



From the Desk of the President *Linking Education Research and Civic Responsibility: Why Now?*

Greetings! I was very pleased to see the tremendous response to the call for submissions for the 2008 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association. We received a record-breaking number of scholarly submissions—more than 12,000—by the close of the process on August 2. To accommodate this level of demand requires a significant investment of time by hundreds of Association members serving as program chairs and reviewers. Please accept my heartfelt thanks for investing in the peer review process of our organization. Special thanks to the divisional and SIG leaders who are managing the review process. Your service is greatly appreciated.

I am delighted that so many colleagues are interested in joining us in New York City for the Annual Meeting. The 2008 Meeting theme is “Research on Schools, Neighborhoods, and Communities: Toward Civic Responsibility.” I firmly believe that the topic of schools, neighborhoods, and communities will remain one of the most pressing domestic policy issues of the next several generations. Despite longstanding discussions of this topic instantiated in court records, research literature, and an array of media sources, I have been questioned about the choice. Some colleagues have inquired, Why this particular theme? I usually refer people to the description associated with the theme (see boxed information with this article). But after reflecting on this matter, I have concluded that the inquiries are less about the text describing the theme than about something internal. The underlying question, individualistic in nature, is, What personally motivated this theme from you?

I will attempt to respond to this question. My motivation for the theme is a product of two sources—my lived reality and the social science research literature.

I live in an urban community where the largest school district in the metropolitan region has been de-accredited and taken over by the state. Two other school districts in our metro region also have been de-accredited and taken over by the state. Time and space will not allow me to explain in detail the legal considerations and programmatic changes involved, or the implications for thousands of students and their families. I will say the pain and confusion expressed by parents and other members of the community are transparent. Questions of civic responsibility are central in our region. Our region is not unique. System-changing policy actions in the field of education have been a part of the American political landscape for the past decade. Most takeovers

occur in communities with large concentrations of families living in poverty and usually with majority-minority demographics. Living in this setting as a citizen forced me to ask, Who cares about the children? And what is best for them? These two questions were part of my thinking as the program theme was developed. The latter question leads to my second motivation for the program theme.

My second motivation was drawn from the social science research literature in a variety of disciplines. I have been particularly influenced by the scholarship produced by the Civic Capacity and Urban Education Project (CCUEP), funded by the National Science Foundation. The scholars associated with this project—Jeffrey Henig, Clarence Stone, Marion Orr, and Desiree Pedescleaux, to name just a few—have framed the issue of regimes and civic capacity in important ways. In 2001, Clarence Stone wrote:

The use of the term “urban regime” does not imply that every community has a strong and effective set of arrangements. Quite the contrary, the concept is intended to focus on the question of when and how effective arrangements come into existence and are sustained over time. In many issue areas in many communities, governing arrangements have limited effectiveness. For various sectors of the community to come together in a cooperative relationship is far from the usual state of affairs. Cooperation rather than its absence is to be explained. Non-cooperation is in many ways the norm. (p. 23)

As a scholar who once accepted the challenge of leading one of the National Science Foundation-funded Urban Systemic Programs, I understand the need to achieve the “abnormal” state of cooperation as part of a concerted, sustained effort to improve the nature and quality of education for students in large cities in the United States.¹ In my opinion, an important component of civic capacity in education is the usefulness—the scale, rigor, relevance, and trustworthiness—of the education research enterprise in metropolitan regions. I am convinced there is a need for every major metropolitan region in the United States to establish a consortium of researchers and school leaders with the express purpose of providing rigorous scholarship that is directly linked to local education issues and concerns. In this regard, the Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) at the University of Chicago has established a model for institutional partnerships among universities, school districts, human service agencies, and other civic actors. As stated by CCSR on its website,

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A number of features distinguish CCSR from other, more typical research organizations: our comprehensive data archive, a focus on one place—Chicago, our engagement with a diverse group of stakeholders, a wide range of methods and multiple investigators, and our commitment to sharing research findings with diverse publics.²

The ability to bring policy-relevant research to bear on local conditions has the potential to be transformative. Both CCUEP and CCSR consist of multiple investigators focused on understanding the ill-structured problem space called urban education. The scholarship produced by CCUEP provides insights into the intricacies of civic capacity in urban communities; CCSR, as a research enterprise, is part of the civic capacity in the city of Chicago. Both research efforts, supported by universities and foundations, contribute to civic capacity and responsibility. These efforts speak to the social roles that are vital to advancing democracy and political action. I am very pleased that some universities and local school districts are creating partnerships that include research as a foundational aspect of their interactions. We need more arrangements of this kind to ensure that policy-relevant information on local matters is readily available to all members of the community. I challenge local, regional, and national funding agencies and foundations, school districts, and institutions of higher education to respond to this important matter of civic capacity.

In 1991, the late Asa Hilliard III penned an article entitled “Do We Have the Will to Educate All Children?” Our colleague raised a vitally important question. If the answer to the question is yes, a logical follow-up question for education researchers is, How can research contribute to the improvement of civic capacity in the field of education? This question motivates me. I hope to see you in New York City.

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NOTES

¹For more information on the Urban Systemic Program, see <http://www.nsf.gov/pubs/2000/nsf0034/nsf0034.htm>.

²See <http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/content/page.php?cat=1>.

REFERENCES

- Hilliard, A., III (1991). Do we have the will to educate all children? *Educational Leadership*, 49(1), 31–36.
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2008 AERA Annual Meeting Theme

Research on Schools, Neighborhoods, and Communities: Toward Civic Responsibility

New York City is considered by many to symbolize the gateway of opportunity in the United States. The history of immigrant families and communities in this metropolitan region is well documented and an important part of the American Dream. Yet the geography of opportunity has become a local, national, and global challenge. Cities and metropolitan regions are experiencing intensified city/suburban fiscal disparities. The trend toward increased class- and race-based geospatial polarization has implications for schools, neighborhoods, and related social institutions and groups. The resulting local, state, and federal government responses often create new problems. There has been an expansion of the policing functions of government, for example, while the demand for many key social services continues to grow (e.g., housing, schools, health, and transportation). Thus local, state, and federal funding remains an important policy consideration and research opportunity.

Funding is only one of the many challenges facing communities within and across social and spatial boundaries. Many scholars have found that metropolitan education does not share the level of civic capacity that is available for other local ventures (e.g., sport stadiums). The term “civic” refers to actions and strategic plans conceived to support the goal of advancing the well-being of the entire community. Some scholars have argued that “civic capacity” captures the extent to which multiple sectors of a region have constructed formal and informal structures to create common objectives and advance common goals (e.g., the Civic Capacity and Urban Education Project). Civic capacity requires communities to move beyond immediate relationships and specific occupational roles toward the acceptance of their interdependence and civic responsibility. Civic responsibility in education requires that multiple sectors of the community—individuals, governments, and nongovernment organizations—accept the charge of creating high-quality educational opportunities irrespective of neighborhood or other geospatial considerations.

This year’s Annual Meeting theme provides an intellectual space for scholarship focused on schools, neighborhoods, and communities. Examples of relevant research topics include, but are not limited to (1) higher education and community development, (2) education and social service partnerships, (3) community-based teacher education, (4) project-based learning in metropolitan settings, (5) juvenile justice and opportunity to learn, (6) fiscal policy and planning, and (7) educational role of the professions (e.g., health, law, and engineering).

While in New York City, the AERA community will have an opportunity to explore research, historical writings, and moral arguments. An overarching purpose is to define, frame, contextualize, explain, and debate solutions to the ongoing challenge of linking research on schools, neighborhoods, and communities to matters of civic responsibility and capacity-building opportunities. Please consider participating in this important intellectual endeavor.