

Marshall Memo 894

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education

July 5, 2021

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Quotes of the Week

“Screw-ups are, paradoxically, opportunities to build trust, so long as you admit error and are clear about what you’ve learned and what you’re doing to change.”

David Brooks (see item #2)

“A major source of stress for many is the pervasive feeling that there is never enough time.”

Dane Jensen (see item #3)

“Beginning in elementary school, we are taught to sit still, work quietly, think hard – a model for mental activity that will dominate during the years that follow. The skills we develop and the techniques we are taught are mostly those that involve using our individual, unaided brains: committing information to memory, engaging in internal reasoning and deliberation, mustering out mental powers from within... The limits of this approach have become painfully evident. The days when we could do it all in our heads are over. Our knowledge is too abundant, our expertise too specialized, our challenges too enormous. The best chance we have to thrive in the extraordinarily complex world we’ve created is to allow that world to assume some of our mental labor. Our brains can’t do it alone.”

Annie Murphy Paul in [“How to Think Outside Your Brain”](#) in *The New York Times*, June 13, 2021

“There are some things in math that need to be memorized and drilled, such as addition and multiplication facts. Repetitive practice lies at the heart of mastery of almost every discipline, and mathematics is no exception. No sensible person would suggest eliminating drills from sports, music, or dance. De-emphasize skill and memorization and you take away the child’s primary scaffold for understanding.”

Barry Garelick in [“What It Takes to Actually Improve Math Education”](#) in *Education Week*, June 30, 2021

1. A Historian Reflects on Attempts to Control How History Is Taught

In this *New York Times Magazine* article, Timothy Snyder (Yale University) describes the famine in the Soviet republic of Ukraine in the early 1930s, in which 3.9 million Ukrainians died as a result of Stalin's policies. "The Soviet Union took drastic steps to ensure that these events went unnoticed," says Snyder. Foreign journalists were not allowed to travel to Ukraine. The *New York Times* correspondent in Moscow followed the party line and downplayed the genocide. Subsequently, Soviet and Russian history textbooks portrayed the Ukrainian famine as the result of administrative errors.

In 2009, Russian president Medvedev established a Commission to Counter Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia's Interests. Any attempt to revive the memory of what happened in Ukraine, anything that might cause Russians to feel uncomfortable, was deemed divisive, unpatriotic, and criminal. "These Russian policies," says Snyder, "belong to a growing international body of what are called 'memory laws': government actions designed to guide public interpretation of the past. Such measures work by asserting a mandatory view of historical events, by forbidding the discussion of historical facts or interpretations, or by providing vague guidelines that lead to self-censorship."

Snyder notes the similarity of these memory laws and what happened in the wake of the 1921 Tulsa race riot. "Documents concerning the massacre vanished from state archives," he says. "Oklahoma history textbooks had nothing to say. Young Tulsans and Oklahomans were denied the chance to think about their own history for themselves. Silence prevailed for decades." One hundred years after the tragedy, the Oklahoma legislature passed a law forbidding schools to act in a way that "any individual should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress" on issues related to race. The governor of Oklahoma said recently that the Tulsa massacre can still be taught, but educators have their doubts, and the chilling effect is clear. One community college has already cancelled a course on race and ethnicity.

In recent months, dozens of similar bills have been introduced in state legislatures across the U.S. They attack Critical Race Theory and attempt to guide and control the teaching of history in K-12 schools. So far, Idaho, Iowa, Tennessee, Texas, and Oklahoma have passed laws that direct and restrict classroom discussions, and a number of other states are following a similar path. The most common feature of the bills, says Snyder, "is their attention to feelings. In almost identical language, several forbid any classroom activity that would give rise to "discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of the individual's race or sex."

At the center of this activity is the way the word *racism* is perceived. The traditional understanding is that the term refers to an individual's irrational beliefs (most often negative) about people of another race. A more recent understanding (included in Critical Race Theory and a number of books and diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives) is that there can be racism without racists – that racial advantage and disadvantage can become embedded in economic, social, and political systems and endure for centuries.

Many white people, still thinking in terms of the traditional definition, see talk of “systemic racism” as a personal attack (*I'm not a racist!*). Taking it a step further, they fear that a detailed study of the nation's racial history will result in their being called racists and asked to shoulder personal responsibility and guilt because of their race. Of course white people's perceptions and fears are only part of the story. “What would it really take,” asks Snyder, “to remove ‘discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress’ on account of race from the lives of black people, or from the school days of black students?” He believes that, in an age-appropriate way, the facts of U.S. racial history need to be taught.

“Facts do tend to be controversial,” Snyder acknowledges. “It would be controversial to note, for example, that the Tulsa massacre was one of many such instances of racial cleansing in the United States, or that its consequences are manifest in Oklahoma to this day. It would be controversial to note that racial pogroms, alongside whippings, shootings, and lynchings, are traditional tools to intimidate black Americans and to keep them away from the ballot box.”

But in the final analysis, he concludes, “History is not therapy, and discomfort is part of growing up... My experience as a historian of mass killing tells me that everything worth knowing is discomforting; my experience as a teacher tells me that the process is worth it. Trying to shield young people from guilt prevents them from seeing history for what it was and becoming the citizens that they might be. Part of becoming an adult is seeing your life in its broader settings. Only that process enables a sense of responsibility that, in its turn, activates thought about the future. Democracy requires individual responsibility, which is impossible without critical history. It thrives in a spirit of self-awareness and self-correction. Authoritarianism, on the other hand, is infantilizing. We should not have to feel any negative emotions; difficult subjects should be kept from us. Our memory laws amount to therapy, a talking cure.”

[“Forced Forgetting”](#) by Timothy Snyder in *The New York Times Magazine*, July 4, 2021; Snyder can be reached at timothy.snyder@yale.edu.

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2. David Brooks on Specific Leadership Actions That Build Trust

In this *New York Times* column, David Brooks suggests nine ways leaders can increase trust within complex and diverse organizations:

- *Assume excellence.* Micromanaging people makes them feel distrusted and leads them to be distrustful themselves. Once a leader has set the vision and goals, there should be plenty of operational autonomy.

- *Be more human.* When a group of young interns Brooks was working with asked to spend an afternoon sharing their childhood photos, he thought the idea was ridiculous but said okay. He ended up being pleasantly surprised at how helpful the time was at establishing “new levels of vulnerability and emotional rapport.” Studies have shown that in professional meetings, as little as five minutes of time chatting about nonwork stuff builds collaboration and trust.

- *Don't support backchannel criticism.* Brooks condemns the practice of encouraging members of an organization to criticize colleagues online. “Once this behavior becomes acceptable,” he says, “the harshest people in the organization take over and everyone else cowers.”

- *Discourage cliques.* “A team that has split into different subcultures is bound to become a team in which distrust thrives,” says Brooks. Having people work in mixed groups cuts down on in-group behavior.

- *Don't overvalue transparency.* Making an organization's operations highly visible to outsiders has not worked well over time, says Brooks. Trust comes from competence and results.

- *Be honest about mistakes.* “Screw-ups are, paradoxically, opportunities to build trust,” says Brooks, “so long as you admit error and are clear about what you've learned and what you're doing to change.” Leaders who preen and self-promote are often distrusted.

- *Recognize that you're not psychic.* Lots of people think they know what's going on in others' minds, says Brooks, and actually don't. “People who feel mis-seen and misheard will not trust you.”

- *Give away power.* A good way to earn trust is to spread authority among your colleagues, which encourages cooperation.

- *Answer distrust with trust.* If you keep showing up for people even if they seem to have rejected you, advises Brooks, “it will eventually change their lives.”

[“A Practical Guide to Building Trust”](#) by David Brooks in *The New York Times*, June 11, 2021
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3. Beyond Time Management

“A major source of stress for many is the pervasive feeling that there is never enough time,” says Dane Jensen (Third Factor) in this *Harvard Business Review* article. He believes that the conventional advice on time management – work more efficiently, squeeze in more tasks, reduce “unproductive” time – does not reduce overload and anxiety. The pandemic has provided a natural experiment. People had more time because they weren't commuting and making business trips, and many said they used their time more productively. But it turns out that people worked longer hours, which meant they had less time for the fun activities that increased productivity should have made possible. Why? “As we become more efficient,” says Jensen, “we make room for even more tasks and feel even more pressure.”

As the world returns to something approaching normal, Jensen suggests that we attack the root cause of workplace overload – namely, that there are too many tasks, decisions, and distractions. Here’s his approach for each:

- *Reduce the volume of tasks.* Every time we agree to do something and add it to our to-do list, there’s pressure to deliver on time. If we can’t meet the deadline, says Jensen, “we add the additional stress of a challenging conversation and the guilt of letting someone down.” When your boss assigns a new task, saying you don’t have time can make you sound uncooperative, like you’re not a can-do team player. An alternative question for your superior: “Where would you like me to prioritize this against x, y, and z?” This shifts the onus of prioritizing and reframes the conversation from you refusing a request to the two of you discussing what’s most important.

For self-assigned or self-imposed tasks, stress occurs when we’re unrealistic about when we can finish and the deadline looms. Jensen believes this happens because we put in our calendar the items that involve meetings, calls, and interpersonal activities, but don’t block out time for work we need to do on our own. The solution: put everything on the calendar, making us more realistic about how much time we have to finish a task.

- *Replace decisions with principles.* Deciding what to do with imperfect information can produce cognitive overload, says Jensen, and that increases errors and stress. The alternative is to adopt a simple principle that eliminates the need to make a number of decisions. Three examples:

- A person trying to lose weight had decided, *I’ll limit my snacking after 7 p.m.*, which created multiple decisions every evening (a banana? ice cream?). With the shift to, *I won’t eat after 7 p.m.*, things were much simpler.
- Steve Jobs got tired of deciding what to wear every morning and began to wear the same outfit every day.
- Jon Mackey, head of a Canadian company, realized that he was deciding multiple times a day which meetings to accept and which to reject, and wasn’t carving out time for the deep work he needed to do. His solution: no meetings on Fridays. Now he had a full day each week for uninterrupted think time.

- *Use structure, not will power, to minimize distractions.* Anything that pulls us away from making progress on important tasks has a corrosive effect on morale and productivity, says Jensen, but the usual advice on self-discipline isn’t helpful. “When you try to use willpower to shut out distractions such as social media,” he says, “you are pitting yourself against an army of our generation’s greatest minds.” Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and others are brilliantly designed to “steal a slice of your attention.” Similarly, managers with an open door find it difficult to say no when a colleague drops in and asks, “Got a minute?” Three examples of structures that solve these problems:

- Establish a time every day when you turn off WiFi and Internet access to your devices and work without distraction.
- Create a standing 30-minute time when colleagues can pop in to get direction and answers to questions.

- Don't schedule back-to-back meetings; always leave a 10-minute buffer between meetings for SMORs – small moments of reflection.

[“Time Management Won't Save You”](#) by Dane Jensen in *Harvard Business Review*, June 23, 2021; Jensen can be reached at dane.jensen@thirdfactor.com.

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4. Getting Off to a Strong Start in Algebra 1 This Fall

In this *Education Week* article, Sarah Schwartz reports that mathematics has suffered more than other subjects during the pandemic. Why? Math teachers she interviewed said remote teaching made it more difficult to:

- Show enough visual representations;
- Get students working with manipulatives;
- Have structured student conversations about math concepts;
- Work out problems collaboratively with students;
- Orchestrate student collaboration on whiteboards and informal peer-to-peer help;
- Evaluate student understanding in real time;
- Quickly follow up on misunderstandings, misconceptions, and learning problems.

Teachers said they anticipate that Algebra 1 is going to be especially challenging as the 2021-22 school year begins. This gateway course, often taken in ninth grade, is a prerequisite to advanced math, and passing Algebra 1 is key to on-time graduation and college and career readiness.

“Even in a regular year,” says Schwartz, “...students come into Algebra with varying degrees of readiness. But this year, the range might be even greater, depending on what opportunities and resources they had during remote learning.” The teachers and experts she interviewed had the following recommendations:

- Be explicit about class norms, especially not being afraid to ask questions and make mistakes.
- Set aside time for students to get to know their classmates. This is vital since many students are strangers to each other and will be hesitant to engage in turn-and-talks and group work until they build relationships.
- Teach the on-grade curriculum.
- For each unit, be clear about the prerequisite knowledge and skills.
- Give quick assessments of those items to gauge students' needs.
- Give a task or mini-lesson to shore up gaps, making clear to students the connection to the rest of the unit.
- Give multiple representations for new concepts – for example, the way a linear function looks written as a mathematical expression, a graph, and an equation, then showing real-world applications.
- Listen to students during group work, ask guiding questions, address misunderstandings, and reinforce the use of mathematical language.
- Get students to practice, practice, practice so they build fluency and confidence.

This kind of just-in-time help is better than remediation, which slows things down and is demotivating to students. The key is diving into on-level material and catching students up as needed.

[“Algebra 1 Is a Turning Point. Here’s How to Help Incoming Students”](#) by Sarah Schwartz in *Education Week*, June 22, 2021

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5. Supporting English Learners in the Wake of the Pandemic

Many of the nation’s five million English learners faced especially difficult challenges during the pandemic, reports Ileana Najarro in this *Education Week* article – limited access to computers, a weak Internet connection, glitches with remote learning, and less time for informal conversations with educators and peers. However, says Najarro, “it’s important to remember that being immersed in their families’ languages and cultures also offered some potential benefits to this group.”

For example, a girl might have helped to prepare family meals, learning a number of recipes, and spent hours listening to her grandmother telling stories in Spanish, boosting her vocabulary and background knowledge. The same girl might also have picked up useful tech skills. “As she steps into a new grade this fall,” says Navarro, “her teachers will have to sort out just how big an impact the remote setting had on her English-language proficiency progress, and how to incorporate the silver linings that emerged over the past year into their teaching plans.”

The experts Navarro interviewed stressed the importance of not making assumptions, implementing language- and content-rich instruction, and not getting bogged down in remedial drilling of knowledge and skills in isolation. Additional recommendations:

- Check in with students and parents on what occurred during the pandemic, which might include economic hardship, illness, deaths in the family.
- Continue to do wellness checks through the year.
- Take time up front to build relationships with students, among students, and with families.
- Look at previous language proficiency assessments, which might date back to 2019.
- Do quick informal assessments of listening, speaking, reading, and writing proficiency in English to see how much catching up is needed, and take note of strengths in the native language.
- A thorough assessment is especially important for students who were newcomers to the U.S. during Covid-time and might not be proficient in reading and writing their native language.
- Set ambitious goals for the school year, with student buy-in.
- Give ELs frequent opportunities to practice their English in class and with peers.
- Provide in-class scaffolding and continuous assessment of progress.
- Provide social-emotional support, with native language speaking staff when possible.
- Continue to use online technology to provide extra support and feedback to ELs.

- Organize summer school, after-school, and tutoring support closely linked to classroom instruction.

[“English Learners May Need More Support This Fall. But That Doesn’t Mean They’re Behind”](#) by Ileana Najarro in *Education Week*, June 22, 2021

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6. A1990 Article on the Reading Wars: What’s Different?

In this *Education Week* article from 31 years ago, Robert Rothman reports on the ongoing debate between phonics and “whole language.” Rothman describes a just-released Congressionally mandated study that seemed to settle the matter in favor of a balanced approach. The report concluded that an understanding of letter-sound correspondences is “of inescapable importance to both skillful reading and its acquisition.” The vast majority of studies, said the authors, found that “intensive, explicit phonics instruction resulted in comprehension skills that are at least comparable to, and word-recognition and spelling skills that are significantly better than, those that do not.” The result of effective phonics instruction: students can read without getting bogged down in decoding. The report said that relegating phonics to “seatwork,” which some teachers were doing, was a big mistake, especially for students entering school without good preschool preparation.

But the report went on to say that phonics-based instruction was not enough to give children the skills and intrinsic motivation they need to become proficient readers. “As important as it is to sound words out,” the report said, “it is important only as an intermediate step. Sounding words out should not be the end goal, but a way of teaching what they need to know to comprehend text. The only reason for reading words is to understand text.”

And that means not postponing reading while phonics instruction takes place. For children who enter school with good skills, that would be a waste of time; for students without a strong literacy background, “the drawbacks would even greater,” said the authors. “These children need to be exposed to meaningful, written text as soon as possible so they will begin to notice and have an interest in reading all of the things that are around them that there are to read.”

In terms of classroom methodology, the report recommended that teachers use writing and spelling to reinforce knowledge of spelling sound patterns and help students get a deeper appreciation of a text’s meaning. It praised Reading Recovery, which had been recently introduced in the U.S., for its balanced approach to phonics and “the reading and appreciation of informative and engaging texts.” The report also highlighted the role for parents: “The single most important activity for building the knowledge and skills eventually required for reading appears to be reading aloud to children regularly and interactively.”

The report’s closing plea on the phonics/meaning wars: “Isn’t it time for us to stop bickering about which is more important? Isn’t it time we recognized that written text has both form and function? To read, children must have both, and we must help them.”

[“Balance Between Phonics, ‘Whole Language’ Urged”](#) by Robert Rothman in *Education Week*, January 10, 1990

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7. Jay McTighe on Putting Lesson Plans in Perspective

(Originally titled “For School Leaders, Reviewing Isolated Lessons Isn’t Enough”)

In this article in *Educational Leadership*, backwards-planning guru Jay McTighe says that when principals and other supervisors look at teachers’ lesson plans, they risk missing the forest for the trees. The forest is the curriculum unit plan, whose key elements, ideally, are big ideas, anticipating misconceptions, essential questions, skill and knowledge outcomes, transfer goals, formative assessments, and performance tasks. All this is “too complex and multifaceted to be satisfactorily addressed within a single lesson,” says McTighe. “For instance, essential questions are intended to be explored over time, not fully ‘answered’ by the end of one lesson.”

There’s another reason for looking at curriculum unit plans as part of teacher supervision, says McTighe: the lessons a principal might observe at different points in a unit serve quite different purposes:

- An opening lesson will feature a “hook” to engage and focus students on the new topic, assess students’ prior knowledge and skills, introduce key vocabulary and the essential questions, preview the summative assessment, and share success criteria.
- Lessons in the middle of a unit should systematically build knowledge and skills, use a variety of instructional strategies and checks for understanding, and gradually release responsibility;
- Lessons toward the end of a unit should prepare students for culminating assessments and presentations, with opportunities for students to self-assess and reflect on what they’ve learned;
- The final lesson should include a celebration of worthy achievements and a preview of the next unit.

In short, says McTighe, it’s vital for supervisors to review the big picture of the curriculum unit before observing a teacher in action and spot-checking the plan for that lesson.

[“For School Leaders, Reviewing Isolated Lessons Isn’t Enough”](#) by Jay McTighe in *Educational Leadership*, July 2021 (Vol. 78, #9, pp. 26-28); McTighe can be reached at jmctigh@aol.com.

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8. Ways to Understand Very Big Numbers

In this *New York Times* article, Aiyana Green and Steven Strogatz (Cornell University) says a lot of us have difficulty making sense of very big numbers – whether it’s the price tag on federal budget items or the wealth of the richest Americans. The trick to getting our arms around trillions and billions and millions is to relate them to something more familiar. An example with elapsed time:

- A million seconds from now is about 12 days.

- A billion seconds is 32 years.

“Suddenly the vastness of the gulf between a million and a billion becomes obvious,” say Green and Strogatz. “A million seconds is a brief vacation; a billion seconds is a major fraction of a lifetime.”

An example with physical distance: in Ithaca, New York, there’s the Sagan Walk, a scale model of the solar system at one five-billionth of actual scale. The sun is the size of a serving plate, the Earth a small pea, Jupiter a brussels sprout. The distance from the sun to the Earth in this model is a few dozen footsteps, the distance from the sun to Pluto is a 15-minute hike across town. Experiencing distances in this way, say Green and Strogatz, “Your body grasps it even if your mind cannot.”

To help people understand large sums of money, they scale the U.S. federal budget to the expenditures of a family whose total annual income is \$100,000. A few proportional expenditures:

- Social Security – \$28,654
- Medicare – \$18,352
- Medicaid – \$13,680
- Department of Defense – \$17,130
- Education – \$2,463
- Homeland Security – \$1,251
- Justice – \$846
- NASA – \$594
- EPA – \$268
- The family’s total spending – \$144,011 (a deficit of \$44,011)
- Interest on the debt – \$7,307

[“Who’s Afraid of Extremely Large Numbers?”](#) by Aiyana Green and Steven Strogatz in *The New York Times*, June 22, 2021; Strogatz can be reached at strogatz@cornell.edu.

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9. Recommended Children’s Books on the Middle East and North Africa

In this article in *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, Ilham Nasser (National Arab American Women’s Association) recommends “high-quality, unbiased, and non-stereotypical portrayals” of the people of the Middle East and North Africa. Click the link below for the cover image and short review of each book.

Picture books for Pre-K-Grade 2:

- *Golden Domes and Silver Lanterns* by Hena Khan, illustrated by Mehrdokht Amini
- *Laith the Lion Goes to Palestine* by Jameelah Shelo, illustrated by Sara McMullin
- *Let’s Paint the Arabic Alphabet!* by Sidrah Abdul
- *P Is for Palestine: A Palestine Alphabet Book* by Golbarg Bashi, illustrated by Golrokh Nafisi
- *Sitti’s Secrets* by Naomi Shihab Nye, illustrated by Nancy Carpenter

- *Sitti and the Cats: A Tale of Friendship* by Sally Bahous, illustrated by Nancy Malick
- *Tunjur! Tunjur! Tunjur! A Palestinian Tale* by Margaret Read MacDonald, illustrated by Alik Arzoumanian

Grades 3-5:

- *Farah Rocks Fifth Grade* by Susan Muaddi Darraj, illustrated by Ruaida Mannaa
- *Ibn Al-Haytham: The Man Who Discovered How We See* by Libby Romero

[“Picture Books That Bring Arab Voices and Middle East and North African Culture to K-6 Classrooms”](#) by Ilham Nasser in *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, January/February 2021 (Vol. 33, #3, pp. 17-19); Nasser can be reached at general@naawa.org.

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please e-mail kim.marshall48@gmail.com

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and other educators very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 50 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, writer, and consultant lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 60 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through more than a hundred articles each week, and selects 5-10 that have the greatest potential to improve teaching, leadership, and learning. He then writes a brief summary of each article, pulls out several striking quotes, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the Memo to subscribers every Monday evening (with occasional breaks; there are 50 issues a year). Every week there's a podcast and HTML version as well.

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- An easily searchable archive of all articles so far
- The "classic" articles from all 16+ years

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
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Update
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
English Journal
Exceptional Children
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Educational Review
Independent School
Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Knowledge Quest
Language Arts
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Phi Delta Kappan
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
Teaching Tolerance
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