Marshall Memo 929

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
March 28, 2022

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1. Karin Chenoweth on the secret sauce of gap-closing districts
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Quotes of the Week

"Social life is fast, complex, and incredibly demanding cognitively. Americans have only recently begun to teach social and emotional skills in schools, and there are plenty of reasons to believe that online life erodes these skills. But our happiness in life, as well as our health and fulfillment, is hugely dependent on our ability to be skillfully understanding of and considerate toward others."

David Brooks (see item #2)

"We know that success at work depends on being – and *being seen as* – both competent and likable."

Leslie John (see item #3)

"I encourage people to be more focused on what they don't know than on what they do know or think they know. Our job as journalists is to be constant learners, to recognize that there's always another question we could ask that would tell us more, and that to some degree we're looking at the world through a keyhole."

Martin Baron, former *Washington Post* and *Boston Globe* editor, in an interview with Adi Ignatius in *Harvard Business Review*, July-August 2021

"Up to 30 percent of adults report moderate or severe mathematics anxiety, experiencing fear or dread when encountering mathematics."

Holly Klee, Michelle Buehl, and Angela Miller (see item #4)

"They aren't waiting for the cavalry to teach the kids; they are the cavalry."

Karin Chenoweth on effective district leaders (see item #1)

"The key to a high-performing school is that it becomes a community where adult learning is as important as kid learning is."

Paul Zavitkovsky (quoted in *ibid*.)

1. Karin Chenoweth on the Secret Sauce of Gap-Closing Districts

In the concluding chapter in her book on six beat-the-odds school districts, Karin Chenoweth (The Education Trust) ponders how to summarize the key ingredients. She noticed a number of seemingly important elements: passionate, hard-working teachers; a coherent reading program; an effective assessment system; a good student management program; well-targeted grants. "As nice as it would be to boil the success of these districts down to a couple of those things," says Chenoweth, "I don't think the answer lies in that direction. After all, there are plenty of passionate, hard-working teachers in ineffective districts, and the same can be said about good reading programs, assessments, data systems, and grant programs."

She believes that what explains these districts' remarkable achievements is their "ethos," which was powerfully summed up by Ronald Edmonds in a 1979 article: a culture in which "it is incumbent on all personnel to be instructionally effective for all pupils." Chenoweth unpacks Edmonds's statement:

- *Incumbent* – Educators have internalized the responsibility to ensure that kids get smarter, and they (the educators) are willing to be accountable for that.
- *All personnel* – Getting results is not the sole responsibility of individual teachers but of every adult in the building, including cafeteria workers, bus drivers, and custodians.
- *Instructionally effective* – This is broadly defined, encompassing curriculum, schedules, materials, pedagogy, interventions, engagement, and encouragement.
- *All pupils* – This includes children living in poverty, African-American children, and others who are left out of school success in far too many U.S. schools.

The districts Chenoweth describes – and the schools she's written about in her other books – "are filled with adults who feel it incumbent on themselves to be instructionally effective for all kids." Here's what that looks like in concrete terms:

• *Leadership* – "None of the leaders in this book is a fluffy, utopian idealist," says Chenoweth. "All are hard-headed career educators who have seen the power schools have to change lives… They aren't waiting for the cavalry to teach the kids; they are the cavalry." As one of the superintendents put it, educators "can change the path of poverty." Leaders communicated a clear, ambitious vision and set measurable goals (in one case, that no fourth grader would fail the state reading test and have to repeat the grade). Notably, none of the district leaders blamed educators for student failure; rather, says Chenoweth, they expected principals, teachers, and other staff members "to be curious and willing to learn, improve, and lead efforts to find solutions to problems."

• *Scientific method* – A common theme in the districts was the systematic application of these steps:

- Identify an important problem.
- Propose a solution based on local data and existing research.
- Implement it.
- Gather and analyze data to see if the problem was solved.
- If it was, identify the reasons and extend and expand the solution.
- If it wasn't solved, identify the reasons and either adjust or start over.

"When you do that week after week, month after month, year after year, you start seeing results," said an Oklahoma superintendent. This is not easy work, says Chenoweth, and many educators aren't good at the last three steps. But when the scientific method is applied, "This way of working by its very nature builds leadership capacity throughout schools and districts, because ideas and solutions come from everywhere. A paraeducator's insight into why a student may be having trouble with a particular concept or skill is just as valuable as those of a teacher, principal, or superintendent. A bus driver or school secretary may have information about a student that no other professional in the building knows. A brand-new teacher might have better training in reading or math instruction than a veteran one." With common metrics of success and continual examination of data, schools can be creative, try new things, and find the best solutions for kids.

• *Systems of support* – Chenoweth quotes Paul Zavitkovsky of the University of Illinois/Chicago: "The key to a high-performing school is that it becomes a community where adult learning is as important as kid learning is. And because of the infrastructure of American schools… you're fighting an uphill battle to create the time and the space to do systematic adult learning where adults can really learn their way through chronic problems together." The districts Chenoweth profiled won this battle by:

- Effective teamwork – Teacher teams pored over assessment data, behavioral data, attendance data, and student work and thought deeply about the effects of their work, what they should do more of, and what they should do less of;
- Common assessments – "Teachers need to be looking at how students did on the same assessment given at roughly the same time," says Chenoweth… "Without common data there is no real way to expose and learn from expertise." This means that teacher teams agree on *what* their students should be learning, and then experiment with *how* to teach it.
- A culture of trust – The question often heard in highly productive meetings: *Your kids are doing better than mine; what are you doing?* "It is long past time to acknowledge that it is impossible for individual educators to know all there is to know about making kids smarter," says Chenoweth. "There is simply too much to know. It is only by pooling their knowledge and learning from expertise that educators can possibly expect to help all kids."

- Using the research on how people learn – The districts Chenoweth chose mostly figured this out for themselves. It would be more efficient, she says, for districts to draw on the rich insights on human learning from neuroscience, cognitive science, and psychology.
- Understanding that the work is never done – "There is always another problem to solve," she says, "more opportunities to provide for children, better ways of doing things, higher standards to reach."

"So, to sum up," says Chenoweth, "the common elements of these districts are *leadership* that defines a vision of high expectations for all students and builds a culture where all adults in the system feel it incumbent to make kids smarter; a *process* to guide the adults in the district to making better decisions while growing their ability to do so using the scientific method; and *systems* to undergird that improvement process."

Why aren't more districts implementing these ideas? Why do economic and racial achievement gaps continue to be so wide across the nation? Chenoweth points to these factors:

- It's hard to translate research into practice.
- Many educators resist the idea that others have something to teach them.
- Most school and district leaders don't understand how to lead improvement.
- We as a nation have not fully committed to making all kids smarter.
- Not everyone agrees that all kids can get smarter.
- Local newspaper reporters aren't effectively describing what's happening in schools.
- Some Americans "have become discouraged about whether public schools *can* do much to help kids become smart," says Chenoweth. "Others have become convinced that schools *can* but *won't*."

"I wrote this book hoping to counter such pessimism," she concludes. "The districts I have profiled… provide clear arguments against the idea that public schools are incapable of improvement and excellence. They demonstrate that our future fellow citizens – children from all backgrounds – are capable of getting smarter and that the efforts of ordinary educators, when marshaled together, can help them do so. Kids can get smarter. We can all get smarter. We just have to muster the will to do so."

"We Can All Get Smarter" by Karin Chenoweth in her book, *Districts That Succeed: Breaking the Correlation Between Race, Poverty, and Achievement* (Harvard Education Press, 2021, pp. 129-152); Chenoweth can be reached at kchenoweth@edtrust.org.

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2. David Brooks on Friendship – and Why It Matters More Than Ever

In this *New York Times* column, David Brooks reports some data from Robin Dunbar's forthcoming book, *Friends* (Little, Brown, 2022), on the average number of friendships:

- 150 is the maximum for meaningful relationships most people have – for example, those on a holiday greeting card list or invited to a wedding.
- 15 is the number of closer friends – occasional dinner or movie companions.
- 5 is the most intimate circle – people who will give unstinting emotional, physical, and financial help when it's needed.

The closeness of friendships is influenced by how much people have in common. Meeting a new person, we check out musical tastes, political views, professions, worldview, sense of humor, and other factors and decide which tier of friendship is a possibility.

Time spent together is another factor, says psychologist Jeffrey Hall. It takes about 45 hours for a person to be admitted from acquaintance to friend, another 50 hours to become a close friend, another 100 hours to be in the innermost circle. In a typical month, people spend on average about 8-1/2 hours with their most intimate friends, about two hours with good friends, and less than 20 minutes with the other 135 people in the larger acquaintance circle. These are averages, with extroverts spreading their social energy more thinly with a wider circle, introverts having stronger ties with a smaller group of intimate friends.

"Social life is fast, complex, and incredibly demanding cognitively," says Brooks. "Americans have only recently begun to teach social and emotional skills in schools, and there are plenty of reasons to believe that online life erodes these skills. But our happiness in life, as well as our health and fulfillment, is hugely dependent on our ability to be skillfully understanding of and considerate toward others." Brooks cites the work of Michael Argyle and Monika Henderson on the social actions and communication skills that are key to friendships:

- Sharing important news;
- Confiding vulnerabilities;
- Providing emotional support;
- Standing up for friends when they're not there;
- Throwing the conversation back and forth without interrupting;
- Adding something meaningful;
- Anticipating how the other person might react to a comment;
- Telling jokes and reminiscing about the past.

"A lot of the bitterness and alienation in our country flows from the fact that our social skills are inadequate to the complex society we now live in," concludes Brooks. He believes things have gotten worse during the pandemic, and suggests that as we emerge from isolation, we do a friendship inventory and work at rebuilding these important social bonds.

"The Secrets of Lasting Friendships" by David Brooks in *The New York Times*, March 25, 2022

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3. Artful Self-Promotion

"We know that success at work depends on being – and *being seen as* – both competent and likable," says Leslie John (Harvard Business School) in this *Harvard Business Review* article. But self-promotion is off-putting to colleagues and can feel "icky" to the braggart (unless they're a narcissist). Trying to hide boasting with false humility (*I can't believe I got this award*) doesn't help. "Self-promotion has actually been associated with worse performance reviews," says John, "particularly for women, who are penalized more heavily when they boast."

So how can we ensure that good work is recognized? One approach is to earn recognition through consistent performance; John's father used to say, "The cream will rise to the top." But that is far from guaranteed. John suggests several ways to help it along:

• *Share when asked*. If a colleague poses a question that provides an opening to say something positive about yourself (*Your students did better on that than mine; what did you do?*), don't hesitate. In fact, says John, studies show that not answering a question like this or being coy may cause others to think you're not trustworthy or likable. She advises against "boomerasking" – a question designed to get the other person to ask the same question of you. "Let questions arise organically," she advises, "and when you see opportunities to highlight your successes, make the most of them."

• *Share when others are sharing*. "The penalty for bragging seems to dissipate when others in the room are engaging in self-promotion," says John. The same is true in job interviews, where we're expected to describe strengths and achievements. But don't forget social graces like asking questions, she adds.

• *Recruit a promoter*. Studies show that having a third party describe accomplishments is better than describing them yourself – and most colleagues are surprisingly willing to provide references and shout-outs. What's more, says John, "research on 'positive gossip' indicates that people are more highly regarded when they brag about others." She advises doing the same – and when someone compliments you in front of others, "resist the instinct to humbly downplay it; a smile or a simple 'Thank you' will suffice."

• *Acknowledge failures, small weaknesses, and foibles*. Doing so makes the positives more credible and wins points for candor and humility, especially with a touch of appropriate humor. "This strategy works," says John, "because humans are much more adept at making relative judgments than absolute ones: when negative information is sprinkled into a largely positive narrative, we compare the two, which allows accomplishments to stand out and be more readily accepted." John suggests describing minor issues (*I'm nervous about public speaking*) and not major ones (*I'm so nervous about public speaking that I sometimes start to panic*).

• *Celebrate the right way*. The best approach is to tell a circle of close friends and enjoy their appreciation. Research shows that this dynamic improves relationships – and withholding important good news makes people feel left out, harming trust and intimacy. Solo celebrations are also good – treating yourself to a nice meal, a special purchase, or a relaxing night with your favorite TV show.

John closes with a cautionary note: "If you find yourself constantly fighting the urge to brag, ask yourself why you feel the need. Everybody loves praise, but are you overly dependent on it? Not intrinsically motivated enough? Feeling undervalued in your profession? If so, why?"

"Savvy Self-Promotion" by Leslie John in *Harvard Business Review*, July-August 2021; John can be reached at ljohn@hbs.edu.

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4. Dealing with Math Anxiety

"Up to 30 percent of adults report moderate or severe mathematics anxiety, experiencing fear or dread when encountering mathematics," report Holly Klee, Michelle Buehl, and Angela Miller (George Mason University) in this article in *Theory Into Practice*. For many people, math anxiety begins in elementary school and increases as they move through the grades, leading them to avoid courses and careers that involve math. Research points to four variables that are at play with math-anxious students:

- They believe that doing well in math is important.
- They compare their performance to that of other students and external benchmarks.
- They strive to not mess up and avoid failure versus mastering the material.
- They believe they have very little control over how they'll do.

Studies have shown there's no correlation between math anxiety and ability and IQ; when students are anxious, they have difficulty with tasks they were able to perform when their anxiety was low.

How does math anxiety make people less capable? Klee, Buehl, and Miller believe it's because the anxiety reduces working memory. "The cognitive worry experienced by students with mathematics anxiety," they say, "can occupy a large portion of working memory, leaving less available to process the task at hand… Thus, students with mathematics anxiety are performing two tasks when others are performing one: they are working to solve the problem while also coping with their anxiety."

Klee, Buehl, and Miller suggest six ways for teachers to decrease students' math anxiety and thus improve their self-efficacy and performance:

• *Conceptual teaching* – "The 'drill and kill' method of practicing procedures, while easy to implement and effective in producing 'correct' answers, does not help students gain deep understanding of mathematics concepts," say the authors. It's better to frame goals in terms of understanding versus correctness and good grades, praise students for working hard and explaining their reasoning, and wrap up lessons with a short explanation of the conceptual takeaways.

• *Contextualizing mathematics* – Studies show that the more personal and real-world connections students see, the less anxious they are, the more agency they feel, and the better they do.

• *Partner and group work* – "Encouraging students to work together to discuss potential solutions," say the authors, "provides students the opportunity to voice their own understandings and potentially recognize there are multiple ways to find the correct solution, which can also support autonomy." Working together in pairs or small groups is also reassuring when students realize that they're not the only ones having difficulty. In addition, they can get insights as they wrestle together with problems and come up with novel solutions. Group work increases student autonomy – a valuable psychological factor in success – and allows the teacher to circulate and get ideas about what's causing difficulty and how to boost the conceptual level of the material.

• *Formative assessment and feedback* – Frequent, low-stakes checks for understanding let the teacher know whether to slow the lesson down or increase the conceptual level, and also give students feedback on their level of understanding – perhaps a sense of mastery. Low-stakes assessments convey the importance of mastery, versus students comparing themselves to peers. Short online quizzes during and after class give students an immediate sense of how they are doing and focus on whether they used successful or unsuccessful strategies. Some teachers ask students to self-report on their level of mastery and confidence and follow up with individual check-ins.

• *How summative assessments are framed* – Final exams and end-of-semester tests are when student anxiety is highest, and teachers need to address this head on. Having students talk openly about how they're feeling before a big test is surprisingly helpful, say the authors: students realize they're not alone and gain a greater sense of self-efficacy and control. It's important for teachers to verbally emphasize mastery – *This is an opportunity to show what you know* – versus performance – *I'm looking to catch you on what you don't know and compare you to your classmates*. Teachers should point out that the summative assessment has the same material students have been seeing in formative assessments in recent weeks. It's also good to be open to feedback on the quality of test questions: if all students got a question wrong, that test item needs to be revised – or the teacher needs to change how the concept was taught.

• *Student awareness of strategies to address math anxiety* – "One of the most powerful things we can do as educators is to help students be aware of the anxiety they are feeling," say Klee, Buehl, and Miller. Polling students on their anxiety on the first day of class reveals that students are not alone in the way they are feeling, which is tremendously reassuring. "Hearing anxiety is normal seems to function as a form of social persuasion that increases self-efficacy beliefs and decreases anxiety," they say. "Checking in throughout the semester, especially around exams, continues this acknowledgement from educators and increases students' sense of autonomy. Making anxiety a purposeful conversation is an important strategy for reducing it." One study showed that getting students to write about their worries just before an exam improved performance and speeded up processing time, indicating that working memory had been improved by neutralizing some of those anxious thoughts. Mindfulness interventions have also been shown to improve performance for math-anxious students.

"Strategies for Alleviating Students' Math Anxiety: Control-Value Theory in Practice" by Holly Klee, Michelle Buehl, and Angela Miller in *Theory Into Practice*, Winter 2022 (Vol. 61, #1, pp.49-61); the authors can be reached at hklee@gmu.edu, mbuehl@gmu.edu, and amille35@gmu.edu.

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5. Different Approaches to Kicking Off a Curriculum Unit

In this *Edutopia* article, Kristi Mascher (Missouri Southern State University) suggests three ways to use diagnostic assessments to gather helpful data, tee up critical thinking skills, and avoid sending unintended negative messages to students:

• *OWL versus KWL* – The widely used Know/Wonder/Learn graphic organizer can be intimidating for students who don't know a lot about a new topic (for example, quadrilaterals or Cro-Magnon humans). The implicit message to students is: *You should already know something about this* or *We just got started and you're already behind.*

A slightly different approach is OWL – Observe/Wonder/Learn. With the quadrilaterals lesson, the teacher projects a collage of rectangles, rhombuses, parallelograms, and other 2-D shapes on the screen and asks students to write down everything they notice and wonder. On Cro-Magnons, the teacher shows a segment of a documentary with the sound muted and asks students to discuss their inferences. "The difference," says Mascher, "is that in this type of activity, all students are entering into an equitable experience. Everyone will have something to say or write."

• *Anticipation questions versus pretests* – A typical unit pretest gives the teacher important information on students' prior knowledge and skills, but like KWL, pretests tell students they should already be conversant with the topic. Anticipation questions are open-ended and don't have right/wrong answers, for example:

- There's one best way to solve a problem. Agree or disagree?
- Some of the best things are found by accident. Explain.
- In most cases, help outweighs hurt. How so?

Questions like these require higher-order thinking, get students engaged, and stand a better chance of students starting a unit with curiosity and a positive frame of mind.

• *Narrative/demonstration versus quick-writes* – Low-stakes student jottings can be helpful to retrieve information and process thoughts, feelings, and ideas. But like KWL and pretests, quick-writes tell students they should already know a lot about the subject, and may put a premium on the quantity of words they write. Mascher thinks it's better to have students write everything they know (and don't know) about an upcoming subject on one side of a sheet of paper, then represent the ideas in visual form on the back – for example, clock faces or parts of the digestive system. This puts a premium on depth and allows students to express themselves nonverbally.

"3 Simple Ways to Use Pre-Unit Assessments to Promote Critical Thinking" by Kristi Mascher in *Edutopia*, March 21, 2022; Mascher can be reached at mascher-k@mssu.edu.

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6. Homework Principles

In this *Independent School* article, Maryland elementary teacher Alison Baran shares the guidelines her school developed for out-of-school assignments:

- Children have a right to playtime, extracurricular activities, downtime, and sleep.
- Parents should not be judged for how they regulate their children's time outside school.
- Homework assignments should have a clear purpose.
- If a homework assignment doesn't further learning, the default might be no homework.
- The rigor of homework (e.g., math facts, amount of reading) should vary by grade.
- The type of homework should vary depending on what is happening in class.

- The reason for an assignment should be articulated to students, including the fact that a certain portion might be challenging.
- Tasks should be personally relevant to students and allow for choices.
- Homework assignments are more helpful when students feel competent and confident with the material being assigned.
- Children deserve feedback on homework they've completed.
- Teachers might consider assigning no homework for a set period of time.

"Does Homework Matter?" by Alison Baran in *Independent School*, Winter 2022 (Vol. 82, #2, pp. 78-81); Baran can be reached at abaran@parkschool.net.

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7. Recommended Children's Books on Climate Change

In this *School Library Journal* feature, Baltimore librarian Liz Bosarge recommends books for tweens and teens on global ecology:

Elementary:

- *Living Planet: The Story of Survival on Planet Earth from Natural Disasters to Climate Change* by Camilla de la Bédoyère, grade 3-6
- *Climate Action: What Happened and What We Can Do* by Seymour Simon, grade 3-6
- *Young Water Protectors: A Story About Standing Rock* by Asian Tudor and Kelly Tudor, grades 2-5
- *Can You Hear the Trees Talking? Discovering the Hidden Life of the Forest* by Peter Wohlleben, grade 3-5

Middle school:

- *The Beekeepers: How Humans Changed the World of Bumble Bees* by Dana Church, grade 6-10
- *All the Feelings Under the Sun: How to Deal with Climate Change* by Leslie Davenport, grade 6-9
- *Be the Change: Rob Greenfield's Call to Kids Making a Difference in a Messed-Up World*, by Rob Greenfield, grade 4-7
- *Hothouse Earth: The Climate Crisis and the Importance of Carbon Neutrality* by Stephanie McPherson, grade 8-10
- *Imaginary Borders* by Xiuhtezcatl Martinez, grade 7-9
- *Planet Ocean: Why We All Need a Healthy Ocean* by Patricia Newman, grade 5-8
- *Girl Warriors: How 25 Young Activists Are Saving the Earth* by Rachel Sarah, gr. 7-9
- *Seen: Rachel Carson* by Birdie Willis, illustrated by Rii Abrego, grade 6-8
- *Earth Squad: 50 People Who Are Saving the Planet* by Alexandra Zissu, grade 4-7

High school:

- *The Story of More (Adapted for Young Adults): How We Got to Climate Change and Where to Go from Here* by Hope Jahren, grade 8 and up
- *How to Change Everything: The Young Human's Guide to Protecting the Planet and Each Other* by Naomi Klein, grade 8 and up

"An Eco-Hero's Bookshelf" by Liz Bosarge in *School Library Journal*, March 2022 (Vol. 68, #3, pp. 47-50)

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If you have feedback or suggestions,
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 other educators very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 52 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 150 articles each week, and selects 8-10 that have the greatest potential to improve teaching, leadership, and learning. He then writes a brief summary of each article, pulls out several striking quotes, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the Memo to subscribers every Monday evening (with occasional breaks; there are 50 issues a year). Every week there's a podcast and HTML version as well.

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Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

All Things PLC
American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
AMLE Magazine
ASCA School Counselor
ASCD Express
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
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
Knowledge Quest
Language Arts
Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance)
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Social Education
Social Studies and the Young Learner
Teachers College Record
Teaching Exceptional Children
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