Marshall Memo 464

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
December 10, 2012

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"The pre-observation conference is a vestigial organ remaining from the days when observation of teaching was a 'fuzzy' activity, depending on the intuition or bias of the supervisor."

Madeline Hunter (see item #1)

"'People-proof' systems are stupid systems."

Sara Mead, Andrew Rotherham, and Rachael Brown in "The Hangover: Thinking About the Unintended Consequences of the Nation's Teacher Evaluation Binge," September 2012, *American Enterprise Institute Special Report 2*

"It is impossible to effectively evaluate teacher performance without a significant role for human judgment… [which] is critical both to making smart assessments of teacher performance and to using those assessments in ways that improve instruction for students."

Sara Mead, Andrew Rotherham, and Rachael Brown (*ibid.*)

"School leaders have become increasingly aware of the tremendous variation that exists in grading practices, even among teachers of the same courses in the same department in the same school."

Thomas Guskey and Lee Ann Jung (see item #6)

"We all know students who can borrow, carry, and invert and multiply yet are unaware when their answers are unreasonable."

Marilyn Burns (see item #7)

1. Madeline Hunter on Pre-Observation Conferences (an Oldie but Goodie)

(Originally titled "Let's Eliminate the Pre-Observation Conference")

In this provocative *Educational Leadership* article from 1986, instructional guru Madeline Hunter said, "The pre-observation conference is a vestigial organ remaining from the days when observation of teaching was a 'fuzzy' activity, depending on the intuition or bias of the supervisor… Today, with our knowledge of cause-effect relationships between teaching and learning and of the way formative evaluation increases teaching effectiveness, it is time to discard the time-consuming pre-observation conference." Hunter defended her iconoclastic position as follows:

• *Teachers should know at the beginning of the year the agreed-upon criteria for effective teaching*.

• *Trust and support result from what happens in the post-observation conference*. "The observer who shows empathy for the teacher," said Hunter, "by understanding the tremendous complexity of successful teaching, seeking the teacher's reasons for actions rather than proceeding on unfounded assumptions, appreciating and identifying productive teaching skills, refraining from imposing his or her own style on the teacher, and enabling the teacher to continue to grow in teaching effectiveness – will be welcomed back to that teacher's classroom."

• *An observation requires interpretation of each part of a lesson in relation to what came before and after*. "Viewed in isolation, no technique can be interpreted as productive or destructive," said Hunter. "*There are no absolutes in teaching*."

• *The pre-observation conference builds bias in both teacher and observer*. "Having already told the observer the plan," said Hunter, "the teacher may proceed to develop it even when data emerging from the class indicate a change should be made."

• *The time required for the pre-conference reduces by one-third the time available for observation and post-conferences*.

Hunter believed that *planning* lessons with teachers is a good use of administrators' time. The teacher gets the benefit of collaborative planning, and the administrator "accepts part of the teacher's daily responsibility for planning, teaching, and evaluating countless lessons and experiences the fact that 'it ain't all that easy.'"

"Let's Eliminate the Pre-Observation Conference" by Madeline Hunter (1916-1994) in *Educational Leadership*, March 1986 (Vol. 43, p. 69-70), no e-link available

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2. Fostering a "Growth" Mindset in Students

In this *Principal Leadership* article, Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey (San Diego State University) say that part of school leaders' job is to help students develop their personal narratives – their beliefs about who they are. One crucial aspect of this is helping students move from a *fixed* mindset to a *growth* mindset. Students with a fixed mindset believe their personal qualities are fixed at birth and it's necessary to keep proving themselves to others. Students who have a growth mindset believe their basic qualities can be continuously cultivated through effort and persistence.

Parents, teachers, and other adults shape young people's mindsets by what they say about successes and failures. Praise for being "smart" leads kids to believe that learning should be easy – and if it feels difficult, they're not smart. Praise for focusing and sticking with a task fosters a much more positive mindset – you can get smart through effective effort.

Fisher and Frey say educators can foster students' motivation by the way they talk to them about accomplishments, identity, and agency:

• *Accomplishments* – "When teachers phrase compliments so that students understand their own roles in the accomplishment, they will begin to see that their efforts allow them to meet their goals," say Fisher and Frey. "In doing so, teachers can guide students to 'attend to their internal feelings of pride' (Johnston, *Choice Words*, Stenhouse, 2004), which will build students' internal motivation and reduce their need for external praise." Some examples:

- "You figured that out. Feels good, huh? Tell me how you did it."
- "I bet you are proud of yourself."
- "Marcos, your group tells me that you were very helpful in figuring out the answer to this problem."

• *Identity* – Teachers' comments can help students build a sense of who they are in the world. Some examples:

- "How are you thinking like a historian today?"
- "Your opening line reminds me of one thing that other authors do. As a reader, I enjoy openings with a startling statement and you really captured that here."
- "There are so many ways to solve this problem, and I see that you solved it two different ways… I'd bet it was fun to see it work out both ways."

• *Agency* – This is the feeling that one's efforts lead directly to accomplishments, as opposed to luck being the main variable. Teachers can build children's sense of agency by talking to them in specific ways:

- Asking "Why?" is a helpful way to get students to connect actions to effects.
- "What might you do next?" helps students plan actions that will produce results and also communicates the teacher's belief that students can and will succeed.
- "You did it, but tell me how," a teacher might say. "I'm particularly interested in efforts that were and were not helpful."

Fisher and Frey suggest that when principals visit classrooms, they should listen carefully to teachers' language and see if it's appropriately praising accomplishments and building identity and agency.

"Choice Words" by Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey in *Principal Leadership*, December 2012 (Vol. 13, #4, p. 57-59), http://www.nassp.org/tabid/3788/default.aspx?topic=Instructional_Leader_1212
The authors can be reached at dfisher@mail.sdsu.edu and nfrey@mail.sdsu.edu.

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3. Practice As a Key to Improving Supervisory Conversations

In this *New York Times* article, Troy, NY principal Katie Yezzi describes how her Uncommon Schools boss, Doug Lemov, coached her in preparation for a midyear conference with a struggling teacher. "I was dreading the review," says Yezzi. "I didn't want to be harsh, but I also didn't want to water down the message and give this teacher a false impression. I knew I wasn't ready to have that conversation…"

Practicing the conversation over and over with Lemov proved to be extremely useful. "When it was time for the review, I felt confident and calm, and was able to be entirely present and to listen," says Yezzi. "I said everything that I needed to say, and found the balance between directness and compassion. Practice had helped to make something difficult much easier."

That worked for a difficult conference, but Yezzi didn't think it was necessary with a higher-performing teacher. To her surprise, there were tears during that conference. "I had fallen into the trap of assuming that practice was a tool to avoid disasters, as opposed to a way to maximize positive outcomes," she says. "Now I see it as one of the only things that will keep helping me grow as a professional and add value to my organization."

Practice also works when coaching teachers for lessons. Yezzi used this approach with a teacher who was discouraged and didn't think anything would get her students to improve. "Then we practiced, with me demonstrating alternative teaching methods and her trying them out," says Yezzi. "Her whole outlook changed. She felt the difference. Five minutes later, she was performing in front of her students, doing what we had just practiced. I could hear the difference. I checked in with her later, and she was beaming."

Ninety-two percent of Yezzi's students live below the poverty line, and, she says, "the urgency of our faculty's work is what motivates us to be great every day. But the overwhelming need to be great can also swallow people up. If teachers are underperforming, or if student achievement appears to be plateauing, teachers can become paralyzed and fall prey to self-doubt or frustration. We have found an antidote to this sense of defeat: practicing and preparing outside the classroom."

"At Work, Practice Puts Perfection in Reach" by Katie Yezzi in *The New York Times*, Nov. 24, 2012, http://nyti.ms/S7M1E6; Yezzi is co-author, with Doug Lemov and Erica Woolway, of *Practice Perfect: 42 Rules for Getting Better at Getting Better* (Jossey-Bass, 2012).

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4. Comparing the PARCC and Smarter Balanced Assessments

(Originally titled "Coming Soon: A New Generation of Assessments")

In this *Educational Leadership* article, K-12 Center at ETS director Nancy Doorey provides a helpful guide to the Common Core-aligned assessments that PARCC and Smarter Balanced consortia are crafting for 2014-15 implementation:

Major similarities between PARCC and Smarter Balanced:

- The assessments will be taken on computers for students in grades 3-8 and in high-school ELA, literacy, and math.
- There will be a variety of assessment items: selected-response, constructed response, technology-enhanced, and complex performance tasks.
- There will be two required components, both given in the final weeks of the school year.
- By using electronic and human scoring, results will be available within two weeks.
- There will be optional interim assessments, professional development modules, formative items and tasks for classroom use, model curriculum units, an online reporting suite, and a digital library for sharing vetted resources and tools.
- The cost for all summative components will be about $20 per student per year.

Key differences:

- PARCC summative assessments will use fixed-form delivery – students take one of several fixed, equated sets of items and tasks.
- Smarter Balanced will use adaptive delivery – students get an individually tailored set of items and tasks depending on their responses as they take the tests, and there will be a retake option for the end-of-year component.
- PARCC will have one optional diagnostic and one optional midyear assessment, with the latter containing mostly tasks similar to the summative performance-based tasks. It will have optional K-2 formative performance tasks and a required, non-summative speaking and listening assessment for grades 3-8 and high school, locally scored.
- Smarter Balanced will have optional interim assessments for grades 3-12, computer adaptive with multiple item types, including performance tasks. The number, timing, and scope will be locally determined.

For PARCC test items and prototypes: www.parcconline.org/samples/item-task-prototypes.
For Smarter Balanced items: www.smarterbalanced.org/sample-items-and-performance-tasks.
For a map of which states are in PARCC and which are in Smarter Balanced, see http://www.governing.com/blogs/view/two-paths-toward-common-core-standards-assessments.html

"Coming Soon: A New Generation of Assessments" by Nancy Doorey in *Educational Leadership*, December 2012/January 2013 (Vol. 70, #4, p. 28-34), www.ascd.org; Doorey can be reached at ndoorey@k12.center.org.

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5. High-School Class Rank Declines as a Criterion for College Admission

In this *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, Eric Hoover reports on the decreasing importance of high-school class rank for colleges. "Among the traditional measures of student quality, class rank is widely described by admissions officers as the fuzziest," says Hoover. Only 19 percent of colleges now give "considerable importance" to class rank when considering applicants.

In the past, four major stakeholder audiences were keenly interested in students' class rank:

• College admissions officers, who thought class rank had the aura of fairness: "Seeing how an applicant stacked up to his or her peers seemed like an essential way of running the Darwinistic realm of selective admissions, where talk of competition of ubiquitous," says Hoover. And indeed, students from the top of their high-school classes seemed to do better in college.

• University trustees, prospective students, and external evaluators, including the annual *U.S. News* ranking, which includes the percent of students at the top of their high-school classes in its calculations; Texas uses class rank to improve minority students' access to public universities, and this is part of the *Fisher v. University of Texas* affirmative-action case currently before the U.S. Supreme Court.

• Students themselves, who compete to be at the top of their graduating class;

• Parents, who want to know that their children are excelling and refuse to accept that they might be in the bottom half (the Lake Wobegon Effect).

But some of the variables have changed. "Grading scales have gone haywire," says Hoover, "varying from school to school and resulting in 5.2 GPA's and multiple valedictorians, as well as students with all A's and a few B's who rank below the top tenth. Also, grade inflation has become a major concern for colleges."

And many high schools have stopped calculating student ranks and naming valedictorians. This has led colleges to estimate students' class rank, a practice that recently embarrassed George Washington University and led to a downgrading of its *U.S. News* ranking.

"At one time, class rank was useful, especially when looking at students from schools that you weren't familiar with," says Pamela Horne of Purdue University. "But for many institutions it's not meaningful. It's disappearing, and it's not representative of the class." Christoph Guttentag of Duke University agrees: "Just like college rankings, it assigns a false accuracy, a false differentiation among students."

"High-School Class Rank, a Slippery Metric, Loses Its Appeal for Colleges" by Eric Hoover in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Dec. 7, 2012 (Vol. LIX, #15, p. A1, A5), no free e-link

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6. A Four-Step Plan for More Meaningful Grades and Report Cards

"School leaders have become increasingly aware of the tremendous variation that exists in grading practices, even among teachers of the same courses in the same department in the

same school," say Thomas Guskey and Lee Ann Jung (University of Kentucky) in this thoughtful *Principal Leadership* article. "Such inconsistencies lead many to perceive grading as a distinctively idiosyncratic process that is highly subjective and often unfair to students." In addition, the grades students get from teachers may not align with their performance on state tests. Guskey and Jung propose these steps to improve grading:

• *Articulate the fundamental purpose*. Are report cards for students, parents, or school staff? Are they designed to communicate information about achievement or decide which students qualify for certain programs? The school needs to answer these questions and print the rationale on each report card.

• *Separate out grades for achievement, attitude, responsibility, effort, and behavior*. "If someone proposed combining measures of height, weight, diet, and exercise into a single number or mark to represent a person's physical condition, we would consider it ridiculous," say Guskey and Jung. Yet that's what many schools do when they give students a single grade for a subject. Electronic grading programs have made this easier, automatically giving different weights to different criteria. A far better practice is to separate final *product* grades (the summation of a student's work) from *process* grades (responsibility, learning skills, effort, work habits, homework, etc.) and *progress* grades (the student's value-add that marking period). This gives students and parents detailed feedback on how they are doing in each area and what needs to improve. The key, though, is clearly explaining all this to students and parents.

• *Stop grading on a curve, ranking students, and selecting a valedictorian*. These practices, say Guskey and Jung, lead to bitter competition among high-achieving students and discourage students from working cooperatively with classmates: "Early in their high-school careers, top students analyze the selection procedures and then, often with the help of their parents, find ingenious ways to improve their standing. Gaining that honor requires not simply high achievement; it requires outdoing everyone else. And sometimes the difference among top-achieving students is as little as one-thousandth of a decimal point in a weighted GPA." Far better is to establish demanding criteria for academic excellence (similar to the *summa cum laude, magna cum laude,* and *cum laude* system used by universities) and place no limits on the number of students who can attain the highest honors. Schools that have taken this approach see a rise in student achievement and an increase in students helping each other reach the top honors. "Instead of pitting students against each other," say Guskey and Jung, "such a system unites students and teachers in efforts to master the curriculum and meet rigorous academic standards."

• *Give honest, accurate, and meaningful grades*. "Of all the students in a school's population, those who have disabilities or who are struggling learners have the most to gain from a standards-based approach," say Guskey and Jung. "For those students, intervention decisions depend on having clear and complete information on their performance." The best approach is giving below-level students grades on modified curriculum expectations, with a clear notation on the report card to that effect (for example, an asterisk by the grade and a notation at the bottom of the page saying, "Grades marked with an asterisk are based on

modified expectations. For additional detail, please see the attached progress report"). This approach is also more legally tenable than saying grades are based on special needs or an IEP. "By being transparent about where students are, schools make themselves accountable to employ evidence-based interventions and demonstrate progress toward grade-level standards," say Guskey and Jung.

"Four Steps in Grading Reform" by Thomas Guskey and Lee Ann Jung in *Principal Leadership*, December 2012 (Vol. 13, #4, p. 22-28), http://www.nassp.org/tabid/3788/default.aspx?topic=Four_Steps_in_Grading_Reform
Jung can be reached at ljung@uky.edu.

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7. Marilyn Burns's Online Math Assessment Tool

(Originally titled "Go Figure: Math and the Common Core")

In this *Educational Leadership* article, math guru Marilyn Burns says she is passionate about the Common Core State Standards for Mathematics. Why? She likes the way the standards separate eight standards for mathematical *practice*…

- Make sense of problems and persevere in solving them.
- Reason abstractly and quantitatively.
- Construct viable arguments and critique the reasoning of others.
- Model with mathematics.
- Use appropriate tools strategically.
- Attend to precision.
- Look for and make use of structure.
- Look for and express regularity in repeated reasoning.

from specific, grade-by-grade *content* expectations. These strands should be constantly interacting in classrooms K-12.

Burns says doing mental math (for example, solving 15 x 12 without pencil and paper) is especially helpful in revealing students' mathematical thinking. "We all know students who can borrow, carry, and invert and multiply yet are unaware when their answers are unreasonable," she says. Mental math is an important skill for everyday applications – dividing up checks in a restaurant, deciding when to leave for an appointment, adjusting recipes, and estimating savings from buying something that's on sale. But Burns believes asking students to think through problems out loud can also provide invaluable formative insights to teachers and help improve math teaching.

To this end, Burns and her colleagues created a free online formative assessment tool – the Math Reasoning Inventory – http://mathreasoninginventory.com/Home/VideoLibrary – with video clips showing students' math reasoning as they wrestle with 6th-grade problems in whole numbers, decimals, and fractions. She suggests searching for Monica, Alberto, Malcolm, and Cecelia and then for the specific whole-number math problem they were asked to solve. "Watching these videos is helpful because observing students mentally solve math problems and explain their reasoning helps bring meaning to the practice standards," says Burns. "It's

important not to think about 'fixing' students who don't demonstrate particular skills or understanding, because partial understanding and confusion are part of the learning process – students learn in their own ways, at their own paces."

"Go Figure: Math and the Common Core" by Marilyn Burns in *Educational Leadership*, December 2012/January 2013 (Vol. 70, #4, p. 42-46), www.ascd.org; Burns can be reached at mburns1941@gmail.com.

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8. Close Reading in the Elementary Grades

(Originally titled "Closing in on Close Reading)

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Nancy Boyles (Southern Connecticut University) suggests ways to bring "close reading" – a major theme in the Common Core State Standards – to the elementary grades. "Essentially, close reading means reading to uncover layers of meaning that lead to deep comprehension," she says. Boyles is critical of the "ho-hum" text-dependent questions suggested by David Coleman and his colleagues in their Student Achievement Partners handbook. All of the questions have a right answer and none of them will generate real discussion, she says.

Boyles urges teachers to take students beyond the text and ask deeper questions that they can apply to other texts on their own:

- What is the author *telling* me here?
- Are there any hard or important *words*?
- What does the author want me to *understand*?
- How does the author play with *language* to add to the meaning?

"If students take time to ask themselves these questions while reading and become skillful at answering them, there'll be less need for the teacher to do all the asking," she says. "For this to happen, we must develop students' capacity to observe and analyze." Delving deeper, she suggests getting students to ask themselves questions like these:

- Who is speaking in the passage?
- Who seems to be the main audience for this text?
- What is the first thing that jumps out at me as I read? Why?
- What's the next thing I notice? Are these two things connected? How?
- What seems important here? Why?
- What does the author mean by _____? What exact words lead me to this meaning?
- Is the author trying to convince me of something? How do I know?
- Is there something missing from this passage that I expected to find? Why did the author leave it out?
- Is there anything that could have been explained more thoroughly for greater clarity?
- Is there a message or main idea?
- How does this sentence or passage fit into the text as a whole?

"Students who learn to ask themselves such questions are reading with the discerning eye of a careful reader," says Boyles. The next step is to look at passages with the eye of a writer, analyzing:

- Imagery, including similes, metaphors, personification, figurative language, and symbols;
- Word choice;
- Tone and voice;
- Sentence structure: short sentences, long sentences, sentence fragments, word order within sentences, and questions.

"Closing in on Close Reading" by Nancy Boyles in *Educational Leadership*, December 2012/January 2013 (Vol. 70, #4, p. 36-41), www.ascd.org; Boyles can be reached at nancyboyles@comcast.net.

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9. Robert Marzano on Analyzing Complex Texts

(Originally titled "Analyzing Complex Texts")

In this *Educational Leadership* column, author/consultant Robert Marzano says that when students analyze a text's structure, they should be aware of two levels: (a) the overall organization – for example, rising action, climax, falling action in literature or, in non-fiction, presenting and supporting a claim; and (b) the underlying relationship among ideas, including these four:

- Addition: one idea adds to or is similar to another – for example, *She is dark and beautiful*.
- Contrast: one idea is different or subtracts from another – for example, *He is fast but doesn't like to play sports*.
- Time: one idea occurs before, during, or after another – for example, *She walked away before he arrived*.
- Cause: one idea leads to another – for example, *He woke up because the garbage truck made a racket*.

When students hear a complex sentence like: *Mary called Bill after he left for work, but he didn't get the call because his cell phone was off*, they can probably follow the logic, but when they are reading, they may need guidance analyzing the relationship among ideas. Marzano says students should be explicitly taught the four types of relationships among ideas and use symbols to mark up passages: an equal sign for addition, a not-equal sign for contrast; an arrow for time; and a double-stemmed arrow for cause.

"Analyzing Complex Texts" by Robert Marzano in *Educational Leadership*, December 2012/January 2013 (Vol. 70, #4, p. 84-85), www.ascd.org

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10. Does a Double Dose of Algebra Help High-School Students?

In this *Education Next* article, Kalena Cortes (Texas A&M University), Joshua Goodman (Harvard's Kennedy School of Government), and Takako Nomi (St. Louis University) report on a follow-up study of 11,507 students who took a "double dose" of algebra in Chicago high schools. Researchers found that increased time in algebra resulted in minimal gains for most students, and for a subset of students – those who initially had relatively high math skills and below-average reading skills – had a more significant effect on high-school graduation rate, ACT scores, and college enrollment. An additional finding was that increasing classroom time on algebra didn't hurt students' achievement in other subjects; students actually did a little better in reading and science courses.

"A Double Dose of Algebra" by Kalena Cortes, Joshua Goodman, and Takako Nomi in *Education Next*, Winter 2013 (Vol. 13, #1, p. 70-76), http://educationnext.org/a-double-dose-of-algebra

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Do you have feedback? Is anything missing?

If you have comments or suggestions, if you saw an article or web item in the last week that you think should have been summarized, or if you would like to suggest additional publications that should be covered by the Marshall Memo, please e-mail: kim.marshall48@gmail.com

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 42 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 63 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).

Subscriptions:

Individual subscriptions are $50 for the school year. Rates decline steeply for multiple readers within the same organization. See the website for these rates and information on paying by check or credit card.

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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
ASCD SmartBrief
Better Evidence-Based Education
Center for Performance Assessment Newsletter
Changing Schools
District Administration
ED Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Update/Curriculum Update
Education Week
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
Essential Teacher
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Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Educational Review
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Journal of Staff Development
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Knowledge Quest
Middle Ground
Middle School Journal
NASSP Journal
Newsweek
NJEA Review
PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Perspectives
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Responsive Classroom Newsletter
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
Teacher
Teachers College Record
Teaching Children Mathematics
Teaching Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The District Management Journal
The Language Educator
The Learning Principal/Learning System/Tools for Schools
The New York Times
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Wharton Leadership Digest