Marshall Memo 274

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
February 23, 2009

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"I was always distracted. I couldn't concentrate. Every time the light came on or it beeped, I felt this compulsion to stop everything I was doing."

U.S. Senator Thad Cochran on his BlackBerry (see item #1)

"Although children may claim that they can work better while listening to music or using media devices, research consistently shows that when individuals' attention is divided, their errors increase significantly and projects take twice as much time or more to complete."

Diane Coyl (see item #7)

"Learning depends on the active engagement of the learner. It is what the learner does that is learned, not what the teacher does."

Lorin Anderson (see item #5)

"We must act like we believe that it is not an option to fail and must change those practices in each and every school that attest to the contrary."

Oregon's 2008 Quality Education Commission Diploma Panel Report, in "Stateline: Getting Better at Implementation" by Kathy Christie in *Phi Delta Kappan*, February 2008 (Vol. 90, #6, p. 397-399), available at http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/kappan.htm

"Fixing broken windows and attending to the physical appearance of a school cannot alone guarantee productive teaching and learning, but ignoring them likely greatly increases the chances of a troubling downward spiral."

Stephen Plank, Catherine Bradshaw, and Hollie Young (see item #3)

1. Can a BlackBerry Addict Be a Focused, Productive Leader?

In this thoughtful *Newsweek* article following the news that President Obama is keeping his BlackBerry, Sharon Begley explores research on the effect of frequent interruptions and continuous partial attention on people's memory and intellectual functioning:

• If you take an interruption from a BlackBerry or e-mail alert at a natural break-point in something you're doing (for example, as you finish writing a paragraph), you probably won't be thrown off stride too much. But if you are interrupted in the middle of a thought, an intense conversation, or complex task, it can take as much as 15 minutes to get back to where you were. The delay comes from the time it takes to reactivate memories about the task (*Where was I?*) and "refocus cognitive resources that may have been usurped" by the interruption, says a 2007 University of Illinois study.

• The more intellectually demanding an interruption is, the more likely we are to be thrown off stride and not remember what we were doing. If the interruption is quick and trivial, it's easier to get back on task.

• Interruptions in the middle of listening or reading disrupt the process of coding information from short-term into long-term memory and also interrupt the formation of the neural connections needed to gain access to those memories in the future. This is why interruptions impair memory, according to a 2004 study done in Finland.

• "Continuous partial attention" is not an efficient way to think and work, says Begley. Rapid-fire switching among multiple tasks means we don't process information as well or think as effectively or creatively. "I was always distracted," said Senator Thad Cochran of Mississippi when he got a BlackBerry. "I couldn't concentrate. Every time the light came on or it beeped, I felt this compulsion to stop everything I was doing." He hated the way he and his colleagues were always checking their devices or typing during meetings.

• According to a 2006 study in Scotland, lower-status workers are more often stressed out and subject to impaired intellectual functioning from electronic interruptions because they are at the beck and call of their superiors and are anxious that they will miss an important text message or e-mail from the boss.

• Filling "dead-time" with electronic communication deprives us of a valuable activity – daydreaming. Studies have shown that many of our best out-of-the-box ideas come when the brain is idle and wanders into new territory and brings together unrelated facts and ideas. "If mental downtime becomes BlackBerry time, eurekas will be rarer," says Begley.

People who claim to be able to focus their full attention on important work or conversations while using their BlackBerries, says Begley, are either lying or their work just isn't that hard.

As for President Obama, he doesn't use his BlackBerry during meetings and briefings. Apparently he agrees with the directive given by Roger McNamee, a Silicon Valley entrepreneur, within his company: "You just turn notification off – that's what everybody does – and it doesn't bother you at all," he said. "I don't allow notifications for e-mail, text or any other application. As a result, the devices are not a distraction."

"Will the BlackBerry Sink the Presidency?" by Sharon Begley in *Newsweek*, Feb. 16, 2009 (p. 37)

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2. Dealing with the "Leadership Trap"

In this Harvard Graduate School of Education *Usable Knowledge* online discussion forum, education professor Jerome Murphy asks you to imagine your feelings – and possible actions – if you were a first-year principal and a few minutes before the end-of-the-year faculty meeting, you were handed a letter signed by half the staff criticizing your performance as principal. "You are stunned, flummoxed, and furious, given the school's progress and all your hard work," says Murphy. "Feeling bopped in the belly, but determined to stay in your job, *what would you do*?"

Most people's immediate reaction would be to stew over how this mess happened, rehash the year, blame the faculty, berate themselves for falling short, struggle to contain their own emotions, and bottle up their fury. Many would react defensively, trying to explain themselves to the faculty, giving short shrift to colleagues' perspectives.

Murphy calls this the leadership trap – the belief that to be a good leader, you must avoid feeling or looking weak. "Running away, suppressing your feelings, and hiding are common methods of control," he says. "Yet the more you struggle to control your insides, it turns out the more you undermine your outsides – your ability to build trust and take charge as a leader. The more you bury your stress, for instance, the more stressed and reactive you become."

To escape the leadership trap, says Murphy, we have to do the opposite of what we've been taught. Here are his suggestions:

- Pause, step back, and observe your aches; don't plunge into the thicket.
- Accept your troubling feelings and psychological pain as perfectly normal and accept that you need to deal with them before you feel better.
- Concentrate on what you can control – the appropriate expression of your feelings and your actions in pursuit of your values.
- Develop the poise to take effective action despite intense personal discomfort.

"Empirical research suggests that this toolkit can enhance your performance – and well being – as a leader," says Murphy.

To read the comments so far, and possibly contribute your own, click on the link below.

"The Leadership Trap" by Jerome Murphy in the Harvard Graduate School of Education's *Usable Knowledge* website, January 2009; you can read the full text and post comments at: http://www.uknow.gse.harvard.edu/blog/uk/2009/01/the-leadership-trap.html. For longer treatments of this theme, see Marshall Memos #70 and 90 for *Kappan* articles co-authored by Jerome Murphy and Barry Jentz.

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3. Applying the "Broken-Windows" Theory to Schools

In this intriguing article in *American Journal of Education*, Johns Hopkins University researchers Stephen Plank, Catherine Bradshaw, and Hollie Young report on a study of whether the "broken-windows" theory of neighborhood crime might work in schools. First published in 1982 (Wilson and Kelling), the broken-windows hypothesis is that if a window is broken and isn't fixed promptly (or if graffiti, abandoned cars, litter, and boarded-up buildings are not attended to), there is a much greater likelihood of criminal activity in the neighborhood because:

- Evil-doers take it as a sign that nobody is taking care of social order and they won't get caught if they break the law. "This hypothesis takes the somewhat dark view that a social system always has people lurking within it, or at its edges, who are looking for an opportunity to act on their deviant tendencies," say the authors.
- Visible signs of neglect make law-abiding residents fearful and erode their sense of collective efficacy, making it less likely that they will engage in collective action for social control.

Police departments in a number of U.S. cities have used this theory to combat crime, cracking down on low-level crimes and "quality of life" activities (turnstile-jumpers and squeegee men in New York City, for example) and attending promptly to abandoned cars and other signs of social disorder.

Plank, Bradshaw, and Young wondered if a similar dynamic might apply to school climate and order, and studied 33 urban middle schools over a two-year period. The bottom line: the broken-windows theory does apply to schools. When the upkeep of a school is neglected (trash in the halls, broken furniture, disrespect, etc.), marginal students take it as a signal to misbehave and students who want an orderly setting conducive to good teaching and learning become fearful, lose faith in adults' ability to keep the environment safe, have less of a sense of collective efficacy, and revert to self-protection and insularity. This affects the overall climate of the school and makes it much more difficult to orchestrate high achievement.

One interesting finding is that a climate of fear and mistrust for the authorities leads students to see the same actions in a less favorable light. For example, if the school's climate is anxious and fearful, a classmate's words or gestures are more likely to be interpreted as threatening, and a borderline student is more likely to act aggressively because he or she feels the need to show the world a bold face as a means of self-protection.

"Fixing broken windows and attending to the physical appearance of a school cannot alone guarantee productive teaching and learning," conclude Plank, Bradshaw, and Young, "but ignoring them likely greatly increases the chances of a troubling downward spiral."

"An Application of 'Broken-Windows' and Related Theories to the Study of Disorder, Fear, and Collective Efficacy in Schools" by Stephen Plank, Catherine Bradshaw, and Hollie Young in *American Journal of Education*, February 2009 (Vol. 115, #2, p. 227-247); this article can be purchased for $10 at http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/toc/aje/current.

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4. Two Teachers at Opposite Ends of the Spectrum

In her editor's introduction to this month's *Kappan*, Joan Richardson describes the teachers she had in fifth and sixth grades. Richardson had done well in the earlier grades, but the fifth-grade teacher gave her a very hard time. "She ridiculed me in class," remembers Richardson, "regularly told me in front of other students that I wasn't as smart as I thought I was, and occasionally laughed out loud at my comments, my projects, or my looks." Richardson's grades took a nose dive and she felt terrible about herself.

The next fall, her sixth-grade teacher, Mr. Russove, looked over her 5th-grade report cards and asked what happened. "My teacher didn't like me," Richardson replied. "Hmmm," he replied. "Well, I like you just fine. I think you're going to have a good year here."

She did. "Mr. Russove treated me no differently than any other student," says Richardson. "When I raised my hand, he called on me. When I didn't, he still called on me. He visited my home, just as he visited the home of every student in his class every year. He never once told any students that they were stupid. During a year when our beloved president was assassinated, Jack Russove provided a place where we felt protected and safe… I wish every kid had the good fortune to benefit from a Mr. Russove and that we could figure out how to fill our schools with more just like him."

"Thank you, Mr. Russove" by Joan Richardson in *Phi Delta Kappan*, February 2009 (Vol. 90, #6, p. 394), available for purchase at http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/kappan.htm

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5. Four Keys to Effective Teaching

In this *Kappan* article, University of South Carolina professor emeritus Lorin Anderson says that the upper-elementary grades bear the brunt of accountability and every minute must be used wisely. Contrary to common belief, he says, very few schools have reduced time for science and social studies, lunch and recess in response to NCLB pressures (see the chart in the article linked below). But this doesn't mean schools are using time well. Far too much time is spent on test-prep activities, he says. "There is no evidence that the amount of time spent in test preparation has a positive effect on student learning, achievement, or test performance," he says. "On the other hand, it's quite clear that teaching a curriculum aligned with state standards and using test data as feedback do have positive effects on test performance."

We need to move "from panic to productivity," says Anderson, and embrace four research-based principles of excellent teaching in English/language arts, math, science, and social studies:

• *Actively engage students in learning* – "Learning depends on the active engagement of the learner," says Anderson. "It is what the learner does that is learned, not what the teacher does." Here's what this looks like in each subject:

- ELA – Students are more engaged when teachers pay attention to and accommodate students' interests, needs, and concerns.
- Math – Students are more engaged when they're working on challenging problems.
- Science – Students are more engaged when they learn through inquiry.
- Social studies – Students are more engaged when they grapple with human issues.

In contrast, whole-class instruction emphasizing memorization of names, places, and dates won't produce engagement.

• *Emphasize meaningful learning* – Elementary students want things to *make sense*, says Anderson. Here are subject-by-subject implications:

- ELA – Things make sense when teachers spend more time coaching and less on direct teaching.
- Math – Things make sense when students are solving real problems in collaboration with peers.
- Science – Things make sense when instruction builds on students' current understanding of the natural world.
- Social studies – Things make sense when teachers use videotapes, streaming video, and films that include oral history projects.

Most state standards include higher-order Bloom objectives, with only about 10 percent of standards calling for recall and recognition.

• *Make teaching a conversation* – Dialogues (teacher-student or student-student) work better than lectures and demonstrations, says Anderson. "Dialogues are more engaging and enable students to develop understanding, as well as to check for understanding."

- ELA – Students learn better when they discuss what they have read.
- Math – Students learn more when they take turns acting as learner and teacher solving problems with peers.
- Science – Students learn more when they talk about their ideas, questions, or explanations.
- Social Studies – Students learn more when teachers use stories to teach history.

When teaching is a conversation, learners create meaning with their teachers.

• *Slow down* – "Learning takes time," says Anderson. "Trying to teach too much in too little time at too rapid a pace is likely to be frustrating for teachers and students alike." A slower, more relaxed pace works better in all four subjects:

- ELA – Students learn best when they take the time to reflect on what they are learning.
- Math – Students learn best when there's time for verbal explanations of solution strategies.

- Science – Students learn best when they can investigate and test their ideas in their own ways.
- Social studies – Students learn best when they're able to visit historical sites and study primary sources.

Many teachers believe they have to cover every standard to get their students to high levels of achievement. Not true! It's quality and depth that produce higher learning. "Teachers must stop hiding behind the specter of accountability and take responsibility for doing what's best for their students," concludes Anderson.

"Upper Elementary Grades Bear the Brunt of Accountability" by Lorin Anderson in *Phi Delta Kappan*, February 2009 (Vol. 90, #6, p. 413-418); the full article is available at http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/k_v90/k0902and.htm

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6. Standards-Based Grading That Benefits Students with Special Needs

"Teachers at all levels of education today struggle in their efforts to assign fair, accurate, and meaningful grades to students with special needs," write Thomas Guskey and Lee Ann Jung in this helpful article in *Theory Into Practice*. A perennial problem is mushing together three things: students' achievement with respect to standards, students' effort, and students' progress. "An A, for example," say Guskey and Jung, "may mean that the student knew what the teacher expected before instruction began (product), did not learn as well as expected but tried very hard (process), or simply made significant improvement (progress)." Teachers often combine these three criteria in an attempt to be fair and allow for individual differences, but such grades are confusing to students and parents.

To solve this problem, say the authors, we first need to develop a better grading and reporting system for *all* students that separately reports three ways of measuring learning:

- Product criteria – what students need to know and be able to do as measured by final exams, reports, projects, exhibitions, portfolios, or other assessments;
- Process criteria – what students did to reach their current level of achievement, including effort, behavior, punctuality with assignments, and work habits;
- Progress criteria – the value-added from the learning experience, or how far students have come (versus where they are).

Guskey and Jung report that when these three components are separated out, teachers find it easier to grade students, students take homework, effort, and other work habits more seriously, and parents have a better idea of what's going well and what needs work. It's especially helpful for students with special needs, since everyone has a clear sense of each student's status with respect to standards, progress, and effort.

To guide schools in this process, Guskey and Jung have spelled out five steps for inclusive grading:

• *First, establish clear standards for student learning that distinguish product, process, and progress goals*. Once students, families, and others know the criteria, students can then be graded in each of the three areas and the report card communicates more clearly.

• *Second, decide whether each standard needs to be adapted*. At least once a year, each special-needs student's IEP team should meet to decide which standards need to be adapted for the student.

• *Third, if adaptation is needed, decide whether it should take the form of accommodation or modification*. Accommodation means adapting the way the student learns the same standards as regular-education students (for example, using audiotapes to study a social-studies textbook passage or having more time for a test). Modification means changing the standards (for example, gearing down fourth-grade language arts vocabulary standards to make them manageable for an autistic student with appropriate special-education services).

• *Fourth, if standards need to be modified, develop an appropriate standard*. For example, a fourth grader might be graded on second-grade vocabulary standards.

• *Fifth, assign grades based on the modified standard and note on the report card which standards have been modified*. This gives families much better information on students' learning success and areas of need.

Guskey and Jung add that if a student has additional IEP goals (for example, initiating and maintaining interaction with peers), those goals should be specified and reported to families in a report card supplement.

"Grading and Reporting in a Standards-Based Environment: Implications for Students with Special Needs" by Thomas Guskey and Lee Ann Jung in *Theory Into Practice*, Winter 2009 (Vol. 48, #1, p. 53-62), no e-link available; Guskey is at Guskey@Georgetowncollege.edu.

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7. Upper-Elementary Students' Social and Psychological Development

In this *Kappan* article, California State University/Chico professor Diana Coyl describes four areas in which upper-elementary students develop. As children get older, they are less amenable to adult influence, says Coyl. As a result, the upper-elementary years are prime time for effective prevention and intervention before negative effects on social and academic success take hold.

• *Obesity and body image* – The number of obese children in this age group has doubled since 1980, reaching 17% in 2006, accompanied by an increase in high cholesterol, high blood pressure, type II diabetes, sleep apnea, and bone and joint problems, as well as teasing and low self-esteem. Some girls whose weight is within the normal range think they're fat because of the media's portrayal of ideal body types, leading to poor body image and unnecessary dieting.

• *Media and technology* – Increasing numbers of upper-elementary students have cell phones, personal computers, and electronic games. About 82 percent of seventh graders spend about 6½ hours a day immersed in electronic media. Many children multitask on several devices at once, which reduces the quality of attention to any one task or person. "Although children may claim that they can work better while listening to music or using media devices," says Coyl, "research consistently shows that when individuals' attention is divided, their errors increase significantly and projects take twice as much time or more to complete." Text

messaging and e-mailing reduce face time and provide less access to other people's emotions and the "rich language of nonverbal communication", and the time families spend in dinner-time conversation is much lower.

• *Self-understanding* – In the upper-elementary years, children increasingly see themselves in terms of social comparisons and interactions – *popular, nice, helpful, smart,* or *dumb*. They also get better at taking the perspective of another person, experiencing more than one emotion at a time, and developing appropriate emotional responses to different situations. All this influences children's academic self-concept, level of effort, and actual performance.

• *Social competence* – Bullying, whether physical, relational, or electronic, damages children's psychological and emotional well-being and school performance. Close friendships have the opposite effect, buffering children against emotional harm, boosting academic achievement, and developing self-assurance and social adjustment through companionship, common interests, loyalty, and intimate disclosure. Students without friends are less likely to be successful socially or academically, as are children involved in friendships characterized by conflict, dominating behaviors, rivalry, and betrayal.

"Kids Really Are Different These Days" by Diana Coyl in *Phi Delta Kappan*, February 2009 (Vol. 90, #6, p. 404-407), available for purchase at http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/kappan.htm

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8. What Is the Impact of Achievement Grouping in the Lower Grades?

In this article in *American Journal of Education*, University of Illinois/Urbana-Champaign researchers Christy Lleras and Claudia Rangel report on a national study of first- and third-grade students designed to see if leveled reading groups within classrooms affect the learning trajectory of African-American and Hispanic students. The study compared the reading achievement of upper-group and lower-group students with that of students in matched classrooms that used whole-class instruction for reading.

The theory of action behind achievement grouping is that it allows teachers to tailor instruction to students' current level and avoids having students read material that is too hard or too easy, thus supporting the progress of all students – a rising tide lifts all boats. Those who oppose achievement grouping say that students in the lower groups get lower expectations, a watered-down curriculum, and an overemphasis on skills versus higher-order thinking which, along with the psychological difficulties of being in what may be perceived as the "dumb" group, exacerbates the inequalities with which students enter school.

The Lleras/Rangel study found that students in the lower reading groups learned significantly less than similar students in non-grouped classrooms. This was particularly true for African-American and Hispanic students. Students in upper groups did slightly better than matched students in classrooms that used whole-class instruction. Lleras and Rangel conclude that achievement grouping is a gap-widener and contributes to the difficulties that black and Hispanic students experience in middle and high school.

[This finding is so different from my own experience that I ran it by Gay Su Pinnell, a literacy expert whose opinion I respect. I concur with her misgivings: "I guess to truly understand the study, you would have to know the answers to some questions, for example:

Were students grouped for all literacy activities or only for a short small-group reading lesson? In other words, low-entering students need access to age-appropriate reading materials through interactive read-aloud, literature discussion, and shared reading. What kind of instruction took place in small groups? Was it daily, systematic, rigorous teaching designed to accelerate progress? Or, did teachers simply slow down instruction, taking many days to read one short text? (Often, low-achieving students are 'starved' for text. They are trying to read something that is too hard and struggle through it slowly, taking many more days than average-progress students.) In other words, I'm not sure that the grouping itself is the issue. Rather, it is the instruction. I do think that it is a bit naïve to decide on the basis of a study like this that only whole-class instruction would be allowed. All students need differentiated instruction for part of the day. And they need excellent whole-group instruction that provides a rich input of language."]

"Ability Grouping Practices in Elementary School and African American/Hispanic Achievement" by Christy Lleras and Claudia Rangel in *American Journal of Education*, February 2009 (Vol. 115, #2, p. 279-304); this article can be purchased for $10 at http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/toc/aje/current.

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9. The Power of Intentional, Explicit Vocabulary Instruction

In this *Elementary School Journal* article, University of California/Davis and WestEd researcher Pamela Spycher reports on her study of vocabulary acquisition in two urban California kindergarten classes. In one class, the teacher explicitly taught 20 science vocabulary words as part of a unit on insects. The teacher read narrative texts multiple times, used visuals, and gave students rich explanations of the words, had students use them in a variety of formats, and linked the words to hands-on activities with insects. In the other class, the same teacher taught the science unit without explicit vocabulary instruction.

Not surprisingly, the children in the first class knew the 20 words better and had a better understanding of the underlying science concepts than the children in the control group. "Meaningful exposure to words in meaningful and relevant contexts is a critical component of deep word knowledge development," says Spycher. "The intervention lessons and follow up word-development activities in this study provided students with meaningful and relevant opportunities to use the words they were learning."

These were the texts used in the intervention class in each of the five weeks of this science unit, and the vocabulary words highlighted in each:

1. *Insects Change* by Trumbauer (2003) and *Life Cycle of a Silkworm* by Fridell and Walsh (2001) – amazing, describe, examine
2. *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Carle (1969) and *From Caterpillar to Butterfly* by Legg, Scrace, and Salayira (1998) – nibble, scrumptious, larva, pupa, hatch, metamorphosis

3. *The Grouchy Ladybug* by Carle (1977) and *A Ladybug's Life* by Himmelman (1998) – insist, argumentative, search, escape
4. *A Mealworm's Life* by Himmelman (2001) and *Busy, Buzzy Bees* by Fowler (2001) – wander, pollen, gather
5. *I Wish I Were a Butterfly* by Howe and Young (1987) and *About Insects: A Guide for Children* by Sill and Sill (2000) – magnificent, convince, similar, active

"Learning Academic Language Through Science in Two Linguistically Diverse Kindergarten Classes" by Pamela Spycher in *Elementary School Journal*, March 2009 (Vol. 109, # 4, p. 359-379), available for purchase at http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/toc/esj/current.

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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