The 2020 theme calls upon us as education researchers to situate our annual convening at the crossroads of deliberate reconnection. Informed and inspired by a “future-oriented historiography” (Kelley, 2018) of our past, we will intentionally come together with stakeholders representing a variety of educational organizations to expand our platform for research, practice, and policy. For over 50 years, AERA has been structurally disconnected from the educational communities about whom we write. The time has come for AERA to reclaim the historic possibilities of connectivity and collaboration in educational problem solving and to include organizational stakeholders, both national and local, as full participants in the Annual Meeting.

We will look consciously to our past as we seek to engage organizational stakeholders in the present. In 1968, amidst a national school desegregation crisis, education researchers exited the National Education Association (NEA) to form their own separate organization, the American Educational Research Association (AERA). For more than 50 years prior, education researchers had been structurally connected to NEA, indeed “born in the context of city school systems” (Mershon & Schlossman, 2008, p. 328). However, in 1967, the NEA Council of Researchers adopted the recommendations of a Blue Ribbon Committee that explored the possibilities of becoming a “separate entity.” Consistent with its ongoing efforts to establish respectability for education research, the following year, the group voted 10 to 1 to leave NEA to form an independent organization. They said they wished to “dramatize that we aspire to be a society of scholars” (“In Memoriam: Richard A. Dershimer,” 2007).

The formal departure of AERA researchers from NEA coincided with NEA’s concurrent struggles to contend with race, equity, and opportunity for all children. Fueled by a federal climate in which the U.S. Office of Education’s budget increased from $160 million in 1956 to $3 billion in 1966 and tied the funding to local school districts’ compliance with more pupil and faculty integration, NEA officially merged with its Black counterpart, the American Teachers Association (ATA) at the Miami NEA annual meeting in July 1966 and mandated the desegregation of all its state affiliates. The newly merged organization elected its first
Latino president (Braulio Alonso) to serve in 1967, followed immediately by its first Black president (Libby Koontz) in 1968 (Urban, 2000; Walker, 2018). As the Supreme Court issued its 1968 decision in Green v. County School Board of New Kent County requiring desegregation of all NEA affiliates’ de jure segregated schools and, concurrently, as student protests against varied forms of educational inequity erupted in America and across the world, AERA established an organizational structure separate from NEA.

The corollary relationship between the exit of higher education researchers and the new challenges, resources, and leadership of NEA could remain a historical happenstance of AERA’s organizational independence, merely uninterrogated behavior aligned with its earlier vacillation on the ability of education research to influence public policy and its downplaying of school inequalities (Mershon & Schlossman, 2008). However, if contemporary scholars refuse to relegate history to a remote past, we must ask ourselves: What exactly did education researchers leave when they departed NEA? Through the lens of presentism, a simple consequence appears evident. Education researchers formally distanced themselves from an organization of educational stakeholders as the country and the world confronted the daunting challenge of creating equitable school policies. Moreover, they unknowingly disconnected from the decades-old, intentioned organizational collaborations utilized by the ATA that stitched national, state, and local school communities together with education researchers to address widespread problems of inequality (Perry, 1975; Walker, 2009, 2018).

More than 50 years have passed since this structural disconnection. In 2020 let us harness possibilities and choose as a body of scholars to reconnect with organizational leaders to examine collaboratively continuing educational problems. By reconnecting, we do not mean realigning with NEA, but we do mean programmatically engaging with educational organizations. We wish to invite to the Annual Meeting not simply individuals who are members of organizations. Rather, we believe we can make reconnection more effective by inviting organizational leaders who bring knowledge, status, and constituents to critical educational topics and by engaging these leaders as equal-status professionals. While organizational separation from educational stakeholders may be part of our historical legacy, inviting reengagement can be our current response.

What possibilities for new research and problem solving in educational communities could be prompted if we committed, as an organized body of 25,000 members, to engaged deliberation with organizational stakeholders across the programming in 2020? Suppose Presidential, division, and SIG sessions intentionally identified critical topical areas of unsolved educational problems that dominate the public interest, and invited leaders of a variety of educational organizations to participate on the same panels with researchers to address these areas. We can envision researchers and organizational stakeholders engaging these topical areas with each other and with audience members to imagine new possibilities in research and educational practices, from pre-K to professional schools, both within the United States and beyond our borders into the world.

This call to connect researchers with an audience of organizational stakeholders aligns with AERA’s increasing commitment to address educational challenges through policy and
community engagement and to work with diverse institutional and organizational stakeholders. Although heretofore, Annual Meeting themes have also invoked and engaged the participation of the worlds of policy and practice, the 2020 theme seeks to catalyze engagement and collaboration at the organizational level. The intentionality of this emphasis we hope offers new payoffs. Organizational stakeholders often work in ways disconnected from one another and disconnected from education research. In 2020 let AERA take the lead in connecting research findings to the experiences and challenges of other educational and related organizational professionals.

This invitation to organizational leaders to join AERA members during sessions at the 2020 meeting can serve two purposes, both of which are foundational to AERA’s mission:

- First, sharing the stage with organizational stakeholders who fight educational battles daily will open the possibility of new, previously uncontemplated research questions and, perhaps, different methodological approaches to old problems. This possibility can enhance the quality of our research and extends the first part of the AERA mission: to advance research in education.

- Second, the presence of organizational stakeholders with researchers at the Annual Meeting increases the potential for research findings to be disseminated more widely. Leaders of organizations explicitly concerned with educational challenges have already demonstrated their commitment to the issues, and they bring with them, collectively, the numeric capacity to enable research findings to influence legislation and policy in ways that may exceed the influence of individual researchers. By seeking to engage these leaders, the 2020 theme pushes us closer to the second part of AERA’s mission: to serve the public good.

Come join a collaborative educational conversation in San Francisco in 2020 as AERA education researchers and organizational stakeholders put research in the service of the educational good. The city provides a powerful setting to revisit the pressing educational problems that have persisted from our organizational separation into the present. In the 1960s, despite longstanding inequality, California boasted one of the nation’s best public school systems. Today its students mirror the nation and score poorly on standardized assessments of performance—only 49% proficiency in English and 38% in math. For Black and Brown children in San Francisco, the scores by these measures are even more sobering: 14% for Black students and 22% for Latino students in English; 10% for Black students and 16% for Latino students in math. While wealth and neighborhood revitalization increase as gentrification reconfigures the Bay Area, the schools continue to struggle to attain the educational progress required by federal definitions of educational success (Rivano, 2018).

And yet San Francisco offers a site of hope. California is leading the country in a new visionary educational plan that eschews the “test and punish” of earlier educational policies and partners with students, families, communities, school districts, researchers, and professional learning networks to create multiple measures of success. Already this “California Way” is providing research evidence of the potential for changes in learning
communities when educational stakeholders on varying levels engage collaboratively (Roberta, Hernandez, & Darling-Hammond, 2019). Moreover, California is home to numerous community-based organizations already supporting the educational challenges of educators, students, and universities in the Bay Area and beyond. These existing organizing frameworks on multiple levels in San Francisco provide significant opportunities for collaborative engagements with researchers, and they provide a destination vision for other educational organizations and stakeholders who wish to engage in broader, more united educational changes. Bring yourselves and your research findings. Bring your social media outlets to take the conversation beyond the physical borders of the meeting. In this city, let us imagine the possibilities for the public good that organizational collaboration could bring.

References


