Marshall Memo 1124

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
February 9, 2026

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"Online sports gambling is this generation's cigarettes."

Will Austin in *Boston Focus*, February 6, 2026

"You can't get to effective, innovative, visionary leadership unless you first handle the managerial tasks of the job."

Alex Shultz in "How to Balance Management and Leadership As a Principal" in *Edutopia*, October 15, 2025

"I've got four children in school: a tenth grader, an eighth grader, a sixth grader, and a third grader. I live in a state of constant confusion about who has homework when. It is a perpetual fog of war."

Dave Stuart Jr. (see item #6)

"Whatever replaces the essay, the homework assignment, the résumé, and the compliance quiz has to share certain qualities: it has to be live or near-live. It has to be interactive. It has to make the human's thinking visible – not just their output. And it has to create conditions where the person has a reason to care about the process, not just the product."

Mike Kentz in "How Do We Know What People Know?", February 2, 2026

"When people lack the background knowledge to make sense of public life, they become easy marks for demagogues and charlatans."

Robert Pondiscio in "The Illusion of Learning: The Danger of Artificial Intelligence for Education" in *Education Gadfly*, November 6, 2025

"All of life is a series of daring explorations from a secure base. People need a secure base. Part of that base is emotional: unconditional attachments to family and friends. Part of that secure base is material: living in a safe community, with a measure of financial stability. Part of that secure base is spiritual: living within a shared moral order, possessing faith that hard work will be rewarded, faith in a brighter future… When people do not believe they have a

secure emotional, physical, and spiritual base, they become risk-averse, stagnant, cynical, anxious, and aggressive."

David Brooks in "Time to Say Goodbye" in *The New York Times*, February 1, 2026

"Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness."

Reinhold Niebuhr (quoted in *ibid*.)

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1. Seven Principles for Teaching and Learning

In this online article, Carl Hendrick (Academica University) suggests seven instructional insights that every teacher should know:

• Effective learning strategies often feel like they're not working. For example, summarizing a paragraph or testing oneself on challenging material is difficult and students may be frustrated, but these are among the best ways to commit material to long-term memory. Conversely, re-reading and underlining a passage gives the feeling of mastery, but it's illusory and the "learning" is quickly forgotten.

• Finding out what students don't know is sometimes more important than knowing what they do. "Often we don't pay enough attention to what students don't know," says Hendrick, "and more importantly, their misconceptions, misunderstandings, and gaps in knowledge." Identifying these allows teachers to plan more effectively for the next lesson.

• We understand new stuff based on our knowledge of old stuff. For example, when students are learning to read, their vocabulary, background knowledge, and conceptual understanding are the velcro that helps new learning stick. "Design lessons with that in mind," says Hendrick.

• Caveat emptor on the science of learning. Cognitive psychology has given us powerful strategies – for example, that retrieval practice builds long-term memory. But there are "lethal mutations" to some of these ideas, says Hendrick, and teachers need to apply them "in a systematic way with consistent feedback, reflection, and evaluation."

• The necessary subcomponents of learning look different than the final performance. People who want to become skilled soccer players don't start by playing a match: they work on dribbling, ball handling, fitness, and more. Similarly, to become proficient readers, students need to master phonics, vocabulary, background knowledge, and fluency.

• Not all learning is engaging and fun. One of the worst misconceptions, says Hendrick, is that if parts of a lesson are boring, kids have the right to tune out. "We should impress upon students the value of short-term struggle in order to achieve long-term gain," he says, "a pattern we see again and again in achievement in many different domains of expertise." Students moving from *This is impossible* to *Oh wait, I can do this* is one of the best experiences they can have.

• A few students doing well proves nothing. About 20 percent of students will learn in spite of ineffective teaching practices and an unruly classroom, says Hendrick, but their well-written essays and high test scores are nothing for a teacher to brag about. Effective, equitable teaching is built on day-to-day practices like high expectations, good classroom management, clarity, modeling, scaffolding, and checking for understanding.

"Seven Principles About Learning That Every Teacher Should Know" by Carl Hendrick in *Academica*, February 2, 2026

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2. Can the Girl/Boy Reading Gap Be Closed?

In this *New York Times* article, Claire Cain Miller reports on the downward trend in reading proficiency among U.S. students, with more screen time and less book reading major factors. Boys' reading is especially concerning; in nearly every school district, their standardized reading scores are lower than girls: on average, boys are ¾ of a year behind girls in 4th grade, a full year behind in 12th grade.

"Reading is at the root of everything academically," says Emily LaVasseur, a Texas reading specialist. "And the sad part is, when kids don't get the right intervention and don't get fluent enough to keep pace with their peers, school becomes so hard, and they internalize that defeat." This is definitely a factor in the declining percent of young men graduating from high school and attending college.

In recent decades, the boy-girl gap in math and science (boys doing better) has narrowed through concerted efforts to boost girls' motivation, beliefs, and skills. This suggests that the girl-boy gap in reading can be closed if the right approaches are used. But any gap-closing work must take several factors into account:

- Girls develop language skills earlier as babies and are ahead when they start school.
- Boys are more likely to have dyslexia and ADHD, which make reading harder.
- Boys tend to be less attentive in classrooms and have more difficulty sitting still.
- These differences are amplified by socialization. Some research findings:
- Mothers talk more to their baby daughters than to their sons.
- By age 8, kids believe girls are better at verbal skills, which affects boys' confidence.
- Girls are more likely to say they like to read, and they do it more and get better at it.

That said, girls' average reading proficiency has also declined in recent decades, and there are plenty of girls experiencing low achievement and negative attitudes toward reading.

What can be done for all struggling readers, while also narrowing the girl-boy gap? Miller reports on some key strategies:

• Intervene early. Skill and attitude problems compound over time, so early identification of reading deficits is a key factor, with tailored support starting in the early grades.

• Provide small-group instruction. A study in North Carolina found that when struggling readers were taught in groups of four or fewer, boys made especially good progress – perhaps because it was easier for teachers to manage behavior and attention.

• Use effective teaching methods. Among them: systematic decoding in kindergarten and first grade, assigning whole books, teaching literacy skills in science and social studies, and teaching handwriting and spelling.

• Make it meaningful and enjoyable. This includes high-quality instructional materials, giving students choice of books, and orchestrating discussion among peers. "Books of authentic literary and philosophical merit," says podcaster Shilo Brooks of the George W. Bush Presidential Center, "can widen a boy's conception of what a man can do, become, suffer from, overcome, and wonder about."

• Model reading. Boys benefit from seeing the men in their lives reading for pleasure, joining book clubs, taking them to book stores, and teaching humanities in schools. All this can help boys see reading is part of being a man.

"Why Boys Are Behind in Reading at Every Age" by Claire Cain Miller in *The New York Times*, January 30, 2026

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3. The Troubling Impact of GenAI on Young People's Social Skills

In this *New York Times* article, Clay Shirky (New York University) bemoans the way generative AI has become a "social prosthetic" – a way for people to mediate interactions with other humans. Part of his job as a university administrator is to worry about students using GenAI to cut academic corners, but he's losing more sleep about *emotional* offloading "because farming out your social intuitions could hurt young people more than opting out of writing their own history papers."

College kids are "stuck in the transition from managed childhoods to adult freedoms," says Shirky, and "are both eager to make human connections and exquisitely alert to the possibility of embarrassment. (You remember). AI offers them a way to manage some of that anxiety of presenting themselves in new roles when they don't have a lot of experience to go on." The result: plenty of anxiety.

Kids are turning to GenAI for guidance on understanding texts and other digital messages, using it to learn how to relate to other people. The problem, says Shirky, is that "AI has been trained to give us answers we like, rather than the ones we may need to hear. The resulting stream of praise – constantly hearing some version of 'You're absolutely right!' – risks eroding our ability to deal with the messiness of human relationships."

Sycophantic GenAI isn't good for developing social skills because it smooths out the inevitable bumps in relationships. "We need good judgment to get along with one another," says Shirky. "Good judgment comes from experience, and experience comes from bad judgment. It sounds odd to say that we have to preserve a space for humans to screw up socially, but it's true."

It took two decades of smartphone use for people to decide to ban them from classrooms and set meaningful age limits on social media. Shirky hopes it won't take that long to set meaningful guardrails for GenAI, and notes some early signs: oral exams in K-12 schools and colleges, establishing spaces for face-to-face interactions, and more live communication in the workplace.

"The Dangers of the AI Scripted Life" by Clay Shirky in *The New York Times*, February 1, 2026; Shirky can be reached at clay.shirky@nyu.edu.

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4. A College English Teacher Goes Full Low-Tech

In this *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, Geoff Watkinson (University of California/San Marcos) says that in one of his jobs as a proposal writer for a technology company competing for federal contracts, he's made frequent use of GenAI over the last year. "Some tasks that once took me a full day suddenly took 30 minutes," he says. "My output increased and so did my quality. For tedious, administrative work that I know how to do, AI is a tool I have no intention of abandoning."

But in his other life – teaching writing to first-year students at a state university and a community college in Southern California – Watkinson has strong feelings about not using AI. What's the difference?

"A proposal is a finished product," he says, "– a deliverable with a deadline and a dollar value attached. Teaching writing is about the messy, recursive process of thinking – helping students wrestle with their own beliefs, gather evidence, organize their thoughts, and find a way to say what they mean. I watch for the moment when a student moves from just following instructions to asking real questions to pushing back, to thinking for themselves. That's the work. If they hand off the hardest parts to Claude, they miss the struggle that makes the learning real. My worry isn't so much about cheating as it is about losing moments of revelation and growth. Without those, what is the point of a liberal-arts education?"

AI detectors aren't foolproof, says Watkinson, and he's uncomfortable being a detective. "When deadlines approach," he says, "students reach for whatever works. The tools are too easy. The consequences are abstract."

He's decided to forbid laptop and cellphone use in his classes – just pens and paper. He asks students to read outside of class and arrive ready to discuss and write (by hand) together. He asks students to purchase a journal and write in it during class. "One day we brainstorm in it," he says. "Another day we draft introductions. Another, body paragraphs. They'll write initial responses to readings and discussion questions. Over the weeks, the journal fills with

their thinking. It becomes theirs… The journal isn't a test. It's a space to protect what students need most right now: the chance to grow."

At first some students resisted. Their handwritten work was clumsy and their thoughts came slowly. But then things changed. One student said, "When I write on paper, my mind feels less cluttered." Another said she felt freer. A third likened the experience to mindfulness. "I watch the room settle," says Watkinson. "Pens move; eyes focus. Without screens, even a short writing session can bring a kind of clarity that lingers after class. When I say time's up, some students keep writing They don't want to stop… Real freedom, in this context, feels like flow: being absorbed in your own thoughts, unbothered by notifications or noise. That's the kind of freedom I want my students to find."

Watkinson concludes: "I know my students will use AI in their future jobs, and in their future classrooms… But first, they need to build the muscles of writing and thinking for themselves… AI can wait its turn."

"AI Has No Place in the Classroom" by Geoff Watkinson in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 20, 2026 (Vol. 72, #11, pp. 34-35)

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5. Bronx and Brooklyn Middle Teachers Experiment with an AI Platform

"Artificial intelligence has equal potential to enhance or undermine" student learning, say New York City area superintendents Cristine Vaughan and Celeste Terry in this article in *The 74*. "Teachers are rightly concerned that AI cheats and shortcuts will erode students' independent thinking and that increased screen time will further depress the social skills and human connections kids need more than ever in a technology-powered world."

Vaughan and Terry decided to focus on writing and close reading in 14 of their middle schools – the parts of reading lessons in which students were having the most difficulty. Teachers worked with Mojo, an AI platform that makes curriculum texts and questions interactive, providing targeted support. Here's how it works:

- Students read a text in groups and discuss their initial thinking.
- Students type or speak their response to comprehension questions to the AI platform.
- The AI immediately confirms what students understand and pushes them to go deeper by having them re-read parts of a passage or asking follow-up questions. "It's like the handout is talking to me," said one student.
- The teacher watches a live dashboard showing each group's level of understanding and works with groups having difficulty.
- After 15 minutes, the teacher directs the AI to summarize the two biggest misconceptions in the class and suggest a discussion question to address each one.
- The teacher leads a class discussion on those questions.
- Students complete an exit ticket – a short written paragraph about the lesson.
- Mojo gives students up to three rounds of real-time feedback on their work and they revise their writing after each round.

Vaughan and Terry report that classrooms using this approach at least twice a week made significant gains on state tests last year, doubling the growth rate of their district. Four key features of the pilot:

• Maintaining rigor and fidelity – These AI-assisted lessons worked within the districts' literacy materials and didn't dial down the level of challenge students experienced.

• Student collaboration – In small-group and whole-class discussions, students worked with classmates. Students were not putting on headsets and working silently on screens.

• Teacher support – Mojo gave teachers real-time information on students' misconceptions and progress, and teachers were able to suggest new features, including one that spotlighted misconceptions and another that highlighted strong student thinking and exemplary work.

• Results – This initiative was laser-focused on student learning outcomes as measured by state and NAEP tests – not just process.

"When educators both embrace the transformative power of AI and hold tight to the values and knowledge of effective instruction," conclude Vaughan and Terry, "every school can build the future all students deserve."

"How AI Is Helping NYC English Teachers Improve Middle-School Reading and Writing" by Cristine Vaughan and Celeste Terry in *The 74*, February 3, 2026

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6. Suggestions for Talking with Parents and Guardians About Homework

In this online article, high-school teacher Dave Stuart Jr. says he feels parents' and guardians' pain on homework: "I've got four children in school: a tenth grader, an eighth grader, a sixth grader, and a third grader. I live in a state of constant confusion about who has homework when. It is a perpetual fog of war. My best days are the ones where I at least check in with each of my children on whether or not they have homework and provide a few tips and structure changes to enable them to focus on the work they have." His suggestions for teachers:

• Recognize that parents and guardians are busy. What they need is clear and specific information on their children's homework responsibilities in as few words as possible.

• Start from a humble place and assume good intent. "Just about all parents and guardians I've met do care," says Stuart. "We have to remind ourselves: they love their child more than I do; they are hugely responsible for the things in their child that I love; they are more frustrated by their child's misbehaviors than I am."

• Parents and guardians should never have to teach our material. It's not fair to students or adults at home to send homework that requires instructional help, says Stuart. "It's my job to explicitly teach my students to do everything I want them to do at home."

• Ask parents and guardians to provide a distraction-free place for homework. "Not all of them can," he says, "but whenever a parent asks me what they can do to help, I always bring this up" – specific times for studying, smartphones off and away, and as few distractions as possible.

• Encourage listening to their children and cheer them on. Parents can ask kids how things are going, encourage their work ethic, coach them on seeking help when they need it, and remind them that their worth isn't how well they perform in school but who they are. In the words of Mr. Rogers, "It's you that I like."

"Better, Saner Homework Tips, Part 3: Team Up with Parents and Guardians" by Dave Stuart Jr., February 3, 2026; Stuart can be reached at dave@davestuartjr.com.

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7. The Epidemic of Teen Online Gambling

In this *Education Daily* article, Tim Daly traces the seemingly innocent beginning of state lotteries that sent funds to public schools. But this turned out to be "public con," he says, rarely increasing overall education funding and "freeing up politicians to spend on other priorities without having to raise taxes." Gambling became a pastime in many homes, and after the 2018 Supreme Court decision, sports gambling was legalized in 40 states.

How has this affected young people? "Ubiquitous gambling has been a disaster for kids," says Daly, "and it's rapidly getting worse." Some data from a recent survey by Common Sense Media (with a special focus on boys):

- Half of boys 16-17 report gambling in the past year – more than use alcohol, nicotine, or marijuana.
- Gambling is baked into video games via chance-based, real-money rewards (Counter-Strike 2 and EA Sports FC), fantasy leagues, March Madness pools, single-game wagers, online or in-person poker games, or scratch-off tickets.
- Social media and YouTube constantly push gambling to underage boys, and it is amplified by retweeting and likes.
- Peers are a big influence; boys whose friends gamble are more likely to follow suit, with financial consequences.
- High-school kids carry the habit beyond graduation; about six percent of today's college students are problem gamblers – twice the rate of the general population.

While some parents try to prevent their kids from gambling, others socialize it by discussing their own wagers and even allowing underage children to use their accounts.

"As you would expect," says Daly, "a teen gambling habit is academically unhealthy." It's associated with weaker academic performance, higher disengagement and absenteeism, more stress and anxiety, stoking dopamine systems already overstimulated by cellphones, promoting risk-taking, increasing the likelihood of unsafe behaviors, and undermining the habits schools are trying to teach.

"We need a more robust plan for protecting our kids from a world where they are destined to be surrounded by gambling 24/7," says Daly. His recommendations:

• Treat youth gambling like substance abuse and invest in prevention. This should include adding gambling to the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System and building treatment infrastructure.

• Ban or severely restrict advertising for sports gambling where teens are watching – banter on Sunday afternoon NFL broadcasts, social media feeds, and more.

• Raise the bar for age verification using government ID with selfie matches and periodic reverification.

• Hold parents accountable in ways they already are for providing alcohol and drugs to underage youth.

• Require gaming companies to fund gambling education – ideally starting in middle schools, with information on the risks and consequences of addiction and the pathway many kids are susceptible to.

• Stop using education as political cover. "Gambling's revenue shouldn't pay for schools," says Daly. "If states want to allow gambling for adults, fine… But kids should have good schools because education is a top priority, not because the government preys upon the addictive vulnerability of lower-income citizens."

"Gambling: The New Teen Epidemic" by Tim Daly in *The Education Daily*, February 4, 2026

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8. A Different Take on Daily Leadership Huddles

In this *Leadership Lenses* article, consultant/writer Barry Kislowicz says one factor he's found that most often predicts a leadership team's success in sticking with its strategic plan is a daily huddle – a 5-10-minute stand-up check-in meeting. This is not a time to squeeze in regular agenda items; those belong in the regular 60-minute team meetings where large issues and projects are discussed. So what is the huddle?

It's a connection ritual, says Kislowicz. "We stand up in a circle not only because it keeps the meeting short, but also because it encourages us to look one another in the eye, to read facial expressions and make connections rather than hiding behind the laptop or phone we usually have on the table in front of us." Cellphones are put away during huddles.

As they huddle up, team members get index cards with several prompts that connect to their core tasks and how they feel about them. Some possibilities:

- *What are you really proud of accomplishing this past week?*
- *Which meeting/task are you looking forward to the most today? The least?*
- *What key challenge are you currently facing?*

Each person has 1-2 minutes to speak to the prompt they choose, and colleagues respond with a few words of encouragement.

This can feel awkward at first, says Kislowicz, "which is why we need to commit to this ritual for multiple weeks before we can expect to see results." Scripted prompts may feel unusual and there will be some resistance, but this level of authentic engagement builds interpersonal alignment and supports other tactical and strategic work.

Of course, longer meetings are important – regular 60-minute leadership confabs, monthly and quarterly strategic discussions, and occasional off-site retreats. "But the actual work of implementing a vision happens on a day-to-day basis," says Kislowicz. "And if we

want to make sure that our team takes that big, ambitious vision and turns it into reality piece by piece, the daily huddle may be just the tool we need."

"Doing the Daily Huddle Right" by Barry Kislowicz in *Leadership Lenses*, February 2, 2026; Kislowicz can be reached at kislowiczconsulting@substack.com; see Memos 971 and 1121 for other articles on huddles.

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9. A Book About U.S. Curriculum Culture Wars

"Half a century of battles over what schools teach have generated more outrage than improvement," says David Houston (George Mason University) in this book review in *Education Next*. He takes us back to Man a Course of Study (MACOS), a 1970s social studies curriculum that stirred up a hornets' nest with a graphic video of a seal being impaled with a spear and elderly members of the Netsilik nation left behind to die. "Critics pounced," says Houston, denouncing the curriculum as anti-Christian, anti-American, and a communist plot to promote bad ideas. The upshot: no more federal funding for curriculum research for decades.

The MACOS controversy is one episode in a new book by Mark Hlavacik – *Willing Warriors: A New History of the Education Culture Wars* (University of Chicago Press, 2025) – which describes four other curriculum controversies:

- Allan Bloom's 1987 lament over the demise of classical liberal arts education;
- The collapse of federally funded history standards in the 1990s;
- Backlash to the Common Core State Standards in the 2010s;
- The maelstrom over the *1619 Project* and the role of race in U.S. history.

Houston paraphrases Hlavacik's argument: that each of these "featured similar rhetorical strategies, that these strategies were reliably effective at generating public outrage, and – most importantly – that none of these conflicts contributed to the improvement of education in America."

Houston concludes: "Hlavacik correctly recognizes that political conflict over education is both inevitable and unavoidable in large, diverse, and complex societies like ours. The problem is not that Americans disagree about what should be taught in schools; the problem is the manner in which we have conducted these disagreements over the course of the last half-century. In his analysis of episode after episode of education culture wars, Hlavacik reveals how the rhetoric that suffuses these disputes is neither new nor enlightening. Instead, the battles are tired, stale distractions from the evergreen work of debating and deliberating over how best to educate the next generation."

"The Culture War on Repeat" by David Houston in *Education Next*, February 5, 2026; Houston can be reached at dhousto@gmu.edu.

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10. When Faced with a Tough Dilemma, Dial Some Friends

"When you lead in isolation," says Dan Rockwell in *Leadership Freak*, "perception narrows, judgment dulls, mistakes multiply, influence shrinks, doubt amplifies, ego solidifies, and failure compounds." In situations where you're uncertain , confused, or stuck, he suggests calling five colleagues who care about you, explain the situation, say, "My current thinking is…" and ask:

- *What comes to mind for you?*
- *If you were me, what would be your first move?*
- *What am I overlooking?*
- *What if I do nothing?*

"The 'Call Five People' Rule" by Dan Rockwell in *Leadership Freak*, February 6, 2026; Rockwell can be reached at dan@leadershipfreak.com.

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11. Short Item:

Free Classroom Videos and Lesson Plans – New York Times Retro Reports has more than 300 short videos in multiple subject areas, accompanied by lesson plans and teaching suggestions.

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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 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