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RETHINKING REFORM AND RE-GROWING DEMOCRACY: A CALL FOR RENEWED RESEARCH AND REAL ACCOUNTABILITY**Abstract:**

Over the past 3 decades, a neo-conservative educational reform agenda has come to dominate public education. Since the publication of the polemic, *A Nation at Risk* by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983), educational reform in the US has been guided by private and corporate interests and seized by opportunistic and culturally conservative politicians and policymakers. As Sahlberg (2011) has pointed out, this “at-risk” agenda is now a global phenomenon, characterized by a discourse of crisis and fear. This model of reform is grounded, primarily, in standardized testing as the sole measure of the academic worth of children, teachers, and schools. Fueled by the media, the current reform agenda reinforces the notions of bad kids, bad teachers and bad schools by seizing every opportunity to publish declining scores, the ranks of low performing schools and under-qualified teachers. Such results provide numbers, but given what we know about teaching and learning, these numbers actually short-circuit deeper understanding of student learning and high-quality teaching. Consistent with this test-score emphasis, teachers are being reinvented as technicians, instead of decision-makers, and even more ominous, students are being reinvented as test-takers instead of thinkers. The purposes of this panel discussion are to examine and critique the current wave of reform, and to propose alternative models of accountability (and renewed research) as they relate to educational equity, diversity, and democracy. Our viewpoint places the highest value on good teachers and good teaching, instead of on test scores. An alternative discourse and model of accountability must hinge upon restoring a social reconstructivist point of view. That viewpoint sees schools as mechanisms to improve society, and not as an apparatus to transmit an uncritical acceptance of the past, the thrust of today's neo-essentialist point of view. To that end, the panelists will each engage the participants on a different aspect of this fundamental question: How can concerned educators break into the current discourse about accountability in order to offer a more optimistic, accurate, inclusive, and democratic model for our schools and children?

Keywords:

Reform, accountability, democracy