Marshall Memo 275

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
March 2, 2009

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Read and think. Simultaneously if possible."

Advice to Craig Mullaney from a teacher when he was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford, in "The Battlefield Can Be an Unforgiving Teacher" in Janet Maslin's *New York Times* review of Mullaney's book, *The Unforgiving Moment*, Feb. 26, 2009

"We have overcome fear and hatred, and I am looking forward to the future with optimism."

John Edens of Phoenix on the inauguration of Barack Obama (see item #1)

"It's sexy to pay kids. It seems cool. And it's easier to pay them than to ask the real critical question – what do these schools have to do to facilitate self-motivation?"

Edward Deci on the wisdom of cash incentives for students (see item #5)

"Past behavior is the best predictor of future performance."

Mary Clement (see item #7)

"Research only gets you so far and then teachers' reasoned adaptations must take over. All research is equivocal at least to some extent, and its application to new situations must be discussed and debated… I can think of no strategy that every teacher should use. They are all tools to be used in the service of student learning… Accept things that you know work based on your experience. Reject things that don't work based on your experience, and try things you haven't tried before. Always keep student achievement as the criterion for successful teaching. If students are not learning well, then it is a professional educator's responsibility (I believe) to try something new…"

Robert Marzano in an ASCD Community Insight blogging exchange, Feb. 16, 2009
http://ascd.typepad.com/blog/2009/02/marzano-responds-chapter-one.html

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1. A Sea Change on Race

In a letter to the editor of *Newsweek* following the inauguration of President Obama, John Edens of Phoenix, Arizona wrote: "From the perspective of a 66-year-old white man, what happened on Tuesday, Jan. 20, is truly astounding. I grew up in the highly segregated and bigoted central Texas of the 1940s, '50s, and '60s. As a matter of course, we used all the hateful racial epithets or, when we were being nice, substituted 'Negroes' or 'colored people' for them. We told mean racial jokes and committed horrible acts toward black people. I could not imagine using a toilet or drinking from a fountain after a black person because we thought they carried diseases. My hometown was totally segregated, and no black person would dare come to your front door, go to a white restaurant or fail to step off the sidewalk to let you pass. We did not hate blacks; we just did not think of them as real people with real feelings. On Nov. 4, without giving it a thought, I voted for a black man for president. Race – for or against – had nothing to do with my vote. It was not an issue, and only after the election did the significance become clear to me. We have overcome fear and hatred, and I am looking forward to the future with optimism."

"A Look At the Nation We Have Become" – a letter to the editor of *Newsweek* from John Edens in Phoenix, Arizona, Mar. 2, 2009, http://www.newsweek.com/id/185809

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2. James Popham Spotlights Six Areas for Improvement

In this feisty article in *Harvard Education Letter*, UCLA assessment guru James Popham identifies six mistakes that he believes American schools are making (he confesses to making some of them himself) – and how they can be fixed:

• *Cut down on curriculum goals* – Popham says that districts ask teachers to teach much more than can be managed in a school year – or tested responsibly. This results in a curriculum that's a mile wide and an inch deep, and an annual guessing game by teachers on which curriculum goals will be tested. The solution: a manageable number of state goals with a larger "grain size", better assessments with enough items to measure each objective, and teachers being able to focus on a do-able set of learning objectives.

• *Improve in-classroom assessment* – "For more than a decade we have had access to empirical research showing conclusively that when teachers employ formative assessment in their classrooms, whopping improvements in students' learning take place," says Popham. Yet most classroom assessment is used summatively – students get grades and the teacher moves

on. The solution: train teachers in using on-the-spot assessments, with real-time data put to work adjusting teaching to get all students learning.

• *Focus on student learning* – "This overriding attention to 'what teachers do in class' instead of 'whether students learn' seems to have plagued teachers from time immemorial," says Popham. "In practice, this means that teachers spend too little time evaluating the quality of their instructional activities." The solution: teacher training and professional development must get teachers constantly thinking about short-term student learning results, and feeding the insights back into improving their teaching.

• *Measure the affective domain* – We're not paying enough attention to measuring students' attitudes, interests, and values, says Popham, ignoring the fact that the way a student feels about math or reading, for example, can have an enormous impact on achievement. The solution: tap the affective domain with low-cost assessments and educate teachers to be more tuned in to this dimension of the learning process.

• *Use instructionally sensitive state tests* – Popham believes that most high-stakes test results mirror students' socio-economic status rather than measuring the value that teachers and schools add. The solution: "replace instructionally insensitive accountability tests with those that can, with accuracy, sort out schools where students are being well taught from schools where students are not," he says.

• *Improve assessment literacy* – "It is patently absurd for teachers and administrators not to understand the instruments by which their professional competence is determined, and on which critical educational decisions are based," says Popham. The solution: better PD on assessment!

"Unlearned Lessons: Six Stumbling Blocks to Our Schools' Success" by James Popham in *Harvard Education Letter*, March/April 2009 (Vol. 25, #2, p. 8, 6-7), available for purchase at http://www.edletter.org, as is Popham's new book, *Unlearned Lessons* (Harvard Education Press, 2009)

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3. Collaboration Between Schools and Child Welfare Agencies

In this *Review of Research in Education* article, Fred Wulczyn, Cheryl Smithgall, and Lijun Chen urge closer links between schools and public child welfare agencies. "Success with at-risk children in a school setting may well depend on how well the child welfare system does its job and vice-versa," they write. "Professionals within each sector must understand what each contributes to well-being broadly defined." This means coming together on a common aim: "helping parents raise the next generation." Without effective collaboration, they conclude, "we may discover that we have only added to the perils, despite our best intentions."

"Child Well-Being: The Intersection of Schools and Child Welfare" by Fred Wulczyn, Cheryl Smithgall, and Lijun Chen in *Review of Research in Education*, March 2009 (Vol. 33, p. 35-62), no e-link available yet

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4. How Far Will Value-Added Assessment of Teachers Get Us?

There is lots of interest in value-added assessment, reports Robert Rothman in this *Harvard Education Letter* article, but technical challenges raise questions about its usefulness in everyday practice. On the surface, it makes perfect sense. Shouldn't teachers be judged on the progress students make "on their watch"? Proponents insist that value-added is at least as good as other methods of evaluating teachers. Tennessee, where statistician William Sanders launched this approach, has been using a version of value-added assessment since 1992, with principals and teachers regularly looking at reports of students' progress.

[The value-added method for identifying effective and ineffective teachers is to project students' likely learning trajectory (based on past performance and demographic characteristics); teachers who produce better-than-expected achievement are considered effective; teachers who produce lower-than-expected achievement are considered ineffective.]

However, Tennessee state law forbids using value-added reports to make important personnel decisions about teachers, including granting or denying tenure or giving pay increases or other rewards. This is because: (a) It's hard to completely isolate each teacher's effect from home variables; (b) The statistical model can be distorted by the types of students assigned to a teacher's class (assignments are rarely made randomly); (c) Students don't always grow in a predictable trajectory from year to year; (d) State tests sometimes have flaws; (e) Many state tests aren't vertically aligned (making comparisons from grade to grade impossible); and (f) The reports can suffer from statistical errors.

For these reasons, most statisticians think it's unwise to make judgments about a teacher's effectiveness based on one year's value-added scores. Using three years of data is better, but even that worries some researchers: it's possible to identify very good and very poor teachers, but making fine distinctions in the middle is tricky.

The biggest question with value-added assessment, says Rothman, is whether it is helpful in improving teaching and student achievement. Districts using value-added assessment, he says, have little evidence that principals are using the information that will affect what happens in classrooms. "You can go through all the statistical gymnastics," says Douglas Harris of the University of Wisconsin/Madison, "and if you still don't have a positive impact on schools, it doesn't matter what the technical properties are."

"An Inexact Science: What Are the Technical Challenges Involved in Using Value-Added Measures?" by Robert Rothman in *Harvard Education Letter*, March/April 2009 (Vol. 25, #2, p. 4-6), available for purchase at http://www.edletter.org.

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5. Do Cash Incentives Improve Student Achievement?

In this *Harvard Education Letter* article, journalist David McKay Wilson reports on recent experiments with financial incentives for students, including programs currently under way in New York City, Chicago, and Washington, D.C. public schools. The research, says Wilson, does not support this approach. University of Rochester professor Edward Deci reviewed 128 studies on incentives and concluded that tangible rewards have a negative effect

on intrinsic motivation, with students reverting to their previous patterns when rewards stop. He calls the programs a "quick fix" whose long-term effects are all negative. "It's sexy to pay kids," says Deci. "It seems cool. And it's easier to pay them than to ask the real critical question – what do these schools have to do to facilitate self-motivation?"

Sarah Lawrence College psychologist Sara Wilford calls these incentive programs "behavior modification in the most crass way" and says, "It may be a sweetener to get them in, but what is going to keep them? Pay them more money?" Another study by Judy Cameron of the University of Alberta found that tangible rewards can be helpful with tasks in which students have very little interest, but make no difference with high-interest tasks.

Much more productive, says Wilson, is changing students' attitudes about intelligence. Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck has shown that students who are explicitly taught that ability is malleable and can be developed through hard work (countering the fixed-ability mindset that most Americans are raised with) develop inner motivation and do better. Dweck's most convincing work was with four cohorts of middle-school students in the late 1990s. "We [told] the students to imagine your brain and realize that you form new connections when you work on something hard and learn something new," says Dweck. "Not only does it help – it's true. It unlocks intrinsic motivation, and the kids get smarter." She found that students in the experimental group became much more engaged in learning than those in the control group, set higher goals for themselves, and responded to challenges by working harder. A similar experiment in New York in 2003 had the same result. "Virtually every student in the New York City study said the workshop changed the way they studied and the way they paid attention in class," said Dweck.

"Money and Motivation" by David McKay Wilson in *Harvard Education Letter*, March/April 2009 (Vol. 25, #2, p. 1-3), available for purchase at http://www.edletter.org.

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6. Rick Stiggins on Getting Students Involved in the Assessment Process

In this thoughtful *Kappan* article, assessment expert Rick Stiggins says that by the time students reach the upper elementary grades, they have formed quite divergent views of themselves:

• Some have strong academic self-efficacy based on good grades and positive teacher comments. Over the years, success has built up their confidence and they tend to tackle each new learning experience willing to work hard and take risks.

• Other students have low academic self-efficacy because of a history of poor grades and critical teacher comments. They have experienced a downward spiral of sinking confidence and give up easily to avoid more public failure. By the upper-elementary grades, they have begun to define themselves as school failures.

The challenge for educators is to get a positive dynamic going for more students. This happens, says Stiggins, when teachers use on-the-spot classroom assessments skillfully so that learning problems are fixed immediately. "This reveals to them the secrets of their own

learning success while they are still learning," says Stiggins. "This builds confidence that ultimate success is always within reach."

How can schools make this happen? Stiggins quotes a forthcoming piece of Jan Chappuis outlining the steps:

- Give students a clear vision of the learning targets in student-friendly language.
- Show samples of student work that trace the continuum along which students will travel.
- As teaching proceeds, give students continuous feedback on how they are doing, with a chance to try again if they are having trouble.
- Get students involved in assessing their own work, giving *themselves* feedback.
- Have students keep portfolios of their work so they can trace their progress.
- Help students improve one attribute at a time, building toward the point where they can put all the pieces together.
- Show students how their work is improving over time.
- Have students lead report card conferences with their parents.

"Nowhere are these kinds of strategies more important than in upper elementary grades," says Stiggins, "because this is when the foundations of one's sense of oneself as a learner often become solidified."

Stiggins concludes this article by noting what he considers less effective assessment practices. He believes that annual tests and interim assessments are less beneficial to students' learning than on-the-spot classroom assessments. He cautions against always using classroom assessments for report card grades, saying they should be used primarily as feedback to help students improve. He emphasizes the importance of getting students involved in the assessment process, rather than having it be something adults do to students. Finally, he says that many educators are not well schooled in assessment literacy and professional development is crucial.

"Assessment FOR Learning in Upper Elementary Grades" by Rick Stiggins in *Phi Delta Kappan*, February 2009 (Vol. 90, #6, p. 419-421); the full article can be purchased at http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/kappan.htm.

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7. Effective Questions for Interviewing Principal Candidates

"Past behavior is the best predictor of future performance," says Berry College (Georgia) professor Mary Clement in this *Principal* article on interviewing for a principalship. Clement thinks that fuzzy questions – "Tell us about yourself" or "What is your educational philosophy of teaching and leadership?" – are a waste of everyone's time. Far better, she says, are behavior-based questions, for example:

- Tell us about your experiences with students this age. What motivates them?
- How have you organized curriculum to meet state mandates, and how have you assisted others to organize the curriculum to make it fit into a school year?
- How have you been able to raise achievement in your classroom, grade level, and school?

- How have you shared assessment data with other teachers, parents, school board members, or the community?
- Describe any experiences you have had in hiring and preparing new teachers.
- Describe your experience with managing facilities and budgets.
- How have you involved parents and communities in the classrooms and schools where you have worked?
- Describe meetings that you have led.
- From your experiences, describe your vision for our school.
- How have you stayed current in the field of education?

Candidates should be able to answer based on their work as lead teachers, department heads, committee chairs, interns, or assistant principals.

When conducting a behavior-based interview, Clement recommends scoring candidates on evidence of their past experience, skill, and knowledge on the subject, perhaps using a 3-2-1 or 5-4-3-2-1 scale.

When answering behavior-based questions, Clements recommends two acronyms to structure one's thoughts:

• *PAR: Problem, Action, Results* – State the problem (*Our fifth-grade math scores were near the bottom in the district*), describe the action you took (*As lead teacher, I scheduled a meeting with the fifth-grade team, showed my colleagues how the state test was different from the tests we were accustomed to*), and tell the results (*We invited parents to an open house, walked them through what we learned from this year's test results, and told them about a free two-week summer math institute for their children*).

• *STAR: Situation, Task, Action, Result* (for questions that that don't pose a problem) – Describe the situation (*Sixth-grade teachers were dreading a new class that had a reputation as challenging*), describe the task you developed (*I had the team read Fred Jones's book, Tools for Teachers, over the summer and we discussed it during August PD time*), describe the follow-up action (*Teachers liked the book and decided to implement some of the strategies*), and tell the results (*Referrals for sixth graders went down and teachers feel mutually supported; they want the rest of their colleagues to read the book*).

Clement suggests that if you are asked a traditional question (*Tell me about yourself*) it's most effective to give experience-based answers – for example, details on a year when you raised student achievement, a situation where you guided colleagues in successful professional development, a situation where you handled a budget, specific evidence of your work ethic, and what professional journals you read.

"Interviewing for the Principal's Job: A Behavior-Based Approach" by Mary Clement in *Principal*, March/April 2009 (Vol. 88, #4, p. 14-17), no e-link available. Clement can be reached at mclement@berry.edu. For summaries of articles by Clement applying these principles to teacher interviews, see Marshall Memos 12, 87, 186, and 217.

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8. Should Principals Talk About "My Teachers" and "My School"?

In this provocative article in *Principal*, East Tennessee State University Professor Eric Glover chides himself on his tendency, when he was a principal, to refer to "my school" and "my teachers." He acknowledges that for many school leaders, this way of speaking is verbal shorthand – easier to say than "the teachers with whom I work" or "the teachers in our school." But he has come to believe that this way of speaking is seen by teachers as somewhat proprietary and paternalistic, a symbol of the power the principal holds over them.

"Although the professionals with whom you work are bureaucratically subservient to the principal position," says Glover, "principals should recognize that many or most of these teachers have a knowledge of teaching and learning that is equal to and likely greater than their own. Principals recognize that their job is to provide the resources teachers need to meet the complex needs of the diverse students in their classrooms. And yes, one of the important resources is supervision of instruction – helping teachers work through student learning problems and develop better instructional strategies. But having the responsibility to support teachers' growth through supervision does not make them *your* teachers."

There is a time when the possessive pronoun is appropriate, Glover says. It's when a teacher has helped us learn something important, correct an error, or see things in a new way. We do a teacher proud when we refer to him or her as "my teacher" in these situations, he says.

"Are They Really *Your* Teachers?" by Eric Glover in *Principal*, March/April 2009 (Vol. 88, #4, p. 58-59), no e-link available. Glover can be reached at glovere@etsu.edu.

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9. Getting the Most Out of a Tutoring Program

In this helpful *Kappan* article, researcher/author Edward Gordon gives some practical recommendations for maximizing the impact of tutoring programs. The final measure of a program, he says, is short-term and long-term improvement in students' daily classroom achievement.

• *Start with diagnosis*. Tutors should observe their students and run them through good assessments to get a detailed sense of learning obstacles, including subtle cognitive processing issues like dyslexia, visual/auditory perceptual issues, attention span, etc.

• *Run a structured program*. Gordon says research has found that "homework helper" and drill-and-practice tutoring are ineffective. He favors multi-session, systematic programs with short, frequent assessments – test-tutor-test – to track progress from session to session, modifying instruction accordingly. Tutors need to use continuous feedback to help students develop positive self-images as learners and work informally with students to help them develop good study habits and work more productively in their regular classrooms. Gordon mentions the Individualized Instructional Program (IIP) as an example of a highly structured program.

• *Use experienced teachers and prepare them well*. "Highly trained tutors have consistently produced better tutoring results," says Gordon. Unskilled tutors may produce

short-term gains, but students soon revert to their previous patterns; it takes an experienced teacher to change deeply ingrained habits. The best tutors are highly motivated to change students' learning trajectories, seeing themselves at "learning detectives," not homework helpers or test-prep specialists. Finland has instituted an exemplary tutoring program across the country, with one specially trained tutor for every seven classroom teachers. Any student who shows signs of falling behind gets immediate tutorial help; in any given year, 30 percent of students receive tutoring to get them back on track.

• *Tutoring works best in students' homes*. Gordon reports that tutoring produces the best long-term gains when students get it at home (versus at school, in public libraries, or in community centers). This is because tutors have a chance to help parents create a good homework environment and routine for their children, get insights into their children's learning difficulties, understand the assignments children are bringing home, and learn the best ways to support academic achievement. "These tutors were often the first teachers who had ever visited these homes," says Gordon. "For the first time, many parents understood that learning occurs day to day in small increments… As a result, the parents' role as primary motivators of their child's learning was enhanced even after the tutoring sessions ended." Of course parents need to be in the home during all tutoring sessions – although not in the same room. Gordon acknowledged that home tutoring isn't possible for all students, but if it's not, teachers should still try to provide coaching for parents so they are part of the improvement effort.

• *Use peer tutoring in the classroom*. This has great potential for improving achievement (for tutors as well as tutees), but only if peer tutors are trained and the program is highly structured. Here are some possibilities with peer tutoring:

- Peer tutors should use tutees' ideas and experiences to shape their approach.
- Teachers might assign tutor/tutee pairs complex, meaningful problem-based activities.
- Tutors should make their thinking explicit to tutees and encourage tutees to do the same through dialogue, writing, and drawing.
- Tutors should use a variety of assessments to understand how their tutees' ideas are evolving and give feedback at every stage.

"Five Ways to Improve Tutoring Programs" by Edward Gordon in *Phi Delta Kappan*, February 2009 (Vol. 90, #6, p. 440-445); the full article can be purchased at http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/kappan.htm. Gordon can be reached at imperialcorp@juno.com.

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10. Early Vocabulary Enrichment

In this article in *Harvard Magazine*, editor Elizabeth Gudrais emphasizes the importance of vocabulary development in pre-school and the primary grades. The most striking feature of the article is a graph showing the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test scores of 53 low-income, English-speaking American children as they moved from kindergarten to sixth grade (see link below for the graph). All the lines on the graph slope upward, but the gap between low- and high-scoring children is 60 points in kindergarten and virtually the same in sixth

grade – and the lines remain almost exactly parallel. In other words, children who started behind their peers remained equally behind throughout their elementary school careers. Small vocabularies entering school were highly correlated with low literacy achievement entering middle school.

The article quotes Harvard literacy expert Catherine Snow on the critical importance of parents and teachers teaching "sophisticated vocabulary" to young children to make up for early deficits and using effective strategies, including: introducing reading through familiar words in context (versus phonics exercises where students spell decontextualized words); teaching new vocabulary through stories (versus memorization); and exposing children to as many letters and words as possible – posters, signs, labeled objects, and books, books, books all over the classroom.

"The Developing Child" by Elizabeth Gudrais in *Harvard Magazine*, March/April 2009 (Vol. 111, #4, p. 34-41), http://harvardmagazine.com/2009/03/the-developing-child

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11. The Importance of Recess

In this *New York Times* article, Tara Parker-Pope reports on recent research linking exercise and fresh air to improved school performance:

• A study published in the journal *Pediatrics* study found that 15 minutes or more of recess had beneficial effects on 8-9-year olds' classroom behavior. "We should understand that kids need that break because the brain needs that break," said pediatrician Romina Barros, the study's lead researcher.

• A study in the *Journal of School Health* found a positive correlation between middle-school students' physical fitness from gym classes and recess and their academic performance.

• A study in the *Journal of Attention Disorders* found that ADHD children who took walks outside did better on tests of attention and concentration, especially if they took nature walks. Going out for a stroll worked as well as medication – or better.

"It's pretty clear that all human beings experience attentional fatigue," says Dr. Faber Taylor of the University of Illinois. "Our attention has to be restored from that fatigue, and there is a growing body of research evidence that nature is one way that seems particularly effective at doing that."

"The 3 R's? A Fourth Is Crucial, Too: Recess" by Tara Parker-Pope in the *New York Times*, Feb. 24, 2009 (p. D5), available with free registration at http://www.nytimes.com/

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12. Students Stand and Deliver in a Minnesota Elementary School

In this *New York Times* article, Susan Saulny reports on a Minnesota school that is experimenting with stand-up desks in some of its upper-grade classrooms. Inspired by stand-up workstations in some adult workplaces, teachers allow students at this school to sit on bar-stool-height chairs, or stand if they wish, resting their feet on swinging footrests under the

desks. The theory is that an "activity-permission" classroom lets antsy students move around without getting in trouble, helps with concentration, and burns calories.

So far, teachers are seeing positive signs as measured by discipline referrals and sick days. "At a stand-up desk," says Pam Seekel, a fifth-grade teacher, "I've never seen students with their heads down, ever. It helps with being awake, if they can stand, it seems."

"They Stand When Called Upon, and When Not" by Susan Saulny in the *New York Times*, Feb. 25, 2009 (p. A1, 15), available with free registration at http://www.nytimes.com/

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13. Short Item:

Mapping Africa – Harvard University recently launched the Africa Map project to make data about the continent easier to find and explore: http://africamap.harvard.edu. The maps have information about soil types, populations, transportation, and much more.

"Mapping Africa" in *Harvard Magazine*, March/April 2009 (Vol. 111, #4, p. 46)

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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.marshall8@verizon.net

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 37 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 44 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 about 50 issues a year).

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Publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
ASCD, CEC SmartBriefs, Daily EdNews
Catalyst Chicago
Changing Schools (McREL)
Ed. Magazine
EDge
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
Essential Teacher (TESOL)
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Educational Review
JESPAR
Journal of Staff Development
Language Learner (NABE)
Middle Ground
Middle School Journal
New York Times
Newsweek
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
Teacher Magazine (online)
Teachers College Record
The Atlantic Monthly
The Language Educator
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Tools for Schools/The Learning Principal