

Marshall Memo 505

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education

October 7, 2013

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Quotes of the Week

“There’s 15 things they need to get better at, and so all 15 of them are important; where do I begin?”

An administrator working with struggling teachers, quoted in “Principal and Teacher, a Complex Duet” by Brent Staples in *The New York Times*, Sept. 28, 2013,
http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/29/opinion/sunday/principal-and-teacher-a-complex-duet.html?_r=0

“How can we improve instruction faster?”

Paul Bambrick-Santoyo (see item #1)

“No one ever became a master teacher – or a doctor or Olympic skier – overnight. We get better at what we do by perfecting one small element of our craft at a time, ideally with the aid of an expert who gives us the right bite-size feedback at the right time.”

Paul Bambrick-Santoyo (*ibid.*)

“Every student in my room is underperforming based on their potential, and it’s my job to do something about it – and I can do something about it.”

A teacher quoted in a study of successful Los Angeles educators (see item #2)

“Most creative geniuses work ferociously hard and, through a series of incremental steps, achieve things that appear (to the outside world) like epiphanies and breakthroughs.”

Joanne Lipman (*ibid.*)

“A teaching profession that values autonomy rejects *both* the notion that teachers should be left alone to do as they please *and* the belief that teachers are pawns who must be controlled.”

Celine Coggins and PK Diffenbaugh (see item #3)

“Busy does not mean purposeful.”

Tracy Coskie and Michelle Hornof (see item #7)

1. Accelerating the Rate of Teachers' Professional Growth

(Originally titled "Stone Soup: The Teacher Leader's Contribution")

"How can we improve instruction faster?" is the driving question in this *Educational Leadership* article by Paul Bambrick-Santoyo. He bemoans the fact that most teachers in U.S. schools are observed only once or twice a year, and often the feedback from these observations is unhelpful because it's constrained by cumbersome processes and intricate evaluation instruments. The traditional approach may be necessary to make summative judgments, he says, but it rarely provides coaching for improvement.

Here is how Bambrick-Santoyo is addressing this challenge in the nine charter schools he manages in Newark, New Jersey.

- *Increase the number of educators giving feedback to teachers.* His principals recruit their strongest teachers to observe colleagues and give detailed feedback in face-to-face coaching conversations. By reducing the number of teachers per observer, weekly classroom visits become possible. "With this level of support," says Bambrick-Santoyo, "teachers... get more feedback in one year than most teachers do in 20." The teacher leaders still have a full schedule, but their extra duties are reduced commensurate with their coaching load.

- *Comment on only one key item per classroom visit.* This might be as simple as the teacher scanning the classroom to make sure all students are on task or prompting students to go back to the text to find evidence for their statements. "No one ever became a master teacher – or a doctor or Olympic skier – overnight," says Bambrick-Santoyo. "We get better at what we do by perfecting one small element of our craft at a time, ideally with the aid of an expert who gives us the right bite-size feedback at the right time." The observer's job is not to make a list of everything a teacher could do better (the traditional approach) but to focus on what will make the teaching more effective for students tomorrow. "Narrowing the focus is incredibly powerful, as every seasoned coach knows," says Bambrick-Santoyo. "What makes bite-size feedback effective is that the leader can follow up the next week and affirm that [the teacher] has mastered the skill." By taking one step each week, teachers can experience incredible growth in the course of a school year.

- *Practice.* "Multiple cooks don't spoil the broth," he says, "as long as they're using the right recipe... Practice is at the heart of all high-quality coaching." In feedback sessions with teachers, his principals and teacher leaders role-play what will happen in the classroom. And in periodic meetings, instructional leaders watch videos of feedback meetings and practice effective approaches until they become habits. Within each school, leadership teams give each

other feedback on their feedback, prepare for teacher debriefs, and plan and practice professional development.

“Stone Soup: The Teacher Leader’s Contribution” by Paul Bambrick-Santoyo in *Educational Leadership*, October 2013 (Vol. 71, #2, p. 46-49), www.ascd.org; Bambrick-Santoyo can be reached at pbambrick@uncommonschoools.org.

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2. Eight Reasons Why Toughness Pays Off in the Classroom

In this thoughtful *Wall Street Journal* article, Joanne Lipman remembers Mr. Kupchynsky, her tough-to-the-point-of-abusive orchestra teacher at East Brunswick High School in the 1960s. Mr. K, as students knew him, would call students “idiots” if they messed up and shout “Who eez deaf in first violins!?” if someone played out of tune. “He made us rehearse until our fingers almost bled,” she says.

But when Kupchynsky died a few years ago, there was an outpouring of love and respect from hundreds of former students who had gone on to success in a variety of fields. “Research tells us that there is a positive correlation between music education and academic achievement,” says Lipman. “But that alone didn’t explain the belated surge of gratitude for a teacher who basically tortured us through adolescence.”

Lipman’s question: “What did Mr. K do right? What can we learn from a teacher whose methods fly in the face of everything we think we know about education today, but who was undeniably effective?” Stressing that she doesn’t support abuse (“I’d be the first to complain if a teacher called my kids names”), she lists the following:

- *A little pain is good for you.* The much-quoted study by psychologist Anders Ericsson showing that 10,000 hours of practice is needed to attain true expertise also found that the path to proficiency requires “constructive, even painful, feedback.” High-performing violinists, surgeons, computer programmers, and chess masters “deliberately picked unsentimental coaches who would challenge them and drive them to higher levels of performance.” [See Marshall Memo 192 #3 for a related article.]

- *Memorization pays off.* Fluency in basic math facts is the foundation of higher achievement, but many American students aren’t learning their times tables and basic math facts. Lipman says one reason Asian students do so much better in math is the hours of drill in their schools.

- *Failure is part of the learning process.* In a 2012 study, French sixth graders were given extremely challenging anagram problems. One group was told that failure and persistence were a normal part of the learning process, and this group consistently outperformed their peers on subsequent assignments. Lipman says American parents and educators worry too much about failure being psychologically damaging and haven’t given children the right messages about failure being intrinsic to the learning process.

- *Strictness works.* A study of Los Angeles teachers whose students did exceptionally well found that they combined strictness with high expectations. Their core belief was, “Every student in my room is underperforming based on their potential, and it’s my job to do

something about it – and I can do something about it.” A fourth grader summed it up: “When I was in first grade and second grade and third grade, when I cried my teacher coddled me. When I go to Mrs. T’s room, she told me to suck it up and get to work. I think she’s right. I need to work harder.”

- *Creativity is not spontaneous combustion.* “Most creative geniuses work ferociously hard and, through a series of incremental steps, achieve things that appear (to the outside world) like epiphanies and breakthroughs,” says Lipman. Creativity is built on a foundation of hard work on the basics.

- *Grit is more important than talent.* Angela Duckworth’s study of 2,800 high achievers found that the best predictor of success is passion and perseverance for long-term goals, not innate talent. Another key element of grit is students’ belief that they have the ability to change and improve, and this can be inculcated by teachers who share that belief.

- *Praise must be strategic.* As Stanford professor Carol Dweck has found, complimenting students for being “smart” has negative consequences, whereas praising a student for being a “hard worker” leads to greater effort and success.

- *Moderate stress makes you stronger.* Researchers have found that being exposed to challenges – including “a hardass kind of teacher” – builds resilience and confidence. What’s going on here? Lipman believes it’s that students are picking up an underlying faith in their ability to do better. Thinking back to Mr. K’s super-tough approach to his orchestra, she says, “There is something to be said about a teacher who is demanding and tough not because he thinks students will never learn but because he is so absolutely certain that they will.”

“Why Tough Teachers Get Good Results” by Joanne Lipman in *The Wall Street Journal*, Sept. 27, 2013, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702304213904579095303368899132.html>

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3. Mastery, Purpose, and Autonomy As Keys to Teacher Retention

(Originally titled “Teachers with DRIVE”)

In this article in *Educational Leadership*, Celine Coggins (Teach Plus) and PK Diffenbaugh (Garden Grove Schools, California) cite the grim statistics on U.S. teacher attrition: half of all urban teachers leave the profession within their first 3-5 years and half of the “irreplaceables” (the most-successful 20 percent of all teachers) leave within five years. “Failure to retain effective teachers is not only costing our school systems billions of dollars,” they say, “but is also negatively affecting student achievement.”

Drawing on the work of Daniel Pink, Coggins and Diffenbaugh suggest three ways to increase the number of teachers who continue working effectively in classrooms for more than a few years:

- *Mastery* – People thrive when they feel good at their work, but three factors in schools have a perverse impact: (a) Many rookie teachers are thrown into the most difficult classrooms with inadequate support, leading them to quit, while many veteran teachers plateau because they aren’t given appropriately challenging work, leading them to seek more challenging work outside of education; (b) The profession is still fuzzy on the definition of mastery in teaching,

and the new idea of defining success in terms of test scores is controversial; (c) The way most teachers are evaluated is weak, with infrequent, often superficial feedback. “A mastery-focused professional must provide frequent quality feedback to the practitioner,” say Coggins and Diffenbaugh.

- *Purpose* – Most teachers are in the classroom because they want to improve the lives of students and leave the world a better place. Stage-two teachers (those with 3-10 years of experience) want opportunities to improve student outcomes on a broader scale – for example, working with a team of teachers to affect 150 rather than just 30 students. At this stage in their careers, teachers aren’t comfortable simply implementing other people’s ideas; they want to have a say in school policies. Another avenue for broader impact is helping colleagues who are struggling with significant challenges. Coggins and Diffenbaugh describe how two Chicago teachers convened 2,500 educators for Saturday workshops on implementing the Common Core. They also tout Teach Plus’s Turnaround Teacher Teams program, which sends a group of high-performing teachers into a struggling school to work closely with the faculty and administrators to improve the school.

- *Autonomy* – Does the new push for accountability mean that teachers will have less freedom? Must they endure scripted curriculums, rigid pacing guides, and mandatory test prep? No, say Coggins and Diffenbaugh. Teachers can join in pursuing common curriculum standards while maintaining significant choice in how to implement them. “A teaching profession that values autonomy,” they say, “rejects *both* the notion that teachers should be left alone to do as they please *and* the belief that teachers are pawns who must be controlled.”

“Teachers with DRIVE” by Celine Coggins and PK Diffenbaugh in *Educational Leadership*, October 2013 (Vol. 71, #2, p. 42-45), www.ascd.org; Coggins can be reached at ccoggins@teachplus.org.

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4. A Teacher Team Solves Its School’s Homework Detention Problem

(Originally titled “The Problem-Solving Power of Teachers”)

In this thoughtful *Educational Leadership* article, ELA teacher Ariel Sacks describes how she and her colleagues in a New York City middle school dealt with the unintended consequences of a top-down policy. The school decided that students who missed two homework assignments in a single week would be required to attend after-school detention on Wednesday. Teachers were asked to notify parents, get confirmation, put detention students on a list, and tell them to report to the designated classroom on Wednesday afternoons.

But what seemed like a plausible plan ended up creating extra work for teachers and fostering noncompliance. After teachers notified parents, usually on Friday afternoon, there were lots of questions about homework assignments, protestations that their children had really done the work, promises to do a better job supervising their kids, and requests that a student be granted an extension or serve detention on a different day. “The process was overwhelming,” says Sacks, “and correspondences easily dragged from Friday, across the weekend, all the way through the Wednesday of the actual detention.”

In addition, there was no guarantee that students would do their missed assignments during detention, and if they were confused about the work, help wasn't available. The result: a lot of unproductive teacher time, some teachers circumventing the policy (which raised equity concerns), and the same students attending homework detention week after week. Often these students weren't completing regular class work and were failing one or more subjects. Their underlying academic problems were clearly not being addressed.

A change in the school's schedule gave Sacks and her eighth-grade team an idea. The new schedule created a block at the end of each day when teachers had "office hours" for students who needed help. Sacks's team noticed that the students who showed up weren't always the ones who most needed help, so they started encouraging students who weren't completing assignments to come during office hours. This created problems when struggling students were asked to be in several teachers' classrooms at the same time, but the team solved that by all sitting in one classroom for office hours.

Then it hit them: why not make office hours mandatory for struggling students and substitute it for the school's Wednesday detention? Any eighth grader could come for help, but office hours would be mandatory for the 12 students (out of 107) who weren't completing assignments. The principal quickly approved the idea, parents and others were notified, and four days a week (Thursdays were teacher-meeting days), office hours became a regular routine for students who most needed help. The after-school office hours "became a positive space," says Sacks, "where students helped one another as much as we helped them." Some students didn't show up, but teachers were able to follow up with them.

The result? Almost all the students who came to office hours passed their classes, some students improved their homework habits and "graduated" from the program, and seventh-grade teachers heard about the system and decided to adopt it for their students. "Teachers no longer spend hours chasing after students and their families over homework detention – or feeling guilty for not doing so," says Sacks. "More students get the help they need, even if that help is nothing more than a time and place to do their homework."

The moral of this story, she concludes, is that teachers can come up with effective "bottom-up" solutions to problems if they have administrators who trust them (the teachers and the ideas), empower teams to think issues through and get them vetted by colleagues, and support implementation.

"The Problem-Solving Power of Teachers" by Ariel Sacks in *Educational Leadership*, October 2013 (Vol. 71, #2, p. 18-22), www.ascd.org; Sacks is at wholenovels@gmail.com.

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5. Using Academic Notebooks in Middle-School Classrooms

In this helpful article in *Middle School Journal*, Alison Rheingold (a Massachusetts instructional coach), Caitlin LeClair (a Maine middle-school social studies teacher), and Jayson Seaman (University of New Hampshire) describe effective use of academic notebooks. Here are their suggestions on how these composition-style notebooks might be used for a project, unit, or course:

- The notebook's content is teacher directed but created by each student;
- It's a place for students to put ideas and information they gather each day;
- It's a tool for both teacher and student to track learning.

“Slowly, over the course of the project,” say Rheingold, LeClair, and Seaman, “notebooks become filled with handwritten notes; academic vocabulary; graphic organizers; glued-in, teacher-created rubrics; and formative and summative assessments related to specific learning targets and the overall goals of the unit.”

LeClair used academic notebooks for the first time for a unit on the Civil Rights Movement. Afterward, she, Rheingold, and Seaman adduced the following implications:

- It takes time to teach students how to use a notebook. However, say the authors, this is time well spent – when students know the routines, there's a payoff throughout the year.

- Notebooks establish norms for gathering, organizing, and using information. LeClair found that she heard fewer comments like, “I can't find my work”, “I don't remember what we did in the last class”, or “I left it on the bus.” (Students were asked to leave their notebooks in the classroom.)

- Notebooks support academic and social goals. LeClair found they helped build community and supported hesitant students in participating more fully in class.

- Academic notebooks don't work in all situations. For some units, an adjustable, portfolio-type collection might be more appropriate.

- A final assessment of the notebook may not be necessary. LeClair found that by working with students on each step of their notebooks, an overall “notebook check” was superfluous. This encouraged students to focus on the learning targets and completing project goals.

- Notebooks can be used for multiple purposes. During and after her Civil Rights unit, LeClair used the notebooks to support bulletin board displays and student-led portfolio conferences with parents, and to display student growth over time.

“Using Academic Notebooks to Support Achievement and Promote Positive Classroom Environments” by Alison Rheingold, Caitlin LeClair, and Jayson Seaman in *Middle School Journal*, September 2013 (Vol. 45, #1, p. 24-32), <http://bit.ly/18K1d2o>; Rheingold can be reached at arheingold@mcaulifferegional.org.

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6. Sixth Graders Look Everywhere for Academic Vocabulary

In this article in *The Reading Teacher*, Margaret McKeown, Amy Crosson, Nancy Artz, Cheryl Sandora, and Isabel Beck (University of Pittsburgh) describe “In the Media,” a way to get students to notice academic vocabulary in real-world contexts. In the Media is part of RAVE – Robust Academic Vocabulary Encounters – a program that teaches words chosen from a 3.5-million-word list taken from academic texts. (The ten that appear most frequently are *analysis, benefit, concept, derived, established, factors, indicate, legal, method, and occur.*)

In the Media is a voluntary activity that challenges students to find RAVE words in the world around them. When students see a word, they fill out a “word deposit slip” telling where

they found it and how it was used. Students earn a point for each deposit and ten points get them a homework pass, bonus points, extra computer time, or another reward.

McKeown and her colleagues studied the implementation of In the Media in two sixth-grade classrooms and wondered if only the highest-achieving students would take part. They found no correlation between achievement and participation – students who participated were from all levels of the achievement spectrum. The main driver of participation seemed to be social, and peer chemistry varied from class to class. The researchers tried a “Double Points Challenge”, offering two points for every word spotted, and this was successful in boosting participation.

Where did students find words? The most common source (for 43% of words) was literature: in *Anne Frank: Diary of a Young Girl* they found *sustained* and *traditions*. The *Twilight* series and *The Hunger Games* were also hot spots. Television was an active source: *isolated* thunderstorms in a weather forecast, “It is hard to *sustain* the flavor” on the Food Network, and various legal terms in *NCIS* and *Harry’s Law*.

“The most heartening signs that students were really tuning in to words in their world were the unlikely sources of encounters they reported,” say McKeown *et al.* “This kind of evidence suggests that students were developing an awareness of words even in brief, passing nonacademic contexts. These included:

- *Consume* in a silica packet inside a newly purchased purse (“do not consume”);
- *Drama* in the word dramatization in the corner of a Clinique TV commercial;
- *Dominant* in sports broadcasts (dominant players);
- *Unique* in a church service (“Everyone has a unique relationship to God”);
- *Mutual* in Facebook pages (you can have a mutual friend);
- *Criteria* on a school poster about the criteria for Student of the Month;
- *Potential* on a crystal growing kit (potential for burning);
- *Decline* in the amount of first-class mail, spotted in a parent’s *Mail Pro* magazine.

Sometimes teachers had to dig for the meaning and context and redirect students. Three students reported encountering the word *suspend* watching a football game on TV. “The lights at the field were *suspended*,” wrote the first. “The power *suspended* at the field,” wrote the second. “They had to *suspend* the football game because the power went out,” wrote the third, clarifying what had really happened.

Did all this noticing and reporting improve students’ knowledge and understanding of academic vocabulary? Looking at pre- and post-test results, McKeown and her colleagues found a significant positive relationship between In the Media participation and word mastery. The more RAVE words students found, the better they did on the post-test.

Students also got a vivid sense of the multiple meanings and connotations of words. For example, the definition students were given for *expose* was, “If you *expose* something, you let it show or make it known.” Here are some of the contexts that students found:

- Miners blasting off a mountain to *expose* coal.
- Students being *exposed* to different styles of music.
- *Exposing* someone for mistreating a dog.

- “You feel foolish, *exposed*, stupid,” from *Stargirl*
- “He felt *exposed* along the bare edge of the gorge,” from *Warriors: Firestar’s Quest*

There was another benefit to In the Media: students got multiple experiences with each word in a variety of contexts, which McKeown and her colleagues believe was another reason their word knowledge improved so much.

“In the Media: Expanding Students’ Experience with Academic Vocabulary” by Margaret McKeown, Amy Crosson, Nancy Artz, Cheryl Sandora, and Isabel Beck in *The Reading Teacher*, September 2013 (Vol. 67, #1, p. 45-53), <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/trtr.1179/abstract>; McKeown can be reached at mckeown@pitt.edu.

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7. Preventing Technology from Taking Over the Writing Process

In this article in *The Reading Teacher*, Tracy Coskie (Western Washington University) and Michelle Hornof (a Bellingham, WA elementary teacher) say that when technology is used in writing instruction, teachers should engage students in real writing tasks and focus first on the writer, then on the writing, and only then on the technology. Stamina, ideas, voice, and craft – these are the core elements of the writer’s workshop. Coskie and Hornof have a five-point acronym for maintaining effective writing instruction and preventing “tech takeover” – E-BEST:

- *Embed technology in writing content.* “Sometimes it is tempting to dream up flashy projects for our student writers as an excuse to use a new tool or program,” say Coskie and Hornof. “... Instead, consider first how technology can be embedded in the work you are already doing in writing workshop.” A program as straightforward as Microsoft Word might be the best platform for a photo essay.

- *Busy does not mean purposeful.* Students can be highly engaged in various aspects of computers but stray from their core purpose. For example, Coskie and Hornof noticed students working on a typing program and racing to meet its goals by hunting and pecking faster and faster – thereby reinforcing bad habits at the keyboard. Students working in Microsoft Word can spend hours playing around with Word Art, Clipart, photo borders, background colors, fonts, and font colors and lose sight of what they are trying to create.

- *Keep a critical Eye, exploiting tech’s potential and watching for problems.* For example, students can use Prezis to give a nice sense of how details fit into the whole, but audience members can get dizzy if there’s too much zooming in and out. Teachers need to learn the potential and pitfalls of programs and guide students to use them effectively.

- *Promote Social interaction.* Coskie and Hornof suggest using the “each one teach one” approach when introducing new technology, exploiting the interactive potential and getting more students actively involved. “One of the hallmarks of a strong writer’s workshop is that it is a supportive social environment,” they say, “and this approach to technology helps to create that environment.”

- *Teach technology explicitly.* Students will need some aspects taught directly – for example, downloading pictures from a camera and saving them onto the computer. Coskie and Hornof recommend a mid-workshop tech tip – partway through the workshop, give a three-minute tip on one aspect of technology and add it to a growing chart of skills and techniques on which students can draw as they work. This also allows the teacher to check for understanding and re-teach to certain students if necessary.

“E-Best Principles: Infusing Technology into the Writing Workshop” by Tracy Coskie and Michelle Hornof in *The Reading Teacher*, September 2013 (Vol. 67, #1, p. 54-58), <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/TRTR.1189/abstract>; the authors can be reached at tracy.coskie@wwu.edu and michelle.hornof@bellingshamschools.org.

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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 43 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 64 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).

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Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
AMLE Magazine
ASCA School Counselor
ASCD SmartBrief/Public Education NewsBlast
Better Evidence-Based Education
Center for Performance Assessment Newsletter
District Administration
ED Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Update/Curriculum Update
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
Essential Teacher
Go Teach
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Educational Review
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Journal of Staff Development
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Knowledge Quest
Middle School Journal
NASSP Journal
NJEA Review
Perspectives
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Responsive Classroom Newsletter
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
Teacher
Teachers College Record
Teaching Children Mathematics
Teaching Exceptional Children/Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The District Management Journal
The Language Educator
The Learning Principal/Learning System/Tools for Schools
The New York Times
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Time
Wharton Leadership Digest