Marshall Memo 1008

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
October 23, 2023

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"It's all gas pedal and no brakes."
Mitch Prinstein (American Psychological Association) on young teens, quoted in "Being 13: Three Girls, One Year" by Jessica Bennett in *The New York Times*, October 15, 2023

"Being openhearted is a prerequisite to being a full, kind, and wise human being. But it is not enough. People need social skills."
David Brooks (see item #1)

"People are dying to tell you their stories; very often, no one has ever asked about them."
David Brooks (*ibid*.)

"When teachers stay with their students longer, they can see beyond the surface and recognize the brilliance beneath."
Adam Grant (see item #2)

"They're expecting us to perform miracles, you know, to walk on water."
A Chicago principal dealing with pressure to raise test scores (see item #3)

"As teachers might 'teach to the test,' with implications for students' education, principals might 'lead to the test,' with implications for parents' involvement in their children's schooling."
Jordan Conwell and Simone Ispa-Landa (*ibid*.)

"By mistaking equity for mediocrity, San Francisco Unified School District has disrupted its students' math education with nothing to show for it."
Jeanette Luna (see item #5)

"Schools cannot 'deliver' algebra to a student any more than Jenny Craig can deliver six-pack abs to a customer. The obstacle to learning is often not a lack of resources but a lack of uptake on the part of the students. Yet educationists perennially ignore student agency and effort… The largest gains will go to students who are motivated to use them. To get them motivated, they need strong intrinsic drives, peers who push them to work harder, a family that incentivizes academic performance, an inspiring teacher, or some shorter-term stakes to their academic effort."

Adam Tyner in "Why Education Technologies Disappoint" in *Education Gadfly*, October 19, 2023

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1. David Brooks on Building Social Skills in Ourselves and Others

"Being openhearted is a prerequisite to being a full, kind, and wise human being," says David Brooks in this *New York Times* article. "But it is not enough. People need social skills." He's often struck by people's "social clumsiness" – for example, when he leaves a gathering and realizes that only one third of the people he talked with asked him a question.

This widespread lack of curiosity results in people feeling unseen and disrespected, says Brooks: "Black people feeling that the systemic inequities that afflict their daily experiences are not understood by whites; people who live in rural areas feeling that they are overlooked by coastal elites; people across political divides staring at one another with angry incomprehension; depressed young people who feel misunderstood by their parents and everyone else; husbands and wives who realize that the person who should know them best actually has no clue about who they are."

Brooks is working on a book about teaching and learning social skills, and this article includes some of his insights so far. He believes we've become unmoored as a society, too many of us are unable to connect across our divides, and national survival depends on improving our interpersonal skills. He's learned most from people he calls *illuminators*: "They have been trained or have trained themselves in the craft of understanding others," he says. "They know how to ask the right questions at the right times – so that they can see things, at least a bit, from another's point of view. They shine the brightness of their care on people and make them feel bigger, respected, lit up. Illuminators are a joy to be around." Some key skills we can learn from them:

• *See people well* – The way we attend to people makes all the difference, says Brooks. As a young man, he came across as reserved and aloof, which didn't bring out the best in

others. He's learned from illuminators to be warmer, more respectful, seeing others as "creatures with infinite value and dignity, made in the image of God," he says. "Casting this kind of reverential attention is an absolute prerequisite for seeing people well. When you offer a gaze that communicates respect, you are positively answering the questions people are unconsciously asking themselves when they meet you: 'Am I a person to you? Am I a priority to you?' These questions are answered by your eyes before they are answered by your words."

• *Accompany others* – As we encounter people in the routines of daily life, says Brooks – chatting at work or when we pick up the kids at school – we need to be "lingerable," taking our time, letting go of the efficiency mindset, being *present*, and using conversation as a form of play that brings out the best in others. He makes the analogy to a piano accompanist, "sensing where the singer is going, subtly working to help the singer shine."

• *Develop the art of conversation* – From experts at being better conversationalists, Brooks has picked up these pointers:

- Be an active listener with interjections like *Aha, Yes, Amen*.
- Get people telling stories – Instead of asking, *What do you think about that?*, ask *How did you come to believe that?*
- Paraphrase back – This makes the other person feel heard, or allows them to correct things you've misunderstood.
- Ask follow-up questions – This encourages your conversational partner to go into more detail.
- Don't be a "topper" – If you tell a related story from your own experience, you're trying to make a connection but it shifts attention to you.

• *Ask big questions* – "People are dying to tell you their stories," says Brooks; "very often, no one has ever asked about them." Getting to know a person for the first time, ask where they grew up, where they got their names, or a favorite unimportant thing about them. Once a trusting relationship is established, you can move on to a 30,000-foot question, for example: *What crossroads are you at? If the next five years is a chapter in your life, what is the chapter about? Can you be yourself where you are and still fit in? What would you do if you weren't afraid? What have you said yes to that you no longer really believe in? What is the gift you currently hold in exile? How do your ancestors show up in your life? If you died today, what would you regret not doing?*

• *Stand in their standpoint* – When talking with someone with different views or status, says Brooks, it's important to be persistently curious. Every conversation has two levels: what's actually said and "the ebb and flow of emotions that get transmitted as we talk. With every comment I am showing you respect or disrespect, making you feel a little safer or a little more threatened… I think the wise person's gift is tender receptivity."

Really good confidants "are more like coaches than philosopher kings," says Brooks. "They take in your story, accept it, but prod you to clarify what it is you really want, or to name the baggage you left out of your clean tale. They're not here to fix you; they are here simply to help you edit your story so that it's more honest and accurate. They're here to call

you by name, as beloved. They see who you are becoming before you do and provide you with a reputation you can then go live into."

"Give the Gift of Your Attention" by David Brooks in *The New York Times*, October 22, 2023

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2. Adam Grant on Looping

In this *New York Times* article, Adam Grant (Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania) says researchers have found a common factor behind high-achieving schools in Finland, Estonia, North Carolina, and Indiana: looping. Students who are with the same teacher for more than one year do better. "When teachers stay with their students longer," says Grant, "they can see beyond the surface and recognize the brilliance beneath… The nuanced knowledge they acquire about each student isn't lost in the handoff to the next year's teacher."

Reading the research on looping, Grant remembered that when he was in middle school, he benefited from a pilot program that kept students with the same core teachers for all three years. "When I struggled with spatial visualization in math," he says, "Mrs. Bohland didn't question my aptitude. Having seen me ace a year of algebra, she knew I was an abstract thinker and taught me to use equations to identify the dimensions of shapes before drawing them in 3D." Another teacher noticed his passion for character development in Greek mythology and encouraged him to do his year-end project on psychology.

Grant urges schools to orchestrate more looping. We know that having the same athletic or music coach for years is effective, so why not with "the most important coach of all?" However, he acknowledges two common worries about looping:

- Teachers will have less specialized knowledge of a particular grade level or subject.
- What if students are stuck with an ineffective teacher for two or more years?

"But in the data," says Grant, "looping actually had the greatest upsides for less-effective teachers – and lower-achieving students. Building an extended relationship gave them the opportunity to grow together."

Finland and Estonia have another laudable result, Grant reports: they have the world's lowest rates of low-performing students, with much smaller performance gaps between students from wealthy and low-income families. Being disadvantaged is less of a disadvantage in these countries than almost anywhere else, in stark contrast to U.S. schools, which have huge gaps between our higher- and lower-achieving students and our wealthy and less-resourced schools.

In addition to looping, Finland and Estonia have several other practices that contribute to higher and more-equitable results:

- Better teacher training in evidence-based practices and interpreting ongoing research;
- Greater autonomy for teachers;
- In the primary grades, play-based pedagogy and a less-accelerated curriculum;
- In elementary schools, 15 minutes of recess for every 45 minutes in classrooms;
- No test prep [but frequent use of formative assessments to check for understanding];

- Early intervention with students who have difficulty, with fewer students retained.

"What Most American Schools Do Wrong" by Adam Grant in *The New York Times*, October 22, 2023; Grant can be reached at grantad@wharton.upenn.edu.

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3. High-Stakes Testing, Principals, and Parent Involvement in Chicago

In this article in *Urban Education*, Jordan Conwell (University of Texas/Austin) and Simone Ispa-Landa (Northwestern University) report on their interviews with 26 novice Chicago Public Schools principals in an era of test-based accountability. Conwell and Ispa-Landa were especially interested in how principals handled their schools' relationships with parents, analyzing principals as "street-level bureaucrats" with some discretion as they implemented policies from the central office. Here are vignettes from five of the principals:

• Adriana – Leading a school that was on probation for low test scores, Adriana was critical of the high-stakes testing policy ("garbage," she called it), concerned that teachers were being pressured to focus on the "bubble" students (those just below the cutoff) and sell other students short. But within a few months of assuming the principalship, Adriana and her data team had mounted charts showing students' test scores in the teachers' lounge and spoke with pride about the "clear visual representation" of exactly how students were doing at each grade.

The team put up an anonymized chart of test scores by the school's security desk so parents could see students' progress (without knowing how their own children were doing). "I want that to be the first thing they see when they walk into the building," said Adriana, "so that people are constantly being refocused and retrained. The focus here is learning, the focus here is growth."

In pursuit of higher test scores, Adriana decided to forbid parents from visiting classrooms during instructional time, telling the school's security staff to remove parents from school grounds if they violated this policy. "This is a school," she said. "The purpose of school is to learn and visitors need to respect the learning time. So no, you may not go into the classrooms. Period. They are in the care of the teachers. The teachers are the professionals. Period."

• Nelson – As a new principal of a school under threat of being closed for low test scores, he said, "If your scores are going up, you're a good principal." But he was discouraged, seeing himself as the captain of the Titanic heading toward an iceberg because he was saddled with a fair number of mediocre teachers, unhelpful parents, unmotivated students ("hell-bent on failure," he said), and a disorderly school environment overseen by "two extremely weak security staff."

Nelson's main focus was on hiring better teachers, based on the assumption that effective teaching, not partnering with parents, was the way to boost test scores. He spoke with pride about a number of parent involvement events – family reading night, family math night, family science night – but, say Conwell and Ispa-Landa, "such events reflect school-centric conceptions of parental engagement that may not align with families' strengths and

circumstances… His efforts to involve parents in academic matters did not extend beyond those highly scripted and traditional events." The school ended up being closed by the district, much to Nelson's chagrin; he said it was unfair because the data were trending upward.

• Emily – Leading a school that was also on probation, Emily was ambitious and optimistic, wanting to make the school "a beacon of light in the community" by hosting over 50 parent engagement activities during the school year, raising student and staff attendance, and improving student and parent satisfaction. Nonetheless, her number one goal was raising test scores. What explains this seeming contradiction? Although she didn't believe scores were the most important measure of the school's impact on students, she pointed to research showing a correlation between scores and students' future chances, so she embraced that priority.

This position, say Conwell and Ispa-Landa, shows how "in a bureaucracy with multiple, sometimes conflicting goals, performance is often reduced to quantifiable metrics, which in turn shapes bureaucrats' priorities." Emily's focus on test scores affected her approach to parent participation. She believed students' home environment made it difficult for them to assimilate to the school's culture, and that parents would not provide school-like learning activities at home. "One of the biggest challenges," she said, "is teaching my kids to code-switch, but also to really get my teachers to understand that… your students aren't always gonna listen to you the first time they're asked, or you're asking them to, because of the [home] environment."

• Andrea – In her second year as principal, Andrea was losing sleep over the school being put on probationary status. Test scores are "what it's all about," she said, but fretted about unrealistic challenges: "They're expecting us to perform miracles, you know, to walk on water. And that's not possible dealing with the population that we deal with, all the fires that we have to put out constantly and trying to get the climate under control, the discipline under control, getting teachers to get on board with the plan that we have…"

Andrea planned a pep rally to get students excited about doing well on the tests and messaged parents about the importance of getting their children to school on testing days. She considered parent participation a key factor in improving students' achievement and encouraged parents to volunteer in the school. At the same time, she worried about parents' educational level and effectiveness at home, and worked to provide GED and ELL classes. "We have a lot of young parents who need some parenting skills," she said, "and they need to learn that education is important and that they're not there yet… This is hard work. I have to raise you and your child? That's hard."

• Damien – Leading a school on academic probation, Damien had mixed feelings about test-based accountability, saying he felt "ethically challenged" by the testing regime he was responsible for implementing. But he did believe in the efficacy of interim assessments, and made a point of educating parents about test score data. He pushed back on parents who said the curriculum in this PreK-8 school was too rigorous, arguing that on-grade-level work was important to students' future success.

Damien believed that parent involvement was a key to students' success and worked to build parents' knowledge of the curriculum and increase their interaction with teachers. But he drew the line when he believed parents were advocating for what he considered an incorrect position. In one case, he urged a mother not to pull her daughter out of a supplementary reading program that he thought was important to the girl's development. This was another case, say Conwell and Ispa-Landa, of a principal putting limits on parents' role as "watchdog and overseer" of their children's education.

The authors conclude: "As teachers might 'teach to the test,' with implications for students' education, principals might 'lead to the test,' with implications for parents' involvement in their children's schooling."

"Principals in Urban Schools Under Pressure: Relations with Parents in an Era of Test-Based Accountability" by Jordan Conwell and Simone Ispa-Landa in *Urban Education*, November 2023 (Vol. 58, #9, pp. 2089-2117); the authors are at jconwell@utexas.edu and s-ispa-landa@northwestern.edu.

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4. Should an Instructional Coach Intervene in a Classroom?

In this *Edutopia* article, Jo Lein (Teaching and Leading Initiative of Oklahoma, Johns Hopkins University) describes two situations in which she as an instructional coach intervened directly with struggling first-year teachers:

• *A fourth-grade teacher with major classroom management problems* – This teacher was on the verge of quitting, and Lein had to address two challenges: (a) boosting the teacher's confidence in her ability to lead the class, and (b) convincing her that students could behave with her (she'd seen them acting appropriately in other settings in the school).

Lein spent three days pretty much full time in the classroom. Here's what she did to support the teacher:

- Circulated among students reinforcing good behavior;
- Pulled students out when necessary;
- Occasionally addressed the class;
- Reinforced the teacher's positive mindset (*Yes, they can do this*);
- Built the teacher's positive beliefs about herself;
- Made explicit connections between the teacher's actions and students' actions;
- Helped the teacher develop specific skills, including narrating good behavior, giving clear directions, and showing confidence.

The teacher began to take Lein's lead, and by the end of the third day she said, "I didn't think it was possible for me to get through a whole math lesson like this!" When Lein checked in a few weeks later, the teacher was implementing her suggestions and doing well.

• *A middle-school math teacher, also having trouble managing his classes* – Lein planned a model lesson that she would teach, but as she began, students started yelling at her: "Are you here because our teacher sucks?" The teacher looked on in horror as students moved from their assigned seats, put on headphones, and chatted with one another. Lein was able to regain some control, but "it was ultimately a bust," she says. "The modeled lesson had

reinforced negative mindsets about his students, and he used that as an excuse in every future conversation."

The problem, Lein believes, is that she hadn't assessed the situation correctly. In previous conversations, the teacher had spoken confidently about his own teaching ability and blamed students for the discipline problems. In this case, teaching a model lesson was not the right approach. The teacher's attitude never changed, and he was released at the end of the school year.

Learning from this and other coaching interactions, Lein and her colleagues developed a four-square matrix (click the article link below to see the graphic). The vertical axis is teachers' belief in themselves (high to low). The horizontal axis is teachers' belief in their students (low to high). Here are Lein's suggestions for the best instructional coaching approach for each quadrant:

• *Low self-efficacy, high belief in the kids (the first example above): Teach + support* – The teacher teaches the class while the coach addresses some students directly and occasionally speaks to the whole class. This helps reset student behavior, says Lein, while quickly building the teacher's classroom management skills.

• *High self-efficacy, low belief in the kids (the second example above): Team teach* – (This is what Lein wishes she'd done.) The teacher and coach teach the lesson together, having decided beforehand on a clear division of responsibility. For example, the coach opens the lesson and turns it over to the teacher for student guided practice. "Having additional capacity in the classroom," says Lein, "can demonstrate to the teacher that the students are capable of meeting expectations and learning outcomes with the right guidance and support."

• *High self-efficacy, high belief in the kids: Live coach* – The teacher teaches the class and the coach offers in-the-moment guidance via hand signals from the back of the class, whispered support while students are working, or acting like a student (*Miss, can you help me figure out what page I'm on?*).

• *Low self-efficacy, low belief in the kids: Model teach* – The coach teaches the class while the teacher observes, taking notes on how students respond to specific teaching moves (watching a video can also be effective). Debriefing afterward, the coach discusses each move, decision, and result, guiding the teacher in adopting those practices.

"Sometimes our classrooms devolve into places where learning is heard," Lein concludes, "and an instructional coach or administrator can help to put it back on track. The decision to adopt different coaching strategies has some risks but can also have tremendous rewards."

"How Instructional Coaches Can Use Co-Teaching to Support Teachers" by Jo Lein in *Edutopia*, February 23, 2023

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5. A Study of San Francisco's Decision to Defer Algebra I Until Ninth Grade

In an Annenberg EdWorking Paper, Elizabeth Huffaker, Sarah Novicoff, and Thomas Dee (Stanford University) report on the impact of the San Francisco Unified School District's

decision (implemented in the fall of 2015) to put off Algebra I for all students till ninth grade. The decision was driven by concerns about wide racial/ethnic disparities in students taking higher-level math courses in high school. Nationally, here are the figures for students who entered high school in 2012 and took calculus by their senior year:

- Asian or Pacific Islander – 48 percent
- White – 22 percent
- Hispanic – 14 percent
- Black – 11 percent

In San Francisco, the figures for students enrolled in AP Calculus were even more alarming: seven percent of Hispanic and five percent of African-American students.

San Francisco, like many districts across the nation, had previously embraced the "Algebra for All" approach, aimed at getting more students taking Algebra I in eighth grade. But this policy did not work out well, especially for the lowest-achieving students. San Francisco decided the way to further the cause of equity was to remove Algebra I as an option for eighth graders and enroll all students in the course in the first year of high school. Even with a beefed-up Common Core curriculum in middle school, district leaders believed it was a mistake to rush students to Algebra I in eighth grade. The idea was that universal Algebra I in ninth grade would level the playing field across racial/ethnic lines, cut down on tracking in ninth and tenth grades, and boost enrollment of historically marginalized students in advanced courses.

There was considerable pushback on the policy, with opponents arguing that some students were ready for Algebra I in eighth grade (or earlier), that not offering the course in middle school required compressing five high-school mathematics courses into four years, and that more-advanced students who wanted to apply to selective colleges and pursue a higher-level STEM pathway would be handicapped. Policymakers responded by offering a "compression" course combining Algebra II and Pre-Calculus and organizing a summer course in Geometry after ninth grade.

Huffaker, Novicoff, and Dee conducted a longitudinal study of 23,000 students over six years of the policy's implementation to see if San Francisco's reform reached its ambitious goals. Here are the three questions the researchers addressed and what their study found:

• *How did high-school math course-taking patterns change?* In the early years, there were big drops in student enrollment in Geometry, Algebra II, and Pre-Calculus and a six percent drop in AP Calculus. Subsequent cohorts made better use of the acceleration options, but enrollment in advanced math classes remained lower than before the reform.

• *How did student credits earned in high-school math courses change?* The number of students who received credit in an advanced math course – including Pre-Calculus, AP Calculus, Probability and Statistics, and AP Statistics – remained unchanged.

• *How did the policy affect students in different racial/ethnic groups?* "The large ethnoracial gaps in advanced math course-taking motivated by this reform did not change in the post-reform period," say the authors. The percent of African-American students enrolling in any AP math course remained virtually the same as it was before 2015, and Hispanic student

participation increased by only one percentage point. There's also evidence that families with resources were enrolling their children in tutoring, summer courses, and private schools, widening achievement gaps.

Huffaker, Novicoff, and Dee conclude by commenting on the current debate on calculus versus data science/statistics and probability in the high school math curriculum. Calculus has historically been seen as a stepping stone for careers in STEM, and most high-school counselors still believe taking calculus gives students an edge in the college admissions process. But college admissions officers increasingly disagree, and the argument is being made that privileging calculus distorts the middle- and high-school math experience for many students. "These considerations about the varied educational goals associated with reforming math pedagogy," say the authors, "provide an important context for framing the possibilities and challenges like the ones examined here."

In an *Education Gadfly* commentary on this study, Jeanette Luna says, "By mistaking equity for mediocrity, San Francisco Unified School District has disrupted its students' math education with nothing to show for it."

"Ahead of the Game? Course-Taking Patterns Under a Math Pathways Reform" by Elizabeth Huffaker, Sarah Novicoff, and Thomas Dee in an Annenberg EdWorking Paper, March 2023; the authors can be reached at huffaker@stanford.edu, snovi@stanford.edu, and tdee@stanford.edu.

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6. Recommended Spooky Graphic Novels for Tweens

In this *School Library Journal* feature, Alyssa Taft recommends these books for elementary and middle-school students for the Halloween season (click the link below for cover images and short synopses):

- *Forever Home* by Jenna Ayoub, grade 4-7
- *Misfit Mansion* by Kay Davault, grade 5-9
- *The Bawkness Monster* by Sara Goetter and Natalie Riess, grade 3-7
- *Pebble and Wren* by Chris Hallbeck, grade 4-8
- *Apple Crush* by Lucy Knisley, grade 3-7
- *Beetle and the Hollowbones* by Aliza Layne, grade 5-9
- *Wingbearer* by Marjorie Liu, grade 5-8
- *Prunella and the Cursed Skull Ring* by Matthew Loux, grade 2-5
- *The Moth Keeper* by K. O'Neill, grade 4-8
- *Dungeon Club: Roll Call* by Molly Knox Ostertag, grade 4-8
- *Garlic and the Witch* by Bree Paulsen, grade 3-6
- *Batcat: The Ghostly Guest* by Meggie Ramm, grade 2-5
- *Tidesong* by Wendy Xu, grade 4-8
- *My Aunt Is a Monster* by Reimena Yee, grade 4-8

"Great Books, Fewer Tricks, More Treats" by Alyssa Taft in *School Library Journal*, October 2023 (Vol. 69, #10, pp. 42-44)

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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 54 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 HTMI 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
ASCD SmartBrief
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
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 Ed (formerly Ed. Magazine)
Harvard Educational Review
Independent School
Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Kappan (Phi Delta Kappan)
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
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