Marshall Memo 905

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
October 4, 2021

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Requiring lesson plans burdens all teachers with a mandate many of them don't need, and burdens administrators with oversight work that has little value."
Justin Baeder (see item #1)

"Never say 'but' after saying something good."
Dan Rockwell (see item #7)

"There is more to reading than recognizing words."
Claude Goldenberg (see item #2)

"Higher education is at its best when it creates tomorrow's opportunities. It is at its worst when it reinforces today's inequalities."
James Fallows (see item #3)

"People are suckers for lists."
James Fallows (*ibid*.)

"The past is a foreign country: They do things differently there."
The opening line of L.P. Hartley's novel, *The Go-Between*, quoted in "What Should I Do with My Portrait of a Slaveholding Ancestor?" in The Ethicist by Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The New York Times*, October 3, 2021

"We have preferred to diminish slavery because of the uneasiness with which it sits beside our founding propositions about equality and liberty, and for the price we fear we might have to pay for exhuming it for full pedagogical display."
Allen Guelzo in "Teaching About Slavery" in *Education Next*, Fall 2021

"We cannot take the politics out of public schools, because decisions about what to teach and what to leave out are inherently political. Social studies curricula seem the most political of all, since they lack the precision of math and combine history with heritage."

Robert Maranto (*ibid*.)

"Educators today are trying to figure out how to portray slavery in America as an example of state-sanctioned oppression and one that is central to our history. Their challenge is to do that effectively while also celebrating how our nation's enduring principles have provided the world an indispensable model of how formerly enslaved people came to regularly produce some of the country's most influential leaders in virtually every facet of American life."

Ian Rowe (*ibid*.)

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1. Should Teachers Be Required to Hand in Lesson Plans?

In this article in *The Principal Center*, Justin Baeder notes an interesting difference in lesson plan policies. In schools with low staff turnover, teachers are less often asked to turn in their plans – perhaps, says Baeder, "because they've demonstrated other ways to satisfy administrators that they are teaching appropriate content and sufficiently planning ahead." In schools with high staff turnover (which often serve less-advantaged students), it's usually required that teachers turn in lesson plans.

Baeder believes this is part of a self-perpetuating feedback loop. In high-turnover, underresourced schools, teachers are often in the first or last decade of their careers. Administrators tend to have less confidence in these teachers and ask for lesson plans to keep tabs and manage them. That is a factor in some teachers deciding to leave. In low-turnover, better-resourced schools, most teachers are in the middle of their careers – ten or more years of experience and some time until retirement. Administrators have more confidence that these teachers will be prepared, and give them more autonomy. That's a factor in teachers staying and those schools having lower turnover.

So teachers across the U.S. work in two different worlds: one where teachers are generally trusted to be prepared, the other where they're burdened with turning in lesson plans. For the latter, the question is whether collecting lesson plans makes a positive difference to teaching and learning. Baeder has found no evidence that it does.

So what is administrators' motivation for making teachers turn in lesson plans? Accountability, pure and simple: making sure that teachers are prepared each day. Teachers hear the implicit message loud and clear: without a lesson plan requirement, they wouldn't be prepared. To most teachers, that is insulting.

Okay, a few teachers are winging it. What do administrators want from them (and actually, from all teachers)?

- Being fully prepared to teach each lesson;
- Teaching lessons that are part of units embedded in a well-articulated, ambitious scope and sequence aligned with standards;
- Each lesson containing learning targets, success criteria, and how learning will be assessed;
- Ultimately, students learning what they're supposed to learn.

The problem is that requiring this information from all teachers creates an extraordinary workload. For teachers, even the best prepared, there's an extra step. "Organizing oneself for the work ahead is one thing," says Baeder. "Making those plans comprehensible to someone else, who doesn't share the same knowledge of the curriculum, students, and the classroom, is something else entirely."

For administrators, things are even worse. Let's start with basic accountability – making sure all teachers are planning. A schoolwide lesson plan requirement involves:

- Establishing the expectation, "which may be costly in terms of leadership capital and goodwill," says Baeder.
- Creating a system for submitting lesson plans, which involves e-mails and notifications;
- Checking that each teacher has submitted plans;
- Following up with teachers who haven't;
- Implementing further measures for chronic noncompliance.

"This level of accountability is not necessary for many teachers," says Baeder, "yet it's insufficient for others, who may need closer oversight of their plans' quality."

For administrators to monitor the *quality* of lesson plans, there's additional work: getting right to work on hundreds of plans so feedback can be timely; consulting standards and pacing guides; giving e-mail or in-person feedback where needed and following up. Doing this for all teachers is an impossible task; besides, administrators know that only a few teachers need such concentrated attention. But is it fair to require that only poor planners and laggards turn in lesson plans? This is the dilemma that drives a schoolwide requirement. Here's how that plays out:

- Conscientious teachers take the time to turn in their plans, but they're already well prepared and don't need micromanagement.
- Administrators often fall behind on holding teachers accountable because of the sheer quantity of plans; in a school with 30 teachers, there are about 750 lesson plans a week.
- As a result, feedback to teachers is minimal or non-existent.
- Teachers who struggle with planning probably need other forms of support, but because of administrators' paperwork burden, these teachers may slip through the cracks.

The problem is clear, says Baeder: "Requiring lesson plans burdens all teachers with a mandate many of them don't need, and burdens administrators with oversight work that has little value." Teachers may not complain, but lesson plan requirements are a factor in attrition – which

results in more novice teachers who may need supervision and support on lesson planning. It's a doom loop.

Yes, being prepared is essential to successful teaching, and "planning one's lessons should be an expectation in all schools," says Baeder. He suggests six alternatives that address the basic goal of teachers being well prepared – without the needless paperwork:

• *Adopt solid curriculum materials*. If there isn't a well-developed curriculum (or a good textbook), it's asking a lot of teachers to create one on the fly. Most teachers, especially rookies, don't have the time or skills, and the result may be random activities and mediocre online materials. If there is a comprehensive curriculum, asking teachers to cut and paste lessons each week is not a good use of their time. The key: a well-developed curriculum that contains lesson plans and obviates the need for teachers to turn in their own.

• *Visit classrooms regularly*. "Instead of asking teachers to send you their plans, go and see what they're doing," says Baeder. "Classroom visits that are frequent (3 a day) and brief (5-15 minutes) can give excellent insight into what teachers are doing, while actually taking less time than reviewing lesson plans."

• *Check out classroom work, portfolios, projects, and hallway displays*. "If students seem to be producing little work," says Baeder, "or if assignments seem random and disconnected from standards and learning targets, that may indicate a planning problem."

• *Tap into same-grade/same-subject teams*. Colleagues who are teaching the same content and skills (within a school or across a district) are the best resource for teachers who are struggling with lesson planning.

• *Lean on PLCs*. Same-grade/same-subject teacher teams "should be the primary setting where teachers discuss what they're teaching and how they're teaching it," says Baeder. Dropping in on PLC meetings is an excellent way for administrators to monitor content and pedagogy – and also collegiality.

• *Make lesson planning part of an individual improvement plan*. The teacher's plan might focus on a particular area where mapping out lessons will help a teacher improve – content-area knowledge, curriculum resources, training on adopted materials. The supervisor might also mitigate factors that are causing the teacher to struggle – perhaps too many preps or excessive extracurricular duties.

"Alternatives to Collecting Lesson Plans: A Guide for School Administrators" by Justin Baeder in *The Principal Center*, September 21, 2021; Baeder can be reached at justin@principalcenter.com.

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2. Some "Known Unknowns" About Early Reading Instruction

In this article in *Education Week*, Claude Goldenberg (Stanford University) says the pandemic has reminded us of something important: scientific findings are never definitive, and there's always some uncertainty – viz the evolving advice from experts on sanitizing, social distancing, masks, boosters, and virus variants. There are ways to reduce the risk of infection, but there are things we don't understand and no guarantees. Actually, says Goldenberg, "This

is what gives science its credibility: the systematic search for answers coupled with a willingness to acknowledge uncertainty."

In the current debate about early reading instruction, several things can be said with reasonable certainty:

- Children who are poor readers at the end of first grade rarely become at least average-level readers by the end of elementary school.
- Early reading failure can be reduced if primary-grade teachers focus on foundational skills, without which students are at risk of developing reading difficulties.
- Foundational skills include the alphabetic principle, knowing letters and sounds, phonemic awareness, and knowing how to use letters and sounds to read words.
- All children benefit from some instruction in foundational skills.

"But just how much foundational skills instruction is needed, how intensely and explicitly, varies," says Goldenberg. "Some will require very little; some will require a great deal." This is one of a number of uncertainties; he identifies five more:

- One study found that solid instruction in foundational skills brings the lowest readers at least to the 30th percentile of word-reading skills – not exactly mastery.
- It's not clear how effective early intervention is in the absence of solid Tier 1 classroom instruction.
- Researchers have not adequately explored the role of language, comprehension, knowledge, and experience in preventing reading failure. "There is more to reading than recognizing words," says Goldenberg.
- Researchers haven't defined the conditions needed for virtually all students to acquire adequate word-level reading skills in the early elementary grades.
- We don't know how effective early interventions are in preventing reading failure from third grade on.

Returning to parallels with the pandemic, Goldenberg says, "The science of reading is not as clear on fundamental facts as is the science of Covid-19 immunology. Phonics, decoding, and associated skills provide no immunizations against poor reading outcomes. But they do provide a foundation upon which we must build… Most important, there's still a great deal we don't know about how to assure virtually all children become successful readers."

"Science of Reading Advocates Need to Acknowledge Uncertainties" by Claude Goldenberg in *Education Week*, September 29, 2021 (Vol. 41, #7, p. 17); Goldenberg can be reached at cgoldenberg@stanford.edu.

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3. Better Information on the "Best" Colleges

In this *Breaking the News* article, reporter James Fallows traces the history of how college admissions became a marker of privilege and status, setting off a frenzy among families around the world to achieve "positional good." He says this is a relatively recent phenomenon; before the 1950s, admissions to selective colleges was regional, family-based, and mostly from prep schools. Until around 1940, less than 10 percent of the U.S. population

had attended college, and less than five percent had a four-year degree (now it's 38 percent and rising).

Even when college admission expanded after World War II, driven by the GI Bill and other social changes, getting into college wasn't that big of a deal and remained quite regional. Things changed in the 1960s as elite colleges diversified and the competition for the limited number of seats in the most selective colleges intensified. The overwhelming majority of colleges and universities in the country accept most students who apply, but the desire to get a seat in name-brand universities went off the charts. "The resulting situation," says Fallows, "is distorting for those schools; it's insanely pressurized for students; and it serves no clear educational or public goal."

Around 1964, *U.S. News* launched its college rankings with the well-intentioned (and shrewd) goal of providing guidance around higher education. The rank-ordered college lists became immensely popular with college-aspiring families around the world. But a ranked list has huge problems, says Fallows: "Is Cal/Tech 'better' than Amherst? And which of them is 'better' than the University of Chicago? Or West Point? In the real world, the answer is: it depends on what you're looking for. But in the ranking world, one or the other would be 'better' than the others, and every year they could move up or down the charts."

This basic flaw notwithstanding, colleges began to take the rankings seriously, driving all kinds of distortions as they tried to game the system. The fact remains, says Fallows, that rankings are based "largely on the advantages their students already have, when coming into the school. What their test scores were, how tough a selective-admissions process they survived, the range of experiences their family background has exposed them to. Plus the advantage a college itself has, starting with its endowment." The *U.S. News and World Reports* rankings are based on measures of wealth, exclusivity, and prestige that are easily manipulated.

"People are suckers for lists," says Fallows, and rankings are here to stay, but he points to one idea for making the competition for seats in elite colleges somewhat less frenzied: *measuring results rather than input*. Starting in 2005, *The Washington Monthly* has published rankings based largely on how students do after they graduate. These rankings, which are published every year, aim to push colleges and universities to be engines of upward mobility, scientific progress, and democratic participation.

Fallows says that in his travels around the U.S., he's "repeatedly found that the crucial American education institutions of the moment are not the ones that dominate the 'best colleges' list. They're community colleges; 'career-technical' academies; land-grant universities; and others in addition to the crown-jewel research institutions and liberal arts colleges that still distinguish American education. Higher education is at its best when it creates tomorrow's opportunities. It is at its worst when it reinforces today's inequalities. More tools are now at hand to measure, publicize, and thus encourage more of the opportunity-expansion education can provide. Check them out."

"The College Rankings Racket" by James Fallows in *Breaking the News*, September 6, 2021

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4. Making Research Findings Clear and Informative for Teachers

In this article in *Educational Researcher*, Hugues Lortie-Forgues and Matthew Inglis (Loughborough University, UK) and Ut Na Sio (University of Sheffield, UK) report on their study of 250 teachers' preferences on how they are given data on the impact of educational interventions. (Teachers were asked for the clearest and most informative method of reporting results.) Here's how teachers rank-ordered several ways of presenting data; note in all five, the effect size was 0.15, which some consider "promising" for classroom interventions:

- *Threshold* – In the group that did not receive the intervention, 79% of students received a passing grade on the test, while in the group receiving the intervention, 83.2% of students received a passing grade on the test.
- *Months of progress* – The intervention had an average impact of 2 additional months' progress. In other words, the pupils receiving the intervention made, on average, 2 months' more progress than the pupils not receiving the intervention.
- *Test scores* – In the group that did not receive the intervention, the average standard score on the KS2 math test was 105.0 out of 120, while in the group receiving the intervention, the average standard score was 106.1 out of 120.
- *Percentile gain* – The intervention had an average impact of 6 percentile points. In other words, an average student (percentile 50) in the group not receiving the intervention would have scored 6 percentile points higher on the test (percentile 56) had the student received the intervention.
- *Cohen's U3* – 56% of the students in the group that received the intervention scored above the mean score of the group that did not receive the intervention.

Lortie-Forgues, Sio and Inglis add three cautionary notes.

First, teachers can misinterpret data presentations, believing that an intervention is more (or less) effective based on which method is used. "Reporting effects in terms of Months of Progress," say the authors, "is likely to lead to higher perceptions of effectiveness, whereas using the other metrics examined, particularly Test Score units, are likely to result in lower perceptions of efficacy."

Second, say Lortie-Forgues, Sio and Inglis, researchers can manipulate teachers' perceptions of an intervention's impact by the way they report the data. An intervention can be spun with teachers by choosing a metric that makes the results seem better than they really are.

And third, the Months of Progress approach, although it's one of the most popular with teachers, can be unreliable and misleading. A potential solution, suggest the researchers, is to use multiple metrics when reporting results to teachers – for example, months of progress and test scores.

"How Should Educational Effects Be Communicated to Teachers?" by Hugues Lortie-Forgues, Ut Na Sio, and Matthew Inglis in *Educational Researcher*, August/September 2021 (Vol. 50, #6, pp. 345-354); the authors can be reached at H.Lortie-Forgues@lboro.ac.uk, M.J.Inglis@lboro.ac.uk, and U.N.Sio@sheffield.ac.uk.

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5. An Analysis of DonorsChoose Crowdfunding

"America's education system is rife with resource inequality," say Sarah Wolff and Deven Carlson (University of Oklahoma) in this article in *Educational Researcher*. Expenditures per pupil range from under $9,000 to more than $20,000, and there is variation within states, with some schools spending two or three times more than others. "Such realities," say Wolff and Carlson, "regularly lead to scenarios where students in well-off districts have access to state-of-the-art technology, while their peers in less-affluent districts work with tattered textbooks and struggle to gain access to basic supplies."

As a direct response to these inequities, crowdfunding platforms have sprung up, serving as a "shadow financing" mechanism. Many teachers in underresourced schools are writing proposals to procure essential classroom supplies and technology. Wolff and Carlson gathered data on DonorsChoose – the largest education-focused crowdfunding organization in the U.S. – to learn more about supplementary funding. Here's what they found:

- Over the last two decades, more than 80 percent of U.S. public schools have posted a project with DonorsChoose (it was founded in 2000 by a New York City teacher).
- More than 4.3 million individual donors have contributed almost $1 billion to schools.
- Each year, about one-third of schools post a project on DonorsChoose.
- The teachers most likely to post projects are working in schools that serve less-advantaged students, in states with the lowest spending for public schools.
- Most projects focus on reading and math, but those proposals are slightly less likely to reach full funding than those in other subjects.
- Schools enrolling economically disadvantaged students are less likely have expensive projects funded.

Wolff and Carlson have several thoughts about these findings:

• Teachers who apply for crowdfunding are making a laudable effort to level the playing field for their students, but the hours they spend writing proposals are hours not spent on their students. "Teachers in more-advantaged environs," say Wolff and Carlson, "have the luxury of focusing almost exclusively on instruction, rather than procuring materials."

• "DonorsChoose is serving a purpose that should arguably be the responsibility of states' school finance systems," say the researchers. "There are both legal and moral cases to be made that teachers should have ready access to such materials to educate our nation's youth."

• The generous contributions made by crowdfunding donors unwittingly mask the continuing problem of inadequate funding by school districts and states. "Teachers' crowdfunding efforts," say Wolff and Carlson, "may mitigate discontent among parents and the public that would have otherwise been directed at public officials."

"Who Chooses DonorsChoose? Submission and Funding Patterns on the Nation's Largest Education Crowdfunding Platform" by Sarah Wolff and Deven Carlson in *Educational Researcher*, August/September 2021 (Vol. 50, #6, pp. 355-367); Carlson can be reached at decarlson@ou.edu.

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6. How School Librarians Can Maximize Their Impact in Unsettled Times

In this article in *Knowledge Quest*, Kristin Fontichiaro (University of Michigan) and Wendy Steadman Stephens (Jacksonville State University) suggest 40 ways that school librarians can maximize learning in a time of uncertainty. A selection:

- Realize your leadership potential – what Ewan McIntosh describes as "agile, whole-school interdisciplinary work that is needed to create the exceptional learning experience our young people deserve."
- Define success by the impact you make, not by how busy you are, leaning into the influential, urgent, critical tasks in your building role.
- Replenish your "surge capacity" by carving out time to connect with others, exercising, practicing hobbies, and living your faith.
- Retool your website so it works for students who are learning remotely.
- "Go spelunking" into a database to find advanced features, tuning into webinars, and updating assignments with new tools.
- Reconsider punitive overdue policies – for example, letting items auto-renew, permitting students to renew on their own, and ending fines.
- Adapt online lessons for offline students, partnering with special educators to keep lessons accessible for students with learning differences.
- Do a diversity audit of your collection and adapt selection criteria to reflect the richness of a global society and a multicultural community.
- Remember that parents are watching, with some ready to pounce on cultural differences between home and school; anticipate these conflicts and mediate a new level of family involvement in the curriculum.
- Consider taking on the role of supporting families as they master virtual connections with the school.
- Tune in to school board and public library meetings.
- Teach students how to explore multiple perspectives on the news, including Freedom Forum's collection of front pages.
- Curate e-books available to students at home, creating "bookshelves" of hand-picked titles.
- Explore how you will address widespread misinformation and disinformation – for example, by using Rand Corporation's Media Literacy Standards to Counter Truth Decay.
- Explore and share Google Scholar, a powerful search tool to find scholarly papers.
- Evaluate your media diet and that of your school with tools like Ad Fontes Media and AllSides.
- Build in some time for students to wonder, using digital resources like livecams or remote locales, Google Arts and Culture, and digitized museum collections.
- Do one thing you've put off. "You'll feel relief and accomplishment," say Fontichiaro an Steadman.

"Pushing Forward While Treading Water" by Kristin Fontichiaro and Wendy Steadman Stephens in *Knowledge Quest*, September/October 2021 (Vol. 50, #1, pp. 42-48); the authors can be reached at font@umich.edu and wstephens@jsu.edu.

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7. Some Words for Leaders to Avoid

In this *Leadership Freak* article, Dan Rockwell suggests turns of phrase that colleagues find annoying or worse:

- *I should have…* This is "backwards facing," says Rockwell. Better to say, "Next time…"
- *You should have…* Again, better to start with, "Next time…"
- *What can we do about that?* "It's insincere to say 'we' when you mean 'you,'" says Rockwell. Better to ask, "What could you do next?"
- *It's simple. It's easy.* What's simple to you may be difficult for others. "Judge people through the lens of their experience and strength, not yours," says Rockwell.
- *I don't care. Whatever.* People who say this often *do* care but are afraid to admit it.
- *Don't you agree?* This question pressures people to agree or insults their intelligence.
- *Failure is not an option.* "People set low goals when failure is not an option," says Rockwell. Better to foster a culture where people feel safe to learn from mistakes.
- *But…* "'But' is an eraser," he says. "Never say 'but' after saying something good. Try using 'and' when you're tempted to use 'but.'"
- *I didn't mean to…* This is a way of not taking responsibility. "Say what you intended, not what you didn't intend," says Rockwell. "Own it and move on."
- *Nice job.* Be specific when giving compliments; what was "nice" about it?

"12 Things Smart Leaders Don't Say" by Dan Rockwell in *Leadership Freak*, September 30, 2021; Rockwell can be reached at dan@leadershipfreak.com.

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8. Short Items:

a. Smithsonian Resources for Teaching and Learning – The Smithsonian Institution and PBS have teamed up to make extensive materials available online. Check out this link for free PK-12 resources on coral reefs, ocean ecosystems, air and space exploration, African-American history and culture, and more.

Spotted in "Smithsonian at Home" in *Independent School*, Spring 2021 (Vol. 80, #3, p. 17)

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b. A Website for English Teachers – On her Drawings of… site, Boston teacher Lillie Marshall (yes, I'm her proud father) tackles homophones, figurative language, commonly confused words, and literary devices, accompanied by cartoons and explanations. Check it out!

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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
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
English Journal
Exceptional Children
Harvard Business Review
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Independent School
Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Knowledge Quest
Language Arts
Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance)
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
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