

Marshall Memo 563

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education

December 1, 2014

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Quotes of the Week

"Culturally enriching field trips matter. They produce significant benefits for students on a variety of educational outcomes that schools and communities care about."

Jay Greene, Collin Hitt, Anne Kraybill, and Cari Bogulski (see item #8)

"If what's measured is what matters, then we need to measure more outcomes to expand the definition of what matters in education."

Jay Greene, Collin Hitt, Anne Kraybill, and Cari Bogulski (*ibid.*)

"Executive function – our ability to remember and use what we know, defeat our unproductive impulses, and switch gears and adjust to new demands – is increasingly understood as a key element not just of learning but of lifelong success... [It acts as] an air traffic control system of the mind – helping us manage streams of information, revise plans, stay organized, filter out distractions, cope with stress, and make healthy decisions."

Bari Walsh (see item #5)

"Whatever decisions principals make or mandates they issue, teachers remain the 'street-level bureaucrats' who independently decide what their students' true potential and problems are, which of the principals' initiatives deserve their support, and what they think might improve the school."

Susan Moore Johnson, Stefanie Reinhorn, Monica Ng, Megin Charner-Laird, Matthew Kraft, and John Papay (see item #1)

"Editing makes one a better writer, writing makes one a better editor, and both make one a better thinker."

Susan Taylor (see item #4)

1. Teacher Involvement As the Key to Schoolwide Change

In this *Teachers College Record* article, Susan Moore Johnson, Stefanie Reinhorn, and Monica Ng (Harvard Graduate School of Education), Megin Charner-Laird (Salem State University), and Matthew Kraft and John Papay (Brown University) report on their study of teachers' leadership roles in six high-poverty urban schools that were required to implement improvement plans.

Johnson and her colleagues begin with a blunt statement about the loosely-coupled nature of K-12 schools: "Whatever decisions principals make or mandates they issue, teachers remain the 'street-level bureaucrats' who independently decide what their students' true potential and problems are, which of the principals' initiatives deserve their support, and what they think might improve the school." It's virtually impossible, say the researchers, "for principals to closely monitor and direct what teachers do." This means that any schoolwide reforms will rise or fall based on the degree to which teachers believe in and support them.

In all six schools, teachers recognized the urgency of the work they faced, knew that it couldn't be accomplished by working in isolation, were deeply concerned about their students' current well-being and future life chances, and feared the sanctions their school faced if significant improvements weren't made. In other words, teachers weren't hunkered down in their classrooms: they were ready to work with their principals on schoolwide change. Among the challenges: improving classroom instruction, ensuring order and discipline, expanding support services for students, increasing learning, and raising test scores.

Teachers looked to their principals to set the general direction for change and deferred to their positional authority and access to a broad array of information and resources. At the same time, teachers wanted a chance to initiate and contribute to change, rather than being expected to implement the principal's plan. "Their continuing investment in the principal's agenda," say Johnson et al., "depended on whether they thought a proposed strategy was sound and whether the principal took an inclusive or instrumental approach to the teachers' contributions."

The researchers found that when a principal took an "instrumental," top-down approach, marginalized teachers' contributions, and asked for superficial buy-in, teachers were resentful, withdrew to their classrooms, and considered leaving the school – and the school improvement plan was rejected or was implemented in a perfunctory manner. In one school whose principal took this approach, teachers complained about consultants who were brought in to implement an improvement program, micromanagement of team meetings, and

administrators' "snoopervision" visits to classrooms. "Formal authority can only go so far in changing day-to-day practice," say Johnson et al.

In another school, the principal took an inclusive approach and teachers actively invested in schoolwide reforms. "When teachers believe the proposed changes are sound and that the principal has taken their views, suggestions, needs, and interests into account," say the researchers, "they are more likely to lend their support and encourage colleagues to do so as well." A veteran teacher in one of the schools with this approach said of the principal, "He's the driving force behind the school, but the teachers are sort of pushing behind him. He's not like pulling us through."

"One of the most interesting puzzles raised by this study," conclude Johnson et al., "is how individuals (such as teachers) who have less formal authority in the organization can lead others (such as principals) who hold more authority. Under what circumstances within schools do principals become followers and teachers become leaders as they exercise organizational leadership? Is it simply a matter of interpersonal influence, for example, when a teacher is unusually articulate or persuasive? Is it the calculated political response of a principal confronting a strong alliance of teachers who disagree with him? Or does active leadership by teachers arise because the principal deliberately seeks their perspective on the problems of the school and how they might be addressed? ... Principals must recognize the leadership that runs throughout their organization and ensure support for teachers who are prepared to take the lead on school improvement beyond their classroom. In doing so, they will see that this does not mean that they have lost authority but rather that they have increased influence and effectiveness as they authorize others to lead on behalf of the school."

"Ready to Lead, but How? Teachers' Experiences in High-Poverty Urban Schools" by Susan Moore Johnson, Stefanie Reinhorn, Monica Ng, Megin Charner-Laird, Matthew Kraft, and John Papay in *Teachers College Record*, October 2014 (Vol. 116, #10, p. 1-50), http://scholar.harvard.edu/files/mkraft/files/ready_to_lead_080513.pdf; Johnson can be reached at susan_moore_johnson@harvard.edu.

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2. Student-Run Socratic Seminars

(Originally titled "Spinning the Web")

In this *Educational Leadership* article, instructional coach Alexis Wiggins describes how her classroom approach was radically altered when she taught English at a high school whose rubric for Socratic seminars included this clause: "Because this is a team effort, there will be a team grade. *The whole class will get the same grade.*" Loquacious students had a powerful incentive to dial back, shy students needed to speak up, and all students had to learn to facilitate broad participation by asking good questions and really listening. "This is a shift in thinking about learning and assessment for many students," says Wiggins, "but I think it targets some major gaps in how we educate students to become ethical, collaborative thinkers and problem solvers."

Wiggins found this approach so effective that she developed a variation that she calls Spider Web Discussion. First, she explains the process to students, hands out copies of the discussion rubric, says how much time they have, and spells out the goals for the discussion (which is usually on a text they read the night before). For example, here are the criteria for an English class to earn an A:

- *Everyone* participates in a meaningful and substantive way, more or less equally.
- There is a sense of balance and order, focusing on one speaker and one idea at a time.
- The discussion is lively and the pace is neither hyper nor boring.
- Students back up what they say with examples and quotes from their journals and/or the text.
- At least one literary feature, element of writing style, and class vocabulary word is discussed correctly.

For other sample rubrics, see <http://bit.ly/15LWXTI>.

During the discussion, Wiggins sits outside the circle with a map of the class and keeps track of the “web” of talk by drawing lines across the circle as students respond to one another. She also codes what’s going on – interruptions, citing the text, insightful contributions, thoughtful questions – and notes student weaknesses for individual chats afterward. For example, she spoke to a girl whose comments were often superficial and urged her to use her journal to develop deeper insights about the reading. “Using this kind of data to help students correct errors in thinking and understanding *before* the big test or paper was one of the most powerful outcomes of my coding system,” says Wiggins.

One of the key features of her approach is that students run the discussion. From the beginning, Wiggins insists that they ask the questions, redirect the conversation when it’s getting off track, correct misunderstandings, and ensure that the tone is civil. At first, things are awkward as students adjust to an unusually laid-back teacher, but there’s a steep learning curve. After each discussion, students debrief and assess themselves on the rubric. They’re usually right on target, says Wiggins, providing useful data for improving future discussions. “Students are far better referees and masters of knowledge than we usually give them credit for,” she says. “By the middle of the year, they do it very well, and I take great pleasure in seeing how irrelevant I am.”

What about schools that don’t allow group grading? Wiggins has found that even if the group assessments don’t “count,” students still care about them and the dynamic is the same.

“Spinning the Web” by Alexis Wiggins in *Educational Leadership*, November 2014 (Vol. 72, #3, p. 78-81), <http://bit.ly/15LWO2g>; Wiggins is at alexiswiggins@spiderwebdiscussion.com. For a short video of Spider Web Discussion in action, see www.authenticeducation.org/alexis.

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3. Transforming Dreary Research Papers With a Dynamic Inquiry Process

In this *Knowledge Quest* article, Leslie Maniotes (Denver Public Schools) and Carol Kuhlthau (Rutgers University) lament about a typical last-minute request to a school librarian: a teacher says her class will be visiting the library the next day to do research on invasive plant

species. Students will each choose one plant, find five information sources in the library, and take notes for a six-page research paper. Since the paper is due in two days, there's time for only one library visit.

“This is an example of an educator suffering from Traditional Research Syndrome (TRS),” say Maniotes and Kuhlthau. “Although teachers have good intentions, they don't realize that their traditional research approach is actually not supporting student learning.” That's because when students are given TRS assignments, they often produce shallow reports full of disconnected facts without having given much thought to the meaning and importance of their topic. Sometimes they just go through the motions and copy material straight from their sources.

What's the alternative? Guided Inquiry Design, say Maniotes and Kuhlthau, with the teacher and librarian working as a team to provide expert guidance as students move through these eight phases (the examples come from an exemplary unit on invasive plant species):

- *Open* – The teacher and librarian pique students' curiosity on the topic with an essential question – they show students photos of kudzu vines taking over a building and ask, What are the implications of this phenomenon?

- *Immerse* – The whole class builds knowledge on the topic by observing a local invasive plant and hearing from an expert on plants and animals that are affected when an invasive species takes over.

- *Explore* – Students use the library's resources to learn more about an aspect of invasive plants that particularly interests them. “Only *now* is each student ready to identify a specific question to research and learn more about,” say Maniotes and Kuhlthau.

- *Identify* – Students then formulate a focused research question that is important in the context of the essential question. Here are some examples:

- How does a particular invasive plant affect the surrounding area?
- How is a particular animal affected by an invasive plant species?
- How can an invasive plant affect local birds?
- How are insects affected by the invasion?
- What potential damage might a particular native plant incur from an invasive plant?
- Is there a benefit to native plants?
- Are there ways to stop invasives?

- *Gather* – Now students can collect information on their individual focus area. They research their question(s), check in on their family members' knowledge and misconceptions, and begin to think about the main points they want to make in their reports.

- *Create* – Students put together their individual reports and some do a multimedia public information campaign to showcase their learning about a local invasive plant species.

- *Share* – Students present their project at a local community night, invite the expert they heard from earlier, and post their material online.

- *Evaluate* – The teacher and librarian assess the products and lead students in a self-assessment: what supported their learning, what was challenging, how did they deal with roadblocks, and what are the implications for future inquiry projects?

Maniotes and Kuhlthau conclude with a list of the ways this kind of guided inquiry improves teaching and learning:

- It is learning-centered rather than product-centered.
- It is carefully and intentionally designed.
- It is driven by students' authentic questions.
- It goes beyond low-level facts to deep understanding.
- It recognizes and supports the emotional side of learning.
- It can promote and support academic research by students at all grade levels.

“Making the Shift from Traditional Research Assignments to Guiding Inquiry Learning” by Leslie Maniotes and Carol Kuhlthau in *Knowledge Quest*, November/December 2014 (Vol. 43, #2, p. 8-17), <http://www.ala.org/aasl/kq/novdec14>; the authors can be reached at lesliekm67@gmail.com and Kuhlthau@rutgers.edu.

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4. Getting Students Acting as Peer Editors of Each Others' Writing

In this article in *The Journal of Adventist Education*, Susan Taylor (Andrews University, MI) says that teachers spend many, many hours reading and commenting on students' writing assignments, trying to correct errors and help students become better readers of their own writing so they will become better writers. But all that work doesn't seem to be paying off – many teachers have observed that students rarely make use of the comments they receive. “With so much time and energy devoted to a single activity,” asks Taylor, “why doesn't Johnny write better?”

The solution, she believes, is getting students to read and comment on classmates' writing. “Such opportunities for peer review can help students improve their reading and writing, as well as learn how to collaborate effectively,” she says.

Of course peer review can be an ineffective process. “I liked your story about the horse, but I think you should add a little more detail and maybe change the last two sentences,” is a typically unhelpful comment from a classmate. Here are some common problems:

- Many students feel uncomfortable passing judgment on peers' writing, and bland comments like “I loved your story” get them off the hook.
- Friendships make some students biased, even dishonest, in the comments they give. A critical comment could sour a relationship or be taken as a hostile gesture.
- Some students give more thoughtful feedback than others, and highly proficient writers may discount comments from classmates who are less adept.
- Many students don't know how to use the feedback to revise their writing and may react defensively to classmates' criticisms.
- Some teachers assume their students already have the skills to give helpful feedback (which few do) and fail to give student editors the necessary guidance.

For these reasons, few teachers use peer review effectively, if they use it at all.

But Taylor says two peer-review protocols can make the process a powerful tool for improving student writing. Before each one, the teacher emphasizes the importance of peer

review, provides students with detailed rubrics of effective writing, and offers guidance on giving feedback.

- *PQP: Praise, Question, Polish* – Groups of 2-5 students take turns reading each others' drafts aloud as other students follow along in copies the teacher has made for them. "This oral reading helps writers hear how well the paper flows and independently identify possible changes," says Taylor. Students then react to the piece by writing comments on their PQP form: *Praise*: What is good about the writing, and why is it good? *Question*: As a reader, what do you not understand? What would you like clarified? *Polish*: What specific suggestions for improvement can you make?

- *Drafting* – The class is divided into groups of three and students read all the essays produced by the group, commenting both in the margins and at the end of each paper. During the next class period, they share comments and reactions.

During both PQP and Drafting sessions, Taylor recommends that the teacher maintain a "hands-off" approach, monitoring the groups and keeping them focused and commenting appropriately at the end on how things went. "When students are given the proper tools," she says, "they can function with little input from the teacher."

Why does peer review work? First, language, thought, writing, and learning are social in nature, and working in collaborative groups helps students take advantage of a powerful instructional process. Second, peer review makes students more perceptive readers, more attuned to details in any piece of writing. Third, peer review reinforces values about the way writing should be taught – through respect, negotiation, and cooperation. Students become more aware of each other's needs, which cultivates a spirit of mutual responsibility. Peer interaction helps young writers choose which criticisms to take seriously, and that makes them more confident writers. "Editing makes one a better writer, writing makes one a better editor, and both make one a better thinker," says Taylor.

Fourth, students get lots of practice at formulating and communicating constructive feedback to their peers, as well as responding to comments on their own writing. Fifth, students make the transition from writing primarily for their teachers to thinking about a wider audience. Finally, peer review teaches students valuable lessons about teamwork. "Collaborative experiences are fundamental to empowering students as communicators, both in school and in their future careers," says Taylor.

"Can Peer Review Help Johnny Write Better?" by Susan Taylor in *The Journal of Adventist Education*, April/May 2014 (Vol. 76, p. 42-46), no e-link available (spotted in *Education Digest*, October 2014 (Vol. 80, #4)

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5. Developing Executive Function in Young Children

In this article on the Harvard Graduate School of Education's *Usable Knowledge* website, Bari Walsh says, "Executive function – our ability to remember and use what we know, defeat our unproductive impulses, and switch gears and adjust to new demands – is increasingly understood as a key element not just of learning but of lifelong success."

Executive function acts as “an air traffic control system of the mind – helping us manage streams of information, revise plans, stay organized, filter out distractions, cope with stress, and make healthy decisions.” Most children are first introduced to executive-function skills by their parents in the following ways;

- Reliable routines;
- Meaningful and responsive interactions;
- Play that focuses attention and stirs the beginnings of self-control;
- Imaginary play;
- Reading books and storytelling;
- Having children act out stories;
- Singing songs and having children sing and create songs;
- Taking field trips.

Unfortunately, children who grow up in unstable homes and suffer from neglect and abuse may not get these early lessons in executive function, putting the burden on elementary teachers to play catch-up.

This article (click the link below) has a number of links to websites and resources helpful to parents and educators.

“The Art of Control: Activities and Resources to Enhance Executive Function in Young Children” by Bari Walsh in Harvard’s *Usable Knowledge* website, <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/14/10/art-control>

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6. Five Byproducts of On-the-Spot Classroom Reading Assessments

In this article in *Reading Today*, author and former teacher Jennifer Serravallo says that because standardized reading tests ask students to read silently and answer multiple-choice questions under high-stakes conditions, they have limited utility for teachers. She suggests five insights that lower-key classroom assessments can provide throughout the year:

- *How a student handles print, especially in the early grades* – Only when a teacher listens to a child reading a passage aloud (perhaps conducting a running record) is it possible to learn about errors and self-corrections and do an accurate miscue analysis to meet the student’s needs.

- *The child’s fluency* – Listening to students as they read aloud gives important insights on whether they can break up sentences into chunks, pause appropriately, and read with expression. This is vital information for finding each student’s reading level and helping them with specific problems.

- *What will engage a child* – “To support children in enjoying a literate life, we need to help them learn how to find books they will love, and how to develop the stamina necessary to stick with the books,” says Serravallo. This kind of “interest inventory” and coaching can only be done day by day in the classroom.

- *What’s really going on with student comprehension* – Multiple-choice test questions on short passages that are often well above students’ current reading levels provide incomplete

and sometimes downright misleading information, says Serravallo. Open-ended questions on appropriate books followed by thoughtful discussions are far more informative.

- *What students can do in collaboration with others* – “When we have the opportunity to converse with others, we can take in new perspectives, clear up misconceptions, and arrive at new ideas,” says Serravallo. “Kids need opportunities to meet with partners and book clubs, and to talk as a whole class.” In such settings, teachers gather valuable insights on how to improve teaching and learning.

“What Standardized Tests Don’t Tell You: The Information Only a Teacher Can Decipher” by Jennifer Serravallo in *Reading Today*, November/December 2014 (Vol. 32, #3, p. 12-14), www.reading.org; Serravallo can be reached at jserravallo@gmail.com.

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7. Reducing “Summer Melt”

In this article in *ASCA School Counselor*, Laura Owen (San Diego State University) suggests a menu of actions that high schools can take to cut down on “summer melt” – seniors who are admitted to college but don’t enroll in the fall – which can be as high as 40 percent among minority-group and low-income students and first-generation college attenders:

- Extend school counselors’ contracts so they can work on this issue over the summer.
- Calculate the school’s summer melt rate and disaggregate the data to identify the subgroups that are particularly vulnerable.
- Administer a student exit survey to get contact information and current student information.
- Before school lets out, connect college-bound seniors and their parents with web-based resources, with particular emphasis on completion deadlines for FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid).
- Collaborate with community groups, religious organizations, and businesses committed to increasing college enrollment.
- Set up meetings with local colleges and universities and connect students and parents with colleges that students plan to attend.
- Become well versed in the latest information on college expenses and financial aid.
- Hold workshops and provide hands-on assistance for students and parents on completing the FAFSA form.
- Schedule FAFSA completion events before major deadlines.
- Translate key documents into home languages, and arrange for translation at meetings.
- Be creative and flexible about making contact with students over the summer – meeting in Starbucks, using after-work hours, providing transportation.
- Track data on college enrollment, ascertain which interventions were most effective in preventing summer melt, and share insights with key stakeholders.

“Prevent Summer Melt” by Laura Owen in *ASCA School Counselor*, November/December 2014 (Vol. 52, #2, p. 10-16), www.schoolcounselor.org; Owen is at lowen@mail.sdsu.edu.

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8. The Impact of Students Seeing a Live Performance of a Play

In this article in *Education Next*, Jay Greene, Collin Hitt, Anne Kraybill, and Cari Bogulski (University of Arkansas) report on their study of the impact of taking high-school students to see live performances of plays – *Hamlet* and *A Christmas Carol* – compared with a control group that read the plays or saw movie versions. The findings: seeing live performances brought about significant improvements in students’ knowledge of details from the plays, tolerance of diversity (for example, being open-minded about views different from their own), and sensitivity to what others are thinking and feeling. [See Marshall Memo 503 for a report on a similar study of the impact of taking students to an art museum.]

“Culturally enriching field trips matter,” the authors conclude. “They produce significant benefits for students on a variety of educational outcomes that schools and communities care about... If what’s measured is what matters, then we need to measure more outcomes to expand the definition of what matters in education.”

“Learning from Live Theater” by Jay Greene, Collin Hitt, Anne Kraybill, and Cari Bogulski in *Education Next*, Winter 2015 (Vol. 15, #1, p. 54-61), www.educationnext.org

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9. Helping Parents Buy the Right Kinds of Technology for Their Children

(Originally titled “A Buying Guide for Parents”)

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Doug Johnson, who serves as technology director in a Minnesota district, suggests that schools planning to have students use laptops, tablets, and smartphones as part of the learning process should send detailed specifications to parents. This might be especially helpful as families gear up to give children technology items as Christmas presents. Johnson believes the most important items on a school list should be:

- The kinds of learning tasks students will be asked to do with their personal device;
- The systems with which students’ devices need to be compatible;
- The power and capabilities that will be necessary to perform instructional tasks.

Johnson also suggests letting parents know where they can get access to technology if they are not able to purchase the recommended devices. For example, in his area, an organization called PCs for People www.pcsforpeople.com provides computer equipment to qualifying households.

“A Buying Guide for Parents” by Doug Johnson in *Educational Leadership*, November 2014 (Vol. 72, #3, p. 86-87), <http://bit.ly/1FGH000>; Johnson is at doug0077@gmail.com.

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10. A Poll in Which Teachers are “Graded”

In this article in *Education Next*, Michael Henderson, Paul Peterson, and Martin West report the results of a recent poll on educational issues. Among the findings [some others were covered in Marshall Memo 559] were opinions on the proficiency of American public-school teachers. Representative samples of the general population and of teachers were asked to

anonymously give overall A-B-C-D-F grades to teachers in their local public schools. The ratings of teachers by the general population:

- A – 25%
- B – 26%
- C – 25%
- D – 13%
- F – 9%

The ratings of teachers by other teachers:

- A – 41%
- B – 28%
- C – 18%
- D – 8%
- F – 5%

Henderson, Peterson, and West note that teachers gave higher “grades” to their colleagues, but were struck by the fact that the percent of teachers deemed unsatisfactory (grades of D or F) was quite high for both samples: 22 percent among the general population and 13 percent among teachers. Both figures are considerably above the percent of unsatisfactory ratings given by principals using new performance evaluation systems.

“No Common Opinion on the Common Core” by Michael Henderson, Paul Peterson, and Martin West in *Education Next*, Winter 2015 (Vol. 15, #1, p. 8-19), www.educationnext.org

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Do you have feedback? Is anything missing?

If you have comments or suggestions, if you saw an article or web item in the last week that you think should have been summarized, or if you would like to suggest additional publications that should be covered by the Marshall Memo, 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 others very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 43 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, and writer, lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 64 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 every Monday evening (with occasional breaks; there are 50 issues a year).

Subscriptions:

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Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
AMLE Magazine
ASCA School Counselor
ASCD SmartBrief/Public Education NewsBlast
Better: Evidence-Based Education
Center for Performance Assessment Newsletter
District Administration
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
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Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
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Kappa Delta Pi Record
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Middle School Journal
Perspectives
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Responsive Classroom Newsletter
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Teacher
Teachers College Record
Teaching Children Mathematics
Teaching Exceptional Children/Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The District Management Journal
The Journal of the Learning Sciences
The Language Educator
The Learning Principal/Learning System/Tools for Schools
The New York Times
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Time
Wharton Leadership Digest