

Marshall Memo 831

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
April 6, 2020

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Quotes of the Week

“Typing LOL is not the same as actually laughing out loud.”

Alana Semuels, “Does Remote Work Actually Work?” in *Time*, April 6/13, 2020, p. 46

“This is my 16th year teaching, and I feel like I’m a first-year teacher. The amount of work and new things that I’m encountering on a daily basis is astounding.”

Gloria Nicodemi, New York City high-school science teacher, quoted in “Teachers’ Herculean Task: Moving 1.1 Million Children to Online School” by David Chen in *The New York Times*, March 30, 2020, <https://nyti.ms/3bUfe2R>

“When hurricanes, wildfires, and now the coronavirus upend our way of life, they call for everybody, literally every individual, to step into the breach. Not just first responders or caregivers, not only state governors or national leaders, but all of us... In good times, we can rely more on our boss or others to get things done, but that’s no longer enough. It is our own leadership moment, too. We are all in charge.”

Michael Useem, University of Pennsylvania Wharton School, in “It’s Our Leadership Moment” in *Knowledge Wharton*, March 30, 2020, <https://whr.tn/3dW7X4p>

“Don’t worry if you are not the perfect homeschooling parent; don’t worry if you are torn between working at home and helping your kids. Don’t let your kids spend nine hours a day doing schoolwork online – cut them off and tell the teacher it was too much. Don’t let these days be joyless for your kids.”

Jennifer Gallagher, Long Beach, NY school superintendent, in a message to parents, quoted in “How Much Home Teaching Is Too Much? Schools Differ in Demands on Parents” by Christina Samuels in *Education Week*, April 2, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2Xcyfti>

1. Maintaining Relationships with Students While Physically Separated

In this *Edutopia* article, Sarah Gonser reports on strategies she curated from interviews with teachers about how they stay connected with their students during school closures:

- *Frequently saying hello* – Several teachers emphasized the importance of communicating, by video if possible, that you’re thinking of students, care for them, and miss them. For students without video access, a phone call is a good substitute.

- *Maintaining morning meetings* – This might be a video of announcements and daily content, with students chiming in, or a recorded meeting that students can watch asynchronously.

- *“Temperature” checks* – One high-school teacher is using Schoology to have his students report on their state of mind: thumb up, thumb sideways (meh), or thumb down. As part of homework, another teacher asks students to check in on a classmate and report back to her by e-mail, text, or Skype. Other teachers are using forms like the one developed by the Association for Middle Level Educators <https://bit.ly/2yvRUdl>.

- *Snail-mail pen pals, phone pals, or virtual turn and talk* – One third-grade teacher uses the Zoom breakout room feature to have students discuss a question in small groups and follows up with one-on-one sessions with students, having them read aloud for a few minutes. At the low-tech end of the spectrum, some teachers are encouraging students to call each other on a rotating basis, or sending home paper, envelopes, and stamps for students to write letters to each other.

- *Creating virtual “tables”* – A North Carolina eighth-grade English teacher is using Google Classroom to get groups of 4-5 students (randomly assigned) discussing assignments, asking each other questions, and staying connected.

- *Including parents* – This same teacher checks in with parents via e-mail every day with questions like “How are you?” and “Do you need anything?” Another teacher connects with parents with the messaging platform Remind or, for parents who don’t have text messaging, a dedicated Google Voice phone line.

- *Naming and processing emotions* – Social isolation, cabin fever, and disrupted routines may be freaking out students, and many teachers are providing avenues for kids to express and explore their thoughts, feelings, and worries – individually or with classmates. As students share, teachers watch for those who are having the most difficulty and following up with individual dialogue and perhaps a counseling referral.

“7 Ways to Maintain Relationships During Your School Closure” by Sarah Gonser in *Edutopia*, March 25, 2020, <https://edut.to/2JKmLW4>

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2. Suggestions for Online Teaching

In this paper in *One Trusted Adult*, consultants Brooklyn Raney and Ryan Donaher suggest guidelines for working online with middle- and high-school students in ways that build trust and maintain boundaries. Some excerpts, directly quoted as noted:

- *Clarify intent.* “I care about your health, happiness, safety, and success, and our inability to meet in person doesn’t change that. I believe a routine and a sense of normalcy will help us during this unprecedented time.”

- *Set up for success.* This includes having a daily routine with students, dressing like you’re going to school, sitting at a table, and asking students how you can help them.

- *Build a safe virtual space.* “Do not assume your students will automatically bring classroom norms with them into this venue. Take time to reiterate all of the rules that still apply, and any additional ones that need to be set up in order to protect the safe space needed to learn. Ask for their contributions and feedback to the list.”

- *Be fully present.* “What students will notice more than anything is whether or not you are really with them.” That means not being visibly distracted by phones and other events.

- *Model vulnerability.* “There is no need to pretend you know what you are doing. Ask for their patience and understanding, request their help, and model learning something new at a rapid pace and delivering it before it is fully tested.”

- *Create opportunities to contribute.* “Seek opportunities for them to lead, teach, inspire, and support each other virtually.”

- *Provide structure and predictability.* “Beyond your curriculum and content, consider the fringe moments, the intentional and unintentional connectors that happen in your classroom, that can be creatively translated to your online space.”

- *Reassure and encourage.* “Try to say every name of each of your students every day. Let them hear their name in a positive way, whether as a greeting or being called upon to share. Allow your students an opportunity to be seen, heard, valued, reassured, and encouraged. And never, ever underestimate your role as a trusted adult, even virtually, in the lives of these young people.”

- *Work with two shoulder partners.* “Continue interacting with young people as if their parents are on one of your shoulders, and your direct supervisor is on the other. Then, assume all your virtual interactions are being recorded – would you want this recording to go viral? For your safety and security as an educator, and for the safety of your students, continue building trust with young people through the establishment of boundaries, and create educational moments you would be proud to share.”

“Tips for Maintaining Trust and Boundaries with Virtual Students” by Brooklyn Raney and Ryan Donaher in *One Trusted Adult*, March 2020; Donaher can be reached at ryan.donaher@gmail.com.

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3. Grading Dilemmas in the Time of Coronavirus

In this article in *Education Week*, Stephen Sawchuk covers the debate on whether students should get grades during school closures. On one hand, there's the unfairness of penalizing students who don't have computers and/or robust Internet access at home; on the other, there's the danger of communicating that students don't have to take school seriously while instruction is online. The current situation forces educators to consider all the reasons for giving grades: to motivate students to apply themselves; to give them feedback on proficient and less-than-proficient work; to report subject-area mastery to parents; for student-to-student comparisons (for college admission, for example); and more. Sawchuk reports on different approaches around the U.S.:

- *Mountain Empire* – This sprawling 1,700-student California district includes three Native American reservations, and there is a wide range of Internet access. Teachers are assigning interdisciplinary projects on topics of interest that students can work on over several days, but because of differences in Internet access, teacher-student interactions vary widely. Because of that, the district is recommending that as long as students participate, they should get the grades they were receiving in each subject before schools closed. Students who want to improve on previous grades have the option to do so.

- *Salem City* – In this small district in Virginia, every student has a Chromebook and virtually all have Internet access, thanks to 200 WiFi hotspots and a local cable company providing access to students whose families qualify for free and reduced-price meals. After spring break, teachers aim to cover the most essential of the remaining state standards for their subject via remote learning, and will give letter grades for students' work. Teachers have been asked to stagger instruction and assignments so students aren't slammed with too much work at once. At the end of the school year, students will be able to appeal grades they believe don't reflect their achievement, making the case that those grades should be counted as pass/fail and not be part of GPA calculations.

- *Highline* – This Washington district, whose students speak over 100 different languages, will give pass/no credit grades for the period of online learning and will give students who don't pass other opportunities to earn credit in the summer or later. Many colleges appear to be willing to accept pass/fail or pass/no credit reports.

- *Los Angeles* – The second-largest district in the U.S. says teachers should “continue to grade and give timely feedback to students,” but officials haven't yet decided what will go on transcripts.

- *New York City* expects teachers to give grades for remote work, but says there is flexibility to adapt if students don't have access to devices or outside learning supports.

- *New York City math teacher Bobson Wong* says, “I feel like the most important thing I want to accomplish right now, is to establish a routine in this environment and a sense of order and progress that we are actually moving forward, and this is not just 13 days of busywork.” Wong is finding the pace is slower because of the difficulty of checking for understanding and following up with students who are not getting it. He's leery of giving grades, but believes it's important to give students feedback on their level of mastery. “Grades aren't a judgment of

character,” he says, but students need to know if they need to do additional work to achieve mastery.

- *Arizona, Idaho, Illinois, Ohio, Oregon, Mississippi, Virginia, and Wisconsin* have waived various graduation requirements, including certain mandated courses, end-of-course exams, and minimum attendance hours. Many states are allowing districts to decide whether students have met graduation requirements. [New York state announced on April 6, 2020 that spring Regents exams have been cancelled.]

- *In Georgia*, more than 70,000 students have signed a petition asking the state to void fourth-quarter GPAs. Says organizer Ellison Gonzalez, “Without the proper help from teachers or having the ability to actively question teachers and receiving rapid responses, students are not truly learning, but rather grabbing the information temporarily.”

“Grading Students During the Coronavirus Crisis: What’s the Right Call?” by Stephen Sawchuk in *Education Week*, April 1, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2UKzQ8a>

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4. Dealing with Zoom Problems

These articles in *The New York Times* and *Education Week* report on malicious harassment of Zoom meetings and classes in recent weeks. Some of the “zoombombing” interruptions are by organized groups using a variety of platforms (including Discord, an app popular in right-wing circles) to plan attacks, while others are by teenagers who say they are stressed out by the schoolwork their teachers are assigning (classroom management problems that have migrated to the online world). Zoom, which had 76 million first-time installs in March, has scrambled to provide safeguards and advice to users and respond to concerns about data privacy.

Here are Massachusetts teacher Megan Mullaly’s suggestions for K-12 educators. They’ve been widely shared on Twitter (spotted in the *Education Week* article linked below):

- Do not post your link publicly.
- Consider using a password for entry to your classes.
- Use the Waiting Room feature to screen new arrivals.
- If possible, have another teacher co-host to manage waiting room, comments, muting.
- Turn off Private Chat (this eliminates chats among students but leaves on group chats).
- Turn off Screen Sharing (it can be added back once norms are established).
- Turn on the “remove uninvited participant” and/or “put participant on hold.”
- Lock your meeting once everyone is present.
- Explore other settings, including Chime Upon Entry, Muting All, Annotations, etc.
- Use Zoom for check-ins, games, and social interaction but not for direct teaching.
- Have some practice Zooms with friends and co-workers to check out the features.

“As Zoom’s Use Soars, So Does Its Abuse by Harassers” by Taylor Lorenz and Davey Alba in *The New York Times*, April 4, 2020, <https://nyti.ms/2Xg6i3M> and “Zoom Use Skyrockets

During Coronavirus Pandemic, Prompting Wave of Problems for Schools” by Mark Lieberman in *Education Week*, April 3, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3bWkqmQ>

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5. A New York City K-8 School’s Mission for Right Now

Franklin Headley shares the mission that his music-themed school in Queens has adopted for the current era (adapted from the goals articulated by principal Steve Evangelista at Harlem Link Charter School):

- Ensure a community of care for all students, families, staff members, and alumni.
- Improve our remote learning environment so that it simulates as much of the regular school day experience as possible, in order to mitigate the loss of learning and community, while carefully instituting a virtual school that will not overwhelm the resources of families and staff.
- Provide targeted supports for at-risk students and families.

VOICE Charter School’s Mission for Online Teaching, personal communication from Franklin Headley, April 6, 2020; Headley can be reached at FranklinHeadley@voicecharterschool.org.

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6. Animated Graphics on a Virus’s Exponential Spread

This *Washington Post* article by Harry Stevens <https://wapo.st/3dZbdfj> has several animated graphics that show how a virus spreads exponentially.

“Why Outbreaks Like Coronavirus Spread Exponentially, and How to ‘Flatten the Curve’” by Harry Stevens in *The Washington Post*, March 14, 2020

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7. Seven Ways to Optimize the Work of a Leadership Team

In this article in *School Administrator*, author/consultant Douglas Reeves suggests how superintendents’ and principals’ cabinets can avoid common mistakes and greatly enhance their impact:

- *Establish a charter.* By this Reeves means an explicit agreement on what will be handled in meetings – and what won’t. It should be clear, for example, that routine updates and information sharing will be handled in writing before each meeting, along with the agenda and key items up for discussion. Each leadership team member is expected to read prep material before the meeting and show up prepared to ask questions and make cogent arguments for and against.

- *Share responsibility for enforcing norms.* Reeves suggests that the “norm-minder” role should be rotated on a random basis so every team member regularly takes on the job of making sure that meetings start and end on time, people stick to the topic and use real evidence, and everyone abides by other agreed-upon expectations (which should be posted in the meeting room).

- *Record decisions and commitments in real time.* Writing down and displaying key agreements during the meeting clarifies what’s been decided and who is responsible for doing what. There also needs to be a record of ideas that were rejected or deferred. “If you have heard the phrase ‘I thought we already decided that...,’” says Reeves, “then it’s an indication you need to record every decision and maintain it on a permanent decision log that is easily accessible by every member.” Key decisions should also be shared with other colleagues so they know what the leadership team has been up to.

- *Require evidence that is clear, transparent, and traceable.* Bad decisions are sometimes the result of giving too much credence to statements like, “Everyone is saying...” Pushing back and asking for evidence can give offense – “Don’t you trust me?” This whole dynamic can be avoided if there’s a clear expectation that any report of educator or community sentiment must be backed up with solid evidence – perhaps from an anonymous staff poll.

- *Ask for mutually exclusive decision alternatives.* It’s not a good idea to deliberate on only one possible solution, says Reeves – for example, hiring a new colleague or deciding on a technology purchase. There may be the appearance of “buy-in” on the decision, but it may not have been thought through and could very well be unwise. Better to insist on at least two alternatives, with pros and cons of each spelled out in a compact memorandum before the meeting. “Every option has disadvantages and risks,” says Reeves. “Leaders never make perfect decisions, but they can choose thoughtfully among alternative risks.”

- *Say it once – but say it.* An important question should be asked at the end of each meeting: “Is anything left unsaid?” The clear understanding needs to be that if a concern isn’t raised and resolved at this point, it’s over and won’t be raised in the hallway or parking lot.

- *Make sure every member of the leadership team can carry the flag.* There’s a tendency for people to tune out when agenda items outside their area are discussed; when asked about these after the meeting, a team member might say, “That’s not my department.” Every member should get involved in discussions, ask “naïve” questions to get clarity, and be able to explain every decision to colleagues in the school or district.

“Supercharged Cabinet Meetings” by Douglas Reeves in *School Administrator*, April 2020 (Vol. 77, #4, pp. 24-27), <https://bit.ly/3aOlj0P>; Reeves can be reached at douglas.reeves@creativeleadership.net.

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8. Changing Teacher-Centric Habits

(Originally titled “Your Words Matter”)

In this *Educational Leadership* article, teacher/author/consultant Mike Anderson lists reasons that many classroom discussions lack substance and involve only a few students:

- It’s not psychologically safe to share ideas.
- Desks are in rows, making eye contact with classmates difficult.
- Students haven’t done enough prep work to confidently chime in.
- Students may believe the goal is coming up with comments that please the teacher.

This last one is especially unhelpful with adolescents, who may be teased if they're seen as brown-nosing the teacher.

Anderson says many teachers have gotten into habits, often with the best intentions, that degrade the quality of discussions. His suggestions:

- *Change language habits.* Statements like, *I want to hear some of your ideas. Here's a question to answer for me...* or *I'm looking for lots of students to share their thinking...*

give the unintentional message that the point is for students to share with the teacher instead of each other. As the discussion progresses, the teacher-centric dynamic is reinforced if students hear, *Thanks for sharing! I liked the way you phrased that,* or *I appreciate your participation.* Better to say, *What are some of your ideas? Here's a question to consider.* and *If a variety of students share ideas, we'll have a richer class discussion.*

- *Stop echoing back what students say.* But isn't this a way to show you're listening, validate students' contributions, and amplify soft-spoken students' comments? The problem is that it increases teacher talk and tells students they don't need to listen to their classmates because the teacher is going to restate their comments. What's more, an idea that isn't echoed must not be worthwhile. Better to make eye contact, nod or smile, and if a student is speaking too softly, cup a hand behind your ear. It's also helpful if students are sitting in a circle so they can see and hear each other.

- *Reduce judgment.* If a student's contribution is greeted by, *Yes, Jake! That's such an awesome example!* students who are unsure of their ideas may hold back. "This kind of praise can also set a competitive tone," says Anderson, "where students are vying for the best responses to please the teacher." Better to ask, *Who has an idea to share?* and follow up by emphasizing your desire to get lots of ideas on the table, interjecting as appropriate to keep things on track: *Let's see if we can refocus on the main idea of our discussion.*

"Your Words Matter" by Mike Anderson in *Educational Leadership*, April 2020 (Vol. 77, #7, pp. 22-26), <https://bit.ly/3dZEx5G>; Anderson is at mike@leadinggreatlearning.com.

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9. Alexis Wiggins on Group Grading of Discussions

(Originally titled "A Better Way to Assess Discussions")

In this *Educational Leadership* article, teacher/author Alexis Wiggins remembers her surprise when in 2006 she moved to a school that graded classroom discussions in a radically different way. Students were given a rubric for discussions with this statement up front:

Because this is a team effort, there will be a team grade. The whole class will get the SAME grade.

Wiggins loved what this did for her class discussions. "Like a soccer team," she says, "we were working in concert with one another, no one 'player' hogging the proverbial ball and sucking up all the action." In her previous teaching assignments, Wiggins had counted class participation as ten percent of students' grades based on each student's "volume" of participation. Now the grade wasn't about how much students spoke but the *quality* of their contributions and how well they worked with their classmates.

Wiggins realized that in her previous classes, it was possible for a student to get an A in participation for “putting on a one-man intellectual show while cutting off classmates’ comments and making everything about his own ideas.” Students tended not to listen to each other as they vied to get checked off for getting their thoughts in. But with a group grade, what is assessed is the quality and effectiveness of an extremely important life skill: *collaboration*. Tellingly, three skills prominently mentioned in the World Economic Forum’s Future of Jobs Report for 2020 are: people management, coordinating with others, and emotional intelligence.

Since leaving the school with group-graded discussions, Wiggins has developed what she calls Spider Web Discussions. She’s maintained the core belief that every voice counts and should be heard equally, but now keeps track of individual students’ contributions for comment-writing and conferences. She’s also made the group grades formative and doesn’t count them on report cards. Students still care about the group grade because of the intrinsic enjoyment of really good class discussions.

Wiggins also started using Equity Maps, an app available for iPads that allows teachers to map and voice-record discussions and report out how much individual students – and groups of students – are talking. She also recommends Parlay, an app that tracks digital discussions and allows students to take on pseudonyms, which makes them less afraid of offering ideas that might be branded as “stupid” or “wrong” by their friends.

Below is Wiggins’s revision of the rubric she encountered in 2006. Students know what they’re collectively working on and debrief at the end to reach consensus on the class’s grade:

- Everyone has participated in a meaningful and substantive way, more or less equally.
- A sense of balance and order prevails, one speaker and one idea at a time
- The discussion is lively, neither hyper nor boring.
- The discussion builds and there is an attempt to resolve questions and issues.
- Big ideas and deep insights are not brushed over.
- Loud or verbose students don’t dominate; shy and quiet students are encouraged.
- Students listen carefully and respectfully to each other; no phones or daydreaming.
- There are no sarcastic or glib comments.
- Everyone is clearly understood, with requests for repetition if an idea is not understood.
- Students take risks and dig deep for meaning and insight.
- Students back up what they say with examples and quotes from texts and journals.
- At least one literary feature and new vocabulary word is used correctly each time.

The class gets an A for doing all these at an impressively high level, an F if the discussion is a real mess, B, C, and D for gradations in between. Students know that unprepared or unwilling students bring the whole class’s grade down.

“A Better Way to Assess Discussions” by Alexis Wiggins in *Educational Leadership*, April 2020 (Vol. 77, #7, pp. 34-38), <https://bit.ly/2V4WyqA>; Wiggins can be reached at awiggins@ceelcenter.org.

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10. Notable Children’s Picturebooks

In this *Language Arts* feature, Cynthia Alaniz, Jane Bean-Folkes, Elizabeth Bemiss, Sue Corbin, Jeanne Fain, Rebecca Leigh, and Jennifer Summerlin share the Notable Children’s Books chosen from among 500 published in 2018. The selection criteria included appealing format, enduring quality, unique use of language, and inviting kids’ participation.

Picturebooks

- *Alma and How She Got Her Name* by Juana Martinez-Neal (Candlewick)
- *Baby Monkey, Private Eye* by Brian Selznick and David Serlin, illustrated by Brian Selznick (Scholastic)
- *A Big Mooncake for Little Star* by Grace Lin (Little, Brown)
- *Boy* by Phil Cummings, illustrated by Shane Devries (Kane Miller)
- *Crescent Moons and Pointed Minarets: A Muslim Book of Shapes* by Hena Kahn, illustrated by Mehrdokht Amini (Chronicle)
- *The Day You Begin* by Jacqueline Woodson, illustrated by Rafael López (Nancy Paulsen/Penguin)
- *Drawn Together* by Mihn Lê, illustrated by Dan Santat (Hyperion)
- *Dreamers* by Yuyi Morales (Neal Porter)
- *Imagine* by Juan Felipe Herrera, illustrated by Lauren Castillo (Candlewick)
- *Quiet* by Tomie dePaola (Simon & Schuster)
- *The Word Collector* by Peter Reynolds (Orchard)

(Novels and poetry selections next week)

“The 2019 Notable Children’s Books in the English Language Arts” by Cynthia Alaniz, Jane Bean-Folkes, Elizabeth Bemiss, Sue Corbin, Jeanne Fain, Rebecca Leigh, and Jennifer Summerlin in *Language Arts*, March 2020 (Vol. 97, #4, pp. 259-273), no e-link available

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*If you have feedback or suggestions,
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About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and other educators very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 50 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, writer, and consultant lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 60 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through more than a hundred articles each week, and selects 5-10 that have the greatest potential to improve teaching, leadership, and learning. He then writes a brief summary of each article, pulls out several striking quotes, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the Memo to subscribers every Monday evening (with occasional breaks; there are 50 issues a year). Every week there's a podcast and HTML version as well.

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Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

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