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 want to start with the word promising. I had the opportunity to sit alongside Dr. Paul Batalden, the co-founder of the Institute for Healthcare Improvement, a few years ago. I asked him, “What are you learning about now?” and I hope to never forget his response: “Right now, I’m fascinated by how all my research and understanding of complexity and systems change might boil down to a question of promises. What is the promise we are making, and how do we keep it?” I’ll mention two efforts where I see a promise being made and real attention and struggle to keep it.

Nuestra Escuela, a school system of five learning centers in Puerto Rico serves so-called “at-risk” students starting at age 14 who often have dropped out of school or struggle with substance abuse or family violence. Each student’s experience begins with a retreat where human needs of belonging and dreaming are examined. These “soft-skills” are balanced with a strength-based bio-psychosocial assessment from a social work practitioner. Each student then completes a skills test and lays out a personalized strategic plan for their learning. Students describe Nuestra Escuela as their family. Historically, there has been no failure. Grades below a “C” are met with the expectation to retake classes. Graduation can happen at any age. A relapse of drug use or a break for dealing with self or family violence, are addressed with staff visits, phone calls, and bedside visits to hospitals. The commitment to each student at the center is real and the feelings of commitment are mutual. The successes of Nuestra Escuela have led to a robust national conversation regarding the purpose of education and the importance of relationships and true supports.

A second example is the relatively unknown work of the Rowland Foundation and its Fellowship program. Introduced four years ago, a Rowland
Fellowship offers a Teacher Leader $100,000 for one year in order to pursue learning interests as a professional. This comes with the expectation that they return to their school and share their knowledge with their school and the state. This financial support shows the value placed on the professionalism of teaching and their contributions to education. Chuck Scranton, a former teacher turned principal, spearheaded this project which now includes 24 fellows and hundreds of applicants who are positively impacting young people, communities, and school systems across Vermont.

In terms of the role of research in relation to efforts of this kind, I will make three points. First, research already has played a role. The initiatives I just described draw on the research of many Lead the Change Series contributors and to the work of AERA in general. If contribution is valued more than attribution, the research community should take much deserved pride in the ways their work has supported “people on the ground” to formulate real efforts that impact the world.

Second, research can contribute more if it can live within relationship and complexity. A process and outcome evaluation system known as Outcome Mapping (OM),1 points at the mark where research matters most, that is, where real partnerships are forged. I cannot say enough good things about the work of Fred Carden and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in this direction, which exemplifies how research and practice are connected. That means the research isn’t above, the researcher isn’t expert, and findings are attached to context. Researchers and research that accomplish these feats can make a real difference to actors on the ground. This stands in stark contrast to efforts of change that constrain, make too linear, oversimplify, or develop “fidelity” measures that have consistently led to broken promises and technique-driven practices that deteriorate over time.

And third, researchers must be as interested in getting their findings used as they are in making findings. I’d love to invite the testing of a hypothesis: More educational impact would be attained over the next two years if all research was brought to a complete stop and all funding and human resource allocations were instead directed on getting the findings of the last ten years used, than if research continued its regular course.

What is IDEA and what its major activities, achievements, and challenges?

Organizing. Showcasing. Learning. Storytelling. That is IDEA in four words. IDEA’s original vision was to create an organization that could redefine democratic education and direct an outward message to the general public that could cause widespread change in how students are engaged in learning across the U.S. A core belief of IDEA is that the best way to effect change is to frame a new narrative, build a powerful network, and catalyze action. The intention is to build a narrative that could bridge conversations around student voice, social justice, education for sustainability, place-based education, and social and emotional learning. The strategy is to work with organizers and educators in existing networks and organizations a few hours each week to listen, begin making critical connections and showcase the bright spots - the places where meaningful learning is happening.

Three years of relationship building with like-minded organizations and change leaders throughout the U.S. and Puerto Rico have substantially increased our ability to generate and spread a powerful narrative. The most potent example of this has been our development and nurturing of “A Year at Mission Hill.” Working with filmmakers Tom and Amy Valens, educator and writer Sam Chaltain, and ABC producer Dennis Powell, we took a documentary film and split it into ten chapters.
Then, we created a platform for other organizations and networks to own and customize their own content around the documentary. The result is that 58 organizational partners, including Rethinking Schools, Ashoka, the AFT, and the National Urban Alliance (to name a few) all shared the same story every other Thursday of a powerful learning community. Much of the reach of “A Year at Mission Hill” was possible through the relationships built by IDEA staff and organizers over the last three years.

In addition to our organizing, showcasing, learning, and storytelling work, we’ve focused on identifying and implementing methods to monitor and evaluate our efforts that fit with our organizational values. In 2012 we began implementation of our adaptation of Outcome Mapping methodology. The Outcome Mapping model has enabled us to craft a specific vision, identify key partners, and establish a system to monitor and evaluate progress through a lens of contribution.

As our fourth year begins, we were pleased to launch our first Learning Breakthrough Series (LBS) with “Learning Session A” on November 2013 in Jackson, MS. Adapted from the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI), the concept behind the LBS was developed by Dr. Paul Batalden almost thirty years ago and it is both simple and profound. How can powerful evidence of advances in practice impact real-life settings that seem to have been constrained or unable to change? The solution: Get content-matter experts and execution experts together with people in organizations that are open to change and have them generate change concepts, try them out, and learn together. The process moves from descriptive to normative theory while mastering local and contextual knowledge rather than washing it away. The focus of our LBS will be on four drivers of sustained community change: practice, policy, public narrative, and strategy.

The challenges are constant in this type of endeavor. But the one I’m most curious about is the ways we limit our own moral, political, and educational imaginations. Having sat in hundreds of rooms working with of organizations all committed to work that, from my perspective, shares a powerful core vision that is rooted in powerful research, how can it be that our nation’s policies and national story of education can be so narrow? The core challenge seems to me to be rooted in how we come to understand and ask more of ourselves and of one another.

Democratic Education is at the core of IDEA’s work. What is democratic education and why does it matter in the educational landscape today?

Democratic education is a frame. It’s a way of gathering together a vast and powerful set of ideas, philosophies of learning, research, school models, teaching practices, policies, and community visions so that a powerful story can be told that reclaims the “public” in public education—that is, education owned by all of us. Democratic education is a story of values and how it impacts people and communities, it is also a story of quality education, of access to opportunity, of empathy, responsibility, and humility. Values are the foundation that rests beneath every school plan, budget, strategy, project, or message. When evoked, values help us locate our best opportunities to collaborate and take practical action. Democratic education is a story of vision and a generative frame. It is a story about the present and future of learning. It is the story of what happens when everyone is engaged in the adventure of learning. Democratic education is a story of relationship with people learning better ways to work together with openness, critique, and empathy. It’s about realizing equity of access, quality, and spirit. Democratic education is not partisan. It is not a “big D
blue” or “big R red” concept. It is simply about promoting educational experiences for all students that will create a thriving democracy.

We are at a moment in time where two broad challenges must be addressed. First, the too-simple narratives running almost nightly across the airwaves offering up oversimplified, narrow, and seductive solutions far removed from the complex reality of today’s students, families, teachers and communities must be interrupted with something other than an equally simple narrative of reaction. Second, there is a real and substantial “influence gap” between where and when decisions are made that impact the daily lives of students, teachers, and families. The sudden onset of public concern about the Common Core Standards is a perfect example. For those in the know, the policy and money creating Common Core was moved into place more than four-and-a-half years ago. But for most teachers, students, and parents it might feel as if this came crashing into existence six months ago. We cannot have a powerful public education system where policy is set by a handful of people with a four-year gap before public response and understanding is palpable or considered. Closing the “influence gap” and contributing to the generation and telling of powerful, generative stories rooted in our best research, practice, and values is what IDEA is up to.

The history of progressive education in America has been one of small groups of committed educators creating new environments where teachers and students engage in meaningful learning. Yet the ideas and practices advanced by these groups have permeated only a small number of schools, and seldom have been sustained or deep enough to have an impact beyond this relatively small proportion of schools. What could be done differently this time to transform teaching and learning on a large scale?

I think it is important to explore the difference between progressive teaching practice inside of four walls and the progressive education that is rooted in the community addressing real community challenges and makes use of community assets. You could replace “progressive” with words like “social justice” or “education for sustainability” or “social emotional learning” and the same question will emerge. It goes something like this: If a fifth grader at an Elementary School in Eugene, Oregon is raised in a nurturing home by two University parent professors and goes to her mostly white upper middle class school and gets a powerful “progressive education” inside the walls of the school and even out in the playground, but she is not made aware of and does not address or has no relationship to the young people and communities experiencing poverty, job loss, and environmental degradation a few miles down the road - can we call her well educated? Progressively educated? (Note: if you don’t think fifth grade is developmentally the right age, when is?) While this is a question of practice, it matters because our desire and capacity for sustained, deep impact towards transformative teaching and learning sets partially within it.

The action is where communities are in the process of addressing this question differently than prior waves of change. I’m aware of six patterns emerging across these efforts:

1) **Necessary Tension.** There is a real tension between the experiences of many people of color and the poor on the one hand and that of progressive schools on the other.

2) **Place matters.** The one-size fits all ship is sailing away (albeit not fast enough). Where learning is connected to people and place and where it matters to those people and places, you can feel the learning - it is palpable.

3) **Social and political skills.** We have somehow reached a point where speaking of values and politics is something to be frowned
upon. Folks are nervous to take positions of substance and there is largely a sense that practice is only about what happens inside a classroom. If, and perhaps there is already, some powerful fabric that can be stitched together to reclaim the “public” in public education - who and how would it be moved politically? There is little to no organizational commitment to this end, beyond the recent awakenings within the AFT, and even less thirst. My gut sense is that there is some generational turn that must happen here as I see folks under 40 across the country chomping at the bit to move work more powerfully but feeling constrained by the need to honor older leaders within civil rights and progressive groups and feeling nervous to step forward.

4) Skepticism about and the need for power. We have to face a challenging contradiction that I’m not sure how to solve. The best of progressive educational practice is rooted in relationships with an attention to getting “right relationships” between students and teachers. Like great parenting, the right amount of challenge and support exists as healthy adults use their power in ways that are “with” as Freire and Buber might name. This view of power within a relationship is not the same as power within a political context. There is a deep need for young people, teachers, families, and communities to have more power. But to get it, at least as the game is currently played it seems like we’d have to violate the very principles we advocate for each day. And there is no integrity in that.

5) Shared agendas require the release of philosophical purity. For at least the last 30 years educational and non-profit organizations have been consistently asked to distinguish themselves from each other to avoid duplication. So what we have is thousands of actors who feel the need to defend their work and are in the habit of seeing their work as the most important. And so even when the opportunity arises to collaborate, the first instincts are to poke holes, tear each other down, and find new theories rather than releasing to any common agenda.

6) Replication = no, Spread = yes. Where certain models or practices have been found powerful and effective through research, we have too often poisoned them by forcing them through the lens of replication and commodification. Schools and educational practices happen with humans in complex systems where every piece of relational and contextual fiber matters. Removing that from the equation to a flat description and attempting to replicate models like replicating a McDonalds is like taking a baby Eagle out of its environment in California and putting it in Iceland with a team of consultants and clear guidance manuals in hopes it can thrive.

What is your vision of the future of education, and what are crucial steps to get there?

My vision for the future of education is blurry. And, at least for now, I’m committed to keeping it that way. It isn’t that I’m absent ideas about what I think makes for powerful learning but that those ideas, and more importantly the values behind them, leave me with clarity that the future won’t look a single way. What I’m passionate about is the values and practices that inform our visions and what I want is a future where we’ve re-established and renewed a public contract - a promise - about what every young person and community experience and possess. That begins with humility - rooting all aspects of our shared educational efforts in the practice of engaging in honest, open, caring conversations that maintain the humbleness required to know we don’t have all the answers. And that is followed quickly by courage. We need the courage and vulnerability to risk not knowing and be unafraid of making mistakes and trying out new ideas and new practices within our work. Next is a value for people, story, and
place, above any single metric – and the adoption of metrics that are generated, owned, and useful to the people most directly engaged in the educational process. I imagine a renewed understanding of accountability where we have clarity about to whom and for what schools must be accountable.

IDEA envisions a world where all young people are engaged in learning that nourishes vibrant democratic communities. The places we call school are really sites of social transformation that will reflect our larger social visions or discord. If we want to nourish democracy, then we will need to expect that our youth can become adults who exercise reflective judgment, take responsibility for themselves and their community, and take part in shaping their country and its policies. And for that to occur, the environment in which they are schooled must teach them how to do that—it must give them practice in real responsibility, real dialogue, and real authority.

I’m very clear about the challenges these values and blurry vision create. But I see so many reasons to be powerfully optimistic and courageous about the future of learning. In towns and cities across the country, educators, young people, and communities are making schools into centers of community that are more equitable, more honest, more relevant, more welcoming, and more like places where real thinking happens. Our best educators know how to create these conditions, and they need our support and encouragement. Our best educators are teachers but they are also plumbers, electricians, administrative assistants, small-business owners, parents, construction foremen, elders, and of course young people.

So given all that, what are the crucial next steps to that blurry future? To be provocative and serious - here’s my most prescriptive effort. First, educators, young people, parents, organizers, school leaders, and citizens interested in defending the commons and reimagining public education must continue to find each other and begin to make visible what’s happening in their communities. That means a values-based lens is applied to concepts of “public,” “quality,” “success,” and “democracy,” and our educational landscapes become populated by the schools, projects, and programs that make visible all these words. By identifying the 50 schools, after-school projects, and community programs that best reflect a shared vision in each state, we’d have 2500 different models among which we could begin to see the patterns, core elements, and important nuances as we create a new educational policy and practice framework for public education.

Second, a powerful network of educators, young people, families, and organizations must come together with a common agenda to accomplish at least two things in the public interest: We must campaign for the replacement of No Child Left Behind, if nothing better emerges, with the exact ESEA legislation that was passed in 1965 by Lyndon Johnson as part of the civil rights movement. It is not perfect and should not be in place for more than a few years, but it would immediately return the federal government to the role of capacity builder and provider of oversight on issues of gross inequality in public education while removing its more direct engagement with determining school leadership or a national agenda. Then, we hit pause for two years to actively pursue an open question as a nation about the future of education and what is needed in communities and states across the country. Maybe we could hold a kind of national reauthorization event where federal, state, and district resources and technology leverage the insight of vast networks of educators, school leaders, community organizations, researchers, youth, and other citizens. Using formal and informal hearings, crowdsourcing, deep-dive action-based
research, spoken word contests, and town hall discussions, we would have the time as a country for a “truth and reconciliation” project of sorts, to really catch-up to what has been a time of rapid change and deterioration in economic and political conditions.

And third, out of this massive engagement project, we must emerge with design elements of a new social and educational operating system. One that simultaneously removes the wide gaps in educational investment depending on the zip code you are born into and that wildly invites the resourcefulness and creativity to meet needs in very different communities while living within a renewed sense of public promise.

Scott Nine became the Executive Director of the Institute for Democratic Education in America (IDEA) in 2010 and has spent three years traveling, listening, organizing, and learning about the state of education across the U.S. and Puerto Rico. Scott’s focus is on the intersections of place and community-based education, movement building, systems entrepreneurship, action research, and public narrative. He earned a Masters in Social Work from Arizona State University in 2002 where he focused his learning on program planning, non-profit administration, and community organizing. He has experience teaching 7th graders, directing state university housing programs, working with seniors, and supporting social work, educational, and community organizations. Scott lives in Portland, Oregon, where his three children teach him on a daily basis. He can be contacted at snine@democraticeducation.org.

NOTES
1. The Outcome Mapping Learning Community is online at: http://www.idrc.ca/