Marshall Memo 379

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
March 28, 2011

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"They're not going to respond positively to a negative system."
A San Diego high-school teacher on improving attendance (see item #2)

"Simply stated, it's hard to learn when you're not in school."
Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey, and Diane Lapp (*ibid*.)

"I maintain that memorizing someone else's words or thoughts is not much different from a musician's committing melodies to memory. It is the precursor to improvising."
David Brooks, University of Montana teaching assistant (see item #5)

"The ultimate goal is effective teaching in every classroom, every day, every year."
Kim Marshall (see item #4)

"Reading is *the* skill. Teaching students to unlock the full meaning of the texts they read is the single most powerful outcome a teacher can foster. If your students can read well, they can essentially do anything."
Doug Lemov in *Teach Like a Champion* (Jossey-Bass, 2010, p. 249)

"Comprehension – understanding a text's full meaning and relevance – is the ultimate aim of reading."
Doug Lemov (*ibid*., p. 283)

"Time is water in the desert, a teacher's most precious resource: to be husbanded, guarded and conserved. Every minute matters."
Doug Lemov (*ibid*., p. 230)

1. The Khan Academy and Its Revolutionary Potential

This intriguing 20-minute TED lecture by former Boston hedge-fund analyst Salman Khan is well worth watching in full: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nTFEUsudhfs. Khan describes how five years ago, he was doing long-distance tutoring of his cousins in New Orleans. He decided to put his videos on YouTube (they have step-by-step graphics with Khan's voice explaining), and found that his cousins preferred the YouTube versions to working with him in person or on the phone – they could pause, go back, repeat, jump ahead, all at their own pace. One thing that's annoying when you're learning, says Khan, is a teacher asking, "Do you understand?"

People began stumbling on Khan's YouTube explanations, he got lots of positive feedback, and he created more and more videos. Eventually he quit his job and started the Khan Academy website, which now has 2,200 free video lessons explaining a wide range of skills and content, from algebra to evolution to the French Revolution, each subject organized into a sequential "knowledge map" – http://www.khanacademy.org. So far, the lessons have been viewed by more than 43 million students of all ages around the world.

In the TED lecture, Khan describes the next step in his thinking: using the explanatory videos to change the way classrooms work. He says that in the traditional classroom, teachers present one-size-fits-all lectures, have students practice, assign homework, give tests, and move on. Because most students are at an 80 percent or lower level of proficiency, many aren't prepared to be successful at the next level. It's like teaching a child to ride a bicycle to the 80 percent level and then presenting a unicycle. This is why capable students start failing at the higher levels of mathematics and other subjects, says Khan – because the "Swiss-cheese" gaps in their knowledge accumulate over time and eventually make the subject frustrating and confusing.

So Khan and his colleagues have created quick assessments of each skill with instant feedback to the student, and have set the bar for mastery much higher: you have to get ten problems in a row correct to be ready to move on to the next level. This component has made it possible for teachers to start using the Khan videos in classrooms. Two schools in Los Altos, California have begun using the Khan videos for about half of content instruction. A lot of what was formerly conveyed in teacher lectures is now in a series of individual mini-lessons for students, tuned to their proficiency level, which frees up the teacher to cruise around the room providing just-in-time help and using data from frequent online assessments to target areas of confusion and misunderstanding. It also allows the other half of classroom time to be

devoted to simulations, games, and real-world problems like estimating the height of a hill from its shadow.

In the Los Altos classrooms, some students charge ahead in the knowledge map in the opening days, which leads people to conclude that these students are "gifted." But what always happens in the next week or so, says Khan, is that students who got off to a slow start master the basics (getting ten in a row correct) and then pick up speed and charge ahead in the curriculum. Students who looked "slow" now look "gifted."

There's a lot of talk about student-teacher ratios among educators, says Khan, but the ratio he's more interested in is the amount of valuable human time each student is getting. This ratio is much better when students are doing a lot of their learning on computers. Paradoxically, he says, technology is humanizing classrooms, increasing human interaction by a factor or five or ten.

Bill Gates comes onstage at the end of the lecture and asks several questions, including this one: will this technology, and Khan's dogged work cranking out hundreds of well-crafted explanations – revolutionize American classrooms?

"Let's Use Video to Reinvent Education" by Salman Khan, TED Lecture, Mar. 9, 2011
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nTFEUsudhfs

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2. Improving Attendance and Engagement in a San Diego High School

"Simply stated, it's hard to learn when you're not in school," say Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey, and Diane Lapp in this *JESPAR* article. They go on to describe how, over three years, they improved student attendance in a 500-student San Diego high school from 90.3% to 95.6%, a level comparable to suburban schools, and addressed student engagement and achievement.

Fisher, Frey, and Lapp started by comparing the attendance of the highest-performing 10% of students and the lowest-performing 10% of students over a five-month period. They found that the former (overwhelmingly white and Asian) were absent an average of 1.8 days a month, with none missing more than four days, while the latter (overwhelmingly black and Latino) missed an average of 6.5 days a month, with some missing as many as 15). In addition, Fisher, Frey, and Lapp documented a lack of engagement among low-performing students when they were in school. Here's what they did next:

• *Sharing the data* – The school's staff was startled when presented with the attendance figures and came face to face with their previous acceptance of low attendance among some students. "I guess I've just grown used to the idea that [student's name] isn't going to be there five days a week," said one teacher. "We need to find ways to let them know it matters when they're not here," said another.

• *Coming up with a strategy* – Teachers decided that their approach shouldn't be punitive. "They're not going to respond positively to a negative system," said an English teacher. Within a few weeks, a schoolwide plan was in place, focused on building a sense of community among students.

• *Noticing absences* – Each time a student was absent, a personalized note – with variations on the theme "We missed you today" – was mailed home. Administrators signed the notes, and teachers began adding personal messages before the notes were mailed. One student wrote back, saying, "I didn't know it mattered I was gone. I missed you too. Thank you for that note. It made me feel special."

• *Home visits* – Administrators visited the homes of students for every fifth absence, using a cumulative absence tally. "Are you gonna keep coming when I'm gone from school?" asked one student. "I was sick this time." The principal asked if there was anything that the school could do – like bringing some chicken soup.

• *Reversing unexcused absences* – The school's social worker assistant, a paraprofessional funded by Title I, began making home visits to students with unexcused absences. If he found the student at home with an adult present, he advised the adult that the child must be in school. The school followed up with truant officers in chronic cases, and filed with child protection after ten days of truancy. When the child returned to school, he or she was warmly greeted.

• *Celebrating attendance* – Each grade's daily attendance was posted prominently for students, faculty, families, and visitors to see, which sparked comments among teachers ("What's up with the seniors?"), e-mail exchanges ("Let's hear it for 9th grade! 100%, baby!"), reactions from parents ("I didn't realize that keeping him home this week to help his cousin move made such a difference"), and, when the slices of pizza were offered to any class with perfect attendance, exhortations from students ("No one be absent tomorrow! Don't mess it up!").

• *Improving engagement* – "Getting students in the classroom is one issue," say Fisher, Frey, and Lapp. "What happens when they get there is another… In too many classrooms, the dominance of teacher talk fosters student passivity." Many students find the very common *initiate-respond-evaluate* pattern predictable and dreary: "What are the names of the particles in the nucleus of an atom?" "Neutrons and protons." "Correct!" Students in other cultures find this dynamic baffling: why would a teacher ask a question to which she clearly knows the answer? In professional development sessions, Fisher, Frey, and Lapp worked with teachers to break out of this pattern and have more extended discussions with students in which the teacher was not always the dominant player. Teachers used videotapes of their classrooms to analyze and enhance student discourse.

• *Reducing teacher talk* – Fisher, Frey, and Lapp shared with the faculty the research on the dominance of the teacher's voice in high-school classrooms, especially with lower-achieving students. One study found that teacher talk takes up 55% of the air time in high-achieving classrooms versus 80% in low-achieving classrooms. Professional development in the school focused on gradual release of responsibility, with students taking on an increasingly important role in class discussions and activities. "Productive group work is the linchpin of learning," say the authors. "Students collaborate to refine new learning through tasks designed to promote interaction. In the company of fellow novice learners, they ask questions of one another, clarify understandings, demand justifications, and formulate ways to complete the

assignment. It's noisier, to be sure, but administrators and teachers understand that this is what learning sounds and looks like. Students, otherwise left to fend for themselves through independent work, have the *safety net* to hone their learning before attempting it alone."

What have been the academic results at this high school? After three years of intervention on attendance and engagement, the percentages of students passing California's tenth-grade tests the first time have increased steadily, reaching these levels by the end of the 2009-10 school year:

- 91% of students passed the ELA test (compared with 79% statewide).
- 88% of students passed the math test (compared with 80% statewide).
- 94% of African-American students passed ELA (compared with 69% statewide)
- 69% of African-American students passed math (compared with 64% statewide).
- 86% of Latino students passed ELA (compared with 71% statewide).
- 88% of Latino students passed the math test (compared with 72% statewide).

"Focusing on the Participation and Engagement Gap: A Case Study on Closing the Achievement Gap" by Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey, and Diane Lapp in the *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)*, January-March 2011 (Vol. 16, #1, p. 56-64), http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~db=all~content=a934414973; Fisher can be reached at dfisher@hshmc.org.

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3. Accelerating Struggling Middle-School Students

In this *Middle School Journal* article, Christine Finnan of the College of Charleston and South Carolina high-school teacher Dennis Kombe describe a program that sought to accelerate over-age seventh graders through two years of academic content in one year. The goal was to get these struggling students to reestablish their identity as learners and rejoin their age-mates in ninth grade. Here are the details:

- Eligible students were invited to apply, but students with serious behavior and/or learning disorders were eliminated from the pool.
- The Accelerated Program was located in four portable classrooms on the campus of a suburban middle school.
- The program focused heavily on reading and math, which were taught in 90-minute blocks.
- Students used the Read 180 computer curriculum to condense two years of material into one year.
- Class size was maintained at 15, and a partner university provided extra staff and resources, including a full-time program director, enrichment activities (field trips and service-learning experiences), one-on-one tutoring, and ongoing research.
- Social studies and science were taught in one 90-minute block each day.
- The same teachers taught all core subjects, so there was a family-like atmosphere in the program.

- A full-time counselor and the program director provided social and emotional support to students, including individual goal-setting and a Stop the Drama intervention to address interpersonal issues among some of the girls.

What were the results? Finnan and Kombe say that "students began to shift their sense of self to make room for future success in school and in life."

- Attendance was strong, averaging only three absences per student.
- Behavior infractions were low – only one suspension the first year of the program and zero the second.
- In the first cohort, 33 of 37 students successfully completed the program and were promoted to ninth grade.
- In the second cohort, 33 students entered and 33 were promoted.

What happened when these students entered high school? Finnan and Kombe say that students' "fragile identity shift was tested." Here are some downstream results:

- In the first cohort, 42% of students stayed on track and were in 11th grade three years later; 42% of this cohort were in tenth grade that year; the remaining 16% of students were still in ninth grade.
- In the first cohort, 79% had no out-of-school suspensions in high school; 65% had no in-school suspensions; two students were expelled.
- In the second cohort, 52% were on track as tenth graders two years later; 48% were still in ninth grade.
- In the second cohort, 57% had no out-of-school suspensions and 64% had no in-school suspensions.
- Due to funding cuts, the program was terminated after two years.

"Although the data do not point to a dramatic transformation," conclude Finnan and Kombe, "the Accelerated Program provided a necessary intervention for many students. Graduates of the program continue to look back to it as a golden time."

"Accelerating Struggling Students' Learning Through Identity Redevelopment" by Christine Finnan and Dennis Kombe in *Middle School Journal*, March 2011 (Vol. 42, #4, p. 4-12), http://www.nmsa.org/Publications/MiddleSchoolJournal/Articles/March2011/Article3/tabid/2354/Default.aspx; the authors can be reached at finnanc@cofc.edu and dennis_kombe@charleston.k12.sc.us.

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4. Fixing Teacher Evaluation

In this *Boston Globe* Op-Ed article, former Boston principal Kim Marshall says the teacher-evaluation system in many schools "does a terrible job distinguishing between highly effective, effective, mediocre, and ineffective teaching. Many outstanding teachers aren't recognized and asked to share their magic; lots of teachers who need help aren't getting it; and all too many who shouldn't be teaching are still in front of kids."

Marshall identifies three reasons that teacher evaluation often doesn't work as well as it might:

• Principals are spread thin. In a school with 40 teachers, 200 lessons are taught every day; that's 36,000 lessons a year! "Even the most energetic principal sees only a tiny fraction of teachers' work with students," says Marshall.

• Teachers generally have advance notice of annual evaluation visits. "Knowing exactly when the boss is coming, and having so few chances to show their stuff, it's understandable for teachers to prepare a 'glamorized' lesson that is not representative of what students are getting every day," says Marshall. The special-lesson tradition is "a collusive deal," he continues. "[T]he principal pretends the observed class is typical and writes it up – saving the time, emotional difficulty, and union hassles involved in spotting, confronting, and improving less-than-effective teaching. Struggling teachers sign the evaluations, avoiding the hard work of getting better. And all those 'satisfactory' evaluations go into personnel files, maintaining the fiction that things are just fine."

• Teacher evaluation rarely deals with the most important question: are students learning what's being taught?

"The ultimate goal is effective teaching in every classroom, every day, every year," says Marshall. But how do we get there? One idea is using standardized test scores to evaluate teachers. Marshall notes that there's a heated debate on the merits of this idea, but points to one obvious problem: test scores aren't tabulated until summer, so an entire school year passes before anyone is held accountable. "Struggling teachers need tough-love feedback and support during the year," he contends. "Teacher teams and administrators need to look at well-constructed assessments every few weeks to see which teaching methods are working or which aren't. And if a teacher is having serious problems and isn't taking suggestions and improving, the dismissal process must begin early to minimize the damage to children's learning."

Marshall believes that the best way to fix the dysfunctional teacher-evaluation process is to give new tools to principals, who, after all, have the best access to classrooms and the greatest opportunity to orchestrate improvements in teaching and remove failing teachers. Principals will be far more effective if their classroom evaluation visits are:

• Unannounced, so they see everyday reality;

• Short, frequent, and systematic, so every teacher is visited at least 10 times a year and all aspects of instruction are sampled;

• Followed each time by a short, face-to-face conversation in which the principal and teacher focus on curriculum, methods, and results (struggling teachers would get more intensive supervision and support and an improvement plan);

• Summed up in end-of-year evaluations with two dimensions: a rubric that gives detailed ratings at four levels: highly effective, effective, improvement necessary, and does not meet standards – and a report on each teacher team's September-to-May student learning gains measured by high-quality during-the-year assessments.

"Schools experimenting with these ideas are making dramatic progress," concludes Marshall. "Let's follow their lead, bring out the best in principals and teachers, and give all our kids the education they deserve."

"Visit Classrooms Early and Often, and Give New Tools to Principals" by Kim Marshall in *The Boston Globe*, Mar. 25, 2011 (p. A13)
http://www.boston.com/news/education/k_12/articles/2011/03/25/visit_classrooms_early_and_often_and_give_new_tools_to_principals/

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5. How to Get Active Student Participation In Class Discussions

In this thoughtful *Chronicle of Higher Education* article with clear implications for K-12 classrooms, University of Montana history teaching assistant David Brooks suggests ways to get students to open up and *talk*:

• *Require students to recite passages*. Brooks has asked students to memorize material from one of the course's weekly reading assignments and present it in class. He's found that having students recite authentic material from historical figures like Benjamin Franklin, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Frederick Douglass gets discussions off to a much livelier start. "Nailing down the thesis or main points early made it easier to tackle questions of evidence, rhetorical style, or connections to lecture material," says Brooks. "I maintain that memorizing someone else's words or thoughts is not much different from a musician's committing melodies to memory. It is the precursor to improvising." In addition, when students take exams, they see the value of having key portions of historical documents at the tip of their tongues.

• *Have students give presentations*. Brooks has students prepare and deliver short, extemporaneous talks related to the assigned material. "Because I let students pick their own topics for these talks, they owned the material," he says. "At best, the exercise put students in the role of teacher, giving them a chance to ask and field questions. It associated a sense of authority with talking in class." Every time Brooks did this, he found that the section ran overtime.

• *Hand out questions in advance*. Brooks says that when he hasn't given students questions or themes to think about *before* they read, class discussions usually flop. "Without reading prompts," he says, "students seem to retain less of what they've read, for lack of focus. And unprompted reading leaves students, literally, on different pages: some recall specific details, others, overarching arguments, while most come to the discussion with an unorganized smattering of recollections."

• *Launch discussions by putting solid content on the table*. Brooks has found that starting a class by asking for a summary of a document – for example, the plot of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* – gets discussions off to a better start than asking general questions like "How did Northerners view slavery?" Asking students to recap the previous class discussion or a recent lecture is equally effective.

• *Give students time to think*. Brooks often gives students five minutes to jot down their thoughts before launching a discussion. "Many feel more comfortable contributing to a discussion if they have a crib sheet of their own creation at hand," he says. "I'm a slow thinker. I walk away from plenty of conversations and uncover my clearest thoughts on the topic

minutes, sometimes hours or days later. Expecting students who might be grappling with unfamiliar material to have quick and ready answers is often unrealistic."

• *Set discussion rules*. Brooks requires that once a person has spoken in class, he or she has to wait until three others have spoken before participating again. This gets more students involved in the discussion, discourages hasty rebuttals, and stimulates extended exchanges and more robust debates. The rule applies to the TA as well, which eliminates the all-too-frequent ping-pong dynamic of teacher-queries/student-answers.

• *Tolerate silences*. "At the very least," says Brooks, "the awkwardness of an elongated pause in a room full of undergraduates, with a question hanging over their heads and a TA looking on, goads even the most reticent student to talk. Eventually someone will sacrifice herself or himself, and others will soon commiserate."

• *Schmooze*. "Rather than waltzing into class at the last minute and using my first question like the rap of a gavel to stifle energetic talk about last weekend (or the next one)," says Brooks, "I like to show up early and socialize." Sometimes there's a convenient segue from pre-class chatter and the subject matter of the day – and sometimes digressions during the class can help students make links to their own lives and see more clearly the importance of what they are learning.

• *Listen*. These techniques are helpful in promoting better discussions in class, concludes Brooks, but there's one thing that may be most important of all: "it's hard to make people want to talk if you don't want to listen."

"Getting Students to Talk" by David Brooks in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Mar. 25, 2011 (Vol. LVII, #29, p. A31-32),
http://chronicle.com/article/Getting-Students-to-Talk/126826/

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6. When Veteran Workers Have a Younger Boss

In this *Nano Tools for Leaders* brief, Wharton School professor Peter Capelli shares insights on handling "older" employees (defined as 55 and above). Research shows that people in this age bracket have superior job performance compared to novices; along with their experience, they have highly desirable "just in time" skills and are more flexible in the hours they can work.

But problems arise when these battle-tested workers have younger supervisors – something that happens frequently in the military, business, and education. Capelli has the following suggestions for less-experienced bosses:

• *Recognize the problem*. More-experienced workers may have a problem being supervised by a whippersnapper. A dictatorial management style ("Because I said so…") won't work.

• *Acknowledge expertise*. The younger supervisor should say something like, "I know you have a lot of experience in this area, and we want to use that expertise."

• *Involve them*. Ask for the help of older subordinates defining and solving problems, weighing pros and cons, and anticipating likely scenarios.

• *Overcome biases in supervision*. Younger supervisors tend to have unconscious biases about older workers – for example, that they are less effective and that training won't improve their performance. They need to be aware of these biases and make an extra effort to be fair.

• *Manage follow-up*. Younger supervisors are often reluctant to supervise older subordinates. They need to get past this reluctance, collaboratively setting goals and planning for regular praise and constructive feedback.

"Managing the Older Worker" by Peter Capelli in *Nano Tools for Leaders*, March 2011
http://wlp.wharton.upenn.edu/LeadershipDigest/nano-tool-managing-older-workers.cfm

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7. Short Items:

a. Free e-books – Project Gutenberg offers more than 33,000 free electronic books that can be downloaded and read on a computer, iPhone, Kindle, Sony Reader, iPad, Android, or other portable devices: http://www.gutenberg.org

Spotted in "21st Century Skills: Prepare Students for the Future" by Lotta Larson and Teresa Northern Miller in *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, Spring 2011 (Vol. 47, #3, p. 121-123)

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b. Virtual manipulatives – The National Library of Virtual Manipulatives, created at Utah State University, offers online material that can be used with a whole class or by individual students on their own computers: http://nlvm.usu.edu

Spotted in "21st Century Skills: Prepare Students for the Future" by Lotta Larson and Teresa Northern Miller in *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, Spring 2011 (Vol. 47, #3, p. 121-123)

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c. Multimedia math lesson plans – PBS: Teachers Math offers lesson plans that promote a multimedia approach: http://www.pbs.org/teachers/math

Spotted in "21st Century Skills: Prepare Students for the Future" by Lotta Larson and Teresa Northern Miller in *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, Spring 2011 (Vol. 47, #3, p. 121-123)

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d. Science lesson plans – Education Planet-Science has more than 45,000 lesson plans in all areas of science and more than 1,000 Web links for additional science exploration: http://www.educationplanet.com/directory/science

Spotted in "21st Century Skills: Prepare Students for the Future" by Lotta Larson and Teresa Northern Miller in *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, Spring 2011 (Vol. 47, #3, p. 121-123)

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e. Science questions answered – Scientific American: Ask the Experts invites students to ask questions on any scientific topic (including tsunamis, drug addiction, and more):

http://www.scientificamerican.com/section.cfm?id=ask-the-experts

Spotted in "21st Century Skills: Prepare Students for the Future" by Lotta Larson and Teresa Northern Miller in *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, Spring 2011 (Vol. 47, #3, p. 121-123)

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f. Telling fact from opinion – The EduHound website has several lessons on this vital skill: http://www.eduhound.com/site_sets/Fact_or_Opinion.cfm

Spotted in "Bulletin Board" in *Principal Leadership*, March 2011 (Vol. 11, #7, p. 6)

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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 41 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:

Individual subscriptions are $50 for the school year. Rates decline steeply for multiple readers within the same organization. See the website for these rates and information on paying by check or credit card.

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

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- 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 log-in

Publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
ASCD, CEC SmartBriefs, Daily EdNews
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
Teachers College Record
The Atlantic Monthly
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Language Educator
The Learning Principal
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
The School Administrator
Theory Into Practice
Tools for Schools