Marshall Memo 259

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
November 10, 2008

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Quotes of the Week

"Difficulty is the one excuse that history never accepts."

Edward R. Murrow, legendary CBS newscaster, quoted in *Winners Never Cheat, Even in Difficult Times* by Jon Huntsman (Wharton School Publishing, 2005), excerpted in the *Wharton Leadership Digest*, November 2008

"You can accomplish anything in life, provided that you do not mind who gets the credit."

President Harry Truman (*ibid.*)

"If I ever hear the word 'hard-wired' used to describe anything other than an electrical system – the human brain, for instance – I'm going to scream."

Sharon Begley (see item #1)

"Imagine that you need glasses to drive, but you must take your road test without wearing them. You have just identified an accommodation that you need. Wearing glasses does not make a bad driver better or make driving easier; wearing glasses makes driving accessible."

MaryAnn Byrnes in "Removing Barriers to Learning: A Primer" in *Principal Leadership*, November 2008 (Vol. 9, #3, p. 34)

"Here's an implication of the Holocaust: that adults don't protect innocent children… *[T]hat* is a major reason why you don't teach this to young kids."

U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum education staff member (see item #2)

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1. Are Boys "Naturally" Better at Math and Science?

In this punchy *Newsweek* column, Sharon Begley attacks the widespread notion that girls are less able in science and math. "If I ever hear the word 'hard-wired' used to describe anything other than an electrical system – the human brain, for instance – I'm going to scream," she writes. "…[T]he dogma of the hard-wired brain has endured for an inexcusably long time given the evidence against it." Begley cites two research findings:

- We know that the left side of the brain's motor cortex controls the right side of the body and the right side controls the body's left side, but when stroke victims receive therapy, they can use the left motor cortex to control the left side of the body, or vice-versa.
- When people are blindfolded for a week and receive intense tactile stimulation (including feeling Braille dots), their visual cortex switches from processing stimuli from the eyes to processing stimuli from the fingertips. This also happens in the brains of people who are blind from birth.

"If not even a structure as fundamental as the visual cortex is hard-wired," says Begley, "can we please retire the claim that boy brains are hard-wired for math and girl brains are not?"

So what accounts for the small number of U.S. women earning doctorates in math (29 percent), holding tenure-track appointments in university math departments (19 percent), and winning the Fields Medal, the math "Nobel" (zero percent)? It's cultural, says Begley. In countries that send a different message – that you can get good at science and math by hard work – females do far better. In the International Mathematical Olympiad, a grueling nine-hour competition, the Bulgarian, German, and Russian teams have historically had strong female representation, while the U.S. team had no girls for 23 straight years. "Whether mathematical ability is identified depends on social, cultural and other environmental factors," says Janet Mertz of the University of Wisconsin. Nurturing and support also matter; high-achieving girls got extracurricular support and practiced their math problem-solving strategies in their free time. "Countries whose girls lag behind boys tend to see math as for nerds only, which drives away many U.S. girls (who are more sensitive to social status than boys)," says Begley.

Perhaps the most telling evidence is the stark difference between the composition of Math Olympiad teams from two pairs of countries that share a common gene pool. The former East Germany sent 18 girls to the Math Olympiad, while the former West Germany sent none; Slovakia sent 22, while the Czech Republic sent 10. "It's hard to see that as anything but the result of the starkly different social and other environmental forces in each country," says Begley.

As cultural beliefs have gradually shifted, there has been marked progress in the U.S. In 1983, the Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth found a 13-to-1 boy/girl ratio of children under 13 scoring 700 or higher on the math section of the SAT. In 2005, the ratio had fallen to 2.8 to 1. "Nothing in the brain that is 'hard-wired' can change that quickly," says Begley.

Brain imaging studies are beginning to reveal how social and cultural messages can disable performance. In a 2007 study by Maryjane Wraga of Smith College, students were told that girls are less able at spatial intelligence just before they took a challenging test – and girls proceeded to do poorly on the part of a test that measured spatial ability. Brain scans revealed that as they took the test, girls had higher activity in their anterior cingulate (the site of negative emotions such as anger and sadness) and lower activity in the parts of the brain that handle visual and complex working memory. "Anxiety triggered by social forces had muted activity required for spatial reasoning," says Begley. "Scale that up to years of messages telling girls they're intrinsically inferior and then try to argue that a hard-wired brain rather than the messages society sends explains the math gender gap."

"Math Is Hard, Barbie Said" by Sharon Begley in *Newsweek*, Oct. 27, 2008 (p. 57)

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2. At What Age Should Students Learn About the Holocaust?

In this troubling *Teachers College Record* article, University of Wisconsin/Madison professor Simone Schweber reports on her in-depth study of a suburban third-grade teacher's curriculum unit on the Holocaust. Schweber sat in on classes, examined teaching materials, read students' journals, interviewed the teacher before, during, and after the unit, and spoke to a selection of students and parents, seeking to answer the basic question: were these students too young to be learning about such horrific events?

Schweber introduces her study by naming two ways that teachers change the "intended curriculum" (i.e., state standards): the first is "gatekeeping" – wielding their professional discretion to keep certain mandated topics out of their classrooms; the second is "curricular creep" – introducing topics that they care about personally, even though they're not in the official curriculum. This article is a story of curricular creep: the teacher, a 25-year veteran public-school teacher, recipient of many teaching awards, revered in the community, felt strongly that it was important that his third graders have an early awareness of the Holocaust. The teacher, who is Jewish, believed that teachers should not shy away from taboo subjects, even with young children.

The three-week Holocaust unit was literature-based, and Schweber says it was masterfully taught, engaging every child in a powerful way. Each day, after mid-morning snack, the teacher read a carefully chosen storybook aloud, led a class discussion, and had students write in journals and engage in an activity to extend that day's material. Among the books were: *The Terrible Things* (Bunting, 1995), *Star of Fear, Star of Hope* (Hoestlandt, 1995), *Hiding from the Nazis* (Adler, 1997), *Hilde and Eli: Children of the Holocaust* (Adler, 1994), *The Number on My Grandfather's Arm* (Adler, 1987), and *Anne Frank* (McDonough,

1997). Students learned about the Holocaust in depth, without sugar-coating, and reacted with horror, revulsion, fascination, and incomprehension. The one Jewish child in the class, Lila, had a particularly strong reaction and reported having nightmares during the unit – although she and her mother, both of whom Schweber interviewed, were supportive of the unit.

Schweber concluded that some students understood the full horror of the Nazi death camps and became (appropriately) depressed for a while; other students didn't understand and gained little from the unit ("What happened to their pets?" one of them asked). Schweber concludes, "[I]f teaching about atrocity yields either depression or incomprehension among students, then the rationale for teaching about it to young children must be based on an answer to the question, 'Why now?'"… Despite both the teacher's eloquence on that very question and the parents' defense of their children's 'occasional nightmares for the right reasons,' I cannot find a compelling answer." Either way, she says, there were "no wins." At the same time, a good many students came away with some very disturbing messages. Schweber interviewed a staffer from the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, who said: "Here's an implication of the Holocaust: that adults don't protect innocent children… *[T]hat* is a major reason why you don't teach this to young kids."

The bottom line: Schweber believes that teaching about the Holocaust should wait until grades 6-10. [Another bottom line: principals need to monitor curriculum gatekeeping and curriculum creep, bringing into closer alignment the intended, taught, and learned curriculum.]

"'What Happened to Their Pets?': Third Graders Encounter the Holocaust" by Simone Schweber in *Teachers College Record*, October 2008 (Vol. 110, #10, p. 2073-2115), no e-link

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3. Mentoring New Teachers – What Best Practice Looks Like

In this thoughtful article in the *American Journal of Education*, University of Michigan education professor Sharon Schwille reports on the insights she gained from studying the work of 26 pairings of mentors and novice teachers in the U.S., England, and China. She believes that mentoring, if it's done right, will "engage novice teachers in the intellectual work of teaching" and "instill in them the intellectual habits that foster student learning." Here are the ways mentors can make this happen:

• *Coaching and stepping in* – The most direct form of mentoring happens while the novice is actually teaching; the mentor gives input via facial expressions, mouthed words, or a quick consultation on the fly ("This just happened, what do you think?").

• *Teaching together* – The mentor and mentee co-teach a lesson as partners, sometimes splitting the class in two halfway through the lesson, and then debrief afterward.

• *Demonstration teaching* – The mentor shows how it's done by teaching a class or a segment of a class to students, focusing on a particular area in which the mentee needs help. One mentor conducted a demonstration without students present, acting out a series of teaching moves for the mentee.

• *Brief interactions* – Some mentors have quick, spontaneous conversations with their mentees before or after teaching to pass along insights or ask questions. One researcher calls this "mentoring on the move."

• *Mentoring and debriefing sessions* – These were 20-60-minute talks about lessons and the novice's progress as a teacher, usually happening once a week. The mentor covers specific material, but also watches for openings in the conversation to inject observations and reactions – for example, one mentor's belief that the teacher needed to modify the instructional materials to better suit a group of students.

• *Co-planning* – The mentor and mentee plan lessons or units together, with the mentor guiding the process and critiquing the plan as it emerges.

• *Videotape analysis* – Mentor and mentee sit together to watch a lesson videotape, reflecting on what the teacher was thinking at each point, why certain decisions were made, and how students reacted.

• *Writing* – Some mentors and mentees use journal writing as a way to share ideas and critiques. "Writing was a tool for reflection and a means of working out ideas over time," says Schwille. "Mentors and novices could exchange their thoughts, interpretations, insights, and musings about the immediate teaching and learning in their classrooms, as well as about issues that touch broader educational communities. Novices' journals provided a unique window into their thinking and understandings."

Schwille concludes by pointing out two distinct types of mentoring: input that occurs "inside the action" (in-the-moment coaching, stepping in, co-teaching, and demonstration lessons) and input that occurs "outside the action" (quick conversations, mentoring and debriefing sessions, co-planning, videotape analysis, and writing). The most effective mentors use the full repertoire skillfully, geared to the specific learning needs of each mentee, using "bifocal vision" to attend to the here and now while thinking ahead to skills and knowledge the novice must acquire to become a master teacher.

"The Professional Practice of Mentoring" by Sharon Schwille in *American Journal of Education*, November 2008 (Vol. 115, #1, p. 139-167), no e-link available

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4. Putting a Stop to Sexual Harassment

In this column in *Principal Leadership*, Brigham Young University psychologists Ellie Young and Betty Ashbaker report that almost 80 percent of U.S. secondary-school students report that they have been sexually harassed. "This type of behavior has become so commonplace that many adolescents accept it as something everyone puts up with," say the authors. Girls are more likely to be physically harassed, while boys are most often victims of verbal harassment. Boys often find it more difficult to report harassment because of societal assumptions that they should enjoy sexual attention and handle problems themselves. Girls are more likely than boys to be harassed by adults. And students sometimes harass adults, especially lower-status employees such as cafeteria workers, custodians, and paraprofessionals.

It's common for adolescent perpetrators to be so egocentric that they don't understand how their victim feels. "They may confidently believe that they are not hurting anyone even when their actions have painful consequences for someone else," say Young and Ashbaker. "The line between good-natured interactions and harassment can be blurry among young adolescents for whom flirting and teasing are an evolving, sometimes intense part of their social development. If students are flirting and the interaction is mutually enjoyable without a sense of intimidation, it probably is not sexual harassment." But the minute the recipient feels uncomfortable, embarrassed, or threatened, the line has been crossed, even if that wasn't the other person's intent.

Here are Young and Ashbaker's suggestions for ways that school leaders should approach the issue of sexual harassment:

• *Define the problem, giving specific examples and non-examples*. It's important for students and staff to have a clear picture of what sexual harassment is and isn't. The simplest definition is unwanted and unwelcome sexual behavior, which includes:

- Physical behaviors such as touching that's uncomfortable, embarrassing, or offensive;
- Verbal harassment, including crude or sexually explicit language that creates an uncomfortable environment;
- Offensive jokes, comments, greetings, gestures, looks, teasing, or inappropriate name-calling ("Hey, babe," "hot stuff," "big stud," "fag");
- Starting or spreading sexual rumors;
- Sending mean or vulgar text messages, e-mails, or letters;
- Writing sexual graffiti on walls;
- Showing sexual drawings or pornography;
- A person in power requesting sexual favors in return for access to a popular club or peer group, a position on a team, or a higher grade.

"Victims of sexual harassment feel fearful, intimidated, manipulated, and overpowered," say Young and Ashbaker. They may also feel embarrassed, anxious, vulnerable, confused, and even depressed.

• *Clearly state that sexual harassment is unacceptable and spell out consequences*. This includes consequences for student infractions and consequences for adults who ignore or downplay harassment they witness.

• *Set up procedures for investigating claims of sexual harassment*. It's best to designate two staff members for this role, one male and one female. Staff should take reports of harassment seriously and never tell students to "just ignore the person and it will stop."

• *Specifically prohibit retaliation*. Students sometimes fail to report harassment because they fear they will be targeted by the perpetrator. They need to feel confident this won't happen.

• *Train staff and include skill-building and awareness in the curriculum*. Staff members can sometimes witness harassment without realizing what it is, so increased sensitivity should be part of training. In addition, staff should make a point of being present and vigilant in the

places where harassment most often happens – hallways, stairways, playgrounds, and cafeterias. Student training should include pro-social replacement behaviors.

• *Provide counseling and other resources for victims and perpetrators*. For students who have experienced harassment, this may include learning how to respond assertively and set boundaries with peers and adults. Young and Ashbaker say it's important for adolescents to get explicit instruction, including role-playing, in saying "Stop, I don't like that" assertively and clearly so peers really understand that the behavior in question is unwelcome. For harassers, this might include learning appropriate social skills, including apologizing and finding more acceptable ways to get attention.

"Addressing Sexual Harassment" by Ellie Young and Betty Ashbaker in *Principal Leadership*, November 2008 (Vol. 9, #3, p. 10-14, Middle School Edition), no e-link available. Young can be reached at ellie_young@byu.edu; related articles and handouts can be downloaded from http://www.nasponline.org/resources/principals. Guidelines for creating school policies are available at http://www.aauw.org/research/harassmentFreeHallways.cfm.

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5. High Expectations in Action

In this *Principal Leadership* article, University of Colorado/Boulder professor Neal Cross suggests some indicators of high expectations that principals might look for in classrooms:

• *Teachers explicitly state their expectations for student achievement*. Fuzzy expectations can't be high expectations.

• *Teachers give equal time to low- and high-achieving students*. Research shows that many teachers unconsciously smile more often at high-achieving students, are more pleasant toward them, praise them more often, give them more challenging questions and tasks, and give them more wait-time after asking questions. It takes a conscious effort to convey the same warmth and expectations to all students.

• *Teachers are explicit about the relationship between effort and achievement*. In other words, they teach that students are not just born smart but can get smart by applying effective effort. Low-achieving students often attribute school failure to factors beyond their control – a lack of innate intelligence, unfairly difficult assignments, or bad luck. It's vital that teachers "retrain" them, helping them attribute failure and difficulty to things they can control: studying hard enough and applying the correct learning strategy. "Teachers can help students understand that in most classes, students achieve good scores by listening, trying, trying again, reading, asking questions, paying attention, asking for help, being serious, and reading critically," says Cross. [Jeff Howard and his colleagues at the Efficacy Institute have done some excellent work on this subject. See http://tools.isovera.com/organizations.php3?action=printContentItem&orgid=58&typeID=622&sortField=alpha&templateID=2237&User_Session=25410bb621f6b70f6672f5a021531f3c for resources, including Jeff's paper, "An Attribution Primer."]

• *Teachers convey a powerful three-part message*: This is important. You can do it. I won't give up on you (Saphier et al. 2008).

"The Power of Expectations" by Neal Cross in *Principal Leadership*, November 2008 (Vol. 9, #3, p. 24-28, Middle School Edition), no e-link available; the author can be reached at neal.cross@colorado.edu.

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6. Advisory Groups Help Turn Around a Washington High School

In this *Principal Leadership* article, Joseph DiMartino and John Clarke of the Center for Secondary School Redesign describe an advisory program implemented by Granger High School (WA) and how it helped bring about dramatic improvements in student achievement. The program's goal was to have all students:

- Known well, personally and academically, by at least one staff member; principal Richard Esparza believes that students will work hard for an adult who cares about them;
- Pushed to increase reading and math achievement;
- Challenged to meet rigorous academic standards in an appropriate educational program;
- Experience community membership and develop and practice leadership;
- Have a strong transcript, a career pathway, a plan, and a portfolio by graduation.

To meet these goals, Granger's heterogeneous advisory groups meet for 30 minutes last period Monday through Thursday. Each advisory group loops, staying with the same certified staff member for four years. A considerable amount of advisory time is spent preparing for student-led conferences each semester, with students leading a parent through what they are learning and how they are progressing on their personalized learning plan. Before each conference, advisors touch base with all teachers, get a sense of how each student is doing, and prepare the student to do a good job in the conference. Advisors also keep track of any student with one or more grades below a C; these students are required to get extra help until their grades are all in the acceptable range.

"Advising does not come easy for all teachers," say DiMartino and Clarke, and they describe the school's support system for advisory group leaders and the active involvement of the principal. Teachers worked with the principal to develop a professional development program, including early dismissal every Friday to give staff members a chance to reflect and plan together. Teachers also write optional lesson plans for advisory sessions.

By the three criteria Granger established to assess its advisory program, it has been a smashing success: parent attendance at student-led conferences has risen to 100 percent; the percent of students meeting state standards has gone from 20 percent to 76 percent in reading, from 8 percent to 66 percent in writing, and from 4 percent to 31 percent in math; and the school's graduation rate has improved from 58 percent to 95 percent.

"The Heart of School" by Joseph DiMartino and John Clarke in *Principal Leadership*, November 2008 (Vol. 9, #3, p. 16-19, Middle School Edition), no e-link available; the authors can be reached at joedimartino@ccsr.us and jhclarke@gmavt.net.

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7. Successful Advisory Groups in Virginia

In this *Principal Leadership* article, John Brewer, Michelle Quirin, and Karrie Rinder Bryan describe how they implemented an advisory group program in their 1,250-student high school in Sterling, VA, using a baseball motif. Each "clubhouse" of 12 "players" was shaped to represent the overall student body and was led by a "manager" – a certified staff member. The "commissioner" – the principal – didn't lead a group but kept track of the whole operation and circulated during advisory-group times. Clubhouses met for 20 minutes every Tuesday and Wednesday morning between the first two instructional blocks.

The year before launching the program, the school spent a good deal of professional and committee time planning objectives, lesson plans, anticipatory sets, and closure activities for every clubhouse day. Staff decided to focus the program on three activities:

• *Goal-setting* – Each student developed measurable goals for each subject and for attendance, community service, and engagement in cocurricular programs.

• *Character development* – One of the planning subcommittees identified key values – including trust, integrity, understanding, empathy, and respect – and wrote lesson plans with real-life scenarios to prompt discussion about responsible decision-making. In the first year of implementation, however, staff had difficulty getting students involved in high-quality discussions about values and character. The level of trust wasn't high enough, so the school implemented the Raising Student Voice and Participation (RSVP) program in the second year to build a sense of community.

• *Sustained silent reading* – Students were asked to read silently during each Wednesday clubhouse meeting. At first, the school identified one book – *The Acorn People* by Ron Jones – and gave copies to all students and staff. But it turned out that having all students read the same book was not successful, so the school purchased hundreds of high-interest adolescent titles and gave students choices. This significantly improved the quality of the weekly silent reading time.

The authors (the principal, assistant principal, and a teacher) believe that the clubhouse program was directly responsible for reducing the school's failing grades by 14 percent – without an increase in the number of Ds. For Hispanic students, the reduction in failing grades was even more significant: 29 percent.

"The Home Field Advantage" by John Brewer, Michelle Quirin, and Karrie Rinder Bryan in *Principal Leadership*, November 2008 (Vol. 9, #3, p. 20-23, Middle School Edition), no e-link available; Brewer can be reached at john.brewer@loudoun.k12.va.us.

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8. An Enhanced Homeroom Period in a California High School

In this *Principal Leadership* article, California high-school principal Julie Vitale describes how she and her colleagues transformed the school's homeroom period into an advisory program that is now in its third year. Each fall, incoming freshmen in this 2,800-student school are assigned to a homeroom of not more than 30 students. These groups stay together for four years with the same mentor teacher, meeting for 38 minutes every Wednesday morning.

Teachers created the homeroom curriculum, preparing materials for lessons on topics including: getting to know each other, team-building, conflict resolution, tolerance, sexual orientation, immigration and migration, race and ethnicity, religious diversity, social activism, goal-setting, Cornell note-taking, drug awareness, bullying, health, and financial planning. Initially the plan was for all grades to focus on the same topic at the same time, but the school is now differentiating by grade level, deciding on topics that seem most relevant and developmentally appropriate. A teacher has taken on the job of coordinating topics and materials, and gets an extra prep period to carry out these duties. All lessons are stored on a website that is accessible to all teachers.

Vitale says that another important function of homerooms is that immediately after each progress report, quarter report, and semester report, each student meets with his or her mentor to review grades, celebrate successes, and flag areas that need extra help. Mentors also review the four-year plans that students draft during their freshman year.

"Homeroom: An Updated Classic" by Julie Vitale in *Principal Leadership*, November 2008 (Vol. 9, #3, p. 24-27, High School Edition), no e-link available; Vitale can be reached at jvitale@cnusd.k12.ca.us.

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9. Short Items:

a. One more election resource – McNeil/Lehrer Productions at PBS has a series of five-minute videos featuring the conventions, the debates, the ground game, campaign strategy, and the recent economic crisis. It's at http://www.pbs.org/newshour/thenews.

Spotted in a letter to *Education Week*, Nov. 5, 2008 (Vol. 28, #11, p. 27)

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b. After-school program resources – The National Partnership for Quality Afterschool Learning has compiled online databases for literacy, math, science, and technology. Each can be searched by title, grade level, and subject and has a description and notes about implementation with reviews by program experts, content experts, and practitioners. See http://sedl.org/afterschool/resources/curriculum.html.

Spotted in "Bulletin Board" in *Principal Leadership*, November 2008 (Vol. 9, #3, p. 9)

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c. Five Freedoms Project – This website covers the First Amendment, leadership, voice, and impact in a democratic society with videos, news, and blogs suitable for educators, students, parents, and community members: http://www.fivefreedoms.org.

Spotted in "Bulletin Board" in *Principal Leadership*, November 2008 (Vol. 9, #3, p. 9)

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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

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 37 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:

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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- What readers say
- About Kim Marshall (including links to articles)
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- The current issue (in PDF or Word format)
- All back issues (also in PDF or Word)
- 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 Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
ASCD, CEC SmartBriefs, Daily EdNews
Catalyst Chicago
Changing Schools (McREL)
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
Harvard Educational Review
JESPAR
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
Teacher Magazine (online)
Teachers College Record
The Atlantic Monthly
The Language Educator
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Tools for Schools/The Learning Principal