Marshall Memo 1100

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
August 18, 2025

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"We shape our tools, and thereafter they shape us."

John Culkin (quoted in item #3)

"The first draft is the most important part in terms of human involvement because it establishes the intention behind the expression. If a student comes to me with a text that has been generated by an AI, we have nothing to talk about, because we cannot discuss what it was they want to say, because they have yet to say anything. Synthetic text production is a performance of writing, not writing itself… Without an underlying idea, the words have no importance and very little genuine meaning."

John Warner in *More Than Words: How to Think About Writing in the Age of AI* (Basic Books, 2025)

"When ChatGPT strings together its tokens in the form of syntax, it is not wrestling with an idea. It is arranging language. There is no intention behind the expression. There is no objective in mind other than each word makes sense next to what comes before and after it relative to the original prompt. It is a technical marvel that this process produces text that seems to be the product of thought, but we shouldn't confuse that process for the kind of thinking humans do.

John Warner (*ibid*.)

"Book banners may seek to limit children's books based on their definition of what is 'good' or 'bad' for children. But with subject matter tackled in a developmentally appropriate way, many topics that parents and teachers have historically struggled to explain to children are now being addressed deftly by some of the best storytellers in the field."

Betsy Bird (see item #10)

1. Social Class Divergence in the "Post-Literate" World

In this *New York Times* article, journalist Mary Harrington says that cellphones, social media, and the shift away from reading whole books disproportionately harm those at the lower end of the economic scale. She likens it to the impact of junk food: "As ultra-processed snacks have grown more available and inventively addictive, developed societies have seen a gulf emerge between those with the social and economic resources to sustain a healthy lifestyle and those more vulnerable to the obesogenic food culture… Obesity has become strongly correlated with poverty."

Long-form literacy – the habit of reading extended texts – is hard work and literally mind-altering, says Harrington. "It rewires our brains, increasing vocabulary, shifting brain activity toward the analytic left hemisphere, and honing our capacity for concentration, linear reasoning, and deep thought. The emergence of these traits at scale contributed to the emergence of free speech, modern science, and liberal democracy."

The kind of thinking engendered by digital devices couldn't be more different. Optimized for distraction, designed to be addictive, smartphones work against nuance and thoughtful reasoning, says Harrington, pushing us toward skimming, hopping from one short text to another, and watching enthralling short-form videos. "The result," she says, "is a media environment that seems like the cognitive equivalent of the junk food aisle and is every bit as difficult to resist as those colorful, unhealthy packages."

Why would there be a social class impact to cellphone addiction? Because there is a historic correlation between literacy and poverty, says Harrington. Less-advantaged students more often enter adolescence with lower skills, and are more susceptible to the siren song of digital media. A recent study found that lower-SES teens are spending two hours more a day on their devices than their more-affluent peers, resulting in less-developed working memories, processing speed, attention levels, language skills, and executive function.

Meanwhile, advantaged teens are more likely to attend schools and live in homes that are stricter with online time. News reports about Bill Gates and other tech titans limiting their own children's screen time are telling. "The class scissor here is razor sharp," says Harrington. "A majority of classical schools are fee-paying institutions. Shielding your kids from device overuse at the Waldorf School of the Peninsula will set you back $34,000 a year at the elementary grades."

True, some states are trying to level the playing field with bell-to-bell cellphone restrictions, but will these bans be enforced in schools with large classes and less-effective

discipline – and will overstretched working-class parents be able to resist the temptation to let devices keep their kids occupied?

"The ascetic approach to cognitive fitness is still niche and concentrated among the wealthy," says Harrington. "But as new generations reach adulthood having never lived in a world without smartphones, we can expect the culture to stratify even more starkly. A relatively small group of people will retain, and intentionally develop, the capacity for concentration and long-form reasoning. A larger general population will be effectively post-literate – with all the consequences this implies for cognitive clarity."

And what does that portend? Harrington fears America will be "more tribal, less rational, largely uninterested in facts or matters of historical record, moved more by vibes than cogent argument, and open to fantastical ideas and bizarre conspiracy theories… This post-literate world favors demagogues skilled at code-switching between the elite language of policy and the populist one of meme-slop. It favors oligarchs with a good social media game and those with more self-assurance than integrity. It does not favor those with little money, little political power, and no one to speak up for them."

"Thinking Is Becoming a Luxury Good" by Mary Harrington *The New York Times*, August 3, 2025

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2. GenAI Shifting from "Butler" to Thought Partner to Sparring Partner

In this *AI EduPathways* article, Mike Kentz says that over the past year, lots of people have moved from thinking of GenAI tools as a helpful servant to a "thinking partner," putting its impressive horsepower to work for collaborative brainstorming, getting feedback, and solving problems. "We've been led to believe that AI is smarter than us," says Kentz, "that it can navigate between different disciplines and provide 'good advice' or ideas on any subject."

Not true! While GenAI is impressive at pattern matching and pulling information from the seemingly bottomless database on which it's been trained, there's a lot it doesn't know – and it sometimes makes stuff up to fill the gaps. A human thought partner "brings experience, wisdom, and judgment to the collaboration," says Kentz. But if you ask a psychologist friend for advice on a legal problem, they'll tell you it's not an area of expertise. A chatbot will forge ahead, feigning wisdom and experience.

The bots have another problem, he says: sycophancy. They seem to have a desperate need to be liked and will agree with everything you say, even flatter you. This is not the best partner for brainstorming and solving problems!

Kentz suggests another way to use GenAI: as a backboard, a mirror, a sparring partner. Here's a prompt: *Ask me questions to better understand the problem and potential solutions*. "I can attest that this strategy works incredibly well," he says. It forced him to think, to better understand the task, to have a back-and-forth dialogue that challenged him and moved his thought process along. In sparring mode, a chatbot has these characteristics:

- It's not there to be liked and doesn't want to be your friend.
- It wants to test you, push you, challenge you to make sense of your ideas.

- It keeps you on your toes, makes you aware of weaknesses in your position.
- It's about developing your skills, not being your buddy.
- It develops your subject-matter expertise and metacognition.

"Keeping up with AI is *hard*," Kentz concludes, "like, *really hard*. That's the greatest educational value of AI, not using it as a tutor, an accelerated productivity tool, or even a thought partner. Using it as a test… That's what we need to teach young people. That's what we all need to do. That's AI literacy, AI fluency, and metacognition in action."

"From Thinking Partner to Sparring Partner: A Better Way to Use AI" by Mike Kentz in *AI EduPathways*, July 8, 2025

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3. Using ChatGPT for Conversation Practice Learning a Language

In this *Review of Educational Research* article, Feifei Wang, Alan Cheung, and Ching Sing Chai (The Chinese University of Hong Kong) and Amanda Neitzel (Johns Hopkins University) report on their meta-analysis of research on students learning another language by conversing with an AI chatbot. The researchers lead off with a quote from John Culkin: "We shape our tools, and thereafter they shape us," which sums up their assessment of how new AI educational technologies are influencing classroom instruction, in this case, language learning.

The overall finding: students conversing in natural language with ChatGPT had a positive effect on learning (effect size 0.484) compared to non-chatbot instruction. The researchers make these observations:

- A big advantage of chatbot conversationalists was their infinite patience and the anywhere/anytime availability of individualized AI instruction.
- Chatbot conversations for language learning worked much better with mobile devices than using a web-based interface.
- The success of chatbot conversations was influenced by clear learning goals, students' educational level, their language skills, the interface design, and interaction capability.
- Beginning language learners felt motivated to converse with a chatbot, but their accents often kept the chatbot from recognizing what they were saying.
- Teachers played a key role in helping students get the most out of their chatbot conversations.

"In the current era of AI," conclude Wang et al., "teachers assume a critical role to integrate the technology to benefit students by making quality pedagogical decisions, helping students become active investigators, and raising students' ethical awareness regarding the use of chatbots."

"Does Chatting with Chatbots Improve Language Learning Performance? A Meta-Analysis of Chatbot-Assisted Language Learning" by Feifei Wang, Alan Cheung, Amanda Neitzel, and Ching Sing Chai in *Review of Educational Research*, August 2025 (Vol. 95, #4, pp. 623-660); Wang can be reached at ffwang@link.cuhk.edu.hk.

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4. Daniel Willingham on One Way to Prevent GenAI Cheating

In this online article, Daniel Willingham (University of Virginia) says he's skeptical of the transformational potential of generative AI for schools. He cites some recent tech developments that were going to *change everything*: one-to-one laptops, smartboards, MOOCs, open educational resources, flipped classrooms. "I mean, we have Kahoot," he says, "but whether it's all been a net positive is at least open to debate."

What about students having GenAI write their essays – and in some cases take their exams? This is definitely a problem, says Willingham, but we must not give up assigning out-of-class writing. "ChatGPT can't kill the school essay," he says, "because it's too useful to us." That's because writing in-depth papers on meaningful topics is the best way to ensure that students engage in cognitive work.

AI-detectors won't solve the problem, Willingham believes, and students have found workarounds to being required to write on Google Docs: they can get AI to write the essay and then re-type it, adding local color and typos.

Willingham sees a way out: teachers conferencing with students – sitting with each one and having them explain and defend their ideas and the choices they made organizing and putting an essay together. The teacher can ask, *What are you trying to do here?* or *Tell me more about that*. In a one-on-one conference, a student can't fake it with a paper that was written by a chatbot.

"In addition to providing more-focused feedback that's more likely to be attended to," says Willingham, "you can also respond to the student's emotional needs. You can encourage those who struggled, better explain a grade to an angry student, assure a student who thinks poor performance means they don't belong in your class, or persuade the just-tell-me-what-you-want student to take a risk."

Won't conferencing take more time than conventional grading? Not so, says Willingham. His approach is to read students' papers for the first time as he sits with them and explain in real time how he's responding to their thinking. "See how the last sentence of this paragraph made me think you were going to talk about *this*? But then the next sentence you talk about *that*…" This is much more effective than trying to make that point 48 hours later.

How have students reacted to this approach? They find the conferences stressful, says Willingham, but also "extraordinarily useful." Since the arrival of chatbots, he's requiring conferences in all his classes.

"How ChatGPT Might Inadvertently Improve Student Thinking" by Daniel Willingham, July 8, 2025; Willingham can be reached at willingham@virginia.edu.

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5. Low Participation in an Online Tutoring Program in California

In this *Education Gadfly* article, Jeff Murray reports on a study of online tutoring in the Aspire charter schools in California. At the beginning of the spring semester in 2021, all 7,000

middle- and high-school students in the network got personal electronic devices and free access to an on-demand virtual tutoring platform that covered content in core academic subjects. The schools talked up the platform in a variety of ways: print flyers and mailers, e-mails, and text messages appealing to social norms, accountability, and the value of each academic subject. Students could access the platform 24/7.

The Aspire schools tried three additional strategies to get students using the tutoring platform. Here's what the researchers found for each of those during one semester, compared to a control group that didn't receive outreach:

- Direct reminders sent only to the student – participation in tutoring was similar to the control group.
- Direct reminders sent only to parents – a few students signed up initially, but few followed up and participation was similar to the control group.
- Direct reminders to the student and parents – more students used the platform, but participation was only 8.6 percentage points higher than the control group and students attended 1.4 tutoring sessions – still very disappointing participation.
- Control group – only 19 percent of students ever accessed the platform, attending an average of 4.3 tutoring sessions.

Three other findings from the study: there was little evidence of tutoring having an impact on student achievement; students who most needed academic support were least likely to engage with tutoring; and several individual schools had higher engagement with the tutoring platform.

"There are no data provided on how much the charter network spent to implement this tutoring service," says Murray, "but whatever it was, the bang for the buck was clearly just a whimper. Despite the promise of tutoring, Aspire students reaped almost no benefit from it."

The researchers' conclusion: "Helping the students who need it most will require a coordinated effort between educators and families to provide students with embedded, personalized learning opportunities." Recovering Covid-19 learning losses can't be optional, says Murray, "and all adults must be on board with requiring additional work to get it done. To which we could add, at five years and counting, time is quickly running out."

"Can Targeted Communications Boost Student Participation in Opt-In Tutoring?" by Jeff Murray in *Education Gadfly*, April 24, 2025

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6. Effective Use of Rubric Self-Assessment in a 7th-Grade Language Class

In this *Edutopia* article, Oregon seventh-grade Spanish immersion teacher Kate Good says that having students use a rubric to self-assess before tackling an assignment is helpful – but she's made three improvements to get the process working even better:

• Tweaking the rubric so it was more specific and kid-friendly – Initially, her rubrics used technical, teacher-oriented language – for example, the Proficient level for accuracy: *I make hardly any linguistic errors, and they rarely interfere with communication*. With help

from her instructional coach, Good's rubric for understanding figurative language read like this (the Proficient level): *I underline the two things being compared/I explain in a detailed and correct way what the metaphor means*.

• Getting students actively involved in understanding the assignment – Good has students read the assignment silently and jot on a sticky note *One thing I understand is*… and on a different sticky note, *A question I have is*… Students post their notes on the board and Good peels them off , projects them on a document camera, and talks through students' questions with the whole class. She's found that this saves answering a lot of individual questions.

• Nudging students to strive for better performance – Good has found that middle-school students tend to play it safe with their self-assessments, opting for middling performance when they can do better. She's found that by using specific rubric descriptions and pushing students with descriptions of grade-level expectations – *This is where we expect you to be as seventh graders* – students expect more of themselves and do better.

What if students' rubric self-scoring is off-base? "Student self-assessment does not have to be flawless to be functional," says Good. "A student might not know that their interpretation of a metaphor is misguided, and they may mark their explanation as correct or proficient… Nevertheless, students are still well-served by making their best attempt at self-assessment because it encourages them to reflect on their work."

"Teaching Self-Assessment in World Language Classes" by Kate Good in *Edutopia*, August 11, 2025

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7. Family Games to Develop Children's Social-Emotional Skills

In this article in *Usable Knowledge*, Lory Hough reports on a study in the *Journal of Child and Family Studies* on helping parents involve their children in games that develop empathy, gratitude, and diligence. When the activities were made available to parents online, more than 90 percent who responded said they engaged in their chosen activity at least once a week, and more than 80 percent said they followed most or all of the steps. Parents also reported that they communicated better with their children and learned a lot about developing character strengths in their children.

Below are the games described in the original article, which any school or community organization can send to families via e-mail or a website. It is important, the researchers note, to follow up with reminders and nudges.

Empathy – the ability to share, understand, and care about the experiences of others:

- *Capture Caring Moments*: Parents look out for caring things their child does throughout the week, take a real or pretend photo, and then praise their child for being a caring or helpful person, rather than praising the behavior alone.

- *Just Like Me*: Parents ask their children to think about someone they regard as different or who gets excluded in some way, to think about how that person is "just like me," and to look for things they have in common.
- *Story Reflections*: Parents read, watch, or listen to any medium with their child, and then with the help of a list of questions about a character's feelings, relate the conversation to their own, and their child's, life experiences.

Gratitude – a moral emotion and process of appreciating others and what one has:

- *Gratitude Conversation Cards*: Parents write or print out conversation cards and with their child choose cards to spark meaningful conversations. Parents are encouraged to prompt their children to think about the "why" behind their gratitude.
- *Gratitude Scavenger Hunt*: Parents talk about why they want to try a gratitude scavenger hunt ("we're doing this because we want to start noticing things to be grateful for more often"), and once everyone has completed their hunt, players are asked to share and dive deeply into the "what" and "why" behind their gratitude.
- *Show Your Thanks*: Parents ask their child to think about someone who has helped or made their life better in some way, motivate their child to create a thank-you message for that person, and then help them send or express it (ideally by reading it aloud).

Diligence – the ability to work hard and persevere through challenges:

- *Learning from Mistakes*: Parents tell their child (or family) that they want to make it a habit to learn from mistakes and ask their child to talk about what they learned from their mistakes.
- *Stick With It*: Everyone agrees to "try a hard thing" for the next few weeks, with guidelines like "it's something you genuinely want or need to do" and "it's a goal you can accomplish." There are suggested prompts for how to encourage each other throughout.
- *Try It as a Hero*: Parents start by asking their child to think of someone (fictional or not) they admire who does not give up, even when times get tough. Then, when they notice their child struggling with something hard, they remind their child of that person (or character); parents also share about their own struggles and who they look up to for inspiration.

"Can Character Building Start with a Click?" by Lory Hough in *Usable Knowledge*, July 2, 2025. The full *Journal of Child and Family Studies* article, "Online Strategies to Promote Children's Empathy, Gratitude, and Diligence: A Feasibility Study Exploring Parent Implementation" by Meredith Rowe, Richard Weissbourd, Milena Batanova, and Naalia Hudani, June 11, 2025, is available here.

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8. Does Looping Affect Student Behavior?

In this *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness* article, NaYoung Hwang (University of New Hampshire/Durham) reports on her study of Indiana elementary students

who had the same teacher for two consecutive years. She looked at data on almost a million students and 36,173 teachers from 2010 to 2017.

The study found that looping was associated with lower rates of student suspensions and expulsions. This positive result was larger for students with disabilities and those who had discipline problems in earlier grades. "My findings," says Hwang, "provide evidence that increasing student-teacher familiarity is a viable way to decrease the rate of exclusionary discipline. Repeated student-teacher matching likely allows teachers to build close relationships with students and their parents, which may contribute to a reduction in exclusionary school discipline." It's probable, she says, that looping may reduce teacher burnout since discipline problems are among the most stressful parts of the job.

Hwang notes three limitations in her study. First, the data didn't distinguish between voluntary looping (perhaps at the request of a parent or teacher) and involuntary looping (where the whole class moved up with a teacher). Second, the study didn't unpack the causes of improved disciplinary outcomes: was it changes in student behavior, teacher perceptions, or teacher-parent relationships? And third, although she didn't find better outcomes for students of color, another study did, and Hwang encourages further research on that question.

"The Benefits of Familiarity: The Effects of Repeated Student-Teacher Matching on School Discipline" by NaYoung Hwang in *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, July-September 2025 (Vol. 18, #3, pp. 507-528); Hwang can be reached at nayoung.hwang@unh.edu.

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9. A Cost-Benefit Analysis of the Reading Program Descubriendo la Lectura

In this *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness* article, Geoffrey Borman and six colleagues report on their study of Descubriendo la Lectura, the Spanish language adaptation of Reading Recovery designed to boost the reading proficiency of struggling first graders through daily one-on-one tutoring sessions with trained teachers for 12-20 weeks.

The researchers gathered data from 24 schools across four states and concluded that DLL was "relatively cost effective" compared to other Spanish-language and English-language literacy interventions. The average cost was $7,120 per student (in 2022 dollars), with 90 percent of that going to teacher and teacher leader costs. Effect sizes ranged from 0.23 to 0.90.

Descubriendo la Lectura had several key characteristics, all associated with positive impact on student achievement:

- Delivered three or more times a week;
- Staffed by well-trained teachers;
- Emphasizing data use to inform student progress and tailor instruction;
- Using high-quality instructional materials aligned with classroom content, allowing tutors to reinforce regular classroom instruction;
- Students working with the same teacher for 12-20 weeks;
- A teacher relationship that fosters a strong understanding of each student's specific learning needs;

This kind of intervention is especially important, conclude Borman et al., in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has resulted in many students falling behind.

"The Costs and Impacts of Descubriendo la Lectura: Evidence from a Multisite Experimental Study" by Geoffrey Borman, Iliana Brodziak de los Reyes, Trisha Borman, Scott Houghton, So Jung Park, Bo Zhu, and Alejandra Martin in *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, July-September 2025 (Vol. 18, #3, pp. 739-768); Geoffrey Borman can be reached at gborman@asu.edu.

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10. Recommended Children's Nonfiction Books on Challenging Topics

In this *School Library Journal* article, Betsy Bird says the number of nonfiction books for children has been steadily growing since the first Newbery and Caldecott winners in that category in 1922 and 1938 respectively, and the 2001 launch of the Robert F. Silbert Informational Book Medal for the "most distinguished informational book."

"Our children are growing up in a world in which basic truths can be distorted with ease," says Bird. "Avoiding difficult subject matter, including the lives of people who weren't always saints, doesn't help. It can delay knowledge until another source, possibly an inaccurate one, provides the information instead. Better that we take advantage of the wealth of great children's book authors and researchers, and let them tell these stories in the best possible way." She highlights these books (click the article link below for cover images and brief descriptions):

- *Nina: A Story of Nina Simone* by Traci Todd
- *The Poet and the Bees: A Story of the Seasons Sylvia Plath Kept Bees* by Amy Novesky
- *Song for Jimi* by Charles Smith Jr. (about musician Jimi Hendrix)
- *Tricky Vic* by Greg Pizzoli (about Victor Lustig, the con man who "sold" the Eiffel Tower twice)
- *The Great and Only Barnum* and *Presenting Buffalo Bill* by Candace Fleming
- *JIM!* by Jerrold Connors (about gay picturebook artist James Marshall)
- *Outside In and the Inside Out* by Emmy Kastner (about closeted *Frog and Toad* creator Arnold Lobel)
- *Unspeakable: The Tulsa Race Massacre* by Candace Boston Weatherford
- *Glitter Everywhere* by Chris Barton
- *Death Is Stupid, Divorce Is the Worst,* and *Not My Idea: A Book About Whiteness* by Anastasia Higginbotham
- *Torpedoed* by Deborah Heiligman (the sinking of the *SS City of Benares* as it evacuated children from England during World War II)
- *Thirty Minutes Over Oregon* by Marc Tyler Nobleman (another World War II story)

"Book banners may seek to limit children's books based on their definition of what is 'good' or 'bad' for children," says Bird. "But with subject matter tackled in a developmentally appropriate way, many topics that parents and teachers have historically struggled to explain to children are now being addressed deftly by some of the best storytellers in the field… Books

for kids are also for their parents, who may not have had the tools to talk about a particular subject."

"Keeping It Real: Authors Tackle Complex Topics in Children's Nonfiction" by Betsy Bird in *School Library Journal*, August 2025 (Vol. 71, #8, pp. 37-39)

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

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Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

All Things PLC
American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
AMLE Magazine
ASCA School Counselor
ASCD SmartBrief
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
Ed Magazine
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
English Journal
Exceptional Children
Harvard Business Review
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
Language Magazine
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