Marshall Memo 625

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
February 22, 2016

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Educators have access to a dizzying array of virtual learning opportunities, but they must be mindful that working with colleagues produces some of the best learning."

Meg Bates, Lena Phalen, and Cheryl Moran (see item #7)

"The constant seeking of likes and attention on social media seems for many girls to feel like being a contestant in a never-ending beauty pageant in which they're forever performing to please judges."

Nancy Jo Sales in *American Girls: Social Media and the Secret Life of Teenagers* (Knopf, 2016)

"Beyond being a distraction from learning, a preoccupation with texting and social media is affecting their ability to empathize with one another."

Sarah McKibben (see item #2)

"Not unlike other professionals devoted to nurture, such as doctors, teachers are measured – and measure themselves – against an idealized image of excellence that involves incessant work."

Christopher Doyle (see item #1)

"Our communities and families need to talk about mental illness and suicidal thoughts openly and matter-of-factly, just like we would about any other medical condition. We need to encourage those who are suffering and their families to seek treatment, and emphasize that seeking help is a sign of strength, not weakness."

Maria Oquendo, president-elect of the American Psychiatric Association, in a letter responding to *The Atlantic's* Dec. 2015 story on teen suicides, in "The Conversation," *The Atlantic*, March 2015 (Vol. 317, #2, p. 8), http://theatln.tc/1PTmL2g

1. Work-Life Balance 101

In this *Education Week* article, Connecticut educator Christopher Doyle worries that many educators are not taking very good care of themselves – not balancing the intense challenges of work with family, friends, love, sleep, vacations, exercise, good nutrition, emotional health, and civic engagement. "Like American society at large," says Doyle, " many of us are overworked, stretched thin financially, and torn between roles as spouses, parents, and employees… Not unlike other professionals devoted to nurture, such as doctors, teachers are measured – and measure themselves – against an idealized image of excellence that involves incessant work."

Adding even more pressure, there's the stereotype of the lazy, unionized teacher with a cushy, tenured job and long summer vacations. In an attempt to counteract this degrading image, school and district mission statements include verbiage like *The relentless pursuit of excellence*. "Such single-mindedness rings false," says Doyle, "but it, too, pits teachers against an expectation that they will spend all their time working."

And then there are economic pressures. Teachers occupy the middle to lower tiers of the American middle class – whose wages have been stagnant for some time. Many live from paycheck to paycheck and dread being swept into the underclass of the working poor. Doyle says he knows all too many teachers living a "Dickensian" existence teaching full time, juggling second and third jobs, taking graduate classes at night, and constantly struggling to arrange for child care.

Stressed, workaholic educators are not in the best position to help students achieve some kind of balance in their overscheduled lives. All too many secondary-school students don't get enough sleep, rarely read for pleasure, don't regularly eat dinner with their family, and are looking ahead to their post-college lives with foreboding. Three of Doyle's students recently told him they didn't think they'd be able to fit marriage and children into their futures.

How can educators take better care of themselves – a "core standard" in Doyle's estimation. Here are his suggestions:

• *Put overwork in historical perspective*. "Hunter-gatherer societies and subsistence-farming cultures worked far less than do modern Americans," he says. "Many averaged three to five hours of labor per day." Industrialization brought much longer hours, but unions have been effective advocates for setting reasonable limits on work hours – basically supporting work-life balance in the new era.

• *Prioritize balance in the school schedule*. This means building in time for teachers to prepare, think, meet with their colleagues, eat lunch, and pay an occasional visit to the bathroom. It's also important not to burden teachers with unnecessary meetings.

• *Get student loads, preps, and grading under control*. Teachers and school leaders especially need to focus on teachers' workload if they are reading assignments from 80-130 students. Are there simply too many students? Is too much work being assigned? How much responsibility are students taking to assess and improve their own work and get peer review? And how much time are teachers spending, sometimes late at night, correcting papers?

• *Negotiate reasonable time off*. This includes sick leave, care of sick children, parental leave, personal days, and sabbaticals.

• *Set limits*. "We need to put down our laptops, stop grading papers, and go for a walk," says Doyle. "We have to read books that challenge and deepen our intellects. We should make dinner for our families and find time to enjoy it with them. We should get together with friends and share a laugh. We must ask ourselves questions about how much money we really need. We should show our students, through the examples of our own lives, that they can lead healthy, multifaceted existences and not be slaves to their careers."

"Self-Care Is the Educator's Core Standard" by Christopher Doyle in *Education Week*, February 17, 2016 (Vol. 35, #21, p. 20-21), www.edweek.org

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2. Helping Students Learn Self-Regulation in Their Use of Technology

(Originally titled "Taming the Screen Beast")

Secondary-school students' cellphone obsession keeps them from paying attention in school, says Sarah McKibben in this article in *Education Update*. Students find it almost impossible to keep from checking phones every few minutes – and studies have shown that multitasking is incompatible with serious cognitive work. The more screen time teens have (up to 6.5 hours a day), the worse they perform academically. Even if students aren't on their own devices, there's the "nearby peers" effect documented by Canadian researchers: noticing another student multitasking electronically harms the learning of the viewer.

So should schools ban cellphones? That's one option, but students' long-term development may be better served by moving them toward self-regulation. Larry Rosen of California State University/Dominguez Hills suggests a protocol that trains students' brains to stay calm for longer:

- Give students a minute at the beginning of class to check phones.
- Then have them silence their devices, put them face down on desks, and pay attention.
- Every 15 minutes, allow students to check their phones for a minute.
- Gradually increase the interval to 20, then 25, then 30 minutes.
- If students violate the protocol, they forfeit the next phone break.
- Naturally there are times when phones can be used legitimately as part of a learning experience.

Teachers who have used this approach say their students are happier, more focused, and more productive. They've also learned that it's unproductive to confiscate students' phones; this can cause great anxiety and needless conflict. Better to calmly enforce the consequences built into the system.

Savvy teachers have also found that different desk arrangements are helpful. When students are working independently on iPads, desks might be in a circle facing out, so the teacher can be in the middle monitoring screens. When the lesson is on a whiteboard up front, desks could be in a semicircle facing in, with the teacher standing outside the desks operating the whiteboard remotely.

All this also helps students understand another person's perspective. Joshua Suber, an Oklahoma high-school teacher, asks his students, "How would you feel if I was on my phone texting instead of answering your questions? How would you feel if I didn't make eye contact when I was teaching?"

Consultant/author Matt Renwick, like many adults, has his own struggles with technology. He takes a Sunday tech break, and when he makes classroom visits, he takes notes with pen and paper. "I feel more present and pick up on things I wouldn't have noticed if I was crouched over a laptop or writing on an iPad," he says. "I put technology on the back burner to have conversations with kids and staff about learning."

"Taming the Screen Beast" by Sarah McKibben in *Education Update*, February 2016 (Vol. 58, #2, p. 1, 4-5), http://bit.ly/1Q6UXWb; McKibben is at sarah.mckibben@ascd.org.

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3. Is It Wise to Showcase Exceptionally Good Student Work?

In this article in *Education Week*, Sarah Sparks reports on recent studies indicating that the time-honored practice of displaying samples of exemplary student work may be a turn-off for many students. "One of the surprising, negative consequences of the approach," says Todd Rogers, the co-author of one of the studies, "is when students are exposed to truly exceptional work, they use it as a reference point and realize they are not capable of such exceptional quality. It can lead to decreased motivation and eventually quitting if you believe the exceptional work is actually typical."

"I get the irony," Rogers continues. "When we teach and we're doing something new, we want to show them what good work looks like." But it's precisely at this early point in the learning process that showing students examples of outstanding work can be the most discouraging – students haven't had a chance to try it themselves, and seeing very high-quality work makes them doubt whether they're capable of achieving at that level.

Not that students should be shielded from examples of exceptional work, says Rogers. Beverly DeVore-Wedding, a veteran high-school and college teacher, agrees: "In life, the marketplace for exceptional performance is robust. We're disproportionately likely to be exposed to exceptional work of others, rather than mediocre work of others." But there are ways to expose K-12 students to top-notch work without discouraging them:

- Show students work at *several* different levels of proficiency – low-quality, mediocre, solid, and exceptional;
- Have students rate these work samples and zero in on the specifics of why some are better than others;
- Clearly label exceptional work as exceptional so students don't get the impression that work like this is the norm.

There's another dimension to displaying exceptional work: if the students who produced it are in the class, the result can be social isolation for those high-performing students – even bullying. DeVore-Wedding suggests two solutions:

- Use exemplary student work from previous years;
- Have students review each others' work in a "learning community" atmosphere where evaluation and peer-to-peer comparisons are downplayed and students focus on what they can learn from their peers.

"Study: Showing Standout Work to Students Can Backfire" by Sarah Sparks in *Education Week*, February 17, 2016 (Vol. 35, #21, p. 6), www.edweek.org

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4. The Power of Shadowing a Student for a Full School Day

In this *Education Week* interview by Evie Blad, Stanford University d.school network director Susie Wise talks up the Shadow a Student Challenge (www.shadowastudent.org), which encourages principals to spend a full day following a student through his or her entire routine – classes, lunch, even bus rides. Billed as "a one-day crash course in empathy," this initiative will take place next week (February 29th to March 4th) and connect participating school leaders via social media so they can share their insights.

Wise has been a proponent of shadowing for some time, and believes its power lies in building deeper understanding of what it's like to be a student in the principal's school on a day-to-day basis. "It felt like it was a kind of interesting gateway for them in terms of shifting their mindset about their role as a leader," says Wise.

But how is this different from principals walking around their buildings and visiting classrooms? For starters, the principal is able to downshift from hyperactive administrator mode dealing with 47 things at once and really focus on how students experience their day. "One of the things you get to see is the space in between," says Wise. "You see transitions and you see posture. Some of the leaders who've done it have been surprised with how passive the student's day is, and how much sitting there is, how many transitions there are that don't make much sense. You don't see that when you're looking at a master schedule and you're in leader mode… To a person, [principals who have shadowed students] all had realizations, really different ones, that were very profound to them."

How should principals decide which student to shadow? Wise suggests asking, "Who are the groups of students in your school that you know the least about? What's most important is what you might see and how will that connect with the questions you have about your school."

There's one additional benefit to shadowing, she says. It sends a powerful message to students that someone in authority is taking the time to observe and notice with a view to making improvements in the school for their benefit.

"Principals Urged to 'Shadow' Students" – an interview with Susie Wise by Evie Blad in *Education Week*, February 17, 2016 (Vol. 35, #21, p. 6), www.edweek.org

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5. Study Techniques That Benefit Students with A.D.H.D.

In this *New York Times* article, Benedict Carey reports on two new studies showing that the "retrieval effect" – studying by testing oneself on recently learned material – benefits students with attention-deficit problems as much as the general-education population. One of the studies also showed that students with A.D.H.D. using a conventional study technique – reading an essay two or more times – remembered very little.

The researchers acknowledged that there's lots of variation among students with attention challenges and teachers need to differentiate, but it appears that study techniques that have recently emerged from cognitive science are helpful to a broad range of students with special needs. Here's a fuller list of those approaches:

- Breaking up study time into chunks;
- Studying material from more than one subject in the same session;
- Varying study environments;
- Retrieving material from memory by testing oneself and restudying what wasn't recalled (this is especially helpful when the material is beginning to fade, resulting in a productive struggle to recall it).

"Testing Ways to Outfox A.D.H.D." by Benedict Carey in *The New York Times*, February 16, 2016, http://nyti.ms/1oxi2Kh

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6. Misconceptions About Teaching Critical Thinking

In this article in *School Administrator*, Rebecca Stobaugh (Western Kentucky University) and Sandra Love (Mentoring Minds), both former principals, tackle five common conceptual errors about critical thinking:

• *Misconception #1: Critical thinking is only for high-achieving and gifted students.* "All students are capable of higher-level thinking," say Stobaugh and Love. "Critical thinking should not be limited to one group or one age level of students." They suggest that principals check lesson plans to make sure there are challenging questions for all students.

• *Misconception #2: It's okay to have students review for a test by using the same critical-thinking questions that will appear on the test.* With this approach, the test will assess only students' ability to remember answers, not their ability to think through unfamiliar questions. Teachers need to integrate a variety of thinking questions throughout the curriculum

(*analyze scenarios, interpret graphics, evaluate quotes*) and make sure students are seeing test questions for the first time.

• *Misconception #3: Using higher-level verbs in assignments ensures that students will think critically*. Unfortunately for novice teachers relying on commonly used critical thinking verb charts, things aren't that simple. For example, in this task – *Synthesize the passage and identify the main character* – even though a higher-level verb is used, students won't be doing any critical thinking. Another example of how *explain* can be used in a lower-level and higher-level task: (a) *Explain who is the main character*; (b) *Explain what the main character fears the most and how he or she is resilient*.

• *Misconception #4: Higher-level thinking is best assessed through oral questioning*. "Students need time to process high-level questions," say Stobaugh and Love. If students can produce a quick verbal answer when a question is fired at them in class, it's probably a lower-level question. Better to let students ponder good questions and discuss them with a classmate before being asked to respond.

• *Misconception #5: Any teacher can facilitate critical thinking*. Not true, say the authors. Many teachers need PD on framing good critical thinking questions, modeling high-level thinking themselves, and revising their lesson tasks and assessments so they spur critical thinking. One of the best ways for teachers to improve their skills in this area is working with colleagues to create curriculum unit plans, assess student work, and focus on effective practices.

"Misunderstanding Critical Thinking" by Rebecca Stobaugh and Sandra Love in *School Administrator*, February 2016 (Vol. 73, #2, p. 14-15), no e-link available. Stobaugh can be reached at rebecca.stobaugh@wku.edu.

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7. Online Versus In-Person Professional Learning Experiences

In this article in *Kappan*, Meg Bates and Cheryl Moran ((University of Chicago) and Lena Phalen (IPG Media Lab) offer advice on how teachers can make sense of the mind-boggling array of online professional learning material. For starters, they suggest thinking about online experiences in three categories:

- Synchronous – These PD experiences happen in real time – for example, webinars, distance education courses, virtual coaching, and opportunities to collaborate with other teachers. Basically, these are traditional in-person PD experiences in a virtual setting.
- Asynchronous – These happen at different times for different participants - for example, teacher social networks, discussion boards, self-paced online courses (including MOOCs), and resource-sharing websites. Teachers decide when, how, and what they learn.
- Hybrid – Online activities take place as part of a larger bricks-and-mortar learning opportunity – for example, an in-person workshop or course that requires virtual collaboration off-site or online completion of tasks between sessions.

Which category teachers choose depends on what they're looking for (certification, salary-step credits, resources, ideas from similarly situated colleagues), their preferred learning style, and the time they have available. Although most teachers initially request synchronous online experiences, Bates, Moran, and Phalen have found that the majority end up using asynchronous channels.

When is online professional learning a better choice for teachers than in-person experiences? The authors believe there are five scenarios where online is the way to go:

• *To study a topic that's not offered within the district in a particular year*. Professional development is typically planned around new initiatives (e.g., Common Core), new curriculum materials, or external mandates. For teachers who are looking for something beyond the district's offerings, online learning is perfect.

• *A particular expert is not available in the school or district*. There are only so many consultants that a district can bring in to support teachers with curriculum and pedagogy, and external helpers can only stay for so long. Online seminars, courses, and collaborative arrangements can give teachers experiences that aren't available locally.

• *Singleton teachers can reach out to similarly isolated teachers in other locations*. A common example is the lone physics teacher in a small or medium-size high school who would benefit greatly from taking part in a weekly Google Hangouts meeting with singleton physics teachers around the state or nation. [See Memo 473 for an article on this.]

• *Online resources can fill immediate needs, facilitating higher-quality in-person work*. For example, teacher leaders can suggest websites to teachers that can provide a plethora of lesson plans, assessments, videos, and other tools. "Doing so can allow teachers (and professional developers) to focus less on meeting needs and more on the true work of improving instructional practice – work that is best done in person," say the authors. In addition, pulling in resources from the Web is far more efficient than trying to create them from scratch.

• *Online PD can be significantly less expensive and more feasible than in-person PD*. Online learning can be as good as, if not better than, in-person courses, say Bates, Phalen, and Moran, "but educators must research the quality of online opportunity and not make a decision based on cost or convenience alone." Teachers also need to look into sustainability – will a particular online resource continue to be available long-term?

The authors close with two caveats. The first: "Learning of any kind is best done collaboratively with supportive colleagues and facilitators who can push thinking, provide accountability structures, and ensure a quality learning experience. Relying on online professional development becomes dangerous when the learning is too independent and isolated." For example, taking part in a webinar with 100 other educators may be stimulating, but if there's little interaction online and no follow-up afterward, it may add little value in teachers' classrooms.

Second, Bates, Phalen, and Moran point to studies showing that when teachers go online for resources, they often gravitate to those that are immediately useful rather than looking at material that challenges them and helps them grow professionally. "School-based

collaboration is still necessary," conclude the authors, "maybe even more necessary, in an environment where teachers are participating in independent online learning activities." The best scenario may be teachers sharing a variety of online resources with their immediate colleagues – for example, looking over materials to see how they fit with the school's goals for student learning, taking part in a webinar as part of a school-based group, or viewing a classroom video together and pushing each other to discuss key aspects of the pedagogy.

The authors' parting words for teachers: "Use online learning to meet your personal needs, but find ways to take that learning back to your school."

"Online Professional Development: A Primer" by Meg Bates, Lena Phalen, and Cheryl Moran in *Phi Delta Kappan*, February 2016 (Vol. 97, #5, p. 70-73), www.kappanmagazine.org; Bates can be reached at megbates@uchicago.edu.

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8. Assessing the PARCC, Smarter Balanced, and ACT Aspire Tests

In this *Education Gadfly* article, Morton Polikoff (University of Southern California) reports on the Thomas B. Fordham's study of how well the Grade 5-8 PARCC, Smarter Balanced, and ACT Aspire tests measure Common Core standards. "A key hope for these new tests was that they would overcome the weaknesses of the previous generation of state assessments," says Polikoff. "Among those weaknesses were poor alignment with the standards they were designed to assess and low overall levels of cognitive demand… There was widespread belief that these features of NCLB-era state tests sent teachers conflicting messages about what to teach, undermining the standards and leading to undesirable instructional responses."

More than 30 content-area experts were brought in to evaluate the three new tests – and also the Massachusetts MCAS, widely acknowledged as the best of previous-generation state assessments. The conclusions in brief (see below for a link to the full study):

• Overall, reviewers concluded that each of the tests is high-quality and successfully measures student mastery of Common Core and other college- and career-ready standards.

• The PARCC and Smarter Balanced are better in several ways, especially in English language arts.

• The English language arts PARCC and Smarter Balanced tests are well matched to the Common Core criteria, have much more cognitively demanding tasks than the other two tests, and have a superior match to Common Core in coverage of research and vocabulary/ language. Students are required to write open-ended responses drawing on an analysis of one or more text passages, whereas MCAS writing passages don't require textual analysis and writing is assessed in only a few grades.

• In math, the PARCC and Smarter Balanced tests are better focused on the "major work of the grade" than either MCAS or (especially) ACT. The cognitive demand exceeds that of prior state tests – and reviewers believe ACT items are too demanding relative to standards. Item quality was judged to be generally excellent, though a few items on Smarter Balanced tests have mathematical or editorial issues.

"Going forward," Polikoff concludes, "the new tests – and states deploying them – would benefit from additional analyses… We need more evidence about the quality of these new tests, whether focused on their content (as in our study) or their technical properties. It is my hope that, over time, the market for state tests will reward the programs that have done the best job of aligning with the new standards."

"New Common Core Assessments Measure the Most Important Content in the Standards" by Morton Polikoff in *The Education Gadfly*, February 17, 2016 (Vol. 16, #7), http://bit.ly/1Q762Xc; the full report is available at http://bit.ly/1QuzQfy.

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9. Getting the Whole Truth When Making a Reference Call

In this *Harvard Business Review* article, veteran business executive Claudio Fernández-Aráoz says the best way to avoid having to fire ineffective employees is doing a good job checking references. This, he says, is "by far the most important step in making sure that you're not about to bring on someone who you'll soon want to let go."

But getting honest and helpful information from previous employers can be tricky. For a variety of reasons, they may be reluctant to tell the whole truth. This phenomenon was satirized in a book by Robert Thornton titled *The Lexicon of Intentionally Ambiguous Recommendations (L.I.A.R.)* (Sourcebooks 2003). Here are some examples:

- You'll be lucky if you can get this person to work for you.
- I am pleased to report that he is a former colleague of mine.
- I assure you that no person would be better for the job.

Fernández-Aráoz claims that he's never had to fire anyone in his business career, and attributes that to following these five maxims in reference calls:

• *Agree with the candidate on a comprehensive and relevant list of references to call*. This should include former bosses, peers, and subordinates in previous jobs. Narrow the list by thinking about the specific characteristics of the job you're trying to fill.

• *Structure the conversation up front*. Say how important it is to get the full story, since the candidate won't benefit from getting the job if it's a poor fit. Say that you realize no candidate is perfect – everyone has strengths and weaknesses – and it's important that you hear about them up front so if the candidate is hired, appropriate onboarding and support can be provided. Fernández-Aráoz recommends talking in person or on the phone: "[I]t's easier to solicit the whole truth when you can hear hesitation or emotion in a person's voice or see it on their face." And emphasize that all comments will be completely confidential.

• *Help the reference avoid common biases*. If you start by asking an overly general question ("What can you tell me about Carol?"), Carol's employer will usually trot out her best characteristics – and will then feel the need to be consistent with those positive comments when answering subsequent questions.

• *Ask about the candidate's social and emotional competence*. "We tend to hire people on the 'hard' (IQ and experience) but fire them for their failure to master the 'soft,'" he says. "References are one of the best ways to assess the latter."

• *Check values and cultural fit*. Will this candidate fit in and succeed in your organization and work collaboratively with you and your colleagues?

• *Probe for downstream qualities*. Will the candidate keep learning, adapting, and growing? "Ask for examples of situations in which the person has shown the hallmarks of potential: curiosity, insight, engagement, and determination," says Fernández-Aráoz.

"The Right Way to Check a Reference" by Claudio Fernández-Aráoz in *Harvard Business Review*, February 11, 2016, http://bit.ly/1RjgoWl

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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 others very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 44 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 64 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).

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Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
AMLE Magazine
ASCA School Counselor
ASCD SmartBrief/Public Education NewsBlast
Better: Evidence-Based Education
Center for Performance Assessment Newsletter
District Administration
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
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Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
Essential Teacher
Go Teach
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Educational Review
Independent School
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Journal of Staff Development
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Knowledge Quest
Literacy Today
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Perspectives
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Responsive Classroom Newsletter
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Teacher
Teachers College Record
Teaching Children Mathematics
Teaching Exceptional Children/Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The District Management Journal
The Journal of the Learning Sciences
The Language Educator
The Learning Principal/Learning System/Tools for Schools
The New York Times
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Time Magazine
Wharton Leadership Digest