

Marshall Memo 901

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
September 6, 2021

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Quotes of the Week

“Finding a balance with screens is larger than imposing restrictions for children and teens; it is about modeling, fostering candid and engaging discussions, empowering learners, providing resources, setting clear expectations, and designing assessments and learning opportunities that call upon creativity and imagination.”

Alicia Johnson in [“Screen Angst: The Search for Digital Balance”](#) in *Principal Leadership*, September 2021 (Vol. 22, #1, pp. 22-23)

“Many people are socialized, at a deep psychological level, to be more comfortable with brilliance coming from a male body, or to believe that people of a darker skin tone are less capable.”

Stephon Alexander, Brown University physics professor and accomplished jazz musician in “The Cosmic Improviser” in *Psychology Today*, September/October 2021 (Vol. 54, #5, pp. 12-13); see this [2015 TEDX talk](#) in which Alexander describes the impact of a Bronx high-school teacher; Alexander is at stephon_alexander@brown.edu.

“I wanted my books to enable black children to realize how beautiful and smart they are.”

Eloise Greenfield, author of 47 children’s books, who died last week at 92

“Almost always, when professionals watch themselves on video, they’re astonished by what they see – sometimes delighted, sometimes disappointed, rarely unsurprised... Video is rocket fuel for learning because it gives us a clear picture of reality.”

Jim Knight (see item #2)

“One of the most essential yet difficult strategies for promoting independence is to let failure happen. We all want to see our students succeed, but the learning is in the struggle.”

Katerina Watson (see item #5)

“If you fire someone for making an error, you’ve probably just gotten rid of the one person who is never likely to make that mistake again.”

Art Markman (see item #9)

1. Words That Support and Encourage Students

For this *Edutopia* article, Stephen Merrill checked with a number of highly proficient teachers and collected seven comments they use to empower students and create a supportive classroom environment:

- *We really missed you yesterday.* A student hearing this upon returning from an absence understands that they are a valued contributor to the classroom community.
- *I’m listening.* An open-ended invitation to say more is effective – if the teacher doesn’t jump in to fill the silence and if their body language signals that the student has their full attention.
- *Oops, I made a mistake.* Teachers modeling the comfortable acknowledgement of errors “is essential to academic resilience in students,” says Merrill. Adding humor makes it that much better: *That’s a real whopper!* or *I can’t believe I did that again!* Teachers should also praise the thinking behind a student’s creative error.
- *I’m sorry.* A judicious use of apologies “instantly humanizes the relationship between teachers and students,” says Merrill. It “instills trust, signals respect for the receiver, and makes you more accessible.”
- *We’ll figure it out together.* This positions the teacher and student as co-learners, flipping the usual top-down script and giving the student encouragement and agency.
- *You’ve really improved on...* “Feedback that is specific, measured, and focused on a student’s process or effort is motivating and actionable,” says Merrill. “Steer clear of feedback that engages in hyperbole, lacks specificity, or praises ostensibly inherent qualities like intelligence.”
- *I believe in you.* “Teachers are required to correct papers, hand out grades, and at times chastise poor behavior,” says Merrill. “That power dynamic can subtly undermine

students' self-confidence." Periodically expressing belief in students' individuality and high expectations for their success can get things back on an even keel.

[“7 Things Teachers Say to Create a Supportive Classroom”](#) by Stephen Merrill in *Edutopia*, August 26, 2021

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2. Maxims for Instructional Coaches

(Originally titled “Hey Instructional Coach, What Do You Do?”)

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Jim Knight (University of Kansas, Instructional Coaching Group) suggests five maxims for instructional coaches as they help teachers get better at their craft:

- *A coach is a teacher talking with a teacher.* In other words, the coach should be a partner, not an expert. “A partnership conversation is one between two people who have equal power,” says Knight. “This means that instructional coaches interact in ways that ensure that collaborating teachers make the decisions about what happens in their classrooms.”

- *Videos of teachers in their classrooms help them see reality as it is, not as they wish it to be.* “Almost always, when professionals watch themselves on video, they’re astonished by what they see,” says Knight, “– sometimes delighted, sometimes disappointed, rarely unsurprised.” That’s why looking at videos with a coach is “rocket fuel” for improvement.

- *If there’s no goal, it’s just a nice conversation.* “When teachers pursue a powerful, student-focused goal that truly matters to them,” says Knight, “unmistakable improvements happen in students’ lives and learning.”

- *Who’s doing the work here?* Coaches need to resist the temptation to say, “Oh, I’ve had that issue. Let me tell you what you should do.” Better to listen, ask reflective questions, and make tentative suggestions. An imperfect solution owned by the teacher often produces better results than the perfect solution from the coach.

- *Real learning happens in real life.* Conversations are important, but in the end teachers need to try new skills, ideas, and beliefs with students and see whether they work. “Coaches walk a tightrope between support and dialogue,” concludes Knight, “to ensure that such real-life learning occurs.”

[“Hey Instructional Coach, What Do You Do?”](#) by Jim Knight in *Educational Leadership*, September 2021 (Vol. 79, #1, pp. 80-81); Knight can be reached at jimknight@mac.com.

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3. Getting the Most from Teacher Teams This Year

(Originally titled “Why Teacher Teams Are More Critical Than Ever”)

In this article in *Educational Leadership*, Susan Moore Johnson (Harvard Graduate School of Education) says her interviews with educators during the pandemic pointed to the key role of school-based teams in supporting schools’ “resolve and resilience.” Going forward, she urges school leaders to maximize the impact of teams in five ways:

- Build a schedule with weekly common planning time for same-grade/same-subject teachers.
- “Doggedly protect” meeting times so teachers can count on them.
- Give teams responsibility for important decisions, including curriculum materials, analyzing student work, and parent outreach.
- Coach team facilitators on assigning roles to members and running meetings that continuously improve teaching and learning.
- Keep the whole staff informed about each team’s deliberations and decisions.

[“Why Teacher Teams Are More Critical Than Ever”](#) by Susan Moore Johnson in *Educational Leadership*, September 2021 (Vol. 79, #1, pp. 59-63); Johnson can be reached at susan_moore_johnson@gse.harvard.edu.

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4. More Than “Fluffy Stuff” – Social-Emotional Learning in Math Classes

In this article in *The Learning Professional*, mathematics instructional specialists Carrie Edmond, Rebekah Kmiecik, Rachel Mane, and Ashley Taplin (North East ISD, Texas) describe the evolution of their thinking on integrating CASEL’s five social-emotional skills into math lessons: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. As they built trust with their colleagues and engaged in coaching cycles (reflection, independent brainstorming, and collaboration implementing ideas), they zeroed in on specific entry points for SEL:

- A welcoming activity up front to help students feel included – for example, what’s new, mix and mingle, four corners;
- An engaging practice maximizing student voice – for example, think/pair/share, quick-writes, Pear Deck, mindful minute, gallery walks, give one/get one/move on;
- An optimistic lesson closure – for example, a one-word whip around, a human bar graph, my next step.

At all three points in the lesson, students might be asked:

- *What am I still curious about?*
- *What might be a different perspective?*
- *What would happen if...?*
- *What is one takeaway from this experience?*
- *How has your thinking changed about...?*

The authors also suggest that teachers explicitly name the way in which the CASEL social-emotional skills are being put to work – for example:

- *We’re doing this check-in as a way for you and me to be aware of your energy level before beginning today’s lesson.*
- *When you set a goal based on today’s target, we are working on self-management to achieve it.*
- *When you tell me where you’re at in your understanding, you are making a decision to help me know how best to help you.*

- *I'm pairing you up so we can develop effective communication, collaboration, and relationships.*
- *Someone might not have seen it the same way you did; when we talk about different strategies and perspectives, we're working on social awareness.*

The authors' coaching work was initially done in high-school math classes but began spreading to other subject areas. In one districtwide meeting, the superintendent joked that if Algebra II could embed SEL, anyone could.

[“Coaching with SEL in Mind”](#) by Carrie Edmond, Rebekah Kmiecik, Rachel Mane, and Ashley Taplin in *The Learning Professional*, August 2021 (Vol. 42, #4, pp. 36-39, 44); the authors can be reached at cedmon1@neisd.net, rkmiec@neisd.net, rmane@neisd.net, and atapli@neisd.net.

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5. Intentionally Building Primary Students' Self-Reliance

In this *Edutopia* article, Katerina Watson says there was a point when she realized she was doing too much for her elementary students – picking up a snack wrapper, helping a student finish cutting out a circle – and resolved to break out of that pattern. “As soon as I became more mindful of stepping back,” she says, “I saw nearly immediate results in my students' independence, academic progress, and pride in themselves.” Here are several ways she put her epiphany to work:

- *Side-by-side modeling* – For example, Watson sits next to a student with a whiteboard and writes a word that follows a similar phonics rule but isn't exactly the same – for example, if the student is struggling to write *bat*, Watson writes *cat* and prompts the student to figure out the correct spelling.

- *Normalizing errors* – “One of the most essential yet difficult strategies for promoting independence is to let failure happen,” she says. “We all want to see our students succeed, but the learning is in the struggle.” When a student accidentally cut her craft project in half, Watson waited, and when the student did nothing, asked, “What is your plan for fixing this?” The student grabbed some tape and patched up her project.

- *Saving students from regrettable actions* – To prevent students from messing up something they've been working on for weeks, Watson narrates what will happen if they make a certain choice and then lets them proceed. “Sometimes they decide to avoid the harmful action,” she says; “other times, they ruin the project. Either option prompts meaningful learning while still allowing the student to think critically and make their own choices.”

- *Self-provisioning* – It saves time to give students what they need in advance – for example, a pencil to complete a writing project. Watson now makes students responsible for getting the materials they need.

- *Tying shoelaces and zipping up jackets* – Continuing to do this for students when it's no longer age-appropriate “only does them a disservice,” says Watson. “Even if the skill takes a significant portion of time during the first few go-arounds, allowing an independent process

will have the student performing the skill quickly in no time and takes a major task off of your plate.”

• *Choosing the right words* – The teacher’s language truly makes a difference, says Watson. Some suggestions:

- *Where can you look to find that information?*
- *Have we seen this anywhere before?*
- *I see how hard you are working. What you’re doing is helping you learn so much.*
- *I’m so proud of you! You put in the work, and you did this all on your own.*
- *You’re such a creative problem solver. Look how much you were able to accomplish by yourself.*

“While honoring the process takes more time and often means a bit more mess in our classrooms,” Watson concludes, “in the long run it gives our students invaluable opportunities to think critically, reflect, and build independence. The meaningful learning that happens during the process is far more important than ensuring a perfect final product.”

[“What Have I Been Doing for My Students That They Could Do for Themselves?”](#) by Katerina Watson in *Edutopia*, August 13, 2021

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6. Ian Rowe on Achievement Gaps Versus the “Distance to 100”

In this *Education Gadfly* article, New York City educator Ian Rowe (American Enterprise Institute) says it’s discouraging that in recent decades, U.S. student achievement has plateaued, and that despite strenuous efforts to close achievement gaps, there’s still a stubborn correlation between race, class, and test scores. Asked to speak before the Rhode Island Board of Education on ways to improve educational outcomes, Rowe shared the state’s NAEP scores from 1998 to 2019 (quite similar to the nation as a whole).

The data showed a gap of more than 20 percentage points between the average reading scores of white students and students of color. But white students’ scores were nothing to boast about: fewer than half of white eighth graders were proficient in reading. “The sad irony,” says Rowe, “is that closing the black- or Hispanic-white achievement gap in reading, without improving outcomes for all students, would mean growing black and Hispanic outcomes from sub-mediocrity to full mediocrity.”

The raw numbers of Rhode Island eighth graders reading below proficiency drive home the nature of the problem: 3,429 white students, 2,233 Hispanic students, and 784 black students at an unacceptable level of literacy. “These data on reading proficiency,” says Rowe, “– both in raw numbers and proportional rates by group – underscore our nation’s massive collective failure to effectively teach literacy and build verbal proficiency across *all* races and classes. It also shatters the accepted truth that there is any sole or even primary cause of low proficiency rates among black and Hispanic Americans.” If more than half of all students are below par in reading, the reasons can’t be specific to race, ethnicity, or social class.

A better way of looking at the educational challenge, Rowe believes, is focusing on the *distance to 100* – that is, the gap between students’ current level of proficiency and the aspirational goal of all students reaching proficiency. The gap between the average reading level for all students and 100 percent proficiency – about 70 percentage points at a national level – is far larger than the racial and economic gaps. That should be the focus of our attention.

Looking through this lens, says Rowe, helps us realize that “white students read below grade level for many of the same reasons black and Hispanic students do.” For starters, few elementary schools focus on building students’ knowledge in literature, science, and social studies. Instead, most students are taught reading in a way that’s disconnected from content, on the theory that if students know how to decode, find the main idea, make inferences, and draw conclusions, they will apply those skills to understand any reading passage put before them. In other words, says this widely implemented theory, children must learn to read before they read to learn. Thus most classroom texts are generic, not linked to a systematic K-12 knowledge curriculum.

Rowe closes by quoting a 2019 study by Eric Hanushek, Paul Peterson, Laura Talpey, and Ludger Woessman: “The stubborn endurance of achievement inequalities suggests the need to reconsider policies and practices aimed at shrinking the gap. Although policymakers have repeatedly tried to break the link between students’ learning and their socioeconomic background, these interventions thus far have been unable to dent the relationship between socioeconomic status and achievement. Perhaps it is time to consider alternatives.”

[“A Better Way to Improve Literacy Among Black and Hispanic Children”](#) by Ian Rowe in *Education Gadfly*, September 2, 2021; Rowe can be reached at ian.rowe@aei.org.

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7. Reading Strategies to Avoid – and to Embrace

In this *Edutopia* article, Sarah Gonser nominates four literacy practices that she believes should be relegated to the dustbin of pedagogy:

- *Reading logs and other rote accountability tasks* – The evidence is that having students fill out a mandatory record of 20 minutes of at-home reading saps interest in reading and reduces kids’ intrinsic motivation to find the right books and truly enjoy them.

- *Turn-taking oral reading* – Even with variations like popcorn and using popsicle sticks to decide the next reader, this is a poor use of classroom time that somehow persists despite 50 years of contrary evidence. It stigmatizes struggling readers, weakens comprehension, and undermines many students’ fluency and pronunciation. Oral reading is important, says Gonser (as is an increasing amount of silent reading as students move through the elementary grades), but round-robin reading is the wrong approach.

- *Giving prizes for reading* – Extrinsic rewards do little to build good reading habits and may actually decrease the motivation of students who already love to read. Better incentives might be extra reading time or well-chosen books that students can keep.

• *Overemphasizing discrete reading skills* – Having students read unfamiliar texts while learning ostensibly transferable skills (e.g., main idea and summarizing) is increasingly viewed as a poor way to improve overall reading proficiency, especially for students who enter school with disadvantages. A far more effective strategy is building age-appropriate background knowledge, fluency, and comprehension using proven pedagogy and well-chosen texts.

Gonser goes on to describe six classroom strategies that are supported by research and anecdotal evidence:

- *Reading accountability partners*, with pairs of students meeting daily for ten minutes to discuss homework reading;
- *Mini-lessons and group work*, with students learning roles (e.g., holding peers accountable, being receptive to feedback), getting guiding questions, and then doing small-group work with close teacher monitoring;
- *Choral reading* with the class and teacher reading a passage aloud together; this reduces struggling readers' public exposure while immersing all students in the text. The teacher occasionally pauses before a key word, inviting the class to say it out loud.
- *Scaffolding silent reading* by pre-teaching vocabulary and providing a plot overview;
- *Teacher read-aloud* for 5-7 minutes each day, modeling reading strategies (e.g., what to do with an unknown word), stopping frequently to wonder out loud, and giving a running commentary on the plot and characters;
- *Cross-grade reading buddies*, with upper-grade students pairing up with lower-grade partners once a month; this benefits both the younger and older students and builds classroom community.

These strategies, concludes Gonser, coupled with systematically building background knowledge and providing a rich variety of books and other reading matter, will build motivation, increase the time spent reading inside and outside of school, and steadily improve reading proficiency. This will be especially true for students who come to school with disadvantages.

["4 Reading Strategies to Retire This Year \(Plus 6 to Try Out!\)"](#) by Sarah Gonser in *Edutopia*, August 12, 2021

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8. Should Teachers Tell Students Their Personal Opinions on Hot Topics?

(Originally titled "A Matter of Opinion")

Should teachers share their personal views on controversial issues? wonders Philadelphia high-school teacher/author Matthew Kay in this *Educational Leadership* article. It's a tricky question because teachers tend to have strong opinions and, as authority figures, are in a position to influence students, especially those who care about teachers' approval and accept what they say as gospel. Teachers are often urged to keep their views to themselves, facilitate debates among students, and, when put on the spot, ask, *What do you think?*

Kay agrees that teachers shouldn't proselytize or indoctrinate, but he's troubled by being totally silent on hot topics. Students who ask what teachers think are seeking

understanding. “When we deflect their questions about our own perspectives,” says Kay, “I believe they feel misled and patronized, as if guided back to the kiddie table.” In addition, these are missed opportunities for students to get insights on how a teacher’s thinking on tough questions has evolved through reading, discussion, and analysis.

The middle ground, he believes, is teachers being honest about their opinions and humble about their expertise. A teacher might respond by sharing a view, followed by, *I’m not an expert on that subject; tell me honestly, does this hold water?* This last part is vital, says Kay: “Often, kids don’t know *when* it is a good time to disagree with their teacher. Sometimes questioning an ‘authority figure’ is applauded, and other times it gets them sent to the dean’s office. So the invitation to respectfully critique a teacher’s personal opinions should not just be offered, but offered earnestly.” Kay believes using this approach conveys three important messages:

- It’s okay to question a teacher’s views.
- People can express views that aren’t fully formed.
- “Criticism and clarification can be humbly sought and thoughtfully engaged.”

[“A Matter of Opinion”](#) by Matthew Kay in *Educational Leadership*, September 2021 (Vol. 79, #1, pp. 82-83); Kay can be reached at mrkay@notlight.com.

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9. How to Avoid Being a Bad Boss

In this article in *Fast Company*, Art Markman (University of Texas/Austin) describes four leader behaviors that destroy motivation, poison relationships, and keep people from doing their best work:

- *Hogging credit for successes and blaming others for failures* – “As a leader,” says Markman, “you are going to get more credit for the success of your team than you deserve, because you are the most visible member of that team.” A wise boss will counter this tendency by thanking colleagues when things go well and drawing attention to their contributions. And when things go badly, the leader needs to shoulder responsibility and shield colleagues from blame. “Even if team members slipped up,” says Markman, “it was the leader’s role to ensure that everyone was prepared, to check on the status of the project, and to deal with missteps.”

- *Creating uncertainty* – When people aren’t sure what’s going to happen next, they get anxious and hyper-vigilant, which is not conducive to collegiality and focusing on the mission. Unwise leaders dole out information on a need-to-know basis, move the goalposts without warning, and implement new initiatives without consulting others. “Good bosses,” says Markman, “make the landscape more predictable for their team. They communicate expectations clearly and reward people who meet or exceed those expectations... They provide as much information as they can in unstable times – like during the pandemic. They even admit when they themselves don’t know exactly what is coming next.”

- *Sowing mistrust* – Humans are social creatures and cooperation is at the heart of successful organizations, says Markman. But cooperation requires trust – a belief that others won’t use your valuable insights to advance their own position, that your contributions will be

reciprocated. Bad bosses pit people against each other, play favorites, and reward people who aren't working for the common good, while good bosses do the opposite.

• *Using sticks more than carrots* – “A single time someone gets mad at you affects your mood far more than a single instance of praise,” says Markman. Harsh criticism and yelling “whittles away at people’s joy of coming to work.” Punishments, he believes, should be reserved for negligence, repeatedly making the same mistake, not coming forward to report an error, or deliberately sabotaging the mission. “Routine mistakes – even ones that have big consequences – are just teaching opportunities. And if you fire someone for making an error, you’ve probably just gotten rid of the one person who is never likely to make that mistake again.”

[“4 Ways a Boss Can Create a Toxic Workspace”](#) by Art Markman in *Fast Company*, September 3, 2021; Markman can be reached at markman@utexas.edu.

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10. Being Present As a Leader

“Distracted leaders don’t know what’s going on around them and can’t see what’s in front of them,” says Dan Rockwell in this *Leadership Freak* article. Rushing to a meeting or thinking about something on the to-do list, they devalue a colleague who’s trying to have a conversation with them. To counter this, Rockwell preaches *situational awareness*: “Release thoughts of the next thing so you can focus on this thing.” Some specifics:

- Watch faces.
- Hear tone.
- Notice the environment.
- Be aware of a colleague’s back story.
- Consider saying, “I could be wrong, but something feels off. What’s happening?”
- Ask, “What should I be noticing?”
- Perhaps say, “I want to give you my full attention. I have a meeting in five minutes. Could we connect after the meeting?”

[“Situational Awareness: How to Stop Hitting People with Bats”](#) by Dan Rockwell in *Leadership Freak*, September 2, 2021; Rockwell is at dan@leadershipfreak.com.

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11. A Reenactment of a Difficult Conversation

In this [interactive presentation](#) at the July SAM conference in Tucson, two educators took the roles of an elementary principal and second-grade teacher (Lew and Helen) as they engaged in a series of five conversations about the teacher’s problematic performance. This true-to-life case by consultant Barry Jentz, who coached the real Lew as he prepared for each meeting, was summarized in Marshall Memo 849 and can be read in full in Jentz’s book, *Leadership and Learning: Personal Change in a Professional Setting*, available [here](#).

“Lew’s Case” acted by J. Roth and Carol Merritt, with narration by Kim Marshall, at the National SAM Conference, Tucson, Arizona, July 9, 2021; Jentz can be reached at bjentz@entrybook.com.

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If you have feedback or suggestions,
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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 50 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, writer, and consultant lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

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

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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
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Update
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
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Language Arts
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Phi Delta Kappan
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
Teaching Tolerance
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