Marshall Memo 254

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
October 6, 2008

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"When the bell rang and the doors closed, I was on my own."
Jennifer Goldstein on her first year of teaching (see item #1)

"In my view, two fundamental problems afflict large comprehensive high schools: They are large, and they are comprehensive."
Patrick McQuillan in "Small-School Reform Through the Lens of Complexity Theory: It's 'Good to Think With'" in *Teachers College Record*, September 2008 (p. 1774), the last seven words from Michael Fullan, 2004.

"Academically successful schools will be ones that exert considerable press for achievement on their students, yet manage to do so in a manner that is perceived by the students as in their favor. This is unlikely to be an easy task."
Floyd Hammack in "Off the Record – Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed, Something Blue: Observations on the Small Schools Movement" in *Teachers College Record*, September 2008 (p. 2070)

"Children need to feel that they as individuals count in the life of the school."
Mariajose Romero (see item #2)

1. Peer Assistance and Review – A Better Way to Evaluate Teachers?

New York-based researcher Jennifer Goldstein begins this *American Educator* article with a hair-raising description of her first year of teaching in Compton, California. She struggled with all the basics of teaching, but was lucky enough to have a helpful colleague across the hall who shared lesson plans and materials and sometimes took misbehaving students under her wing. Unfortunately, there was never time for the two of them to actually observe each other's classes. "When the bell rang and the doors closed," says Goldstein, "I was on my own." The principal did pay one visit to her classroom that year – on April 15th, the deadline for getting teacher evaluations to the district office. The principal asked Goldstein to sign a form, promising her that she would like what it said, and left. "I was thus initiated to the quality-control mechanism of my profession," says Goldstein.

A much better alternative to this all-too-common process of teacher initiation and evaluation, she says, is peer assistance and review (PAR), which shifts teacher evaluation from superficial, infrequent reviews by checklist-wielding principals to a year-long process of frequent, standards-based classroom assistance by highly qualified peers. PAR, says Goldstein, is a "high-leverage policy that administrators such as those in Compton could implement to attract teachers who are qualified, support and guide them to develop into teachers with high-quality performance, and retain them beyond their initial years on the job, while also removing from classrooms those teachers who do not display competency even after having received intensive support and mentoring."

PAR was born in Toledo in 1981, the brainchild of Dal Lawrence, then president of the local AFT branch, and spread to a number of other districts, including Cincinnati, Columbus, Rochester, Dade County, and others. The basic idea is to free up highly effective educators to act as "consulting teachers" for two or three years and assign them to work with novice teachers and more experienced teachers who are having difficulty. Consulting teachers help their charges with lesson and unit planning, procure curriculum materials, observe and give feedback on classes, provide emotional support, and advocate for them with the principal. Consulting teachers report to a districtwide board composed of teachers and administrators, usually co-chaired by the union president and the director of human resources. At meetings of this board, members discuss individual cases and share ideas on effective coaching strategies. Each spring, the board makes recommendations on continued employment of certain teachers to the superintendent, who decides which names to pass along to the school board.

Goldstein studied the literature and conducted a one-year study of PAR in a California district, and identified several problems that she believes PAR successfully addresses:

• *Problem #1: Giving teachers feedback* – One principal said, "the current evaluation process really is a sham, it's a joke." Goldstein found that most principals are simply too busy to spend meaningful time in classrooms. This allows teachers who don't meet standards to slip through the cracks, and misses opportunities to support good teachers to reach higher levels of performance, sometimes resulting in losing them to other professions. A well-designed PAR program can remedy this situation by assigning a caseload of 12-15 teachers to each consulting teacher and ensuring that they visit classrooms at least once a week (some visits unannounced) and give ongoing feedback. Consulting teachers are also available for consultation in impromptu meetings, phone calls, and e-mails. Data from PAR districts indicates that this kind of attention and support helps teacher retention. In Columbus, for example, 80 percent of new teachers are still in the district after five years, and in Rochester the retention rate is 85 percent.

• *Problem #2: The disconnect between evaluation and professional development*. In most districts, says Goldstein, evaluation is focused on quality assurance, not on improving performance. Principals' evaluations are usually based on very little data gathered in announced classroom visits (the "dog and pony show"), and rarely draw on the insights of support specialists (e.g., literacy and math coaches) and others who are working on professional development. Consulting teachers, on the other hand, are in and out of classrooms on a regular basis and have a real sense of how things are going. They can build trust, give their charges ongoing instructional feedback, create individual assistance plans, and draw on authoritative standards for good teaching.

• *Problem #3: Principals often pull their punches in evaluations*. Because they have so little observational data to go on and want to avoid conflict and keep the peace, principals' evaluations tend to be skewed toward the positive end of the spectrum. "This tendency may be understandable," says Goldstein, "but it does little to ensure a competent teacher for every student." In addition, there's an "Eleventh Commandment" in schools that teachers should not speak ill of a colleague, even if students are getting a terrible education. PAR, on the other hand, pierces the isolation of many classrooms and give teachers constant, honest feedback on their performance from a peer who knows what he or she is talking about. Equally important, consulting teachers are held accountable for their evaluations (by their review panel) in a way that principals are not. Principals who take part in the PAR process often learn a lot about observation and feedback. Clear standards of effective teaching help everyone get beyond the hackneyed "I know good teaching when I see it" and promote conversations based on real evidence of what's going on in classrooms.

• *Problem #4: Many evaluations lack credibility*. "Principals often doubt themselves when making evaluative decisions," says Goldstein. "How could it be otherwise?" They just don't have enough information and rarely make the leap to professional development that will solve classroom problems. Once again, PAR provides the solution. Consulting teachers working with principals and their review panels can produce evaluations with much more heft.

• *Problem #5: Firing a teacher is seen as impossible*. "Many principals have viewed the union as an unbeatable adversary," says Goldstein, "and often do not try to fire a teacher." They may tolerate mediocre or poor performance, try to orchestrate voluntary or involuntary transfers, or wait until retirement time. "Given the structural weaknesses in the traditional system," says Goldstein, "teachers rarely are fired for teaching poorly." In one study, only 1 percent of teachers in a district were fired, whereas 5 percent had been informally identified as incompetent. Goldstein believes that PAR can solve this problem. The joint union/management committee can recommend dismissal based on far more classroom evidence and bona fide opportunities for underperforming teachers to improve. Consulting teachers, who have double credibility by virtue of their status as teachers and the time they are spending in classrooms, are willing to recommend dismissal where a teacher is not improving despite intensive support. "Consulting teachers and panel members often noted that they were fulfilling a responsibility to the students of the district, in effect 'stepping up' to do a difficult job that had to be done," says Goldstein. A California principal agreed: "I'm working collaboratively with the union. It's a whole different feel and there's a sense that the union and I agree that we need teachers who use best practice, and we're working together to have best practices occur, and we're not opposed in terms of keeping some person in there who is not utilizing best practice. I feel like we're all on the same team and it's about children and the kind of teaching they get." Goldstein agrees: "For some teachers' unions, PAR is one way to defend the profession of teaching rather than individual teachers."

"Taking the Lead" by Jennifer Goldstein in *American Educator*, Fall 2008 (Vol. 32, #3, p. 4-11, 36-37) http://www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/fall2008/goldstein.pdf

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2. The Long-Term Impact of Kindergarteners' School Attendance

This *Education Week* article reports on a new study showing that kindergarten absence rates of 10 percent or more (excused and unexcused) were correlated with learning problems in reading, math, and general knowledge in first grade and low achievement in reading and math at the end of fifth grade. The study, conducted by Hedy Chang and Mariajose Romero, found that the low-attendance/low-achievement link was especially strong for poor children.

The researchers found tremendous variations between schools – from 1 percent chronic absenteeism in one school to 55 percent in another. The problem is that some schools don't take absenteeism among younger children seriously because they aren't hanging out and getting in trouble with their friends. Nonetheless, early attendance problems are ominous. Joyce Epstein of Johns Hopkins University says the impact reaches into high school. "Dropping out of school, although identified by a single event, reflects a long process of disengagement and withdrawal from schooling and educational institutions," she wrote in 2002.

Why do kindergarten students miss school? The Chang/Romero study pointed to a number of factors:

- Parents who are unaware of the long-term consequences of low attendance;
- A lack of basic resources – food, clothing, transportation
- Moving from school to school;
- Family turmoil and stress;
- A history of negative experiences with schools;
- Not feeling welcome in school; "Children need to feel that they as individuals count in the life of the school," said Romero.
- Schools not monitoring attendance and following up with students with chronic absenteeism.

Early-grade absenteeism is not getting enough attention from school districts, the researchers believe. "As problems go, there are far more complicated problems that are hairier and harder to deal with than absenteeism and truancy," said Bucky Burnsed of the Savannah-Chatham County schools in Georgia. "But you absolutely can't let it go. It takes accountability at every level." Burnsed's district sends a letter home after three consecutive days of absence, and has staff who are willing to drive to individual students' homes and say, "Put the PlayStation down and get ready for school."

Epstein's earlier research found that truant officers, workshops for parents on attendance, and referring parents for counseling were ineffective strategies. What does work? Rewards for good attendance, giving parents a contact person in the school, communicating well with all families, and home visits for chronic cases. "It's through the personal contact generally that you can get the biggest bang for your buck, positively," said Epstein. Romero agrees with Epstein on the ineffectiveness of the punitive approach, saying that it creates animosity and doesn't address the issues of families with multiple problems. But some districts have had success with a tough-love approach with parents whose children have chronic attendance problems, forcing them into hearings and informational sessions on the importance of regular attendance to their children's futures.

Another positive factor: high-quality pre-school programs are associated with better primary-grade attendance because they orient families to school norms and establish regular attendance as a daily routine.

"Absences in Early Grades Tied to Learning Lags" by Linda Jacobson in *Education Week*, Oct. 1, 2008 (Vol. 28, #6, p. 1, 12)
http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2008/10/01/06absent_ep.h28.html

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3. A College Professor on Five Types of Problem Students

In this *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, Seattle University professor Sven Arvidson shares his ideas for dealing with a variety of classroom challenges. Although he is writing about college teaching, a lot of what he says applies to K-12 classrooms.

• *Uninterested students* – When students are visibly bored, what should the teacher do? Arvidson preempts this problem by asking students about their interests in a beginning-of-the-

year survey and then using analogies linked to their interests (e.g., soccer, computer games, etc.) in class. He also gives writing assignments that invite students to make links between class material and their passions. And he chats with students before and after classes and learns more about what interests them.

• *Passive/aggressive students* – How should a teacher respond to a student who makes a point of reading outside material in class, doing crossword puzzles, surfing the Net or doing e-mail, daydreaming in an obvious way, or sleeping? If subtle hints don't work, Arvidson advises making an appointment to talk to the student, being very direct about the behavior, and asking *What's up?* However the conversation goes, the teacher will have made the point that the student is being disrespectful and causing a distraction to the teacher and other students. "Except in extreme cases with incredibly unreasonable students," says Arvidson, "a respectfully led meeting in which you have attempted to get to know the student should yield some success."

• *Interrupters* – Some students over-participate to the point of breaking up the flow of teaching and preventing other students from getting air time. Arvidson suggests acknowledging interrupters' passion and enthusiasm in a one-on-one talk and then enlisting them as class leaders: "I see how you have shown others how to speak up, but for some it takes more time to warm up. What do you think about letting others have the floor too, now that they've seen how you do it?"

• *Hijackers* – These are students who publicly undermine the teacher's authority and actively enlist others in the class. Other students may feel intimidated and unable to speak up to a hijacker. "A hijacker must be dealt with directly and honestly," says Arvidson, and suggests an individual meeting in which the teacher gives specific examples of the behavior, expresses concern about other students' need to learn, makes an I-statement ("I need to be able to lead with some authority"), and asks "What is your goal?" He has found this approach usually stops hijacking behavior in its tracks.

• *Painfully shy students* – "Some students have taken a vow of silence, to be broken only if necessary," says Arvidson. "They never voluntarily speak in the class. They'll even hide in writing assignments designed to reveal their perspective." He advises against publicly chiding these students, even in subtle ways ("Don't be afraid, we're all friends here"). Call on them as you would other students, he says, giving them the opportunity to pass if they wish. It's also important to create a welcoming atmosphere in class, use non-dismissive responses to questions, and give opportunities for all students to talk in small break-out groups. Shy students can also benefit from opportunities to share their ideas in writing.

"Students 101: How to Tailor Your Teaching to the Interrupter, the Hijacker, and Other Familiar Types" by Sven Arvidson in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Oct. 3, 2008 (Vol. LV, # 6, p. A120), no e-link available

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4. The Importance of Coherence

In this article in *Principal's Research Review*, Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory researcher Diana Oxley identifies "instructional program coherence" as a key factor in effective schools. A school's program is coherent, she says, when it has a common instructional framework, clear learning expectations, and teacher collaboration within and across content areas and grade levels. "The key to their success," says Oxley, "is the requirement that teachers within a grade level share curriculum, instructional strategies, and assessments of students, and that curriculum and assessments build seamlessly on subject matter from one grade to the next."

What is the evidence that program coherence is so important? Oxley says there are three strands:

• *Learning theory* – Researchers who study how people learn have shown that "teaching is more likely to produce learning when it connects learning in different contexts over an extended period of time," says Oxley. "Students' ability to apply learning in different contexts allows them to test what they know and generalize their knowledge." This is especially true of mathematics; Japanese students' high achievement in math has been attributed to being asked to solve problems in different content areas.

• *Motivation* – When students learn content and skills in different classes, their sense of mastery and competence increases, as does their intrinsic motivation and willingness to work hard.

• *Staff effectiveness* – Program coherence and sustained professional development help teachers gain greater skill and understanding of their craft, improving their sense of efficacy.

How does a school develop a coherent program? The principal's leadership is key, as are adequate resources – although both can produce *incoherence* if they are not used wisely. Here are some of the most important building blocks of coherence:

- Common learning goals and strategies are used by teachers within each grade, including art, health, library, and computer teachers.
- Common assessments are used to check on student mastery at each level. "Assessments of student proficiency are central to ensuring high standards," says Oxley. These might include public demonstrations and rites of passage to the next level.
- Teachers coordinate curriculum and assessments to avoid repetition within a grade and offer students new and more complex material in each successive grade.
- Assemblies, field trips, tutoring, remedial instruction, and parent education are all aligned with the common core of curriculum, instruction, and assessment.
- Professional development is sustained over time and supports the common learning expectations, instructional practices, and assessments, including using common planning time for professional learning communities.
- The school says yes to external programs and initiatives that support the core program and no to programs that don't.
- School improvement planning and assessment embody curriculum coherence.

- The curriculum remains reasonably stable over time, giving teachers and students a chance to master the material.
- Teachers and program leaders are stable over time – but the principal works on improving teacher quality through thoughtful hiring.
- Collaborative decision-making promotes ownership and support of the program throughout the staff.

"Creating Instructional Program Coherence" by Diana Oxley in *Principal's Research Review*, September 2008 (Vol.3, # 5, p. 1-7); no e-link; Oxley can be reached at oxleyd@nwrel.org.

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5. A Consumer Guide to Elementary Math Programs

In this 88-page article in *Review of Educational Research*, Robert Slavin and Cynthia Lake of Johns Hopkins University rate K-5/6 mathematics programs on their impact on student achievement. This is the first comprehensive review of math programs using the "scientifically based" criteria suggested by No Child Left Behind. [A similar review of grade 6-12 reading programs by Slavin et al. was summarized in Marshall Memo 243.]

Slavin and Lake looked at 87 studies that met rigorous criteria, of which 36 used random assignment of treatments. They grouped programs into three categories: (a) Math textbooks; (b) Computer-assisted instruction (CAI) programs, which use technology as a supplement to the regular math program, diagnosing students' performance and providing exercises tailored to students' individual needs; and (c) Instructional process programs, which include cooperative learning, cooperative/ individualized strategies, direct instruction, mastery learning, professional development focused on math content, professional development focused on classroom management and motivation, and supplemental programs. Here are the study's conclusions:

• *Math textbooks* – The median effect size was +0.10 across 13 studies. There is little high-quality evidence of positive effects from these materials compared to control groups, say Slavin and Lake. And there was little difference between the ratings of the programs that did make the cut – meaning, they say, that it doesn't make much difference which textbooks schools purchase.

• *Computer-assisted instruction* – The median effect size was +0.19, higher than that of math textbooks, and there were more high-quality studies in this area. CAI programs did best in the area of computation (versus concepts and problem solving).

• *Instructional process strategies* – The median effect size was +0.33, significantly higher than the other two areas. Several of these programs had the strongest impact on student achievement (see ratings below), leading Slavin and Lake to conclude that the best way to boost students' math achievement is to work on improving teachers' classroom methods, not worrying about which textbooks or CAI materials to buy. They emphasize that what makes these programs effective is not generic professional development or training in math content knowledge, but helping teachers "use instructional process strategies, such as using time

effectively, keeping children productively engaged, giving children opportunities and incentives to help each other learn, and motivating students to be interested in learning mathematics."

Several categories of instructional process programs were the most effective in well-designed studies, say Slavin and Lake: (a) Cooperative learning (including Classwide Peer Tutoring, PALS, and STAD, and Team Accelerated Instruction; (b) Programs to improve teachers' skills in classroom management, motivation, and effective use of time (especially Missouri Mathematics Project and CMCD); (c) Programs focused on helping teachers introduce math concepts effectively (including CGI, Dynamic Pedagogy and Connecting Math Concepts); and (d) Supplementing classroom instruction with well-targeted supplementary instruction (including small-group tutoring for struggling first graders and Project SEED).

Below are the overall ratings. The type of program is in parentheses after each one: MC = Math Curricula, CAI = Computer Assisted Instruction, IP = Instructional Process. A large number of programs had insufficient evidence for the researchers to judge their impact on students' math achievement.

• <u>Strong evidence of effectiveness:</u>
- Classwide Peer Tutoring (IP)
- Missouri Mathematics Project (IP)
- Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (IP)
- Student Teams-Achievement Divisions (IP)
- TAI Math (IP/MC)

• <u>Moderate evidence of effectiveness:</u>
- Classworks (CAI)
- Cognitively Guided Instruction (IP)
- Connecting Math Concepts (IP/MC)
- Consistency Management and Cooperative Discipline (IP)
- Project SEED (IP)
- Small-group tutoring (IP)

• <u>Limited evidence of effectiveness:</u>
- Accelerated Math (CAI)
- Dynamic Pedagogy (IP)
- Every Day Counts (IP)
- Everyday Mathematics (MC)
- Excel Math (MC)
- Growing With Mathematics (MC)
- Houghton Mifflin Mathematics (MC)
- Knowing Mathematics (MC)
- Lightspan (CAI)
- Mastery Learning (IP)
- Project CHILD (IP/CAI)

• Insufficient evidence:

- Math Steps (MC)
- Math Trailblazers (MC)
- Saxon Math (MC)
- Scott Foresman-Addison Wesley (MC)

• No qualifying studies:

90 other programs, including Compass Learning, Harcourt Math, Investigations in Numbers, Data, and Space, Macmillan McGraw-Hill Math, Math Blasters, Math Their Way, McGraw-Hill Mathematics, New Century Mathematics, PLATO, Real Math, Scott Foresman Math Around the Clock, Singapore Math, Voyages, and Waterford Early Math.

Slavin and Lake conclude with several important points. First, "the findings of this review suggest that educators and researchers might do well to focus more on how mathematics is taught, rather than expecting that choosing one or another textbook by itself will move their students forward." Second, although instructional process programs do much better in the research, curriculum materials are still important and necessary. "There is no point in teaching the wrong mathematics," they say. Third, it's striking that traditional math textbooks (e.g., Saxon Math) didn't do better than progressive math materials (e.g., Everyday Math) using standardized test scores as the measure of effectiveness. Fourth, say the authors, "it is important to note that the three types of approaches to mathematics instruction reviewed here do not conflict with each other and may have additive effects if used together." For example, they say, a school might get a synergistic effect from using Everyday Math as a core textbook, with well-structured cooperative learning and supplemental computer-assisted instruction. Finally, the study didn't find that any program did a better job than any other at closing the achievement gap between African-American and Hispanic students and white and Asian students. The key criterion in closing the gap, they say, is using the highest-quality materials and instructional practices.

"Effective Programs in Elementary Mathematics: A Best-Evidence Synthesis" by Robert Slavin and Cynthia Lake in *Review of Educational Research*, September 2008 (Vol. 78, #3, p. 427-515), no e-link available

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6. How Well Are Gates-Funded Small High Schools Working?

This *Teachers College Record* article summarizes a major five-year study of two approaches to small high schools funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The first approach, starting up new, small high schools, was successful in creating a more supportive climate, stronger student engagement, and better attendance. However, student achievement gains were uneven, with better math and ELA test scores in only one of the four districts studied (the quality of 10th-grade student work was higher across the board). Overall, though, the study was optimistic: "Start-up schools enjoy the tremendous advantage of being able to

start with a relatively clean slate, giving them the opportunity to develop coherent school visions, structures, and practices. Start-up schools were more likely… to have a dynamic leader who could attract others to the school vision."

The researchers found that the second approach, converting large, traditional high schools to smaller schools-within-schools, was less successful. Enormous energy went into the logistics of breaking up large schools, reorganizing staff and students, and dealing with issues of loss, which explained why student achievement did not improve. They concluded that this model of change, based on interim results, is "insufficiently powerful." They call for more research and follow-up on small high schools and whether they can be taken to scale.

"Contrasting Paths to Small-School Reform: Results of a 5-year Evaluation of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's National High Schools Initiative" by Linda Shear, Barbara Means, Karen Mitchell, Ann House, Torie Gorges, Aasha Joshi, Becky Smerdon, and Jamie Shkolnik in *Teachers College Record*, September 2008 (Vol. 110, #9, p. 1986-2039), no e-link available

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7. Short Item:

Census website – This website from the U.S. Census Bureau has a section on "State facts for students" (including how many toy stores in each state!), data on housing, economic and geographic information, and free lesson plans and classroom activities: http://www.census.gov/dmd/www/teachers.html.

Spotted in *American Educator*, Fall 2008 (Vol. 32, #32)

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Do you have feedback? Is anything missing?

If you have comments or suggestions, if you saw an article or web item in the last week that you think should have been summarized, or if you would like to suggest additional publications that should be covered by the Marshall Memo, please e-mail: kim.marshall8@verizon.net

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and others very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 37 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, and writer, lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

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

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Publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
ASCD, CEC SmartBriefs, Daily EdNews
Catalyst Chicago
Changing Schools (McREL)
Ed. Magazine
EDge
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
Essential Teacher (TESOL)
Harvard Business Review
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Language Learner (NABE)
Middle Ground
Middle School Journal
New York Times
Newsweek
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
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Teachers College Record
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The New Yorker
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Theory Into Practice
Tools for Schools/The Learning Principal