

Marshall Memo 1018

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
January 8, 2024

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Quotes of the Week

“When we sing, read rhyming stories, or share rhymes, we help children hear and play with the smaller sounds of words.”

Jessica Ralli and Rachel Payne (see item #5)

“Most experts on coaching believe that the fastest way to get teachers to change is through video. Teachers can’t argue with what they see on video.”

Sharron Helmke (quoted in item #2)

“Rather than a trait to be acquired, leadership is a state to be activated.”

Hitendra Wadhwa (see item #4)

“Understand before you act. Approach an issue with heightened curiosity and fully explore it before making your move.”

Hitendra Wadhwa (*ibid.*)

“In the absence of discomfort, the entire enterprise of higher education becomes trite at best.”

Isabella Cho (see item #3)

“Experts say that getting enough sleep is one of the most important things we can do for our mental health.”

Christina Carol and Dana Smith (see item #7)

“Figure out if your anxiety is protective or problematic.”

Christina Carol and Dana Smith (*ibid.*)

1. Teacher Teamwork That Gets Results

In this article in *The Learning Professional*, retired superintendent/author Diane Zimmerman and James Roussin (Generative Learning) say that all too often, teacher teams have difficulty focusing on student work, learning from each other, and taking collective responsibility for student learning. Zimmerman and Roussin's research indicates that three key elements in PLCs successfully boost student learning: psychological safety, constructive conflict, and actionable learning.

• *Psychological safety* – Team members feel that they can take risks, make mistakes, and ask for help. This operates at four levels:

- Trust in self – I feel safe speaking my personal truths.
- Trust in relationships – I feel listened to and respected by my teammates.
- Trust in process – There are norms for taking turns, listening to all voices, and more.
- Trust in collective learning – Cycles of inquiry explore student successes and challenges and identify the most effective classroom practices.

“When any of these dimensions breaks down, teams tend to bog down,” say Zimmerman and Roussin. “When teams regularly monitor the four dimensions of trust, they increase their psychological safety, capacity to self-monitor, and self-regulate (and co-regulate) to maintain and repair trust.”

One way to establish team norms up front is to ask team members what they *don't like* about meetings and flip those into agreements on what collaboration will look like. Going forward, the norms should always be there, and any team member can speak up when there are problems – for example, “Time out. We need to balance voices in the room” or “We seem bogged down. Can someone give a summary of the key points on the floor?”

• *Constructive conflict* – Avoiding conflict and always striving for harmony can lead to groupthink, say Zimmerman and Roussin, which won't improve teaching and learning. There's going to be conflict; the trick “is staying open, neutral, curious, and interested... seeing disagreements as opportunities to learn.” Key skills include:

- Summarizing a disagreement so it can be discussed with less passion;
- Getting more comfortable hearing other perspectives and points of view;
- Intentionally drawing out differences in how colleagues think and perceive.

Teammates need to learn to be aware of personal triggers that derail productive discourse. Reframing those emotions into a neutral or positive approach to the problem. “I'm feeling anxious,” one person might say, then listen to how others react, and work together to resolve the issue.

• *Actionable learning* – To get better results with students, teams need to dive into kids’ learning difficulties, identify skill and knowledge gaps, and collectively identify new teaching strategies that produce better results. Key skills:

- Regularly assessing what’s working and not working with students;
- Challenging the status quo (for example, a mandated commercial program) and examining assumptions about current practices;
- The team organizing around more-effective practices.

Team members need to ask probing questions: *What do we know and what don’t we know? Why is this important? What might we do next?* If a teacher has learned a successful classroom technique, it needs to be shared – perhaps in a workshop, perhaps by colleagues observing that classroom.

[“Teacher Teams That Lead to Student Learning”](#) by Diane Zimmerman and James Roussin in *The Learning Professional*, December 2023 (Vol. 44, #6, pp. 66-70); the authors can be reached at dpzimmer@gmail.com and jim.roussin@gmail.com.

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2. Using Classroom Videos for Coaching Cycles

In this article in *The Learning Professional*, Joan Richardson describes the use of classroom videos by instructional coaches in the MyTeachingPartner-Secondary program (MTP-S). Here’s how it works:

- Coaches introduce teachers to a rubric that deconstructs classroom instruction.
- Coach and teacher agree on which aspect of the rubric will be the focus in a two-week coaching cycle – for example, teacher questioning or giving real-world examples.
- Teachers make a 30-minute digital video of their own instruction and upload it to a secure platform.
- The coach watches the video and chooses three short clips (30 seconds to 2 minutes) that show the teacher effectively engaging students.
- The coach sends a reflection e-mail for the teacher to consider before their next meeting.
- In a 30-minute meeting (in person or remotely) the coach and teacher watch the short video clips and discuss how the effective practices can be strengthened or expanded.
- The coach writes a summary of the conversation and an action plan for the rubric area that they decide to address in the next cycle.

This process has received high marks in two randomized control studies. The key ingredients seem to be: (a) focusing on effective classroom practices rather than areas for improvement, (b) using short video clips to give teachers a chance to step back and see themselves in action, (c) the structured nature of the program, including video recording, 30-minute coaching meetings, and two-week coaching cycles; (d) being job-embedded and time-efficient for teachers; (e) the focus on actionable next steps; and (f) coaching teachers “to home in on moments and interactions that may have seemed small but were actually significant,”

says Richardson. “Some of those moments revealed practices teachers wanted to do more of, and some less.” Several examples:

- One teacher noticed that when students raised their hands to answer a question, she was pointing at them rather than using their names. “When I changed and started doing that,” said the teacher, “and when I encouraged students to use each other’s names, that brought even more respect into the classroom.”

- Several teachers noticed how often their voices dominated the classroom and how their perspective took precedence. “I make connections to the real world all the time,” said a social studies teacher, “but are they my connections or are they adolescent connections? I started allowing kids to share their examples before I share mine... Real-world can mean so many different things to different people.”

- A coach commended a teacher for an especially effective beginning-of-class routine and encouraged her to introduce a similar routine at another part of her classes. “That was a very powerful moment of learning for her,” said the coach.

Using videos of teachers’ actual work with students was powerful. “Most experts on coaching believe that the fastest way to get teachers to change is through video,” said Sharron Helmke of Learning Forward. “Teachers can’t argue with what they see on video.” Centering coaching conversations on examples of effective teaching was another important part of the program’s success. “It was a mindset shift for us,” said one coach. “We weren’t there to fix something.” They hoped that mindset would ripple into how teachers interacted with their students, focusing on what they were doing right.

[“30 Seconds of Video Reinforces Teachers’ Strengths”](#) by Joan Richardson in *The Learning Professional*, December 2023 (Vol. 44, #6, pp. 56-60); Richardson can be reached at joan.richardson@comcast.net.

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3. The Role of Personal Identity in the Classroom

In this article in *Harvard Magazine*, Harvard student Isabella Cho (just selected as a Rhodes Scholar) describes a moment in a history class during her sophomore year. The question before students was which civic and political problems had increased gang violence in certain areas of Chicago. When a student raised her hand and prefaced her comment by saying she had lived in the Chicago area for 18 years, Cho recalls that the classroom dynamic changed: “Because she was the only person who identified as a long-time resident of the area, her perspective took on an air of heightened authority.”

The result, says Cho, was that she and others were less inclined to voice a counterpoint; that would come across as challenging the authority of the student who had spoken, even appear callous. The discussion continued in desultory fashion, with most students aligning with the view of the student from Chicago, and the class ended.

Reflecting on this, Cho wonders about introducing personal identity in such discussions, which happens frequently in her college classes. “We inhabit a zeitgeist that, often

with good reason, celebrates identity,” she says. “But is it always helpful to bring identity into a classroom? Is such an act intellectually rigorous?”

Cho interviewed a law and a humanities professor, both of whom discourage students from introducing personal stories into their classes. Of course, students have their own lives in mind as they read legal cases and Shakespeare, but bringing those experiences into discussions invites others to bring theirs, often with a desire to legitimize their own stances. The professors didn’t think that leads to the most thoughtful interchanges.

Good readers bring their “whole self” to what they read, said the humanities professor, but that doesn’t mean they should make premature, overly definitive, or moralizing judgments about a text. “Whether in law or humanities,” says Cho, “personal experience obviously matters – but it’s not always about *our* personal experiences.”

This debate is pertinent, she continues, because universities are being criticized for morphing from forums of open intellectual exchange to bastions of identity politics – being “woke.” This line of argument is caught up in partisan politics, but she believes it has “a grain of truth.”

In the humanities, Cho’s major, stories are central, but “identity represents a thorny question in storytelling, because great literature frequently involves – often demands – deep personal engagement.” That raises an important distinction: between “liking” a text – it resonates with one’s personal tastes and experiences – and recognizing that it is great literature. Not recognizing the difference, she says, makes the study of literature “at once very arrogant and very drab.”

This work makes me feel seen is a frequent student comment in Cho’s humanities classes. Everyone likes being seen, she says, including her: “I am appreciative when a text presents, in cogent and penetrating terms, an experience I had registered as being fundamentally my own. Such literature can help us feel, if only for a moment, less lonely.”

But if this means focusing only on writers whose identity is close to one’s own, the student’s intellectual experience is constrained. When Cho tells people she is studying literature, they often light up and ask if she likes works by certain Asian female writers.

“To ‘be seen’ in a work does not – or at least should not – make that work automatically good,” she says. “Yet in the conversations I have with peers, this is indeed often the formulation. The work makes me feel seen, therefore the work is good.”

This raises the related subject of trigger warnings – instructors alerting students to material that may disturb them because of their personal histories. One of Cho’s fellow students heard from professors about this issue: “They feel as though the trigger warning strips the art of its capability to shock the reader into understanding a sort of randomness or a multiplicity of possibility in life, which I think is really real,” he said.

There’s still plenty of intellectual liveliness at the college, Cho says, “What exists alongside it, though, is a diminishing willingness to place ourselves in positions of genuine intellectual precarity, in which we truly do not know what comes next. We present a sophisticated question and purport to consider it rigorously, all the while knowing what conclusion is on the horizon.”

It's uncomfortable to feel intellectually inept, she concludes, but students need to shed their desire to always feel impressively sharp and capable: "In the absence of discomfort, the entire enterprise of higher education becomes trite at best... The classroom is first and foremost about others. It is about strangers who are rendered vivid and urgent and total by the scholarship we immerse ourselves in. It is by suspending the 'I' in order to submit wholly, if only for a moment, to the world as seen by another that we commence that bizarre and astonishing process of change that earns the title of education. Not everything we learn turns wholly back to us."

["Is Pedagogy About Us?"](#) by Isabella Cho in *Harvard Magazine*, January-February 2024 (Vol. 126, #3, pp. 58-59)

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4. Activating Inner Leadership Potential in a Few Minutes

"Rather than a trait to be acquired, leadership is a state to be activated," says Hitendra Wadhwa (Columbia Business School, Mentora Institute) in this *Harvard Business Review* article. In everyday life, people's personalities and behavior can fluctuate depending on the context, says Wadhwa: "Someone may be extroverted in one situation, introverted in another; agreeable in one, disagreeable in another. That's why leadership is not a static trait – it is a dynamic one." Within every person, he believes, is an inner core, a space of highest potential, their best self, but it has to be tapped.

Studies have shown that when people are calm, attuned, and open – connected to that inner core – they're more likely to perform well. When they're emotionally upset, they tend to underperform. All too often, high-stakes situations bring out the worst in leaders. They approach the drama worried about what could go wrong, not about positive outcomes such as building trust, resolving conflict, inspiring colleagues. Under stress, they react in habitual, fixed ways, zeroing in on technical solutions rather than adapting to the needs and styles of the people in the room.

Wadhwa and his team have found that deliberately flipping this dynamic can produce much better results. That happens when leaders spend 5-10 minutes preparing for a high-stakes challenge and then visualizing a positive outcome – which is the way successful athletes warm up for games or performances. What works, when leaders have to resolve a conflict, get buy-in for an initiative, or create urgency for peak performance, is focusing on one or more of the "energies" we all possess: purpose, wisdom, growth, love, and self-realization. Action suggestions for each:

- *Purpose energy* – Committed to a noble cause:
 - Craft a compelling vision that inspires people to pursue the goal despite challenges.
 - Faced with an unexpected change or setback, find a way to reapply your core values.
 - Link colleagues' dearly held values to the goal.
 - Push, pull, pause, pivot – "When you run into resistance," says Wadhwa, "find a way to move forward by refining your idea and then presenting it again; shelving it if the costs

are too high; waiting for changes that might renew interest in it; or reimagining it altogether.”

- *Wisdom energy* – Calm and receptive to the truth:
 - Understand before you act. “Approach an issue with heightened curiosity,” he says, “and fully explore it before making your move.”
 - Find something true in what a resistor is saying and disarm them by affirming it.
 - Fusing warring positions can create a new synthesis that breaks an impasse.
 - Dial up positive emotions – mention a past success – and dial down negative feelings to bring out the best in people.
 - Direct emotional energy – for example, use a defeat to motivate a team to work with greater attention to detail.
 - Kick out distorted thoughts (*It was a total disaster*) so the team can see the situation more clearly.
 - Describe challenges, opportunities, and assignments in a way that brings out the best in people.
- *Growth energy* – Curious and open to learning:
 - Through growth mindset thinking, recognize people’s vast untapped potential.
 - Solicit advice from experts and stakeholders.
 - Swiftly acknowledge, apologize for, and correct mistakes.
 - Use setbacks and failures to get better, not bitter.
 - Anticipate challenges and plan how to adapt to them.
- *Love energy* – Connecting with those you work with and serve:
 - Appreciate positive qualities in people and situations.
 - Find common ground with others.
 - Create strong emotional bonds.
 - Attune yourself, without judgment, to the emotions and thoughts of others so they feel understood.
 - When communicating hard truths and tough decisions, bring a deep sense of caring.
- *Self-realization energy* – Centered in a positive spirit:
 - Spark joy with small, uplifting acts.
 - Step back from immediate events and focus on your core values.
 - Affirm a positive quality that colleagues already have.
 - Cultivate intuition and creative insights by getting into a relaxed frame of mind – perhaps by taking a walk or meditating.

“Losing touch with the five energies amid life’s whirlwind is natural,” says Wadhwa, “but rekindling them is within our reach. All we need to do is focus on a goal, open our hearts and minds to new possibilities, and select the right actions that will activate our inner core – that state from which remarkable performance arises.”

Wadhwa suggests picking which of these are appropriate to the situation at hand and preparing as athletes do. Then afterward (similar to athletes looking at game tapes), do a

postmortem to assess how well it went and what can be learned from it. “Even when things don’t turn out as desired,” he says, “this practice can produce valuable insights.”

[“Leading in the Flow of Work”](#) by Hitendra Wadhwa in *Harvard Business Review*, January-February 2024 (Vol. 102, #1, pp. 42-50); Wadhwa is at hw2114@gsb.columbia.edu.

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5. How Libraries Can Launch Preschoolers Into Reading

In this *School Library Journal* article, Jessica Ralli and Rachel Payne (Brooklyn Public Library, New York City) say the parents of preschoolers have lots of questions about the current push for phonics and decodable books. They want to know the best way to get their children ready for reading.

“While an understanding of phonics is important in reading instruction,” say Ralli and Payne, “it’s not the only skill needed to build strong readers.” Librarians’ decades-long focus on *Talk, Read, Write, Sing, and Play* (the Every Child Ready to Read principles) should continue to drive early literacy programming, they say, because they “directly support the development of oral language, phonological awareness (which will support later phonics instruction), vocabulary, and background knowledge.” Specifically:

- *Oral language* – Librarians should encourage parents to talk to their kids starting in infancy. In the library, adults should talk with students about books they’re checking out: “Yes, you’re right! That’s a big, brown, furry dog!”

- *Phonological awareness* – “When we sing, read rhyming stories, or share rhymes,” say Ralli and Payne, “we help children hear and play with the smaller sounds of words. If parents ask for decodable books for young children, it is fine to show them a few, but make sure they also go home with a stack of fun, engaging rhyming books and the lyrics to favorite story time songs, which they may enjoy even more. They will have plenty of time with decodable books when they begin reading instruction.”

- *Vocabulary* – Language-rich picture books presented orally expose children to words they don’t hear in everyday conversation, building oral language skills and personal word banks.

- *Background knowledge* – This is “essential for the development of strong readers,” say Ralli and Payne, “and libraries excel here.” Read-alouds are an opportunity to pause and explain new concepts in age-appropriate ways. Parents should be encouraged to check out fiction and non-fiction books and take advantage of museum-pass lending programs.

- *Loving books and seeing themselves as readers* – Young children’s attitude toward reading is a key to learning, the authors conclude, quoting Mollie Welsh Kruger of the Bank Street College of Education: “Be ready with those books kids can’t put down and can’t wait to get home and open up!”

“Preschoolers and the Science of Reading” by Jessica Ralli and Rachel Payne in *School Library Journal*, January 2024 (Vol. 70, #1, p. 17)

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6. Mental Health Tips for Stressed-Out Adults

In this *New York Times* article, Christina Caron and Dana Smith say that since the pandemic, “there has been a cultural shift in the way we talk about mental health.” Isolation and uncertainty helped people understand the centrality of emotional needs to well-being. Caron and Smith summarize some action steps from mental health professionals:

- *Sleep better.* “Experts say that getting enough sleep is one of the most important things we can do for our mental health,” report Caron and Smith.

- *Figure out if your anxiety is protective or problematic.* A moderate amount of anxiety is actually useful, they say, but if worry and fear are constant, accompanied by restlessness and a sense of fear and doom, it’s time to get help.

- *Stop the worry cycle.* Distract yourself from too much stressful rumination – try a word game, music, exercise, or block out 30 minutes to focus on a problem that needs attention.

- *Practice ‘five things tidying.’* “Your home doesn’t have to be perfect, but it should be livable,” say Caron and Smith. Make cleaning manageable by focusing one at a time on trash, dishes, laundry, things with a place, and things without a place.

- *Embrace gratitude.* Express it to people – or a higher power – whenever possible, by writing thank-yous and journal entries and giving hugs.

- *Be optimistic about aging.* A positive mindset about growing older can actually extend healthy lifespans, say Caron and Smith. Appreciate the benefits and pay attention to positive role models.

- *Participate in the arts.* Write a poem, sing, draw, color a mandala – and don’t worry about talent and perfection.

- *Look for a little bit of awe every day.* Get outdoors and look with fresh eyes. Pay attention to your senses. “Simply notice the sky,” say Caron and Smith. “It can be more restorative than you might expect.”

- *Minimize tech distractions.* People are constantly bouncing from one thing to another, and technology is a big part of the problem, say Caron and Smith. They recommend focusing on work projects for 15-minutes and then taking a very short break to check your device, gradually increasing the work periods to 45 minutes or more.

- *Take a deep breath.* Taking slow, deep breaths is one of the fastest, easiest ways to calm your mind and body. One breathing exercise that can be helpful is inhaling for four seconds, holding it four seconds, and exhaling for eight.

[“Resolve to Nurture Your Mental Health”](#) by Christina Caron and Dana Smith in *The New York Times*, January 2, 2024

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7. A Different Way of Arranging Students' Desks

In this *Edutopia* article, veteran Oregon high-school teacher Jay Schauer (now a mentor to other educators) says teachers should put as much thought into configuring students' desks as they do to planning lessons and assessments and nurturing relationships. If students' desks are in rows facing the front, all students have a direct view for whole-class presentations, but this arrangement is not conducive to group work. If desks are in groups, collaboration is easy but some students have their backs to the board.

A few years ago, Schauer stumbled on a way of arranging student desks that he believes solves these problems. Groups of four desks are arranged in the shape of a L, with two students on each side (here's a [diagram](#) and the article linked below has a photograph). This way, all students can see the front of the room and can also converse with their group mates. Two additional advantages: the teacher can more readily monitor students' work, and can stand in the interior angle of one of the L-shaped groups and have direct eye contact with all four students.

Schauer used this arrangement from that point on, having students shift to rows for tests and into square-shaped groups for labs, projects, or games. He's experimented with ways of assigning students to different positions in each L-group, shuffling the composition of groups by having students in a designated position shift to a different group, doing jigsaw activities by regrouping students by position, and calling all students from a particular position together for a briefing and then having them return to their groups to share the information.

["A Desk Layout Alternative to Rows and Circles"](#) by Jay Schauer in *Edutopia*, January 2, 2024
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8. Recommended Poetry Books and Verse Novels

In this *Language Arts* feature, Mary-Kate Sableski and five colleagues list their selection of notable poetry books and verse novels for 2023 (click the article link for cover images):

STEM Connections:

- *Mother Winter* by James Christopher Carroll
- *Ice Cycle: Poems About the Life of Ice* by Maria Gianferrari, illustrated by Jieting Chen
- *At the Pond* by David Elliott, illustrated by Amy Schimler-Safford
- *Odder* by Katherine Applegate
- *Out of This World: Star-Studded Haiku* by Sally Walker, illustrated by Matthew Trueman
- *Behold Our Magical Garden: Poems Fresh from a School Garden* by Allan Wolf, illustrated by Daniel Duncan
- *Counting in Dog Years and Other Sassy Math Poems* by Betsy Franco, illustrated by Priscilla Tey

Dreams and Imagination:

- *Patchwork* by Matt de la Peña, illustrated by Corina Luyken

- *You Are the Loveliest* by Hans Hagen and Monique Hagen, translated by David Colmer
- *Marshmallow Clouds* by Ted Kooser and Connie Wanek, illustrated by Richard Jones
- *Mother Goose Goes to India* by Kabir Sehgal and Surishtha Sehgal, illustrated by Wazza Pink
- *Room for Everyone* by Naaz Khan, illustrated by Mercè López

Fostering Resilience:

- *A Seed in the Sun* by Aida Salazar
- *Blood Brothers* by Rob Sanders
- *The Road to After* by Rebekah Lowell
- *The Hope of Elephants* by Rawson Amanda Hill
- *The Door of No Return* by Kwame Alexander
- *Maya's Song* by Renee Watson, illustrated by Brian Collier

[“Bringing the NCTE 2023 Notable Children’s Poetry Books and Verse Novels Into the Classroom”](#) by Mary-Kate Sableski, Junko Sakoi, Rebecca Kai Dotlich, Ryan Colwell, Deanna Day, and Joseph Pizzo in *Language Arts*, November 2023 (Vol. 101, #2, pp. 130-136)

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If you have feedback or suggestions, please e-mail kim.marshall48@gmail.com

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and other educators very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 54 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, writer, and consultant lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 60 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through more than a hundred articles each week, and selects 5-10 that have the greatest potential to improve teaching, leadership, and learning. He then writes a brief summary of each article, pulls out several striking quotes, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the Memo to subscribers every Monday evening (with occasional breaks; there are 50 issues a year). Every week there's a podcast and HTML version as well.

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- A free sample issue

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- The current issue (in Word or PDF)
- All back issues (Word and PDF) and podcasts
- An easily searchable archive of all articles so far
- The "classic" articles from all 20 years

Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

All Things PLC
American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
AMLE Magazine
ASCA School Counselor
ASCD SmartBrief
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
English Journal
Exceptional Children
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Ed (formerly Ed. Magazine)
Harvard Educational Review
Independent School
Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Kappan (Phi Delta Kappan)
Knowledge Quest
Language Arts
Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance)
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Principal
Principal Leadership
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Social Education
Social Studies and the Young Learner
Teachers College Record
Teaching Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Journal of the Learning Sciences
The Language Educator
The Learning Professional (formerly Journal of Staff Development)
The New York Times
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Time
Urban Education