

Marshall Memo 123

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
February 13, 2006

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Quotes of the Week

"Many teachers teach the way they learned, and they're offended that the kids don't learn the way they did."

Eris Gruwell, teacher trainer (*Reading Today*, Feb./Mar. 2006 (Vol. 23, #4, p. 23))

"Every day, students are spending time in classrooms, either learning or not learning. And every day, changes can be made to improve the learning community in every class."

Ariela Rothstein, Massachusetts high-school senior (see item #1)

"Our theory is that teaching is rocket science. Teachers make a lot of really important decisions throughout the day."

Darlene Merry, Montgomery County Schools official (see item #2)

"The moral development of students does not depend primarily on explicit character education efforts but on the maturity and ethical capacities of the adults with whom they interact."

Rick Weissbourd, quoted in Benninga et al., *Kappan*, Feb. 2006 (Vol. 87, #4, p. 449)

"I kind of liked that test. Why don't you give us more tests like that?"

A student after a team testing experiment (see item #3)

"I've always loved you, Mrs. Starnes."

Mike to his long-ago sixth-grade teacher, Bobby Ann Starnes, at a recent reunion of the class she taught in Ohio in 1968, her first (*Kappan*, Feb. 2006, p. 477)

1. What's This? High-School Students Observing Their Teachers?

Two years ago, a group of students at Lexington High School in Massachusetts formed the Best Practices Club and, with the approval of their principal, department heads, and the teachers' union, began observing teachers' classes. They observed only teachers who volunteered, filling out a three-page protocol that they devised, and sat with teachers afterwards to go over their impressions and get the broader perspective of the lesson they saw. The protocol, which took the students several months of trial and error to develop, focuses on four major areas: student understanding, the student's role, the teacher's role, and the atmosphere in the classroom. Within those areas, student observers zero in on topics like the level of student participation, how the teacher checks in with students, and the way the teacher shows respect for students. (See below for details.)

After an initial round of observations, students met with seven teachers and shared best practices they had observed and sought teachers' suggestions for improving their observation tool. According to Ariela Rothstein, a senior who helped found the club, the teachers "spent an hour and a half enthusiastically sharing methods with each other as we students listened with astonishment to all the thought that went into making an excellent class so excellent. By the end of the meeting, we students hadn't said much about what we had been doing, but the teachers were thrilled and grateful to us for initiating and facilitating this kind of sharing among teachers. One teacher described this student-led experience as the 'best thing to ever happen at Lexington High School.'"

Encouraged by the success of this meeting, the principal approved a bold next step: a workshop for the entire faculty of 150 teachers. After an initial whole-group meeting, the staff broke into five groups, each facilitated by Best Practices students. A few teachers expressed mild irritation at students presuming to evaluate their teaching, but most were much more positive. Rothstein reports that the sessions buzzed with sharing of effective practices. "[I learned] excellent strategies in engaging students," said one teacher. "I like the way the personal connection of students and teachers kept being brought up. It's nice to remember how important that is." A common reaction was that this meeting was a "rare opportunity to share with peers." Teachers especially liked working with peers in other subject areas. After the meeting, 75 teachers expressed a willingness to be observed by Best Practices students and take part in sharing sessions in the future.

"The greatest value of Best Practices," concludes Rothstein, "may be perceptual: When teachers come to meetings facilitated by students, they realize that, yes, these particular

students may be unusual, but every day there are over a hundred informal observers in their classrooms. Every day, students are spending time in classrooms, either learning or not learning. And every day, changes can be made to improve the learning community in every class.”

Here is the full observation protocol developed by Best Practices students:

- Class:
- Date:
- How are students coming up with new ideas?
- How are students showing they understand?
- How are they asking related questions?
- At what levels are they showing understanding? Basic, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, Advanced
- What kinds of questions are they asking?
- How are students showing their involvement (paying attention, participating)?
- Describe the flow of the conversation (are students’ questions related to each other?)
- How does the teacher incorporate student comments into the flow of the discussion?
- Is the teacher supporting the discussion (posing questions, connecting comments, listening to students)?
- How does the teacher encourage students to develop their own ideas (including constructive criticism)?
- How is the teacher demonstrating respect toward students (in terms of the atmosphere)?
- What kinds of decisions are students able to make in the classroom?

To read a sample student observation report, go to the Best Practices website (<http://www.bestpracticeslex.org>), click on “observations,” and scroll down to “Honors Advanced Math.”

“Students as Coaches” by Ariela Rothstein in *Education Week*, Feb. 8, 2006 (Vol. 25, #22, p. 31-32), no free e-link available. Rothstein can be reached at ariela18@gmail.com.

2. Montgomery County’s Professional Development Plan

In this article in the National Staff Development Council’s periodical, *The Learning System*, Joan Richardson profiles Montgomery County, Maryland’s recent professional development efforts, which the district believes have been instrumental in raising higher student achievement and narrowing the racial/economic gap. The district has made a substantial investment of resources – three percent of the operating budget – and focused on six key principles:

- *Adopting a common language and framework for teaching* – The district requires teachers and supervisory staff to take Jon Saphier/Research for Better Teaching courses on teaching and learning. “Our theory is that teaching is rocket science,” said Darlene Merry, the district’s associate superintendent for organizational development. “Teachers make a lot of really important decisions throughout the day.” RBT staff also review teacher observation reports on a random basis to see if the design is being applied consistently.

- *Giving every school a staff developer* – These teacher trainers guide training experiences within each school, work with teachers to analyze student achievement data, and ensure consistent implementation of district policies.

- *Providing each school with a “bucket” of substitute time* – Every school has one or more building substitutes between October and April (depending on the number of students) to cover for teachers when they meet in teams, observe one another’s classrooms, or attend training.

- *Requiring individual professional growth plans* – Every tenured teacher must write a multi-year plan focusing on areas that need development. (A recent review of the district’s professional development plan found that many teachers felt these plans were “busy work” and didn’t contribute to their effectiveness in the classroom.)

- *Setting up a peer assistance program* – New teachers and teachers with performance issues get support from a mentor; the district employs 41 exemplary teachers in these roles, released from their classrooms for three years. In the case of an underperforming teacher who is not improving, the consulting teacher makes a recommendation to a panel of eight teachers and eight principals, and the teacher’s principal makes a separate recommendation. Of the 500 underperforming teachers who were assigned to Peer Assistance and Review between 2001 and 2004, 177 were dismissed, chose to leave, or did not have their contracts renewed. The comparable figure between 1994 and 1999 was one teacher.

- *Adopting a new teacher evaluation system* – The district crafted a new system based on the standards of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, driven by the belief that evaluation should be about helping teachers improve, not just finding fault. Principals note teachers’ competence in six domains of teaching and point them toward areas for improvement. Union president Bonnie Cullison said of the system, “I think this is fairly monumental. It’s time consuming but worth it because of what we get out of it.”

“Investing in People Pays Off” by Joan Richardson in *The Learning System*, Feb. 2006 (Vol. 1, #5, p. 1, 6, 7), no e-link available

3. Team Testing – An Alternative Assessment Approach

In this article in the February *Kappan*, three researchers identify test anxiety as a major concern in classrooms – something that prevents students from showing what they know and doing their best work. The authors suggest an antidote: “team testing.” Here’s how their system works: when it’s time to test knowledge and skills, the teacher divides students into heterogeneous groups of three or four. All students get a copy of the test and are assigned roles as the “reader” or “judges” (at intervals during the test, students switch roles). Students are given ground rules on appropriate discussion of the topic, appropriate answers to questions, effective cooperation among group members, and leaving enough time for discussion. If all students in a group agree on an answer (for example, Yes, this is a sentence fragment), they mark their papers and move on to the next question. If they can’t agree, each student checks the answer he or she thinks is correct and they move on. The teacher circulates throughout the test

to make sure students are following the rules. A variation on this system is to have students work in pairs, taking turns (on odd and even questions) being the “patient” and the “doctor,” with the latter doing a diagnosis of strengths and weaknesses of the other student’s answers.

The researchers report that students prefer this kind of testing (one said, “I kind of liked that test. Why don’t you give us more tests like that”) and show increased motivation and higher levels of performance, especially in the areas of creativity and critical thinking. They argue that in adult life, cooperation and teamwork are much more common demands than silent work.

The authors acknowledge some possible pitfalls to team testing, among them:

- The testing format can be manipulated by students – for example, one student can do all the work and the other can avoid being held accountable.

- Team testing could make low-achieving students dependent on peer support and verbal cues, making them less effective in conventional testing situations.

- Teachers could overuse the format, rather than making it an occasional change of pace.

- Team testing could be challenged by administrators, colleagues, parents, or even students. The authors have found that students who are most likely to be uncomfortable with team testing are high-achieving students who do well on traditional tests – but they say they know of no situations where such students’ grades were jeopardized by team testing.

To counteract these very real pitfalls, the authors suggest that teachers use this kind of testing only part of the time, and that during team testing, they patrol the classroom vigilantly to make sure students aren’t taking advantage of the situation. The researchers believe that if teachers heed these two cautions and give team testing a fair chance, it will change students’ attitudes toward testing, improve their performance and self-confidence, increase creativity and problem-solving skills, and possibly lead to better achievement on conventional tests. Here is their full list of team testing’s advantages:

- Learning occurs during testing time; students acquire and strengthen skills and knowledge as they work together.
- Students must demonstrate their knowledge of the subject matter.
- Negative feelings, fear, and test anxiety are greatly reduced.
- Low-achieving students are much better motivated and do better.
- Students use all facets of language (i.e., speaking, listening, reading, and writing).
- Students learn problem-solving skills from watching other students.
- Students with weak areas can learn from students who are stronger in those areas.
- Team testing fosters a sense of community (versus competition) among students.
- It creates a student-centered classroom atmosphere.
- Every student has specific responsibilities and plays an important role.
- When students are more actively engaged, they see the curriculum as more relevant.
- Students develop critical thinking skills as they share ideas, listen to others, discuss best answers, and make decisions.

“Team Testing for Individual Success” by Lee Hurren, Matt Rutledge, and Amanda Burcham Garvin in *Phi Delta Kappan*, Feb. 2006 (Vol. 87, #6, p. 443-447), no e-link available

4. Another Way to Assess Student Understanding

In this article in the February issue of *Middle Ground*, Ohio middle-school science teacher Beth Kloos describes her growing disillusionment with the pencil-and-paper science tests she had been giving for years, especially with the anxiety they provoke among her students. “[M]any students would just lay their heads on their desks and not care about the test at all,” she recalls.

So Kloos decided to try an alternative way of evaluating student understanding. At the end of a unit, she started giving students a rubric with escalating levels of work demanded. Here’s her scoring guide for a unit on simple machines:

SIMPLE MACHINES FINAL ASSESSMENT

Your project will be due Wednesday, January 22

To get a D, you must:

1. On a large sheet of paper, draw three types of each of six simple machines.

To get a C, you must:

1. On a large sheet of paper, draw three types of each of six simple machines.
2. Build or explain a complex machine with at least three types of simple machines in it.

To get a B, you must:

1. On a large sheet of paper, draw three types of each of six simple machines.
2. Build or explain a complex machine with at least three types of simple machines in it.
3. Take at least three of the machines in class and write a paragraph (5 sentences) on what simple machines are involved and how it helps us. Explain how it changes direction, force, or distance.

To get an A, you must:

1. On a large sheet of paper, draw three types of each of six simple machines.
2. Build or explain a complex machine with at least three types of simple machines in it.
3. Take at least three of the machines in class and write a paragraph (5 sentences) on what simple machines are involved and how it helps us. Explain how it changes direction, force, or distance.
4. Calculate the mechanical advantage of one machine.

Kloos gives students three days to complete the assessment, which is the same amount of time as the three days she had previously devoted to review and conventional testing (one day for a review sheet, one day for some kind of review game, and one day for the test itself). As the assessment proceeds, Kloos sits with students individually and goes over their work.

How is this approach working out? Kloos reports a dramatic improvement in her students’ motivation and participation in the assessment, with *every student* trying for an A.

She also gets much better results, which energizes her as a teacher: “I was motivated to help my students,” she says. “I was excited about my teaching.”

But Kloos reports that not all of her teaching colleagues have been thrilled with this approach, or with the “controlled chaos” in her classroom during each assessment. “Some teachers were angry,” she writes. “How would students ever learn to take tests if we all did this?” She assured them that not everyone had to use this approach and students would get plenty of practice taking conventional tests over the years. She continues to believe that this is a breakthrough idea. “I encourage you to try this in your own classroom,” she writes. “It is one of the most creative and motivating things I have done in my career. It is also one of the most rewarding. The students are engaged in their learning. They are in charge! They are motivated because they want to be successful...”

“Teaching Away from the Test” by Beth Kloos in *Middle Ground*, Feb. 2006 (Vol. 9, #3, p. 24-26), no e-link available

5. Jazzing Up Middle-School Science with Poems and Such

Nebraska middle-school teacher Bruce Hayden, Jr. believes in using creative writing and poetry to liven up his science classes. To alleviate the anxieties that writing poetry rouses in some students, Hayden sticks to simple forms of poetry and structures his assignments by having students generate word lists. Here are examples of a haiku and cinquain:

HAIKU

	<i>Scientific</i>	<i>Artistic</i>
Line 1 five syllables	Energy transfer	Majestic eagle
Line 2 seven syllables	Flows to predator from prey	Talons grasp captured salmon
Line 3 five syllables	Complex web of life	Surviving the day

CINQUAIN

Line 1 one word OR	name the topic or object	Cougar	Hare
Line 2 two words	describe or define the topic or object	Stealthy feline	Arctic white
Line 3 three words	express action about the topic or object	Pursuing, grasping, devouring	Dodging, dashing, fleeing
Line 4 four-word phrase	express feeling or effect of the topic or object	Survival depends on success	Survival depends on success
Line 5 one word	synonym for the topic or object	Predator	Prey

Hayden also has his students write obituaries for deceased life forms. Here’s one for a tree:

Oak, Mighty B., age 187 years. Omaha. Visitation daily at the Fontenelle Forest Nature Center, Bellevue. Mighty provided food and shelter for

innumerable creatures during his lengthy stay among us. He continually gave without complaint. Military service included rifle stocks in WWII and tent poles during the Korean Conflict. Even after death Mighty continues to contribute to his community. With the aid of countless decomposers, Might is slowly recycling the nutrients he so nobly used these many years. Future generations of living things owe their existence to Mighty's unselfish love. He is survived by a tree house in the Wilsons' yard and a dining room table in Kansas City.

Hayden also makes Latin name tags from students' names, has them create cartoons and graphic novels, and creates myths for things that are hard to visualize and understand (for example, "The Mythology of Photosynthesis").

"Creative Writing in the Science Classroom" by Bruce Hayden, Jr. in *Middle Ground*, Feb. 2006 (Vol. 9, #3, p. 35-33), no e-link available

6. Making the Most of External Partnerships

In this article in the February *Kappan*, two UCLA researchers sing the praises of partnerships and say that all schools should work to forge productive alliances with businesses, community agencies, universities, police departments, and other organizations. The major potential benefits:

- *Organizational* – External partners can help a school with its mission by adding expertise and knowledge to increase productivity and help solve problems.
- *Political* – "Partnerships provide credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of the community and other stakeholders," write the authors. This is especially true of partners that are well-established and have name recognition in the community.
- *Financial* – Partners can contribute hard cash or in-kind contributions that make a big difference to financially-challenged schools.
- *Curriculum* – A number of charter schools have enriched their curriculum offerings by taking advantage of external partners (for example, museums, universities, and companies).
- *Teacher professional development* – This is especially true with university partners, who can enrich teachers' offerings and provide direct or indirect professional development.
- *At-risk students* – They can benefit through direct tutoring and services or indirectly by being recruited for high-interest learning projects.

The authors conclude with three pieces of advice for schools seeking to cultivate external partnerships. First, they caution against agreeing to work with every partner who walks through the door. "Strong partnerships that sustain themselves over time," they write, "exist when the partner organizations and the schools share common goals or have common philosophical approaches to education."

Second, the authors say that the best partnerships are a two-way street where both sides benefit.

Finally, they say that partnerships are not static and don't last forever. Schools need to modify their agreements with partners as conditions change, and, if a relationship has outlived its usefulness and can't be strengthened, schools should not hesitate to terminate it.

“Improving Schools Through Partnerships: Learning from Charter Schools” by Priscilla Wohlstetter and Joanna Smith in *Phi Delta Kappan*, Feb. 2006 (Vol. 87, #6, p. 464-467), no e-link available

7. How Can We Make Every Child a Reader?

“It's a truism,” writes Massachusetts English teacher and academic dean Peter Gow in the current *Education Week*, “that the most academically successful children, whether success is measured by grades or by standardized-test scores, are those who read. All the SAT-prep courses in the world cannot bring a nonreading student to the scoring level of voracious, experienced readers whose eyes have passed over tens of thousands of pages because they enjoy, even crave, reading.”

And yet, Gow says, these kids are not usually lionized by their peers. “The children who both can and do read, nonstop, with pleasure, curiosity, and skill, occupy a strange place in our national pantheon. Because their endeavors tend to be solitary and to focus the child on inward things, these young super-readers are often regarded by peers as nothing but oddities – in the cruelest construction, geeks or nerds. They may be the teachers' pets, but few of their classmates are working to emulate them the way they might a star athlete, a trendy dresser, or the first kids in their elementary school to experiment with those risky behaviors that media culture represents as ultracool.”

How can this be changed? Gow has a radical suggestion: make fourth grade into an all-reading year – no math, no science, no social studies that year (okay, a little gym) – and make every classroom into a first-class library. By the end of the year, Gow believes, virtually all kids would have read a rich collection of great books and become enthusiastic readers.

“I challenge any school, anywhere, to give this a try,” he concludes.

“To Build a Nation of Readers” by Peter Gow in *Education Week*, Feb. 8, 2006 (Vol. 25, #22, p. 30-31), no free e-link available

8. “All the Research Says...”

In this guest editorial in *Education Gadfly*, researcher/writer/speaker Doug Reeves tees off on the current state of education research, which he fears is moving away from the gold standard of randomized experiments and relying too much on methodology that is “short-term, isolated, unscientific, and devoid of context.” Studies like these, says Reeves, mislead educators.

“Does Success for All or Open Court or Read 180 or, for that matter, McGuffey's Reader really work?” he asks. “Typical research that considers only the presence or absence of these programs is unlikely to provide answers. The programs are effective when partnered with effective teaching, accurate feedback, and meaningful leadership support. When these

contextual variables are absent, the programs usually accomplish little. Unfortunately, it is the rare research study that provides long-term observation of student performance, teaching practices, and leadership support, and also provides a systematic measurement of other contextual variables.”

Among the most important variables, concludes Reeves, is *time*. If school leaders don’t commit the time to proper implementation of a program – and don’t monitor time in classrooms – even the best programs will fail.

“The Mad, Mad World of Education Research” by Douglas Reeves in *Education Gadfly*, Feb. 9, 2006 (Vol. 6, #6)

9. Short Items:

a. “Value-added” under the microscope – In his regular *Kappan* research column this month, Gerald Bracey takes a look at the status of the “value added” method for assessing teacher impact. He has three words to describe it: preliminary, potential, promising. It’s far too early, he says, for anyone to evaluate a teacher based on value-added data; there are just too many variables that can’t be controlled, and the best-developed algorithms for calculating value added are still proprietary and can’t be examined by independent researchers. But this is an area of research that has great potential and promise.

“Research: Value-Added Models, Front and Center” by Gerald Bracey in *Phi Delta Kappan*, Feb. 2006 (Vol. 83, #87, p. 47-9), no e-link available. A recent Rand study on value-added is available for \$18 at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG158/>.

b. Setting up a Teachers as Readers group – This article in *Reading Today* sings the praises of these teacher-organized book groups that meet periodically (usually monthly, often at a teacher’s house) to discuss children’s books. “Joining a TAR group has made me a more critical reader,” says Iowa teacher Sylvia Thompson. Here are some tips for organizing a TAR group:

- Invite about ten teachers, librarians, administrators, parents, or community members.
- Select a facilitator.
- Set a regular meeting date, time, and place.
- Establish a way to decide what books will be read.
- Talk about listening and speaking skills and expectations.
- Read and enjoy!

A Teachers as Readers “starter kit” with a video, as well as the book *Teachers as Readers: Perspectives on the Importance of Reading in Teachers’ Classrooms and Lives* (IRA, 2003) are available at <http://marketplace.reading.org>

“Teachers As Readers: Practicing What You Teach” by Margriet Ruurs in *Reading Today*, Feb./Mar. 2006 (Vol. 23, #4, p. 22), no e-link available

c. Data-driven instruction weblinks – *Middle Ground* magazine lists the following links to sites that might be helpful in this area:

- Date-Driven School Improvement: <http://www.ericdigests.org/1997-3/data.html>
- School Improvement Through Data-Driven Decision Making:
<http://www.ncrel.org/datause>
- Data-Driven School Reform: Easier Said Than Done:
<http://www.middleweb.com/CSLVfinal/CSLVfinal3.html>
- Improving Teaching and Learning with Data-Based Decisions: Asking the Right Questions and Acting on the Answers: <http://www.ers.org/spectrum/sum01a.htm>
- On the Job: Data Analysts Focus School Improvement Efforts:
<http://www.nsd.org/library/publications/jsd/killion211.cfm>
- Driven by Data: What It's Like to Teach in the Age of Accountability:
http://www.educationworld.com/a_curr/curr414.shtml
- Digging Beneath the Surface of Assessment:
http://www.educationworld.com/a_issues/issues302.shtml
- Imagination and School Reform: <http://www.middleweb.com/HMcreativity.html>
- Taking Data to New Depths:
<http://www.nsd.org/library/publications/jsd/love254.cfm>

“Hot Links” by Brenda Dyck in *Middle Ground*, Feb. 2006 (Vol. 9, #3, p. 17)

d. History video clips – This new U.S. History website from Fun Productions has free downloadable video clips and original songs for elementary and middle-school students, free lesson plans and classroom activities for teachers, and educational research. Check out:

<http://www.findthefunproductions.com>

“History Comes Alive” in *Middle Ground*, Feb. 2006 (Vol. 9, #3, 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 36 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 scores of 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 (with occasional breaks; there were 50 issues in 2004-05).

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.

Website:

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- About Kim Marshall (including links to articles)
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Marshall Memo subscribers have access to the Members' Area of the website, which has:

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

Publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American School Board Journal
ASCD SmartBrief
Atlantic Monthly
Boston Globe
CommonWealth Magazine
District Administration
Ed. Magazine
EDge
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Update
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Educational Review
Jimmy Kilpatrick
Journal of Staff Development
Language Learner
Middle Ground
Middle School Journal
NASSP Bulletin
New York Times
New Yorker
Newsweek
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
Teacher Magazine
Teachers College Record
Theory Into Practice