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 should research play in relation to such innovations?

Our capacity to speak, share, and dialogue as a global community is transforming the world of education and the role of research. While the existence of a global education community may not necessarily lead directly to the most promising innovations, it does ensure that research is more likely to be out in the public eye and shared across jurisdictions. Today the public, along with educators and researchers, are able to ask questions like, “If they can do this in Finland, why can’t we do it here?” Or, “I read about a report on new special education strategies being used in Singapore. Should we be testing their effectiveness in our school district?”

On the other hand, there is a danger that easy access to reports and research may lead to global education “flavours of the month” and innovation for innovation’s sake. In his warnings about the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM), Pasi Sahlberg outlines the dangers in applying simplistic or one-size-fits-all solutions offered in “global education policy markets.”

It is here that research has a vital role to play. The research community has the capacity to help us assess reforms that might be an easy sell politically, but which are not necessarily backed up by evidence. Strong research can also help to protect school systems from the pressure to innovate that may be driven more by corporate interests eyeing billions of dollars of potential profits, than by a desire for educational excellence. Research allows intelligent assessment of proposed innovations and their potential contribution to the different purposes of public education.

Through research we can do our best to ensure that the changes we make help our school system produce graduates who are well prepared for adult life, active citizenship, and the challenges of a fast-changing world.
Tell us about People for Education: its history, its goals, its strategy, and its main accomplishments to date.

People for Education\(^2\) is a non-profit, independent organization established in 1996 to support public education as an essential part of civil society. We conduct research, make policy recommendations, oversee an extensive public engagement/communications strategy, and provide information and support to parents.

Our belief is that public education has the capacity to transform and enrich lives, and to prepare all students for the bright future they deserve. It is the foundation of a civil society, and in a fully publicly funded education system, every student will have access to the rich, broadly based education that meets his or her needs.

Our goals are to ensure that every student has an equitable chance for success, that all families can be effectively engaged both in the education of their children and in the education system itself, and that public education is recognized as an integral part of civil society.

We occupy a unique position in Ontario, acting as a bridge between the academic/policy/system world of education and the parent/community/public world. Over the last 17 years we have become expert at convening disparate communities, producing and disseminating research, engaging stakeholders and a range of partners, and using online strategies to involve a wide range of participants.

People for Education has an unrivalled capacity for two-way communication around education issues, using both traditional media and social networking approaches. Our web hub has approximately 200,000 unique visitors each year, and we host an online community discussion forum in which 1,500 people participate and thousands more view each month. Through our e-newsletter, we communicate regularly with all the schools in Ontario, hundreds of community organizations and thousands of individuals across Canada (and other jurisdictions), bringing them up to date on the latest news and research in education.

Each year, more than 1200 principals fill in our surveys to provide data for our Annual report on Ontario’s publicly funded schools\(^3\) as well as smaller, subject-specific reports on issues such as the arts in schools or course choices and streaming in secondary school. These reports have been cited by the media, policy-makers and in academic journals across Canada.

Backed by strong research and thousands of engaged individuals in school communities across the province, People for Education brings an independent voice to policy tables and public discourse. As a result, our organization has had a substantial impact on education policy in Ontario.

As founder and Executive Director of People for Education, what can you tell us about what works and what doesn’t to stimulate parent and civic engagement in education? And in what ways do parent and community engagement matter?

Without a doubt, parent, community and public engagement matters to the health, viability and long term success of public education. When parents and the public are engaged in education, they are more likely to perceive it as valuable, and more likely to be among its strongest advocates. Parent engagement also has a positive impact on students’ chances for success.

However, engagement is a complicated beast. There is a tendency in education to want to develop neat and tidy systems by which to define, organize and manage engagement, but true engagement is difficult to “systematize.”

Parent engagement in particular does not fit well into a structured system that matches the structured quality of education. Parents have different needs and goals, vastly different opinions about their children’s education, come from a wide range of socio-economic
backgrounds and have an array of political perspectives. School systems spend a great deal of energy developing structured parent engagement models to support the more visible forms of parent involvement such as school councils, but the research is very clear that it is what parents do at home that matters most for student success.

While parent engagement at school helps build community, better strategies for communications and outreach could ensure that parents have easy access to the support and information they need where it matters most – at home with their children.4

When provided with support and with help navigating what can be a very complex system, parents can be effective advocates for their children and their schools, as well as vital spokespersons for strong public education systems.

But it is not enough for education systems to focus only on engaging families in education. Strong public education systems are linked to healthier, more equitable societies, greater social cohesion, and improved economic and health outcomes. For these reasons, our systems have a responsibility to communicate effectively with and engage the broader public in ongoing dialogues about public education.

People for Education’s parent/public engagement strategy can be summarized as follows:

- We provide updates on education policy and research written in accessible language.
- We offer parents support – including a toll-free phone line, online help, tip sheets in multiple languages and workshops – to help them participate in their children’s education or in their schools.
- We conduct ongoing outreach through traditional and social media – because engagement is built in part through public dialogue.
- We host an easy-to-access online “space” for dialogue. In this space, parents can find other parents to share information, or they can debate a wide range of issues. What makes the space unique is that it supports multiple points of view.

One of the most recent projects of People for Education is “Measuring What Matters” What is this project about, what are its expected outcomes, and what are key lessons you’ve learned so far in the process?

People for Education – working with national and international experts – is embarking on a five-year project to broaden the Canadian definition of school success by expanding the indicators we use to measure progress.

School success is currently evaluated, for the most part, using assessments of literacy and numeracy. While these skills are critical, the evidence is clear that to prosper in the 21st century, students will need much more than achievement in the three Rs.

There is no question that literacy and numeracy are foundational skills that are critical for further learning and for success in life. However, there is a glaring lack of evidence regarding school success in other domains, and this leaves large gaps regarding how well schools are meeting the broader needs of students and the expectations of policy-makers, parents, and the public.

There are few standard tools to reliably evaluate and report on schools’ progress in fostering good physical and mental health, in stimulating democracy and citizenship, or in developing social-emotional skills, in creating positive school climates and quality learning environments.

To address the gaps in our knowledge about schools’ success in meeting new, broader goals, over the next 5 years People for Education will:

- Work with teachers, academic experts...
and policy-makers to develop a new broader set of measures to complement current benchmarking in literacy and numeracy.

- Engage extensively with parents, representatives of government, community leaders and leaders of the business and labour communities to ensure we’re developing the right measures.
- Partner with selected school communities to pilot the new measures to confirm their validity and adjust as needed.

As a non-partisan organization we are perfectly positioned to sponsor a process that is not top-down, where we can demonstrate that it is feasible and useful for schools to define success more broadly.

The result of the process will be a new, broader set of measures that will be both useful for educators and understandable to the public.

What is measured influences policy, funding and public expectations for our schools. By changing what is measured, the initiative will support positive change in schools, making more room for the curriculum, programs and resources that support health, creativity, citizenship, social-emotional skills and positive school climate.

The province of Ontario has gained an international reputation for the high performance of its public education system. What are in your view the most important achievements of public education in Ontario and Where would you like to see the province moving forward?

Ontario is a province with a strong commitment to public education: 95% of students attend public schools; 83% of them graduate and two-thirds go on to college or university. Ontario’s students are one of the reasons Canada has the highest post-secondary graduation rate in the world. Our students do well in reading, writing and math compared to most of the world, and the gaps between high- and low-achieving students is narrower than most other countries and less affected by socio-economic status.

These accomplishments earn Ontario the right to be called a “high performing” system. But it may be time to evolve our thinking beyond the idea of “performance” and set goals for our young people that are higher, broader and more closely connected to our social goals.

If we want to live in a country where everyone has an equitable chance to “lead a good life” (one of the objectives in a renewed list of goals for education in Finland)\(^5\) and where the population is healthy, employed, socially responsible, civically and culturally engaged, relatively happy, and positive about life-long learning, simply getting the highest score in limited education measures is no longer good enough, nor is it enough to measure success in education in isolation from societal success. It’s time to set our sights higher, and it’s time for those of us in the global education community to work outside of our sector to ensure a better, brighter future for all our children.

NOTES

2. [www.peopleforeducation.ca](http://www.peopleforeducation.ca)
3. [www.peopleforeducation.ca/research/annual-report](http://www.peopleforeducation.ca/research/annual-report)
4. See People for Education’s 2011 paper *Doing What Matters Most: How Parents Can Help Their Children Succeed at School*, available at their website (Note 2)
5. [www.edu.gov.on.ca/bb4e/Finland_CaseStudy2010.pdf](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/bb4e/Finland_CaseStudy2010.pdf)
Annie Kidder is the Executive Director and founder of People for Education, an organization dedicated to the ideal of a publicly-funded system that guarantees every student access to the education that meets his or her needs. People for Education promotes greater civic engagement in the public education system, conducts research into the effects of policy and funding changes on schools, coordinates a comprehensive communications strategy focused on education issues and brings an independent voice to government policy tables. Formerly a theater director, Kidder is the recipient of numerous awards and has spoken at conferences across Canada and in Europe. She is regularly quoted in the media as an expert on education issues. She lives in Toronto. Annie Kidder can be contacted at annie@peopleforeducation.ca, and followed on Twitter @anniekidder.