Marshall Memo 942

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
June 27, 2022

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Everybody must get an opportunity to at least touch an instrument, learn an instrument, understand that instrument, play that instrument."

Abidemi Hope, principal of P.S. 11 in New York City in "After the Music Stops for Covid, One School Brings Back Its Band" by Sarah Diamond in *The New York Times*, June 19, 2022

"Educating students is an inherently interpersonal endeavor. Caring relationships between teachers and students foster a sense of belonging for students and create classroom climates where students are poised to do their best learning."

Leigh Wedenoja, John Papay, and Matthew Kraft (see item #3)

"Teacher effectiveness is both dynamic and context-dependent, evolving over time, and shaped by the match between individual teachers, schools, and students."

Leigh Wedenoja, John Papay, and Matthew Kraft (*ibid.*)

"A sense that teachers were gaming their SLOs undermined school cultures as many principals and teachers disliked working in environments where bad behavior appeared to be rewarded."

Linda Mayger (see item #2)

"You expand your impact when you trust competent others to get things done. Only do what only you can do."

Dan Rockwell (see item #6)

"The penalty for not turning in work should be doing the work."

Douglas Reeves (see item #1)

1. A Debate About Fair and Unfair Grading Practices

In this three-article exchange in *Education Gadfly*, Daniel Buck and Douglas Reeves have a point-counterpoint on grading policies and the use of zeroes. Here are the key points in their exchange:

• Reeves, in a 2004 article in *Phi Delta Kappan*, argued that giving a student a zero on a 100-point scale is unfair. That's because of the way letter grades line up with 100 points: A's with the nineties, B's with the eighties, C's with the seventies, and D's with the sixties. The 60-point spread from D to zero is out of proportion, he argues, and "just two or three zeroes are sufficient to cause failure for the entire semester." To avoid this punitive and demoralizing result, he says, the lowest grade should be a 50.

• Buck doesn't dispute Reeves's math but disagrees with the underlying assumptions. "Proportionality is no clear determinant of fairness or justness," he says. "I want a surgeon to know far more than 60 percent of their craft, but an MLB player who hits more than 60 percent would set the all-time record… Cut-off points are at times arbitrary, yes, but not necessarily unfair." Getting a D for 60 percent correct on an assessment "represents the barest minimum of what a school or teacher considers acceptable by way of student learning," Buck continues. "Below that is completely unacceptable, deserving of no credit, no points, no reward." 100-point grading rewards mastery and excellence and sets a clear bar for both, he says, and is an incentive for students to strive for more than just completing their work.

• Reeves has no problem with giving a zero, as long as it's mathematically accurate – for example, not a single item correct on a math test with 100 problems. But with other types of assessments that have more subjectivity, the 100-point scale conveys a false sense of precision. "No teacher can persuasively explain the difference between a 32 and 33," he says, "a 75 and 76, and – here is where the blood is spilled when grades are reported – an 89 and 90, or 59 and 60. These one-point variations are classic distinctions without a difference." Better to use a five point scale – A, B, C, D, and F – whose distinctions students and parents readily understand. Importantly, this is the scale often used to calculate students' GPAs.

• Buck agrees that zeroes are disproportionate and likes the idea of a five-point scale, which he describes as 0 1 2 3 4. But he's skeptical and wants more evidence for its effectiveness. He contends that a zero conveys a powerful message to a student who is making no effort – quite different from a 60 for shoddy work. "Disproportionality is neither inherently unethical nor unjust," he says. "We must look at the consequences that result from different approaches to grading and decide such questions."

• Reeves agrees that 60 percent correct should not be considered mastery in algebra – or brain surgery – and he imagines an unfortunate scenario of "students bringing in a truckload of missing assignments on the last day of the semester and expecting teachers to absolve them for months of late work."

• Buck is concerned that if students know they will get a 50 for failing a test, essay, or project, they have little reason to try harder. "Whereas a 0 percent weighs heavily on someone's final grade," he says, "and so incentivizes students to make corrections or seek out additional help… What implicit message does it communicate to students when no effort receives half points?"

• Reeves agrees that students should have consequences for failing to submit work, but he questions whether zeroes or F's or point deductions are effective. If the punitive approach worked, he says, we would have solved this problem long ago and all student work today would be handed in on time, which is clearly not the case. "The penalty for not turning in work should be doing the work," he says. When schools handle it well, the logical consequences approach is far more effective than zeroes. This involves putting constraints on students' time and space, not allowing students to participate in athletic teams until homework is done, having a "quiet table" in the cafeteria (or a "quiet room" elsewhere in the school) to get work done. These consequences work, says Reeves.

• Buck is skeptical, arguing that zeroes get students' attention. "If a student doesn't have the dead weight of a zero hanging on their grade," he says, "won't they be less likely to pursue corrections, retakes, or extra tutoring in a last-ditch attempt to save their grade? Won't more students just accept mediocrity rather than fighting to correct an F?" But he admits that this is all speculative and theoretical and calls for trying out different approaches in a few schools and analyzing the results. "If learning really does improve in a measurable way or school climates get a boost, I'll change my opinion," he says. "But scrapping our current grading practices without a viable alternative is unwise, reckless even."

• Reeves says that the problem is not just zeroes but the way they are averaged with other grades, often automatically by electronic grading systems. "This is why the zero becomes the academic death penalty," he says. "Far from incentivizing students to be diligent, the zero, when combined with the average, tells students that all the blather about resilience and perseverance that they hear from their teachers is just so much hot air." He's observed many students giving up in the final weeks of a semester, accompanied by disruptive behavior and absenteeism.

• Buck lists what he believes are advantages of traditional grading: "It provides at least some extrinsic motivation. It incentivizes excellence over mere completion. And as all the SAT critics love to point out, a student's GPA has proven to be an almost chillingly accurate predictor of future college and life success, meaning a letter grade succinctly condenses countless factors – from general intelligence to content mastery to conscientiousness – down to a simple, useful data point."

• Reeves says that pilots, surgeons, and engineers make lots of mistakes as they are trained in simulated environments, and their early failures are not averaged in when they take

final competency assessments to enter their profession. "The same emphasis on learning from mistakes, getting feedback, respecting and applying feedback, and ultimately improving performance should be the focus of classroom work in schools," he says.

• There are better alternatives to the no-zero idea, counters Buck. One is grading students in comparison to their peers. Another is standards-based grading. A third is additive grading – starting students with a zero and awarding points for each skill and piece of knowledge acquired, working toward a perfect score of 100. While none of these is perfect, Buck believes they're better than eliminating the zero, which has little research backing and has encountered local opposition and been abandoned by some schools. In addition, Buck argues that grading on a 100-point scale is quick and efficient, especially for teachers who have more than a hundred students. An efficient grading system leaves more time for preparing units and lessons, feedback to students, and parent communication.

• Reeves believes that he and Buck want the same thing: "Students who respect teachers, organize their work, meet deadlines, and learn the habits of responsibility and diligence. My respectful suggestion is that we pursue these goals with techniques that actually work rather than persist in a system of zeroes and averages that undermines the very character we seek to instill."

"A 'No Zeroes' Grading Policy Is the Worst of All Worlds" by Daniel Buck; "Revisiting 'The Case Against the Zero': A Response to Daniel Buck," by Douglas Reeves; and "Let's Not Get Reckless with Grading: Replying to Douglas Reeves" by Daniel Buck in *Education Gadfly*, June 16, June 23, and June 23, 2022; Buck can be reached at buck@thechalkboardreview.com, Reeves at douglas.reeves@creativeleadership.net.

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2. The Unintended Consequences of SLOs (Student Learning Objectives)

In this *Elementary School Journal* article, Linda Mayger (The College of New Jersey) says that holding teachers accountable for their students' learning was a central part of the Obama administration's Race to the Top initiative. In addition to classroom observations, a key accountability tool was value-added measures (VAM) – statistical algorithms that used state test scores and other variables to determine teachers' contribution to student learning. The problem was that VAMs could be used for only about 30 percent of teachers – those teaching in grades with standardized test data.

For the remaining 70 percent of teachers, Student Learning Objectives were the recommended tool. With SLOs, teachers decide on at least one specific learning target, identify appropriate ways to measure student growth, get their principal's okay, make predictions about how students will do, track their progress over a semester or school year, measure whether students hit the proficiency targets, and are given a score by the principal based on how well the targets were met. The idea was that SLOs would get teachers more focused on what their students learned, encourage data-based instruction and team collaboration, and give teachers a more active role in their evaluations.

Here's an example of a grade 4 ELA target from Connecticut: *Nine students (45%) identified as "some risk" or "at risk" in September will increase their proficiency by one level by May as measured by the STAR Early Literacy Assessment.* And here's a grade 9-12 instrumental music SLO, also from Connecticut: *By the end of the school year, 13 of my 17 Treble Choir students (76%) will score a 70% or higher on the summative musical symbols and vocabulary assessment.* Federal education authorities arranged for materials and trainings to support schools as they developed SLOs.

Right from the start, there were concerns with SLOs. One study (Gill et al, 2013) predicted that combining the flexibility of SLOs with high-stakes consequences would be counterproductive, making it "nearly impossible" to make SLOs a valid and reliable way to evaluate teachers and spur professional growth. "Teachers themselves are setting the targets," said the researchers, "and if their evaluation depends on reaching the targets, teachers will have an incentive to set the targets low. So districts need to recognize that the efficacy of SLOs for instructional improvement could be undermined in high-stake contexts. More generally, because teachers can customize SLOs, it is difficult to use them fairly for evaluation."

The weight attached to SLO ratings in teachers' evaluations varied across the U.S., from 10 percent in Indiana to 50 percent in Connecticut, with a median weight of 25 percent. The most serious concerns about the reliability of SLOs were in districts with merit pay, including Denver and Austin. In one low-performing Denver school, the percentage of teachers who met both of their SLOs ranged from 20 to 100 percent. There were complaints among Denver teachers about targets being set low by some teachers – and about some principals requiring teachers to adopt unattainable learning targets.

There was so much backlash to VAM and SLOs that the 2015 federal ESSA legislation did away with the requirement to use student achievement as part of teachers' evaluation. "As state policy makers capitalize on this flexibility to revise their evaluation process," says Mayger, "it is critical to examine whether SLOs warrant an investment of time and resources." This is especially important since 34 states haven't taken advantage of the freedom in ESSA and are still using teacher evaluation systems developed during Race to the Top.

At the heart of the Obama-era teacher accountability initiative were two theories of motivation, internal and external:

- The internal theory says that teachers naturally want to help their students and will improve their practice when supported with feedback, PD, and appropriate resources.
- The external theory says that incompetent and unmotivated teachers are unlikely to undertake the uncomfortable and difficult process of improvement unless confronted with evidence of poor performance and a credible threat of losing their jobs.

The problem with the Race to the Top approach to improving teaching – a "wicked problem" said one expert – was that many school districts conflated the two theories, putting them both in a single teacher improvement system in which the stakes were high and teachers could lose their jobs. The result was widespread gaming of the system – teachers putting on a "dog-and-pony show" for principals' classroom observations and manipulating the SLO process to show robust student growth.

In her study, Mayger examined (a) the extent to which teachers and principals believed SLOs were an effective and efficient way to evaluate teachers, and (b) how SLOs influenced their work. She interviewed and surveyed 297 teachers in 17 states that were using K-12 performance evaluation systems with an SLO component. Here's what she found:

- Most teachers and many principals believed SLOs were poor measures of instruction and student learning.
- Most educators were dismissive of the SLO process as a vehicle for instructional improvement and considered it "unworthy of their time."
- Many participants in the study said SLOs were no more than a superficial compliance exercise and consequently gave them a minimal investment of time.
- "At their best," says Mayger, "principals used SLOs to reinforce reflective school-based inquiry practices that were already occurring."
- "At their worst," she continues, "SLOs were amenable to gaming and outright cheating and, thus, undermined principals' ability to assign accurate evaluation scores."
- The accountability systems sorted teachers into "saints, cynics, or sinners" – those conscientiously implementing, cynically complying, or corrupting the system.
- The fatal flaw, says Mayger, was flexibility: "A sense that teachers were gaming their SLOs undermined school cultures as many principals and teachers disliked working in environments where bad behavior appeared to be rewarded."
- Districts that imposed standardized SLOs to reduce flexibility drove a wedge between principals and teachers and among teachers.
- The process undermined relational trust in schools, whose components are respect, caring, competence, and moral integrity.
- Conversely, SLOs increased alienation, whose components are powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and estrangement.
- The principals interviewed said the punitive climate made it more difficult to orchestrate teacher growth, and the SLO paperwork took precious time away from more-productive activities.

There is another element embedded in some teachers' resistance to being evaluated by their students' achievement: the belief that student learning is only partly within teachers' control. "Such thinking could indicate a teacher's lack of self-efficacy or desire to shift responsibility onto others," says Mayger. "But students do have agency, inequitable conditions in underresourced schools and communities can influence student performance, and many teachers struggle to succeed in unsupportive school environments. Teachers, therefore, may be justified in emotionally disconnecting from systems that focus solely on teacher quality inside the classroom while disregarding external conditions that adversely affect students and teachers."

"The question at issue," Mayger concludes, "is not whether teachers should be held accountable, but what they should be held accountable for and by whom. Rather than judging teachers' worth by outcomes that may only somewhat represent their efficacy, school administrators should establish climates of reciprocal accountability where districts assume

responsibility for creating conditions where students and teachers can thrive, and teachers in turn assume responsibility for their professional growth… Establishing such professional school cultures does not mean principals should abdicate their oversight roles. On the contrary, principals develop trusting professional communities by holding teachers accountable for conforming to professional norms and using pressure and coercion on intractable individuals when necessary."

"'This Is the Piece of the Pie We Can Control' – Educators' Experiences with Student Learning Objectives as Performance Measures" by Linda Mayger in *Elementary School Journal*, June 2022 (Vol. 122, #4, pp. 591-615); Mayger can be reached at maygerl@tcnj.edu.

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3. The Effects of Students Spending More Than One Year with a Teacher

In this Annenberg/Brown University paper, Leigh Wedenoja (Rockefeller Institute of Government) and John Papay and Matthew Kraft (Brown University) report on their study of Tennessee students in grades 3-11 who were with the same teacher for more than a year. They found that intentional looping was quite rare; only 1.5 percent of teachers kept the same group of students for two or more years. But unintentional repeat pairing of students and teachers was much more common: 44 percent of students spent at least one additional year with the same ELA or math teacher, with repeating more common in middle and high schools. Unintentional pairing occurred when teachers moved to a higher grade or taught several grades – for example, a math teacher who teaches general math to seventh graders and algebra to eighth graders.

Wedenoja, Papay, and Kraft were able to compare student achievement and behavioral outcomes for students who worked with the same teacher more than once with students who didn't have a repeat teacher (students who repeated a grade with the same teacher were not included in the study). The finding: being with a teacher more than once had several positive effects on students:

- Test scores were higher, with significant larger gains in high school (the equivalent of an extra month of learning).
- Disciplinary infractions were lower – a 10 percent reduction in suspensions.
- Attendance and high-school truancy were better, although only 0.5 percent lower.
- Test score gains were most significant among high-performing and white female students.
- Improvements in attendance and discipline were most significant for low-performing students and male students of color.
- Student learning and behavioral gains occurred with teachers of all levels of experience.
- The researchers also found a "spillover" effect: in classes with a higher percent of students repeating with that teacher, all students performed better.

Were these positive effects caused by self-selection – stronger teachers more likely to have repeat students, or repeating happening when a positive teacher-student dynamic had been

established in the first year? By looking at teachers' value-add scores and other data, the researchers ruled out both of these as causes.

What caused the student learning and behavior gains? Wedenoja, Papay, and Kraft found a positive dynamic that worked in two directions: teachers got to know students better, built stronger relationships, and were able to adapt to students' individual learning needs. Students got to know their teachers better, formed more positive and trusting relationships, exerted more effort, and learned more. "Educating students is an inherently interpersonal endeavor," say the authors. "Caring relationships between teachers and students foster a sense of belonging for students and create classroom climates where students are poised to do their best learning… This can be particularly important in high school where teachers often have well over 100 students in a school year."

One takeaway from this study is that a teacher's effectiveness is not a fixed entity. Rather, say the authors, "teacher effectiveness is both dynamic and context-dependent, evolving over time, and shaped by the match between individual teachers, schools, and students."

While the authors did not study looping, they believe their data point to even more positive effects when an entire class spends more than one successive year with the same teacher.

"Second Time's the Charm? How Sustained Relationships from Repeat Student-Teacher Matches Build Academic and Behavioral Skills" by Leigh Wedenoja, John Papay, and Matthew Kraft, Annenberg/Brown University EdWorking Paper, June 2022; the authors can be reached at leigh.wedenoja@rock.suny.edu, John_Papay@brown.edu, and mkraft@brown.edu.

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4. Pushing Back on the "Tiger Parent" Stereotype

In this *Teachers College Record* article, Janine Bempechat (Boston University), Amy Cheung (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), and Jin Li (Brown University) describe their study of how lower-income Chinese-American ninth graders perceive their immigrant parents' academic expectations and involvement. The researchers found that the stereotype portrayed in Amy Chua's 2011 book, *The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* – harsh and authoritarian, with excessively high expectations of their children – was not accurate. The picture that emerged from interviews with students was quite different:

- Monitoring schoolwork, parents used a "light touch," with only a few regularly asking about homework and most trusting their children to get it done. Parents became actively involved only when there was a serious problem.
- Parents conveyed their expectations at a general level, saying that their children should "do good in school," get good grades, attend a good college, and get a job that allowed them to take care of their family. Only a few parents pushed for the Ivy League.
- Conversations about school were mostly initiated by students in a tone of courtesy and respect, belying the top-down, authoritarian tone of supposed tiger parents. Parents quickly signed off on course and extracurricular choices after hearing a description.

In short, parents were attentive and involved at an "informed distance," conveying general messages about achievement and intervening only when there were problems.

Bempechat, Cheung, and Li believe there are two important messages from their study. First, educators need to disabuse themselves of common misconceptions about Asian-American parents. "The joining of the tiger parent stereotype with the model minority myth," they say, "results in the harmful assumption that Asian-American achievement is guaranteed, through either domineering parenting or excessive efforts." Teachers and guidance counselors need to stay closely involved and fine-tune recommendations to individual students. This is especially important since some Asian-American parents are deferential to educators' judgments, believing schools have the prerogative to make decisions for their children.

Second, say Bempechat, Cheung, and Li, there is "the critical need to recognize the diversity within the Asian-American populations." Stereotypes prevent educators from seeing and addressing the unique educational needs of individual students, as well as the differences among groups by ethnicity and social class. The authors describe how an educator expressed surprise that an Asian-American student was being raised by a single parent in a working-class home. "The student found this reaction to be both galling and alienating," say the authors, "reflecting a lack of understanding of intersectional realities."

"Academic Socialization from an 'Informed Distance': Low-Income Chinese-American Adolescents' Perceptions of Their Immigrant Parents' Educational Messages" by Janine Bempechat, Amy Cheung, and Jin Li in *Teachers College Record*, April 2022 (Vol. 124, #4, pp. 124-150); the authors can be reached at jbempech@bu.edu, acheungq@mit.edu, and jin_li@brown.edu.

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5. Giving Students Scaffolding When It's Needed and Then Withdrawing It

In this *Cult of Pedagogy* article, Jennifer Gonzalez describes a differentiation strategy developed by Melanie Meehan, a Connecticut elementary social studies and writing coordinator. The idea is to look at the whole task – for example, toothbrushing for a toddler – and figure out what skills will be needed to get there. If the child is struggling with the fine motor coordination involved in putting toothpaste on the toothbrush, doing that for the child will help them get started and build confidence. Later, when brushing becomes more automatic, the child learns how to apply toothpaste to the toothbrush. Several other examples:

- Narrative writing – Providing students with an idea, or three pictures in a sequence, to get them started.
- Research – Supplying pre-selected resources and notes on the topic and having students write a summary.
- Multi-step math problems – Doing the first few steps and then having students take over and finish.
- Cooking – Using Blue Apron or HelloFresh, which supply pre-measured ingredients and instructions for specific meals.

Gonzalez and Meehan have these suggestions:

• Start by analyzing the task. By thinking through the steps involved in completing an assignment, and remembering where students struggled in the past, the teacher can decide the best points at which to provide support.

• Involve students in the process. If students can see all the steps in a task, they can tell how much support they need, and where.

• Gradually remove the scaffolding. As students gain confidence and competence (and perhaps curiosity) about the task, the teacher has a plan to do less and build independence.

"How to Use Backward Chaining to Differentiate Instruction" by Jennifer Gonzalez and Melanie Meehan in *Cult of Pedagogy*, June 20, 2022

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6. Mistakes Leaders Make Under Pressure

In this *Leadership Freak* article, Dan Rockwell explores the mistakes that busy leaders make, especially when they're under time pressure:

• *Being penny wise and pound foolish* – "There's *always* too much to do," says Rockwell. "Busyness is no excuse to take your eye off what's important." Some examples:

- Not getting enough exercise, healthy food, and sleep;
- Postponing professional learning and self-development;
- Cutting corners;
- Being abrasive with colleagues;
- Not taking the time to build relationships.

"Some leaders need busyness to feel important," says Rockwell, "but being busy isn't necessarily productive… Establish non-negotiables that reflect what's truly important."

• *Beating yourself up when you make mistakes* – This won't lift you up and improve performance, says Rockwell. "Encourage yourself the same way you encourage your friends when they screw up. You experience emotions; you aren't your emotions. You make mistakes; you aren't your mistakes. You succeed; you aren't your success."

• *Doing everything yourself, thinking it will get done faster* – The key, of course, is delegation. "You expand your impact when you trust competent others to get things done," says Rockwell. "Only do what only you can do."

• *Giving voice to everything in your head* – "Time pressure is an invitation to say something stupid," says Rockwell – for example, whining, being defensive, destructive criticism, catastrophizing, and amplifying the problem.

"The Top 4 Mistakes Busy Leaders Make" by Dan Rockwell in *Leadership Freak*, June 27, 2022; Rockwell can be reached at dan@leadershipfreak.com.

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7. Short Item:

A Position Paper on Antisemitism, Bigotry, and Discrimination – The National Council for the Social Studies just released this position paper.

"Position Statement on Antisemitism, Antisemitic Violence, and All Bigotry and Discrimination," NCSS, June 2022

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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 52 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 150 articles each week, and selects 8-10 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
ASCD Express
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
English Journal
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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
Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance)
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Social Education
Social Studies and the Young Learner
Teachers College Record
Teaching Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
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
Urban Education