Marshall Memo 964

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
December 5, 2022

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"You can't look good and get better at the same time."
The principal of a turnaround elementary school to her teachers (quoted in item #1)

"It's not fair that a child could have two different experiences because of the flip of a coin, you got this teacher and not that teacher."
The same principal (*ibid*.)

"It is appropriate, to examine nightly homework to see what is authentic practice of the material and what is unnecessary busywork that doesn't advance learning. It is right to question whether the College Board drives the pacing of our classes to the point that, at times, depth may be sacrificed for breadth."
Rachel Skerritt (see item #2)

"The traditional 'transmission' model of instruction, in which teachers transmit knowledge to students through lectures and assigned readings, may be suboptimal for supporting students' ability to think and communicate in sophisticated ways, demonstrate creativity and innovation, and transfer their skills, knowledge, and attitudes to new contexts."
Anna Rosefsky Saavedra et al. (see item #5)

"How many pizza boxes would it take to cover our classroom floor?"
A question to build students' estimation, problem-solving, and SEL skills (see item #4)

"Take him to lunch. Everyone has to eat."
Advice to Aaron Basko to mollify a superior he had offended (see item #6)

1. How One Elementary School Dramatically Improved Math Achievement

In this *American Educational Research Journal* article, Elham Kazemi (University of Washington), Alison Fox Resnick (University of Colorado), and Lynsey Gibbons (University of Delaware) describe how the principal of a racially diverse, low-SES elementary school shifted math instruction from teacher-centered and procedure-focused to student-centered and emphasizing discussion, problem-solving, reasoning, and sense-making. Over three years, the school rose from "failing" status to being named as a School of Distinction by the state, with fourth and fifth graders outscoring the district and state (passing rates for fifth graders went from 20 to 79 percent) and no achievement differences among the school's racial and socioeconomic student groups.

Kazemi, Resnick, and Gibbons studied this turnaround with a particular focus on how the principal worked with teachers and teacher teams. Their observations:

• *Teachers as learners* – The principal was clear about her vision for an improved mathematics curriculum and classroom practices that needed to change, say the authors, but she also believed teachers "needed to be trusted and engaged as competent sensemakers in messy and experimental learning." To encourage risk-taking, one of the principal's mantras was, "You can't look good and get better at the same time." She knew it would take time for the pedagogical changes that needed to be made, with plenty of mistakes along the way.

• *Modeling risk-taking* – As the principal worked shoulder to shoulder with teachers in grade-level meetings, math labs, and PD sessions, she shared their struggles implementing new materials and pedagogical practices, built collegiality and trust – and continued to communicate clear and high expectations. "I'm constantly shifting back and forth between pressure and support," she said. "As I'm listening, I'm thinking all these things at once." Because the principal sat in on so many teacher meetings, she was a keener observer of math teaching and learning when she visited classrooms.

• *Equity* – One of the school's goals was to close racial and economic achievement gaps, but the principal "resisted pervasive equity discourse," say the authors – also the idea that black and brown students needed to "catch up" with their white and Asian peers. Instead, the principal "focused closely on students' experiences and participation in classrooms" – and on *all* students' opportunities after they graduated from the school. Bringing effective, rigorous instruction to every classroom was central to the principal's equity philosophy. "It's not fair," she said, "that a child could have two different experiences because of the flip of a coin, you got this teacher and not that teacher."

• *Student agency* – "Our goal," said the principal, "is to change kids' outcomes in life by having them be thinkers, by having them be leaders of their own learning." In classrooms, she watched for who was doing the intellectual heavy lifting – the teacher or the students. When a teacher said, "I wish you were in here five minutes ago when I was teaching," the principal said that "teaching" was everything teachers were orchestrating that got kids talking to each other about their work and understanding math content and skills.

• *Teacher collaboration* – The principal saw weekly 45-minute grade-level teams (during teachers' common planning time) as the "unit of change," the key "leverage point" for improving individual teachers' effectiveness. The school's math coach facilitated these meetings, guiding teachers as they talked about what had been most successful in their classrooms. The principal and coach watched for how well teachers were working together, and the principal reassigned teachers to different grade levels when team dynamics were not productive. Maximizing the potential of teams was also a key consideration when the school filled teaching vacancies.

• *Lesson study* – Four to six times a year, each grade-level team, joined by special education and ELL teachers, participated in a full- or half-day "math lab" in which (facilitated by the math coach) they (a) unpacked new ideas about content, instruction, and student thinking; (b) collaboratively planned a short lesson; (c) taught the lesson in their classrooms; and (d) discussed their insights. The principal made a point of attending all teams' math labs in the course of each year (24 in all), and saw these cycles as key to improving instructional planning and disrupting some teachers' deficit ideas about what students were capable of doing mathematically.

• *Individual coaching* – Every week, the principal and the math coach visited classrooms to gauge how teachers and students were making sense of the curriculum and provide feedback and support. The principal sat with students on the rug or checked in with them as they worked at their desks, asking about what they were learning and which problems they found easy and difficult. The principal and the coach followed up with teachers during and after visits, praising effective practices and problem-solving when students were struggling.

• *Teacher evaluation* – The district's system for evaluating teachers was incompatible with the principal's desire to have conversations about teaching and learning throughout the year, setting goals and giving feedback from September through June. The principal also disagreed with the district's practice of making each classroom visit evaluative. "I need to be spending my time with teachers learning and planning and reflecting and adjusting," she said. She complied with the district's requirements, but her main focus was on being in classrooms and team meetings every week, noticing how teachers were interpreting and implementing lesson plans, communicating with teacher teams about their insights and ideas, and fine-tuning teaching throughout the year.

• *Instructional leadership team* – The ILT, consisting of the principal, assistant principal, and the math and literacy coaches, focused on how well teachers were implementing new practices, how successfully students were learning, and teacher interactions in grade-level

teams. The leadership team made decisions about supporting individual teachers and teams and brainstormed ideas for the next round of math labs.

• *All-staff communication* – The principal used e-mails, staff meetings, and schoolwide professional development sessions to deprivatize practice, spread effective ideas, and communicate a sense that "we are all learning this together."

• *Storytelling* – The principal encouraged teachers to tell her when lessons went especially well and send students to her (or the math coach) when they made a learning breakthrough. The principal often began staff meetings by sharing one or two of these stories, and frequently used metaphors to make important points: they were all in the same boat and needed to be rowing in the same direction; building a new mathematics system was fragile and vulnerable, like a house of cards; when sharing learning data that showed student progress, she stressed that students were on the road but had not yet arrived.

• *Buffering outside agendas* – Once the school's instructional vision was clear, the principal pushed back on district initiatives that would distract teachers from the path they were on. "Part of what I do," she said, "which is my least favorite part of my job, is I say no all the time. 'No, I'm sorry our teacher can't go to that. No, I'm sorry, we can't help you do that. No, I'm sorry, we can't have another visit. No, we do not want that curriculum you bought because you think every elementary school needs it. No, I can't even store it in my building because… that sends a message.'"

"Principal Leadership for Schoolwide Transformation of Elementary Mathematics Teaching: Why the Principal's Conception of Teacher Learning Matters" by Elham Kazemi, Alison Fox Resnick, and Lynsey Gibbons in *American Educational Research Journal*, December 2022 (Vol. 59, #6, pp. 1051-1089); the authors can be reached at ekazemi@uw.edu, alison.resnick@colorado.edu and lgibbons@udel.edu.

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2. A Boston Principal Reflects on Leadership

In this *Education Next* article, Rachel Skerritt looks back on her five years as principal of Boston Latin School, a 2,400-student, grade 7-12 exam school that dates all the way back to 1635. Skerritt, who herself graduated from Boston Latin and taught English there before leading two other schools, including a turnaround high school, and serving as a central-office leader in Boston and Washington, D.C., returned to lead BLS from 2017 to 2022. She shares what she has learned about school leadership:

• *A culture of urgency is essential*. What this involves, says Skerritt, is "to unite all constituents around a mission and to be clear about where we currently fall short" – without creating so much stress that staff members burn out. Just before she became principal at Boston Latin, an incident at the school crystallized an urgent need to improve racial dynamics. Professional development, hiring, and working on school culture were central to her leadership for several years, and she believes the school made progress.

Often, says Skerritt, it's difficult to create a sense of urgency in schools like Boston Latin that believe they're "good enough" because they have high achievement and send almost

all their graduates to college. The leader's challenge in such schools is to get stakeholders to focus on the urgent work that still needs to be done, often involving disparities in student achievement by race, class, gender, and ELL status, inequities in the quality of teaching, student disengagement in the curriculum, and mental health issues.

• *Good teaching is the heartbeat of the school*. Classrooms are where students spend most of their school time, says Skerritt, and the quality of teaching is every school leader's main responsibility. Some teachers do a good job "as long as every student does exactly what they're supposed to do," she says. Others are experts in their field but aren't good at fostering students' deep understanding. And some teachers are "great with kids" but don't know their subject area. Students need teachers who are strong across the board, and school leaders shouldn't have to choose between "content knowledge and the ability to forge trusting relationships with students."

Skerritt is also concerned with the way college admissions criteria wag the secondary school dog, pressuring students to take specialized AP courses (for example, two physics APs) and miss out on electives that would expand their minds and might create alternative pathways. Teachers know that many colleges will subject first-year students to large lecture courses with their entire grade depending on a couple of exams, so high schools may feel the need to give students practice with passively taking in large amounts of information and sitting through a week of high-pressure exams.

Then there's the pressure to present as a "well-rounded student," leading students and counselors to cram college applications with high grades, clubs, sports, music, service, and part-time jobs. No wonder so many Boston Latin students report they are chronically sleep-deprived and dealing with anxiety. "It is appropriate," says Skerritt, "to examine nightly homework to see what is authentic practice of the material and what is unnecessary busywork that doesn't advance learning. It is right to question whether the College Board drives the pacing of our classes to the point that, at times, depth may be sacrificed for breadth."

But Boston Latin's track record of getting students across all its racial groups into (and through) four-year colleges is undeniable, making it difficult for leaders to question its instructional practices. Skerritt is hard on herself for not spending more time in classrooms and teacher team meetings, "often feeling the pull of returning e-mails that *felt* like emergencies instead of keeping to a set schedule of uninterrupted time on instruction." She believes district leaders can help by assigning a chief of staff to schools to take non-instructional tasks and community relations off the principal's overloaded agenda.

• *Stay true to one's principles in the face of pushback*. Skerritt says that last spring, a Boston Latin teacher posted a poem by a student of color making critical comments about a predominantly white Boston neighborhood. There was tremendous blowback that took weeks of meetings and discussion to process, and Skerritt is critical of her own actions. "While I didn't, and still do not, believe it to be a wise decision to post the piece publicly, absent context or a space for readers to process or discuss the inevitable strong reactions to its content, and without the student's explicit consent, I overcorrected in my apology for its display… My public statement on the issue will remain a regret, and it speaks to the danger created when a

leader is overly conciliatory, something that can easily occur when you're trying to keep everyone rowing in the same direction in a community with many different politics."

• *Leadership must be grounded in love*. When three students at Skerritt's former D.C. high school suffered non-fatal gunshot wounds, she called her grandmother and asked what she should say to students when they gathered in the auditorium the next morning. "Tell them you love them," was the reply, and that's what Skerritt and her team conveyed to students as they dealt with yet another trauma in their young lives. "They knew that there were limitations to what was in our power to do," she says, "but they believed and trusted in the community we'd forged."

At Boston Latin, Skerritt guided the school through Covid, the aftermath of George Floyd's murder, several school shootings around the U.S., and the deaths of two BLS students and a staff member. "At times," she says, "it felt like the only promise we could make to students was to love them. And to love our students means to love their families. And to love our teachers. And to love so hard that sometimes you feel like you can't lead anymore because you're spent. But then you head to a Junior Classical League tournament and watch students in togas riding a homemade chariot, laughing and acting every bit their youthful age. And your cup fills again."

"What I Learned Leading America's First Public School" by Rachel Skerritt in *Education Next*, Winter 2023 (Vol. 23, #1, pp. 46-53)

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3. How Flexible Should Teachers Be with Assignments Handed in Late?

In this *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, Carolyn Kuimelis reports that during the pandemic, many college instructors eased off on penalizing students for late work, recognizing there were often extenuating family and health circumstances. Now that classes are back in person, should policies return to where they were before Covid – for example, docking grades for each day after the deadline? The rationale for this tough-love approach has always been that it motivates students to stay on top of their work and prepares them for the kinds of deadlines they'll face in the real world.

But there are three concerns with tough deadlines. First, it seems unfair to mark down a first-rate paper for something unrelated to the quality of the work. Second, disadvantaged students may have more life circumstances that get in the way of meeting academic deadlines. Third, students who are more socialized for college tend to be more assertive asking for extensions. With these concerns in mind, Regan Gurung (Oregon State University) built in a 24-hour buffer with all his assignments and made it easier to ask for an extension; if students need extra time, they can fill out a Google form for two more days.

As the pandemic waned, Constance Kassor (Lawrence University) experimented with much greater leniency in the interests of equity: no penalties at all for lateness. But she found that without penalties for lateness, many students missed one deadline after another; at the end of the semester, she had an enormous pile of last-minute papers to grade. Now she's trying a hybrid strategy:

- Major assignments are broken down into components – the outline and various drafts – each with a deadline.
- Each component is low-stakes, worth only 5 percent of the final grade.
- Each chunk must be handed in on time; late work won't be accepted for any reason.
- 10 points of extra credit are available for exemplary work.

Kassor says this approach has several advantages: because the stakes are lower, students can miss one or more deadlines and still be successful in the course; she can see which students are struggling and intervene earlier; and she doesn't have to make difficult judgments about whether requests for extensions are legitimate. "Is somebody helping a family member who's sick with Covid," asks Kassor, "or did somebody just sleep through their alarm and not come to class? Often, I don't know the whole story, and that's not my job." More important, she believes, is providing timely support when and where it's needed.

"Does Flexible Grading Hurt Students?" by Carolyn Kuimelis in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 25, 2022 (Vol. 69, #7, p. 10)

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4. Using Fermi Questions to Improve Math and SEL Skills

In this article in *Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12*, Kathryn Lavin Brave and Jillian Miller (Baltimore County Public Schools) describe using Fermi questions to get students thinking about key mathematics standards while bolstering their social and emotional skills. Fermi questions were named after the Nobel Prize-winning physicist Enrico Fermi, who was known for his theoretical and practical contributions and for making reasonable estimates from limited data.

Fermi questions are designed to get students working on a challenging problem "by making reasonable assumptions about the situation, not necessarily relying on definite knowledge for an exact answer" (Taggart et al, 2007). These questions are especially helpful, say Brave and Miller, as schools emerge from the pandemic, providing an opportunity to combine math problem-solving with building SEL skills, especially collaboration. Some examples:

- How many times can you say the ABCs in 24 hours?
- How many hairs are on your head?
- How many sticky notes would cover the chalkboard?
- How many pizza boxes would it take to cover our classroom floor?
- How much water is wasted by a leaky faucet in one day?
- How many cars drive by our school building in a day?
- How many plastic containers does the cafeteria throw away each week?

Brave and Miller suggest this step-by-step plan for using a Fermi question in an upper-elementary classroom:

- The teacher gives background information on Fermi and the role of estimation in solving problems.

- Students are presented with a Fermi question that's appropriate to their grade level and a mathematical skill or concept they're learning.
- Students are encouraged to make "wild estimates" on what the answer might be.
- The teacher introduces the idea of "outliers" and the class discusses answers that seem too high or too low to be plausible.
- Students discuss which estimates might be closer to the exact answer and why.
- The class discusses a plan for finding the answer, dividing the Fermi question into a series of questions than might be used to get relevant data.
- Students get into groups to find the answer; the teacher fields initial questions like, *Can we use a ruler? Can we use a calculator?*
- The teacher circulates, guiding students with mathematical questions and prompts and highlighting interesting strategies and insights for the whole class.
- The teacher points out SEL insights on self-regulation, sharing, self-awareness, patience, and persistence.
- The teacher reminds students to evaluate their work and make mid-course corrections.
- Finally, groups present their answers to the whole class for critique and discussion and share what they learned about social and emotional skills.

"Using Fermi Questions to Foster Community" by Kathryn Lavin Brave and Jillian Miller in *Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12*, November 2022 (Vol. 115, #11, pp. 801-807)

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5. Can Project-Based Learning Work in AP Courses?

In this article in *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, Anna Rosefsky Saavedra (University of Southern California) and seven colleagues report on their study comparing students' performance on two Advanced Placement exams (U.S. Government and Environmental Science) following traditional and project-based instruction. For teachers trying to implement an innovative project-based learning classroom, say the authors, "the AP context is particularly challenging because of the sheer amount of content covered in the course-specific AP curriculum frameworks and the looming end-of-year, high-stakes examination."

The researchers looked at the exam results of students in five predominantly urban, low-income school districts around the U.S. What did they find? Students who learned through project-based learning did significantly better on AP exams than those with lecture-based instruction. This was true for students from both low- and high-income families. The researchers found that teachers using project-based learning focused their learning objectives on more-sophisticated thinking and communication skills, did less AP test prep and quick-turnaround assignments, and spent more time on student-centered activities like simulations and debates.

The authors have several caveats. First, shifting from traditional to project-based pedagogy is a "substantial change for teachers," requiring high-quality, ongoing, job-embedded PD and coaching support. Second, the teachers using project-based learning in this

study chose to participate, indicating that they were "early adopters" who were more motivated than those in the control group to try something new and/or were drawn to, or already knowledgeable about, project-based learning. Third, the schools in the study were philosophically aligned with project-based learning, offered many AP courses, and required open access enrollment in AP courses. Classrooms and schools without these favorable conditions might not get the positive results found in this study.

Still, say the authors, "The traditional 'transmission' model of instruction, in which teachers transmit knowledge to students through lectures and assigned readings, may be suboptimal for supporting students' ability to think and communicate in sophisticated ways, demonstrate creativity and innovation, and transfer their skills, knowledge, and attitudes to new contexts."

"The Impact of Project-Based Learning on AP Exam Performance" by Anna Rosefsky Saavedra, Kari Lock Morgan, Ying Liu, Marshall Garland, Amie Rapaport, Alyssa Hu, Danial Hoepfner, and Shira Korn Haderlein in *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, December 2022 (Vol. 44, # 4, pp. 638-666); Saavedra can be reached at asaavedr@usc.edu.

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6. Advice on Not Taking Bad Career Advice

In this *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, Aaron Basko (University of Lynchburg) shares five of the worst pieces of career advice he's received, and what his own experiences have taught him since:

• *You're not ready*. Early in his career, Basko was offered a promotion and regrets that he followed the advice of several colleagues who reinforced his worries about stepping out of his comfort zone and taking a risk. "There is no perfect career path for you to mess up," he says. "If you get an opportunity to move up, by all means, consider the pros and cons of stepping into the spotlight, but also think hard about what it will mean for your career to decline the offer."

• *Keep your head down and be a team player*. This is not the kind of organization you should be part of, says Basko. If you're checking out a new workplace, he advises, "observe how people there communicate… Do people agree with everything the leader says? If you get the sense that people on the team value loyalty above all else and seem afraid to say anything that would contradict the supervisor, run in the other direction."

• *Don't worry about them*. Every institution he's worked for had office bullies, says Basko. Several times when his "bully radar" went off, he was advised to ignore the troublemaker: "Just stay in your lane and it won't be a problem." This is not a good strategy, says Basko. Better to figure out what personality types annoy you the most, do an Enneagram study of people you work with, identify the hidden motivations driving them, and think about how to handle potential confrontations.

• *All that matters is results*. Basko was once told that as long as he had good "numbers" he'd be okay. Not true. He's seen people with great results getting fired, and mediocre performers keeping their jobs. "It took me a while, as a results-oriented person, to figure out

how important it was to maintain and cultivate long-term relationships in the field," he says. Early in his career, he made a remark that offended a superior. A seasoned colleague advised, "Take him to lunch. Everyone has to eat." It worked.

• *That's too big a risk.* As he's made several career moves, Basko has always heard from people who said he was crazy to do so, but he believes they were wrong. "Make career decisions that work for you," he advises. "No one else knows what is in your head or the values that motivate or fulfill you. In my changing jobs, I have prioritized two things: a good location for my family and a work environment where I knew I could make a difference. That's a different set of choices than if my goals had been working at a prestigious institution, maximizing my salary, or playing it safe… Play your own game. You – not the folks giving you advice – have to live with your choices."

Basko cites the 85 percent rule, which says that optimal learning takes place when you're making mistakes 15 percent of the time. The best career advice, he concludes, comes from "those in your field who have earned their battle scars and are still smiling, still building relationships, still getting results… When you receive bad advice, it usually comes from people who, while they have great theories, haven't actually lived through the situation they are advising you about. They are projecting their own fears onto your predicament… And at the end of the day, don't be afraid to make 15 percent of your own mistakes. That way you'll have good advice to share when others come to you."

"The Worst Career Advice" by Aaron Basko in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 25, 2022 (Vol. 69, #7, p. 42-45); Basko can be reached at basko_a@lynchburg.edu.

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7. Short Items:

a. A Grant Wiggins Curriculum Talk – Here's a YouTube link to a talk that the late Grant Wiggins gave at the Avenues School in New York City in 2013 on curriculum planning, teachers' value added, and critical and creative thinking – with a soccer coaching analogy. Here's Part Two of the same seminar.

Grant Wiggins, Understanding by Design at Avenues School, February 28, 2013

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b. John Wooden on Teaching and Coaching – Check out this 2009 TED Talk with the legendary UCLA basketball coach, including insights from his days as an English teacher in Indiana.

"The Difference Between Winning and Succeeding" with John Wooden, March 26, 2009

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c. Education Poll Results – Here are the findings of a national poll conducted by *Education Next* on public attitudes about schools.

"Partisan Rifts Widen, Perceptions of School Quality Decline: Results from the 2022 *Education Next* Survey of Public Opinion" by David Houston, Paul Peterson, and Martin West in *Education Next*, Winter 2023 (Vol. 23, #1, pp. 8-19)

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If you have feedback or suggestions,
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About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly publication keeps principals, teachers, instructional coaches, superintendents, and other educators well-informed on current K-12 research and ideas. Kim Marshall, drawing on 53 years 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 Tuesday (with occasional breaks; there are 50 issues a year). Every week there's also a podcast and HTML version.

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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 Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
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Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
English Journal
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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
Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance)
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
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