Marshall Memo 359

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
November 8, 2010

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"No one has the right to waste a day in the life of a child."
A principal quoted by Karin Chenoweth (see item #1)

"Most principals won't realize that support staff can be your undertakers – they will bury you."
Alabama principal Agnes Tomlinson (*ibid*.)

"One of the more pointless debates going on in many school districts is who will decide how teams will use their collaborative time… Both sides should be able to agree that if teachers do not use the collaboration time for the purpose intended (that is, if they don't co-labor on the right work), there will be no gains in student achievement."
Richard and Rebecca DuFour (see item #2)

"Saying or doing the just-right thing so that students do the cognitive work is a critical aspect of teaching reading and writing."
Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher (see item #5)

"Algebra is everywhere. When taught right, algebra is beautiful and simple."
Daryao Khatri of Washington, D.C. in a letter to *Education Week*, Nov. 3, 2010 (p. 25)
http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2010/11/03/10letter-2.h30.html

"More aerobic exercise!"
Georg Kuhn on the implications of brain research for children (see item #8)

1. The Keys to Highly Effective Schools

(Originally titled "Leaving Nothing to Chance")

In this *Educational Leadership* article, author and Education Trust writer Karin Chenoweth describes the practices of some of the most successful high-poverty schools she has studied. "These schools succeed by doing just about everything right," says Chenoweth, "from classroom management to curriculum to assessment to discipline. It isn't easy to do everything right. But the educators in these schools know that their students are particularly vulnerable to sloppy or inadequate instruction in a way that many middle-class children are not." Here are some of her findings:

• *Distributing leadership* – Too many principals "major in the minors," says Delaware principal Sharon Brittingham. They make themselves popular by solving lots of little problems and are comfortable spending most of their time dealing with day-to-day crises. Principals in high-achieving schools delegate most non-instructional tasks – the lunchroom running out of French fries or the sixth-grade field trip bus running late – to capable colleagues, making it possible for the leader to focus on instruction.

• *Hiring well* – The principals Chenoweth studied spent more time making hiring and tenure decisions than less-successful principals. One insisted that prospective teachers be willing to develop interim assessments and look at the results with colleagues, teach during at least one of the vacations, participate in after-school classes in reading and math, take on extra responsibilities such as sponsoring a club or leading professional development sessions, and keep up with professional reading. These principals also pay attention to non-instructional staff. "Most principals won't realize that support staff can be your undertakers," says Alabama principal Agnes Tomlinson, "– they will bury you."

• *Supervising everyone* – Chenoweth's principals set high expectations and supervise all staff to make sure they are measuring up. In particular, they are constantly in classrooms and follow up with commendations and suggestions, not insisting on one right way to teach but looking for what's effective with students.

• *Continuously monitoring student learning* – Principals in high-achieving schools look at summative and interim assessment data to see what's working and what isn't and organize professional development in weak areas of the curriculum. Strong principals help teachers look at student data without feeling under attack, search for patterns of success and failure, and use the insights of teachers who have found successful approaches.

• *Insisting on respect* – In one school in which teachers were speaking disrespectfully to students, the principal laid down the law on appropriate tone and led a study group on the book *Teaching with Love and Logic: Taking Control in the Classroom* (by Jim Fay and David Funk).

• *Being relentless* – Chenoweth found that principals in high-performing schools brought great urgency to their conversations with colleagues. "They know that school leaders must be guardians of their students' futures, not of their staff members' happiness," says Chenoweth. She quotes one principal saying, "It's the job of the principal to make a marginal teacher uncomfortable," and another saying, "No one has the right to waste a day in the life of a child."

• *Doing whatever it takes* – Sometimes teachers aren't willing to help, as when the displaced staff in one Alabama school trashed the building on the way out. The new principal rolled up her sleeves and did the repair work necessary for students to enter a decent school in the fall.

"Leaving Nothing to Chance" by Karin Chenoweth in *Educational Leadership*, November 2010 (Vol. 68, #3, p. 16-21), available for purchase at www.ascd.org. Chenoweth can be reached at kchenoweth@edtrust.org.

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2. Richard and Rebecca DuFour on the Elements of Teacher Teamwork

"One of the more pointless debates going on in many school districts is who will decide how teams will use their collaborative time," say consultant/authors Richard and Rebecca DuFour in this Solution Tree advertisement in *Education Week*. "Both sides should be able to agree that if teachers do not use the collaboration time for the purpose intended (that is, if they don't co-labor on the right work), there will be no gains in student achievement." What is "the right work"? For the DuFours' list of 18 critical issues for grade-level and subject teams, see: http://www.allthingsplc.info/pdf/tools/CriticalIssuesForTeamConsideration.pdf

The big idea here is that when educators work collaboratively rather than in isolation, students learn more. Key elements of collaboration are:

- Committing to implementing a guaranteed and viable curriculum;
- Using interim assessments that provide ongoing evidence of each student's learning;
- Collectively analyzing that evidence and using it to inform and improve practice;
- Putting in place a systematic intervention process that provides struggling students with additional time and support.

It's also important, say the DuFours, for teacher teams to be as self-directed as possible, so that if the principal leaves, the work will continue. Team leaders and administrators should agree on the work to be done, a timeline, and what the team will present as evidence of completion. As long as things are running smoothly, administrators should meet with teams only once a quarter to review progress, analyze evidence of student learning on interim assessments, and offer specific support. But if there are signs of dysfunction on a team,

administrators should attend meetings to get things back on track. The key principle here is *reciprocal accountability* – the team is accountable for doing its work and administrators are accountable for providing what's needed to support success.

"Who Decides Who Decides" by Richard DuFour and Rebecca DuFour in *Education Week*, Nov. 3, 2010 (Vol. 29, #10, p. 14), no e-link available

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3. Fact and Fiction on Boy-Girl Differences

(Originally titled "The Myth of Pink and Blue Brains")

"The truth is that neuroscientists have identified very few reliable differences between boys' and girls' brains," says Chicago Medical School of Rosalind Franklin University professor Lise Eliot in this *Educational Leadership* article. Worldwide studies of the brains of children and adults show only minor differences, and there is as much difference in the academic and social-emotional abilities within any group of males or females as there is across gender lines. "Of course, teachers know this," says Eliot. "Teachers recognize that girls or boys can be strong readers. On the playground, about one-third of girls are physically more active than the average boy."

So what is behind the well-documented gender gaps? Since the NAEP was launched in 1971, girls have outperformed boys in reading and boys have done better in math. Similar gaps show up in international assessments. But there are significant variations in gender gaps in different countries, suggesting that environmental factors are at work.

"[N]o mental ability – or ability difference – is 'hardwired' into the brain," says Eliot. "Abilities develop in a social-cultural context that includes each child's opportunities, relationships, sense of identity, and more… When it comes to gender gaps, boys and girls start out a little bit different, but these differences become rapidly magnified by a culture that sees them – and encourages them to see themselves – as fundamentally different creatures."

This happens in three areas. Young boys are modestly more physically active than girls; toddler girls talk one month earlier than boys; and boys appear more spatially aware. Parents proceed to amplify all three differences: they talk more to their daughters, encourage their boys to engage in more physical risk-taking, and reinforce toy preferences – trucks or dolls. Children bring their differences to school, where they are further amplified: "Simply put, girls spend more time talking, drawing, and role-playing in relational ways," says Eliot, "whereas boys spend more time moving, targeting, building, and role-playing as heroes." The hours that boys and girls spend on their divergent activities build divergent skills: stronger verbal and reading skills among girls, stronger spatial and problem-solving skills among boys.

How should teachers react to all this? "Very carefully," says Eliot. "As with all types of diversity, the challenge is to respect and honor differences without turning them into self-fulfilling prophecies." She suggests that teachers should de-emphasize gender (for example, not lining up boys and girls separately) and:

• *Avoid stereotyping*. "Both sexes need more physical exercise," says Eliot, "and both need to be comfortable blending competition and cooperation."

• *Appreciate the range of intelligences*. Expose all students to a broad variety of opportunities.

• *Strengthen spatial awareness*. Practice with puzzles, map reading, targeting sports, and building helps all students with fractions, proportionality, geography, physics, chemistry, and calculus.

• *Boost literacy with boys*. They need early encouragement and skill-building in vocabulary, phonological skills, and a love of books. One-on-one dialogue is important; so is a wide variety of reading matter with lots of humor, action, adventure, and nonfiction.

• *Recruit boys into nonathletic extracurricular activities*. The school newspaper, yearbook, and student council should not be female-dominated preserves.

• *Bring more men into the classroom*. This includes teachers, fathers, and other adult males who can serve as role models for intellectual engagement.

• *Treat teacher bias seriously*. "There are still teachers who cannot tolerate physical exuberance or coloring outside the lines," says Eliot. "Considering the potent effect of teacher expectations on student performance, we must train teachers about potential bias and evaluate them with respect to it."

"The Myth of Pink and Blue Brains" by Lise Eliot in *Educational Leadership*, November 2010 (Vol. 68, #3, p. 32-36), available for purchase at www.ascd.org.

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4. More Ideas for Gender-Friendly Classrooms

(Originally titled "Gender-Friendly Schools")

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Michael Gurian, Kelley King, and Kathy Stevens of the Gurian Institute differ with the preceding article on male and female brains – they believe there are significant differences in the cortical areas, frontal lobe development, and neural rest states. But Gurian, King, and Stevens share many of the same concerns about how things play out in schools. "Given the structures, expectations, and teaching styles in today's classrooms," they say, "teachers generally have more difficulty teaching boys than girls. In a classroom of 25 students, we may notice that five to seven boys are having difficulties, whether these are overt issues or a tendency to check out of the learning process."

Here are their suggestions for classroom improvement:

• *Add movement*. Getting up and moving as part of learning helps all students – but especially boys, who have a tendency toward what the authors call *neural rest* (boredom). Frequent "brain breaks" are also a good idea – jumping jacks, dancing, stretching, or doing the wave from one side of the room to the other.

• *Build on the visual*. Boys who might be unsuccessful with traditional writing activities do much better when teachers introduce comic-strip pictures, graphics, and drawing as part of the brainstorming and writing process.

• *Include students' interests and give choices*. Stocking classrooms with materials that draw on students' interest in sports, adventure, mystery, and nonfiction makes a positive difference, as does introducing more options in how students pursue curriculum goals.

"Gender-Friendly Schools" by Kelley King, Michael Gurian, and Kathy Stevens in *Educational Leadership*, November 2010 (Vol. 68, #3, p. 38-42), available for purchase at www.ascd.org; the authors can be reached at Kelley@gurianinstitute.com, michaelgurian@comcast.net, and Kathy@gurianinstitute.com.

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5. Thoughtful Scaffolding During Guided Reading Instruction

"Saying or doing the just-right thing so that students do the cognitive work is a critical aspect of teaching reading and writing," say San Diego State University professors Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher in this thoughtful article in *The Reading Teacher*. The heart of small-group literacy instruction is providing students with the scaffolding they need to move toward self-sufficiency in what Vygotsky called the zone of proximal development – where tasks are challenging but not too challenging and where expert help (not too much and not too little) will accelerate learning.

The skillful teacher provides scaffolds that guide, not simply tell, steps back and observes what students do, continuously assesses how well instruction is sticking, and gradually releases responsibility to the student. "The use of these scaffolds represents the intersection of the art and the science of teaching," say Frey and Fisher. "Perhaps this is why small-group guided instruction is often identified as the most complex type of teaching."

To capture how the most effective teachers do this challenging work, Frey and Fisher closely observed 18 kindergarten through fifth-grade urban teachers. These teachers were "fairly systematic, yet not scripted, in their approach to small-group guided instruction," say the authors, and used four kinds of scaffolding:

Checking for understanding:

• *Elicitation questions* – These ask students to give information or deal with a misconception using previously-taught concepts or skills – *who, what, when, where, why,* and *how* questions.

• *Elaboration questions* – These are often follow-ups to the first kind of question, for example, "Can you tell me more about that?" or asking a student to show where he or she found the information and why it supports an answer.

• *Clarification questions* – These also follow up on elicitation questions to dig deeper into students' knowledge of the content, for example, "What evidence do you have of that trait?" and "You read the word *mighty*. Tell me about that word."

• *Divergent questions* – These ask students to consolidate concepts about two topics to formulate a new understanding, often drawing on background knowledge – for example (in a third-grade class looking at a map of California), "Why might the Sierra Nevada mountain range be called 'the backbone of the state'?"

• *Heuristic questions* – These ask students to formulate a problem-solving technique or rule of thumb – for example, after reading two editorials on school uniforms, one written by the president of a school uniform company, students were asked, "Are there techniques you use to make a judgment about these letters?"

• *Inventive questions* – These invite students to use what they've learned to speculate or create – for example, asking students to make a list of items that would be vital for an astronaut traveling to Mars.

Prompting when students are confused:

• *Prompting for background knowledge* – Often students have the background knowledge but haven't activated it. When reminded, the frequent response is, "Oh, yeah!"

• *Prompting for process or procedural knowledge* – For example, a teacher might refer students working on a composition to a checklist or rubric on the traits of effective writing.

• *Prompting for models, templates, or frames* – This would include using a mentor text to understand and emulate the writing style of a particular author and a teacher urging students to use the words *hieroglyphics, writing system,* and *civilization* in their group discussions on Egypt.

• *Prompting for reflective knowledge* – These get students thinking about their thinking – metacognitive processes on how they are learning and how learning might be breaking down – for example, *What am I trying to accomplish? What strategies am I using? How well am I using the strategies?* and *What else could I do?* Younger students might be prompted with teacher questions like, "Does that make sense to you?" and "How would you say that?" and "What can you do to help yourself?"

Cuing students when they aren't noticing something:

• *Visual cues* – Drawing students' attention to illustrations, photographs, bold-faced words, graphs, charts, diagrams, or blinking icons – for example, "Did you see the bear on this page? Take a look at what he's holding. That will help you make an inference."

• *Verbal cues* – For example, "Watch out! This is a tricky word. Pay attention to all the parts."

• *Gestural cues* – The teacher moves his or her body to focus students' attention – for example, using a specific gesture for finding the main idea or silently pointing to a language chart.

• *Physical cues* – This might include touching a student's hand to encourage the student to keep reading or touching a student's shoulder to divert the student's gaze to the left.

• *Environmental cues* – Teachers had word walls (which helped one student find the spelling of the word *beautiful*) and sentence frames to help students understand – for example, "Some spiders _____, but all spiders _____."

Direct explanations and modeling:

When questions revealed a lack of understanding and prompts and cues didn't resolve the issue, teachers explained or modeled. "In the language of the gradual release of responsibility," say Frey and Fisher, "these explanations required that the teacher reassume control of the thinking and demonstrate how the task could be completed or the strategy could be applied." For example, a fifth-grade teacher whose students were struggling with writing instructions took out a piece of paper and wrote a sample introduction, thinking aloud as she did so.

"Identifying Instructional Moves During Guided Learning" by Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher in *The Reading Teacher*, October 2010 (Vol. 64, #2, p. 84-95), no e-link available; the authors can be reached at nfrey@mail.sdsu.edu and dfisher@mail.sdsu.edu.

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6. Dealing with School Refusal

"The first time I realized I was complicit in school refusal, I didn't even know the term," confesses pediatrician Perri Klass in this *New York Times* article. Klass was writing doctor's note after doctor's note for an anxious, somewhat quirky first-grade boy who had a variety of ailments – a sore throat, a bad cough, an emergency-room visit, another sore throat. "Can I just get a note for the school?" his mother would ask, and Klass obliged.

But when the school nurse called and said the boy was in danger of being kept back if he had any more absences, Klass realized that this was a case of school refusal, which she defines as "any kind of absenteeism, from phobia to truancy, that can be traced to the child's own actions or wishes." School refusal is at the intersection of education, psychology, and pediatrics, says Klass, so it's "a good place for teachers, psychologists, and pediatricians to work together."

In the case of the first-grade boy, it turned out he was avoiding things in school that made him uncomfortable – interactions with other students on the bus, rough play at recess, academic struggles that he was embarrassed to admit. "And he was sticking close to his mother, so she would keep an eye on him and he could keep an eye on her," says Klass.

After appropriate interventions and lots of extra help, the boy ended up being promoted to second grade. "So what started with vague sore throats and nagging coughs ended up with a list of important tasks for a long cast of characters," Klass writes. "The school environment had to change. The child had to learn new coping skills. His mother had to change her approach to minor illnesses. And his pediatrician had to wise up."

School refusal can be as simple as kindergarten children having difficulty separating from Mom, the desire to play video games all day, or a toilet stall with no door; as serious as a terrifying bully in the girls' room or fear of failure and humiliation on a math exam; and as complicated as medical and psychological problems, including depression. Missing school can become its own problem, says Klass. "In fact, missing school intensifies both the academic pressures and the social pressures that are waiting when a child returns, setting up a dangerous cycle in which the more you're absent, the more you want to stay out."

Absenteeism is a red flag; it's not a diagnosis or a disorder, but a symptom – a sign that something is wrong with a child's health, emotional life, family, or school. It's up to each professional to see if the cause is in his or her area – the pediatrician to find out if it's an undiagnosed illness; the psychologist or counselor to look for possible anxiety or depression; and the educator to deal with bullying or academic issues.

"When a Doctor's Note for a Student Doesn't Help" by Perri Klass in *The New York Times*, Sept. 14, 2010
http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/14/health/14klass.html?scp=5&sq=Perri%20Klass&st=cse

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7. What Schools Need to Know About Homeless Students

(Originally titled "Students Without Homes")

"Most educators are only gradually awakening to the fact that many of their students may not have homes," says Vicky Dill of the Homeless Education Office at the University of Texas/Austin in this *Educational Leadership* article. About one in 50 children in the U.S. is homeless in any given year because of economic hardship, foreclosure, eviction, or abuse. Every school district is required to have a homeless liaison to keep track of homeless students and make sure they get a good education, but some homeless students still fly under the radar because they are too ashamed to reveal their situation.

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 2001 established rights for homeless students, including Title I services and other supports to ensure academic success; immediate enrollment in school even if they don't have certain documents; assistance getting school records; being allowed to stay in the school they attended before becoming homeless; transportation to that school; free school nutrition; referrals for medical, mental health, dental, and other necessary services; and help getting school supplies, backpacks, uniforms, etc.

Homeless children suffer from a variety of problems – depression, shame, chronic stress, and poor health, hygiene, and nutrition – and schools are ideally situated to provide support. Dill has the following suggestions for teachers:

- Be sensitive to the possibility that students in your classroom may be homeless.
- If you think you have a homeless student in your class, contact the district's homeless liaison.
- Be available to talk if the student wants to confide in you, but don't push the student to disclose information.
- If your homework requires students to have supplies or materials, make sure all students have access to what they need (the homeless liaison can help).
- Discuss readings, stories, news articles, movies, and literature that explores economic hardship, families without homes, or characters who are resilient, and give students the option of writing on these topics.
- Do a homeless awareness activity such as gathering food, hygiene items, or school supplies for others.
- Create an atmosphere of community in the classroom so that all students' feelings and situations are accepted and stigmatization is taboo.

"Students Without Homes" by Vicky Dill in *Educational Leadership*, November 2010 (Vol. 68, #3, p. 43-47), available for purchase at www.ascd.org; the author can be reached at vickydill@austin.utexas.edu.

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8. Vigorous Exercise Makes Children Smarter

In this *New York Times Magazine* article, Gretchen Reynolds reports on several studies of the effect of aerobic exercise on children's brains. In one study at the University of Illinois/Champaign-Urbana, 9-10-year olds who ran on treadmills performed markedly better

than sedentary kids on a variety of cognitive challenges, including the ability to filter out unnecessary information and pay attention to relevant cues. When their brains were scanned with an M.R.I., the fittest children had significantly larger basal ganglia, the part of the brain that deals with "executive control" – the ability to crisply coordinate actions and thoughts. The fit and unfit children all had the same socioeconomic background, body-mass index, and other characteristics, so it must have been the vigorous exercise that enlarged that part of their brains.

A second study at the same university grouped 9-10-year olds by exercise level, gave them tests involving complex memory, and did M.R.I. scans. Sure enough, the fittest children did best on the tests and the scans showed that the hippocampus in these children, the part of the brain that deals with complex memory, was enlarged.

An earlier study found that 20 minutes of walking just before a test improved scores, even among students who were unfit or overweight.

And a study conducted among 18-year-olds in Sweden found that better fitness correlated with higher I.Q. scores and more lucrative careers, even among identical twins. There was no correlation between muscle strength and I.Q. It's clear that aerobic exercise, not strength training, is best for the brain.

The implication for schools is clear, says Georg Kuhn, a professor at the University of Gothenburg: "More aerobic exercise!"

"The Fittest Brains: How Exercising Affects Kids' Intelligence" by Gretchen Reynolds in *The New York Times Magazine*, Sept. 19, 2010
http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/09/15/phys-ed-can-exercise-make-kids-smarter/?scp=9&sq=Gretchen%20Reynolds&st=cse

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9. Short Items:

a. A website to help students choose the right college – This free website uses a program inspired by the eHarmony computer dating service to match students with the right colleges: http://www.WiseChoice.com. Students complete a five-part questionnaire and input academic and financial information, and the computer gives recommendations on the best matches.

"The Perfect Match: Road Testing the eHarmony of Higher Education" by Rebecca Ruiz in *Education Life*, *The New York Times*, Nov. 7, 2010 (p. 27)
http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/07/education/07wisechoice-t.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=Rebecca%20Ruiz&st=cse

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b. State-by-state differences in test rigor – The chart in this article (click on it to get the full picture) compares the percent of fourth graders in each state scoring proficient on state math tests compared with a common internationally benchmarked standard. There are huge discrepancies – only in Massachusetts do students score higher on the international standard than on the state test.

"Tests' Rigor Varies State to State" by Sarah Sparks in *Education Week*, Nov. 3, 2010 (Vol. 29, #10, p. 12-13) http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2010/11/03/10air-2.h30.html

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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 41 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
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
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Educational Review
JESPAR
Journal of Staff Development
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
Reading Today
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The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Language Educator
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