

Marshall Memo 1125

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
February 16, 2026

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Quotes of the Week

“When you are in the presence of a temptation, the closer it is to you, the more tempting it is.”
Angela Duckworth, quoted in [“Do Cellphone Bans Work? What Early Findings Tell Us”](#) by Arianna Prothero in *Education Week*, February 2026

“Just as helicopter parenting outside of school can stifle a child's independence, helicopter staffing inside school can do the same.”
Lee Ann Jung (see item #3)

“Tell me something that you could do with a class of 15 that you can't do with a class of 30.”
Rob Coe (see item #8)

“Admonitions to teach phonics are almost certain to get somebody to overdo it, just as cautions against too much phonics will likely encourage some to pull back too much.”
Timothy Shanahan in [“Are We Teaching Too Much Phonics?”](#) in *Shanahan on Literacy*, February 14, 2026; Shanahan can be reached at shanahan@uic.edu.

“Language proficiency depends on access to a common stock of knowledge that writers assume and readers recognize. Comprehension is not a content-neutral ‘skill’ that can be reduced to decoding symbols on a page and finding the main idea. It's a sense-making process that rests to an extraordinary degree on references, idioms, allusions, and stories that are common and broadly shared among the literate.”
Robert Pondiscio in [Education Gadfly](#), February 5, 2026

“AI can be genuinely useful when it serves as a multiplier of existing competence. A well-informed teacher can use it to save time on tasks that don't require much judgment, like

generating examples or producing low-stakes practice materials. A motivated student can use it to clarify confusion or practice skills already in progress. A chatbot can even serve as a Socratic partner for students, posing counterarguments or probing for clarity. But these examples presuppose that the user already possesses the knowledge and judgment to recognize when the machine is wrong. There's the rub. The very people most likely to misuse AI – those with shallow background knowledge, weak discernment or motivation – are the ones most susceptible to its illusions.”

Robert Pondiscio (*ibid.*)

“Replication is a fool's game.”

Karin Chenoweth in a podcast interview with Michael Petrilli, February 9, 2026, referring to the problem of schools trying to copy the practices of highly successful programs without adapting them to local conditions.

1. Intervention – How to Make it Count

(Originally titled “Supercharge Intervention – *and* Motivate Struggling Learners”)

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Nathan Levenson and David James (New Solutions K12) say it's vital for intervention time to be a positive experience for kids “because nothing is more energizing than finally catching up academically, seeing your progress, and knowing that someone cares deeply about your success.” But in many schools' intervention classes, kids aren't catching up and some are falling further behind.

That's because of the way intervention time is being implemented, say Levenson and James. They believe what struggling students need isn't working on computers with teachers hovering in the background, “but more targeted and engaging intervention during already-allotted time.” Here's the approach they've refined over 15 years of consulting across the U.S.:

- Direct, varied instruction – working directly with students using a variety of approaches. “Students might need the same concept explained two or even three different ways before it makes sense to them,” say Levenson and James. “In a room full of students who are struggling, no single strategy will be effective for everyone” – and hearing it taught different ways is more likely to engage them.

- Targeting skill and knowledge gaps – zeroing in on the specific areas where students are having difficulty and connecting it to what the whole class is learning. Students must see a direct connection between intervention time and “real class” – which they'll do if they are taught the prerequisite skills for tomorrow's lesson.

- Deep, not wide – Students can't catch up on everything all at once, say Levenson and James. Intervention teachers need to provide sustained, focused, daily, multi-week instruction,

one subject at a time, on the “power standards” – so students are engaged and see progress. “Depth leads to mastery and keeps students invested,” they say. “That confidence spills over into other areas.”

- Self-monitoring by skill – “For students who have struggled for years, intervention can feel like a long, uphill march,” say Levenson and James. Students should keep a list of their target areas and tick them off week by week and month by month based on benchmarks and other assessments.

- Engagement as an explicit goal – by making the content relevant, celebrating success, and knowing students as people. In middle and high schools, it’s helpful to treat intervention as a course with a name, a code, and pass/fail credit. At the secondary level, students take their cues from the schedule, say Levenson and James. “If intervention is optional, ungraded, and treated like a study hall, they won’t take it seriously.”

The authors conclude: “While these engagement strategies are powerful, their impact rests on genuine human connection... When kids are engaged – when they feel seen, supported, and successful – that’s when intervention stops being a reminder of what they can’t do and becomes proof of what they can.”

[“Supercharge Intervention – and Motivate Struggling Learners”](#) by Nathan Levenson and David James in *Educational Leadership*, February 2026 (Vol. 83, #5, pp. 14-19)

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2. Differentiating with GenAI

(Originally titled “How AI Makes Differentiation Possible”)

In this article in *Educational Leadership*, Jessica Garner says that as North Carolina’s 2009 Teacher of the Year, she traveled the state championing differentiation. But back in her classroom as a Spanish teacher, she was reminded of how difficult it was when some students were fluent speakers and others had no knowledge of the language. This daunting challenge was one reason she decided to leave the classroom.

Garner is now at ISTE+ASCD and sees the potential for using generative AI to meet the differentiation challenge. Here’s how she suggests using an approved GenAI platform to meet students’ individual needs, with sample prompts:

- Describe specific student learning needs without identifying students by name. *Three students in my class are English language learners with strong mathematical reasoning skills but limited academic vocabulary.*

- Specify learning objectives and standards. *I’m teaching the concept of photosynthesis aligned with NGSS standard MS-LS1-6. Students need to understand the process and be able to explain how matter and energy flow through this system.*

- Request differentiated activities. *Can you suggest three different activities – one hands-on, one visual, and one that uses analogy – that would help students with varying reading levels access this content?*

- Apply your pedagogical framework. *Ensure these activities align with Bloom’s revised taxonomy, with options ranging from remember/understand to analyze/evaluate.*
- Examine what GenAI produces and ask for refinements. *The hands-on activity is good, but it requires materials I don’t have. Can you suggest an alternative using common classroom items?*

Another strategy for a Spanish class might be asking the chatbot to generate three versions of an article about *Dia de los Muertos*: one using present tense and cognates, one with past tense, and one with the original complexity. “All versions would convey the same cultural concepts and learning objectives about the holiday’s significance,” says Garner, “but each would be accessible to students at different language acquisition stages.”

Yet another approach is asking GenAI to provide personalized support for students during independent work time by creating tools that can be programmed to respond in a student’s home language and trained on specific curriculum content, providing immediate, personalized support. With math problems, the chatbot could give hints and encouragement rather than direct answers; with writing, it could ask clarifying questions about students’ ideas. “The key,” says Garner, “is designing these interactions to promote learning and independence rather than dependence” – and making sure that expectations remain high.

“The most important aspects of teaching remain fundamentally human endeavors,” Garner concludes: “building relationships, understanding individual contexts, and making professional judgments about student growth. AI tools are most effective when they amplify these human capabilities rather than attempt to replace them.”

[“How AI Makes Differentiation Possible”](#) by Jessica Garner in *Educational Leadership*, February 2026 (Vol. 83, #5, pp. 9-13)

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3. Rethinking One-to-One Paraprofessional Support of Students

(Originally titled “It’s Time to Rip off the Velcro!”)

In this article in *Educational Leadership*, Lee Ann Jung (Lead Inclusion/San Diego State University) says that when paraprofessionals shadow their one-to-one students for the whole day, it can be counterproductive. Jung reports on what researchers have found about a velcro-like student/paraprofessional relationship:

- Peer friendships – The students tend to have fewer reciprocal social exchanges because classmates talk to them less when an adult is right there. “In this case,” says Jung, “proximity has a *distancing* effect.” The separation may also engender feelings of stigma.
- Teacher-student relationships – When teachers work with one-to-one students through their paras – *Can you make sure he gets started?* – kids have a weaker bond with their teacher.
- Access to the teacher – “Research demonstrates that teachers provide less direct instruction and fewer interactions to students who have a paraprofessional seated next to them,” says Jung. “Students with the most significant learning needs end up with less access to certified teaching than their peers.”

- Independence – Paras naturally want to help their students, but this can take the form of supplying a word too quickly, finishing a problem for them, prompting before the student has time to think, and too readily anticipating needs.

The result of all this, says Jung, is that “what looks like the most supportive option can, in fact, undermine the very goals of inclusion... Just as helicopter parenting outside of school can stifle a child’s independence, helicopter staffing inside school can do the same.”

But what if the student’s IEP says a one-to-one para is required? That may over-interpret a learning plan, says Jung. “An IEP should describe the supports and services necessary for the student to access learning, communicate effectively, and build independence. It should not cement a model that research shows can isolate a child.”

The solution is to write better IEPs and, when necessary, modify those that are overly restrictive, says Jung, ensuring that students have “plans that prioritize access, dignity, and growth toward independence.”

Jung suggests a basketball analogy: zone rather than one-to-one defense – a fluid support model. With this approach, she says, “paraprofessionals move fluidly throughout the classroom, not tethered to one student. They step in when needed – helping a group organize materials, quietly prompting a student to re-engage, or modeling a task for learners. Like zone defenders, they scan the room, shift to where they are needed, and anticipate what’s next. Support flows, rather than clings.”

There’s another advantage: sometimes the teacher is the one who helps the student with an IEP, providing more-expert support. And another: “When this model is working,” says Jung, “support is nearly invisible. From the outside, you cannot immediately tell which students have IEPs... Better yet, students can’t tell which student (or students) the paraprofessional was assigned to support. The paraprofessional is simply another adult helping *everyone*.”

For schools with a velcro-like dynamic with their students, Jung suggests that leadership teams follow these steps:

- Start by examining the problems with constant shadowing.
- Visit classrooms and describe what’s happening.
- Communicate with families of students with individual paras, explaining the change.
- Reframe paraprofessionals’ role and train them for the new model.
- Give paras and their teachers weekly time to plan together.
- For students who have been closely shadowed, transition gradually.
- Monitor through check-in meetings and adjust as necessary.

[“It’s Time to Rip off the Velcro!”](#) by Lee Ann Jung in *Educational Leadership*, February 2026 (Vol. 83, #5, pp. 34-39)

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4. English Learners (ELs) and Career and Technical Education (CTE)

In this article in *Teachers College Record*, Mark Emerick (Vassar College) reports on his 18-month study at a large regional career and technical education center in the Northeast
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U.S. He found that many teachers and administrators at the center had bought into four “deficit discourses” about their English learner students, many of them immigrants, when they arrived at the center. But the EL students, he found, had “counterstories” to each of the negative discourses:

- Stock narrative: dumping – Many CTE staff believed EL students had been sent to the center because their high schools saw career and technical education as a step down for students who could not succeed in a regular high school. But most EL students, Emerick found, saw CTE as a step up and a pathway to careers in health care, food service, law enforcement, and other fields.

- Stock narrative: lack of agency – At the CTE center, some believed that EL students lacked initiative and would not take advantage of the school’s opportunities. But Emerick found that EL students had a “sophisticated understanding of how to navigate educational institutions to achieve their aspirations.” They were motivated to escape the substandard conditions of their sending high schools and take advantage of the career opportunities at the CTE center.

- Stock narrative: lack of family support – Center staff often characterized EL students’ families as unable and unwilling to support their children’s education. On the contrary, Emerick found in his interviews with EL students and families, students had lots of family support as they explored a variety of career opportunities and how the center could help.

- Stock narrative: negative peer pressure – Staff often believed that EL students came to the school and chose their specialty area (e.g., culinary arts, cosmetology) based on wanting to be with friends rather than genuine interest. Emerick saw some evidence of this, but mostly EL students decided to enroll in the school and made appropriate choices in the areas they pursued.

Emerick’s conclusion: CTE educators (and those in traditional high schools) must let go of these deficit discourses and tune in to EL students’ motivation, agency, family support, and ability to navigate program choices, as they build their proficiency in English and develop positive identities despite the misapprehensions of many adults around them.

Emerick closes with this concern: “With recent shifts toward a model of CTE aimed at preparing students for high-wage, high-skill jobs and postsecondary education, CTE programs have become more likely to serve middle-class white students, flipping the narrative on CTE. With this, CTE is in danger of gentrification – becoming another exclusive educational pathway that privileges whiteness and marginalizes racialized communities.”

[“Challenging Deficit Discourses with Counterstories of Cultural Wealth: Multilingual Learners’ Pursuit of Career and Technical Education”](#) by Mark Emerick in *Teachers College Record*, December 2025 (Vol. 127, #11-12, pp. 60-92); Emerick can be reached at memerick@vassar.edu.

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5. Math Coaching for Teachers Isn’t Optional, It’s Foundational

“Math coaching is not an add-on to professional learning,” say the authors of this *Make Math Moments* article. “It is the mechanism that makes professional learning work.” Many

school districts are finding that despite adopting high-quality math curriculum materials, aligning their scope and sequence, and conducting appropriate PD, they're not seeing consistent shifts in classroom pedagogy. Teachers seem on board at first, exploring new routines, tasks, and strategies, but a few weeks later, they're teaching as they did before.

“This gap between math professional learning and math classroom practice is not a teacher problem,” say the authors. “It is a system design problem.” What’s needed to move the needle, they believe, is math instructional coaching. Some key lessons from their work:

- Math PD without coaching will not change instruction. Research shows that teachers need 30-100 hours of sustained, high-quality learning over 6-12 months to shift classroom practices toward more inquiry-oriented teaching – or (a different study found) about 49 hours a year to produce measurable gains in teacher practice and student learning.

- Math coaching bridges the gap between knowing math strategies and using them. Coaches do this by modeling lessons that incorporate student thinking, co-planning tasks aligned with math learning goals, supporting teachers in anticipating student misconceptions, and thinking about students’ responses and instructional decisions.

- Math coaching needs to be centralized and protected to stay instructional. “The impact of math coaching depends heavily on how it is deployed,” say the authors. When math coaches report to principals and are assigned to several schools, they get pulled for test coordination, intervention scheduling, and coverage. To prevent this, coaches should be deployed from and accountable to district math leadership, protected from other duties (except in emergencies), aligned with district math priorities, and part of networks of math coaches to learn, calibrate, and grow together.

- Ongoing math-specific support is the most fragile part of change. Sustained improvement in math instruction requires four components, say the authors:

- Alignment to a shared math vision;
- Opportunities to observe and experience effective math instruction;
- Teachers’ belief in their ability to teach math differently;
- Ongoing math-specific coaching and follow-up.

“Coaching provides the continuity teachers need to persist through uncertainty, especially when implementing practices like productive struggle and student-led discourse,” they say. Without coaching, teachers often revert to procedural instruction.

- Don’t try to coach every math teacher at first. Math coaching shouldn’t be allocated equally to all math teachers, say the authors; this spreads it too thinly – with minimal impact everywhere. A better strategy is:

- Identifying early adopters willing to deepen their practice.
- Focusing coaching on priority grades or goals – perhaps K-2 number sense, middle-school reasoning.
- Allowing strong instructional models to emerge and spread.

“Equity in math instruction is not achieved by equal time allocation,” say the authors. “It is achieved when effective practices become visible, replicable, and scalable.”

• Math coaching builds internal capacity for sustained improvement. “Effective math coaching compounds over time,” say the authors. “This builds resilience in the system, especially during curriculum changes, leadership transitions, or staff turnover.” Teachers who get good coaching become instructional leaders in math, facilitators of math PLCs, mentors to new teachers, and carriers of the district’s math vision.

[“6 Lessons Leaders Need to Learn About Math Coaching”](#) in *Make Math Moments*, February 2, 2026

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6. Broadening Students’ Idea of What It Means to Be Good at Science

In this article in *The Science Teacher*, Minnesota curriculum specialist Marta Stoeckel says that when students are asked what it means to be good (i.e., smart) at science, they often say it’s about quickly getting the right answers to a teacher’s or test-maker’s questions. But when Stoeckel and a high-school physics teacher discussed the idea with students, kids’ definition of science chops expanded to include the following:

- Posing interesting questions;
- Making connections between ideas;
- Representing and communicating ideas clearly;
- Using evidence to construct explanations and arguments;
- Working systematically and persistently;
- Using multiple representations and translating between representations;
- Taking risks and trying ideas, even if it means making a mistake.

Stoeckel and the teacher worked with students to assess their own science thinking skills and those of classmates, significantly broadening the way they thought about what’s involved in high-quality science cognition.

“Helping students understand that science is not just about right answers and requires a wide range of skills,” Stoeckel concludes, “is key to the reforms in the Next Generation Science Standards. Aided by this teacher’s efforts, students recognized many ways to be good at science and saw the ways their peers demonstrated those skills... Finding ways for students to give each other recognition reflectively is an important step in ensuring that students not only see that being good at science involves a range of skills, but that they have those skills.”

[“Expanding What Counts As Good at Science”](#) by Marta Stoeckel in *The Science Teacher*, July 7, 2025 (Vol. 92, #4, pp. 49-57); Stoeckel can be reached at mrstoeckel@gmail.com.

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7. What Is the Best Size for Student Groups?

In this *Edutopia* article, Kathy Kansky says that in her 17 years of teaching, she’s tried every type of desk arrangement including rows, pairs, and groups of four. She recently decided that three-student groups is the best approach. Here’s why:

- Three seems to be the best number for small-group discussion and sharing diverse views, while groups of four can result in one student being disengaged.
- Groups of three are “intimate without being isolated,” says Kansky, “and off-task conversations occur less frequently.”
- Groups of three facilitate communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking through turn-and-talks, thinking tasks, and using manipulatives.
- Three-desk clusters create a more spacious classroom, making it easier for the teacher to circulate, talk to groups, and see students’ work.
- When it’s time to work at vertical whiteboards, three is the best size group.

Kansky has suggestions for working with this configuration:

- Arrange the desk clusters so no students have their backs to the board.
- Don’t assume that students know how to conduct themselves in groups; model expectations and discuss what collaboration should look and sound like.
- In each group, have a student who is in charge of picking up supplies and handing in papers.
- Have a caddy at each group with pencils, markers, glue sticks, protractors, and other supplies needed for a lesson.
- Circulate and monitor conversations, but don’t stay too long so that productive struggle and independence are fostered.

[“All the Reasons for Seating Students in Groups of 3”](#) by Kathy Kansky in *Edutopia*, February 5, 2026

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8. Why Is Class Size a Relatively Weak Factor in Student Achievement?

In *Improving Teaching*, Harry Fletcher-Wood interviews Rob Coe (Evidence-Based Education, Education Endowment Foundation) on the state of research on K-12 schools. Midway through the discussion, Coe says researchers have concluded that class size doesn’t make much difference in student learning; there’s a positive effect, but it’s small compared to other factors.

This finding flies in the face of what most educators and parents believe, and Coe offers this challenge: *Tell me something that you could do with a class of 15 that you can’t do with a class of 30.* People might say the teacher can give more individual attention and spend less time grading students’ work, but are those the key to how much students learn?

“How much individual attention can you give?” asks Coe. “Is that your dominant pedagogy for how you’re going to spend a lesson – each child one by one? Because that’s not a very efficient way to go about it.” In a class of 15, each student gets four minutes; in a class of 30, it’s two minutes. And as for grading...

“So these conversations made me think hard about learning,” says Coe, “how it happens, and how teachers manage it.”

[“Chalk & Change 4: Rob Coe: Campaigning to Get Evidence Taken Seriously”](#) by Harry Fletcher-Wood in *Improving Teaching*, February 15, 2026

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9. Why Tutoring Wasn’t Effective in Nashville

(Originally titled “A Closer Look at High-Dosage Tutoring”)

In *Educational Leadership*, Bryan Goodwin (McREL) asks why district-wide implementation of high-dosage tutoring in Metro Nashville Public Schools – 125,000 hours delivered to 6,888 students by trained educators using curriculum-aligned materials for 90 minutes a week over a full semester – produced minimal gains in reading and none in math. Students who didn’t get tutoring but worked with an adaptive computer program and had small-group support in their classrooms did almost as well.

Researchers believe these disappointing results were because tutors often repeated classroom content rather than focusing on each student’s specific skill gaps. Goodwin’s conclusion: with tutoring, assuming other key components are present, focus on gaps.

[“A Closer Look at High-Dosage Tutoring”](#) by Bryan Goodwin in *Educational Leadership*, February 2026 (Vol. 83, #5, pp. 5-6); Goodwin can be reached at bgoodwin@mcrel.org.

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10. How to Improve Meetings

“Meetings have become weapons of mass dysfunction,” says Dan Rockwell in *Leadership Freak*. “Tolerance of bad meetings is permission for more.” His suggestions:

- Stop using attendance, duration, or ‘calendar fullness’ to define success.
- Measure meetings by decision quality, progress made, and clarity of next actions.
- Cap attendance (smaller is better), shorten default meeting lengths, limit agenda items, and rename meetings so the purpose is unmistakable.
- Use meetings for decisions, conflict resolution, and sense-making.
- Design meetings for engagement: clarify who it’s for, get everyone involved, rotate facilitation, build in moments for thinking, and end with explicit decisions or commitments.

[“Create Your Best Meeting Ever”](#) by Dan Rockwell in *Leadership Freak*, February 3, 2026; Rockwell can be reached at dan@leadershipfreak.com.

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11. Recommended Children’s Picture Books

In *School Library Journal*, Betsy Bird notes the rules for children’s picture books to be considered for the Caldecott Medal: the author must be an American resident or citizen and the

artwork must be original. While these eight books didn't qualify, she believes they deserve recognition:

- *I Am We: How Crows Come Together to Survive* by Leslie Barnard Booth, illustrated by Alexandra Finkeldey (who is Canadian)
- *Gather Grateful* by Megan Litwin, illustrated by Alexandra Finkeldey
- *Cat Nap* by Brian Lies (the book replicates art from the Metropolitan Museum of Art)
- *Dawn* by Marc Martin (he is Australian)
- *The Glasshouse* by Helene Druvert, translated by Jill Phythian (Druvert is French)
- *The Interpreter* by Olivia Abtahi, illustrated by Monica Arnaldo (Arnaldo is Canadian)
- *Island Storm* by Brian Floca, illustrated by Sydney Smith (Smith is Canadian)
- *The Paper Bridge* by Joelle Veyrenc, illustrated by Seng Soun Ratanavanh, translated by Katy Lockwood-Holmes (originally published in France)

“Caldenotts: Best of the Ineligible Picture Books” by Betsy Bird in *School Library Journal*, February 2026 (Vol. 72, #2, pp. 14-16)

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About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and other educators very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 54 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, writer, and consultant lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 60 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through more than a hundred articles each week, and selects 5-10 that have the greatest potential to improve teaching, leadership, and learning. He then writes a brief summary of each article, pulls out several striking quotes, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the Memo to subscribers early Tuesday (there are 50 issues a year). Every week there's a podcast and HTML version. Artificial intelligence is not used.

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Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

All Things PLC
American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
AMLE Magazine
ASCA School Counselor
ASCD SmartBrief
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
Ed Magazine
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
English Journal
Exceptional Children
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Educational Review
Independent School
Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Kappan (Phi Delta Kappan)
Knowledge Quest
Language Arts
Language Magazine
Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance)
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Principal
Principal Leadership
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Social Education
Social Studies and the Young Learner
Teachers College Record
Teaching Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Journal of the Learning Sciences
The Language Educator
The Learning Professional (formerly Journal of Staff Development)
The New York Times
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Time
Urban Education