Marshall Memo 440

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
June 11, 2012

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Quotes of the Week

"In the absence of legitimate neuroscience in education, a neuro-mythology has arisen in schools."

Paul Howard-Jones (see item #6)

"So let us be clear about what educating English-learners is not about. It is not about speaking English louder in the classroom. It is not about retention or test preparation as interventions. It is not about all those brown kids sitting in rows with their uniforms on while few hands are raised. It is not about blaming the parents or the kids. It is not about politicians, school board members, or special-interest groups planning for the education of English-learners."

Margaret Bonanno (see item #8)

"Obesity's fundamental cause is long-term energy imbalance – ingesting more calories than you spend over weeks, months, and years. Of the many contributors to energy imbalance today, plentiful sugar may be the worst."

Daniel Lieberman (see item #7)

"Sip by sip and nibble by nibble, more of us gain weight because we can't control normal, deeply rooted urges for a valuable, tasty, and once limited resource."

Daniel Lieberman (*ibid.*)

"Federal and state plans are pouring hundreds of millions of dollars into data systems and tests designed to replace collaborative professional culture and experienced instructional leadership with a kind of 'psychometric astrology.' These data-driven formulas lack both statistical credibility and a basic understanding of the human motivations and relationships that make good schooling possible."

Stan Karp (see item #1)

1. Peer Assistance and Review in Montgomery County

"If narrow, test-based evaluation of teachers is unfair, unreliable, and has negative effects on kids, classrooms, and curricula, what's a better approach?" asks Stan Karp in this thoughtful *Rethinking Schools* article. "Federal and state plans are pouring hundreds of millions of dollars into data systems and tests designed to replace collaborative professional culture and experienced instructional leadership with a kind of 'psychometric astrology.' These data-driven formulas lack both statistical credibility and a basic understanding of the human motivations and relationships that make good schooling possible."

But what's the alternative to the powerful momentum of value-added teacher evaluation? Karp points to Montgomery County, Maryland's Professional Growth System as a model. Here are the main features:

- It is designed to develop and sustain good teaching.
- It has real consequences for persistently poor performance.
- It was negotiated through collective bargaining.
- It's based on a clear, common vision of high-quality teaching.
- It includes test scores as one of many indicators of student progress and teacher performance, but does not use rigidly weighted formulas.
- It includes strong peer assistance for all novice teachers and those who are underperforming; nearly 5,000 teachers have completed the Peer Assistance and Review process.

In short, Montgomery County takes a broad, qualitative approach to promoting individual and system-wide teacher quality and continuous professional growth while dealing with problem employees.

Six standards of good teaching inform the district's evaluation rubrics, contractual agreements, protocols, handbooks, and professional development:

- Commitment to students and their learning;
- Knowledge of subject matter and how to teach it to students;
- Establishing a positive learning environment;
- Frequent assessment of student progress, analysis of results, and follow-up with students;
- Continuous improvement and professional development;
- A high degree of professionalism.

Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) is the heart of Montgomery County's system. PAR relies on 24 Consulting Teachers, master educators with at least five years of classroom experience in the district. They make a commitment to work for three years as Consulting Teachers and then return to a school for at least two years in a teaching or non-administrative role. Each Consulting Teacher works with 16-18 novice teachers and/or experienced teachers who have been referred to PAR by their principals. Consulting Teachers do informal and formal observations; provide written and verbal feedback; run coaching sessions; support lesson planning, classroom management, and time management; teach model lessons; co-teach; and organize peer observations. Over the last ten years, nearly half of Montgomery County teachers have been through the PAR process, which costs $4,000-$7,000 per participant.

Consulting Teachers don't formally evaluate, but they document an overall evaluation of Meeting or Not Meeting Standards, which goes to the PAR panel of eight teachers and eight principals. The panel reviews Consulting Teachers' conclusions and recommends nonrenewal/dismissal, an additional year of PAR, or release from the program. If either the teacher or the principal disagrees with the panel's recommendation, there's an appeal process in which parties can present additional information. Formal challenges to the panel's final decision are rare. "Teachers overwhelmingly view the process as one that treats teachers fairly and is not a 'gotcha' process," says Chris Lloyd, a high-school teacher who is the union's vice president. "It's designed to help teachers grow, not to fire them."

But teachers are fired. In the past year, says Karp, there were about 50 hearings involving cases where principals and Consulting Teachers disagreed about whether a teacher was meeting standards. About half of those teachers were referred to a second year of PAR, ten were dismissed, and the remainder no longer needed the program. Over the last decade, 500 teachers have been removed from the classroom. Karp says the fact that more than one professional takes part in the final decision answers one of the biggest complaints about evaluation procedures: arbitrary judgments by one supervisor.

How is Montgomery County's student achievement? Over the past ten years, results on Maryland state tests have improved in every racial, ethnic, and SES subgroup, and achievement gaps have narrowed at all grade levels in ELA and math – by 16 points in grade 3 and 5 math and grade 7 reading, and by 20 points in grade 3 and 5 reading. Eighty-four percent of Montgomery County students go on to college and 63 percent earn degrees.

"You're going where the country needs to go," said U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan to Montgomery County Superintendent Jerry Weast. Yet Montgomery County was denied a waiver from the U.S. Department of Education for its evaluation system and had to forfeit $12 million in state Race to the Top funds because its approach does not conform to the federal test-based model.

"Just as with student assessment," concludes Karp, "evaluation can be a tool for improving teaching and learning or an instrument of bad policy and external control. The key in both cases is to make sure that people, not tests, are the point of departure and that real collaboration among all parties shapes the process."

"Taking Teacher Quality Seriously: A Collaborative Approach to Teacher Evaluation" by Stan Karp in *Rethinking Schools*, Summer 2012 (Vol. 26, #4, p. 46-50), http://bit.ly/szXDt5; Karp can be reached at stan@rethinkingschools.org.

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2. An Argument Against Test-Score Evaluation of Teachers

In this opinion piece in *Education Week*, College of the Holy Cross (MA) professor Jack Schneider takes note of the growing popularity of evaluating teachers based on student test-score gains rather than classroom observations. "It won't be long before high-stakes personnel decisions – hiring, firing, and divvying up pay raises – are conducted by computers running algorithms rather than by administrators toting clipboards," he says.

Teacher union leaders have argued strenuously against this approach, but Schneider believes that proponents of data-based teacher evaluations are winning the argument with policymakers by portraying teachers as self-interested impediments to reform. Here are the two main union arguments against data-driven teacher evaluation and how they are being countered:

• *The new approach to teacher evaluation is really an attack on job security*. "They're not focused on improvement," said one union representative; "they're focused on kicking people out." The counterargument is that ineffective teachers *should* be removed, and the current superficial system of supervision and evaluation isn't doing the job. Student-achievement results don't lie, and they can be used not only to dismiss bad teachers but to reward good ones. Top-scoring teachers in Washington DC can make $140,000 a year.

• *Student-achievement data fluctuate from year to year and are therefore unreliable*. One study found the value-added error rate to be as high as 35 percent. A teacher in the top 20 percent one year can be in the bottom 20 percent the next. The counterargument is that the numbers smooth out after several years, clearly identifying effective and ineffective teachers. "The math involved is too complicated for laypeople to decipher," says Schneider, "and the aggregate research is easily cherry-picked."

He believes a stronger argument against using student test data to evaluate teachers is that current multiple-choice tests are weak. They don't measure thinking, writing, the ability to persuade, perform an experiment, do original research, or show prowess in civics or robotics. "Instead," says Schneider, "it is about memorized minutiae and good guesses. We accept this approach to measurement only because it is so common. And it is common not because it actually measures achievement, but because it is time-efficient and cost-effective. Simply put, we're using the wrong instrument."

What we need to do, he argues, is develop better assessments that measure learning outcomes and habits of mind that are valued by teachers, scholars, and the American public. Poor assessments lead to dumbed-down instruction and cause good teachers to leave the profession. "Unwilling to play a thoughtless and artless game, they will stand up and leave the table," says Schneider. "And they won't come back."

3. How Can Making Learning More Difficult Improve Learning?

In this intriguing *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, Assumption College professor James Lang examines the counterintuitive research indicating that when students read material in difficult-to-read, unfamiliar fonts – or when they read arguments with logical gaps – they learn more deeply. He says this confirms a well-established learning principle called cognitive disfluency and has implications for all classrooms.

The common assumption is that if we find new information easy to process or encode, learning must be proceeding smoothly. But in fact, the opposite is true. Easy learning is often shallow. By contrast, when learning is more challenging, when there are graphic or logical difficulties that students have to deal with, there's more cognitive engagement, deeper processing, and better long-term learning and retention. "In other words, when students encounter cognitive disfluency, and have to put in more work in processing the material, it may sink in more deeply," says Lang. This has been demonstrated in experiments with college and high-school students.

"To put this as (over)simply as possible," he says, "learning material in fluent conditions – easy-to-read fonts, clear causal connections – is like driving to the grocery store on cognitive automatic pilot. You get from Point A to Point B, but you are not really paying close attention, and, hence, are unlikely to remember your trip in any detail later. Learning material in disfluent conditions would be like driving to a grocery store in England if you are an American, having to navigate an unfamiliar route from the other side of the road."

What are the implications for teachers? If we want learning to be richer, more elaborate, and more "sticky", we need to find ways to force students out of their normal learning and processing modes into a state of cognitive disfluency. We want them to feel like they are driving on the wrong side of the road.

But of course we can't take this too far. Students will rebel or give up if it's too difficult to read an eye-straining font or if the writing makes no sense. Lang believes there's a happy medium of "desirable difficulties" that produce enough cognitive disfluency to promote deep learning but not so much that students get discouraged and feel stupid. Here are some general teaching principles that Lang and some colleagues cooked up:

• *Ask students to process or translate course material using unusual rhetorical or expressive modes*. For example, have students to reduce a concept to a visual representation or a 140-character Twitter message.

• *Require students to argue on behalf of unfamiliar positions*. For example, a political science professor had students debate the Arab-Israeli conflict from the opposite side of their personal beliefs, and a medical professor did the same with the issue of abortion. "In both cases," says Lang, "students were forced into the uncomfortable and defamiliarizing position of having to look at a well-trod debate from a new angle."

• *Ask students to find or identify mistakes*. A chemistry teacher asked students to watch for mistakes in her presentations and even deliberately inserted them from time to time. This got students out of automatic pilot and honed a very useful skill, since many jobs require people to review presentations, problems, performances, or communications for accuracy.

• *Plan for failure*. Rather than proceeding with an experiment correctly, the way the teacher intended, try asking students to plan an experiment that will fail – and understand why.

"The Benefits of Making It Harder to Learn" by James Lang in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 8, 2012 (Vol. LVIII, #38, p. A33-A34), http://chronicle.com/article/The-Benefits-of-Making-It/132056/; Lang can be reached at careers@chronicle.com. For a full list of suggestions on "positive disfluency", see http://www.jamesmlang.com.

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4. How Good Is Good Enough?

In this trenchant *New York Times* column, David Brooks explores the subject of human dishonesty, drawing on a new book by Dan Ariely, *The (Honest) Truth About Dishonesty* (Harper, 2012). Nearly everyone cheats, says Ariely, but usually only a little. Some examples:

- Cans of Coke and plates with dollar bills were laid out in college dorm kitchens. Students walked off with Cokes but not dollar bills; that would have felt like thievery.
- Taxi drivers are less likely to take a longer-than-necessary route with a blind passenger than with sighted people.
- People took a 20-question math test and most got four correct. When asked to self-report their scores after shredding their test papers, most said they got six right.

What's going on here? Brooks says that until quite recently, people in Western cultures were raised to see themselves as depraved sinners. "In this construct," he says, "sin is something you fight like a recurring cancer – part of a daily battle against evil.

"But these days, people are more likely to believe in their essential goodness. People who live by the Good Person Construct try to balance their virtuous self-image with their selfish desires. They try to manage the moral plusses and minuses and keep their overall record in positive territory. In this construct, moral life is more like dieting: I give myself permission to have a few cookies because I had salads for lunch and dinner… The Good Person isn't shooting for perfection any more than most dieters are following their diet 100 percent. It's enough to be workably suboptimal, a tolerant, harmless sinner and a generally good guy."

The problem, says Brooks, is that it's more difficult for people to judge their own morality than it is for a dieter to look at the bathroom scale every morning. In addition, people are brilliant at rationalization, self-deception, and denial: "I was honest with that blind passenger because I'm a wonderful person. I cheated the sighted one because she probably has too much money anyway."

"The key job in the Good Person Construct," concludes Brooks, "is to manage your rationalizations and self-deceptions to keep them from getting egregious… Your moral standards will gradually slip as you become more and more comfortable with your own

rationalizations. So step back. Break your patterns and begin anew. This is what Yom Kippur and confessionals are for… We're mostly unqualified to judge our own moral performances, so attach yourself to some exterior or social standards… As we go about doing our Good Person moral calculations, it might be worth asking: Is this good enough? Is this life of minor transgressions refreshingly realistic, given our natures, or is it settling for mediocrity?"

"The Moral Diet" by David Brooks in *The New York Times*, June 8, 2012 (p. A23), http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/08/opinion/brooks-the-moral-diet.html?_r=1

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5. How to Deal with Humans' Built-In Sweet Tooth

"An evolutionary perspective helps explain why two-thirds of American adults are overweight or obese, and what to do about it," says Harvard human evolutionary biology professor Daniel Lieberman in this *New York Times* Op Ed article. "… Obesity's fundamental cause is long-term energy imbalance – ingesting more calories than you spend over weeks, months, and years. Of the many contributors to energy imbalance today, plentiful sugar may be the worst."

Here's the three-step evolutionary process that set up modern humans' tendency toward obesity:

- In ancient times, when food was scarce, a sweet tooth was adaptive – it drove early humans to seek out a vital form of energy that was relatively scarce. Except for honey, most foods were not sweeter than a carrot.
- Excessive sugar in the bloodstream is toxic, and natural selection favored humans with the ability to rapidly convert digested sugar into stored fat.
- This was adaptive to remaining active during periods when food was scarce. Human brains burn lots of energy, so storing fat was particularly important to maintaining the advantages that large brains conferred.

"Simply put, humans evolved to crave sugar, store it, and then use it," says Lieberman. "For millions of years, our cravings and digestive system were exquisitely balanced because sugar was rare… Until recently, all humans had no choice but to eat a healthy diet with modest portions of food that were low in sugar, saturated fat, and salt, but high in fiber. They also had no choice but to walk and sometimes run an average of 5 to 10 miles a day."

But the beginning of agriculture made starchy foods more plentiful, and when humans learned how to refine sugar, they were able to ingest much more than they were burning. "Sip by sip and nibble by nibble, more of us gain weight because we can't control normal, deeply rooted urges for a valuable, tasty, and once limited resource," says Lieberman.

So what is to be done? One option is to do nothing, based on the libertarian belief that people have a God-given right to drink mega-portions of soda, eat junk food, avoid exercise, and get fat. A second option is to hope that scientists will develop a pill to control obesity. A third is to educate people, especially children, about the dangers of too much sugar consumption. And a fourth is to introduce some form of coercion – along the lines of New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg's recent proposal to ban large servings of sugary soft

drinks, which has stirred up vehement resistance, including a *New York Times* editorial saying Bloomberg has gone too far in the direction of the "nanny state."

Lieberman comes out in favor of paternalistic coercion – but only for children. "Youngsters can't make rational, informed decisions about their bodies," he argues, "and our society agrees that parents don't have the right to make disastrous decisions on their behalf. Accordingly, we require parents to enroll their children in school, and we don't let children buy alcohol or cigarettes. If these are acceptable forms of coercion, how is restricting unhealthy doses of sugary drinks that slowly contribute to disease any different?"

Lieberman also suggests banning all unhealthy food in school – soda, pizza, French fries – and requiring daily physical education.

"We humans did not evolve to eat healthily and go to the gym," he concludes. "Until recently, we didn't have to make such choices. But we did evolve to cooperate to help one another survive and thrive. Circumstances have changed, but we still need one another's help as much as we ever did. For this reason, we need government on our side, not on the side of those who wish to make money by stoking our cravings and profiting from them."

"Evolution's Sweet Tooth" by Daniel Lieberman in *The New York Times*, June 6, 2012 (p. A27), http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/06/opinion/evolutions-sweet-tooth.html?_r=1

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6. Cheating in Online Courses

In this front-page *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, Jeffrey Young reports on ways that some college students are cheating on their online courses and getting away with it. One student at a U.S. public university spent just 25-30 minutes a week on an online science course (that's how long it took him to take the weekly test), never read the materials, never opened a textbook, learned almost nothing – and got an A. How? He and four other students used a shared Google Doc that all five added to as they took the test online. Interestingly, the online test was engineered to prevent cheating – the questions rotated with each administration – but this group of students figured out how to defeat the system by pooling their answers to the full array of questions.

This student (who, of course, remained anonymous) had a facile rationalization for what he did. He said that for his other courses, which met in person, he attended classes and did the work. But he's juggling a job along with his studies and figured the university hadn't put much into security so clearly didn't care that much if students actually learned. Hundreds of other students were taking the course with no direct contact with the professor, and it all felt sterile and impersonal.

A professor at this university, who also requested anonymity, said cheating in introductory online courses was common. It was easy for students to pay their money, cheat, and get the credential they needed. "This is the gamification of education," he said, "and the students are winning."

What are professors (and pre-college educators) to do? One solution is not using multiple-choice questions, but essays can be plagiarized from online services. The answer to

this is services that can detect a student's – or a plagiarizer's – writing "fingerprint." This can be combined with face-recognition software (using the student's webcam) to verify who is taking the online exam.

"Online Classes See Cheating Go High-Tech" by Jeffrey Young in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 8, 2012 (Vol. LVIII, #38, p. A1, A20),
http://chronicle.com/article/Cheating-Goes-High-Tech/132093/

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7. A Quiz on Neuroscience and Neuromyths

In this *Education Week* article, Sarah Sparks reports on the nascent field of mind, brain, and education. It appears that many K-12 educators are being exposed to bits and pieces of information, some of it true, some half-true, and some simply wrong. Paul Howard-Jones, a senior lecturer in psychology and neuroscience at the University of Bristol (UK), says, "In the absence of legitimate neuroscience in education, a neuro-mythology has arisen in schools."

How good are you at separating fact from fiction? Test yourself on these statements and then check the answers at the end of today's Memo [I thought I knew this stuff pretty well and scored only 64%]:

1. Students learn better when the instructional format, such as visual or kinesthetic, matches their learning style.

2. A learning disability associated with genetic differences in the brain can be remediated by educational interventions during the school years.

3. Except in cases of extreme injury or trauma, the brain no longer makes new connections after the age of 18.

4. Boys' brains are hardwired to be better at spatial tasks than girls' brains.

5. If a child does not learn a language before a critical window closes, he or she will never become fluent.

6. Emotion hinders reasoning and memory in the brain.

7. Cognitive and physical exercises can help integrate the hemispheres of a student's brain.

8. Most people do not use their entire brain, but it's possible to bring more of your brain "online" with cognitive training.

9. A student with a dominant left-brain hemisphere is likely to be more creative, but also may have difficulty with spatial skills.

10. Students use different memory systems to ride a bike and recall a phone number.

11. Drinking less than the equivalent of six glasses of water a day causes the brain to dehydrate and shrink, impairing learning.

"Teachers Need Lessons in Neuroscience, Experts Say" by Sarah Sparks in *Education Week*, June 6, 2012 (Vol. 31, #33, p. 16-17),
http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/06/06/33teachers.h31.html

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8. A Call to Arms on ELL Education

"First, let me tell you there is no silver bullet," says California educator Margaret Bonanno in this passionate *Education Week* opinion piece. No textbook or consultant has the answer to raising the achievement of ELLs, she believes, nor do pullouts and other quick-fix programs. "So let us be clear about what educating English-learners is not about," she continues. "It is not about speaking English louder in the classroom. It is not about retention or test preparation as interventions. It is not about all those brown kids sitting in rows with their uniforms on while few hands are raised. It is not about blaming the parents or the kids. It is not about politicians, school board members, or special-interest groups planning for the education of English-learners."

So what is educating English language learners all about? Bonanno suggests the following:

- Identifying the best research and reading it together to identify best practices;
- Focusing on the most-effective core instruction;
- Selecting the curriculum materials that match the strategy chosen;
- Putting in place a comprehensive professional-development program that supports teachers;
- Having constant discussions about what's working and what isn't;
- Having the wisdom to stop using ineffective practices and developing better practices.
- Establishing a planned ELD program;
- Using the student's primary language as an instructional tool;
- Setting up good dual-immersion programs.

"The motto for this plan must be 'no excuses, just do it,'" concludes Bonanno.

"Just Do It: We Must Focus on Educating English-Learners" by Margaret Bonanno in *Education Week*, June 6, 2012 (Vol. 31, #33, p. 28-29), http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/06/06/33bonanno.h31.html

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9. Answers to the Neuroscience Quiz in Item #7:

1. False. Neuroscience has found the opposite to be true. People perceive through a variety of formats and senses, but perceiving is not the same as learning. People process information through many different modes to comprehend a concept or master a task.
2. True. Experience has a greater effect on how brains of all types – even those of people with dyslexia or autism – change over time.
3. False. Neurons continue to grow throughout life.
4. False. Boy-girl differences have not been shown to be innate. The variation between boys and girls is less than the variation within each sex and among different cultures. For example, while American boys outperform American girls on spatial tasks, Singaporean girls far outperform American boys.

5. False. The human brain changes throughout life in response to training and experience. While languages are learned more easily below the age of seven, people can learn new languages late in life.
6. Partly false. Positive emotions like excitement and engagement enhance learning. But negative emotions and stress can distract students from learning and reduce later performance and recall.
7. False. In normal, healthy people, both hemispheres of the brain act in concert and areas associated with language and other tasks are found in both hemispheres. An OECD study found no evidence of different hemispheres creating personality differences or requiring different learning modalities.
8. False. Most people use all of the brain constantly (except those with a severe cognitive disability). Even while asleep, a person uses more than 10 percent of the brain.
9. False. The notion of a "dominant" left or right hemisphere, leading to differences in language or spatial ability, comes from studies in the 1960s on adults whose hemispheres had been surgically divided to treat severe epilepsy. Typically, both hemispheres of the brain act in concert, and areas associated with spatial and other tasks are found on both hemispheres.
10. True. The brain activates in different ways to remember many different things. Recalling facts takes place in the hippocampus and medial temporal lobe, while body memory of a repetitive task activates the motor cortex.
11. False. Severe hydration can decrease cognitive function, but that's not likely to happen in a typical classroom. Recent studies have found no cognitive benefit from drinking the canonical eight glasses of water a day. Students should drink water when they are thirsty, but there's no reason to push them to drink a specific amount.

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

Subscriptions:

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Publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
ASCD, CEC SmartBriefs, Daily EdNews
Better Evidence-Based Education
EDge
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
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PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
Teachers College Record
Teaching Children Mathematics
The Atlantic Monthly
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Language Educator
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
The School Administrator
Theory Into Practice