Marshall Memo 1110

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
October 27, 2025

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"The simplest way to signal curiosity is just to say you are curious."
Julia Minson, Hanne Collins, and Michael Yeomans (see item #2)

"Researchers have found that gaps in knowledge in STEM-related areas emerge as early as kindergarten, and these gaps continue to widen as students progress to later elementary grades and beyond."
Nicole Fenty, Neyli Nouraei Yeganeh, and Vanessa Uhteg in "Sequencing Nursery Rhymes Through Early Coding in Preschool Settings" in *The Reading Teacher*, November/December 2025 (Vol. 79, #3, pp. 1-35)

"You can get through fifth-grade math without fact fluency, but it's like riding a bike with a rusty chain or flat tire. It's a grind."
Mike Kenny in "Vermont Teacher Turns School Project Into Successful Math App" by Alison Novak in *Seven Days*, October 21, 2025

"Forcing students not planning a STEM career to take calculus because it's the only rigorous math option may discourage and frustrate them, while a different math course such as statistics might better prepare them for high-earning careers in other fields that better align with their interests."
Adam Tyner in "Rethinking Advanced Math in High School" in *Education Gadfly*, October 23, 2025

"Phonics is essential to helping kids learn to read, but overemphasis on decoding short, uninteresting texts may put children off reading… Faced with competition from social media and the instant gratification of short videos, allocating hours to reading a good book is a difficult sell, so we have to look at what interests young readers – song lyrics, spoken word, poetry, movie and play scripts, sports stories, and even comics – so that they have the

opportunity to expand their understanding of the world and people they are yet to meet through the joy of reading."

Daniel Ward in "Pleased to Read" in *Language Magazine*, Oct. 2025 (Vol. 25, #2, p. 4)

"I don't think we pay enough attention to what it is that makes a particular text hard to understand."

Timothy Shanahan, quoted in "These Teachers Have Their Students Read Multiple Novels a Year. How They Do It" by Sarah Schwartz in *Education Week*, Oct. 21, 2025

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1. Toward Reliable "Consumer Reports" for Curriculum Materials

In this *Education Gadfly* article, journalist Holly Korbey traces the history of EdReports, which was originally launched to help states and districts see how well curriculum products were aligned with Common Core State Standards. Now, says Korbey, "EdReports has become the *de facto* authority for many states in either choosing curricula or helping create lists of approved materials that districts are allowed to choose from. A 'green light' from EdReports means to people who make decisions that those reading, math, or science materials are going to be 'high quality.'"

But how reliable are EdReports assessments? Early in its history, reviews were written by groups of well-trained educators, but critics say that a number of problems are leading to uneven quality:

- Review groups don't consult with researchers or experts.
- Reading and mathematics groups sometimes use criteria not supported by research.
- Reviewers assess standards alignment, not whether materials improve student learning.
- EdReports has responded to criticisms, but some previously green-lighted materials haven't been re-evaluated.

For these reasons, says Natalie Wexler, author of a widely-read critique of the platform, "Relying on EdReports blindly is not reliable."

This is news to many school districts and if it's true, there's reason for concern. "Using learning materials that are well-designed, organized, and sequential, year upon year," says Korbey, "adds up to more than the sum of their parts, according to cognitive science. A store of knowledge in long-term memory is so crucial to the kind of thinking and analyzing we want students to be able to do."

Reliable reviews of commercial learning materials are especially important, Korbey continues, because there's been pushback on teachers using too much low-quality stuff from Google, Pinterest, and Teachers Pay Teachers. So are there alternatives to EdReports?

- What Works Clearinghouse does efficacy reviews of instructional materials, but they're hard to understand, says Holly Lane of the University of Florida Literacy Institute: "They're great at explaining something to other researchers, but not great at breaking it down in a way that a practitioner can understand."
- The Knowledge Matters Campaign focuses on knowledge-building.
- The Reading League evaluates evidence-based reading materials.
- Johns Hopkins Evidence for ESSA rates the quality of the evidence used to test different curriculum materials, but in at least one case, that's in conflict with evidence of effectiveness for students.
- And there are the super-positive marketing materials from many publishers.

What's frustrating, says Lane, is that there are strong programs out there that haven't yet been run through gold-standard studies, and there are weaker programs that have been studied but not for their learning impact.

How do school districts actually make decisions on curriculum materials? They clearly don't have the time and resources to do a comprehensive review of all the options and make sense of the sales pitches from publishers. That would be like expecting doctors to conduct their own drug trials – just not do-able.

Districts may look at EdReports and other reviews, but a study at Michigan State University found that many actually rely on community buy-in and whether teachers like the materials, think they are a good "fit" with existing practices, and believe they're needed. Leaders often say, "I did my research" or "My teachers did their research," but what that often means is that they gathered information from neighboring districts on how well educators liked the materials.

Lane believes the answer to this hodge-podge is a national entity that culls evidence and makes authoritative recommendations on which curriculum materials actually work with students. (Australia is considering something like this.) Staffers would have expertise in the science of teaching and learning, what makes for quality research, curriculum standards, and the everyday realities of classroom teachers.

Most importantly, the recommendations of this agency would have "teeth" – a federal minimum standard that would require publishers to incorporate research findings in their materials. It would be like the FDA, says Lane, which sets standards for food and drugs before they can be brought to the marketplace. Such a Federal Education Quality Administration would also solve a big problem with current reviews, says Korbey: conflicts of interest.

"When the same funders support curriculum review sites and other big-name education platforms," she says, "some suggest that has kept prominent literacy and math advocates from having a more open conversation about review sites' problems." People are afraid to criticize EdReports because they believe it might put their funding at risk.

Meanwhile, the head of EdReports, Eric Hirsch, has announced that he's leaving in June 2026. Might that be an opportunity for EdReports to rethink its review process, including experts and researchers and checking whether curriculum materials produce robust student learning gains? "I would love EdReports to be reformed," says Karen Vaites, founder of the Curriculum Insight Project. But she doesn't expect to see that happen. Why? "States aren't demanding it, funders aren't demanding it. If people demanded it, it's possible. Nothing about this is impossible. It would take resources and leadership."

"My Kingdom for a Reliable Curriculum Review" by Holly Korbey in *Education Gadfly*, October 17, 2025

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2. How to Disagree Constructively

In this *Harvard Business Review* article, Julia Minson (Harvard Kennedy School of Government), Hanne Collins (UCLA Anderson School of Management), and Michael Yeomans (Imperial College London) say that when people disagree, there can be important benefits: sparking creativity, preventing costly errors, and better decisions. But if disagreements are not handled well, they can escalate into a "competitive spiral" and cause major interpersonal and institutional problems.

The usual advice for preventing escalation is to *think and feel* about your counterpart and *act* in specific ways:

- Put yourself in their shoes.
- Have compassion and empathy.
- Try to understand them versus judging them.
- Use open body language showing receptiveness, friendliness, willingness to engage.

But despite this well-intentioned guidance on our *intended mental state*, conflicts persist. What are we doing wrong?

The problem is that the other person may not be seeing our good intentions – and we can't read their minds. There's an *intention-behavior* and a *behavior-perception gap*. "For others to notice, appreciate, and react to our conflict-management attempts," say Minson, Collins, and Yeomans, "our thoughts and feelings must be reflected in the things we *do and say*. Mental states must be translated into observable behaviors." The most important thing is the *words we speak* – and all too often, our words don't communicate our intentions. For example, a person trying to be curious might ask, "How can you believe that?"

Drawing on years of research, the authors present five suggestions for paying close attention to the language used during disagreements:

• *Signal a desire to learn*. "The simplest way to signal curiosity is just to say you are curious," they say. When you see that your counterpart disagrees, you could say, "Hey, it seems we are seeing this differently. I am curious how you think about XYZ." This doesn't mean giving up your own position; it tells the other person you want to understand where they're coming from, which tends to lower the temperature.

• *Acknowledge the other side*. "In conflict, people often worry that what they say doesn't even register," say Minson, Collins, and Yeomans. "The best kind of acknowledgement restates the core of your partner's statement; it *proves* you were really listening." And if you actually don't understand their perspective, ask for clarification.

• *Find common ground*. No matter how big the disagreement, if you zoom out for a minute, you can usually find beliefs, values, and goals you agree on. You might say, *I agree with some of what you're saying,* or *We both want…* or *When I went to that meeting, I also noticed…*

• *Hedge your claims*. Studies show that in disagreements about facts, the average person is wrong at least 50 percent of the time. "With that in mind," say the authors, "rather than asserting confidence that you are sure you are right, try showing some humility by hedging your claims and leaving open the possibility that you could be wrong." You might say, *From my viewpoint…* or *Sometimes it is the case…*

• *Share your story*. "Our strongest beliefs (and the emotional force behind them) usually come from something that happened to us in the past," say Minson, Collins, and Yeomans. "Sharing stories and the feelings they bring up is often a more-effective way of building trust than trying to impress our counterparts with command of facts and data."

What can leaders do to foster this approach to disagreements? They should model the precepts, hire people who have demonstrable skills in this area, and conduct PD on translating good intentions into clear verbal signals. "Instead of simply telling people to be curious," conclude the authors, "we should teach them to express curiosity verbally. Instead of only telling them to be open-minded, train them in conversational receptiveness. Instead of merely telling them to be respectful of one another's diverse lived experiences, teach them effective storytelling skills."

"A Smarter Way to Disagree" by Julia Minson, Hanne Collins, and Michael Yeomans in *Harvard Business Review*, November-December 2025 (Vol. 103, #6, pp. 108-115); the authors can be reached at julia_minson@hks.harvard.edu, hanne.collins@anderson.ucla.edu, and m.yeomans@imperial.ac.uk.

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3. When to Use AI and When Humans Must Do the Work

In this *Harvard Business Review* article, Bharat Anand (NYU Stern School) and Andy Wu (Harvard Business School and Penn Wharton School) have three observations on GenAI:

- The new wave of artificial intelligence is much more user-friendly and democratic than previous generations; pretty much anyone can use it with minimal IT support.
- Opportunities to create value exist right how; we don't have to wait for a flawless, all-powerful AI.
- Competitive advantage comes from using GenAI more strategically than competitors, not just faster.

Anand and Wu suggest a quadrant with four types of GenAI use. The horizontal axis is the cost of errors, from low to high. The vertical axis is the type of knowledge required: from explicit

(clearly articulated, documented, and stored) to tacit (experiential, intuitive, often content-specific).

Creative Catalyst	Humans First
No Regrets	Quality Control

Here is their description of the use case of GenAI in each quadrant:

• *Humans First*: tacit knowledge, high cost of errors – "Tasks here," say Anand and Wu, "involve subjective judgment, situational nuance, and complex decision-making – and mistakes carry serious consequences, whether financial, legal, reputational, or personal. Trust, ethics, and long-term strategy are often on the line." Examples: hiring, managing people, setting strategy, and navigating crises. A key component is emotional intelligence, which means using GenAI with extreme caution. However, AI can sometimes make human judgment more effective – for example, refining job descriptions and generating interview questions.

• *Quality Control*: explicit data, high cost of errors – GenAI produces information that is explicit and highly structured and humans carefully verify it, providing oversight, judgment, and final accountability. The advantage GenAI brings in this quadrant is the ability to scan large amounts of information, detect anomalies and opportunities, and produce boilerplate documents. Key questions: Which parts of the workflow can be safely delegated to GenAI? Where is human expertise truly essential?

• *No Regrets*: explicit data, low cost of errors – "You don't need perfect accuracy here," say Anand and Wu. "The real value lies in completing tasks faster, more cheaply, or at a greater scale than before." Some examples: screening résumés based on well-defined criteria, drafting stock e-mails, and acting as a stenographer for meetings. Two key questions: Are the cost savings worth the errors GenAI makes? Can we use GenAI for things we don't do today, or that used to be too costly (e.g., having a stenographer in meetings).

• *Creative Catalyst*: tacit knowledge, low cost of errors – GenAI acts as a creative catalyst, generating options from which humans select. "GenAI can meaningfully augment human creativity by speeding up experimentation, generating a greater volume of ideas, and enabling broader participation in the creative process," say Anand and Wu. "The key to applying GenAI in this quadrant is to deconstruct the creative task and identify where GenAI can expand the capacity of humans to add value through their creativity."

The authors conclude: "It's often said that those who use AI will replace those who don't. But the reality is more complex: as the framework illustrates, some tasks are best done by AI alone, others through human-AI collaboration, and some still require purely human

judgment. Rather than debating replacement versus complementarity, the key is understanding which tasks remain distinctly human."

"The GenAI Playbook for Organizations" by Bharat Anand and Andy Wu in *Harvard Business Review*, November-December 2025 (Vol. 103, #6, pp. 108-115); Anand can be reached at bharat.anand@stern.nyu.edu.

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4. Building Thinking Classrooms – the Research Base

In her latest *Coaching Letter*, Connecticut author/consultant Isobel Stevenson says Peter Liljedahl's Building Thinking Classrooms approach aligns with several strands of educational research. "The smart thing about BTC," she says, "is in pulling those strands together and making them usable for teachers in a way that I don't think anything else has, at least in math – and now of course the influence is spilling over to other content areas." Here's her list of research-based components:

• *Task predicts performance* – In a Building Thinking Classrooms lesson, the task student groups tackle (at their stand-up whiteboards) is designed to carry math ideas. This echoes Doyle (1983) on academic work and Smith and Stein (1998) on selecting and implementing high-level tasks.

• *Random grouping* – Horn (2010) and others have written about how groupings affect classroom dynamics and student participation. "Random groupings," says Stevenson, "interrupt the familiar hierarchies that form when students know who's 'good at math' and who isn't." Liljedahl has been an outspoken proponent of heterogeneous grouping so that hierarchies of performance aren't cemented over time.

• *Maintaining cognitive demand* – A central practice of Building Thinking Classrooms is to start with a meaty, low-floor-high-ceiling problem and then hold and augment that level of demand as students work. Stevenson cites Smith and Stein (1998) and their *Mathematical Tasks Framework* on how cognitive demand often erodes during instruction. The goal in a BTC lesson is "flow" as described by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.

• *Formative assessment and in-the-moment responses* – The heavy lifting of good teaching is teachers checking for understanding, responding to student questions, and making good decisions on which ideas to pursue. Stevenson cites the work of Ball, Thames, and Phelps (2008), Nuthall (2007), and Wiliam and Black (1998). In a BTC classroom, the teacher circulates, listens carefully, and decides when to suggest, give hints, ask questions, or smile and walk away.

• *Whole-class discussion and consolidation* – "A common misconception is that BTC sidelines teacher talk," says Stevenson. "In reality, teacher talk is abundant – including some direct explanation – but it happens at consolidation, when the class comes back together to make sense of their work." She cites Jackson, Garrison, Wilson, Gibbons, and Shahan (2013) on all-class discussions being where students' opportunities to learn are shaped. Liljedahl's approach is to not front-load explanations but wait until students have wrestled with concepts

and skills and then consolidate learning in discussion and direct instruction in the last one-third of the lesson.

• *Belonging and expectations* – "It's not enough for teachers to *believe* they have high expectations," says Stevenson; "what matters is whether students *experience* those expectations as real and directed toward them. BTC structures – random grouping, visible thinking, public consolidation – are as much about cultivating belonging and shared responsibility as they are about math content." She cites Cohen, Steele, and Ross (1999), Ferguson (2003), and Walton and Cohen (2011).

Stevenson sums up her belief in the efficacy of Building Thinking Classrooms: "It is a very clever, elegant, and practical packaging of what is, in fact, some very old research… We see it working all the time, and frequently it is most obviously working well for the students whom teachers see as less capable."

"Coaching Letter #221" by Isobel Stevenson, October 21, 2025; Stevenson can be reached at istevenson@partnersforel.org.

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5. Timothy Shanahan on Using Grade-Level Texts

In this online article, Timothy Shanahan (University of Illinois/Chicago) tackles the perennial question of whether students who are behind should be reading material at their instructional level or on grade level. When students read easier texts, they read more fluently, make fewer mistakes, and have good comprehension. But does that make them better readers? "No," says Shanahan. "Lessons are supposed to help kids improve their reading ability. My purpose is to enable kids to read successfully texts that they cannot already read well."

Shanahan traces the idea of students reading at their instructional level back to 1946, when Emmett Betts said students should be reading texts where they have 75-89 percent comprehension and 95-98 percent oral reading fluency. But there's "no convincing evidence" that this improves students' reading proficiency, says Shanahan. "When you place kids in texts that they can read as well as the instructional level dictates, there just isn't that much to figure out. Those texts are opportunity deserts."

What makes a text difficult? Any of the following might cause a student who is reading below that level to struggle:

- Problems with decoding and fluency;
- Unknown vocabulary;
- Complicated syntax;
- Subtle or confusing cohesive links;
- Complicated discourse structure;
- Sophisticated content;
- Lack of background knowledge, or failure to use it.

"If the point is immediate comprehension," says Shanahan, "then those difficulties are a real problem. Any and all of those can interfere with understanding a text. However, if our goal is

to increase the students' abilities to read, then those difficulties are an opportunity for teaching and learning."

Of course students need scaffolding as they read challenging texts – the teacher helping them make sense of unfamiliar words, ideas, and language structure. One way to provide that support, says Shanahan, is re-reading the text, or a portion of it, and addressing what's causing confusion. He cites studies showing that a second reading (with support) increases fluency, improves comprehension, highlights new information and links to graphics, and focuses on key linking words and causal connections (*because, so, so that, consequently, if…then*). At the elementary level, having students retell the passage after the first reading, then rereading, has been found to be effective.

In short, says Shanahan, "rereading has the power to transform a difficult read into an easier one, and learning to make sense of texts that one can't already read easily is at the heart of successful reading instruction."

"Don't Confuse Reading Comprehension and Learning to Read (and to Reread)" by Timothy Shanahan in *Shanahan on Literacy*, October 25, 2025; Shanahan's new book is *Leveled Reading, Leveled Lives* (Harvard Education Press, 2025); he is at shanahan@uic.edu.

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6. Using Multi-Classroom Observations to Spark Collective Efficacy

In this article in *Edutopia*, consultant Olivia Odileke says checklist-driven evaluations of teachers rarely improve instruction. Teachers subjected to this process are often defensive, says Odileke, "implement surface-level compliance changes or feel singled out for improvement." Traditional teacher evaluations also fail to address instructional problems that exist across classrooms and would benefit from collective action.

Odileke saw this most clearly when she accompanied a principal observing several third-grade classrooms. The principal checked boxes for each teacher on posted learning objectives, whether students were on task, questioning strategies, and status with the pacing guide. But when the principal was preparing for the third-grade PLC meeting that afternoon, she realized that she had data but no insights about the grade as a whole. She wasn't in a position to get the third-grade team invested in making needed improvements across classrooms.

To orchestrate that kind of collective work, Odileke believes principals should make 15-minute visits to all of a grade level's classes when teachers are working on similar content, focusing on one schoolwide priority – perhaps student engagement, questioning strategies, or differentiation. And principals should ask teachers up front what to look for in that area, making them partners in the process.

Then, when meeting with the grade-level team, the principal asks questions that get teachers thinking about effective practices, versus calling out individual deficits, for example:

- *I noticed that student participation varied significantly across classes. What conditions help quiet students feel safe to share their thinking?*

- *I saw different approaches to pacing. What have you noticed about how processing time affects student understanding?*
- *I saw fascinating moments when students asked unexpected questions. What strategies help you feel confident when students take learning in unexpected directions?*

"Notice how each question shifts ownership from individual deficits to collective exploration," says Odileke. "The team becomes invested in solving challenges together rather than feeling evaluated individually."

Odileke convinced a high-school principal to try this approach with several ELA teachers with a focus on how engaged students were. The principal was struck by the variation among classes, and in a department meeting later that day, the principal launched the discussion by saying, "This morning we focused on student engagement. I'm excited to explore what we can learn together."

Two insights emerged. When students initially talked to a partner, there was much wider engagement in whole-class discussions. And participation improved with nonverbal response strategies. Teachers decided they would experiment with both strategies. "Collective problem-solving rather than individual defensiveness," says Odileke. "More important, it created shared ownership of the challenge across the entire team."

"Using Your PLCs to Promote Collective Instructional Improvement" by Olivia Odileke in *Edutopia*, October 16, 2025

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7. How Do Single-Sex Schools Affect Students' Future Attitudes?

"Feeling comfortable interacting with someone of another gender and having competence in cross-gender relationships are important for adolescents' and young adults' psychosocial development," say Wang Ivy Wong (Chinese University of Hong Kong) and five colleagues in this article in *Journal of School Psychology*. Wong et al. report on their study comparing Hong Kong students attending single-sex high schools with students who attended coeducational schools. The researchers surveyed students in their senior year in high school and then 18 months after graduation.

The results: students who attended single-sex high schools reported lower other-gender relationship efficacy than their coeducation-attending peers. However, for both groups, mixed-gender anxiety increased over time, at about the same levels. "The study suggests potentially negative effects of same-sex schooling on mixed-gender interpersonal outcomes," conclude the authors. "These findings call for attention to the social-relational needs and challenges faced by high-school students. They also call for the need for continual intervention programs to fortify students for successful mixed-gender interactions and confidence, such as providing opportunities to learn peer norms and expectations in diverse peer groups, breaking down biased gender perceptions, and organizing more activities involving multiple schools. These interventions may be beneficial, particularly for students in single-sex schools."

"Mixed-Gender Anxiety and Gender-Based Relationship Efficacy: A Cross-Lagged Study of Single-Sex Versus Coeducational Schooling Bridging High School Graduation" by Wang Ivy Wong, Sylvia Yun Shi, Gu Li, Lynn Liben, Janice Sin Yu Leung, and Zhansheng Chen in *Journal of School Psychology*, April 2025 (Vol. 109, pp. 1-23); Wong can be reached at iwwong@cuhk.edu.hk.

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If you have feedback or suggestions, 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 other educators very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 54 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, writer, and consultant lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 60 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through more than a hundred articles each week, and selects 5-10 that have the greatest potential to improve teaching, leadership, and learning. He then writes a brief summary of each article, pulls out several striking quotes, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the Memo to subscribers early Tuesday (there are 50 issues a year). Every week there's a podcast and HTML version. Artificial intelligence is not used.

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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 SmartBrief
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
Ed Magazine
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School 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
Kappan (Phi Delta Kappan)
Knowledge Quest
Language Arts
Language Magazine
Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance)
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
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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