

Marshall Memo 506

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education

October 14, 2013

In This Issue:

1. [The strengths of the autistic mind](#)
2. [The downside of value-added evaluation of teachers](#)
3. [Robert Marzano on using learning as part of teacher evaluation](#)
4. [What should principals look for in blended classrooms?](#)
5. [Increasing rigor for below-level secondary-school students](#)
6. [Three ways to use writing in content-area classes](#)
7. [School libraries get with the times](#)
8. [What kind of knowledge makes science teachers more effective?](#)
9. [Using children's books to enhance mathematics](#)

Quotes of the Week

“...frequent school-based diagnostic assessments to inform instructional practices.”

One of four key factors in the success of Finland's schools, according to Helen Janc Malone in “Looking Beyond Our Borders for School Improvement Ideas” in *Education Week*, Oct. 2, 2013 (Vol. 33, #6, p. 26-27), www.edweek.org

“The library's resources have changed, but not its mission: teaching people to effectively access information to meet their needs.”

Doug Johnson (see item #7)

“When children make mistakes, our job should not be to spin those losses into decorated victories. Instead, our job is to help kids overcome setbacks, to help them see that progress over time is more important than a particular win or loss, and to help them graciously congratulate the child who succeeded when they failed.”

Ashley Merryman in “Losing Is Good for You” in *The New York Times*, Sept. 25, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/25/opinion/losing-is-good-for-you.html?_r=0

“I have begun to realize that there is a big difference between editing a student's paper and giving useful feedback.”

A California teacher on grading students' hard-copy papers (see item #4)

“Numerous studies have demonstrated that multitasking degrades performance while simultaneously promoting an ‘illusion of competence’...”

David Helfand in “One Thing at a Time, Please” in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Oct. 4, 2013 (Vol. LX, #5, p. B10), <http://bit.ly/1bSiPOt>

“[N]inth-grade students in most need of a qualified math teacher are least likely to have one.”

Jason Hill and Ben Dalton in “Student Achievement and Out-of-Field Teaching” in *Educational Researcher*, October 2013 (Vol. 42, #7, p. 403-405), <http://bit.ly/1bSj5ge>

1. The Strengths of the Autistic Mind

In this important article in *Time*, Temple Grandin and Richard Penek say that “intelligence” varies depending on how it’s measured. If the test measures something that could be learned only through social interaction – what to do with a sealed, addressed, stamped envelope found on the street – people with autism usually do poorly. But if the test depends only on nonverbal information – arranging blocks into designs – only 5 percent of people with autism are labeled low-functioning and one-third score very well.

Grandin and Penek list three strengths that people with autism generally have. They aren’t saying that autism is a great thing – just that “if we can recognize, realistically and on a case-by-case basis, what an individual’s strengths are, we can better determine the future of the individual – a concern now more than ever, as the rate of autism diagnoses reaches record levels.” Here’s their list of positive attributes:

- *Bottom-up thinking* – “People with autism are really good at seeing details,” say Grandin and Penek – for example, seeing something that’s hidden in a picture or, in Grandin’s case, seeing the paper cup or hanging chain that will spook a herd of cattle. The other side of the coin is that people with autism aren’t good at seeing the forest for the trees. They have “local bias” and “weak central coherence.”

- *Associative thinking* – Walking through the United Airlines terminal in Chicago, Grandin looked up at the glass roof and immediately thought of the greenhouse at her university, the Crystal Palace from the 1851 World’s Fair in London, a botanical garden, Biosphere 2, and then the turrets of the Hoover Dam. She says that her brain works like a search engine: “If you ask me to think about a certain topic, my brain will generate a lot of hits. It can also easily make connections that will get off the original topic pretty fast and go pretty far afield.”

- *Creative thinking* – Creativity has been defined as “a sudden, unexpected recognition of concepts or facts in a new relation not previously seen.” Grandin and Penek say that being autistic “makes a certain kind of creativity more likely to arise. See enough trees and you’ll eventually make out the forest. But the forest that the autistic brain winds up seeing might not look the same as the forest that the neuro-typical brain sees.”

“I’m certainly not saying we shouldn’t work on deficits,” concludes Grandin. “But the focus on deficits is so intense and so automatic that people lose sight of the strengths... For

me, autism is secondary. My primary identity is as an expert on livestock. Autism is part of who I am, but I won't allow it to define me. Some people's difficulties are simply too severe for them to ever have the opportunities I have. But for so many people on the spectrum, identifying their strengths can change their lives. Instead of only accommodating their deficits, they can cultivate their dreams."

"What's Right with the Autistic Mind" by Temple Grandin and Richard Penek in *Time*, Oct. 7, 2013, no free e-link available

[Back to page one](#)

2. The Downside of Value-Added Evaluation of Teachers

In this troubling *Teachers College Record* article, Leo Casey (Albert Shanker Institute) analyzes the way the New York City Department of Education used value-added student test data to evaluate the effectiveness of 18,000 teachers based on their students' state test scores from 2007 to 2010. The Teacher Data Reports were initially going to be used in a low-stakes manner – to help teachers develop as professionals – but the DOE changed its mind and began to use them as one factor in tenure decisions. The teachers' union went to court to prevent the reports from being publicly released, but a judge ruled that they were public information and they were released to newspapers and other media outlets. In the ensuing publicity, a sixth-grade teacher in Queens was named by the *New York Post* as the "worst teacher" in New York City.

Casey argues that the value-added reports were inaccurate at three levels. First, the state test scores on which they were based had recently been criticized by Harvard testing expert Daniel Koretz (hired by the State Education Department to study testing policies) as suffering from "score inflation, a lowering of standards, or both." Second, even when they are based on higher-quality state tests, value-added measures have "disturbingly high rates of error," says Casey. Third, it's difficult to separate the effect of a particular teacher from classroom factors and school effects, especially when looking at only one year of performance. For example, the Queens teacher who had such an abysmally low value-added report was, according to her principal, colleagues, students, and parents, an excellent teacher. The low score was due to the fact that she taught ESL to small classes of high-need recent immigrants over several years, plus the school's grade configuration. Because of these statistical quirks, the scores presented a completely inaccurate picture.

According to the Department's own calculations, teachers' score reports had a margin of error of 53 percentile points in English language arts and 35 points in math. One-third of the scores were so imprecise that the Department said it couldn't use them. "Yet the DOE chose to ignore these problems in a push to produce data which could be used in the annual evaluations of the greatest number of teachers," says Casey. "The sheer magnitude of these numbers takes us into the realm of the statistically surreal... It was, to put it simply, a demonstration of professional malpractice in the realm of testing."

The outcry from teachers, psychometricians, and others was intense, and in June of 2012, the New York state legislature and governor enacted legislation that prohibited the public disclosure of teacher evaluations (although parents can be told the rating of their own children's teachers).

Why did intelligent and well-meaning city and DOE leaders embark on this course? asks Casey. He attributes it to the theory of action espoused by the Mayor, Chancellor, and other reform advocates around the country: public schools are a monopoly that needs to be subjected to the discipline of the marketplace. "The solution to all that ails public schools, therefore, is to remake them in the image and likeness of a competitive business," explains Casey. "Just as private businesses rise and fall on their ability to compete in the marketplace, as measured by the 'bottom line' of their profit balance sheet, schools need to live or die on their ability to compete with each other, based on an educational 'bottom line.' If 'bad' schools die and new 'good' schools are created in their stead, the productivity of education improves." Test scores were determined to be the best "bottom line" and teachers were "stacked" from the highest to the lowest performing according to a calculation of how much value they had added to their students' test scores. Others could learn from this unfortunate experience, says Casey.

"The Will to Quantify: The 'Bottom Line' in the Market Model of Education Reform" by Leo Casey in *Teachers College Record*, September 2013 (Vol. 115, #9, p. 1-7), no free e-link

[Back to page one](#)

3. Robert Marzano on Using Learning as Part of Teacher Evaluation

(Originally titled "How to Show Student Learning")

In this *Educational Leadership* article, author/consultant Robert Marzano lists the problems with using test scores to evaluate teachers and suggests better ways "to demonstrate that students taught by a given teacher have learned":

- *Use common assessments.* For example, a second-grade team creates a pre- and post-test for a unit on plant and animal survival needs, with items at three levels: basic, proficient, and advanced. Teachers can use the results to measure growth and follow up as needed.

- *Use common student surveys.* When students are asked questions like these from the Tripod Project...

- I've learned a great deal in this class.
- My teacher pushes us to work hard and think deeply.

... teachers get valuable feedback on motivation and learning.

Race to the Top requires that measures be comparable from teacher to teacher. Marzano says this can be managed by having teachers score each others' common student assessments. "Doing this for both the pre- and post-test gives each student a relatively reliable growth score," he says, "which one obtains by subtracting the pre-test from the post-test scores." Before-and-after student surveys can be used in the same way.

How about small districts where there's only one teacher per grade level? Marzano recommends going online to create and score common assessments with nearby districts.

“How to Show Student Learning” by Robert Marzano in *Educational Leadership*, October 2013 (Vol. 71, #2, p. 82-83), www.ascd.org

[Back to page one](#)

4. What Should Principals Look for in Blended Classrooms?

In this thoughtful article in *Principal Leadership*, Nancy Frey, Douglas Fisher, and Ian Pumpian (San Diego State University) give this definition of a blended classroom:

- It’s part of a formal education program.
- It takes place in a bricks-and-mortar school.
- Student learning happens partly online and partly in the classroom.
- Students have some choice about time, place, path, and pace.

Quality blended learning is not about the devices, say Frey, Fisher, and Pumpian – it’s about the pedagogy. They suggest seven general principles for quality instruction and say that school leaders should look for them in blended classrooms and ask the following questions of teachers after observing their classes:

- *What is the purpose of the lesson?* When administrators walk around the classroom, students should be able to articulate what they are learning and how they can apply it.
- *How do you model and think aloud?* “Students benefit from observing the expert thinking of their teachers and mentors,” say the authors, “because it promotes their own metacognition.” Online modeling can take place when teachers record their think-alouds and make them available to students electronically.
- *What makes this task sufficiently complex for your students?* It’s easy for online tasks to be low-level busywork, say Frey, Fisher, and Pumpian: “If a task lacks complexity, students will simply divide the group’s work among themselves, work on their separate pieces independently, and assemble the final product later.” One way to boost the rigor level is giving students choices so they follow a path of appropriately challenging tasks.
- *How do you ensure that you are communicating high expectations?* Administrators should look to see that the work is standards-based, on grade level, gets students setting goals, and fosters perseverance.
- *How do your students receive guided instruction?* This is where teachers can check for understanding, scaffold, and provide corrective feedback, but it’s harder to guide students in this way when they’re online. Frey, Fisher, and Pumpian say teachers should use various apps that provide students with prompts and cues for learning – but some kinds of guidance need to take place in person.
- *What academic language supports can students access?* When students are working online, they can use built-in glossaries, online dictionaries, and rhetorical frames to guide reasoned arguments, citations, and summarizing.
- *How is assessment used by your students?* “I have begun to realize that there is a big difference between editing a student’s paper and giving useful feedback,” said one teacher. “When I was getting hard copies, I did a lot more editing, but then all they did was make the changes I had designated and then turn it back in. There was no real revision.” Online mark-up

and commenting tools make it more likely that students will thoughtfully revise their work, say Frey, Fisher, and Pumpian.

“Quality in a Blended Learning Classroom” by Nancy Frey, Douglas Fisher, and Ian Pumpian in *Principal Leadership*, October 2013 (Vol. 14, #2, p. 60-63), no free e-link available; Frey and Fisher can be reached at nfrey@mail.sdsu.edu and dfisher@mail.sdsu.edu.

[Back to page one](#)

5. Increasing Rigor for Below-Level Secondary-School Students

“Increasing the rigor of learning tasks to align with the expectations of the Common Core State Standards presents challenges for many educators, particularly for middle and high school teachers of non-proficient readers,” say Rosemarye Taylor (University of Central Florida/Orlando) and Rebecca Watson (Orange County Public Schools) in this article in *Principal Leadership*. Materials geared to low-achieving students tend to have questions and activities that are heavily scaffolded and focus on literal recall rather than high-order thinking. That means teachers have to come up with their own ways to get students applying, synthesizing, analyzing, and evaluating. In many classrooms Taylor and Watson have visited, students aren’t being challenged to apply learning, construct knowledge, read between the lines, and communicate well. Some examples:

- A middle-school teacher asks her students to suggest a higher-order thinking question for the book they’re reading, *Lord of the Flies*. A student says, “Evaluate the island,” and the teacher accepts the answer with no comment and moves on.
- A teacher asks students to summarize when she really wants them to analyze (take apart and put back together).

And some teachers believe their low-achieving students are not capable of higher-level thinking because of language issues, special needs, or low self-esteem and motivation. “The empathy and concern that teachers have for their students may, in some cases, result in lowered expectations that impede teachers’ willingness to develop and use rigorous learning tasks,” say Taylor and Watson.

They suggest four ways teachers can enhance rigor for middle and high-school students who are behind:

- *Scaffold instruction*. Give students lots of support as texts are introduced and reduce scaffolding as students become increasingly successful. In other words, classes move from direct instruction to guided practice to independent practice. “Students must achieve independent practice to demonstrate proficiency with the target skill or knowledge,” say Taylor and Watson. “If they do not demonstrate it during instruction, they will most likely not demonstrate it on assessments.”

- *Add parallel texts*. Below-level students who are reading below-level texts should also have on-grade-level texts containing the same content and similar vocabulary. This challenges students, builds confidence, knowledge, and vocabulary, and helps them feel more on level with their peers.

- *Add rigorous tasks.* With materials that don't challenge students, teacher teams need to work collaboratively to develop complex tasks and think through how to teach, model, and get students to practice them and work toward independence.

- *Develop and implement benchmark scales.* Teachers should be able to observe and measure the level of their students' thinking, say Taylor and Watson. They recommend a 4-3-2-1-0 scale for each major skill with descriptions of what achieving the benchmark looks and sounds like. Here's an example for working with text features:

4 – Edit or create new text features that provide information more helpful to comprehension than those in the text.

3 – Explain how specific text features do or do not improve comprehension of the text.

2 – Write how specific information from text features is used in the text.

1 – Underline and label text features.

0 – Underline text features.

“By identifying acceptable evidence in advance of the instruction,” they say, “teachers’ instruction and language [become] more precise.”

“Raising Rigor for Struggling Students” by Rosemarye Taylor and Rebecca Watson in *Principal Leadership*, October 2013 (Vol. 14, #2, p. 56-59), no free e-link available; the authors can be reached at rosemarye.taylor@ucf.edu and Rebecca.watson@ocps.net.

[*Back to page one*](#)

6. Three Ways to Use Writing in Content-Area Classes

American students' writing achievement has been stagnant for years, say Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey (San Diego State University) in this article in *The Reading Teacher*. Why? Because too many teachers just assign a prompt, have students write, and mark up and grade what they produce. This rarely helps students meet state and Common Core standards like these:

- Write opinions and arguments with evidence.
- Write informational pieces that include details.
- Write narratives that are highly descriptive.

The literacy block is prime territory for building writing skills, but Fisher and Frey believe teachers in the content areas should also be using writing regularly as a check for understanding. Here are three routines for doing that:

- *Power writing* – This is a series of brief, timed writing events designed to build fluency. For example, a social studies teacher writes *immigration* on the board and tells students to “write as much as you can, as well as you can” in their journals for one minute. When the time is up, students read over what they've written, circle any errors, and count the number of words they wrote. The teacher repeats this routine two more times, and by the end of the class, students have three one-minute writing samples and record the highest number of words on a sheet of graph paper in their notebooks. Students' fluency improves with practice – from 10 words a minute to 25 to 60 – and their understanding of the content also improves because they have put down what they know and are that much more attentive to instruction

and discussion. Power writing also helps the teacher check for understanding and notice common student errors.

- *Shared writing* – For example, in a fourth-grade math class, the teacher read *How Much Is a Million* (Schwartz, 1993) with students, had them turn and talk about possible items they could count, decided on tennis balls, and posed the question: How much space would a million tennis balls take up? After some discussion, students came up one at a time to write the problem as a series of algebra statements, with prompting on word choice, spelling, and punctuation.

- *Writing from sources to inform and explain* – This is an important part of science and social studies classes, say Fisher and Frey. “Students must use their writing skills to produce pieces that are informative or explanatory.” Annotating a text is a key precursor skill, and they list the most common annotation marks: underlining; vertical lines in the margin to highlight longer passages of note; star or asterisk in the margin to emphasize important points; numbers in the margin to indicate a sequence of points; number of other pages where the author makes the same points; circling key words or phrases; writing questions in the margins or at the top or bottom of the page. “When students annotate a text, they have sources that they can use to support their claims,” say Fisher and Frey.

“A Range of Writing Across the Content Areas” by Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey in *The Reading Teacher*, October 2013 (Vol. 67, #2, p. 96-101), <http://bit.ly/1bSjtLC>

[Back to page one](#)

7. School Libraries Get with the Times

(Originally titled “The New School Library”)

In this helpful *Educational Leadership* article, Minnesota media/technology director Doug Johnson asks whether school libraries are necessary when students have vast amounts of information at their fingertips via smartphones, tablets, and computers. Absolutely, says Johnson, if libraries repurpose themselves to serve three vital functions:

- *A social-learning commons* – The popularity of coffee shops, shopping malls, and teen centers demonstrates people’s desire to meet and learn in a physical environment. Libraries need to be a “high-touch environment in a high-touch world,” says Johnson, with comfortable seating, flexible furniture arrangements, and “attention to aesthetics in lighting and colors [that] make the library a place where students and staff want to be.” Libraries should be used for meetings, research, tutoring, and specialized student services.

- *Production and presentation* – The library should be less a grocery store where people “get stuff” than a kitchen where people “make stuff,” says Johnson. Students should have access to computers with lots of memory, robust processing speed, and software for music and video production and photo-editing, as well as presentation formats like interactive whiteboards and audience response systems.

- *Teaching spaces* – “The library’s resources have changed,” he says, “but not its mission: teaching people to effectively access information to meet their needs. The emphasis has shifted from teaching learners how to find and organize information to teaching them how

to evaluate and use information.” The librarian is key to teaching students these skills in large-group, small-group, and individual formats.

“The New School Library” by Doug Johnson in *Educational Leadership*, October 2013 (Vol. 71, #2, p. 84-85), www.ascd.org; Johnson can be reached at doug0077@gmail.com.

[Back to page one](#)

8. What Kind of Knowledge Makes Science Teachers Most Effective?

“Everybody wants teachers to be knowledgeable,” say Philip Sadler, Gerhard Sonnert, Harold Coyle, Nancy Cook-Smith, and Jaimie Miller (Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics) in this article in *American Educational Research Journal*. “Yet there is little agreement on exactly what kinds of knowledge are most important for teachers to possess.” To find out, they tested the knowledge of 181 middle-school physical science teachers and the learning of 9,556 of their students at several points during a school year. Here are their conclusions:

- The teacher’s subject-matter knowledge is an important predictor of student learning. “That effective teachers must know the concepts they teach may sound like a truism,” say Sadler et al., “but empirical evidence has been rather elusive in prior studies.” However, this kind of knowledge goes only so far. Here’s the more intriguing finding:

- Teachers who are able to predict students’ misconceptions and wrong answers are more effective than teachers who can’t. The researchers asked teachers to identify which test items students would get wrong; teachers who did this well got better achievement results than those who didn’t.

In other words, conclude the authors, “A teacher knowing only the scientific ‘truth’ appears to have limited effectiveness. It is better if a teacher also has a model of how students tend to learn a particular concept, particularly if there is a common belief that may make acceptance of the scientific view or model difficult... This... may allow teachers to construct experiences, demonstrations, experiments, or discussions that make students commit to and then test their own ideas.”

“The Influence of Teachers’ Knowledge on Student Learning in Middle School Physical Science Classrooms” by Philip Sadler, Gerhard Sonnert, Harold Coyle, Nancy Cook-Smith, and Jaimie Miller in *American Educational Research Journal*, October 2013 (Vol. 50, #5, p. 1020-1049), <http://aer.sagepub.com/content/early/2013/03/06/0002831213477680.abstract>

[Back to page one](#)

9. Using Children’s Books to Enhance Mathematics

In this article in *The Reading Teacher*, Allison Hintz and Anthony Smith (University of Washington/Bothell) suggest ways to use children’s literature to explain mathematics and make it vivid for students. The key steps, they say, are (a) choosing a good text, (b) exploring the text in a read-aloud and discussion with students, and (c) extending the text by getting

students to explore ideas after the read-aloud is finished. Here are some books they suggest, along with the math links and suggested age-ranges:

Text-dependent:

Double Those Wheels by Nancy Raines Day – Doubling, counting by groups – Grades K-2

Equal Shmequal by Virginia Kroll – Equal and fair – Grades 3-5

Mummy Math: An Adventure in Geometry by Cindy Neuschwander – Geometry – Grades 2-4

Pete the Can and His Four Groovy Buttons by James Dean and Eric Litwin – Number recognition, counting back – Grades K-1

Tiger Math: Learning to Graph from a Baby Tiger by Ann Whitehead Nagda and Cindy Bickel – Data and statistics – Grades 3-5

Idea-enhancing:

Actual Size by Steve Jenkins – Estimation, measurement – Grades 1-3

The Doorbell Rang by Pat Hutchins – Adding on, counting up – Grades 2-4

Move Over Rover by Karen Beaumont – Adding on, counting back – Grades K-2

The Phantom Tollbooth by Norton Juster – Number sense, geometry – Grades 4-6

Ten Flashing Fireflies by Philemon Sturges – Fact fluency, combinations of ten – Grades K-2

Illustration-exploring:

Ancient Greece by Anne Pearson – Geometry, estimation, counting – Grades 3-5

Anno's Counting Book by Mitsumasa Anno – Counting on by ones, groups – Grades K-2

I Spy a Dinosaur's Eye by Jean Marzollo – Counting and cardinality – Grade K-2

Lonely Planet Not for Parents Extreme Planet by Lonely Planet – Representing and interpreting data – Grades 4-6

Shintauro's Umbrellas by Marjorie Jackson – K-1

There Is a Bird on Your Head by Mo Willems – Addition and grouping – Grades K-2

“Mathematizing Read-Alouds in Three Easy Steps” by Allison Hintz and Anthony Smith in *The Reading Teacher*, October 2013 (Vol. 67, #2, p. 103-108), <http://bit.ly/1emFxf2>; the authors can be reached at ahintz@uwb.edu and ansmith@uwb.edu.

[Back to page one](#)

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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
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Update/Curriculum Update
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
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
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