Marshall Memo 297

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
August 17, 2009

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Quotes of the Week

"I like all the big questions – the questions most people don't care about: What is truth? What is right and wrong?"

Edward Gilliam, 14, a student in a summer ethics course in Baltimore, quoted in "Philosophy Students Explore 'Big Questions' by Mary Ann Zehr in *Education Week*, Aug. 12, 2009 http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2009/08/05/37philosophy.h28.html

"Suppose you find that your bucket leaks. Does that mean you need a bigger bucket? Not necessarily; you may just need one that doesn't leak."

Mike Schmoker on lengthening the school day and year (see item #6)

"[W]e didn't know how to go to the moon when Kennedy put that out… This is a bigger challenge than that. This is our moonshot. And it's not one moonshot, it's thousands."

Tom Vander Ark on the challenge of turning around failing schools (see item #1)

"Sometimes you need a two-by-four to get change. Sometimes you need a scalpel."

Robert Hughes (*ibid*.)

"If we see students getting 100s on pretests, it doesn't make any sense whatsoever to leave them in that class."

Kim Lansdowne, Arizona administrator (see item #5)

1. Key Factors in Turning Around Failing Schools

In these two *Education Week* articles, Debra Viadero and Catherine Gewertz report on what we know about rescuing underperforming schools. Some say the research is thin, but others point to solid findings from the business world, "beat the odds" schools, and a large body of existing research on comprehensive school reform models that have a good track record, including Success for All and Direct Instruction. "We learned a vast amount from research on comprehensive school reform that would be of great use in turning around low-performing schools," says Robert Slavin, who developed Success for All. "[W]e didn't know how to go to the moon when Kennedy put that out…" said Tom Vander Ark, former education director for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. "This is a bigger challenge than that. This is our moonshot. And it's not one moonshot, it's thousands."

The key difference between school improvement and turnaround efforts is speed: turnarounds need to see dramatic gains within three years, while school improvement involves a steady, incremental change over a longer period. Turnarounds need a good diagnosis of how the school got into difficulty in the first place so that improvement efforts can target the key areas. "You need to have an accurate diagnosis of why each of these 5,000 schools is failing," says Robert Hughes, president of New Visions for Public Schools in New York City. "It's crucial. Sometimes you need a two-by-four to get change. Other times you need a scalpel."

In a recent speech, U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan outlined four different approaches to dealing with failing schools:

• *Reboot* – A new principal and lead teachers recruit new teachers. Teachers who were previously in the school can reapply for their jobs, but typically, few are rehired.

• *Reconstitute* – The school's leadership and staff are replaced and the school is handed over to a charter-management or for-profit management organization.

• *Revamp* – Most of the staff remain, but major steps are taken to improve the culture – better performance evaluation, supports, training, mentoring, and curriculum and instruction, as well as increased learning time and more flexibility with budget, staffing, and calendar.

• *Close* – The school is shut down and students must enroll in better schools.

The U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (IES) published a set of guidelines for school turnarounds in May. The essential points:

• *Strong leadership* – To transform a failing school, there needs to be a clear signal that things are going to change, which might include a public statement about urgency, replacing the principal, requiring the school's leader to take on a higher-profile role guiding instruction, or turning the school over to a charter-management group.

• *Quick wins* – Experts are nearly unanimous on the need for early, tangible evidence of improvement, the classic example being William Bratton's move on the "squeegee men" who were pestering motorists when Bratton took over the New York City police in the 1990s.

• *A focus on student learning* – This means collecting and using achievement data to identify and track gaps in student learning, attendance, and other factors that are getting in the way of higher achievement.

• *Freedom to innovate* – Turnarounds are easier if the district "reimagines" its procedures or schools cluster together, perhaps in a "protective zone" under a charter-management organization, to escape traditional bureaucratic constraints.

"Research Doesn't Offer Much Guidance on Turnarounds" by Debra Viadero in *Education Week*, Aug. 12, 2009 (Vol. 28, #37, p. 10)
http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2009/08/04/37turnresearch.h28.html and
"Call for Transforming Struggling Schools Stirs Debate" by Catherine Gewertz in *Education Week*, Aug. 12, 2009 (Vol. 28, #37, p. 1, 18)
http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2009/08/12/37turnaround-2.h28.html

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2. Quality Problems with District and State Evaluations of School Principals

In this *Elementary School Journal* article, six researchers take a critical look at how a number of states and urban districts (including Baltimore City, Boston, Chicago, Fairfax County, Fort Wayne, Memphis, Milwaukee, New York City, and Newark) evaluate their principals. "Ideally," they write, "a principal assessment should be easy to administer, capture the essence of the role of a school principal, and provide valid and reliable data for purposes such as professional development and performance evaluation… When designed appropriately, executed proactively, and implemented properly, principal leadership assessment can enhance leadership quality and improve organizational performance…"

Before getting to their critique, the authors lay out the challenges involved in evaluating principals. The first is *what* to assess. There have been several schools of thought over the last century:

- Assess responsibilities – For example, managing school programs, pupil personnel, community relations, physical facilities, student behavior, and coordinating professional development;
- Assess knowledge and skills – For example, good listening and presentation skills, participative decision-making style;
- Assess processes – For example, the presence of items from the list of "effective schools" correlates or other best practices in the principal's school;
- Assess organizational outcomes – These might include improved student achievement, better attendance, and a lower dropout rate.

A 2006 study by Portin et al. found that in recent years, principal evaluations are shifting toward assessing behaviors rather than traits, relying more on professional standards, focusing

on learning results, emphasizing leadership development, and taking organizational context into account.

The second challenge is *how* to assess principals. The researchers found a wide variety of methods: districts and states are using checklists, free-form narratives, and evaluating against a set of pre-determined goals – or a combination of these – conducted by a central-office administrator with or without input from parents, teachers, and the principals themselves. Previous research has found flaws in the way these processes are implemented, including fuzzy policies, not publicizing standards for performance, and not following policies. One study by Douglas Reeves (2005) found that principals believed their evaluations were generally positive, accurate, and consistent with job expectations, but many said the criteria weren't clear, the evaluations didn't specify what needed to be changed, didn't give them useful feedback, didn't motivate them to change, and were inconsequential.

The authors then present a framework for "learning-centered leadership" that plots key factors on a matrix with these two axes:

• Core components:
  - High standards for student learning
  - Rigorous curriculum (content)
  - Quality instruction (pedagogy)
  - Culture of learning and professional behavior
  - Connections to external communities
  - Performance accountability

• Key processes:
  - Planning
  - Implementing
  - Supporting
  - Advocating
  - Communicating
  - Monitoring

This matrix, the authors believe, zeroes in on the most consequential dimensions of school leadership. The core components (on the vertical axis) are what "principals or leadership teams must accomplish to improve academic and social learning for all students" and the key processes (on the horizontal axis) are "how leaders create and energize those core components." The authors posit that effective leadership can be measured by looking at the intersection of these two dimensions. Obviously, the principal can't do all this alone; leadership must be distributed.

The authors acknowledge that a lot is missing from this framework, but defend it by saying, "Any leadership evaluation model that tries to capture all the subtleties of the principal's role and to operationalize all the day-to-day activities of the principal is doomed to fail." Knowledge and skills, personal characteristics, and beliefs are precursors to the leadership behaviors in the matrix.

What did the study find? "Alarmingly," conclude the authors, "our analyses indicate that current principal evaluation documents do not focus on some of the most important factors related to improving student learning: ensuring rigorous curriculum and quality instruction… As much as curriculum and instruction are considered to be classroom teachers' territory, it is the responsibility of the school principal to ensure that challenging academic content is provided to all students in core academic subjects and that teachers use effective instructional practices that maximize student academic and social learning." The study found that most instruments over-emphasize a culture of learning and professional behavior, while an average of only 5 percent of items deal with ensuring that the school has a rigorous curriculum and only 7 percent focus on the principal's engagement with the quality of instruction.

The authors were equally critical of how the instruments are implemented in districts and states. Most fall down on documentation, psychometric properties, evaluation procedures, and evaluator training. Evaluations of principals are conducted "with no clear norms or performance standards," say the authors. "There is little consistency in how assessments are developed, which leadership standards are used, and if the measures are reliable and valid."

"The Evaluation of Principals: What and How Do States and Urban Districts Assess Leadership?" by Ellen Goldring, Xiu Chen Cravens, Joseph Murphy, Andrew Porter, Stephen Elliott, and Becca Carson in *Elementary School Journal*, September 2009 (Vol. 110, #1, p. 19-39), no e-link available. [FYI, you might want to check out my Principal Evaluation Rubrics, available open source at www.marshallmemo.com, click on Bio/Publications].

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3. The Best Ways to Expand Kindergarten Students' Vocabularies

In this *Elementary School Journal* article, a team of five researchers reports on a study of two approaches to teaching vocabulary to kindergarten students in an urban K-8 school. They start with the following observations:

- Children enter school with significant differences in vocabulary knowledge; at-risk students know thousands fewer words than other students.
- This initial achievement gap grows wider as students move through the early grades.
- At-risk students are less likely than students with larger vocabularies to learn words incidentally while listening to stories.
- Code-based skill instruction isn't enough to help at-risk students catch up on vocabulary knowledge.
- Overall, vocabulary knowledge is a strong predictor of language and comprehension achievement in school.
- It's therefore critically important to find ways to accelerate the vocabulary development of at-risk students.

The researchers looked at three ways of teaching vocabulary through whole-class instruction using a storybook:

• *Incidental* – Students hear the new vocabulary words as the story is read but the words are not highlighted or explicitly taught.

• *Embedded* – Definitions of new words are introduced before the storybook is read and their definitions are taught and reinforced as they come up in the story (each word is given about a minute). This exposes students to a fair number of words but without a lot of depth.

• *Extended* – A smaller list of words is introduced before the story, singled out for instruction during the story, and then students use them in new contexts and engage in other activities with the words after the storybook is finished. This approach is more time-consuming (about five minutes per word) and exposes students to fewer words – but in considerably more depth.

Students were tested on word knowledge right after the storybook was read and again eight weeks later. The researchers found that students with embedded and extended vocabulary instruction did significantly better than students who had only incidental exposure to the new words. Students who had extended instruction did best of all. Those with embedded instruction had more superficial knowledge of the words – they couldn't produce definitions or answer yes/no questions that required additional word knowledge.

The authors conclude that there's a role for all three levels of vocabulary instruction: "It includes (a) reading storybooks to children that contain varied and complex vocabulary, (b) providing embedded instruction on a subset of targeted words contained in the storybook, and (c) providing extended instruction on a second set of words from the story." The words targeted for embedded instruction should be those that help students refine and consolidate word knowledge when they encounter those words again. The words targeted for extended instruction should be chosen because they are essential to understanding the important ideas and concepts of the story, and should be taught in a way that helps students develop more complete word knowledge.

All three levels are important – daily incidental exposure to words in stories and other classroom contexts, embedded instruction during readalouds of stories, and extended instruction during and after stories. This tri-level approach uses instructional time most efficiently and stands the best chance of helping students develop both breadth and depth in their vocabularies.

And there's one more thing: When the researchers returned and assessed students eight weeks later, some of the new vocabulary knowledge had slipped. This emphasizes how important it is that teachers continue to expose students to new words after initial instruction for those words to become firmly anchored in students' vocabularies.

The researchers close on a sobering note. They found that students who enter kindergarten with weaker vocabularies don't make gains as large as classmates who know more words up front. Thus, even with this intensive and effective instruction, the achievement gap widens. The authors say that this "highlights to the need to intensify instruction for students most at risk for language and literacy difficulties. It is likely that these students will require additional intervention above and beyond general classroom instruction to make gains similar to their peers who are not at risk."

"Direct Vocabulary Instruction in Kindergarten: Teaching for Breadth versus Depth" by Michael Coyne, Betsy McCoach, Susan Loftus, Richard Zipoli Jr., and Sharon Kapp in *Elementary School Journal*, September 2009 (Vol. 110, #1, p. 1-18), no e-link available

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4. An Effective Intervention with a Struggling Third Grader

In this *Teachers College Record* article, Northwestern University doctoral student Leigh Mesler reports on a piece of action research she conducted when she was a third-grade teacher in New York City. Confronted with the challenge of teaching Christopher, who had been retained twice in his brief elementary-school career and entered with obvious skill and attitude problems, she decided to have him act as a peer tutor for Jose, a struggling classmate. Two or three times a week from late January through April, Christopher helped this boy in math while the rest of the class did morning exercises. To prepare for the tutoring sessions, Mesler had a planning session with Christopher before school. At first, the boy showed up late for these meetings, but after a few weeks he started to arrive on time, and the length and substance of the meetings improved as they discussed upcoming math topics, what was confusing Jose, and strategies that might be effective. Mesler noticed that Christopher began to take the lead in these sessions and needed less and less direction from her.

The academic payoff for Christopher was immediate. Before he started tutoring, his classroom math test scores were well below the class average. As soon as he started tutoring, his scores jumped up slightly above the class average, and he stayed well above that average through April. In fact, Christopher's math achievement improved more than any student in the class. This was not just a factor of extra practice with certain math problems in preparation for tutoring. Mesler saw a big improvement in self-esteem and confidence and believes that was more important in his improved achievement. When a teacher came to the classroom in February to pick up students who needed help with the upcoming New York math test, Christopher said, "I don't need extra help in math. I'm smart in math. That's why I'm tutoring Jose."

Mesler checked in on Christopher the next year, and found that he had relatively few behavior problems in fourth grade, performed near the class average, passed the New York reading and math tests, and was promoted to fifth grade. This was the first time in five years he had passed a grade on his first attempt. Mesler is not a fan of retention, but says "If students must be retained, the repeated year should be a time when students receive the targeted assistance they need, as opposed to a mandatory 'sentence served' for failing to meet grade-level standards the year before… Peer tutoring provided opportunities for Christopher to receive individual positive attention, practice basic math skills, and become involved in an activity that helped build his self-esteem."

"Making Retention Count: The Power of Becoming a Peer Tutor" by Leigh Mesler in *Teachers College Record*, August 2009 (Vol. 111, #8, p. 1894-1915), no e-link available

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5. A Low-Cost Way to Accelerate High-Achieving Students

In this *Education Week* commentary article, Laura Vanderkam and Richard Whitmire bemoan recent cutbacks in programs for high-achieving students and suggest that double-promoting them (or having them take above-grade courses) is an efficient and effective way of nurturing their talents and providing academic challenge. "There is no better way to give gifted kids what they need," say the authors, citing research on the efficacy of boosting these students up a level or two. "Acceleration is also cheap," they continue. "It costs nothing to send a 1st grader to 3rd grade for reading, or to have a 4-year-old who is already reading start kindergarten early. If a student moves through grades K-12 in 11 or 12 years, rather than 13, taxpayers save money."

Yet most schools don't use this approach, opting instead for pullout programs in which high-achieving students engage in activities like learning about insects or myths or going on special outings. "While these programs are fun for gifted learners," say Vanderkam and Whitmire, "you don't have to be gifted to enjoy enrichment activities, and they don't give gifted kids what they really need, which is academic work that challenges them to the extent of their abilities."

A few schools are experimenting with acceleration. Zuni Elementary School in Scottsdale (AZ) has a one-hour block for math instruction first thing every day and students join the level for which they are prepared. About 25 are working two or more grades above their chronological grade. "If we see students getting 100s on pretests, it doesn't make any sense whatsoever to leave them in that class," says Kim Lansdowne, a district administrator. Acceleration avoids some of the problems of pullouts and the "gifted" label and gives students work that's on their level.

The schools in Lebanon (PA) are taking a similar approach, even transporting some students from elementary to middle schools, middle schools to the high school, and high school to college. Laura Cramer, a middle-school student in Lebanon, takes honors chemistry and honors 10th-grade English at the high school, does Algebra 2 online, and is back at her middle school for lunch, history classes, and the track team.

"Acceleration by subject or grade may not have the same cachet as seeing 2nd graders labeled 'gifted,'" say Vanderkam and Whitmire, "but it serves the needs of children in an uncontroversial, straightforward, and relatively inexpensive way. The only puzzle surrounding acceleration is why more districts don't embrace it."

"What Ever Happened to Grade Skipping? Accelerating the Gifted in a Time of Tight Budgets" by Laura Vanderkam and Richard Whitmire in *Education Week*, Aug. 12, 2009 (Vol. 28, #37, p. 36, 30) http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2009/08/12/37whitmire_ep.h28.html

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6. Mike Schmoker on Capturing Wasted Classroom Time

In this provocative *Education Week* article, writer/consultant Mike Schmoker argues that there is a *ton* of wasted time in the regular school day and we should focus on recapturing that time before lengthening the school day and year. "Suppose you find that your bucket

leaks," he writes. "Does that mean you need a bigger bucket? Not necessarily; you may just need one that doesn't leak."

The current push for a longer school day and year is a structural reform, says Schmoker, not a substantive change. This effort "will consume our time and political energy, even as it postpones our encounter with a more vital, less costly opportunity: making good use of the huge number of hours that currently 'hide' within the conventional school day and year." Schmoker lists these examples of classroom activities that add little or no value:

- Students settling in at the beginning of each class and packing up at the end;
- Worksheets – a "lamentable and unnecessary use of instructional time" that takes up 25-30 percent of instructional time;
- Movies, often full-length;
- Ill-conceived group activities, such as making banners, castles, book jackets, collages, and mobiles;
- Arts and crafts activities – cut, color, and paste activities that can take up to two-thirds of the typical elementary reading/language arts period.

Schmoker says that the best teachers eschew these time-wasters, but many others use them, totaling *three months* of unproductive time in a typical school year. "If we recovered this time and properly redirected it," he concludes, "the impact on student learning would be greater than any reform ever launched."

"Do We Really Need a Longer School Year? How We Could Add Three Months of Instructional Time Without It" by Mike Schmoker in *Education Week*, published online, July 17, 2009; Schmoker can be reached at schmoker@futureone.com. See Marshall Memo 277 for a summary of Schmoker's more detailed *Kappan* article on this subject.

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7. Ideas on Teaching Evolution

In this *Education Week* article, Sean Cavanagh reports on a Pennsylvania summer institute designed to help teachers deal with the theory of evolution in high-school classrooms. Among the challenges teachers face and some possible solutions:

- That supporting evolution is akin to atheism, that it's incompatible with being religious and a threat to faith. In fact, many religious people believe that evolution accurately describes the diversity of life on earth and put religion in a different compartment than science: religion deals with *why we are here* and *how we should live*, while science is empirical and experimental.
- That humans evolved from chimpanzees. Actually, both species evolved from a further-back common ancestor.
- That evolution is "just a theory", which can be interpreted to mean that it's a hunch. Scientists use the word *theory* to mean an explanation backed up by multiple sources of evidence; they tend to say that a theory is *well-supported* rather than *proven* because under certain circumstances even very a well-established theory like gravity is not 100 percent accurate.

- Many students have difficulty understanding events that unfolded over millions of years, not to mention the complexities of the fossil record and molecular biology. "It's very rare that you meet someone at the student level who has a firm grasp of it," said private school teacher Adam DeDionisio. "If we can't see something, we have trouble making sense of abstract things." One way that teachers can present the basics of evolution is to make it concrete: collect snails and examine their survivability in a fish tank with crayfish, natural predators, by looking at specific traits.

Given many students' religious beliefs, it's a mistake for teachers to try to get students to *believe* in evolution, says University of Alabama/Birmingham science professor Lee Meadows (author of the forthcoming book, *The Missing Link: An Inquiry Approach for Teaching All Students About Evolution* (Heinemann). A better strategy, he says, is to describe the evidence for evolution and ask students to explain it using the rules and language of science. "I want kids to understand the preponderance of evidence for evolution," he says, and develop their own views about "what's true with a capital T."

"Teachers Pick Up Tips for Enhancing Topic of Evolution in Class" by Sean Cavanagh in *Education Week*, Aug. 12, 2009 (Vol. 28, #37, p. 8)
http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2009/08/06/37evolution.h28.html
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8. Are "Dumb" Students Really Dumb?

In this *Education Week* opinion piece, University of Michigan professor Susan Neuman lambastes the notion that "dumb" students in lower-track classes have low attention spans and are "culturally deprived… brain-damaged, nonverbal, unmotivated, and lazy." She cites a 1984 study by Michael Murtaugh in which students who performed very poorly in abstract math in their classrooms were able to do more than 200 mental calculations in a supermarket with 98 percent accuracy. "They formulated problems, calculated ratios, and solved problems taking into account a whole host of relevant inputs, such as limited storage capacity and unit prices, with considerable skill," says Neuman. The key is working with real-world problems that matter, versus classroom abstractions.

Neuman cites another study (by Wolfie Schneider) demonstrating that prior knowledge of the subject matter (in this case, soccer) is more important than I.Q. in reading complex prose and successfully predicting, summarizing, analyzing, and evaluating.

"Could it be that all this intelligence buzz measures only a weak correlate of ability?" asks Neuman. "And that giving these kids a fighting chance by providing rigorous standards and a strong knowledge base is really what getting smart is all about?"

"The Dumb Class" by Susan Neuman in *Education Week*, Aug. 12, 2009 (Vol. 28, #37, p. 28)
http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2009/08/12/37neuman_ep.h28.html
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9. An Online Math Textbook

California is gearing up to offer free, open-source digital textbooks to high-school students this fall, and state officials have given high marks to an Algebra II textbook written by North Carolina teacher Kenny Felder, one of the first to be submitted. It's published by Connexions, an open-education initiative at Rice University in Houston and is available at http://cnx.org/content/m19435/latest. Felder, who teaches algebra and calculus at Raleigh Charter High School, says the book represents ten years of classroom work. "My book presents math as an exploration of ideas – not a collection of facts and techniques," he says. "Students often tell me they are realizing, for the first time, that math makes sense. And that's what I hope they remember from my class; there are reasons for everything in math, and you should ask 'Why?' and keep asking, particularly if someone says, 'That's just the way it is.'"

"High School Teacher's Algebra Book Aces California Test" in *Education News*, Aug. 8, 2009. Other California Learning Resources Network Free Digital Textbook Initiative textbook review results are available at http://www.clrn.org/FDTI/index.cfm.

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Do you have feedback? Is anything missing?

If you have comments or suggestions, if you saw an article or web item in the last week that you think should have been summarized, or if you would like to suggest additional publications that should be covered by the Marshall Memo, please e-mail: kim.marshall8@verizon.net

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and others very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 37 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, and writer, lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 44 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through more than a hundred articles each week, and selects 5-10 that have the greatest potential to improve teaching, leadership, and learning. He then writes a brief summary of each article, pulls out several striking quotes, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the Memo to subscribers every Monday evening (with occasional breaks; there are about 50 issues a year).

Subscriptions:

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- Headlines for all issues
- What readers say
- About Kim Marshall (including links to articles)
- A free sample issue

Marshall Memo subscribers have access to the Members' Area of the website, which has:

- The current issue (in PDF or Word format)
- All back issues (also in PDF or Word)
- A database of all articles to date, searchable by topic, title, author, source, level, etc.
- How to change access e-mail or password

Publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
ASCD, CEC SmartBriefs, Daily EdNews
Catalyst Chicago
Changing Schools (McREL)
Ed. Magazine
EDge
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
Essential Teacher (TESOL)
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Educational Review
JESPAR
Journal of Staff Development
Language Learner (NABE)
Middle Ground
Middle School Journal
New York Times
Newsweek
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
Teacher Magazine (online)
Teachers College Record
The Atlantic Monthly
The Language Educator
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Tools for Schools/The Learning Principal