Marshall Memo 515

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
December 16, 2013

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"I've never worked so hard and taught so little."

> A Connecticut teacher on her principal's requirement that she produce evidence of her performance in each area of the teacher-evaluation rubric

"Every student's brain is teeming with things they already know; things they understand; things they *think* they understand (which may actually be misconceptions); things they're interested in; and things they're *not* interested in."

> Jessica Hockett and Kristina Doubet in "Turning on the Lights: What Pre-Assessments Can Do" in *Educational Leadership*, Dec. 2013/Jan. 2014 (Vol. 71, #4, p. 50-54), http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership.aspx

"[A] failure to focus inward leaves you rudderless, a failure to focus on others renders you clueless, and a failure to focus outward may leave you blindsided."

> Daniel Goleman (see item #1)

"Mathematics is the language of the cosmos, and the basic human thirst for knowledge led to the discovery of its beauty and connectedness to everything around us. Therefore, it is certainly not the math that is boring, but the way we present it to students."

> Seth Blum in a Dec. 10, 2013 letter to *The New York Times* responding to the editorial two days earlier titled "Who Says Math Has to Be Boring?"

"Treat people well. Don't mislead them. Don't be prickly. Don't say things that are aggravating. Try to be as agreeable as you can be. Try to be helpful rather than harmful. Try to cooperate."

> Sandra Day O'Connor, former U.S. Supreme Court Justice, answering the question, "What's the secret to developing strong, decades-long working relationships with peers?" in a *Harvard Business Review* interview (December 2013, Vol. 91, #12, p. 144)

1. Three Things Leaders Need to Focus On

"A primary task of leadership is to direct attention," says emotional-intelligence guru Daniel Goleman (Rutgers University) in this thoughtful *Harvard Business Review* article. "To do so, leaders must learn to focus their own attention… an inward focus, a focus on others, and an outward focus… [A] failure to focus inward leaves you rudderless, a failure to focus on others renders you clueless, and a failure to focus outward may leave you blindsided." Mastering these three is especially important in organizations where leaders are flooded with information and demands on their time. As Nobel economist Herbert Simon put it, "a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention."

• *Focusing on yourself* – Self-awareness is the starting point of emotional intelligence, says Goleman. First, it means listening to your "gut" – your intuitive sense of what's right and wrong – but balancing that with real-world data. A study of investment bankers in the U.K. found that those who were most successful balanced intuition with analytics. Second, it means putting together a coherent picture of our authentic selves. "To be authentic is to be the same person to others as you are to yourself," says Goleman. "In part that entails paying attention to what others think of you, particularly people whose opinions you esteem and who will be candid in their feedback." That may involve actively reaching out for feedback, since not everyone tells us what we need to hear.

A third aspect is what Goleman calls "cognitive control" – being able to resist temptation and distraction, stay focused on a goal, and "stay calm in a crisis, tame their own agitation, and recover from a debacle or defeat."

• *Focusing on others* – The key to not being clueless in relationships is empathy – cognitive empathy (being curious about and able to understand another person's perspective); emotional empathy (being able to feel what someone else feels); and empathetic concern (being able to sense what another person needs from you). Studies have shown that managers' empathy skills tend to degrade as they rise up through the ranks, so it takes a concerted effort to keep all three types of empathy working well.

• *Focusing on the wider world* – "Leaders with a strong outward focus are not only good listeners but also good questioners," says Goleman. "To sustain the outward focus that leads to innovation, we need some uninterrupted time in which to reflect and refresh our focus… First we prepare out minds by gathering a wide variety of pertinent information, and then we alternate between concentrating intently on the problem and letting our minds wander

freely… (That's why so many fresh ideas come to people in the shower or out for a walk or a run.)"

"The Focused Leader" by Daniel Goleman in *Harvard Business Review*, December 2013 (Vol. 91, #12, p. 50-60), no e-link available

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2. The Value of Keeping Teams Together

In this *Harvard Business Review* article, Robert Huckman (Harvard Business School) and Bradley Staats (University of North Carolina) cite evidence from a number of different fields that team performance improves when team members work together over time. "Team familiarity – the amount of experience individuals have working with one another – can influence how a group performs," say Huckman and Staats. In most cases, the less team turnover, the better the results.

This goes against many managers' intuitive sense that teams need to be shuffled to shake things up, prevent staleness, and ensure fresh thinking. But team stability can increase trust and productivity. Huckman and Staats studied an orthopedic surgeon who was able to perform far more knee replacement operations much more quickly than other doctors in his hospital – with better outcomes and fewer complications. The key factor was that he consistently worked with two teams of nurses and anesthesiologists and their familiarity with each other made it possible to pioneer methods that made such speed and success possible.

Huckman and Staats cite positive results when teams in corporations, hospitals, the military, airliners, professional basketball, and consulting organizations work together for extended periods of time. Why? They believe five key factors are involved:

• *Coordinating activities* – Teams whose members have different specialties are sometimes inefficient because of poor communication, conflict, and confusion. "Members new to each other simply don't understand when and how to communicate," say Huckman and Staats. "Familiarity can help a group overcome this obstacle; once a team has learned when and how to communicate on one project, it can carry those skills over to the next."

• *Learning where expertise lies* – Each individual brings knowledge to the team's task, but it takes time to learn who has useful information.

• *Responding to change* – Teams have to respond to changing circumstances and new demands, and familiarity provides a common platform from which members can adapt and meet new demands.

• *Integrating knowledge to innovate* – "Innovative solutions typically come from new combinations of existing knowledge," say Huckman and Staats. "Because familiarity helps team members share information and communicate effectively, it makes them more likely to integrate knowledge and come up with coherent, innovative solutions."

• *Capturing value* – In a stable, cohesive team, "Each member's performance is dependent on that of the others," say Huckman and Staats. This means the loss of an individual won't do grievous harm to the productivity of the group. It's also possible that a valuable

employee considering another job offer might decide to stay because of the warm embrace of the team.

What are the implications of these findings for managers? The authors recommend that leaders chart how often people work together and in what ways and use that information to maximize team consistency over time.

Huckman and Staats acknowledge that the research on teams is relatively new and there are some unanswered questions. Is there a difference in the impact of consistency between routinized tasks (such as knee replacements or piloting an airliner) versus work that requires more creativity and innovation? At what point are there diminishing returns because a team has been together *too* long? And are there situations (brainstorming, for example) where bringing in a new team member will bring new insights that will lead to greater productivity?

"The Hidden Benefits of Keeping Teams Intact" by Robert Huckman and Bradley Staats in *Harvard Business Review*, December 2013 (Vol. 91, #12, p. 27-29), no e-link available

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3. How Google Helps Its Managers Go From Good to Great

In this *Harvard Business Review* article, David Garvin (Harvard Business School) says that in Google's early days, engineers questioned the value of managers [in the same way that some teachers question the value of their administrators]. Google engineers "believed that management is more destructive than beneficial, a distraction from 'real work' and tangible, goal-directed tasks," says Garvin. After experimenting with a flat organizational structure, Google realized that it needed managers for some key functions, but decided to keep their number to an absolute minimum. The typical manager has 30 direct reports – a deliberately high ratio to prevent micromanagement and provide space for engineers' innovation and decision-making.

As the company grew, Google set up Project Oxygen to analyze what its best managers were doing, agree on a shared vocabulary, and create a survey to evaluate managers. A highly effective team leader, Oxygen found:

- Is a good coach.
- Empowers the team and does not micromanage.
- Expresses interest and concern for team members' success and personal well-being ("Engineers hate being micromanaged on the technical side, but they love being closely managed on the career side," said one manager).
- Is productive and results-oriented.
- Is a good communicator – listens and shares information.
- Helps with career development.
- Has a clear vision and strategy for the team.
- Has key technical skills that help him or her advise the team.

Google managers are evaluated semiannually by their direct reports on those characteristics with questions like these:

- My manager delivers difficult feedback constructively.

- My manager gives me actionable feedback that helps me improve my performance.
- My manager does not micromanage (get involved in details that should be handled at other levels).
- My manager regularly shares relevant information from his/her manager and senior leadership.
- My manager helps me understand how my work impacts the organization.
- My manager has regular one-on-one talks with me.
- My manager has the technical expertise to effectively manage me.
- My manager talks about all aspects of career development – not just promotions.
- My manager has had meaningful discussions with me about my career development in the past six months.

Managers who score low in particular areas are required to engage in professional development – for example, managers who do poorly on vision are helped writing vision statements for their teams and bringing the ideas to life with compelling stories, and managers with low scores in coaching are given pointers on delivering personalized, balanced feedback. Managers care about their scores and Google-wide data show steep improvements among those who initially scored low.

"How Google Sold Its Engineers on Management" by David Garvin in *Harvard Business Review*, December 2013 (Vol. 91, #12, p. 74-82), no e-link available

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4. A Formula for Student Motivation

(Originally titled "Minds on Fire")

In this article in *Educational Leadership*, author Kathleen Cushman describes the research she's done on what sparks motivation in teenagers. She's boiled it down to eight conditions under which students get inspired:

- I feel okay.
- It matters.
- It's active.
- It stretches me.
- I have a coach.
- I have to use it.
- I think back on it.
- I plan my next steps.

Under these conditions, says Cushman, students "experience a rush of feeling when they start to understand some hard, new thing – and they want more of it. Teachers feel it, too. Kids sit up straight; something shifts in their attention, in their voices. Maybe our teaching has taken them by surprise. Maybe we're noticing and building on their stories and their strengths. Students differ in countless ways, so there's no single way to draw them into a given challenge. But when something we try lights the fires in their minds, we can harness that energy to inspire excellent work."

"Minds on Fire" by Kathleen Cushman in *Educational Leadership*, December 2013/January 2014 (Vol. 71, #4, p. 38-43), http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership.aspx; Cushman can be reached at kathleencushman@mac.com.

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5. Combining Flipped Classrooms with Mastery Learning

(Originally titled "Flipping for Mastery")

In this article in *Educational Leadership*, Jonathan Bergmann and Aaron Sams (high-school chemistry teachers and advocates of flipping) note that Benjamin Bloom's mastery learning theory is difficult to implement because of two logistical issues:

- How can teachers deliver direct instruction on new material when students are all over the place in terms of prior knowledge and achievement?
- How can teachers make the time to create multiple versions of assessments so that students can take them on subsequent attempts to achieve mastery?

Bergmann and Sams believe that recent technological advances solve both problems – if teachers use a "flipped-mastery" model. Online videos make it possible for students to learn new content outside the classroom and at their own pace (even catching up with months of missed work if they enter a classroom midyear). And new learning management systems and online quizzing modules (such as Moodle, BlackBoard, Canvas, My Big Campus, Schoology, Pathwright, Quia, and Haiku Learning) make it much easier for teachers to create multiple iterations of assessments.

Here is how Bergmann and Sams recommend planning and implementing a curriculum unit:

- Break the unit into learning objectives (for example, *Being able to calculate using the combined gas law*).
- Create the videos and problem sets or decide on the textbook segments needed to learn each chunk of material.
- Decide on required activities that students need to complete – for example, hands-on experiments, inquiry-based labs, teacher demonstrations, and online simulations.

Bergmann and Sams created short videos (about 15 minutes long for their tenth graders) for most objectives, required students to watch the videos outside of class, and then followed up in class with worksheets, hands-on activities, and lots of interaction.

Does this seem like too much work? Bergmann and Sams say they already had most of the worksheets and activities from years of conventional chemistry teaching, and they don't recommend creating a video for every objective – for example, atomic theory was too abstract to be explained in a video. But they believe there's value in teachers making their own videos, because "students recognize that their teacher is taking the time to 'teach' them."

How does this continuous-progress approach deal with the tyranny of pacing guides and marking periods? At first Bergmann and Sams set up a curriculum calendar, telling students what they needed to accomplish each week – but slower learners weren't mastering content and were falling behind. "We almost gave up because of this," say the authors. Then

they hit upon a solution: they reorganized objectives to front-load the most essential material, and saved the nice-to-know objectives for the end of each grading period. That way, students who fell behind missed only the material that was less essential.

On the issue of assessments and grading, Bergmann and Sams decided on two layers to meet their school's requirements and still remain true to their model:

• Real-time checks for understanding – "The most important part of our assessment system was simple conversations we had with our students," they say. "When students felt they had mastered an objective, they approached us with their evidence, which usually included their worksheets, experiment write-ups, and notes from their interaction with an instructional video." The teachers quizzed students and were able to judge their mastery quite quickly and redirect them if they weren't there yet.

• Summative tests – Students were able to take unit assessments as many times as necessary to demonstrate mastery. Using Moodle as their learning-management system, Bergmann and Sams generated multiple versions of each assessment, with the computer randomly pulling from item banks so that each test was unique. Teachers followed up with students individually after tests and discussed items they got wrong. "We realized that these face-to-face interactions take a lot of time," they say. "But we were able to take the time by shifting all the low-level content delivery out of the classroom."

Bergmann and Sams feel strongly that flipped classrooms should not be used to reduce the number of teachers by replacing them with videos. "In the flipped-mastery model, teachers are even *more* valuable," they say. "Their time in the class is maximized. The teacher's main role is not to be a disseminator of knowledge, but rather a facilitator of learning."

"Flipping for Mastery" by Jonathan Bergmann and Aaron Sams in *Educational Leadership*, December 2013/January 2014 (Vol. 71, #4, p. 24-29), http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership.aspx; Bergmann can be reached at jon@jonbergmann.com; for other articles by the authors, see Marshall Memo 403 and 457.

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6. Standards-Based Grading Takes Hold in an Iowa District

(Originally titled "Redesigning Grading – Districtwide")

In this helpful article in *Educational Leadership*, Iowa educator Matt Townsley describes the frustration he felt as a high-school math teacher with his district's grading system. For example, if a student got a B, did that mean:

- The student understood 85 percent of the concepts?
- The student understood 100 percent but didn't turn in 15 percent of assignments?
- The student understood 90 percent but turned in one assignment late?
- The student understood 75 percent but did a few extra-credit crossword puzzles?

Townsley decided to revise his grading system based on two axioms: first, report learning targets rather than assignments, assessments, and behavior; and second, value what students learn over when they learn it. Instead of recording grades for worksheets, quizzes, homework, and tests, he kept track of students' current level of understanding on a 4-3-2-1 scale, revising

grades if there was improvement (or regression). Students and parents could log into the class website and track progress, and final grades were based on mastery of the content. Students who did poorly on assessments were encouraged to do additional work and take another assessment, at which point their grade reflected what they attained.

Townsley's principal supported these changes, and the following year a group of teachers formed a study group and standards-based grading spread within the high school and into the district's middle school.

But having different grading systems in different classrooms caused problems, and when Townsley took on a district leadership role, he realized that the district needed a consistent system and orchestrated a series of discussions, which culminated in a new policy:

- Teachers' grade-book entries counting toward the final grade will be limited to course or grade-level standards (i.e., classwork and homework don't count).
- Extra credit will not be given at any time.
- Students will be allowed multiple opportunities to demonstrate their understanding of classroom standards, including retakes and revisions.
- Teachers will use multiple points of data, emphasizing the most recent, to determine grade-book entries, and will be able to provide evidence for their grades.
- Students will have multiple opportunities to practice standards independently and get feedback on homework and other class work.

How did it go? There was some resistance and some implementation bumps, but at the end of the 2012-13 school year, 75 percent of high-school students said they agreed or strongly agreed that, "Overall, I have an understanding of where I am in my learning and the areas in which I need to continue to learn." Townsley says there was also a shift from students asking "How do I improve my grade?" to "Can you help me better understand this standard?"

"Redesigning Grading – Districtwide" by Matt Townsley in *Educational Leadership*, December 2013/January 2014 (Vol. 71, #4, p. 24-29), http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership.aspx; Townsley can be reached at matt.townsley@gmail.com.

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7. Using Authentic Historical Texts to Implement the Common Core

In this forceful article in *Education Week*, Sam Wineburg (Stanford University) says that one of the best ways to teach the nonfiction English language arts Common Core standards is through the social studies curriculum. But *not* using "that 1,000-page behemoth known as a history textbook," he says. The following Common Core standards suggest a very different approach:

- Students must learn to "integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats."
- Students should "assess the strengths and limitations of sources."
- They need to "attend to and interrogate the date and origin" of information.

- Students should learn to evaluate authors' claims by "corroborating or challenging them with other information."

"Teaching students to contend with this complexity by using the homogenized prose of the textbook is like training swimmers to survive a raging sea but never letting them out of a wading pool," says Wineburg. "That approach sets them up to drown… Traditional pedagogy prepares students to meet the challenges of a world that no longer exists." He believes that social studies teachers can no longer hand off literacy responsibilities by saying, "I'm not a reading teacher." In fact, there are three ways reading high-quality historical material can contribute to the laudable goals of the Common Core:

• *Rich variety* – An important key to adolescent literacy is exposing students to a well-chosen, varied diet of texts, mixing topic, genre, style, and levels of difficulty. "Adolescents become fluent readers when their horizons are broadened," says Wineburg. "The documentary record – a trove of letters, diaries, secret communiqués, official promulgations, public speeches, and the like – confronts readers with varied styles and textures of language that push the bounds of literacy. It is this rich textual fare that students most need."

• *Close reading* – When reading historical texts, students need to slow down. "Decoding a 17th-century lyric poem by John Donne requires the toolbox of symbolism, rhyme scheme, inversion, and theme," says Wineburg. "But different tools are needed to parse the Lincoln-Douglas debates." For example, Lincoln's statement that "the Negro is not my equal in many respects, certainly not in color, perhaps not in moral or intellectual endowment…" leads superficial readers to accuse him of racism. But a close reader notices the word "perhaps." In an era in which the innate inferiority of African-Americans was commonly accepted, Lincoln's "perhaps" signaled that he was open to a different interpretation. "History demands that we think about the meaning of words not to us 150 years later, but to the people who actually uttered them," says Wineburg.

• *Judgment* – Now that "any kook with an Internet connection claims historical expertise, separating truth from falsehood is not a luxury, but an essential quality for discharging the duties of citizenship," says Wineburg. "Today, when information bombards young people from all sides, the question is not where to find it, but once found, whether it should be believed."

"Steering Clear of the Textbook" by Sam Wineburg in *Education Week*, Dec. 11, 2013 (Vol. 33, #14, p. 36, 30), www.edweek.org

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8. The Debate on How to Teach Reading in the Common Core Era

In this *Education Gadfly* article, Kathleen Porter-Magee examines four debates swirling around the implementation of Common Core ELA standards:

• *Close reading* – In 2011, David Coleman, the lead author of the new standards, challenged teachers to ratchet up the complexity of classroom reading material and get students to plunge directly into the texts rather than pre-teaching background knowledge and vocabulary. Three elements are essential to this approach: (a) choosing appropriately complex

texts that are worthy of close reading; (b) sequencing texts to build students' content knowledge and vocabulary; and (c) guiding students with questions that get them to analyze the author's words rather than their own experiences and opinions. There's been a lively debate about this over the last two years, and Coleman has backed off a little, acknowledging that pre-teaching can be helpful in some circumstances, as long as it's targeted and brief and the focus is on getting students into the text for close, careful reading.

• *Knowledge first* – E.D. Hirsch and other advocates of the importance of content knowledge insist that "teaching content is teaching reading" – that once students master decoding, the best way to improve comprehension is by teaching a coherent, content-rich curriculum in history, science, literature, and the arts. Is this vision in conflict with Coleman's? Porter-Magee thinks not. In fact, she cites the Common Core as advocating a "content-rich curriculum" and systematically building students' knowledge as an integral part of K-12 education – in marked contrast to the approach taken by basal reading textbooks with their decontextualized literature and content passages.

• *Skills and strategies* – In a blog post in October 2013, Grant Wiggins pushed back on what he called Hirsch's "one-note samba about reading," saying that students need explicit, focused instruction in certain reading skills. Wiggins says test results reveal that U.S. students are "consistently terrible at identifying main idea and author purpose… The results reveal over and over again that students cannot identify the key assumptions and conclusions – the main ideas that shape the text. They have great difficulty distinguishing key facts in the text from the inferred idea; they are too literal in their reading." But Wiggins acknowledges the importance of content, and Porter-Magee believes effective, appropriate skills-and-strategies instruction is entirely compatible with an emphasis on content – and with close reading.

• *Just-right books* – Porter-Magee is critical of programs that assess students' reading levels and get them reading texts in their "zone of proximal development" – not too easy, not too difficult. "Instruction then focuses not on the text *per se* but rather on teaching comprehension skills and strategies that will help students understand the book they've chosen and (presumably) help propel them into increasingly complex texts." Students' reading levels vary tremendously depending on their prior knowledge and motivation, and there's no underlying knowledge curriculum. This approach, used by the Fountas and Pinnell Leveled Literacy Intervention and Lucy Calkins's Teachers College Reading and Writing Workshop and marketed by Heinnemann, is "content-free, text-neutral, and skills-focused," says Porter-Magee, and is unlikely to prepare students for the kind of reading they need for college and career success.

"An Update on the Common Core Reading Wars" by Kathleen Porter-Magee in *The Education Gadfly*, Dec. 12, 2013 (Vol. 13, #47),
http://www.edexcellence.net/commentary/education-gadfly-weekly#56438

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9. Ways of Using Technology in Classrooms

(Originally titled "Teaching Above the Line")

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Doug Johnson (a district technology director in Minnesota) describes some of the ways technology is being used in classrooms. The bottom line, he says, is how effectively computers, tablets, e-books, online texts, Moodle courses, and other devices and platforms are helping students learn what they are supposed to be learning. In a sidebar, Johnson presents four levels of technology use in classrooms (Puentedura, 2013), all of which can be appropriate in different situations:

Transformation:

• Redefinition: Technology allows for the creation of new tasks, previously inconceivable.
• Modification: Technology allows for significant redesign of tasks.

Enhancement:

• Augmentation: Technology acts as a direct tool substitute, with functional improvement.
• Substitution: Technology acts as a direct tool substitute, with no functional change.

"Teaching Above the Line" by Doug Johnson in *Educational Leadership*, December 2013/January 2014 (Vol. 71, #4, p. 24-29), http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership.aspx; Johnson can be reached at doug0077@gmail.com.

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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.marshall48@gmail.com

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 43 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 64 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).

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Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
AMLE Magazine
ASCA School Counselor
ASCD SmartBrief/Public Education NewsBlast
Better Evidence-Based Education
Center for Performance Assessment Newsletter
District Administration
ED Magazine
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Education Update/Curriculum Update
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Elementary School Journal
Essential Teacher
Go Teach
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Educational Review
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Journal of Staff Development
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Knowledge Quest
Middle School Journal
NASSP Journal
NJEA Review
Perspectives
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Responsive Classroom Newsletter
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Teacher
Teachers College Record
Teaching Children Mathematics
Teaching Exceptional Children/Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The District Management Journal
The Language Educator
The Learning Principal/Learning System/Tools for Schools
The New York Times
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Time
Wharton Leadership Digest