Marshall Memo 1115

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
December 1, 2025

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Quotes of the Week

"The best way to learn something well is to work beside someone who does it well."
Joseph Viteritti in *Radical Dreamers: Race, Choice, and the Failure of American Education* (Oxford, 2025, p. x)

"One of the cardinal characteristics of effective schools is that they are as anxious to avoid things that don't work as they are committed to implementing things that do."
Ronald Edmonds (quoted in *ibid*.)

"Anger is a check-engine light… Warning lights don't cause problems. They reveal them."
Dan Rockwell in "Anger: Your Fierce Ally" in *Leadership Freak*, November 25, 2025

"I cannot in good faith allow students to stare at screens for hours at school when I know that when they go home, the majority of students spend the majority of time watching screens."
Landon Durtschi, New York City high-school teacher, quoted in "350 Teachers on How Screens Take Over Classrooms" by Claire Cain Miller and Sarah Mervosh in *The New York Times*, November 15, 2025

"A machine that makes a child feel understood may offer comfort, but it doesn't teach the child how to understand others."
Isabelle Hau and Daniel Schwartz (see item #4)

"Assigning traditional essays is unethical in the age of AI."
Scott Carlson and Matthew Brophy (see item #3)

"Instructors must confront the startling truth that never again will college graduates need to write a polished essay entirely on their own, They will always have AI as their co-author. In the age of AI, the value of writing lies less in grammar and polish than in grappling with

comprehension, synthesis, and original insight."
Scott Carlson and Matthew Brophy (*ibid*.)

"Never doubt that a small group of concerned citizens can make a difference. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."
Margaret Mead (quoted in item #1)

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1. What Happens When Teachers Disagree with a Mandated Curriculum?

In this *Review of Educational Research* article, Andrew Huddleston (Abilene Christian University) and four colleagues report on their study of the ways that some teachers engage in "principled resistance" to implementing mandated materials. An example: a teacher believed the highly scripted Open Court curriculum didn't meet her students' cultural and individual needs and implemented a creative literature-based curriculum with extensive student writing. Despite her kids scoring well on state tests, the teacher's contract was not renewed because she wasn't a team player; she left the profession.

"Although we greatly empathize with the teachers in this review who engaged in acts of principled resistance," say Huddleston et al., "we are not advocates for an anarchical approach in which teachers do whatever they want for any reason. We recognize that even within a student-centered classroom, direct instruction still has a place, and a provided curriculum can be helpful, especially for new teachers." Indeed, research has shown that a "guaranteed and viable curriculum" correlates with student achievement, and aligning curriculum across classrooms and grades can be part of an effective strategy for equitable student learning. On the other hand, test prep and rigid curriculum mandates can actually make test scores go down.

With those caveats, the researchers explore the literature on principled resistance and identify three reasons some teachers resist curriculum mandates, with an example for each:

• Students' needs not being met – A teacher implementing the Lucy Calkins *Units of Study* curriculum believed the writing prompts were contrived and artificial, and she found ways to spark students' writing ideas through conversations with each other.

• Social justice – Three bilingual teachers felt that monolingual instruction wasn't meeting the needs of their emerging bilingual students and advocated with their colleagues on the importance of a 50/50 biliteracy approach. In another instance, high-school social studies teachers advocated for a justice-oriented ethnic studies curriculum focused on the surrounding community.

• Culturally responsive pedagogy – Two urban fifth-grade teachers objected to the test prep toolkit they were required to use and implemented a culturally responsive interdisciplinary unit that made connections to students' lived experience.

From their review of numerous studies, Huddleston and his co-authors describe these "models of resistance" used by teachers who have issues with curriculum materials:

- Strategic compliance – they go along while believing their students aren't served well.
- Compliance with frustration – teachers are deeply unhappy but feel powerless to resist.
- Compliance with complaint – they voice their concerns but aren't listened to.
- Resisting covertly – behind closed doors, teachers supplement or alter the material.
- Strategic compromise – they use parts of the required curriculum but not others.
- Adjusting pacing – teachers make changes in how time is allotted.
- Rearranging – they change the sequence and substance to align with their beliefs.
- Supplementing – teachers add materials and techniques they believe are necessary.
- Omitting – they skip certain elements and substitute their own ideas.
- Hybridizing – teachers blend their own ideas with the required curriculum.
- Persuading – they make the case for different materials to colleagues and leaders.
- Going public – teachers use social media to try to influence parents and policymakers.
- Collective action – they rally others to opt out of curriculum or testing.
- Overt and outright rejection – teachers refuse to implement test prep or materials.
- Forced to leave – as in the case above, a contract is not renewed or the teacher is fired.
- Transferring – teachers move to a school with a more-sympatico curriculum.
- Leaving teaching – they decide the struggle is not worth it and change profession.

Did these forms of teacher pushback – from grudging compliance to putting their jobs on the line – result in better student outcomes? Unfortunately, say Huddleston et al., "none of the studies we located compared the student performance of teachers who resisted curricular mandates with those who did not." It's possible, they say, that some of the changes teachers made did more harm than good. Clearly more research is needed because in some cases, the opposite occurs: teachers persuade school leaders to make changes that improve student achievement.

In the meantime, what are the implications of this study for school leaders? One guiding principle, say Huddleston et al., is watching for situations where teachers make the case for adaptations that are within the spirit and intent of a curriculum. "Being faithful to the purpose of a program," they say, "addresses the need for a schoolwide focus and cohesion while at the same time carving out space for teacher discretion, decision-making, and necessary modification."

The big questions raised by this study: what's best for students, how that's measured, and who gets to decide. "Principled resistance," say Huddleston et al., "is not laziness, stubbornness, or resistance to change," but teachers who believe a mandated curriculum is harmful won't help their students by suffering in silence or quitting. They're most likely to improve things for students when they join with colleagues and make the case for curriculum

changes that improve not only test scores but also students' deeper learning and future well-being.

The article closes with a quote from Margaret Mead: "Never doubt that a small group of concerned citizens can make a difference. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

"Teachers' Principled Resistance to Curricular Control: A Theoretical Literature Review" by Andrew Huddleston, Stephanie Talley, Sara Edgington, Emily Colwell, and Allison Dale in *Review of Educational Research*, December 2025 (Vol. 95, #6, pp. 1213-1250); Huddleston can be reached at andrew.huddleston@acu.edu.

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2. Teachers Experiment with Alternative Endings to *Animal Farm*

In this article in *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, Andrea-Roxana Bellot and Mar Gutiérrez-Colón (Universitat Rovira, Spain) report on their study of first-year students in a Spanish public university studying George Orwell's allegorical 1945 novel, *Animal Farm*. Two cohorts of students read and discussed the book. Then the first cohort, working in pairs, created alternative endings to the book, swapped papers with another team, and used a detailed rubric to analyze it in terms of social and historical context, literary devices, and characterization.

The second cohort, also working in pairs, fed the prompt that was given to the other cohort into ChatGPT – *Invent an alternative ending for Orwell's Animal Farm; Write up to 800 words* – and then analyzed the output using the same rubric. Comparing the work of the two cohorts, the researchers had these insights:

• The first cohort clearly exerted more creative effort than the second, imagining and writing their own original endings to *Animal Farm*, and the rubric analysis added to their intellectual work.

• The two cohorts' analysis of literary devices and characterization were similar (albeit with different content), but the historical analysis of the cohorts was quite different. The former hewed closely to Orwell's plot, reflecting on the Russian Revolution and Stalinism and ending gloomily. "The pigs represent the corrupt leadership of the Soviet Union" wrote one pair of students. "Napoleon becomes like a God, with everyone praising him," wrote another.

• By contrast, the endings generated by ChatGPT were more optimistic, with the animals emerging from the crisis with a more-hopeful and utopian outcome. "In the ending, there is hope, something that does not appear in the original one," said one pair of students. "The farm thrived, with education and collective decision-making prioritized, ensuring no one would repeat the mistakes of the past," wrote another. A third noted, "Stalin was never overthrown by a revolution or a coup, which makes this ending less accurate to the historical parallels."

• Looking at their students' overall appraisal of the alternative endings, Bellot and Gutiérrez-Colón found that most students in the peer-generated group didn't like the dour endings, while most students in the AI-generated endings group liked ChatGPT's upbeat inventions. These differences reflected students' distinct reactions to the exercise, with the

peer-generated group taking a more conventional approach and the AI-generated group appreciating the fresh take that ChatGPT brought to the book's conclusion – while expressing skepticism about its plausibility.

• "AI can complement, not replace existing pedagogical methods," conclude Bellot and Gutiérrez-Colón, "by offering students new modes of access and insight into literary texts." This exercise provides "a window into evolving literacy practices. Their attention to tone, theme, and style signals a growing awareness of how meaning is constructed and contested, in both human- and machine-generated texts. These responses highlight an emergent form of critical literacy, where students move beyond passive reading to become evaluators of authenticity, intention, and genre."

"All Assignments Are Equal, but Some Assignments Are More Equal Than Others: Exploring Student Responses to AI and Peer-Generated Alternative Endings to Orwell's *Animal Farm*" by Andrea-Roxana Bellot and Mar Gutiérrez-Colón in *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, January/February 2026 (Vol. 69, #4, pp. 1-44); Bellot can be reached at andrearoxana.bellot@urv.cat.

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3. Orchestrating Authentic Student Writing in the Age of AI

"Assigning traditional essays is unethical in the age of AI," say Scott Carlson and Matthew Brophy in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. That's because the use of AI tools to write essays with little or no student effort has become a "subversive epidemic," with the true victims being "honest, hard-working students who are now disadvantaged in compromised classrooms," say Carlson and Brophy, "This inequity is compounded when only well-resourced or tech-savvy students can fully exploit these tools."

It's still essential that students learn to write, they believe: "The ability to clearly communicate ideas is not only an effective way to convey arguments and persuade people, but it also indicates that one has processed and absorbed the ideas shared – one of the reasons writing has long been a key part of the curriculum." So must all student essays now be written in class under the watchful eye of teachers? That's impractical, say Carlson and Brophy, but so is trying to catch cheaters with AI-detection tools, which are notoriously unreliable.

Instead, they suggest the VOICE framework (which Brophy is using in his classes at High Point University) to ensure authentic student writing in the age of AI:

• **V**erification of process – Use tools like Google Docs and Draftback to monitor students' writing as it unfolds – "each thoughtful pause, revision, and rephrasing part of the paper's cultivation," they say. "This not only deters undetectable cheating but also affirms writing as iterative and evolving."

• **O**wnership through reflection – Have students give brief oral presentations to explain in their own voice their writing decisions and idea development.

• **I**terative stages – Students work through progressive phases – low-stakes reading-analysis papers, proposals, drafts, and revisions – which scaffold learning and make last-minute outsourcing to ChatGPT less likely. Students are graded on their process as well as the

final product.

• **C**ollaborative engagement – Peers review drafts, which makes writing social and accountable. "When students explain their ideas to each other," say Carlson and Brophy, "they clarify those ideas for themselves. This also adds to motivation by looping peers into their process and helps lighten the burden on the professor. Further, it cultivates a classroom community based on trust and sharing of ideas."

• **E**mphasis on ideas over mechanics – "Instructors must confront the startling truth that never again will college graduates need to write a polished essay entirely on their own," say the authors. "They will always have AI as their co-author. In the age of AI, the value of writing lies less in grammar and polish than in grappling with comprehension, synthesis, and original insight."

"Stop Assigning Traditional Essays" by Scott Carlson and Matthew Brophy in *The Edge: The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 16, 2025; Brophy is at mbrophy@highpoint.edu.

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4. Can GenAI Foster More-Creative, Connected, and Caring Schools?

In this article in *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Isabelle Hau and Daniel Schwartz (Stanford University) say there's a danger that all artificial intelligence will do is teach skills more efficiently. The problem is that AI does that very well – eventually better than humans. Instead, say Hau and Schwartz, we should use AI to improve "learning in all its richness and complexity, including to care, connect, and flourish in a changing future." To do that, we need "a more-expansive view of human intelligence grounded in appreciation, understanding, and adaptability" – specifically:

• *Appreciation* – Truly enjoying a sunset, a painting, or a clever idea "cannot be outsourced," say Hau and Schwartz.

• *Understanding* – This, too, "demands more than surface-level information." A good reader uses background knowledge and a lifetime of experience to make meaning of incoming perceptions.

• *Adaptability* – "The capacity to change one's approach in the face of new contexts will be essential in this new era," they say. Currently, too much teaching prioritizes recitation. Instead of assessments that look for right answers, we need adaptive tests that assess students' ability to try new approaches and be creative in the moment.

"Creativity is a deep form of adaptability," continue Hau and Schwartz. "It means trying new approaches, generating ideas, seeking feedback, and attending to constraints on reasonable solutions… The rise of generative AI opens profound new possibilities for how we learn, what we value, and who gets to create."

But how that plays out depends on how educators handle two crucial insights on how people learn:

• Creation-centered learning – Fifty years of research, say the authors, have shown us the limits of just transmitting knowledge and rewarding or punishing student based on how

well they absorb it. Our new understanding emphasizes the importance of interaction and feedback and how "learning the tools in one's environment shapes the ability to think… the context of learning and one's standing within it."

• The social element – "Relationships matter," say Hau and Schwartz. "Social exchange drives many forms of learning, whether as a motivator or as a prosocial model that children can emulate. Belonging is not an add-on; it is foundational… Even brief interventions aimed at belonging lead to long-term academic gains, particularly for students from under-represented groups." AI can help by facilitating social interactions – or harm if used as "'nanny tools' to monitor digital behaviors, prioritizing surveillance over genuine connection, or as forms of illusory and emotionally manipulative companionship."

In short, creation and sharing are crucial ingredients in this new era. Project-based learning includes both elements, with students collaborating to solve a problem or create a product, with helpful peer and teacher feedback built into the process. Generative AI can support teachers as they manage multiple projects, and enrich students' work by helping them with research and simulations.

"Creation-centered learning," say Hau and Schwartz, "also helps develop abilities useful for adaptation, such as persistence, experimentation, goal-setting, feedback-seeking, and novel-solution generation. In this vision, students command the AI – they use it to augment their ideas and imagination… This depends on building tools that support educator decision-making and instruction, elevate student agency, and scaffold pathways for creation and connections for all learners."

"Humans are naturally adaptive and profoundly social," continue the authors, "but these traits must be nurtured. Creating with AI has the potential to enhance our adaptability. But can AI also support the development of our social abilities" – helping us to belong, empathize, and care for one another? Unfortunately, it sometimes does the opposite: "A machine that makes a child feel understood," they say, "may offer comfort, but it doesn't teach the child how to understand others."

GenAI, used wisely, can help us create schools that are more creative, connected, and caring, conclude Hau and Schwartz, "but only if we move beyond the lure of efficiency-driven automation and instead design with intention – anchored in the science of learning, recognizing the complex differences among learners, and grounded in a deep belief in human potential."

"Avoiding Education's Turing Trap" by Isabelle Hau and Daniel Schwartz in *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Winter 2025 (Vol. 24, #1, pp. 65-66); the authors can be reached at ihau@stanford.edu and Daniel.Schwartz@stanford.edu.

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5. Timothy Shanahan on Students Reading Challenging Texts

In this online article, Timothy Shanahan (University of Illinois/Chicago) responds to a teacher worried that students will be frustrated and discouraged if they're required to read material above their current level. "I don't want to undermine anybody's motivation or love of

reading," says Shanahan, and he acknowledges that reading difficult texts can be frustrating and sometimes leads to off-task behavior and discipline problems, especially if students are trying to do so without support. But easy, boring texts can also lead students to act out, especially if they sense that their teacher has a negative mindset about "low readers."

"Let's face it, motivation is complicated," says Shanahan. "Difficulty can lead both to withdrawal and intensification of effort." Students can feel incompetent struggling with a difficult text or get a sense of efficacy mastering it. They can feel inept or be driven by a desire to please a teacher, learn new information, and connect with peers. Simply adjusting the instructional level of a text to a child's "just right" level doesn't solve the problem of motivation – and risks the stigma of being assigned to a low reading group. Most important, leveling won't accelerate students' reading level and give them the feeling that they're catching up.

"Instead of avoiding challenge," says Shanahan, "I think it better to introduce it intentionally, placing students in books that they cannot already read well" – and then provide scaffolding and emotional support that encourage persistence and build skill, fluency, and background knowledge. Three important elements:

- Choose texts that connect with students' interests and are worth reading.
- Give students a sense of the progress they're making, emphasizing a growth mindset.
- Don't overdo it; not every text has to be above level, especially independent reading.

"Won't Challenging Texts Discourage Young Readers?" by Timothy Shanahan in *Shanahan on Literacy*, November 29, 2025; Shanahan can be reached at shanahan@uic.edu.

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6. Pushing Back on the "Culture of Poverty" Narrative

In *Educational Researcher*, Christopher Hu and Diane Hoffman (University of Virginia/Charlottesville) say that in the 1960s, the "culture of poverty" was often blamed for lower-income children doing less well in school than their middle-class peers. The theory was that because poor parents didn't talk to their children as much, failed to develop concepts and vocabulary (fewer books in the home and the often-discussed "word gap"), and home environments were often unstable and chaotic, the children of poverty had lower reading and math achievement.

Recent brain research has reinforced this theory, with data from MRIs correlating poverty with a number of structural deficits, including children's language and memory development. The dominant narrative points to "deficits in familial nurturance and linguistic stimulation," say Hu and Hoffman. "Both the old and new culture of poverty narratives locate the explanation of poverty at the individual level… Both shift the focus of analysis and intervention away from broader conditions of environmental lack to the assumed cultural traits and characteristics of home and family." Because brain imaging seems objective, authoritative, and "evidence-based," the culture of poverty narrative has gained new credibility.

There's no question that poverty has negative effects on children's development, say Hu and Hoffman, and they urge greater attention to leveling the playing field in terms of food security, housing, social services, infrastructure, and the justice system. But the authors worry about a broad pathologizing of the home environments of less-advantaged children and attempts to "fix" kids through a variety of school and home initiatives. "Relying on ideas about brain plasticity," they say, "these interventions target the brain as the locus of change rather than the contexts and environments that construct these supposed deficiencies."

A better approach, say Hu and Hoffman, is focusing on children's strengths and drawing attention "to the positive and adaptive responses of children in poverty that emphasizes identity-based adaptations, hidden talents, opportunities for learning, and supports for developing self-reliance or attentional strategies to deal with stress – all of which are equally plausible interpretations of brain findings if the discursive paradigm were to shift."

Their conclusion: "We strongly urge brain science researchers, educators, and education researchers alike to carefully interrogate the language used to describe children and families living in poverty and to uproot the cultural assumptions that have been taken-for-granted… As we have suggested, a broader and more humanistic lens that focuses on diverse cultural pathways for learning and development can help us to approach the brain as one dimension among many that is important for advancing our research on education."

"Poverty and the Brain: The New/Old Language of Cultural Deficit" by Christopher Hu and Diane Hoffman in *Educational Researcher*, December 2025 (Vol. 54, #9, pp. 540-545); Hoffman can be reached at dmh3a@virginia.edu.

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7. A Revised Definition of Dyslexia

This article in *Language Magazine* reports on the International Dyslexia Association's release of the 2025 revision of its 2002 definition of dyslexia. The previous description has guided research, educational policy, legislation, and families since 2002. The new definition, the result of a year's analysis and research guided by more than 100 advisors from a wide range of disciplines and perspectives in the dyslexia community, is intended to be international in scope, research-based, and accessible. Here's the new definition:

Dyslexia is a specific learning disability characterized by difficulties in word reading and/or spelling that involve accuracy, speed, or both and vary depending on the orthography. These difficulties occur along a continuum of severity and persist even with instruction that is effective for the individual peers.

The causes of dyslexia are complex and involve combinations of genetic, neurobiological, and environmental influences that interact throughout development. Underlying difficulties with phonological and morphological processing are common but not universal, and early oral language weaknesses often foreshadow literacy challenges.

Secondary consequences include reading comprehension problems and reduced reading and writing experience that can impede growth in language, knowledge, written expression,

and overall academic achievement. Psychological wellbeing and employment opportunities also may be affected.

Although identification and targeted instruction are important at any age, language and literacy support before and during the early years of education is particularly effective.

What's different in the new definition? Some salient points:

- It moves away from the IQ-discrepancy model, in which dyslexia was diagnosed when there was a gap between a person's performance and their IQ score.
- It recognizes that difficulties exist on a continuum, despite effective instruction.
- It emphasizes the importance of early identification and intervention.
- It includes the biological and environmental influences of dyslexia.
- It expands the recognition of its secondary consequences, including psychological well-being and vocational opportunities.

For more information, see https://dyslexiaida.org.

"Dyslexia Redefined" in *Language Magazine*, November 2025 (Vol. 25, #3, p. 10)

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8. Mindsets Associated with Cheating and Not Cheating in School

In this *Review of Educational Research* article, Li Zhao (Hangzhou Normal University) and seven co-authors report on their meta-analysis of 80 studies in 27 countries on academic cheating from kindergarten to university. Their conclusion: students who have a performance orientation – comparing themselves to other students and competing with them – are more likely to cheat. Conversely, students who have a learning orientation – focused on the intrinsic value of the subject matter – are less likely to cheat. The researchers found that these tendencies were moderated by cultural factors across countries, including the degree of power distance, individualism, avoidance of uncertainty, short-term orientation, and masculinity.

"Academic Cheating, Achievement Orientation, and Culture Values: A Meta-Analysis" by Li Zhao, Xinchen Yang, Xinyi Yu, Jiaxin Zheng, Haiying Mao, Genyue Fu, Fang Fang, and Kang Le in *Review of Educational Research*, December 2025 (Vol. 95, #6, pp. 1292-1336); Zhao can be reached at zhaoli@hznu.edu.cn.

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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 54 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 early Tuesday (there are 50 issues a year). Every week there's a podcast and HTML version. Artificial intelligence is not used.

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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
ASCD SmartBrief
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
Ed Magazine
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
English Journal
Exceptional Children
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Educational Review
Independent School
Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Kappan (Phi Delta Kappan)
Knowledge Quest
Language Arts
Language Magazine
Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance)
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
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