

Marshall Memo 1109

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
October 20, 2025

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Quotes of the Week

“Students who don’t need to do their homework are the ones who do their homework.”
A teacher quoted in item #1

“Good writing is clear, conversational, and as short as possible.”
Shane Parrish in [Brain Food 651](#), October 19, 2025

“If you said, ‘Hey, we could wave a magic wand tomorrow and get your kid proficient in German or French or whatever,’ everybody would take it. All the rich people would take it. Nobody would say, ‘Oh, I don’t know. That might mess up their math skills.’”
Conor Williams, quoted in [“Does Speaking Two Languages Hurt Student Achievement? Experts Say No”](#) by Ileana Najarro in *Education Week*, October 2025

“For anyone under the age of 21, there are not only no benefits to drinking, but clear harms. Alcohol interferes with brain development, amplifies risk-taking and emotional reactivity, and raises vulnerability to addiction. Delaying the onset of first use remains one of the most effective ways to protect against later addiction. I stand by that strongly because it is supported by some of our best epidemiological data.”

Marisa Silveri (Harvard Medical School), quoted in [“‘Dry January’ Helped Drive Drinking Rates to a 96-Year Low”](#) by Alvin Powell in *Harvard Gazette*, Oct. 14, 2025

“Anxiety feeds on avoidance.”
Alex Jordan and Ben Lovett (see item #5)

“When students take on what they’d rather avoid, they learn that worst-case scenarios rarely materialize, that discomfort is survivable, and that anxiety diminishes with practice
Alex Jordan and Ben Lovett (*ibid.*)

“Don’t wing it. Plan it.”
Dan Rockwell on one-on-one meetings (see item #7)

1. Rethinking Homework

In Chapter 7 in their book, *Mathematics Tasks for the Thinking Classroom, Grades K-5*, Peter Liljedahl and Meagan Giroux say most teachers know that homework isn't working. One comment: "Students who don't need to do their homework are the ones who do their homework." So why do teachers keep assigning it? Some common responses:

- It's school policy.
- Parents expect it.
- Students need practice.
- Grading homework means there are fewer grades assigned to tests.
- This is how it's always been done.

But student compliance is typically abysmal. One study found that when students know homework will be graded, 22 percent do it with fidelity; when it's not graded, that figure rises to 31 percent.

When pressed for more-substantive reasons than parental and bureaucratic expectations and past practice, teachers say they want homework to be:

- A safe place where students can make mistakes and learn from them;
- A chance for students to see if they can do classwork on their own;
- A way to check their understanding.

These are good reasons, say Liljedahl and Giroux, but when they asked students why they do homework, none mentioned those three. Instead, kids said:

- *It's for grades.*
- *My mom makes me.*
- *My teacher makes me.*

"The reason that homework doesn't work," say the authors, "is that the gulf between what teachers want to achieve with homework and why students do it is massive. If we want homework to work, we need to narrow this gulf."

Fifteen years of Building Thinking Classrooms research led to a different approach: rebranding homework for students as *checking your understanding* (CYU), with these provisions:

- It's not practice.
- It's not an exercise.
- It's not an easy way to get grades.
- The purpose is to check and improve understanding.
- It's not assigned, collected, checked, or graded.

- Instead, students are given an opportunity to do check-your-understanding questions.
- As much as possible, that opportunity is during class.

“When this rebranding and these practices were put in place,” say Liljedahl and Giroux, “we saw students doing CYU questions for the right reason – to check that they understood rather than for grades. They would take ownership for their own work while at the same time they made use of the knowledge of the students around them as resources to check their answers and get help when stuck.” Because the check-your-understanding questions were ungraded, there was no incentive to “cheat” or divvy up the work among friends. The process incentivizes learning over compliance and grades, and researchers found that 60-80 percent of students seized the opportunity – much better than typical compliance.

But what about the 20-40 percent who opted out? They were probably the same students who, with mandatory graded homework, didn’t do it, cheated, or did it purely for grades and not for learning. Liljedahl, Giroux, and their colleagues were not content to let these students make bad decisions that were not in their best interests: “This is the nature of childhood,” they say. “It is the job of the adults in these children’s lives to not only encourage them to make better decisions, but to create situations where they are more likely to make better decisions.”

Here’s how they modified the check-your-understanding process. Toward the end of a lesson, the teacher writes questions on the board at three levels of difficulty: *Mild*, *Medium*, and *Spicy*. Students are told:

- These are your CYU questions.
- You are going to sit down and do some of these.
- Choose where you want to start.
- Do your own.
- Check your work with the students around you.
- If you need help, get help. And if someone else needs help, give help.

This structure - *working on your own together* – helped students feel safe about making mistakes. Telling students to decide where to start, the researchers found, was much more productive than asking students to choose which questions to tackle. When told to choose where to start, students answered more questions, and if they faltered, it was easy for the teacher to prompt them: “Okay, so where are you going next?”

This structure also promoted a growth (versus a fixed) mindset in students. “Students with a fixed mindset,” say Liljedahl and Giroux, “view evaluation and assessment as a description of *who* they are, whereas students with a growth mindset view evaluation and assessment as a description of *where* they are. To promote a growth mindset, then, we need to make sure that activities such as self-assessment help students understand where they are instead of who they are.” Asking a student, “Where are you going next?” nudges them toward a growth mindset.

Being able to choose Mild, Medium, and Spicy was also significant. Rubrics and performance scales often use terms like Novice, Master, and Expert, which describe students on their level of expertise – a *who* fixed mindset. Mild, Medium, and Spicy describe the tasks,

not the students, and the colloquial language is non-evaluative and nonjudgmental. A year's experimentation with this approach in more than 100 math classrooms from K to 12 showed huge impact on students' desire to do the tasks. Researchers heard comments like:

- *I'm doing one mild, one medium, and then I'm going straight to spicy.*
- *Can we have another spicy one?*
- *I think I'll start with mild and see where I go from there.*
- *I got to medium.*

"They were engaged," say Liljedahl and Giroux. "In fact, we have observed numerous lessons where students wanted to stay and keep working well after the bell to leave has gone." Why?

Three key elements:

- Choice – Students could decide where to start and how far to go.
- Mastery – Success created confidence and momentum to try something harder.
- Challenge – The ladder of difficulty got students into the zone of productive struggle.

Productive struggle is "a state rather than a trait," say the authors. "In order to enter this state, students need to have encountered challenge after success. Once this state is entered, however, it begins to feed on itself. With every success comes the desire to take on more challenge. And the greater the challenge, the greater the feeling of success. The students are enjoying feeling successful at things that are challenging and they want to keep it going – they want to go from mild to medium to spicy."

For the great majority of students, this structure is very successful – but some students are paralyzed by the initial decision of where to start and need a nudge to get going. The teacher saying *Why don't you start with this mild one* is usually enough to get them started, and then they pick up momentum. There are also students who were not paying attention during the lesson or whose skills are below the mild level, and they'll need additional help and their own sub-mild questions (which are still called mild).

A few students are at the other end of the spectrum – they think they're ready to go straight to spicy, but they haven't built confidence and mastery with the easier questions. These kids need to be coached to start with easier questions and stay in a state of productive struggle. And there are students who really are ready for the spicy level and can use an additional challenge. Liljedahl and Giroux advise against creating a fourth level (*Extra Spicy, Habanero, Flaming Hot*) because this leads other students not to venture past medium. For hard-charging, high-achieving students, they say, keep the three levels and put up additional spicy questions that will challenge them – but use the same label.

During check-your-understanding time, a lot of the help comes from peers, but teachers still need to circulate, say Liljedahl and Giroux. It's a great time "to work the room to see where students need the individual support, encouragement, and challenge necessary to complete the learning for the day. Along the way you will gather a ton of informal information about where individual students are in their learning that you can use to either inform your teaching or to inform your grading."

If students are allowed to look at each other's work, won't they just copy? That will happen, say the authors, if check-your-understanding work is treated like an exit ticket and

collected and graded. A critical element of the CYU time is that it's voluntary and ungraded; if it is, there's very high participation and "cheating" shouldn't happen.

Should the mild/medium/spicy questions be printed out on paper? "No!" say Liljedahl and Giroux. "Doing so creates two major problems." First, the check-your-understanding process becomes another worksheet, which triggers a predictable response from students: they treat it as something they're accountable for rather than responsible for. Second, CYU questions need to be the teacher's on-the-spot reflection of what actually happened during the lesson, not what they *wanted* to happen. If the CYU questions are put on paper and run off before the lesson begins, the mild/medium/spicy questions might be off target. What's spicy today might be medium tomorrow.

It is important, the authors add, that check-your-understanding questions are mostly done in class. Relying on CYU questions being done at home is a "losing proposition," they say. "Some will do them. Some will not. Regardless, doing them at home means they are away from the guidance and encouragement that you can provide." The great virtue of a high-involvement check-your-understanding time is that students are taking responsibility for their own learning and achieving mastery in an environment with lots of challenge, choice, and support.

What if parents want regular homework? Liljedahl and Giroux suggest describing the CYU process to parents and explaining why it is so effective at getting children actually learning. If parents insist on homework, direct them to resources with work students can do for them (not the teacher). "Parents' desire to have homework," say the authors, "should not affect your professional judgment of what is best for your students."

"How to Have Students Do Check-Your-Understanding Questions" by Peter Liljedahl and Meagan Giroux, Chapter 7 in *Mathematics Tasks for the Thinking Classroom Grades K-5* (Jossey-Bass 2024); Liljedahl can be reached at liljedahl@sfu.ca.

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2. The Power of Sharing Students' Math Thinking with the Class

In this *Mathematics Teacher* article, Miriam Leshin (University of Virginia) and Laura Kretschmar (a 6th-grade math and science teacher in Berkeley, California) share a text message Kretschmar received from a parent about her daughter Rachel:

She was PROUD that apparently you had used one of her answers as an anonymous example in a lesson. It must have made a big impact on her! Thought you would want to know. Thank you again for all you do for these kids!!!

"Like all students," say Leshin and Kretschmar, "Rachel wants to be seen and wants her ideas to be valued. Rachel's mom's message illustrates the impact that work-sharing can have on students' sense of belonging in the mathematics classroom." Other benefits:

- Students see multiple approaches to solving a problem.
- A big idea or concept is consolidated in their minds.
- Students learn best practices for showing thinking and using correct math notation.

- The class is actively involved.
- Students see their peers (and themselves) as contributors to learning mathematics.

The authors suggest five routines for sharing students' work via a document camera, as part of a slide deck, or distributing photocopies to the class:

- Highlight and celebrate – The teacher selects exemplary work from a previous class to showcase a particularly instructive way of problem-solving, explaining, diagraming, or using notation.
- Elevate a peer – After some group work or a gallery walk, the teacher invites students to highlight a classmate's work for whole-class discussion.
- Critique and feedback – The teacher selects work that reveals mistakes or is an opportunity to make students' work stronger.
- Select and sequence – The teacher selects and shows a variety of strategies (correct or incorrect). This is especially helpful when students are learning a new concept.
- Soliciting volunteers – The teacher asks who would like to display their work and students who raise their hand are called on.

One key decision for teachers is whether students' displayed work is anonymous. Not revealing which student did the shared work keeps the focus on the content and is good for shy students and when errors are being discussed. In other cases, as when students volunteer, the class knows who did the work and those students are showcased for their competence and creativity.

Another teacher decision is who does the explaining when a student's work is shared with the class. The teacher explaining is efficient for pointing out an effective strategy, technique, or error. When the student who did the work explains, it helps that student deepen their understanding and a student-centered class culture is reinforced. When other students do the explaining, it gets the whole class thinking, helps students hone thinking and communication skills, and provides opportunities for a deeper exchange and critique of various solution strategies.

“When work is shared with the class,” conclude Leshin and Kretschmar, “students construct ideas not only about mathematics but also about themselves and each other as doers of mathematics. When we expand work-sharing to include a range of flexible routines in which many different ideas and voices are heard, we create opportunities for more students to be positioned as doers of mathematics and as contributors to the collective development of knowledge.”

“My Work Matters: How Work-Sharing Can Facilitate Belonging” by Miriam Leshin and Laura Kretschmar in *Mathematics Teacher*, October 2025 (Vol. 118, #10, pp. 742-749); the authors can be reached at mleshin@virginia.edu and laurakretschmar@berkeley.net.

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3. Using Concept Maps to Organize, Visualize, and Reinforce Learning

In *Cult of Pedagogy*, Jennifer Gonzalez interviews cognitive scientist Kripa Sundar

about using concept maps to visually represent ideas. Used well, says Sundar, concept maps can have a bigger instructional impact than lectures, discussions, or text summaries. Why? Because they boost *memory formation* in three ways:

- Elaboration – Concept maps show the relationship between ideas.
- Storage – They connect concepts to students’ mental models.
- Retrieval – Graphically mapping ideas reinforces and deepens memory.

Sundar suggests strategies for creating and using concept maps:

- Be clear about your purpose and strategy. “As with all instructional strategies,” she says, “the first question is *why*? Why are you choosing a concept map for what you’re trying to do?” Graphic displays can be done as a whole-class activity, individually, when students are taking notes, or as an assessment.

- Have a guiding question. Narrowing down to a specific question helps focus on key concepts and content and avoids getting too much into the weeds. Click on the article link below to see concept maps on the connection between ocean acidification, driving a car, and human activity.

- Use graphic links and words. In the article’s concept maps, note the arrows and words connecting ideas. Adding these takes more work but makes a big difference in the concept map acting as a robust learning tool.

- Use them as an expert map. A flowchart of a multi-week curriculum unit can help students see the big picture. “We’re going to talk about all of these things,” the teacher might say. “It’s going to feel random at points, but here’s how they all connect.” Sundar says it’s important to limit the map to big ideas and add detail as the unit proceeds.

- Teach students to use concept maps to supplement and sometimes replace notes. “Coming up with visual representations,” says Sundar, “kind of jumps over a lot of the need for lengthy explanations and paragraphs,” which helps them see the relationships between the big ideas.

- Use as a formative assessment. An effective strategy to check for understanding is presenting students with a partially filled-in concept map and have them complete it.

[“How and Why to Use Concept Maps”](#) by Jennifer Gonzalez and Kripa Sundar in *Cult of Pedagogy*, October 12, 2025; Gonzalez can be reached at gonzjenn@cultofpedagogy.com, Sundar at kripasunda@gmail.com. Sundar explains in more detail in her chapter in *Smart Teaching, Stronger Learning: Practical Tips from 10 Cognitive Scientists* (2025, Pooja Agarwal, editor).

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4. Supporting Students with Anxiety Disorder

In this article in *Communiqué*, graduate student Andrea Gonzalez Garcia (Loyola Marymount University) says that in elementary school, she was an A student with near-perfect attendance and never got in trouble, but secretly she was racked with anxiety – intrusive thoughts, shortness of breath, heart palpitations, and nausea. Finally, at age 12, she was diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder and OCD.

Garcia understands why the teachers and psychologists in her school paid more attention to students who acted out and had more visible signs of trouble, but she wishes they had noticed and helped her sooner. Some possible ways:

- Give quiet, anxious students classroom jobs.
- Engage them in casual conversations (without mentioning their shyness).
- Orchestrate small-group collaboration around assignments and projects.
- Within each group, assign roles so all students contribute.
- Use Universal Design for Learning to allow students different ways to show learning.
- Engage shy students in counseling sessions.

“Group counseling can be especially beneficial for students with anxiety as it provides a safe space to learn coping strategies or practice social skills,” says Garcia. “Remember that while students may seem to be thriving in school, they may be suffering in silence.”

“What I Learned As a Student with Anxiety” by Andrea Gonzalez Garcia in *Communiqué*, November 2025 (Vol. 54, #3, p. 6)

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5. Tough Love with Anxious Students

In this *Boston Globe* article, Alex Jordan (McLean Hospital and Harvard Medical School) and Ben Lovett (Columbia University) describe the case of a 10th-grader who is terrified of standing up in front of his classmates to give a presentation. His therapist recommends excusing him from oral reports and the school agrees. Jordan and Lovett demur: “As psychologists who’ve studied and treated anxiety for decades, we believe that this approach – eliminating whatever makes students nervous – is making the problem worse. Here’s why: anxiety feeds on avoidance.”

Excusing students from school activities they feel are stressful can convey two messages:

- The feared situation is psychologically dangerous.
- The student can’t withstand the distress.

“These messages increase anxiety,” say Jordan and Lovett. “By contrast, when students take on what they’d rather avoid, they learn that worst-case scenarios rarely materialize, that discomfort is survivable, and that anxiety diminishes with practice. Indeed, purposefully facing fears is the core of exposure therapy, the gold-standard treatment for anxiety disorders for over half a century.”

School is full of potentially stressful situations, and sometimes accommodations are appropriate. Providing extra testing time for students with reading disabilities helps them perform well despite their challenges. But anxiety is different; when students are allowed to avoid anxiety-producing experiences, it heightens their fears and robs students of the chance to develop important skills – for example:

- Timed quizzes teach performing under pressure.
- Oral presentations build confidence for participating in future college seminars.

- Group work and eating lunch with peers develops social skills for the workplace. “Through these everyday challenges, students develop their self-management skills and learn to get through life even when feeling uncomfortable,” say Jordan and Lovett. “Students are more capable than their anxiety tells them they are. It’s time to stop teaching them otherwise.” The authors recommend that school leaders take these steps:

- Educate all students about anxiety, including the all-important message that exposure is the key to thriving when things feel uncomfortable.
- With moderately anxious students, school counselors and psychologists should run groups using exposure and other effective strategies.
- For severely anxious students, provide intensive help from therapists and community health clinics, calibrating exposure and teaching new ways of thinking about and relating to their anxiety – always including a plan for removing accommodations as soon as possible.
- Encourage parents to not immediately give in to a child’s pleas to stay home on the day of a class presentation. “Children often learn from their parents’ example more than from their advice,” say Jordan and Lovett, “so parents should model in their own behavior a willingness to take on scary things.”

[“Schools Are Accommodating Student Anxiety – and Making It Worse”](#) by Alex Jordan and Ben Lovett in *The Boston Globe*, October 14, 2025; Jordan can be reached at aj@alexjordanphd.com, Lovett at bl2799@tc.columbia.edu.

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6. Timothy Shanahan on the Purpose of Running Records

In this online article, Timothy Shanahan (University of Illinois/Chicago) responds to a teacher’s question about the seeming contradiction between assessing students’ reading levels with a running record and obsessing about students’ independent/instructional/frustration levels. “You are correct that I believe it is a big mistake to try to teach most kids reading at their supposed instructional level,” says Shanahan. “I’ve come to believe that the instructional level is a device that results in both minimized learning and teaching.”

It’s also correct that he’s said it can be useful to collect information on students’ level of reading proficiency. “I admit that sounds at least a bit contradictory,” says Shanahan. “Why measure the instructional level if you aren’t going to use that to choose the books you are going to teach?”

His rationale: it’s helpful for teachers to know up front “how much difficulty a text may pose for their students.” Knowing the gap between classroom reading material and students’ reading levels tells teachers how much scaffolding and support students will need – for example, teaching vocabulary up front, having students read aloud before tackling comprehension questions, and choosing texts that are a good match with students’ background knowledge and interests.

“However,” says Shanahan, “keep your eyes open. Believe what you see day to day, rather than the initial test. If it says youngsters will struggle and they don’t (or vice versa), adjust your plan.”

How reliable are running records? The research is mixed, says Shanahan, and to get highly reliable data, a student has to read eight passages, which is not practical. The best strategy, he believes, is to have students read for three minutes from the class textbook and use their errors to get a rough estimate of their reading levels. Alternatively, the teacher might have students read three different passages for one minute each and get a sense of their reading speed and comprehension. Of course, a lot depends on a student’s background knowledge about what they are reading.

What about asking students comprehension questions after they do an oral assessment? Shanahan thinks it’s better for students to retell the gist of the text. An oral reading test is more reliable, he says, when students know they will be accountable for what they read. It’s a mistake, he adds, to put too much stock in how fast students can read.

Books have varying levels of difficulty, and there’s lots of variation in what students can read with fluency and comprehension. “The problem,” Shanahan says, “is that we are taking these levels – both of students and texts – too seriously and are using them to reduce opportunity to learn.” We need to focus on teaching kids how to read grade-level books and not waste time on testing regimes and misguided policing efforts that result in protecting kids from challenging books.

Informal oral reading tests, he concludes, can give teachers valuable insights on how hard instructional materials are for students – “not to identify the specifics of what may need to be taught, nor to hold kids back to some mythical optimal level, but to help the teacher to monitor and guide to success all students.”

[“Considering Running Records”](#) by Timothy Shanahan in *Shanahan on Literacy*, October 11, 2025; Shanahan can be reached at shanahan@uic.edu.

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7. How to Conduct an Effective One-on-One Meeting

In *Leadership Freak*, Dan Rockwell says regular one-on-one meetings with colleagues are all about relationships, growth, and results, and they can make a big difference in people’s morale and professional engagement. Some pointers:

- Be present. Don’t say, *Just let me finish this e-mail* when someone comes into your office. “Quiet your heart,” urges Rockwell. “Turn your mind toward others. Tell your face to relax. Remove distractions. Don’t wing it. Plan it.”

- Set the tone. “People watch for signs that you matter to them,” says Rockwell. Don’t say, *I’m slammed today; let’s get to it*, or *I need to cut our meeting short because I have an important report to finish*. Better to say something like, *I’ve been looking forward to our conversation*.

- Ask questions focused on them. One of Rockwell’s favorites is, *What’s working for you?*
- Focus responsibility on them. When someone presents a problem, ask, *What have you tried?* then, *How did that work?* then, *What would you like to try next?* “When issues require your involvement,” Rockwell suggests, “step up generously. Offer to help, but don’t do their job for them.”
- Monitor energy. It can be transformational to say something like, *I notice your energy just went up. What’s going on for you?* “People see themselves,” says Rockwell, “when they notice things that give them life.”

[“An Idiot’s Guide to One-on-Ones”](#) by Dan Rockwell in *Leadership Freak*, October 13, 2025; Rockwell can be reached at dan@leadershipfreak.com.

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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 early Tuesday (there are 50 issues a year). Every week there's a podcast and HTML version. Artificial intelligence is not used.

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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
Ed Magazine
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
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Independent School
Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy
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Language Arts
Language Magazine
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Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
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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