Marshall Memo 1106

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
September 29, 2025

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Young children think that receiving help signals incompetence, and they are aware that other people think this as well, which can be a reason why children avoid seeking help themselves."

Jellie Sierksma and Kristin Shutts (see item #1)

"It's exceptionally good at making things look easy – polished summaries, perfect code, frictionless outlines. If we only consume those outputs, we outsource the very mental work that builds durable knowledge."

Philippa Hardman on the "fluency trap" of ChatGPT (see item #2)

"Learning sticks when it's effortful but doable; too easy breeds a 'familiarity illusion,' too hard leads to disengagement."

Philippa Hardman (*ibid*.)

"I hope most teachers are not spending a lot of time 'creating' instructional materials… I'd rather their time be spent on figuring out students' learning needs."

Timothy Shanahan (see item #6)

"What many recess advocates recommend, and what I've adopted in my own work, is facilitated recess. It's not structured. There's free choice. There's lots of opportunities. There's different games and specific zones that kids can play in. Everybody knows what's out there for the offering. There's appropriate equipment. You can go from one game to the other. You don't have to pick one for the day; you can hop around. Or you can do nothing. There are safe places where kids can sit and talk. Some schools have a 'walk and talk' track, where students can just walk and talk if they want. That's an especially good strategy for middle schoolers. Sometimes the counselors or the assistant principal will also walk the track, and then they can be available to interact with students if they're open to that."

Rebecca London, quoted in "Getting Recess Right: A Researcher Shares Best Practices" by Elizabeth Heubeck in *Education Week*, September 16, 2025

1. When Helping Students Is Not Helpful

In this article in *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, Jellie Sierksma (Utrecht University) and Kristin Shutts (University of Wisconsin/Madison) report surprising findings on what sometimes happens when students get help in classrooms. Since there are plenty of things kids can't do by themselves, there's a lot of help-giving by adults and sometimes by classmates. It seems obvious that supporting children would improve academic success, promote happiness, and foster positive peer relationships, so adults – at school and at home – are quick to offer assistance when students seem to need it.

"Yet recent research has revealed a darker side of helping behavior," say Sierksma and Shutts. "Adults' well-intentioned behavior toward children during task completion can backfire." Here's how that can happen when kids get help themselves, watch another student getting help, and help a classmate:

• Getting help from an adult – One study found that 6-to-11-year-old girls who got unsolicited help during a paper-folding task reported feeling less smart afterward. Another study of 4-5-year-olds who got help solving puzzles found they were less motivated to tackle another puzzle and spent less time trying. Other studies have found that providing explicit instructions on a task can hamper exploratory learning and persistence with daily tasks – including toothbrushing.

• Seeing another student getting help – Children think positively about people who are helpful, who share, and who are considerate, but when they witness a classmate getting help, they think less of them. "Young children think that receiving help signals incompetence," say the authors, "and they are aware that other people think this as well, which can be a reason why children avoid seeking help themselves." Children as young as 4 infer that peers who get help are less intelligent. This was especially true when children watched classmates getting direct help – the adult takes over and tells the strategy or the answer – compared to indirect help – giving hints and getting the child to do the task themselves. Kids were astute in inferring (correctly) that classmates who got direct help would learn less.

• Providing help to another student – Children are motivated to help others from an early age, but the ways in which they give help can cause problems. A study of 7-to-9-year-olds found that when students heard that a classmate had done well on a previous quiz, they gave indirect, hint-type help, but when they heard that another student had not done well previously, they gave them direct help, telling the answers or showing them how to do the task, which provided less opportunity to practice and improve their skills.

"Going beyond children's helping," say Sierksma and Shutts, "research has revealed that children show similar tendencies in perpetuating inequality when sharing resources with others. Preschool children, for example, give more resources to people who are rich rather than poor, as well as to those who are dominant rather than subordinate. Young children also tend to share more resources with members of their social in-groups – including those defined by gender, language, and race."

Helping can have an especially negative effect on social inequalities when members of high-status groups preferentially support in-group members and draw invidious conclusions about other students. "Specifically," say the authors, "children might think people from marginalized backgrounds are less smart and therefore need more help, which could lead to the development of stereotypes, which in turn elicit more unequal group-based help."

Students should get help that's truly helpful, say Sierksma and Shutts, so how can these negative dynamics be avoided? "An important mechanism that seems give rise to negative consequences," they say, "is that children associate help with incompetence. Feeling competent is crucial for people's well-being, and someone's competence has a pervasive influence on how much they are liked and trusted. This means we need to consider in what ways we can disrupt the association between help and incompetence early in life." Ten suggestions for teachers:

- Saying that getting help is crucial for learning and not a sign of incompetence;
- Using mastery-based strategies that emphasize learning and growth versus competition;
- Promoting the idea that help should be given after students have tried to solve learning problems on their own;
- Using (and promoting to student helpers) indirect and autonomy-supporting help;
- Not giving unsolicited help, appreciating the importance of students engaging in productive struggle, and giving help in a way that builds skills and autonomy;
- Taking advantage of new ed tech tools to individualize learning materials to students' particular needs and make help-giving less publicly visible;
- Being careful not to give help unequally based on group membership, with out-group children getting more help because of stereotyped beliefs about their ability;
- Encouraging intellectual humility in students – an awareness of the limits in their knowledge and skills and appreciation of those possessed by others;
- Talking to children about social-group biases in society; "When adults make children aware of the structural causes of inequality," say the authors, "this reduces bias in young children and leads them to think that hierarchies are less fair."
- Encouraging researchers to do more studies on help-giving: why, who, when, and how.

"The Unintended Negative Consequences of Help in Childhood" by Jellie Sierksma and Kristin Shutts in *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, April 15, 2025 (Vol. 34, #4, pp. 1-31); Sierksma can be reached at j.sierksma@uu.nl.

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2. Using GenAI for Real Learning, Not Shallow Fluency

In this online article, Philippa Hardman (Learning Futures) describes a recent study of how ChatGPT is being used around the world – mostly as a learning tool, with three-quarters of users asking for information, being tutored, seeking practical guidance, or getting help with their writing.

But does what people are getting from ChatGPT map to how humans learn best? Hardman is skeptical. "Many interactions still optimize for *ease*," she says: "Quick answers, instant drafts, heavy scaffolds. These interactions can feel productive in the moment, yet often fail to produce learning that transfers to new problems."

Three forces drive "the illusion of learning" – what neuroscientists say occurs when information looks familiar and work feels smooth but there isn't real mastery:

- Fluency bias – the material looks clear but doesn't strengthen memory;
- Performance versus learning – breezing through practice but it doesn't stick;
- Over-scaffolding – step-by-step support doesn't build independent problem-solving.

"AI can amplify these traps," says Hardman; "it's exceptionally good at making things look easy – polished summaries, perfect code, frictionless outlines. If we only consume those outputs, we outsource the very mental work that builds durable knowledge."

Hardman suggests several ways to challenge ourselves and check for real understanding and retention:

- Recall it on a blank page without cues. If you can't retrieve it without help, you've built fluency, not knowledge.
- Explain it to a novice. Self-explanation reveals gaps and deepens understanding.
- Tackle a mixed set of problems. Interleaving forces discernment and transfer.
- Perform under constraints – for example, a timed, rubric-anchored task.
- Retain it for a week. Without spacing, retention decays, even when it felt solid.

The next time you "learn" something from GenAI, Hardman suggests, score yourself 5-4-3-2-1 on whether there's durable knowledge or phantom learning.

With that in mind, she proposes ten evidence-based principles that convert "feels like learning" into actual gains in memory, understanding, and transfer. "Think of them as a design spec for every AI-assisted study session," she says, "and a product checklist for anyone building learning tools." With each one, she suggests a prompt for GenAI:

• Embrace the zone of desirable difficulty. "Learning sticks when it's effortful but doable," says Hardman; "too easy breeds a 'familiarity illusion,' too hard leads to disengagement." Ask ChatGPT: *Here's a solved math problem; come up with the same concept with different numbers, then with a twist, then turn it into a word problem*.

• Try a problem before instruction. Attempting something new before you've learned about it "primes" your brain to take in the explanation. Ask ChatGPT: *Pose a novel problem. Don't teach me yet. Let me try. Then offer a minimal hint, then a deeper hint, and a full solution only after I explain my approach*.

• Treat content as a resource, not the destination. "Use content to solve an active problem you've already tried," says Hardman. "Prior struggle creates a 'need to know,'

deepening processing." To ChatGPT: *Before I read this chapter on the French Revolution, generate three analytical questions that I probably can't answer yet to focus my reading*.

• Practice how you'll perform in an authentic assessment. Practice should mirror the final performance, she says, and you learn what you practice. To ChatGPT: *Paste in an article and ask it to create a one-page case study with a decision to be made, then grade my response against this rubric*.

• Close the loop. "Targeted, actionable feedback is the single biggest lever," says Hardman. It should answer the questions, Where am I going? How am I going? Where to next? To ChatGPT: *Act as a writing tutor: assess only my thesis and hook using my goal, my current performance, and give me concrete next steps*.

• Use retrieval practice to make memory do the work. Pulling information from memory strengthens retention and is far more effective than re-reading and underlining. To ChatGPT: *Here's a document on the Krebs cycle, now give me quizzes with multiple-choice questions, fill-in-the-blank questions, and ask me to explain it to a teenager*.

• Use spaced review. Spread out sessions so you revisit material just before you forget it. To ChatGPT: *I have a math exam in six weeks. Build a weekly plan that spaces material on derivatives, integrals, and series, spaced so it resurfaces older topics at optimal intervals. For each weekly plan, include content and activities that help me learn what I'm struggling with*.

• Use interleaving to build flexible knowledge. Mix up problem types so that you have to choose the right strategy for each one. To ChatGPT: *For my math test in six weeks, build a weekly plan that uses interleaving to test my ability to apply key concepts in a variety of contexts. For each weekly plan, include suggested content and activities to help me learn what I'm getting wrong*.

• Learn together. "Explaining to others surfaces gaps and consolidates understanding," says Hardman. To ChatGPT: *Moderate an ethics debate on CRISPR, providing three propositions, each with a brief 'for' and 'against' to kick us off, then facilitate*.

• Respect bandwidth and manage cognitive load. Working memory is limited, and it's important to not overload it, investing in what the brain can handle at any moment. To ChatGPT: *Teach me the Krebs cycle (document supplied) in layers: one-sentence purpose, then high-level analogy, then main stages, then detailed steps*.

"Taken together," Hardman concludes on her ten principles, "they add the right kind of friction – retrieval, self-explanation, interleaving, feedback, spacing – so that your time with AI stops polishing answers and starts building durable skills… Ask for a problem before the explanation. Tell it to quiz you, not coddle you. Demand a rubric, not a pat on the back."

"ChatGPT: The World's Most Influential Teacher" by Philippa Hardman, September 18, 2025

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3. Did the Winner of an Essay Contest Cheat with GenAI?

In this *New York Times* Ethicist column, Kwame Anthony Appiah (New York University) addresses a dilemma from a local historical society. The group awarded $1,000

scholarships to two high-school students who wrote the best essays about a meaningful experience with a historical site. "This year," said the anonymous query, "our committee noticed a huge improvement in the quality of the students' essays, and only after announcing the winners did we realize that one of them, along with other students, had almost certainly used artificial intelligence. What to do?"

Researching and writing an essay, says Appiah, used to be how students learned material, thought it through, and formed their own views. But with the pervasive use of GenAI, it's harder to use essays to judge what students really know and can do. "Your society's prize," he says, "is no doubt meant to reward that process, not just a polished final product. And yet unless your historical society explicitly barred AI use, the winner might not have thought she was doing anything wrong."

Appiah puts the situation in perspective: before AI, students could have worked with a parent or older sibling to improve their essays, and more recently, could have used digital spelling and grammar checkers to fine-tune their drafts. Kafka once said, "Writing is utter solitude, the descent into the cold abyss of oneself." Not any more, says Appiah: "For students today, it may feel more like a cozy group chat with an algorithm" – and in this case, some of them were relying on "silicon Cyranos."

The historical society's experience this year, he says, "should be taken as a wake-up call rather than a crime scene." Tell the teacher liaison about the situation but don't push for a confession from the winner or ask that the prize money be returned. And in the future, let students know what kinds of assistance is off-limits and why producing work of their own matters. Alternatively, consider restructuring the competition so students produce their essays under supervision or are judged in oral presentations.

"An Essay Contest Winner Used AI. Should She Return the $1,000 Award?" by Kwame Anthony Appiah in "The Ethicist" in *The New York Times*, September 14, 2025

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4. Six Research Insights About Homework

"The value of homework," says Youki Terada in *Edutopia*, "is one of education's most heated debates – and one of its most misunderstood." He summarizes these insights from studies of homework, each accompanied by a chart (click the article link to see them):

• Homework adds increasing value as students move up through the grades. There are fewer academic benefits in grades 1-4, but homework is not a total wash in those grades; it can build foundational skills and habits of mind.

• Especially for young learners, homework content matters. Reading and writing practice is better than math drills. One study found that second graders who practiced their literacy skills at home had significant and lasting gains in grammar and spelling. It takes time to build reading and writing fluency, and extra hours at home make a difference.

• Quality also matters. Thoughtful homework assignments (for example, extending ideas from class or preparing for presentations and debates) produce greater engagement –

cognitive, emotional, and behavioral – and better academic results. Busywork, on the other hand, produces low engagement and is a waste of time.

• Time that high-school students spend on homework correlates with achievement. The 2014 PISA study found that most students spend less than one hour a day on homework, but those who spend more than an hour perform much better, with 2-3 hours being the sweet spot.

• Homework contributes to student stress. Among middle and high schoolers, homework and overall workload are second only to grades and tests as stressors. "While homework is a game-changer academically for adolescents, the pressure of too much homework, or homework that feels purposeless, can overshadow nearly every other concern," says Terada. "Balance and teacher discretion is crucial. A growing body of research reveals that excessive homework displaces activities that support healthy development, from sleep and family time to hobbies and friendships, and can significantly increase unhealthy stress levels – all of which can take a toll on student engagement and mental health."

• Family income can increase unfairness in homework assignments. Less access to smartphones, powerful computers, and high-speed internet makes some homework assignments unfair for less-advantaged students. In addition, teachers often misjudge the time homework assignments take low-achieving students to complete. One study found that an assignment teachers thought would take an hour took students all the way from 30 to 85 minutes; struggling students with greater limitations in their home environment took the longest.

To address equity concerns, some teachers survey their students to identify barriers, offer pen-and-paper options for completing assignments, and allow some in-class time for students to get a jump on homework and reveal problems with unclear directions and confusion that can be addressed on the spot.

"The Pros and Cons of Homework (in 6 Charts)" by Youki Terada in *Edutopia*, September 26, 2025

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5. Why It's Better to Ask *How* Than *Why*

In *Behavioral Scientist*, Rene Almeling (Yale University) says young children constantly ask *Why* questions, and parents and teachers have to keep coming up with answers. In the Toyota production system, people are taught to pose the question five times to get to the root of a problem. But when it comes to human interaction, says Almeling, "it can be more productive and compelling to ask questions that begin with *how* rather than why."

For example, consider your answer to the question, *Why are you working at your current job?* Starting with why tends to elicit specific explanations, in her case, a straightforward list of interest and salary. But asking *how* she came to be working at her current job evokes a different response – a meandering pathway from her undergraduate days, an influential adviser, working at a nonprofit, avoiding PhD programs in places with harsh winters, UCLA, and finally Yale. *How* questions get people thinking at a micro, meso (middle), and macro level.

Another example: rather than asking *why* women continue to earn less than men for the same work, asking *how* requires a bit of digging and, says Almeling, is "more likely to reveal a multitude of complicated interacting social processes than does asking *why*, which encourages a unitary and often-too-simple explanation." Asking *why* about individual lives, organizational processes, or major social problems tends to shut down curiosity, while asking *how* opens a range of inquiry and can generate a greater sense of agency, especially if there aren't easy answers.

"Certainly," says Almeling, "there are times and places and topics for which it is appropriate to ask *why*. But defaulting to *why* questions when it comes to human behavior tends to result in oversimplified and unitary perspectives. Posing *how* questions is more likely to reveal complex, multifaceted processes, and understanding what they are and how they work increases the chances of finding new ways forward. It's a simple switch of one three-letter word for another when you ask a question, and yet it produces a powerful shift in thinking. The next time you find yourself grumbling, *Why*? or partaking in a conversation where the answers seem too simple and sweeping, try asking *How*?"

[After a classroom visit, asking *how* a colleague came to use a particular approach might lead to a more-productive conversation than asking *why*. K.M.]

"The Power of Asking 'How?'" by Rene Almeling in *Behavioral Scientist*, September 14, 2025; Almeling can be reached at rene.almeling@yale.edu.

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6. Timothy Shanahan on the Role of Pictures in Reading

In this article on his website, Timothy Shanahan (University of Illinois/Chicago) answers a teacher's question about how students should use pictures as they learn to read. If a first grader reads the word *monkey* and there's a picture, researchers have found that the picture can distract the child from decoding the word. "We learn to remember and read words by looking at the words," says Shanahan, "that is, by looking at the combinations of the letters of which the words are comprised… Six-year-olds are more interested in looking at pictures of monkeys than at the letters m-o-n-k-e-y."

But what about adding the word *monkey* to students' vocabulary? "If the point is to get students to understand the meaning of a word they don't know, pictures can be a real help," says Shanahan. He suggests a way to accomplish both goals: "Start with using a picture to help define the word and then cast it aside so the kids can focus on the letter sequence." With a new word, plenty of repetition is helpful.

And what about comprehension? Pictures can help students understand a story, says Shanahan, at both the literal and inferential level. And kids prefer books with pictures, especially if they are colorful and lively; illustrations invite them into a story. But pictures don't necessarily boost how well children understand the prose, and can provide a shortcut to understanding the story without actually reading.

Teachers can counteract this as students read an illustrated text by asking questions about the pictures and helping students make connections between the story and the illustrations. The point, says Shanahan, "is to get kids exploring both the verbal and pictorial codes and their relationship and to use both together – along with prior knowledge – to develop more complete and coherent representation of this story… Kids have difficulty doing that just with words, so the combination of verbal and graphic information matters."

Shanahan sums up: "Pictures may initially compete with the words in comprehension, but they're essential for helping kids to gain coherent representations of what they read. The trick is neither to avoid the pictures nor to allow them to overwhelm the words. One of the things that can be accomplished during shared and guided reading is to show kids how to combine pictures and words to develop coherent representations, and then to wean them from the pictures over time."

"What Role Should Pictures Play in Teaching Reading?" by Timothy Shanahan in *Shanahan on Reading*, September 27, 2025; Shanahan can be reached at shanahan@uic.edu.

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7. Telling Your School's Story

"Every school has a story, and it's so much more than a tagline," says Emily Cretella (School Storytellers and Cursive Content) in this article in *Independent School*. "It's critical to move past generic messaging to uncover and create a signature narrative that brings the mission to life." Her suggestions:

• Your story needs to connect to potential families. They need to see the school as a good fit for their child, and the narrative has to address possible worries. Cretella suggests getting ideas from open-response surveys, in-person conversations, and e-mail correspondence with families.

• Your story needs to intrigue. The school should have a "big promise" – an attention-grabbing, bold, unifying idea about the impact the school will have on students, a simple, persuasive reason to choose your school. For example, the Schenck School in Georgia, which focuses on students with dyslexia, adopted the slogan, *Empowering Dyslexic Learners from Day One*.

• Your story needs to be simple and say what matters most. "Unlike a mission statement, which tells the world what you're working toward as an institution," says Cretella, "a positioning statement tells your audience why your mission matters to them." For example, the Holy Child School in Pennsylvania says, *We elevate early learning by providing students in preschool through grade 8 with an uplifting education, joyful opportunities, and a boundless childhood experience that allows kids to be kids – because happy children learn better*.

• Your story needs to come to life with meaningful examples. The Quaker School in Pennsylvania, which specializes in working with students with learning differences (it says students are "relentlessly understood"), disseminates articles, e-books, podcasts, and newsletters that educate and support parents of children with complex challenges.

• Your story must be authentic. "If you're promising joy, show it," says Cretella. "If you're promising rigor and support, prove it. If you say, 'Every child is known,' show what that actually looks like in practice."

"Story Core" by Emily Cretella in *Independent School*, Fall 2025 (Vol. 85, #1, pp. 60-67)

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8. Picturebooks About Climate Change

In *Language Arts*, Ysaaca Axelrod, Jenny Brownson, Candance Doer-Stevens, and Denise Ives suggest these children's picturebooks to explain the impact of climate change and possible courses of action:

- *Wild Berries* by Julie Flett
- *Our Green City* by Tanya Lloyd Kyi
- *The Last Polar Bear* by Jean Craighead George, illustrated by Wendell Minor
- *The Boy and the Whale* by Mordicai Gerstein
- *The First Blade of Sweetgrass* by Suzanne Greenlaw and Gabriel Grey, illustrated by Nancy Baker
- *Luna and Me: The True Story of a Girl Who Lived in a Tree to Save a Forest* by Jenny Sue Kostecki-Shaw
- *We Are Water Protectors* by Carole Lindstrom, illustrated by Michaela Goade
- *Autumn Peltier, Water Warrior* by Carole Lindstrom, illustrated by Bridget George
- *Amara and the Bats* by Emma Reynolds
- *The Water Walkers* by Carol Ann Trembath, illustrated by David Craig

"Representations of Hope for Climate Action: An Analysis of Environmental Narratives in Children's Picturebooks" by Ysaaca Axelrod, Jenny Brownson, Candance Doer-Stevens, and Denise Ives in *Language Arts*, March 2025 (Vol. 102, #4, p. 245-254);

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9. Short Item:

Online Access to National Parks – In this *Edutopia* article, James Fester gives links to 10 free resources from the U.S. National Parks Service, including a search engine, curiosity kits, citizen science, junior ranger programs, and 3-dimensional mapping technology.

"10 National Park Service Resources Every Teacher Should Know About" by James Fester in *Edutopia*, September 18, 2025

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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
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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