Marshall Memo 908

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
October 25, 2021

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"This is not the year for a new curriculum, room changes, new programs. The focus should be on stability, quality over quantity, building relationships, and everyone's health and safety."

Jennifer Gonzalez (see item #1)

"Being 'good' at mathematics is not about having the first correct answer."

Courtney Baker, Kimberly Morrow-Leong, Tammy Kraft, and Terrie Galanti (item #4)

"One thing we know from psychology about the learning process is that the act of reaching into your brain, grabbing some knowledge, pulling it out, chewing on it, talking about it, and putting it back helps you learn."

Jon Star in "One Way Is the Wrong Way to Do Math. Here's the Right Way," an interview with Liz Mineo in *The Harvard Gazette*, October 18, 2021

"The mark of a good teacher… isn't being liked in the moment. It isn't charm or brilliance or even empathy. It comes about with practice and research, and it's ultimately about giving students the tools, the space, and the guidance they need to learn – even when they are no longer in your classroom."

Beth McMurtrie in "The Damaging Myth of the Natural Teacher" (paraphrasing Viji Sathy, University of North Carolina/Chapel Hill) in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 20, 2021

"Being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you're using your skills to the utmost."

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who died last Wednesday at 88, on "flow." Here's a 2014 TED Talk by Csikszentmihalyi, also an animated summary of one of his books.

"Vision without action is merely a dream. Action without vision just passes the time. Vision with action can change the world."

Arthur Barker (quoted in item #2)

1. Jennifer Gonzalez on Making It Through a Very Difficult Year

In this *Cult of Pedagogy* article, Jennifer Gonzalez says she's been hearing from teachers around the U.S. that 2021-22 is the "worst school year ever." If she were still in the classroom, says Gonzalez, she wouldn't be able to handle it. "The problem is not you," she says to teachers. "It's not you." So what's making this year so challenging? Time, trust, and safety.

• *Time* – "Pre-Covid, there was already no margin for error, no extra space or time for most teachers to thoughtfully plan, collaborate, and assess student work," says Gonzalez. "Now that schools are transitioning from fully remote back to in-person classes, the problem of teacher time has reached epic proportions." That's because school leaders, while dealing with staffing shortages, Covid-abatement, and anti-mask protests, are pushing to make up for lost time "as if everyone could just do the teaching and learning more quickly and get caught up at twice the speed."

Teachers are being asked to deal with more assessments, screenings, testing, documentation, data analysis, technology, curriculum, and programs. "This stuff might be good," says Gonzalez, "it might be outstanding, but it's still new, and it comes with a learning curve, which means more time… Being short on time puts us in a terrible state as human beings… All of this combined has created an absolute dumpster fire of mental distress for teachers… People whose cortisol levels are regularly elevated don't have the mental capacity to have tough, vulnerable conversations about bias or take in constructive feedback about their disciplinary practices. The clock is ticking and they have a mile-long to-do list, so all that good, deep stuff will have to wait."

• *Trust* – Many teachers are being required to hand in detailed lesson plans, document interventions, and take part in mandatory PD, all of which conveys a belief that they won't do their jobs without constant supervision. Not only is the lack of trust demoralizing, but compliance robs teachers of minutes and hours. "The time lost in writing full, formal lesson plans every day," says Gonzalez, "is time that could be used to conference with a student, watch a video about an innovative technique, or restructure an activity that isn't quite working." Close supervision should be reserved for the small number of teachers who really need it.

• *Safety* – Schools that are going against CDC recommendations or not fully enforcing them are putting educators at risk and adding to their stress. We're still learning about this virus, says Gonzalez, and everyone's situation is different.

Gonzalez commends principals who are successfully steering their schools through these challenges – who are reflective, flexible, and tuned in to their colleagues' needs. But a number of school leaders are using strategies that don't work:

- Jeans days and other clothing-related "rewards";
- Donuts, bagels, and pizzas – Food is nice, says Gonzalez, but it doesn't address the underlying problems.
- Yoga, meditation, and surface talk about self-care without structural changes; ditto.
- Surveys, focus groups, and invitations for teacher input when decisions have already been made;
- Short, unpredictable "free time" opportunities – Ending a faculty meeting ten minutes early or covering a teacher's class for a bathroom break doesn't create the blocks of time needed to do serious work;
- Pep talks – "Telling a room full of teachers that they are doing a great job will likely go in one ear and out the other of those who are worn out and demoralized," says Gonzalez.

She goes on to suggest some administrative actions that teachers will truly appreciate.

<u>Time:</u>

- Cut way back on testing and data analysis.
- Have fewer, shorter meetings.
- Don't take on new initiatives. "This is not the year for a new curriculum, room changes, new programs," says Gonzalez. "The focus should be on stability, quality over quantity, building relationships, and everyone's health and safety."
- Hire extra people to handle data entry, fundraising, permission slips, errands, and lunch and bus duty.
- Compensate teachers for above-and-beyond work, especially when they substitute for colleagues.
- Respect and protect classroom time by reducing interruptions to the absolute minimum.
- Cut back on teaching hours, perhaps with four-day workweeks and additional PD time.
- Take over a class or shadow a teacher for a day. "Just like childbirth and parenting very young children," says Gonzalez, "our memories tend to trick us into thinking it's easier than it really is, because we forget how hard it was." Walking in teachers' shoes makes school leaders more sensitive to their needs.

<u>Trust:</u>

- Listen to teachers' ideas and seriously consider how they might be implemented.
- Micromanage only the handful of teachers who need closer supervision.
- Don't reprimand the whole faculty for the missteps of a few.
- Allow for virtual meetings and PD. People don't all have to be in the same room, and it's nice to take off the mask and have a snack.
- Look for other required activities that might be dropped or scheduled less frequently.

<u>Safety:</u> "No job is worth losing your life over," says Gonzalez. Enough said.

She closes with a message just for teachers: “In the event that your administrators at all levels don’t do what needs to be done to make things better, I want to suggest to you that quitting, as appealing and cathartic as it might seem, is not your only option.” The alternative, she says, is “conscientious objection” for burdensome, time-consuming, unnecessary tasks; just don’t do them.

“Teachers Are Barely Hanging On. Here’s What They Need” by Jennifer Gonzalez “in *Cult of Pedagogy*, October 19, 2021

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2. Steve Graham on Effective Writing Instruction in a Third-Grade Class

In this article in *The Reading Teacher*, Steve Graham (Arizona State University) says three things are necessary for children to learn how to write well:

- Teachers need a theory of action for writing instruction. Graham believes writing is a social activity and needs to be embedded in and shaped by the classroom and community in which it’s enacted.
- The teaching of writing should be guided by the best research evidence, which includes the need for frequent writing, pre-writing and goal-setting, skills and usage instruction, writing on a computer, and lots of feedback and support.
- Teachers need to bring their own knowledge and experience to writing instruction.

“Collectively,” says Graham, “these three ingredients make it possible for teachers to make informed, judicious, and intelligent decisions when conducting a vision for teaching writing.”

He imagines a third-grade teacher who has these elements in place being asked by a parent at back-to-school night how she teaches writing. “Writing is central to everything I do in my classroom,” says the teacher with a smile. “Children will write frequently and for many different purposes:”

- To sharpen their understanding of what they read;
- To extend their thinking about social studies and science;
- To communicate with each other and with students in other classrooms and schools;
- To persuade and argue, gather information, explore the meaning of events, chronicle personal experiences, and create imaginary worlds;
- Students will write about their own experiences and culture and use writing to explore the experiences and cultures of others;
- They will share the writing they create with you, and they will ask you to share things you have written with them.
- I will make sure they know why writing is important.

The teacher then explains how students will be taught to write:

- Discussing the purpose of each type of writing (informative, persuasive, stories, personal narrative) and its basic features;
- Using these same features in their own writing;
- Learning spelling, handwriting, grammar, and sentence construction so students can do their own best writing;

- Learning to plan, assess, revise, and edit what they write;
- Facilitating the brainwork of invention, speculation, deliberation, reflection, and evaluation;
- Reading each other's papers and giving constructive feedback, in the process developing an understanding of what makes good writing;
- Using reading to reinforce good writing – for example, why authors use specific words or devices like cliffhangers;
- Using writing to reinforce good reading.

The teacher then describes the amount of writing students will do and the support they will get. "My goal," says the teacher, "is to create a positive and enthusiastic writing environment where your children are encouraged to try hard and do their best, feel comfortable taking risks, and work together in a positive manner."

- At least one hour a day will be devoted to writing and writing instruction.
- Students will do additional writing in other subjects and in their homework.
- Students will get clear directions and goals for their writing geared to individual ideas and needs.
- Feedback will be constructive and not overwhelming.
- Students will have time to plan and improve what they write.

The teacher closes by encouraging parents to visit the class during writing time and giving feedback as the year progresses.

Graham believes this teacher has successfully combined vision and action, and quotes the American futurist Arthur Barker on the possibilities that creates:

> Vision without action is merely a dream.
> Action without vision just passes the time.
> Vision with action can change the world."

But one teacher's success is not enough, says Graham. "To make even more dramatic changes in how writing is taught requires a more concerted effort on the part of teachers and administrators working together to develop school- and district-wide visions for teaching writing… Not everyone needs to do exactly the same thing, but it is important that everyone is rowing in the same direction."

"Creating a Classroom Vision for Teaching Writing" by Steve Graham in *The Reading Teacher*, September/October 2021 (Vol. 75, #2); Graham can be reached at steve.graham@asu.edu.

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3. Designing High-Quality Tests

In this *Edutopia* article, Youki Terada summarizes the insights of a dozen recent studies on creating classroom tests that accurately measure what students know and are able to do:

• *Tune up study skills*. "Students often overestimate how prepared they are for an upcoming test, which can result in unexpected low performance," says Terada. Students need to know how the value of quizzing themselves, teaching a peer, spacing test preparation over

multiple sessions (versus cramming at the last minute), and just before a test, using self-talk exercises to calm jitters and reframe anxiety as a beneficial, energizing force.

• *Find the Goldilocks level of test difficulty*. Overly difficult tests sap students' motivation and may lead them to remember the wrong content, while too-easy tests accomplish little. A well-framed test, says Terada, should result in prepared students scoring around 70-80 percent.

• *Start with easy questions*. "Let students ease into a test," he suggests. "Confidence and mindset can dramatically affect outcomes."

• *Be aware of how test items can advantage and disadvantage certain students*. Researchers have found that boys tend to do better than girls on multiple-choice items, while girls significantly outperform boys on open-ended questions. Test language can also contain assumptions about background knowledge, jargon, culture, social class, race, and ethnicity (a classic example was an SAT analogy question: runner/marathon paired with oarsman/regatta). The key with test design is to make sure each item measures what it's supposed to measure, not something else.

• *Avoid trick questions*. A question like, "What was George Washington's goal when he wrote the Emancipation Proclamation?" can waste a student's time and even reinforce incorrect knowledge and skills. Stick to the content that needs to be assessed, says Terada.

• *Break tests apart*. "Stress is a normal part of test-taking," he acknowledges, "but there are kinds of stress that should be avoided, such as whether students think they'll be able to finish." Giving a series of shorter tests rather than a full-length high-stakes test can keep students calmer and produce more-helpful data.

• *Try to minimize the effects of time limits*. Studies have found that timed tests disproportionately harm students with disabilities. Terada suggests that teachers take tests themselves to get a sense of how much time should be allotted; ideally most students should be able to finish with time to spare.

• *Periodically let students write their own tests*. "Question generation promotes a deeper elaboration of the learning content," says psychology professor Mirjam Ebersbach. "One has to reflect what one has learned and how an appropriate knowledge question can be inferred from this knowledge."

• *Follow up after tests*. "All too often," says Terada, "students receive a test, glance at the grade, and move on. But that deprives them, and the teacher, of a valuable opportunity to address misconceptions and gaps in knowledge." After a brief post-mortem, students might be asked to jot down reflections about their performance.

• *Allow students to retake tests, perhaps with different questions*. This allows students to correct errors, think through what happened on an unsuccessful test, regain confidence, and get partial credit.

"How to Design Better Tests, Based on Research" by Youki Terada in *Edutopia*, October 15, 2021

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4. Sparking Powerful Mathematical Thinking

"Being 'good' at mathematics is not about having the first correct answer," say Courtney Baker, Kimberly Morrow-Leong, and Tammy Kraft (George Mason University) and Terrie Galanti (University of North Florida/Jacksonville) in this article in *Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12*. Unfortunately, they continue, "a historical *culture of exclusion* can limit teachers' beliefs about who is 'good' at mathematics." In synchronous remote classes, "these stereotypical beliefs are confirmed by who turns on the microphone to ask questions and who responds quickly and correctly in the chat box." The result: a widening achievement gap.

How can teachers use online classes (and face-to-face instruction) to get all students fully engaged in mathematics learning and close gaps? "We need to empower students to see themselves as productive doers of mathematics," say Baker, Morrow-Leong, Kraft, and Galanti, and "counter traditional narratives of speed and correctness as mathematical competence."

To that end, they recommend using digital interactive notebooks (dINBs) for more authentic and equitable assessment of learning, while instruction focuses on five dimensions of robust math understanding:

- Appropriate math content – In each lesson, developing grade-level standards on mathematical ideas, techniques, and perspectives;
- Cognitive demand – Giving all students opportunities to engage in productive struggle with and make their own sense of important mathematical ideas and how they're used;
- Equitable access – Introducing the mathematical task for "collective noticing and wondering," and "collaboratively planning and presenting joint solutions;"
- In-the-moment assessment – Continuously checking on students' initial solutions and subsequent work to see their math reasoning, build on it, fix misconceptions and errors in real time, and give opportunities to deepen their understanding;
- Agency, ownership, and identity – Giving all students opportunities to "see themselves and each other as powerful doers of mathematics" and develop "positive identities as thinkers and learners."

"Building Powerful Mathematical Thinkers with dINBs" by Courtney Baker, Terrie Galanti, Kimberly Morrow-Leong, and Tammy Kraft in *Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12*, October 2021 (Vol. 114, #10, pp. 750-758); the authors can be reached at cbaker@gmu.edu, terrie.galanti@unf.edu, morrowmath@gmail.com, and Tkraft2@gmu.edu.

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5. Getting Students to Write Argumentative Essays Without Rancor

"In today's political climate, discussions can easily turn into verbal combat," says Erica Beaton in this article on *The Good Enough Teacher* website. "Unfortunately, the same corrosiveness emerges when we teach argumentative writing to students." This is especially true if students are taught to present their own point of view and then "shoot down" the arguments on the other side. This hardly prepares students to communicate in civil and

productive ways. Beaton suggests an alternative approach for a high-school argumentative writing unit:

• *Create an independent reading back channel*. "Students need to practice identifying the values, motivations, and fears of others," says Beaton. "This is an essential component of writing an argument that listens." They should do a round of "book speed dating" to find titles that provide windows into lives different from their own, and then check in with an elbow partner on what they're learning.

• *Curate important social issues*. Beaton suggests using resources like the World Health Organization, the World Bank, Amnesty International, Brookings Institute, *100 People: A World Portrait*, and others to create a list of social issues that can serve as a jumping-off point for students. A good question to ask: "What breaks your heart about the world?"

• *Humanize the adversary*. "Once your students have initiated their research and chosen their stance on the topic, it's time to consider the other side of the argument," says Beaton. "If empathy means 'to lean in with compassion,' help your students see the person who sits across the divide from them." Have students think about what type of person might be on the opposing side of the issue, what experiences brought them to their point of view, and what their values might be.

• *Provide models of empathetic, civil discourse*. One source is Jubilee's Middle Ground series on YouTube in which different groups with opposing beliefs come together to find common ground. Students will be struck by how civil people in these videos are despite diametrically differing opinions.

• *Research with "two heads."* Once students understand the "human presence" on the opposing side, says Beaton, they will do their research with a different mindset. They can see "how the message, the audience, and the communicator are perceived by supporters and opponents of their topic."

• *Model how to focus on the values of the other side*. Beaton suggests providing a scaffold for this, perhaps the ICEEE anchor chart: **I**ntroduce, **C**ite a quote, **E**xplain what it says, **E**xpose what it means, **E**valuate why it matters. The teacher should model for students how the quotes or evidence they've found is relevant to the values of the other side, and get them to address what this means for the audience to which their essay is addressed.

• *Provide sentence starters*. If these are well chosen, they can increase students' fluency and confidence. Some examples:

- Many ____ advocates value ____, but most don't realize that _____.
- The large majority of people who agree with _____ would not ____ if they knew ____.

These show that the writer is willing to listen to the other side and speak to those concerns.

• *Dump the time-honored rebuttal paragraph.* Instead, have students: (a) introduce a grey area or complication showing that they see the complexity of the issue; (b) sit side-by-side with opponents and articulate the middle ground ("The other side believes…") ("This issue especially matters to this group because…"); and (c) choose whether to conclude with divergence ("Although I can now acknowledge ____, I want to move forward because___.") or

declaring an impasse, conceding the legitimacy of the other side's claim, or an undetermined element, on a particular grey area.

Using these steps, Beaton concludes, "We can shift from 'winning' an argument to 'solving a problem.' Not only will this make the writing more mature and dynamic, but – with empathy and nuance – our young writers might actually change someone's mind and help heal this divided world."

"How to Heal a Divided World: Argumentative Writing That Actually Listens to the Other Side" by Erica Beaton in The Good Enough Teacher, June 2021

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6. A Virginia School Rethinks Its Dress Code

In this article in *Independent School*, Quincey Grieve (St. Stephen's and St. Agnes School, VA) says that three years ago, her middle-school students had 85 dress code violations "and tensions felt especially high." Students protested in a variety of ways (including wearing uniforms from other schools), and some parents took to social media to express their concerns. A group of eighth-grade girls accused a staff member of saying that their attire was "distracting the boys." It turned out those were not the exact words, but the dress code did say clothing shouldn't be "a distraction from the learning process," and there was ambiguity about what "appropriate" meant.

Grieve decided it was time to have an open discussion about the code, its philosophy, and how staff members interacted with students they believed were out of compliance. In the middle of the 2018-19 school year, she called for a pause on issuing dress code warnings and conducted a survey of students, staff, and parents. The surveys and follow-up focus groups revealed a number of insights:

- Some students said that being called out for dress code violations felt negative, demeaning, and embarrassing – they said they were "yelled at" and body shamed.
- Enforcement of the code was inconsistent – some students "could get away with anything," said one respondent. "Whatever is decided, please enforce," said a parent. "Make it fair for both boys and girls," said another.
- Although some thought uniforms were the answer, the majority of students and parents favored a dress code.
- About 75 percent of students said that leggings, with restrictions, should be allowed, as well as solid-color T-shirts.
- Over 60 percent of faculty felt "uncomfortable" enforcing the dress code with girls, but wanted to help students make better choices and follow the rules.
- For their part, students wanted the code enforced with "dignity."

What also emerged was skepticism – that the whole dialogue would be unproductive.

Nevertheless, a committee of administrators, teachers, and students looked at the input and hammered out the details of a revised policy. In April 2019, Grieve rolled out a new dress code to be piloted in the months ahead. It included these features:

- The code used positive language, specifying what students *could* wear, versus what was prohibited.
- Language was gender-neutral – e.g., a jacket and tie or "formal top."
- There were expectations for regular, casual, and formal dress days. "Formal attire guidelines," said the policy, "exist to recognize that certain events, gatherings, and ceremonies take place and require a more reverent and respectful attire…"
- Wearing a uniform was an option, and about 10 percent of students, mostly girls, took that approach, buying the items from an approved vendor.
- Skirts needed to be "mid-thigh" – no more holding a tape measure on girls' legs to measure four inches.
- Staff members who noticed dress code violations were to notify the dean of students, who would then send a personal e-mail to the student with a copy to the student's parents.
- The e-mail specifies the violation and says, "The purpose of our dress code is to provide guidance to the school community regarding appropriate attire. The dress code is also a means of teaching you a life skill in how to present yourself while you embody the culture of the larger community."
- The student is then invited to have a conversation with the dean, the school counselor, or the middle-school administrator (Grieve) to discuss any questions.
- The first violation offers the conversation and there is no consequence; the second violation requires a conversation – still no consequence; the third requires a conversation and a detention.

Grieve says there were a few "bumps" as the new policy was implemented, especially with the anonymity of the adult making the report and the definition of "mid-thigh." But overall the new policy was embraced and implemented going forward.

Grieve says there's been much less tension and drama, "zero unpleasant conversations," enforcement has been more consistent, and infractions are way down. She attributes this to several factors: communication was open and honest, there was acceptance of the "human element of dress code," students felt trusted and empowered, face-to-face confrontations over violations were finessed, and everyone understood the philosophy.

"Cracking the Code" by Quincey Grieve in *Independent School*, Summer 2020 (Vo. 79, #4, pp. 104-106); Grieve can be reached at qgrieve@sssas.org.

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7. Prize-Winning Young Adult Books

In this *English Journal* article, Bryan Gillis (Kennesaw State University) shares the journal's Honor List of young adult books. Each one, he says, "offers tremendous opportunities for teachers and students to gain cultural awareness, empathy, and understanding for each other."

- *Cemetery Boys* by Aiden Thomas, grade 7 and up
- *Clap When You Land* by Elizabeth Acevedo, grade 8 and up

- *Punching the Air* by Ibi Zoboi with Yusef Salaam, illustrated by Omar Pasha, grade 8 and up
- *We Are Not Free* by Traci Chee, grade 8 and up
- *We Are Not From Here* by Jenny Torres Sanchez, grade 9 and up

"The Honor List of 2020 Prize-Winning Young Adult Books: Cultural Knowledge in YA Literature" by Bryan Gillis in *English Journal*, September 2021 (Vol. 111, #1, pp. 71-76); Gillis can be reached at bgillis3244@gmail.com.

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If you have feedback or suggestions,
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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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
Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance)
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
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