AERA is celebrating 100 years of educational scholarship in 2016 with the theme Public Scholarship to Educate Diverse Democracies. How does your scholarship contribute to public understanding of professional practice to improve education, and to related political debates in the context of increasingly diverse democracies?

The title of the theme sounds like it was created by a committee. So to answer this question, I will simplify the theme to “scholarship aimed at improving the education of diverse groups of students.” And to be clear, I have been primarily concerned with contributing to the understanding of education professionals and policy makers, not the public at large suggested by the theme title. Nor has my scholarship typically been framed explicitly by the concept of diversity.

My research and writing has been aimed, in many different ways, at learning more about how to improve schools serving diverse student populations. Like many others, I have talked about my research goals for students as both “raising the bar and closing the gap.” Most of what we know about the key school, classroom and family variables, which contribute directly to both raising the bar and closing the gap, grows out of research conducted in schools serving students in challenging circumstances or schools with diverse student populations. We also know that improving the status of those key variables makes a bigger difference for students who are struggling to be successful at school than for students who are thriving or excelling at school.

One substantial strand of my research assumes that leadership’s influence on student growth is mediated by these key school, classroom, and family variables (e.g., academic pressure, disciplinary climate, reciprocal trust, focused instruction, family educational culture). The challenge for those exercising leadership is to identify the status of these variables in their own organizations, determine priorities for improvement among those that realistically can be influenced, and focus their improvement efforts on those awarded high priority. This is an approach to school improvement designed to be highly sensitive to the very different contexts in...
which schools find themselves. While this approach provides considerable local discretion for determining what needs to be done, it can and usually is undertaken within a larger policy and organizational framework.

You are well known internationally for your work, inter alia, on the interplay between leadership and student learning and on leadership for school reform. What do you see to be some important contributions of this work to the field of educational change?

In response to this question, I list seven “knowledge claims,” which I believe my research has helped place on quite solid ground.

1. Something called leadership is a key ingredient in almost all successful educational improvement efforts. Organizations are almost never “turned around” in the absence of talented leadership. Especially large-scale external efforts to change schools, absent the support of and collaboration with those in leadership roles, have almost always failed.

2. Leadership has its influence eventually on students to the extent it is able to improve key conditions for learning in schools and classrooms. By now there is a considerable body of accumulated knowledge about which school and classroom conditions both improve student learning and can be readily influenced by leaders.

3. As well, we are now discovering how important family educational cultures are to student success at school and often how open families are to useful interventions from schools.

4. Leadership is often (and rightly) enacted by those in formal administrative roles but those in such roles are usually most effective when they distribute some of that leadership to others in a coordinated manner.

5. While there are many ways of defining the leadership concept, they mostly all include practices that
• result in a shared sense of purpose among organizational members;
• provide both stimulation and support for capacity development on the part of most organizational members; and
• constantly re-align organizational structures, policies and procedures with whatever needs to be done to accomplish shared purposes.

Both transformational and instructional leadership models encompass many of these practices; together they are very comprehensive.

6. Underlying the effective enactment of such practices are a handful of powerful dispositions and capacities. Arguably, the most powerful of these dispositions and capacities is expert problem solving processes.

7. Other powerful dispositions underlying leadership that makes a difference are optimism about what is possible,
perseverance in the face of significant and relentless challenges, a strong sense of efficacy or confidence in one’s own ability to make a difference, refined social skills and a proactive perspective on leadership work.

Given your focus on educational change, what would be some major lessons we can learn from local and global educational change?

I outline five lessons in response to this question. The caveat to most of these lessons is that changes embedded in policy are often not optional. Mostly the five lessons refer to changes over which local educators have some discretion.

1. Educational practitioners are still far too susceptible to unfounded change initiatives and remain much less critical of “innovative” ideas or practices than is in their own and their students best interests. More skepticism and fewer changes would result in more improvement. Educational practitioners often find themselves the targets of change advocates with the kernel of a defensible idea turned into a whole “program” of change for which there is skimpy evidence at best. The market for such programs can be very lucrative for their champions and disciples.

2. A closely related lesson, the phrase “resistance to change” in schools is a pejorative term for a very valuable safeguard for students. In light of the dismal track record of external changes to schools paying off as the architects of those changes claim, students are, for the most part, further ahead because of practitioners’ unwillingness to “drink the cool aid.”

3. Obviously, not all changes introduced to schools are unhelpful, but enough of them are to warrant a good deal of caution on the part of school teachers and leaders. The quickly growing demand for robust evidence to justify claims about the effects of proposed changes is much to be endorsed. More of the types of educational change research that “speak truth to power” (careful assessments of the extent to which polices accomplish their intended goals) should be a priority.

4. There is considerable variation within schools over fairly short periods of time (e.g., two to three years) in the contribution of educational change to student growth, a claim justified by robust recent evidence. Explanations for such variation include sources of variation, which lie to a significant degree outside the control of those in schools as, for example, constantly changing student populations and the inevitable turnover in teachers and school administrators caused by retirements, relocations, illness and the like. Among the implications of such within-school variation and its explanation are that (a) generating authentic improvement in what schools contribute to students is very difficult; (b) sustaining change is a much bigger challenge than bringing it about in the first place; and, (c) efforts toward improvement are never finished because even if the proposed change stays the same, those engaged in the change, change.

5. A considerable amount of the educational change research adds very little value to the good professional judgement of those directly involved in the change.

Young people (students) are the focus of educational change for improvement. From your perspective, what are the key needs of young people at this time and what might the field of educational change prioritize in order to meet these needs?
I attempt no comprehensive answer to this question. Some of my answer here aligns itself with much that has been described under the popular title of 21st century skills, or my preferred title, 16th century skills revisited. In most cases, these “key needs” are combinations of skills and dispositions. Five stand out for me in no particular order:

- **Positive skepticism** – because a large proportion of innovative solutions are created by identifying and improving on the weaknesses of existing solutions. Much of what is thought of as critical thinking is part of positive skepticism but the focus is on how to improve on the limitations of existing solutions once they have been detected.

- **Persistence** – because almost nothing significant ever comes easily and persisting through sometimes many cycles of failure will almost always be necessary. Persistence likely depends on a fair degree of problem-specific self-efficacy.

- **Refined social skills** – because most of what students are likely to accomplish in the future will require them to work easily with others. Much has been made in the past decade about the importance of emotional intelligence and research seems to have caught up with and confirmed its value. The caution here is not to treat it only as an end goal. Socially skillful people develop the trust of others and the functional relationships that make progress on most fronts much more likely.

- **An effortless command of the basic “tool skills” of literacy and numeracy** – because those skills are critical means to other more important ends and those other ends require one’s full attention.

- **A deep understanding of some content domain** – because acquiring deep understanding in one domain enhances one’s appreciation of the value of deep knowledge and provides a taste of what is needed to acquire it in other domains. Acquiring deep understanding in the current ubiquitous digital environment is no easy thing. Unchecked, this environment pulls one’s attention in many different directions and the mind does not multi task. Progress toward deep understanding requires sustained attention to one thing at a time. Sustaining attention to one thing at a time in today’s digital environment requires a high degree of self-regulation.

The field of educational change would contribute to the development of these five sets of skills and dispositions by prioritizing for development thoughtful school environments. These are environments that encourage “mastery” over “performance” orientations to learning on the part of students; much that passes for educational policy at the moment encourages the opposite through its attention to test scores, competitive relationships and other external forms of accountability. Such policy fosters anything but deep understanding and mastery orientations among students.

*What do you think are the most important issues in educational change today? What excites you about educational change field today?*

The field of educational change is, at best, a loose coalition of disparate specialities with very different methodological orientations. The most coherent and empirically
sophisticated of these specialties is about school effects and school effectiveness. While this specialty enjoyed wide international participation in its early period, it is now driven (with several notable exceptions) by scholars outside of North America; this specialty has become exceptionally self-aware and is remarkably responsive to both internal and external criticism. Putting aside legitimate concerns about the extent of its reach and some of its underlying assumptions, this specialty is a model of scholarship largely unmatched by other specialties concerned with educational change.

At the other extreme of educational-change specialties is the body of evidence about large-scale change (districts, regions, countries). Evidence associated with this specialty is derived almost entirely from outlier case study research designs and there is little sign of a norm of self-criticism. Mostly research in this specialty amounts to identifying an exceptionally performing jurisdiction, inquiring about what is being done in that jurisdiction and making best guesses at which of those characteristics or actions account for the exceptional performance.

Admittedly, the challenges to empirical robustness in this specialty are huge, including the difficulties of controlling for most of the factors known to account for variation in student learning and the small number of sites available for study. Results from this line of inquiry might eventually prove to be correct in significant degree but could as easily turn out to be wrong in significant degree. There is a shocking absence, in this line of inquiry, of controlling for cultural and demographic factors that could readily account for what is now attributed to educational factors. The many volumes attempting to explain the performance of Finnish students on international student achievement tests is perhaps the most notorious example of this issue. Those doing inquiry in this educational change specialty would do well to couch their results in highly tentative terms but this is far from the usual style.

The leadership specialty within the field of educational change situates itself between the school effects and large-scale change specialties in terms of both quality of evidence and internal norms of self-criticism. As a long-time student of leadership, I am excited about the growth in methodological sophistication in this specialty, its increasingly clear focus on the “bottom line” (improving the educational experiences and outcomes for students). I am also excited about the growing efforts to accumulate results across research within the specialty in the interests better preparing practicing educational leaders.
Dr. Leithwood is Emeritus Professor at OISE/University of Toronto and recent advisor to the Leadership Development Branch of Ontario’s Ministry of Education. His research and writing is about school leadership, educational policy and organizational change. He has published extensively on these topics. For example, he is the senior editor of both the first and second International Handbooks on Educational Leadership and Administration (Kluwer Publishers, 1996, 2003). His most recent books include Linking Leadership to Student Learning (2012, Jossey Bass), Leading School Turnaround (2010, Jossey Bass), Distributed leadership: The state of the evidence (2009, Routledge), Leading With Teachers’ Emotions In Mind (2008, Corwin), Making Schools Smarter (Corwin, 3rd edition, 2006) and Teaching for Deep Understanding (Corwin, 2006). With colleagues, he completed in 2013 one of the largest studies of its kind about how state, district and school-level leadership influences student learning. Professor Leithwood is the inaugural recipient of the University of Toronto’s Impact on Public Policy award, AERA’s 2011 Outstanding Leadership Researcher Award, and the 2012 Roald F. Campbell Lifetime Achievement Award from the University Council for Educational Administration. Dr. Leithwood is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada.