The 2014 American Educational Research Association (AERA) theme is “The Power of Education Research for Innovation in Practice and Policy.” What do you see as the most promising educational change innovations and what role does/should research play in relation to such innovations?

I am hopeful that research will show the flaw of misusing standardized tests to evaluate teacher quality. The evidence about the political intervention into teacher evaluation is accumulating in many states, and I am hopeful that it will grow to the point that researchers are able to demonstrate to policymakers that this idea has negative consequences for teachers and students and is not an accurate gauge of teacher quality. I feel that policymakers misunderstand the limitations of standardized tests and are in dire need of direction from researchers about their appropriate use.

Current federal policy is totally disconnected from research. Federal policymakers act in willful defiance of what researchers have documented again and again over the years. They have decided to ignore the root causes of low academic performance. They ignore poverty and segregation and count on charter schools that are known to have high attrition rates to improve educational outcomes.

There is today an obligation on the part of researchers – I would call it a moral obligation – to speak out against policy that hurts children and shatters communities. Now is a time to be involved. Now is a time for action and engagement to stop the damage of more than a decade of federal policy that enshrines standardized testing as both the measure and the outcome of education and that enriches consultants and entrepreneurs while distorting the goals of education.


EDUCATIONAL CHANGE SIG
Educational Change SIG adopts an interdisciplinary and international approach to understanding many aspects of educational change, including large-scale reform, school-initiated change, school improvement, and classroom-level change.

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ABOUT THE SERIES
Lead the Change series, featuring renowned educational change experts from around the globe, serves to highlight promising research and practice, to offer expert insight on small- and large-scale educational change, and to spark collaboration within our SIG.

Series Co-Editors
Santiago Rincón-Gallardo and Kristin Kew
The book became extremely popular among teachers and administrators who work in schools because it explained to them what was happening and gave voice to their deep concerns about the way that policymakers are controlling their work.

For a long time, I was puzzled that I received such a positive response from teachers. When I went to speak about the book, many teachers came to me to thank me, some with tears in their eyes. This made no sense because I thought the story I told was about the enormity of the forces determined to de-professionalize teaching. Why would people thank me for writing such a depressing narrative?

Then a friend, Jan Resseger, who worked at that time for the United Churches of Christ as an advocate for public education, explained what I did not understand. She said, "You are validating their truth." I got it. My narrative told them that they are not crazy.

You were originally a supporter of No Child Left Behind and charter schools, and have now become a passionate critic, arguing that you no longer believe that any of these approaches will bring about the desired changes to American education. What made these policy approaches appealing to you at first, and how/why did the initial appeal turned into disillusion?

I liked the ideas in theory. As they worked out in practice, I understood that they were not having positive consequences. I came to realize that incentives don’t work in education as they presumably do in the business world. I understood that professionals work because of idealism, a sense of purpose, and a desire to fulfill the goals of their profession, not because they hope to get a bonus.

I also saw that privatization unleashes both good and bad forces, and the lack of regulation encourages charter schools to select their students and push out those they don’t want. I saw the irrationality of having two publicly-funded school systems, one that could push out students, and the other that had to take them all.

Between 2007 and 2012 you participated in a blog debate with your colleague Deborah Meier called “Bridging Differences.” What were key differences between you and Deborah, how were they bridged over time, and what differences – if any – remain un-bridged?

Deborah and I used to argue about curriculum, about how specific it should be, and who should make it. Deborah is a strong believer in site control; I was a strong proponent of specific national standards. With the arrival of the Common Core standards, I have become skeptical of yet another of my previous beliefs.

There is growing recognition that current education reforms efforts will not take us very far. What is, in your view, a promising and feasible alternative?

We must rethink the entire concept of accountability. It has become a club to beat up teachers and close schools. Many teach in a climate of fear. We must think our way out of the current punitive mode. Instead, we must focus on meeting the needs of children.

We have more children in poverty than any other advanced nation of the world. They need extra help. We have large numbers of children who do not speak English and who have disabilities. We must ask not how can we measure growth, but how can we provide a good public school in every neighborhood? How can we make sure that every child has the opportunity to engage in the arts, to have daily physical education, to learn a foreign language, to study history and civics, to learn about science and mathematics? If we cannot provide equality of opportunity, we are missing the mark. Our goal must be not data, but the best education possible for all children.
Diane Ravitch is a research professor of education at New York University and a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington, DC. As Assistant Secretary of Education and Counselor to Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander from 1991 to 1993, she led the federal effort to promote the creation of voluntary state and national academic standards. Appointed a member of the National Assessment Governing Board in 1997 and reappointed in 2001, she oversaw the National Assessment of Educational Progress program. A prolific writer with more than 500 articles and reviews for scholarly and popular publications, Ravitch has become a champion for public schools across the country, and a fierce critic of today’s most popular ideas for restructuring schools, including privatization, standardized testing, punitive accountability, and the multiplication of charter schools. Her most recent books, both of which have become immediate best-sellers, are *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America’s Public Schools* and *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*. She can be reached at gardendr@gmail.com.