

Marshall Memo 898

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
August 16, 2021

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Quotes of the Week

“Have I been too slow? Should I have pushed harder, and jammed people more to produce more quickly? If you push people too hard, you can shut them down. It’s getting that balance right.”

Thomas Payzant, Boston superintendent 1995-2006, in a *Boston Globe* interview at the end of his tenure. Payzant died last week at 80.

“If your third grader can’t read, that’s a problem. If your algebra student doesn’t have automaticity with multiplication, that’s a problem. If your physics student doesn’t know algebra, that’s a problem. If your high-school graduate isn’t prepared for college or work, that’s a problem. Schools and districts and states and other professionals in the education sector should be figuring out how to fix this problem, not arguing about what to call it (or worse, pretending that it isn’t one).”

Dale Chu in [“Can Changing Our Eduspeak Help with Post-Pandemic Schooling?”](#) in *Education Gadfly*, August 18, 2021

“What do you wish you could spend less time on?”

A suggested question for a “stay interview” to surface workplace problems, in [“We’re in a Bold New Era at Work”](#) by Kevin Delaney in *Time*, July 23, 2021

“Even if we don’t want them to, children do notice differences in race and skin color. And that means that attempts to suppress discussions about race and racism are misguided. Those efforts won’t eliminate prejudice. They may, in fact, make it worse.”

Melinda Wenner Moyer in [“Really, Talk to Your Kids About Race”](#) in *The New York Times*, July 18, 2021

1. Ideas for the “New Normal”

“The past year we learned that everything in schools that looks fixed and hardened is actually contingent and flexible,” say Justin Reich (Massachusetts Institute of Technology Learning Systems Lab) and Jal Mehta (Harvard Graduate School of Education) in this Teaching Systems Lab update of their earlier report (July 27, 2020, summarized in Memo 847). “Grades, curriculum, seat time, schedules, settings, groupings – all of these features can be changed. For all the suffering and hardship of the past year, some of the changes we made really were for the better, paving the way toward reinventing more humane school communities.”

Those insights notwithstanding, say Reich and Mehta, there are three possible scenarios as schools begin the 2021-22 year:

- Returning to the status quo before the pandemic;
- Focusing on remediation of learning loss;
- Using the events of the last 19 months to reflect and reinvent.

To help map the way forward, Reich and Mehta interviewed 50 teachers, asked 200 teachers to interview their students (about 4,000 in all), and facilitated ten design meetings with groups of educators, students, and parents. What emerged was a clear preference for the third scenario, with an emphasis on healing, community, and “humane reinvention” in schools.

“Students and teachers,” say the authors, “told us that the best things about the pandemic year were when it created opportunities to slow down and build real relationships between teacher and students and their families, and when students were given more independence to be in charge of their learning, their bodies, and their development... Overall, we were struck by how different students’ accounts were from prevailing narratives. Young people talked about loss in profound ways, but in their telling, what had been lost was a year of childhood or adolescence, not particular content standards from algebra or social studies.”

Based on the interviews and focus groups, Reich and Mehta suggest three guiding principles:

- Don’t define the coming year as a return to normal. “For too many students,” they say, “normal schooling wasn’t meeting their needs.”
- Start the school year with some noticeable changes: amplify key ideas from the pandemic year, and eliminate or scale back practices that were proved to be ineffective.
- Engage in reflection that allows for celebration of the successes of the pandemic year, grieving for losses, and harnessing the energy from the emergency to build better experiences for students, educators, and families.

Here are some of their specific recommendations.

- First, Reich and Mehta suggest five questions to ask students about the year from which they've emerged:

- What are the aspects of remote learning that you've appreciated the most, and would like to see carried back into in-person schooling?
- What was really hard about remote learning that you hope you never have to manage again as a student?
- After this pandemic, what do you hope adults will do to make in-person school better for this year? What do you hope they don't do in the coming year?
- What do you feel like you missed out on or lost in school because of the pandemic?
- What are you most proud of from the past school year?

- Second, Reich and Mehta list things that should be amplified in the key areas of relationships and trust, school schedules, the curriculum, student agency, mastery-based learning, assessments, social and emotional learning, equity, and humane treatment of students. Some specifics:

- Home visits that build relationships between families and school;
- Advisors, advisories, and office hour check-ins;
- Zoom-style chats to give introverted students more opportunities to thrive;
- Virtual meetings;
- A quarterly schedule with three classes at a time (versus rushed seven-period days);
- Teachers' loads limited to 65-80 students;
- Longer breaks between classes;
- Marie-Kondo-ing the curriculum – narrowing down to a smaller set of priority standards;
- Curriculum relevance and choice to keep students engaged;
- Regular examination of student work;
- No more averaging grades and zeroes;
- Mindfulness practices and emphasizing the mental health of adults as well as students;
- Meeting students' basic needs, including nutritious and tasty meals;
- Meeting students where they are academically and emotionally;
- Listening more to students and involving them in co-designing antiracist practices;
- Less behavioral policing of students' dress and other choices;
- More student choice on when to eat and use the bathroom;
- More outdoor learning;
- Later school start times for adolescents.

(See the full report for ideas on areas that need less emphasis and things to create.)

- Finally, the report suggests several metaphors for the work going forward:
 - School as church and temple;
 - Schools as a place of healing;
 - Schools as family reunion.

[“Healing, Community, and Humanity: How Students and Teachers Want to Reinvent Schools Post-Covid”](#) by Justin Reich and Jal Mehta, Teaching Systems Lab, July 21, 2021; the authors can be reached at jreich@mit.edu and jal_mehta@gse.harvard.edu.

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2. Parent Support for Social and Emotional Learning

In this paper from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, Adam Tyner reports the results of a survey of a nationally representative sample of 2,000 parents on schools’ role in teaching social and emotional skills (it was conducted by YouGov, a global public-opinion company).

Here are the key findings:

- The vast majority of parents support teaching SEL skills in schools.
- The term “social and emotional learning” is quite unpopular, perhaps because parents worry that it will undermine the basics – or might be code for “liberal indoctrination.”
- Parents who identify as Democrats are more comfortable with the term and committing resources to SEL; those who identify as Republicans are a little less willing to commit resources – and they hate the term.
- Across the political spectrum, parents believe the family is the most important place to cultivate SEL, but there are partisan differences on how and where to emphasize it.
- Conservative parents are somewhat more wary than liberals that SEL might divert schools away from academics or conflict with their values.
- In contrast to these partisan disagreements, there are few differences among parents by race, class, and religion.

Tyner concludes with several recommendations for educators: Use plain, concrete language (versus nebulous and jargony) to discuss specifically what schools are doing with social and emotional learning; honor the role of families and community members in this area; avoid pitting SEL against academics; consider ways of teaching social skills indirectly – including teachers modeling common decency and common sense; and use a politically neutral term like “life skills.”

[“How to Sell SEL: Parents and the Politics of Social-Emotional Learning”](#) by Adam Tyner, Thomas B. Fordham Institute, August 2021

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3. Unappreciated Benefits of the Daily Commute

In this article in *The Atlantic*, Jerry Useem says that before the pandemic, lots of people complained about their commutes – traffic jams, crowded subways, dirty trains, a tedious and time-consuming hole in each working day. And then for more than a year, the commute went away. Essential workers continued the daily trek, often at great risk, but millions worked from home.

Here’s the strange part, says Useem: “Many people liberated from the commute have experienced a void they can’t quite name. In it, all theaters of life collapse into one. There are no beginnings and endings. The hero’s journey never happens. The threshold goes uncrossed.

The sack of Troy blurs with Telemachus’s math homework.” What was the commute providing that we didn’t appreciate before?

Historically, the amount of time people have been willing to spend getting to and from work has been remarkably consistent: about a half hour each way. Ancient cities like Rome were never more than about three miles in diameter, allowing their outermost citizens to stay within that walking or horseback commute time. The advent of streetcars, trains, buses, subways, and cars stretched the distance people could travel to work, but the time remained constant; the average one-way commute in the U.S. is 27 minutes.

In a 2001 study, researchers asked people for their ideal commute time, and the average was 16 minutes. Interestingly, it wasn’t zero, and some wanted a longer trip to and from work than their current half hour. Why? The feeling of control in one’s own car; time to plan; time to zone out and decompress; time to listen to audiobooks. This desire for a buffer might explain the failure of WeLive, which aspired to offer “everything you need to live, work, and play in a single location.”

Another idea on the hidden benefits of the commute is boundary theory. However much we might want to bring our “authentic selves” to our jobs, says Useem, “we have multiple selves, all of them authentic. Crossing between one role and another isn’t easy; it’s called boundary *work*.” It turns out that the commute is quite an efficient way to effect the physical and psychological shift from one role to another. On the way to work, we gradually deactivate the emotions and thoughts of home and get our heads into our jobs. Vice-versa on the way home. If this doesn’t happen (as was true for many during the pandemic), people get what researchers call role spillover. “If you respond like a manager at home,” says Jon Jachimowicz (Harvard Business School), “you might be sleeping on the couch that night. And if you respond like a parent at work...” He and his colleagues have found that people who use the commute to engage in “role-clarifying prospection” report greater satisfaction at work and at home. Without this, more effort is required, productivity drops, and there’s more burnout.

[“Admit It, You Miss Your Commute”](#) by Jerry Useem in *The Atlantic*, July/August 2021
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4. Tweaking Rubrics to Provide “Wise” Feedback on Students’ Writing

In this article in *English Journal*, Christina Dobbs and Christine Montecillo Leider (Wheelock College of Education and Human Development at Boston University) recall the reason given by a high-school student for not being willing to revise his essay: “I’ll still just be ‘Below Basic,’ no matter what” (he was referring to the lowest rating on the rubric being used by his teacher).

Dobbs and Leider believe struggling students often see rubrics as a judgment on their potential as writers because of negative language in rubrics’ lowest scoring levels – for example:

- *Little or no skill in writing an argumentative essay*
- *The use of language fails to demonstrate skill in responding to the task.*

- *The use of language is inconsistent and often unclear.*
- *There is little grouping of ideas.*
- *When present, transitional devices fail to connect ideas.*
- *Attempts at analysis are unclear or irrelevant.*
- *Transitions between and within paragraphs are misleading or poorly formed.*

The impact of rubric phrases like these, say Dobbs and Leider, may be especially discouraging for English language learners and students with non-standard dialects. One student recalled feeling ashamed of her black English when a teacher said it was never going to get her anywhere. Many adolescents, especially those who aren't doing well in school, are sensitive to their teachers' and peers' judgments and the way negative stereotypes are conveyed, causing them to internalize negative ideas about their language resources and see themselves as nonwriters.

“Though we cannot change writing rubrics in high-stakes assessments,” say the authors, “as teachers we can reflect and take action in our use of writing rubrics in our classrooms... Our goal is to help teachers create rubrics that encourage students' writing self-efficacy, provide effective and careful feedback, and value linguistic diversity.” Specifically, Dobbs and Leider want rubrics to provide “wise” feedback, which they say has three components:

- Critical feedback is linked to the teacher's high standards.
- The student's ability to meet those high standards is affirmed.
- Students get specific and actionable guidance on how to improve.

Feedback with these characteristics builds trust and motivates students to edit, revise, and polish their writing.

Dobbs and Leider suggest that teachers tweak their rubrics' lower descriptors to emphasize what needs to grow, the purpose of the writing, connections to the audience, and student agency in choosing which of their language resources to use. Instead of the usual summative evaluative ratings – Advanced, Proficient, Needs Improvement, Unsatisfactory – they suggest:

- *This piece of writing is highly effective.*
- *This piece of writing is effective.*
- *This piece of writing is somewhat effective.*
- *This piece of writing has room to grow.*

In place of the kinds of negative language listed above, here are a few of the alternatives they suggest:

- *The connections between various pieces of information could be made clearer to the reader.*
- *The main idea is somewhat clear, but there is a need to add more supporting information.*
- *Relationships between ideas in sentences are unclear, so they do not communicate clearly with the reader.*
- *The grammar in the piece is unusual and unexpected, making it challenging for the reader to understand.*

- *It is difficult to understand why the writer would like the reader to care about this topic.*

[“A Framework for Writing Rubrics to Support Linguistically Diverse Students”](#) by Christina Dobbs and Christine Montecillo Leider in *English Journal*, July 2021 (Vol. 110, #6, pp. 60-68); the authors can be reached at cdobbs@bu.edu and montecil@bu.edu.

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5. Helping Elementary Students As They Use Digital Writing Prompts

In this article in *Language Arts*, Holly Marich (a Nevada professional development coordinator) and Troy Hicks (Central Michigan University) suggest ways that elementary teachers can help students make the best use of word processing tools like spell check, autocorrect, predictive text, automatic grammar feedback, and voice dictation. “Many educators bemoan digital technology as an unnecessary distraction or even a sophisticated form of cheating,” say Marich and Hicks. “But it’s important to recognize that the choices these tools force writers to face matter, both for writers and for writing instructors.”

Marich spent time in a second-grade class in which the teacher regularly gave students the opportunity to write two sentences in the class’s Twitter account on what they were learning, why they were learning it, how they would use the information, and questions they wanted to ask. The teacher checked students’ tweets before they were posted and conducted individual mini-lessons on usage and content as she circulated. Marich observed a number of “micro-moments” when students got digital feedback on their tweets. Four examples:

- A student started to write *This* and the predictive feature inserted *The*. The boy deleted the whole word and took a few moments correctly typing *This* and completing his sentence. He needed help dealing more quickly with the predictive text suggestion.
- A student decided to use the iPad’s speech recognition feature (he’d learned about it on his grandmother’s computer) and quickly found the correct spelling of the word *giraffe*. Some students may bring sophisticated knowledge to the classroom and teachers need to teach when it’s allowed and appropriate.
- A student misspelled a word in her tweet, got the correct spelling from Marich, then chose to ignore at least one incorrect predictive-text prompt – *peas* for *piece*. This student needed more teacher guidance on spotting words incorrectly suggested by the predictive feature.
- A student spelled *lizard* incorrectly – first *listed*, then *liserd* – and spent several minutes brainstorming about possible words, ultimately finding the correct one. In the process she thought creatively about her reptile project.

Marich and Hicks acknowledge that it’s impossible for a teacher to be looking over every student’s shoulder and providing everyone with just-in-time suggestions. But teachers can give some general words of wisdom for students as digital tools pop up during their writing, encouraging them to ask themselves:

- *What do I know about the sound or letter that’s being suggested?*
- *Do I like this word choice?*
- *Do I agree with this suggestion?*

- *What do I as a writer plan to do with this information?*

“These are genuine dialogues with students that help them think deeply about their work as digital writers and the relationships they have with their devices,” say Marich and Hicks.

“Before simply clicking without a thought on automated suggestions or corrections, we need to help our students pause to question the algorithms that are influencing them. In this way, we teach them to be critical, creative, and persistent writers and problem solvers, one micro-moment at a time.”

[“Writerly Decisions in Micro-Moments of Composition: Digital Tools and Instructional Opportunities for Elementary Writers”](#) by Holly Marich and Troy Hicks in *Language Arts*, July 2021 (Vol. 98, #6, pp. 330-339); the authors can be reached at holmarich@gmail.com and hickstro@gmail.com.

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6. Reading Job Applicants’ Letters of Support with a Critical Eye

In this *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, David Perlmutter (Texas Tech University) says that evaluating recommendation letters is challenging for a number of reasons. “As a hiring administrator,” he says, “your job is to get the most you can out of any recommendation letter by sussing out its limitations, both human and technical.” He suggests reading with four questions in mind:

- *Is the letter writer well positioned to recommend the candidate?* More important than recommenders’ prestige and position is how well they know candidates’ work – and their ability to judge their “fit” with the position for which they’re applying.

- *Is the recommendation tailored or generic?* “Quantitative specifics, unique traits, and qualitative examples are telltale signs of a customized letter,” says Perlmutter. Anecdotes about the candidate’s work are particularly helpful.

- *Does the letter praise too much?* No candidate is superior in every area, and recommendations lose credibility when they’re laudatory across the board. “In reading these letters,” says Perlmutter, “you have to look for details that show the praise is warranted.”

- *Are important details missing?* Recommenders tend to accentuate the positive, and a critical reader needs to look for what’s left out, which may be more significant than what’s included.

[“How to Interpret Reference Letters”](#) by David Perlmutter in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 6, 2021 (Vol. 67, #24, pp. 42-44); Perlmutter can be reached at david.perlmutter@ttu.edu.

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7. More Data on Merit Pay for Teachers

In this article in *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, Andrew Hill (Montana State University) and Daniel Jones (University of Pittsburgh) report on their six-year study of the effect of teacher merit pay on the black-white test-score gap in North Carolina public high

schools. Their conclusion: merit pay seemed to bring about small improvements in student achievement, but white students gained significantly more than black students; in some cases, black students performed less well. The bottom line: the black-white test-score gap widened.

Why this disappointing result? Hill and Jones speculate that teachers' different expectations of students may have led them to focus on students they believed had more potential to improve. "If teachers respond to incentives by targeting their attention toward students who they expect to achieve higher levels of growth," say the authors, "gaps may emerge between groups of students, potentially by race... When *average* achievement is incentivized (as is common in the United States and in the programs we study), teachers may – and, in this article seem to – target students perceived to be high ability..." The authors believe that if the achievement of lower-performing students were incentivized, the results might be different.

[“Paying for Whose Performance? Teacher Incentive Pay and the Black-White Test Score Gap”](#) by Andrew Hill and Daniel Jones in *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, September 2021 (Vol. 43, #3, pp. 445-471); the authors can be reached at andrew.hill6@montana.edu and dbj10@pitt.edu.

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8. Fixing What’s Wrong with the Dewey Decimal System

In this *School Library Journal* article, Christina Joseph reports that a growing number of librarians, scholars, educators, and students are drawing attention to flaws in the Dewey Decimal system. Devised by Melvil Dewey in 1873 and published in 1876, this system is used in libraries around the world. Among the problems:

- The section on U.S. history doesn't include African-American history.
- Books by African-American authors are in 325 – International Migration and Colonization.
- British and African poets are in different places, as are male and female poets.
- There isn't a section for bilingual books.
- The section on Careers and Jobs doesn't include domestic work.
- Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter are in the Holiday section (390), but non-Christian religious holidays are listed under Mythology and Religion (290s).
- LGBTQ+ books were once under Perversion or Neurological Disorders and eventually moved to Sexual Orientation.

“Dewey’s #TimesUp moment has been a long time in the making,” says Joseph. In 2019, the American Library Association stripped Dewey from its list of honorees because the resort that he and his wife owned barred Jews and people of color, and he sexually harassed four women in the ALA.

Many librarians have been revising their Dewey numbers one category at a time. School librarian Linda Hoiseth has reorganized libraries in several schools, fixing and adding to Dewey classifications. “We are trying to make it more intuitive for students,” she says, “so they can browse better and they can find relatable things they might not have found otherwise.

My personal motto is: If I can't put a label on a shelf that will tell the students what's on that shelf, then it's not organized very well."

"Move Over, Melvil!" by Christina Joseph in *School Library Journal*, August 2021 (Vol. 67, #8, pp. 28-31)

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9. Recommended Children's Poetry Books

In this feature in *Language Arts*, Grace Enriquez (Lesley University), Gilberto Lara (University of Texas/San Antonio), Summer Clark (Lesley University), Katie Egan Cunningham (Manhattanville College), and Erika Thulin Dawes (Lesley University) list their favorite books of children's poetry from 2020 (click the link below for cover images and short reviews):

- *And the People Stayed Home* by Kitty O'Meara, illustrated by Stefano Di Cristofaro and Paul Pereda
- *A Place for Me: A Poem to Heal the Heart* by Zetta Elliott, illustrated by Noa Denmon
- *Natsumi's Song of Summer* by Robert Paul Weston, illustrated by Misa Saburi
- *In the Woods* by David Elliott, illustrated by Rob Dunlavey
- *BOX: Henry Brown Mails Himself to Freedom* by Carole Boston Weathersford, illustrated by Michele Wood
- *Ice! Poems About Polar Life* by Douglas Florian
- *I Talk Like a River* by Jordan Scott, illustrated by Sydney Smith
- *Construction People* selected by Lee Bennett Hopkins, illustrated by Ellen Shi
- *No Voice Too Small: Fourteen Young Americans Making History* edited by Lindsay Metcalf, Keila Dawson, and Jeanette Bradley, illustrated by Jeanette Bradley
- *The Best Worst Poet Ever* by Lauren Stohler
- *Amphibian Acrobats* by Leslie Bulion, illustrated by Robert Meganck
- *Arenas y Trinos: Abecedario del Rio/Sand and Song: The ABCs of the River* by Alma Flor Ada and Rosalma Zubizaretta-Ada, illustrated by Gabhor Utomo
- *Cast Away: Poems for Our Time* by Naomi Shihab Nye
- *Voices of Justice: Poems About People Working for a Better World* by George Ella Lyon, illustrated by Jennifer Potter
- *Say Her Name: Poems to Empower* by Zetta Elliott, illustrated by Loveis Wise

["2020 Notable Poetry Books for Children"](#) by Grace Enriquez, Gilberto Lara, Summer Clark, Katie Egan Cunningham, and Erika Thulin Dawes in *Language Arts*, July 2021 (Vol. 98, #6, pp. 360-369); Enriquez can be reached at genrique@lesley.edu.

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10. Short Items:

a. Videos on African-American History – Clint Smith narrates [this series of short videos](#) on African-American history; there are 14 in the series so far, including the

Transatlantic Slave Trade, Phillis Wheatley, The Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, The Louisiana Rebellion of 1811, and The Rise of Cotton (there will eventually be 50 episodes).

“Crash Course Black American History” on YouTube, hosted by Clint Smith, 2021

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b. A New Women’s History Curriculum – [This curriculum](#) on women in the U.S. has units on Early Encounters and Settler Colonialism and the Revolution. There will eventually be ten units.

“Women and the American Story” New York Historical Society, 2021

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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

Harvard Educational Review

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

Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)

Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12

Middle School Journal

Peabody Journal of Education

Phi Delta Kappan

Principal

Principal Leadership

Psychology Today

Reading Research Quarterly

Rethinking Schools

Review of Educational Research

School Administrator

School Library Journal

Social Education

Social Studies and the Young Learner

Teachers College Record

Teaching Exceptional Children

Teaching Tolerance

The Atlantic

The Chronicle of Higher Education

The Journal of the Learning Sciences

The Language Educator

The Learning Professional (formerly Journal of Staff Development)

The New York Times

The New Yorker

The Reading Teacher

Theory Into Practice

Time

Urban Education