What Educational Research Looked Like When Scores Were Rising:

A Comparative Analysis of AERA Conference Programs, 2005–2014 and 2022–2025

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Sarah Quesen

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Recent critiques arguing that educational research has become disconnected from classroom realities are concerning, but an analysis of American Educational Research Association (AERA) conference programs across two eras shows that research focusing on teacher-identified concerns has actually increased for the most part.

The analysis I present in this paper is in response to Auburn University professor David Marshall's analysis of more than 25,000 presentations at AERA annual meetings from 2021 to 2025 (Marshall, 2025a, 2025b). Marshall found that the research presented at AERA focused heavily on social justice and identity, whereas topics that teachers consider urgent appeared far less frequently. In his survey of more than 300 teachers, the top concerns were student behavior and discipline, technology and AI integration, teacher burnout and workload, teacher retention, literacy and core academics, student mental health, and attention spans (Marshall, 2025c). His study received extensive media coverage, appearing in *The Hill* (Marshall, 2025b) and on WBUR radio's *On Point* (Marshall, 2025c).

In this paper, I raise a concern that Marshall's methodology has not been clearly described and is likely not replicable due to its reliance on generative AI for analyzing presentations, but out of shared interest in the relevance of educational research, I extend the approach of focusing on AERA conference programs and examine data from two eras: 2005–2014, when National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores were rising, and 2022–2025, when scores were declining.

My analysis finds that research on teacher-identified concerns mostly *increased* between these two eras. In particular, mental health research increased 670 percent, technology and AI research increased 145 percent, chronic absenteeism research increased 743 percent, student behavior research increased 19 percent, and teacher retention research increased 14 percent. Research focus on one teacher concern, literacy and reading, moved in the opposite direction, declining 34 percent.

Research priorities appear to have shifted in ways that correlate with policy changes and national events. The literacy and reading research decline aligns with the end of federal Reading First funding (Gamse et al., 2008). Accountability research declined 73 percent following the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of

2015. Equity research increased 408 percent following the events of 2020, which brought changes in funded research opportunities.

I argue that protecting federal research infrastructure is paramount, independent of changing federal and state policy priorities. Recent cuts to the Institute of Education Sciences threaten the data systems that all educational research depends upon regardless of research focus.

1. Background

Marshall's central claim is that educational research's focus on identity has displaced the practical inquiry that teachers need. But his analysis examined only recent conferences. For better understanding whether research priorities have actually shifted, a baseline for comparison is needed.

For a baseline to use in this analysis, I chose to compare the more recent American Educational Research Association (AERA) presentations to those from an era that had a different student achievement context. Between 2000 and 2015, American education experienced measurable progress. National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data show reading and mathematics scores improving steadily, with most scores peaking around 2013 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2025; Wyckoff, 2025). The subsequent period tells a different story: From 2015 onward, student achievement declined, with recent NAEP scores in 8th grade math falling to levels not seen in 2 decades.

Accordingly, this paper presents an analysis of how the research priorities at AERA conferences during the rising-score era (2005–2014) compare to the recent period (2022–2025) in which NAEP test scores have been declining. Specifically, the paper considers whether research on teacher-identified concerns declined and whether identity-focused topics increased.

2. Methods

2.1 Data

I analyzed AERA Annual Meeting programs from two periods: 2005–2014 (*n* = 10 pdf files) and 2022–2025 (*n* = 4 pdf files), using files retrieved from an archive (Internet Archive, n.d.). The first of these two periods, the historical period, captures the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) era and aligns with rising NAEP scores. AERA programs from 2000 to 2004 were not included because they were unavailable in consistent pdf format. The second, more recent period represents post-ESSA conferences. The 2021 conference was held virtually due to COVID-19 and did not produce a standard pdf program document; it was therefore excluded.

2.2 Analytical Approach

Whereas Marshall (2025a) reported using Microsoft Copilot and word searches but did not provide specific search terms or detailed methodology, I wanted to conduct an analysis that would be fully replicable. Large language model (LLM) generative AI chatbots such as Copilot are nondeterministic and may produce different results across runs, making replication difficult.

By contrast, the approach I used for this paper is meant to be fully reproducible: Identical inputs produce identical outputs. I used R (v4.4.1) with pdftools (v3.6.0) and tidyverse (v2.0.0) packages to perform string matching (R Core Team, 2024). All pdf files were converted to plain text, normalized to lowercase, and searched for exact term matches.

2.3 Search Terms

I selected 13 terms organized into three conceptual categories based on Marshall's claims, his teacher survey results, and the policy context of each era:

- **Teacher Concerns (per teacher survey; Marshall, 2025c):** Student Behavior (student behavior, discipline, classroom management); Mental Health (mental health, wellbeing, well-being, trauma-informed); Teacher Retention (teacher retention, attrition, teacher turnover); Chronic Absenteeism (chronic absenteeism, absenteeism); Technology/AI (artificial intelligence, technology integration, educational technology, edtech); Literacy/Reading (reading instruction, reading achievement, literacy instruction, reading comprehension, science of reading, early literacy)
- **Social/Identity Terms (main focus of Marshall, 2025a):** Identity (identity, identities); Social Justice (social justice); Equity (equity, equitable); Critical Race Theory (critical race theory, crt)
- **Structural/Policy Terms (2005–2014 era priorities):** Accountability (accountability, accountable, high-stakes); NCLB (no child left behind, nclb); Scientific Research (scientifically based, evidence-based, randomized controlled)

I applied identical search terms to both eras. I do not claim that these terms are all-inclusive, but they provide a consistent basis for comparison. This paper reports per-year averages with standard deviations to account for different sample sizes. Appendix A provides total mentions by year.

3. Findings

Tables 1a–1c present per-year averages and standard deviations for all search terms across both eras. Changes between eras ranged from −97 percent to +743 percent. For five of the six teacher concern terms, the frequency *increased* from the earlier era to the more recent era; the social/identity terms showed mixed patterns in the frequency; and the structural/policy terms consistently decreased (see Figure 1).

Table 1a. Teacher Concern Terms Frequency by Era

Term	2005–2014 per-year average (standard deviation)	2022–2025 per-year average (standard deviation)	Change
Mental Health	24.4 (10.7)	188.0 (38.9)	+670%
Student Behavior	82.5 (32.3)	98.2 (14.2)	+19%
Teacher Retention	22.2 (5.5)	25.2 (9.9)	+14%
Chronic Absenteeism	1.4 (1.7)	11.8 (9.0)	+743%
Technology/AI	30.1 (6.0)	73.8 (31.4)	+145%
Literacy/Reading	72.1 (10.9)	47.8 (5.7)	−34%

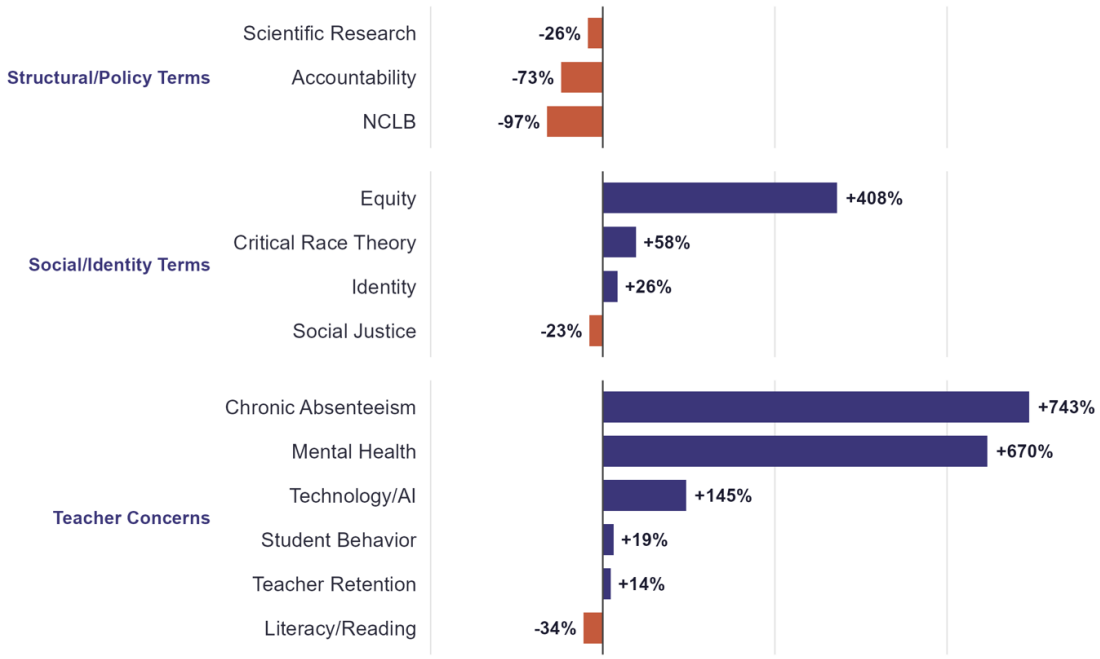
Table 1b. Social/Identity Terms Frequency by Era

Term	2005–2014 per-year average (standard deviation)	2022–2025 per-year average (standard deviation)	Change
Equity	140.0 (19.9)	711.2 (112.1)	+408%
Identity	294.4 (39.6)	370.0 (81.9)	+26%
Social Justice	186.9 (30.0)	144.0 (5.6)	−23%
Critical Race Theory	24.5 (14.7)	38.8 (13.6)	+58%

Table 1c. Structural/Policy Terms Frequency by Era

Term	2005–2014 per-year average (standard deviation)	2022–2025 per-year average (standard deviation)	Change
Accountability	156.2 (73.8)	42.0 (8.1)	−73%
Scientific Research	20.2 (5.2)	15.0 (2.9)	−26%
NCLB	39.5 (24.8)	1.0 (0.8)	−97%

Figure 1. AERA Research Focus, Percent Change in Average Annual Mentions From 2005–14 to 2022–25



3.1 Teacher Concerns

Mental health research increased 670 percent. While frequency counts cannot assess whether this research provides the practical, actionable guidance teachers need, Marshall's claim that researchers are ignoring mental health concerns is not supported by the data. Marshall (2025b) reported finding only 24 presentations on

student mental health and 41 on teacher mental health at the 2025 conference. My cross-era analysis found 188.0 mentions per year in 2022–2025, compared to 24.4 per year in 2005–2014. This nearly eightfold increase suggests that researchers have substantially expanded attention to psychological well-being. The discrepancy with Marshall's count may reflect methodological differences: My search captured this research focus in ways that may not be parallel to his.

Year-by-year data show mental health research was already trending upward during 2005–2014, rising from 10 mentions in 2005 to 36 by 2014.

Year-by-year data (Appendix A, Table A1) show mental health research was already trending upward during 2005–2014, rising from 10 mentions in 2005 to 36 by 2014.

Student behavior research increased 19 percent. This focus increased from 82.5 mentions per year to 98.2 mentions per year, indicating that classroom management, discipline, and student behavior remain active research areas.

Teacher retention research increased 14 percent. This focus increased from 22.2 to 25.2 mentions per year, indicating that research on attrition and turnover has modestly expanded.

Chronic absenteeism research increased 743 percent. This focus increased from 1.4 to 11.8 mentions per year. This term was virtually absent during the earlier era, with counts of zero in *five* of those 10 years. Chronic absenteeism became a required federal reporting metric under ESSA in 2015, meaning the construct was not systematically measured during most of the earlier period. The 2025 conference showed 24 mentions, a spike likely reflecting postpandemic attendance concerns. This pattern illustrates how policy infrastructure creates the conditions for research: Without a federal reporting requirement, there were scarcely any data to study.

Technology and AI research increased 145 percent. This focus increased from 30.1 to 73.8 mentions per year. Levels of this focus were remarkably stable across the 2005–2014 period, ranging from 16 to 37 per year. The recent increase is concentrated in 2025 (118 mentions), reflecting the emergence of generative AI tools in education. Teachers in Marshall's survey ranked technology and AI integration as the second most pressing concern behind student behavior (Marshall, 2025c). The sharp increase suggests researchers are responding to this concern, though the timeline lags the initial release of consumer-facing AI tools by approximately 2 years.

Literacy and reading research declined 34 percent. This focus decreased from 72.1 to 47.8 mentions per year. This is the one teacher concern that moved in a direction counter to teachers' interests. Teachers in Marshall's survey identified literacy and core academics as a priority, and several teachers who responded to the WBUR broadcast specifically cited reading remediation for middle and high school students as an unmet research need (Marshall, 2025c).

The year-by-year data suggest this decline is not a recent phenomenon. Literacy and reading mentions peaked at 87 in 2009 and then fell within the 2005–2014 era, reaching 55 by 2014. The timing corresponds to the end of the federal Reading First initiative, a $1 billion-per-year program that Congress defunded in 2009 following an Institute of Education Sciences (IES) evaluation that found no measurable impact on reading comprehension (Gamse et al., 2008). This pattern is consistent with the broader finding that federal funding priorities drive research agendas: When Reading First dollars disappeared, fewer researchers presented on reading instruction at AERA.

3.2 Social/Identity Terms

The data show a more nuanced pattern than a wholesale shift toward identity topics:

Equity research increased dramatically (+408%), from 140.0 to 711.2 mentions per year. This is the largest shift in the data.

Identity research increased modestly (+26%), from 294.4 to 370.0 mentions per year. Identity was already the most frequent term in 2005–2014.

Social justice research decreased (−23%), from 186.9 to 144.0 mentions per year.

Critical race theory increased (+58%), from 24.5 to 38.8 mentions per year, but remained low in absolute terms.

3.3 Structural/Policy Terms

Accountability research declined 73 percent, from 156.2 to 42.0 mentions per year.

NCLB mentions declined 97 percent, from 39.5 to 1.0 per year. The law was replaced in 2015.

Scientific research methodology terms declined 26 percent, from 20.2 to 15.0 mentions per year. Methodological changes, including broader acceptance of quasi-experimental designs, may account for some of this difference.

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4. Discussion

4.1 Research Focus Relative to Teachers' Interests

The analysis shows that, whatever shifts have occurred in educational research, wholesale abandonment of teacher concerns is not among them. Mental health research increased nearly eightfold. Technology and AI research more than doubled. Chronic absenteeism went from nearly zero to a visible research area. Student behavior and teacher retention research both increased.

> Reading and literacy research declined 34 percent between eras. … The decline appears to be driven by the loss of a dedicated federal funding stream, not by competition with identity-focused research.

The exception is literacy. Reading and literacy research declined 34 percent between eras. This finding deserves attention, particularly given the national focus on declining reading scores and the growing momentum behind the science of reading movement. At the same time, the decline predates the equity research surge: literacy mentions were already falling by 2009, when Reading First funding ended (Gamse et al., 2008). The decline appears to be driven by the loss of a dedicated federal funding stream, not by competition with identity-focused research.

The substantial discrepancy between my mental health findings and Marshall's reported counts (188 per year versus Marshall's reported 65 presentations at a single conference) warrants attention. Possible explanations include different search terms or limitations of LLM-based counting methods. Without access to Marshall's methodology, I cannot determine the source of this discrepancy.

4.2 Shifts Reflect Policy and Events

Research priorities shifted between eras. The difficult question is why. My analysis supports the hypothesis that policy and national events drove the changes.

The accountability collapse follows ESSA. Enacted in 2015, ESSA replaced NCLB and restructured federal accountability. Federal mandates weakened; state autonomy increased. Researchers stopped studying a federal policy framework that no longer existed. The 73 percent decline in accountability research and the 97 percent decline in NCLB mentions reflect this shift.

The equity increase follows sociopolitical events. The events of 2020 and subsequent national attention to racial inequity preceded the equity research increase. Researchers responded to national priorities reflected in funding opportunities.

The literacy decline follows Reading First defunding. Literacy research peaked during the height of Reading First (2008–2009) and declined after Congress eliminated the program in 2009 (Gamse et al., 2008). The same pattern holds

across eras: When dedicated federal reading dollars disappeared, the amount of reading research being presented at AERA declined. The literacy gap that Marshall's teachers identified may be better explained by the absence of targeted funding than by the presence of equity research.

Chronic absenteeism follows ESSA reporting requirements. ESSA required states to report chronic absenteeism data beginning in 2015. Before that requirement, absenteeism data were inconsistently collected. The near-zero counts in 2005–2014 reflect the absence of systematic data, not the absence of researcher interest. Once the data existed, researchers studied them.

Research priorities follow federal funding. During the NCLB era, IES emphasized scientifically based research and accountability studies; researchers responded. In subsequent years, federal priorities emphasized equity-focused work; researchers again responded. More recently, administration priorities have shifted to restrict disparity-focused research. This pattern of research agendas tracking federal priorities is observed across administrations.

4.3 Timing of Events and Outcomes

Marshall's analysis implies that identity-focused research contributed to achievement declines. But the timeline does not support this. NAEP scores began declining around 2015, the same year ESSA passed and federal accountability mandates ended. The large equity research increase occurred after 2020, 5 years after score declines began. If research priorities caused the achievement trends, why did scores decline years *before* the research shift occurred?

More plausible explanations for score declines include the shift from federal to state accountability, instructional disruption during Common Core implementation (Whitehurst, 2015), post-2008 recession budget constraints on schools, and pandemic-related learning loss (Betebenner & Wenning, 2021).

4.4 Protecting Research Infrastructure

Regardless of one's views on research priorities, the education field depends on federal data infrastructure. Recent cuts have eliminated nearly $900 million in IES grants (Binkley & Toness, 2025) and three fourths of National Science Foundation education funding (Barshay, 2025). These cuts threaten not just particular research areas but also the fundamental data collection systems, including NAEP, longitudinal surveys, and enrollment tracking, that make educational research possible.

Peterson (2025) found that nearly every 1 of the 11 most important education studies published since 2002 drew upon IES data infrastructure. Private foundations, state agencies, and academic researchers all depend on the same federal data systems. Without NAEP scores, researchers cannot measure whether any intervention improves achievement. Without longitudinal surveys, no one can track student outcomes over time. This infrastructure serves research across the ideological spectrum.

Stable, nonpartisan, independent research infrastructure benefits everyone who cares about evidence in education.

Federal research priorities have swung in different directions across administrations.

Stable, nonpartisan, independent research infrastructure benefits everyone who cares about evidence in education.

5. Limitations

This analysis has several limitations. First, I analyzed the 4-year period of 2022–2025 rather than Marshall's 5-year period of 2021–2025 because a standard pdf program is not available for the 2021 virtual conference. Second, term frequency

does not capture research quality or practical applicability; research on student behavior, for example, may or may not provide actionable guidance for teachers. Third, the composite search terms may capture some false positives (e.g., "discipline" in "academic discipline") or miss relevant research that uses different terminology. Fourth, without access to Marshall's specific methodology, I cannot directly compare my results to his. Fifth, the Literacy/Reading composite includes terms such as "science of reading" and "early literacy" that were less widely used during the earlier era; however, other terms in the composite (e.g., "reading comprehension," "reading instruction") were in common use throughout both periods, and the decline is observed across these terms as well. Finally, I cannot establish causation between research priorities and student outcomes; correlations between conference topics and NAEP trends are likely spurious.

6. Conclusion

My analysis of AERA conference programs from 2005–2014 and 2022–2025 yields several findings. Five of six teacher-identified concerns saw increased research attention between eras, with particularly large gains in researchers' focus on mental health and technology or AI. The exception, literacy and reading, declined in a pattern that corresponds to the defunding of Reading First rather than to the rise of equity-focused research. Research priority shifts more broadly correlate with policy changes and national events, not with a single ideological trend. And protecting federal research infrastructure matters most: Without NAEP data and longitudinal surveys, no one can effectively argue for any research agenda.

WestEd's mission centers on bridging research and practice. That bridge requires both relevant research and reliable data. Accordingly, I encourage continued attention to teacher-identified needs, transparent methodology in research critiques, and protection of the federal data infrastructure that makes evidence-based educational policy possible.

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Appendix A: Year-by-Year Frequencies

Table A1. Term Frequency by Year, 2005–2014

Term	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Mental Health	10	10	16	18	23	36	35	25	35	36
Student Behavior	41	67	64	86	164	93	82	65	82	81
Teacher Retention	13	23	31	28	19	18	25	25	23	17
Chronic Absenteeism	0	0	0	2	1	0	4	4	3	0
Technology/AI	37	34	30	34	16	32	32	25	33	28
Literacy/Reading	66	70	77	82	87	86	64	73	61	55
Equity	150	129	143	125	111	133	142	133	186	148
Identity	252	242	247	350	316	340	331	299	276	291
Social Justice	155	189	216	200	219	214	205	150	185	136
Critical Race Theory	6	5	15	21	42	25	41	24	47	19
Accountability	352	182	149	171	118	133	134	103	117	103
NCLB	68	70	70	53	46	28	19	17	17	7
Scientific Research	23	21	23	26	12	10	23	22	19	23

Note. Counts represent total mentions in conference program text per year.

Table A2. Term Frequency by Year, 2022–2025

Term	2022	2023	2024	2025
Mental Health	150	190	171	241
Student Behavior	100	111	78	104
Teacher Retention	11	27	29	34
Chronic Absenteeism	13	5	5	24
Technology/AI	46	72	59	118
Literacy/Reading	42	54	44	51
Equity	878	635	667	665
Identity	267	389	359	465
Social Justice	142	152	143	139
Critical Race Theory	30	56	43	26
Accountability	47	49	31	41
NCLB	2	1	0	1
Scientific Research	14	19	12	15

Note. Counts represent total mentions in conference program text per year.

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