Marshall Memo 1105

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
September 22, 2025

In This Issue:

Quotes of the Week

"The biggest link to happiness, and the biggest link to depression, is sleep – always."
Jean Twenge on banning smartphones in the bedroom overnight (see item #1)

"Attention really is the ultimate currency of the classroom. One of the most powerful ways to think about teaching is as the *orchestration of attention*."
Peps Mccrea (see item #9)

"The reason students may turn to ChatGPT to do their schoolwork is because they do not perceive homework as something that benefits them either in the short or long term."
John Warner (see item #2)

"The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug."
Mark Twain (quoted in *ibid*.)

"Education is what remains after one has forgotten what one has learned in school."
Unknown origin

"Research shows that when people experience shame after failing to meet a goal, they are far more likely to withdraw or abandon that goal. By contrast, when people experience guilt, a focus on a specific wrong action rather than a condemnation of themselves, they are more likely to engage in corrective action. Shame erodes self-worth and fosters avoidant tendencies. Guilt preserves self-worth and motivates repair."
Trevor Smith in a letter to *The New York Times*, August 30, 2025

"Well, I hope you don't ever plan to be a writer."

A teacher's comment to a first-year high-school student, Katey Arrington (who is now president of the National Council of School Mathematics), as he handed back an essay on which she hadn't tried very hard, in "What Words Do You Still Hear?" September 22, 2025

"Don't expect the person who needs to change to change."

Dan Rockwell in "Don't Listen to the Change Fairy" in *Leadership Freak*, September 19, 2025

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1. Ideas for Parents Dealing with Teens' Cellphones and Social Media

In this *New York Times* article, Catherine Pearson interviews Jean Twenge (pronounced TWAIN-gee), a psychology professor at San Diego State University, an expert on the link between heavy social media use among adolescents (averaging 4.5 hours a day) and anxiety, loneliness, and depression. Twenge is also raising three adolescent girls and practicing what she preaches, notwithstanding their fervent pleas.

"Having concrete rules that are reasonably strict is usually the way to go," says Twenge. "When stuff has gone wrong, it's often because I'm like, OK, just this one time. And then it blows up in my face… I don't have perfect children; I'm not perfect either." Among the compromises so far: one is allowed to use Discord on her laptop to chat with friends, another, who is "a total Swiftie," can use Spotify on her phone. Twenge says her daughters have not suffered socially. Her oldest, now in college, says that when a friend asks her to text, she says, "No. Call me. I want to hear your voice."

When it comes to Twenge's recommendations to other parents, she is fighting an uphill battle. The average age of getting a smartphone is 11, nearly 40 percent of 10-12-year olds use social media, and half of teens, according to one study, "almost constantly." Here are the guidelines in Twenge's new book:

- You're in charge; parents set the rules versus negotiating or following peer norms.
- Start kids with "dumbphones" with calling, texting, and music but limited apps.
- Advocate for bell-to-bell smartphone bans during the school day.
- No social media until age 16 (or older)
- Give the first smartphone with the driver's license.
- Beware of laptops, gaming consoles, tablets, and other devices; all screens pose risks.
- Use robust parental controls.
- Create no-phone zones – for example, the dinner table and family vacations.

- Give kids real-world freedom, encouraging independence and face-to-face socializing.
- No electronic devices in the bedroom overnight.

On the last item, Twenge says, "The biggest link to happiness, and the biggest link to depression, is sleep – always."

To those who argue for flexibility around when kids get their first smartphone, Twenge says, "We don't say, Oh, some 12-year-olds are ready to drive and some 20-year-olds aren't, so it's just up to the individual or it's up to the parent… With so many other things in society, we choose an age and we stick with it."

"An Unwavering Warning About Teenagers and Screen Time" by Catherine Pearson in *The New York Times*, September 9, 2025; Twenge can be reached at jtwenge@sdsu.edu. Twenge's book is *10 Rules for Raising Kids in a High-Tech World: How Parents Can Stop Smartphones, Social Media, and Gaming from Taking Over Their Children's Lives"* (Simon & Schuster, 2025)

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2. How to Think About and Teach Writing in the Age of GenAI

In his new book *More Than Words*, John Warner urges us to use the arrival of GenAI to renew and improve the way we think about writing. As a writer who has taught writing for years, Warner has come to believe that instruction in this area leaves a lot to be desired – too much formulaic training in five-paragraph essays and mechanical feedback on students' efforts. "Rather than seeing ChatGPT as a threat that will destroy things of value," he says, "we should be viewing it as an opportunity to reconsider exactly what we value and why we value those things… If anything, ChatGPT is the kick in the ass we needed to rethink our approaches."

There's a lot of talk about *pivoting* – either away from AI or toward it. "Rather than pivoting," says Warner, "I believe we have to orient toward goals that are associated with human flourishing and make use of artificial intelligence where it is useful in those goals and reject it where it is a hindrance." Four of the book's chapter titles outline his argument:

- Only humans write.
- Writing is thinking.
- Writing is feeling.
- Writing is a practice.

"What I want to say about writing," he says, "is that it is a fully embodied *experience*. When we do it, we are thinking and feeling, We are bringing our unique intelligences to the table and attempting to demonstrate them to the world, even when our intelligences don't seem too intelligent… The ability to take in, understand, and synthesize information is a foundational, uniquely human skill that separates us from large language models."

Warner describes how he spends a whole class with his writing students on one carefully chosen paragraph. The goal is to have students "read like writers" – to see, as Mark Twain once put it, that "the difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug." Here's a paragraph students read, from an

essay by David Foster Wallace about a cruise he took, "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again."

> *I have seen sucrose beaches and water a very bright blue. I have seen an all-red leisure suit with flared lapels. I have smelled what suntan lotion smells like spread over 21,000 pounds of flesh. I have been addressed as "Mon" in three different nations. I have watched 500 upscale Americans dance the Electric Slide. I have seen sunsets that look computer-enhanced and a tropical moon that looked more like a sort of obscenely large and dangling lemon than the good old stony U.S. moon I'm used to.*

Warner reads the passage aloud several times, emphasizing different words, leading students in a close reading and an intense discussion of Wallace's cadence, repetition, and choice of words – especially *flesh*.

"I am asking them to read like writers," says Warner, "and in doing so, the entire world of the essay opens to them. The rest of the world is open to them as well as they recognize they too can observe, draw inferences from those observations and then conclusions from the collection of those inferences. This is thinking. This is discovering new knowledge, a decoder ring for the culture we live within."

The last section of Warner's book is a three-part framework for action with respect to GenAI: resist, renew, and explore. Here are some details for each:

• *Resist* – There are areas where humans need to maintain autonomy in our relationship with this alien intelligence, he says. For starters, "we cannot treat it as a Great Oz behind a curtain, mouths open in wonder at the latest pronouncement. We have to tear that curtain down and insist on seeing everything behind it with as much clarity as possible."

His advice: (a) resist anthropomorphizing GenAI; it's an efficient (and fallible) robot without a soul; (b) resist giving in to technological determinism; just because GenAI can write more quickly and efficiently doesn't mean we have to use it all the time; (c) resist turning over inherently human activities to AI. "Writing is meant to be read," says Warner, by humans; and (d) resist the argument that economic efficiency is what counts.

• *Renew* – "The reason students may turn to ChatGPT to do their schoolwork," he says, "is because they do not perceive homework as something that benefits them either in the short or long term." Warner describes how he used to give feedback on his students' writing: creating macros for common problems and pasting them into their drafts. After a while, he became unhappy with this batch processing and shifted to a much more individual approach, talking to students about their ideas and responding to their drafts at a human level. Three maxims: students are "creatures, not machines"; individuals are not averages and a class is not the sum of its averages; and teaching writing is about helping students develop and gain confidence in their unique tastes and styles.

• *Explore* – There are ways that GenAI can enhance our lives, says Warner, "and in order to discover those things, we're going to need to try some stuff" – keeping in mind the maxim, *first, do no harm*. The use of GenAI in schools is a "public problem," he says, quoting

Mike Ananny, which means it needs to be "collectively debated, accounted for, and managed… never outsourced to private interests or charismatic authorities."

Warner suggests that teachers find a helpful and trustworthy technology guide/guru, explore GenAI's possibilities and pitfalls, and avoid what happened to him when he used HelloFresh (which delivers meal ingredients with instructions on how to prepare dinner): he made okay dinners but didn't learn how to cook – and was lost when something didn't go according to plan. "My focus," he says, "is on preserving elements of writing and reading that I believe are most meaningful whether AI exists or not and that I believe are only more essential now that AI is here."

More Than Words: How to Think About Writing in the Age of AI by John Warner (Basic Books, 2025); Warner can be reached at johnw@mcsweeneys.net.

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3. Not Throwing Students in the Deep End with Project-Based Learning

In this *Cult of Pedagogy* article, John Spencer says project-based learning is "often structured in ways that exclude students who might need a different approach to thrive. Too often, PBL becomes a space where accommodations and differentiation fall by the wayside." He suggests these steps to ensure that every student can benefit while doing projects:

• *Manage the extraneous cognitive load*. Without structure and clarity, some kids spend the first three days goofing off. Spencer suggests cutting down on unnecessary complexity, breaking the project into subtasks, analyzing the skills that will be used, and providing students with a roadmap and a to-do list.

• Use gradual release of responsibility. "Sometimes the issue isn't academic so much as choice paralysis," says Spencer. Start with small steps and have students take on more control as they proceed.

• Provide optional scaffolds. Use the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to make supports available to all students that are especially helpful to some.

• Be strategic with grouping and establish group norms. One approach is to sort students into three tiers based on skill and create mixed groups within those tiers – the aim being to prevent one student from doing all the work.

• Provide additional processing time. "PBL has a reputation for being loud and chaotic," says Spencer, which can be overwhelming for some students. Building in processing pauses can help students who need to slow down and think things through.

Will this amount of structure rob project-based learning of its adventurous essence? "Real-world relevance doesn't come from chaos but from intentionality," says Spencer. "Authenticity comes from connecting the project to real-world challenges, providing context, and allowing students to engage in meaningful, sustained problem-solving."

"Making Project-Based Learning Accessible for Everyone" by John Spencer in *Cult of Pedagogy*, September 14, 2025

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4. "Selling" Math by Making It Authentic and Exciting

In this editors' note in *Mathematics Teacher*, Iowa middle-school teacher Clayton Edwards and Rebecca Robichaux-Davis (Mississippi State University/Starkville) share strategies for answering the perennial student question: *What good is the math we are learning?* They suggest seven ways to pique students' curiosity and convince them that math is "a fascinating, stimulating, and relevant discipline":

• *Use history and nature*. For example, describe how the golden ratio was used in the Parthenon in Athens and the Grand Pyramid in Giza, and how Mark Barr, an American mathematician, proposed the Greek letter *phi* for the golden ratio. Then point students to examples of the ratio in nature, including flowers, pine cones, seashells, and hurricanes.

• *Use current events*. Have students compute sports statistics for teams and individual players, calculate which is the better bargain for cellphone and internet plans offering discounts, and figure out schedules for after-school tournaments.

• *Engage students in intriguing 3-act tasks*. The YummyMath website has real-world problems involving burger prices, college costs, and (ugh) how much urine is in a swimming pool at any given moment.

• *Have students pose problems*. Students can ask their own questions and follow up. At Edwards's school, students planned and designed the end zones for the local high-school football team.

• *Challenge students with max-min problems*. For example, the fewest number of colors on a map of countries or states, the longest and shortest distances to a destination (given certain constraints), and how to maximize and minimize the volume of three-dimensional shapes.

• *Students figure things out for themselves*. For example, finding the volume of cones and spheres by pouring water from plastic cylinders into cones and spheres with the same diameters and heights and making generalizations about the connections between the volumes.

• *Organize friendly competitions*. For example, teams vie to build the tallest structure with toothpicks and marshmallows, or plan field trips with certain parameters for total distance and minimal expense, and the class votes on the proposal that provides the best experience with the least expense.

"Stimulating Curiosity in Mathematics" by Clayton Edwards and Rebecca Robichaux-Davis in *Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12*, September 2025 (Vol. 118, #9, pp. 650-652); the authors can be reached at claytonmedwards@gmail.com and rrr102@msstate.edu.

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5. Real-World Math Problem Solving

In this *Mathematics Teacher* article, Johana Thomas Zapata and Amy Roth McDuffie (Washington State University) describe working with two 5th-grade classes on the Better Buy task, an everyday application of mathematical modeling:

Which is the better bargain: buying eight granola bars for $10 at Costco or 20 bars for $23 at Rosauers?

The teachers first asked students about their experience shopping with family members and whether they'd ever noticed how pricing for the same item sometimes differs from one store to another.

Students then worked in groups and the teachers circulated, asking kids how they were making sense of the problem, developing a strategy, doing the math, and validating their solutions – questions like, "What strategy are you trying to use?" "What is your thinking?" "I can see what you are comparing…" The teachers supported the use of a variety of strategies, validating different approaches and empowering students to take ownership of the process. Groups then presented their findings to the whole class with posters showing the steps.

"Helping students take charge of their learning and develop strong mathematics identities is crucial for their ongoing success and engagement in mathematics," conclude Zapata and McDuffie. Here's what two of the 5th graders had to say about this activity: "Math makes sense when I can see how it works in real life." "I feel like a mathematician when I solve problems like this."

"Empowering Students Through Modeling: The Better Buy" by Johana Thomas Zapata and Amy Roth McDuffie in *Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12*, September 2025 (Vol. 118, #9, pp. 674-683); McDuffie can be reached at mcduffie@WSU.edu.

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6. Teaching Geography Concepts to Fifth Graders

In this article in *Social Education*, New York City geography teacher Sam Brian says that when students enter his fifth-grade class every fall, they've memorized some isolated facts about maps and learned about latitude and longitude, but they have difficulty reading maps, haven't learned some basic geography concepts, and harbor a number of misconceptions. Some gaps and confusions:

- Believing that islands float and that it's possible to scuba-dive under the Florida peninsula;
- Thinking rivers have a single source and flow from north to south in the northern hemisphere.
- Not understanding river system dynamics, widely varying ocean depths, and plate tectonics.

Brian wishes his students had a better grasp of key concepts and had been exposed to more thought-provoking projects – for example, finding one city on each continent that is vulnerable to sea level rise, or naming the states that are wholly or partly within the Mississippi watershed region. The problem seems to be that many teachers feel unprepared to teach geography and are using inadequate materials.

"I decided to put the map workbooks aside," says Brian, "and try a more hands-on approach with my fifth graders. I asked students to each draw their own 'fantasy island,'

including land, water, trees, people, human activity, and anything else they wanted to include about the island." As he looked at what students produced, he still saw big gaps in their understanding – for example, how rivers originate and flow, different elevations, and key factors in cities and commerce. His bright, eager students were "experientially deprived" – in their real-world experience and classroom instruction, they hadn't had a chance to visualize how the world works.

This led Brian to a different approach: building a terrain model. He crafted a crude mountain with pottery clay and put it in a discarded dresser drawer lined with a black plastic bag. With students gathered around, they used a compass to see which way was north and south and observed what would happen if water poured on the mountain. Simulating rain with tempera paint, they created rivers flowing from high to low, and in different compass directions, to the sea around the mountain. "We've got an island!" exclaimed one student, and there was a discussion about what an island is – a mountain sticking up from the sea, with water all around it. This was the first step in using a three-dimensional model to foster understandings that are difficult with two-dimensional maps.

Brian's insight: "It is premature to expect elementary school students to understand geographic maps before they have developed basic geographic concepts on which these maps are based. Put another way, children need certain concrete geographic experiences in order to invest map symbols with meaning."

In the decades since his clay mountain, Brian has created more-elaborate and complex models that allow him to teach a range of geographic concepts – mountains, valleys, ridges, plains, the form and function of river systems, the cycles of sea level rise and fall, the dynamics of watershed regions, gravity-fed irrigation systems, the function of dams, reservoirs, barrier islands, where lighthouses should be placed, flooding patterns, aqueducts in urban water systems, the concept of relative elevation, and more.

Brian has looked for commercial models that include such features and has yet to find one, so he's continued to work with self-constructed terrain models, and conducts workshops every year to help teachers build their own.

"Three-Dimensional Geography in the Elementary Grades" by Sam Brian in *Social Education*, September 2025 (Vol. 89, #4, pp. 252-256); Brian can be reached at sbrian203@gmail.com.

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7. Dealing with Hurtful and Harmful Words in Schools

In this article in *Middle School Journal*, Gayle Andrews and Alyson Wright (University of Georgia) describe how teachers can develop a critical awareness of unjust and offensive words and actions, prevent them if possible, and when necessary, take action by setting limits and pushing back. A few excerpts:

• Calling in:

- *I'm curious. What was your intention when you said that?*
- *How might someone else see this differently?*

- *Why do you think that is the case?*
- *What do you assume to be true about ---?*
- *What sort of impact do you think your comment might have?*

• Calling out:

- *Wow. Nope. Ouch. I need you to stop right there.*
- *Okay, I am having a strong reaction to that and I need to tell you why.*
- *It sounded like you just said ---. Is that really what you meant?*
- *I need to push back against that. I disagree. I don't see it that way.*
- *That's not our culture here. Those aren't our values.*

"In scaffolding critical consciousness," conclude Andrews and Wright, "we recommend an approach that calls on the better angels of our nature, the angels who would never let a toddler touch a hot stove if we could stop it, who would not stand silently as students faced harm. Instead, our better angels find the power of words to interrupt harm and to establish and sustain courageous learning environments where the reality that education is an act of both love and courage plays out for every student and educator, every day."

"Scaffolding Critical Consciousness in a Middle Grades Teacher Education Program" by Gayle Andrews and Alyson Wright in *Middle School Journal*, September 2025 (Vol. 56, #4, pp. 35-58); the authors can be reached at gandrews@uga.edu and alywright@uga.edu.

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8. Evaluating Film Clips for Social Studies Classes

In this article in *Social Education*, Jeremy Hilburn and Cara Ward (University of North Carolina/Wilmington), Lisa Brown Buchanan (Elon University), and Wayne Journell (University of North Carolina/Greensboro) advocate the use of film clips in social studies classes. Carefully selected segments of longer films can engage students at an affective level, present a more-complete story of an individual, group, or historical event or theme, and expand the use of primary and secondary sources.

The key is making good choices, and the authors suggest criteria for zeroing in on the most relevant and effective clips to show in class:

- Alignment – A good fit with lesson and unit objectives and relevant standards;
- Reliability – Accurate representation of historical events (although a clip doesn't have to be 100 percent accurate if students can evaluate what's inaccurate);
- Perspective-taking – Provides windows and mirrors for students, presenting alternative perspectives, questioning dominant ideas, and highlighting the experiences of minoritized groups;
- One of several sources – Students can compare clips with a primary source and engage in lateral thinking with readings;
- Culturally and developmentally responsive – Age appropriate, not likely to traumatize students or offend community members;
- Affective domain – Accounting for students' emotional reactions.

"From Box Office to the Classroom: A Film Selection Scaffold for Social Studies Teachers" by Jeremy Hilburn, Lisa Brown Buchanan, Cara Ward, and Wayne Journell in *Social Education*, September 2025 (Vol. 89, #4, pp. 244-251); Hilburn can be reached at hilburnj@uncw.edu.

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9. Orchestrating Students' Attention

"Attention really is the ultimate currency of the classroom," says Peps Mccrea in *Evidence Snacks*. "One of the most powerful ways to think about teaching is as the *orchestration of attention*." But there are four hard truths:

- Students can focus on only one thing at a time; multitasking is a myth.
- Attention is skittish; students' minds wander for up to a quarter of a lesson.
- It's hard to tell if kids are really paying attention.
- Schoolwork is not a natural magnet for attention.

These realities constantly undermine teachers' efforts to get all students to pay attention. What can be done? Mccrea suggests:

- Minimize distractions so students can pay attention to the right things at the right time.
- Frequently cue students' attention with voice, gestures, and spotlighting information.
- Make attention visible by having students write silently, talk in pairs, and respond chorally.
- Build habits of attention like sitting up straight and tracking the speaker.

There's evidence that these tactics are especially helpful with students who enter classrooms with disadvantages, including those with weaker self-regulation. "As such," says Mccrea, "not only is the orchestration good for everyone, but it also helps level the playing field (and it makes kids happier)."

"The Mechanics of Focus" by Peps Mccrea in *Evidence Snacks*, September 18, 2025

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10. Mentor Texts to Inspire Elementary Students' Writing

In this *Edutopia* article, Donna Paul recommends books that can serve as mentor texts, helping elementary students try new things, craft strong leads, add dialogue that sounds real, and have fun in the process (click the link below for cover images, short summaries, and teaching suggestions):

- *Come On, Rain* by Karen Hesse, illustrated by Jon Muth
- *I Wanna Iguana* by Karen Kaufman Orloff, illustrated by David Catrow
- *The Day You Begin* by Jacqueline Woodson, illustrated by Rafael López
- *Bats: Creatures of the Night* by Joyce Milton, illustrated by Judith Moffatt
- *Ralph Tells a Story* by Abby Hanlon
- *The Great Kapok Tree* by Lynne Cherry
- *Carl the Cantankerous Cat* by Donna Paul

"Books like these help take the guesswork out of writing," says Paul. "Mentor texts don't have to be complicated or time-consuming. A quick read-aloud, a focused teaching point, and a short writing invitation can make a big impact."

"6 Books to Inspire Student Writers in Elementary School" by Donna Paul in *Edutopia*, August 26, 2025

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11. The Cat in the Hat Helping Young Children with Conceptual STEM

In this *Educational Researcher* article, Megan Silander (Education Development Center), Todd Grindal and Sarah Nixon Gerard (SRI Education), and Tiffany Salone (Fluent Research) report on their study of whether 4-5-year-olds gained science and engineering understandings from watching the PBS series, "The Cat in the Hat Knows a Lot About That!" The result: children made "statistically significant" gains in their understanding of structure stability, the relationship between material properties, force, and movement.

"Learning Science and Engineering from Videos and Games: A Randomized Trial of PBS KIDS The Cat in the Hat Knows a Lot About That!" by Megan Silander, Todd Grindal, Sarah Nixon Gerard, and Tiffany Salone in *Educational Researcher*, August/September 2025 (Vol. 54, #6, pp. 305-317); Silander can be reached at msilander@edc.org.

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About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

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

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

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Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

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