Marshall Memo 466

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
December 31, 2012

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Students don't learn in a vacuum. Higher knowledge is built on prior knowledge."

Susan Sandler and Zaretta Hammond in "Text and Truth: Reading, Student Experience, and the Common Core" in *Phi Delta Kappan*, December 2012/January 2013 (Vol. 94, #4, p. 58-61), www.kappanmagazine.org

"Homework is an institution roundly disliked by all who participate in it. Children hate it for healthy and obvious reasons; parents hate it because it makes their children unhappy, but God forbid they should get a check-minus or other less-than-perfect grade on it; and teachers hate it because they have to grade it."

Louis Menand (see item #4)

"Simply putting kids around a table and telling them to work together does not teach them collaboration skills."

Timothy Quinn (see item #8)

"They dream about how wonderful it would be to work from home in their slippers and to conduct meaningful interactions with students via Skype while preparing dinner."

Richard Rose on some educators' misconceptions about online teaching (see item #7)

"In my online classes, I find myself constantly at risk of wildly misjudging people and their situations."

Richard Rose (*ibid.*)

"Quality classroom teachers succeed by absorbing oral and visual feedback from each class session as it unfolds, and making moment-to-moment adjustments in response."

Richard Rose (*ibid.*)

1. Three Case Studies on the Widening Achievement Gap

In this sobering front-page *New York Times* article, Jason DeParle reports on three young women who were inseparable as high-school students in Galveston, Texas. They were determined, despite humble backgrounds and a high school named "academically unacceptable" by Texas state education officials, to be the first in their families to graduate from college. "I don't want to work at Walmart," said one of them. "We wanted to do something better with our lives."

With the support of Upward Bound, all three graduated from high school and at this point, their stories seemed to validate the American ideal of education as the great equalizer. One was headed for Emory University, another for Texas State University, the third to a local community college. "I felt like we were taking off, from one life to another," said the first. "I felt like, 'Here we go!'"

Four years later, their stories provide sad testimony to how difficult upward mobility is in an age of soaring inequality. "Not one of them has a four-year degree," says DeParle. "Only one is still studying full time, and two have crushing debts." The young woman quoted just above dropped out of Emory and is working as a clerk in a furniture store. "Each showed the ability to do college work, even excel at it," DeParle continues. "But the need to earn money brought one set of strains, campus alienation brought others, and ties to boyfriends not in school added complications. With little guidance from family or school officials, college became a leap that they braved without a safety net."

As DeParle tells each young woman's post-secondary story in depressing detail, these factors stand out:

- One chose an "under-matched" community college, graduated, but passed up an offer to attend a nearby four-year college.
- One missed opportunities to get a much better scholarship deal at Emory because she made errors in her application, and university officials refused to make a retroactive correction.
- The colleges they attended were expensive – there's been a 60-percent increase in tuition and fees over the last two decades.
- Living in single-parent homes meant there were no fathers to get involved and help out. This may have made the young women more dependent on their boyfriends, some of whom were less than supportive.

- Despite the heroic efforts of a dedicated high-school counselor, the young women didn't have anything approaching the level of support that most middle-class students have when applying to college and figuring out financial assistance.
- Two of the young women had to deal with crises at home; investing in education was seen as "selfish" by some family members.
- The young women had some ambivalence about rising above their social stratum and leaving Galveston.

These and other factors conspired to sabotage an upward trajectory that had seemed so promising four years earlier. All is not lost, but the news is not good.

"The story of their lost footing is also the story of something larger," concludes DeParle, "the growing role that education plays in preserving class divisions." Thirty years ago, the difference in college graduation rates between well-off and poor Americans was 31 points; today it's 45. While both groups have improved, the affluent improved much more rapidly, widening the gap. There's also a wider income gap: a generation ago, Americans in the richest 90th percentile had five times as much income as those in the 10th percentile; now they have ten times as much. The extra resources at the upper end of the income continuum pay for enrichment programs, travel, college prep, SAT prep, and support applying to college.

"For Poor, Leap to College Often Ends in a Hard Fall" by Jason DeParle in *The New York Times*, Dec. 23, 2012 (p. 1, 28, 29), http://nyti.ms/UmzwHn

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2. Boosting the Achievement of Low-Income Students

In this thoughtful article in *American Educator*, author Richard Kahlenberg cites research evidence that when less-advantaged students go to schools that are economically mixed – those with fewer than 40 percent low-SES students – they do better than they would in racially integrated schools and high-performing inner-city schools. He points to Montgomery County, Maryland and 80 other districts around the country as evidence that social-class integration is the most effective strategy for narrowing America's achievement gap. Kahlenberg mentions that Finland, whose schools are in the top tier of academic achievement worldwide, has the lowest degree of socioeconomic segregation of all 57 countries in the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) study.

Within Kahlenberg's article is a provocative sidebar on the KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) schools in which he argues that these remarkably successful inner-city schools prove his point about the critical importance of class integration.

Kahlenberg's piece is more about policy than the usual Memo fare, but it's an important big-picture look at promising practices that you may want to read in full.

"From All Walks of Life: New Hope for School Integration" by Richard Kahlenberg in *American Educator*, Winter 2012-13 (Vol. 36, #4, p. 2-14, 40), http://www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/winter1213/Kahlenberg.pdf

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3. Charter Schools and Students with Special Needs

In this *Harvard Education Letter* article, Sarah Carr analyzes a criticism often made of charter schools – that they don't serve as many children with special needs as regular public schools. A recent report from the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that 8.2 percent of students in charter schools have disabilities versus 11.2 percent in regular public schools. (This is not always the case: in six states, charters enrolled a greater proportion of students with special needs, but in 30 states, the opposite was true.)

Why the widespread underrepresentation of children with disabilities in charter schools?

• Some districts steer children with disabilities away from charters because they're not as well-equipped to handle diverse special needs. And indeed, small charter networks or stand-alone charters often lack the resources to provide specialized services.

• Some charter schools don't actively recruit children with special needs, and those students' parents don't go through the application process.

• Charter operators tend to be anti-bureaucratic. Carr quotes a 2011 *North Carolina Law Review* article by Robert Garda saying that special education laws and regulations "contrast starkly with the fundamental nature and culture of charter schools and pit regulation against autonomy, procedures against results, rigid bureaucracy against flexibility, and collective action against independence…"

• Some charters discourage children with special needs from applying, refuse to admit them, or encourage those who enroll to go elsewhere.

• Some charters are successful at educating students with disabilities in mainstream classes and those students are therefore not classified as having disabilities.

What is to be done? Some charter schools are increasing the proportion of children with special needs they serve by using two approaches:

- Forming special-needs cooperatives to pool resources and teacher training among schools; each school pays an annual membership fee (usually $1,500-2,500).
- Getting private and government grants for specialized programs for low-incidence students.

Another approach is mandates – for example, the New York State Education Department's requirement in the summer of 2012 that charter schools serve roughly the same proportion of students with special needs as their district's average. There's also a push to tighten up the charter application process to ensure that new charters have good procedures in place and shut down schools that don't measure up.

"Making Charter Schools More Inclusive" by Sarah Carr in *Harvard Education Letter*, January/February 2012 (Vol. 29, #1, p. 4-7), www.edletter.org

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4. Does Homework Widen the Achievement Gap?

In this *New Yorker* article, Louis Menand wades into the ongoing debate about homework. He reports that French president Francois Hollande announced recently that his government intends to abolish homework in all primary and middle schools. Why? Because students with more-affluent and better-educated parents have an unfair advantage when their children engage in academic activities at home, and Hollande, being a good socialist, wants to level the playing field. (He also plans to divert more resources to schools attended by less-advantaged children.)

"Homework is an institution roundly disliked by all who participate in it," says Menand. "Children hate it for healthy and obvious reasons; parents hate it because it makes their children unhappy, but God forbid they should get a check-minus or other less-than-perfect grade on it; and teachers hate it because they have to grade it. Grading homework is teachers' never-ending homework. Compared to that, Sisyphus lucked out."

How substantive are the arguments against homework? Menand shoots down two of them: that it has no effect on academic achievement (in fact, it does, especially in the secondary grades); and that American students are getting more and more homework (except for a spike after Sputnik, the amount of homework has remained the same since the 1940s – an average of no more than an hour each weekday night).

It's striking that the homework practices in two high-achieving countries are totally different: Finland assigns virtually no homework, and South Korean students have a backbreaking after-school load, including "crammer" schools that are sometimes operating after 10:00 p.m. A country's schools tend to do what people want them to do – in Finland it's bringing everyone up to the same level, and in South Korea, it's enabling hard workers to get ahead.

So what do Americans want from schools? "Not to be like Finland is a safe guess," says Menand. "Americans have an egalitarian approach to inequality: they want everyone to have an equal chance to become better-off than everyone else." The problem, he says, is that economically advantaged students have a definite advantage: "The educational system is supposed to be an engine of opportunity and social readjustment, but in some ways it operates as a perpetuator of the status quo."

But here's the irony: the fiercest opponents of homework, says Menand, are affluent parents "who want their children to spend their after-school time taking violin lessons and going to Tae Kwon Do classes – activities that are more enriching and (often) more fun than conjugating irregular verbs." Less-affluent parents tend to see homework as a way of keeping their children out of trouble. "If we provided after-school music lessons, museum trips, and cool sports programs to poor children," Menand concludes, "we could abolish homework in a French minute. No one would miss it."

"Today's Assignment" by Louis Menand in *The New Yorker*, Dec. 17, 2012 (p. 25-26), http://www.newyorker.com/talk/comment/2012/12/17/121217taco_talk_menand

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5. How Superintendents Should Work with Their Principals

In this *Kappan* article, Paul Bambrick-Santoyo, managing director of the nine North Star charter schools in Newark, NJ, says superintendents need to have a "growth" mindset working with their school leaders (as described by Carol Dweck in her book, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success,* Random House, 2006). Superintendents with a "fixed" mindset believe that if principals aren't charismatic, charming, and energetic, they never will be. The growth mindset, on the other hand, leads superintendents to spend most of their time in classrooms, corridors, auditoriums, and team meetings coaching principals to get better at what they do.

"Nothing better represents the divide between fixed and growth mindsets than the feedback we give to current and aspiring principals," says Bambrick-Santoyo. Most principals get an annual evaluation report with numerous recommendations – which are overwhelming and rarely make any difference. A far more effective approach is giving principals bite-sized feedback, one item at a time, throughout the year. "Growth does not come through elaborate rubrics," he says; "it comes from small, easily applied changes."

Bambrick-Santoyo describes how an aspiring North Star principal flubbed her first all-student assembly, which the previous principal had handled masterfully, including firing questions at students and leading them in inspirational chants. "It was a totally embarrassing experience," the novice said afterward. A group of mentors sat with her and initially made the mistake of dissecting her missteps in great detail. But then they focused on one specific change she needed to make for the next assembly: script and memorize the math and vocabulary questions she would ask students. Things went a little better in the second assembly, and afterward her coaches gave her a second suggestion: change the intonation of her voice to build students' excitement. After she did that, her goal was to identify two students ahead of time to answer questions. Following that, she worked on scaffolding the thinking of a student's incorrect answer with follow-up questions. Her performance gradually improved until she had mastered a skill that didn't come naturally at first.

Her coaches' suggestions were not only focused; they were actionable. They never said, *Be more prepared* or *Show more excitement*. Instead, they suggested writing a script and varying the tone of her voice. "Together, each small change made a powerful difference," says Bambrick-Santoyo. "Yet the best coaches don't just tell their players what to do; they guide them through it."

Two other elements in this leader's coaching made a difference: repeated role-plays after each assembly, and watching her actual performance with students on videotape. "Practice in this manner is relatively unfamiliar in education, let alone at the principal rank," says Bambrick-Santoyo. "But these actions are particularly crucial to growing great leaders quickly."

"Across the country, school leaders vary tremendously in their starting points," he concludes. "If we believe that their skills are immutable, then this is a fact of life. But if we accept a growth mindset – and if we put it to work to get there – then we can achieve extraordinary things."

"Good Coaching Leads to Good Leadership" by Paul Bambrick-Santoyo in *Phi Delta Kappan*, December 2012/January 2013 (Vol. 94, #4, p. 70-71), www.kappanmagazine.org

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6. Teaching Students with Asperger to Deal with Anxiety

"Anxiety can be understood as a hidden disability," say Jessica Minahan (a Newton, Massachusetts special educator) and Nancy Rappaport (Harvard Medical School and Cambridge Health Alliance) in this *Kappan* article. They believe anxiety is the culprit in many of the behavior problems experienced by children with Asperger syndrome. Standard behavior modification approaches (stickers, points, praise) are ineffective and can make things worse, say Minahan and Rappaport: "If students with Asperger are to succeed in school, they need a prescribed behavioral intervention plan that addresses anxiety, explicit instruction in underdeveloped skills leading to anxiety, which helps them learn alternative, more appropriate responses to use when they're flooded with anxiety, and includes accommodations that teachers can use while students learn new skills."

Some students show obvious signs when they're anxious – flushed cheeks, tense muscles. But with others, there aren't clear signs until they act out and anxiety is expressed indirectly – increased insistence on routines and sameness, preference for rigid rules, repetitive behavior, anger outbursts, and silly behavior. Minahan and Rappaport use the analogy of a shaken can of soda: you can't tell it's been shaken by looking at it (the student looks fine); you only find out when you pop the can open (the student inexplicably explodes). Anxiety also undermines students' academic performance by the effect it has on working memory, attention, and other abilities.

"A student's anxiety-related behavior is often motivated by escape or avoidance," say Minahan and Rappaport – asking to see the nurse when a writing assignment is handed out, or cursing just before a math test. "If the teacher responds with a time-out or sends the student to the office," they say, "this may accidentally reinforce the avoidant behavior…" What's needed is explicit instruction in the following underdeveloped skills:

- Self-regulation – the ability to calm oneself and manage frustration;
- Thought-stopping and thought-interruption – the ability to short-circuit a cycle of negative thinking by refocusing attention on a replacement thought;
- Thinking traps – the ability to recognize common thought patterns that can increase anxiety and learn how to manage those thoughts;
- Social skills – the ability to take another person's perspective and use conversation skills;
- Executive functioning – the ability to think before acting and follow sequential steps to complete a task effectively;
- Flexible thinking – when anxious, this can help a student avoid becoming upset when things don't turn out as expected.

"These skills must be explicitly taught if the student is to change his or her behavior over the long term," say Minahan and Rappaport. "Sadly, many behavior plans/programs don't address these skills."

It's critically important for teachers to backtrack from a behavior meltdown and find the antecedents. These might include unstructured times (cafeteria and recess), transitions, writing demands, social demands, and unexpected events. "Ninety percent of every behavior plan should be dedicated to antecedent management," say Minahan and Rappaport. "Students will continue to require accommodations until they develop the skills to cope and can succeed without them." For example, a student might be given two 10-minute anxiety-reduction breaks during each day, and these shouldn't have to be "earned" by good behavior. Academic accommodations are also important – for example, previewing a math worksheet early in the day and doing the first problem with the student, or providing a list of commonly misspelled words. Students need to be coached from statements like "I'm a horrible speller" to saying "I'm not a great speller, but I have a strategy."

Students with anxiety issues also benefit from cognitive behavior coaching. It's a big step when they can understand that emotions start small and grow larger – from calm to an explosion – and what the outward signs are. "Once students understand this," say Minahan and Rappaport, "they can learn to catch themselves at the frustration point and practice a coping strategy to regulate themselves before becoming explosive or shutting down." A teacher might say, "I notice your face is scrunched, your shoulders are up near your ears, and your fist is clenched. You're frustrated right now."

The authors also recommend using an "emotional thermometer" with pictures of various facial expressions and matching emotions and steps to take. Teachers can also provide a "calming box" containing small items the student can use to calm down – putty, a good-luck charm, a "lucky penny", or noise-reducing headphones.

"Anxiety in Students: A Hidden Culprit in Behavior Issues" by Jessica Minahan and Nancy Rappaport in *Phi Delta Kappan*, December 2012/January 2013 (Vol. 94, #4, p. 34-39), www.kappanmagazine.org

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7. Online Courses Are Harder to Teach Than You Think

In this thoughtful *Campus Technology* article, Texas-based educator Richard Rose says many young educators are under the illusion that online courses will be a breeze to teach: "They dream about how wonderful it would be to work from home in their slippers and to conduct meaningful interactions with students via Skype while preparing dinner. Teaching online means never having to be anywhere at any particular time, never having to wear uncomfortable 'professional clothes,' and never being asked a question without having time to research the answer." After two decades of teaching online in higher education and the corporate world, Rose begs to differ. Here are his words of wisdom:

• *Don't expect constant validation*. Instructors' egos get much less stroking in online courses. Even with effective use of e-mails, discussion boards, and Skype, there's an emotional vacuum on the professor's side, says Rose: "Online teaching actually requires a much higher level of emotional security and confidence in one's own professional competence."

• *Work hard to know your students*. Online instruction misses the vital dimension of nonverbal communication. "Remove the nonverbal component from the equation and the chances of misunderstanding increase exponentially," says Rose. "In my online classes, I find myself constantly at risk of wildly misjudging people and their situations. I have had students whom I have mentally pigeonholed as headed for the dust bin – lacking both ability and enthusiasm – only to discover that they are top-notch performers who simply took a while to get the hang of the online system."

• *Accept the loss of complete control*. "To a great extent, online education operates on the honor system," says Rose. "You never know who is really doing the work on the other end of the wire." Teachers who need to be totally in charge will be uncomfortable in this environment.

• *Be prepared to work really hard*. "Between preparation, correspondence, and troubleshooting of student problems, I estimate that I put in 50% more effort in teaching technical courses online than I would teaching the same material in person," says Rose. He makes about 16 hours of videos for each course – and it takes 20-30 hours to create one hour of video. To accommodate students who live in small towns with poor Internet service, Rose makes DVDs of his videos.

• *It's not just a day job*. "Teaching online is less a job than a lifestyle," says Rose. Many online students work during the day and reach out for help during the evening hours.

• *Don't become isolated*. Since Rose's online students are scattered all over the state of Texas, it makes no sense for him to keep office hours and he visits the campus infrequently. "The good news is that online teachers remain blissfully unaware of watercooler politics," he says. "The bad news is that, if they're not careful, online instructors can become seriously out of touch with the ethos of their workplace."

"6 Keys to Engaging Students Online" by Richard Rose in *Campus Technology*, May 31, 2012, www.campustechnology.com; condensed in *Education Digest*, January 2012 (Vol. 78. #5, p. 26-29)

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8. How Can Students Learn to Collaborate?

"Simply putting kids around a table and telling them to work together does not teach them collaboration skills," says Wisconsin assistant principal Timothy Quinn in this *Kappan* article. In fact, assigning group work without prior instruction and thoughtful monitoring is lazy teaching. To learn the vital 21st-century skill of working effectively within a group, says Quinn, students need to learn specific strategies:

- Listening to others
- Establishing common goals
- Assigning roles and responsibilities
- Deciding on measures of accountability
- Giving constructive feedback
- Compromising

- Assessing the group's progress

And at the outset, most students need the teacher to structure group agendas, for example:

- Discuss the problem and divide up tasks (10 minutes)
- Complete individual tasks (15 minutes)
- Reconvene to share individual work and synthesize information (15 minutes)
- Present the solution to the class (5 minutes)
- The teacher may even want to assign roles within the group at first.

And of course the teacher needs to monitor groups by establishing check-points, watching the human dynamics, and asking students to assess how things went. "Only with this type of training will students be prepared to engage in long-term collaborative assignments outside class," says Quinn.

When students work in groups, there are predictable problems. One student may continually harass another. Students may ask to be moved to a different group because of personality clashes. Finding meeting space for groups may be difficult, as well as finding time in students' busy schedules for group work. And then there's the question of how to assess each group's work products and ensure that all students are pulling their weight.

Is it all worth it? Absolutely, says Quinn. "All of these issues are exactly why we should assign group work. Inequality, unfairness, interpersonal conflict, bureaucratic hurdles – this is the stuff of life. Without this experience, students… will be ill-equipped to handle these challenges when they confront them in college and the workplace."

"G-r-o-u-p-w-o-r-k Doesn't Spell Collaboration" by Timothy Quinn in *Phi Delta Kappan*, December 2012/January 2013 (Vol. 94, #4, p. 46-48), www.kappanmagazine.org; Quinn can be reached at tquinn@usmk12.org.

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9. Preventing Principal Burnout

In this *Teachers College Record* article, Columbia Teachers College professor Eleanor Drago-Severson reports on her in-depth interviews with 25 principals in a variety of schools [I was one of them]. She explored the ways principals can renew themselves and prevent burnout and concluded that the best method is meeting regularly with other principals to reflect on practice. Significantly, only three of the school leaders in her sample were actually able to do that.

"The Need for Principal Renewal: The Promise of Sustaining Principals Through Principal-to-Principal Reflective Practice" by Eleanor Drago-Severson in *Teachers College Record*, December 2012 (Vol. 114, #12, p. 1-56), http://www.tcrecord.org/Content.asp?ContentId=16717

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10. Short Items:

a. Geography games – This site http://www.sheppardsoftware.com/web_games.htm (Sheppard Software) has a wide variety of free games for students at different levels. Many thanks to Memo reader Robert Scavullo for the tip.

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b. Digital literacy website – Digital Passport is a free web-based tool from Common Sense Media to help students in grades 3-5 use online and mobile technologies wisely: https://www.digitalpassport.org/educator-registration. For more information, see this article: http://www.commonsensemedia.org/educators/blog/digital-passport-educators-grapple-digital-literacy-citizenship

"Towards Digital Literacy" in *PEN Weekly NewsBlast*, Dec. 21, 2012

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***c. Rethinking Howard Zinn's* A People's History** – In this article in *American Educator*, Stanford University history professor Sam Wineburg gives a detailed critique of Zinn's iconoclastic book. History and civics teachers who are using *A People's History of the United States* would do well to read Wineburg's article in full.

"Undue Certainty: Where Howard Zinn's *A People's History* Falls Short" by Sam Wineburg in *American Educator*, Winter 2012-13 (Vol. 36, #4, p. 27-34), http://www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/winter1213/Wineburg.pdf

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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.marshall48@gmail.com

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 42 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 63 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 50 issues a year).

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Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
ASCA School Counselor
ASCD SmartBrief
Better Evidence-Based Education
Center for Performance Assessment Newsletter
District Administration
ED Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Update/Curriculum Update
Education Week
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
Essential Teacher
Go Teach
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Educational Review
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Journal of Staff Development
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Knowledge Quest
Middle Ground
Middle School Journal
NASSP Journal
Newsweek
NJEA Review
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Perspectives
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Responsive Classroom Newsletter
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
Teacher
Teachers College Record
Teaching Children Mathematics
Teaching Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The District Management Journal
The Language Educator
The Learning Principal/Learning System/Tools for Schools
The New York Times
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Wharton Leadership Digest