- “Modality has an impact on learning,” Willingham writes, “but this impact is the same for all students. Each modality is effective in carrying certain types of information: If it’s important that children know what something looks like, sounds like, or feels like, they should experience that object in that modality... That indicates that teachers should indeed think about the modality in which they present material, but their goal should be to find the content’s best modality, not to search (in vain) for the student’s best modality... Experiences in different modalities simply for the sake of including different modalities should not be the goal. Material should be presented auditorily or visually because the information that the teacher wants students to understand is best conveyed in that modality.”

- Some topics are best taught using more than one modality. Teaching a unit on the Civil War, for example, a teacher might supplement reading and lectures with having students listen to recordings of the music used to inspire the troops, look at maps of the battlefields, and heft the packs that soldiers carried into battle.

- Switching to a different modality can provide a welcome change of pace that facilitates learning. After listening to the teacher for 20 minutes, for example, a short video might drive home the point. If students have been watching a chemistry experiment, it might be time for them to try it themselves.

- Visual images are a often powerful teaching tool, and they work for all students, not just those with strong visual memories.

Why, asks Willingham at the end of the article, do so many teachers cling to the erroneous idea that they should tailor instruction to each students’ learning modalities (a 1979 study showed that 90 percent of special education teachers believed it to be true)? He believes that there are several reasons:

- The theory has become part of educators’ conventional wisdom.
- The theory fits with a more general assumption that many teachers hold – that there are genuinely important differences in how different students learn – and gives us an easily understood way to think about differences.
- The theory offers a hopeful message: that by making a relatively easy adjustment in teaching we can boost the learning of struggling kids.

- Teachers may interpret ambiguous situations in the classroom as proof of the theory. For example, a teacher might verbally explain “borrowing” to a second grader several times without success and then draw a diagram, at which point the student suddenly gets it. The teacher thinks, “Aha. He’s a visual learner. Once I drew the diagram, he understood.” But the more likely explanation is that the diagram would have helped *any* student because it was the best way to explain the concept. In this case, Willingham says, “it’s easy to imagine that the effect has to do with a student’s modal preference when in fact the effect is due to the content’s best modality.”

“Do Visual, Auditory, and Kinesthetic Learners Need Visual, Auditory, and Kinesthetic Instruction?” by Daniel Willingham in *American Educator*, Summer 2005 (Vol. 29, #2, p. 31-35, 44). Readers can pose specific questions to “Ask the Cognitive Scientist” by e-mailing to [amered@aft.org](mailto:amered@aft.org). The article is available at: [http://www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american\\_educator/issues/summer2005/cogsci.htm](http://www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/summer2005/cogsci.htm)

## 2. How to Foster Real Teamwork

This 1993 article on teamwork is reprinted in the current *Harvard Business Review* as one of the classics on high-performing organizations. The article draws a distinction between groups that work well together and highly-productive *teams*. Here is a point-by-point comparison:

| <b>Working Group</b>  | <b>Team</b>   |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong, clearly-focused leader</li> <li>• Individual accountability</li> <li>• The group’s purpose is the same as the broader organizational mission</li> <li>• Individual work products</li> <li>• Runs efficient meetings</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shared leadership roles</li> <li>• Individual and mutual accountability</li> <li>• Specific purpose that the team itself delivers</li> <li>• Collective work products</li> <li>• Encourages open-ended discussion and active problem-solving meetings</li> </ul> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Measures its effectiveness indirectly by assessing its influence on others</li> <li>• Discusses, decides, and delegates</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Measures performance directly by collective work products</li> <li>• Discusses, decides, and does real work together</li> </ul>  |

These are the authors’ rules for building strong team performance:

- *Establish urgency, demanding performance standards, and direction.* “Teams work best in a compelling context.” Leaders therefore need to give team members a sense of the importance of their work and its link to the overall mission of the organization.

- *Select members for skill and skill potential, not personality.* “No team succeeds without all the skills needed to meet its purpose and performance

goals. Yet most teams figure out the skills they will need after the team is formed. The wise manager will choose people for their existing skills and their potential to improve existing skills and learn new ones.”

- *Pay particular attention to first meetings and actions.* “Initial impressions always mean a great deal. When potential teams first gather, everyone monitors the signals given by others to confirm, suspend, or dispel assumptions and concerns. They pay particular attention to those in authority... And, as always, what such leaders do is more important than what they say. If a senior executive leaves the team kickoff to take a phone call ten minutes after the session has begun and he never returns, people get the message.”

- *Set some clear rules of behavior.* Here are some high-priority norms that a group might adopt up front:

- Attendance – No interruptions to take phone calls.
- Discussion – No sacred cows.
- Confidentiality – The only things to leave this room are what we agree on.
- Analytic approach – Facts are our friends.
- End-product orientation – Everyone gets assignments and does them.
- Constructive confrontation – No finger pointing.
- Contributions – Everyone does real work.

- *Set and seize upon a few immediate performance-oriented tasks and goals.*

“There is no such thing as a real team without performance results, so the sooner such results occur, the sooner the team congeals.” Look for some “quick wins” to get the momentum going.

- *Challenge the group regularly with fresh facts and information.* “New information causes a team to redefine and enrich its understanding of the performance challenge, thereby helping the team shape a common purpose, set clearer goals, and improve its common approach.”

- *Spend lots of time together.* This is especially important at the beginning.

- *Exploit the power of positive feedback, recognition, and reward.* This can include public praise, but ultimately, “the satisfaction shared by a team in its own performance becomes the most cherished reward.”

“The Discipline of Teams” by Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith in *Harvard Business Review*, July-August 2005 (Vol. 83, #7, p. 162-171) originally published in 1993, no e-link available

### **3. Turning a Strategic Plan Into Great Performance**

In this *Harvard Business Review* article with direct application to education, two strategy consultants assert that most companies realize only about 63% of their potential because of defects and breakdowns in planning and carrying out

their strategic plan. By following seven simple rules, they say, companies can get a far bigger bang for the buck:

- *Keep it simple, make it concrete.* “Avoid long, drawn-out descriptions of lofty goals and instead stick to clear language describing what [you] will and won’t do.”
- *Debate assumptions, nor forecasts.* Don’t set goals based on politics but on what people really can produce, with a stretch. Ensure that assumptions underlying your long-term plans reflect real-world facts and your organization’s actual performance.
- *Use a rigorous analytic framework and speak a common language.* Make sure the dialogue between leaders and employee teams about trends and assumptions is conducted within a rigorous framework that everyone understands.
- *Discuss resource deployments early.* Create realistic forecasts and executable plans by discussing up front who works where and when.
- *Clearly identify priorities.* Managers have to make thousands of tactical decisions to put a strategy into action, but not all tactics are equally important. In most instances, a few key steps must be taken at the right time and in the right way. Successful organizations make these priorities explicit so that everyone has a clear sense of where to direct his or her efforts.
- *Continuously monitor performance.* Use interim feedback to reset assumptions and reallocate resources. “This real-time information allows management to spot and remedy flaws in the plan and shortfalls in execution – and to avoid confusing one with the other.”
- *Motivate and develop staff.* “[A]t the end of the day, no process can be better than the people who have to make it work.”

“Turning Great Strategy Into Great Performance” by Michael Mankins and Richard Steele in *Harvard Business Review*, July-August 2005 (Vol. 83, #7, p. 64-72), no e-link available

#### **4. A Model Mental Health Clinic in a Tough Oakland High School**

Oakland’s embattled McClymonds High School, considered one of the lowest-performing and most violent in all of California, is the subject of last week’s *New York Times* education column by Samuel Freedman. He tells how Alex Briscoe, a social worker from Philadelphia, got a job as a dropout prevention counselor at the school and turned a broom closet into a student discussion room (dubbed Sanctuary) that was off limits to administrators and security guards.

After a girl came to him and reported being raped, Briscoe formed an alliance with Dr. Barbara Stagers, a pediatrician at nearby Children’s Hospital, whose caseload over the last two decades included an ever-encroaching tide of sexual abuse, HIV infection, gang violence, teenage prostitution, chronic asthma,

and depression (the leading causes of death among her patients were homicide and suicide). Dr. Stagers had come to believe that underneath medical trauma lay emotional turmoil – turmoil that was rarely diagnosed or treated until after an explosion. “These kids were stressed, depressed, PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder],” she said. “Mental health undergirds everything in adolescent medicine. To prevent things that are killing them, you have to address the way they feel about themselves.”

Together, Briscoe and Stagers raised public and private funds and moved the Sanctuary into a former wood shop and transformed it into a spacious, air-conditioned mental health clinic with three full-time social workers and therapists, as well as a psychiatrist one day a week. One crucial element: the clinic has a separate entrance from the street so students can come for appointments without being spotted by classmates. In addition to its mental health services, the clinic provides art classes, recreation, physicals for team sports, and screening for eyesight. Children’s Hospital provides the mental health services on a fee-for-service basis, which works because most McClymonds students are covered by a state health insurance program for the poor. Half of the students at McClymonds visited the clinic last year, a testament to the openness its staff has communicated within the school. “They want to get to know everybody,” said Devon Napier, a recent graduate who was involved when Sanctuary opened during his freshman year, “not just the ones who are bleeding on the floor.”

The clinic uses 15 McClymonds students as peer counselors and outreach workers. One of them, Xenia Simms, told how several months ago a classmate shared her feeling of being unattractive and her fear of physical intimacy with boys, and then went on to confide that she had been raped by her stepfather when she was a child. “For a minute I was silent,” said Xenia. “She just kept going, talking about how it made her feel negative about her body. When you’re going through something hard, you just want somebody to listen. I was just trying to be an open ear.” Ultimately Xenia talked her friend into visiting the clinic and engaging in therapy, and several weeks later, the girl joined Xenia as a peer counselor for the clinic.

“Easing Troubled Emotions Inside a Troubled School” by Samuel Freedman in *New York Times*, July 6, 2005

<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/06/education/06education.html>

## **5. Vocabulary Development Pre-K – Grade 3**

In this interview in *Harvard Education Letter*, early literacy expert Catherine Snow makes these points about the importance of vocabulary acquisition in the early grades:

- Kids need to know about 80,000 words by twelfth grade, and every year counts in building a college-ready vocabulary. “If you’re missing a year, if you’re allowing some kids to learn words at a rate that’s only 75 percent as fast as other kids, you accumulate huge differences,” says Snow.

- By the time they reach third grade, middle-class children whose parents have college degrees know as many as 12,000 words. Children from less affluent homes with less-educated parents know around 4,000 words at this point – a third as many as their more advantaged peers. The gap continues to widen as children move through the grades.

- Snow contrasts the daunting challenge of vocabulary acquisition with the simpler process of learning letters, sounds, or spelling rules: “So you miss a grade. You can get them in second grade. You can’t do that with vocabulary.”

- Snow says the culprit is not having a systematic emphasis on vocabulary development starting in pre-school. She says the goal should be to bring disadvantaged and ELL children closer to the developmental trajectory of students from middle-class homes. “That is the mechanism for shrinking the achievement gap,” she says.

- From a very early age and through the elementary grades, children need constant exposure to oral reading and conversations that:

- Connect ideas across paragraphs;
- Promote understanding of content knowledge;
- Help them learn to use more complex vocabulary than they encounter in normal, spontaneous conversation;
- Develop familiarity with some of the conventions used in written but not in spoken language.

- Learning letters, numbers, and colors in pre-school is an important learning expectation, but insufficiently ambitious, says Snow. Kids also need to *build their vocabularies* and learn how the language works, how to talk, how to tell stories, and how to comprehend.

- The tests used in the primary grades (up through Grade 3) tend to assess phonological awareness, fluency, and literal comprehension. Snow believes that there isn’t enough emphasis on vocabulary in these tests, which leads pre-school and primary teachers to underemphasize this crucial area of language development. What gets tested gets taught, and she advocates beefing up vocabulary assessment throughout the primary grades.

“From Literacy to Learning” – An Interview with Catherine Snow by Darcia Harris Bowman and Michael Sadowski in *Harvard Education Letter*, July / August 2005 (Vol. 21, #4, p. 8, 7) no e-link available

## 6. Should Sixth Graders Be in Elementary or Middle Schools?

Sixth grade is a key transition year in which kids hover on the cusp of their teens – a weird year, full of physical, emotional, social and logistical transitions that schools handle with varying degrees of success. “The students are wonderful, creative and curious,” says Mary Beth Pelosky, an assistant principal in a Virginia middle school, “but they are still kids, trying to grow up, and that makes them very, very emotional.” Rebecca Lesher, a Washington, D.C. sixth grader, puts it more directly: “Everyone is going crazy.”

*Washington Post* reporter Valerie Strauss lists some of the changes: “Kids become moody, rebellious, hormone-driven. Kids are friends one minute, enemies the next. More kids talk back to their teachers than before, and peers matter more than ever. Kids who barely uttered a word in fifth grade are the class clowns in sixth... Parents see their children, on the edge of adolescence, often like strangers, exuberant one minute, crushingly sad the next.” And everyone, says Julia Penn, an 18-year-old Montgomery County high-school student, is just “so awkward.”

The question is whether sixth graders should be housed in K-6 elementary schools, K-8 schools, 5-8 or 6-8 middle schools, 6-12 secondary schools, or autonomous sixth grade academies (there are scores of these around the country).

Middle schools were popular in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, and they still have their partisans. Chrystal Forrester, principal of Swanson Middle School in Arlington, Virginia, believes that a high-performing 6-8 school is the ideal bridge between elementary and high school. She has her sixth graders sequestered in one wing of the school, but introduces a middle-school schedule with students changing classes every period. She also offers choices of clubs, sports, and after-school activities to accustom students to more options than they had in their elementary schools. Sixth grade is about growing up, she says: “The hardest thing for parents is that sometimes we have to let our children fail, make a mistake in a safe environment, so hopefully in a less safe situation, they will make the right decision.”

But the national trend is now toward K-8 schools, especially in urban districts where middle schools are the most troubled level with the most out-of-certification teachers. A dozen large districts, including New York City, Baltimore, Cleveland, and Philadelphia, are shifting to K-8 schools. Philadelphia superintendent Paul Vallas has this to say: “The sixth grade, now that’s when the physical, emotional and psychological changes really accelerate. And to move them from the quasi-tranquility of that K-5 school and suddenly place them in a middle school building, which normally, in urban areas, has 800 to 1,000 kids from eight or nine neighborhoods – that’s an absolute disaster.”

But Paul George, a middle-school expert at the University of Florida, is concerned that these districts may be making a mistake. “There are so many unknowns,” he says, “and I’m afraid... that they are going to do K-8 the same way they do 6-8, and that is with ignorance.”

“Where Do Sixth Graders Belong?” by Valerie Strauss in *MiddleWeb, Middle Grades News*, June 7, 2005

<http://www.middleweb.com/mw/news/sixthgrade.html> (spotted in *PEN Weekly NewsBlast* July 8, 2005)

## 7. What Schools Can Do About Summer Learning Loss

This well-documented *American Educator* article on social-class differences in children’s summer learning experiences – and the achievement gap that widens every summer – concludes with several specific suggestions on what schools can do. “As a society,” the authors say, “we currently do very little to build on children’s efforts to enrich their own summers. But it wouldn’t take much to help children make the most of their own initiative – and perhaps even jump-start those who are a little less motivated.” The trick is to support self-motivation and give parents a stringboard to help their kids make academic gains over the summer. Some ideas:

- Send home lists of books that correspond with children’s reading levels.
- Send home worksheets that correspond with children’s math skills.
- Send home science and history projects that would help kids prepare for the next year’s curriculum.
- Facilitate carpools and daycare exchanges by asking children to exchange phone numbers and summer plans.
- Collaborate with libraries to help set up summer book clubs: select appropriate books, find a parent or volunteer to host the meetings, encourage children to sign up and make sure that enough copies of books are available.
- Work with local government and philanthropies to provide scholarship support for disadvantaged students to attend high-quality summer camps with more advantaged age-mates.
- Bring resources to children via bookmobiles, artmobiles, and museums-on-wheels.
- Make sure students and families know about existing community resources, parks, and summer programs.

“Season of Inequality: Exploring the Summer Activity Gap” by Tiffani Chin and Meredith Phillips in *American Educator*, Summer 2005 (Vol. 29, #2, p. 22-30, 43).

## 8. Buyer’s Remorse Over Hiring Mistakes

Those of us who have made hiring mistakes might resonate with quotes from this front-page *New York Times* article about three American presidents’

regrets over Supreme Court appointments that didn't work out as they had hoped:

- Theodore Roosevelt, when his appointee Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. voted on the side of big railroad interests in 1904: "I could carve out of a banana a judge with more backbone than that."
- Dwight Eisenhower on his appointment of Earl Warren as Chief Justice, after Warren handed down one liberal ruling after another: "The biggest damn fool mistake I ever made."
- Harry Truman, when his appointee Tom Clark voted against the president's 1952 seizure of the steel industry to avoid a strike: "It isn't so much that he's a bad man. It's just that he's such a dumb son of a bitch."

"Presidents, Choosing Justices, Can Wind Up with Surprises" by Todd Purdum in *New York Times*, July 5, 2005  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/05/politics/politicsspecial1/05history.html?oref=login>

## 9. Short Items:

*a. Research on full-day kindergarten* – This West Ed study sums up the latest research on full-day kindergarten and lists the characteristics of an effective kindergarten program.

"Full-Day Kindergarten: Expanding Learning Opportunities" A policy brief from West Ed, available at <http://www.wested.org/cs/we/view/rs/771> (spotted in *PEN Weekly NewsBlast*, July 8, 2005)

*b. Teacher dress codes?* A number of U.S. school districts are issuing rules on what teachers can wear in school, according to this CNN report. Disallowed items include: skimpy tops, short skirts, flip flops, jeans, T-shirts, spandex, baseball caps, spaghetti straps, cleavage, visible private parts, exposed midriffs and undergarments, and hair curlers. Bill Scharffe of the Michigan Association of School Boards says, "There's an impression that teachers are dressing more and more – well, the good term for it would be 'relaxed.' Another term for it would be 'sloppy.'" Some teachers are offended by restrictions and worry about inequitable enforcement. Says Karen Moxley of Grapevine, Texas, "Because we work with children, and we're trying to relate to them, sometimes we need to have guidelines that say, 'You know folks, here's the line, and you really need to stay on this side of it.' But I don't know that it needs to go down to what style of outfit you wear."

"Forget Midterms, What About Midriffs?" by the Associated Press, July 4, 2005, available at <http://www.cnn.com/2005/EDUCATION/07/04/teacher.dress.codes.ap/index.html> (spotted in *PEN Weekly NewsBlast*, July 8, 2005)

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***Do you have feedback? Is anything missing?***

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

# About the Marshall Memo

## ***Mission and focus:***

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and others very well-informed on current research and best practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 35 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 39 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through scores of 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, provide e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the memo to subscribers every Monday (with occasional breaks; there were 50 issues in 2003-04).

## ***Subscriptions:***

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

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- A database of all articles to date, searchable by topic, title, author, source, level, etc.
- How to change access e-mail or password

## ***Publications covered:***

(those read this week are underlined)

American Educational Research Journal

American Educator

American School Board Journal

ASCD SmartBrief

Atlantic Monthly

Bay State Banner

Boston Globe

CommonWealth Magazine

District Administration

Ed. Magazine (Harvard School of Education)

Education Digest

Education Gadfly

Education Next

Education Update (ASCD)

Education Week

Educational Leadership

Educational Researcher

Edutopia

Elementary School Journal

Harper's

Harvard Business Review

Harvard Education Letter

Harvard Educational Review

Journal of Staff Development

Middle School Journal

NASSP Bulletin

New York Times

New Yorker

Newsweek

PEN Weekly NewsBlast

Phi Delta Kappan

Principal Magazine

Principal Leadership

Psychology Today

Reading Research Quarterly

Reading Today

Rethinking Schools

Review of Educational Research

Teacher Magazine

Teachers College Record

E-links will be provided whenever possible.