
REIMAGINING THE INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION SCIENCES

A Strategy for Relevance and Renewal

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Overview and Summary

Founded in 2002, the mission of the Institute for Education Sciences (IES) is to collect and analyze national education statistics; strengthen the quality and efficiency of early childhood through postsecondary education through scientifically valid research, evaluation and dissemination activities; and support state and local agencies to facilitate evidence-based strategies that benefit students across states. Because of its strong attention to rigor and excellence, IES has enjoyed support from a wide array of stakeholders across the education sector. It is not an exaggeration to say that IES's dogged commitment to high-quality empirical studies has transformed the field of education research, shifting it away from less to more rigorous methods and practices.

But over time, IES has faced several issues that have diverted its focus and diluted its effectiveness. To better meet the needs of parents, students, teachers, and policy leaders—school board members, local superintendents, charter school leaders, governors, and so many more—IES must evolve while maintaining its autonomy and commitment to high-quality, rigorous research. These issues include:

- Inconsistent alignment of grant-making and technical assistance with the greatest needs of states and districts, hindering its ability to effectively support those who serve students directly.
- A tendency to prioritize technical precision over practical relevance and timeliness, resulting in research that is not always useful to policymakers and practitioners.
- Overemphasis on large-scale, generalized studies at the expense of targeted, actionable insights that can directly support state and local educational needs.
- Uneven dissemination and communications, with reports and data sometimes presented in formats that are not user-friendly or engaging for the intended audiences, or easily accessible by search engines or, more recently, by large language models.
- An outdated research infrastructure and organization that limits quick insights, coordination across data sets, and innovative, non-traditional research models.

While NCES's functions—collecting and analyzing national education data—have a long history dating back to 1867, the Institute has played a key role in continuing and expanding this work. It

IES's Four Centers

The Institute is comprised of four national centers:

- The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) collects and analyzes education statistics to inform policy and practice.
- The National Center for Education Research (NCER) conducts research to advance knowledge and improve educational practices, as well as provides research training to students in institutes of higher education.
- The National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (NCEE) provides research and technical assistance services to states and districts and evaluates educational programs (including federal programs) for their effectiveness.
- The National Center for Special Education Research (NCSE) focuses on improving outcomes for students with disabilities.

is imperative that IES continue to collect national statistics (such as IPEDS and CCD¹), as they serve the public good, and to administer the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP), or the Nation’s Report Card, to monitor how our students perform against national benchmarks of proficiency and enable state leaders to see how *their* students are doing.

But other parts of NCES, and much of the work of IES’s other three Centers (see *IES’s Four Centers* above), are long overdue for transformation. The Institute has struggled to stay fully relevant to on-the-ground realities, focus its efforts on the most pressing challenges, make its data truly usable to those who depend on them, and deliver timely insights to inform improvements at the state and local levels. Even IES’s strongest supporters say that its research sometimes strays into ideological waters and relies too heavily on contractors. These shortcomings have limited the ability of IES to fulfill its mission of promoting “the use and application of research and development to improve practice in the classroom.”

In 2025, the leadership of the U.S. Department of Education expressed its commitment to re-envisioning the Institute to enhance its efficiency, agility, and responsiveness to the end users it was established to serve. This report outlines the steps needed to achieve that goal.

Numerous discussions with IES, ED and Congressional staff, federal, state, and local policymakers, district and school-based practitioners, education advocates, technology experts, and researchers (nearly 400 individuals in total), as well as over 230 comments to a Request for Information, made one thing abundantly clear: IES is both a highly respected institution and in need of a significant overhaul. Here are six big shifts that it needs to make.

¹ Properly known as The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) and Common Core of Data (CCD).

Six Big Shifts

Big Shift 1: Rather than spreading resources across many disconnected projects, IES should focus on the most urgent education challenges, informed by state and district leaders.

Even as there is widespread agreement about the role of the federal government in collecting statistics and measuring student progress via NAEP, supporting research activity is more controversial and, despite improvements, that research is not nearly as timely, focused, or helpful as it should be. This is the primary element that needs overhauling.

Instead of scattershot grant awards, IES should focus its grantmaking efforts on a handful of fundamental academic challenges that the nation’s students face, aiming to better prepare them for post-secondary education and workforce success.² Selecting those top-most challenges should be done with major input from state leaders, as well as a carefully chosen National Board of Education Sciences (NBES) that advises the IES Director.

These topics should be adapted to align with the mission of each IES center. For example, if early literacy is an identified challenge: NCES would query its various data collections to report useful information about the status of early literacy in the United States, including variation across states and districts and among key student subgroups; NCER would support rigorous experimental studies on early literacy programs and policies; NCSER would study literacy interventions tailored for students with disabilities; and NCEE would provide both technical assistance to states and districts on existing evidence-based practices and evaluate the implementation and impact of new early literacy programs at scale—including those supported by NCER and NCSER-funded research. IES staff would publish, through various outlets, the takeaways of its collective insights through simple graphics and online interactive elements, rather than a traditional PDF report.

IES should also establish measurable, national research objectives based on the efforts it is supporting across the four centers within the identified priorities and regularly update the nation on the progress of these goals through accessible infographics and dashboards.³

² Avoiding scattershot grant awards does not mean a complete absence of field-initiated research. Particularly when it comes to rapid cycle and exploratory/seed grants, investigators should be testing high-potential ideas before they are ready for “prime time” in more targeted competitions. The high-need topics should be flexible and relevant enough that significant state and district educational challenges can be carved out within those domains.

³ An example goal: By 2030, increase the percentage of U.S. 4th graders performing at or above NAEP proficient in mathematics from 36 percent (2024 levels) to 41 percent with targeted gains in the subscales for algebra and for number properties and operations for students at the 10th and 25th percentiles.

Big Shift 2: Instead of funding multiple data collections and longitudinal surveys that may be redundant or outdated, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) should develop a streamlined and coordinated data strategy while preserving and strengthening its vital core functions, such as the Nation’s Report Card.

The National Center for Education Statistics provides indispensable education statistics and assessments for the country, but it urgently needs a comprehensive review of its various data collections. Some of them overlap, ask outdated or useless questions, and/or include vague or confusing definitions.

This strategy should focus on optimizing NCES data collections to include the most relevant data, identifying gaps in our understanding, and creating a plan for more actionable and efficient data use. NCES should lead this data modernization strategy with input from researchers, practitioners, policymakers, data scientists, AI experts, and others.

To our knowledge, NCES data collections as a whole have not undergone a comprehensive review since their inception, often many years ago. This is particularly the case for NCES’s longitudinal studies. A clear-eyed review could be enlightening because what many see as “statutorily required” data collections are, in fact, how NCES has chosen to operationalize flexible and often nondescript “shall” statements in ESRA or other legislation. The only data statutorily required by name in ESRA are the NAEP assessments.⁴

It’s time to reassess our education data needs and determine what information the federal government is uniquely positioned to gather. Then, NCES should identify which of the current data collections address our “must-haves” and need to be protected, as well as what questions remain unanswered.⁵ For instance, we know that we lack earnings data for students who did not receive federal financial assistance, even if they were supported by federal workforce training programs.

“It seems like the usefulness and quality of IES longitudinal data systems have outlived their value.”

~ University professor

Some NCES datasets have become integral components of the education data infrastructure—think CCD, IPEDS, CPS, and NPSAS⁶—and often fuel other complementary data collections. That

⁴ The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) is specifically authorized in Title IV of the Higher Education Act (HEA) and to be administered by NCES.

⁵ As it stands, IPEDS, CCD, CCD-Fiscal, Private School Survey, Current Population Survey, NPSAS, PISA, and EDGE are in place.

⁶ Common Core of Data (CCD) collects data on public elementary and secondary schools. The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) collects data on postsecondary institutions. The Current Population Survey (CPS) collects data on the labor force. The National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey (NPSAS) gathers financial aid information for postsecondary students.

doesn't mean they should escape a fresh eyes review. (Also see sidebar, [Longitudinal Data Considerations](#).)

Longitudinal Data Considerations

Up until March 2025, NCES was actively supporting four longitudinal data collections: The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Class (ECLS-K:2024); High School & Beyond (HS&B); High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (HSL:09); and Beginning Postsecondary Longitudinal Study (BPS). In addition, NCES partnered with the National Science Foundation to pilot the National Training, Education, & Workforce Survey (NTEWS). No doubt each of these longitudinal studies has its advantages. But it's also true that they are vastly more expensive than most administrative data collections,⁷ can have overlapping purposes (e.g., the two high school collections), and sometimes collect data from up to five different types of respondents on the same topic, which is excessive. Further, methodologists have questioned whether a repeated cross-sectional design (such as that used in the Current Population Survey)⁸ or standing up one "super panel" with various cohort types would be more efficient than tracking three or four separate panels of the same students over time—while still meeting the end goals.

None of these data collections and surveys are specifically called out by name in statute. Some have robust statutory language to support them, others less so. This flexibility allows NCES to determine whether each data collection is optimally serving the nation's purposes and to decide whether it should streamline, expand, or offload any of them.

See [Appendix D](#) for a list of current NCES datasets and the statutory language under which they have been operationalized.

In addition to performing a comprehensive review, IES should begin building a coordinated and modernized research infrastructure to enhance data sharing, streamline research efforts, and improve the power of data to address the questions that practitioners need to answer. To improve coordination and data access, IES should:

- Make NCES data more easily accessible through developing new or expanding existing application programming interfaces (APIs), which are protocols that allow different

⁷ Equally important, it is difficult to track down how much is spent on contracted data collections on [USA Spending.gov](#), which appears to be the sole public source of information.

⁸ The Repeated Section (RCS) design in the Current Population Survey calls for administering the same or similar questions to a new sample of respondents at successive time points (typically monthly). This design allows researchers to analyze aggregate trends over time without the costs of tracking individual-level changes. Each survey represents an independent cross-section, enabling analysis of how the distribution of characteristics changes over time. The RCS design tracks trends and establishes causal inferences by maintaining both the representativeness and comparability of samples.

software programs to communicate and interact within certain boundaries (e.g., summarize all literacy interventions for grades 3-5 with positive effects).

- Prioritize SLDS grants to states (as authorized in [20 U.S.C. 9607](#)) that have existing interconnected preK-20W systems or active partnerships across the K-12, postsecondary, and workforce sectors in need of modernization, including plans for interoperability within and among states.
- Ensure that NCES data are consistently structured and have standardized definitions.
- Expand its use of strategies to accelerate the release of data, such as increasing the use of automated data verification and quality assurance activities.⁹

Finally, research organizations outside of NCES are sometimes able to gather, analyze, and present data more quickly or efficiently than NCES. In these cases, NCES should consider collaborating with these external efforts rather than duplicating them, which could be done at much lower costs.

“How can we take advantage of the particular strengths of each longitudinal collection?” ~ IES staffer

Big Shift 3: Rather than focus on individual or project-specific grants within a single state, institution, or jurisdiction, IES should prioritize multi-state awards to help scale the most promising interventions, resources, and policies.

Scaling successful initiatives from one place to another has always been challenging, mainly because the unique educational contexts that make programs successful in one area can't be exactly duplicated elsewhere. The redesigned IES should incentivize states to collaborate in rigorously testing evidence-based solutions and developing models that improve learner outcomes and experiences. These solutions can then be customized to accommodate the individual state and district contexts within the collaborative.

For example, states might come together to seek a multi-state grant to determine if automatically enrolling higher-performing students into advanced math classes increases the likelihood that they will major in STEM in college or obtain a STEM degree. Each state might then implement that policy differently. One state might offer summer school tutoring for students “on the bubble” for auto-enrollment, another might recommend high-quality instructional materials in the elementary grades, and yet another might add a new set of rigorous math skills to their state standards. States would learn not only about the average effects of the auto-enrollment policy but how impacts may vary based on differing state

⁹ NCES should continue issuing “preliminary” files shortly after collection and “final” files after additional rounds of quality assurance.

contexts, conditions, and approaches to the math policy. This shift towards large-scale systemic change rather than isolated projects would leverage early successes within the collaborative, then seek to embed effective policies and resources across multiple jurisdictions.

Enabling robust R&D in states requires rethinking how IES supports the development of research capacity within states, including not only personnel but also state longitudinal data systems (as statutorily mandated in [20 U.S.C. 9543 \(a\)\(4-5\)](#)), so that system-wide impacts can be measured, scaled, and integrated. A structural adjustment to IES grants, including SLDS grants, which allows multiple states to apply for joint research projects, could pave the way for scaling promising interventions, resources, technologies, and policies.

Big Shift 4: Direct the focus of the research work towards practicality, innovation, and relevance.

Research and evaluation must adapt to meet the evolving needs of students and educators. The integration of AI in education, the widespread use of social media among students, and the ubiquitousness of cell phones have significantly changed how information is consumed and retained.

Therefore, research and evaluation efforts should be guided by practicality and innovation.

- Require analysis of causal mechanisms in grants supporting causal research to explore not only whether an intervention, policy, or program works but also how and under what conditions.
- Continue supporting implementation studies for impact analyses that explain how the educational context influences implementation.
- Prioritize in grant applications the practical significance of research over and above the existing “theoretical and empirical rationale.”
- Pilot a “rapid response” grant mechanism for microgrants that last no longer than a year.
- Continue support of digital learning platforms (DLP), which are web-based portals that provide educational content in one place (e.g., Google Classroom, Canvas, Blackboard, Coursera). These platforms furnish researchers with a means for rapid-cycle testing of interventions.
- Intensify efforts to expand the pool of research and development expertise within the IES ecosystem, such as the “rotator program” at NSF, to ensure that IES programs reflect innovative ideas and state-of-the-art technical methods.

A key aspect of “relevance” is careful attention to how results are disseminated, understood, and acted upon by practitioners. To this end, IES should:

- Translate report findings in innovative ways by *requiring* grantees—and making milestone payments incumbent upon—their presentation of key findings in various formats, such as interactive figures, short videos, one-page summaries, infographics, or by engaging with educators directly through podcasts with teacher influencers, webinars, and writing practitioner-oriented articles and blog posts.
- Recommend that grantees partner with existing intermediaries (practitioner, educational advocacy, or leadership groups) that already have working relationships with practitioners to facilitate their interest and participation in research.
- Use application programming interfaces (APIs), consistent identifiers, and open licensing as needed so that publicly available NCES and WWC data are accessible in LLM models (such as ChatGPT) and navigable by lay audiences.
- Incentivize the embedding of evidence into existing routines and tools used by educators, such as learning management systems.
- Continue rapid-cycle research to generate actionable evidence for schools oriented to quicker solutions that can be more readily implemented.
- Use the Hub (see [Part IV](#)) to share REL, Comp Center, and other state resources with all REL regions.
- Amplify IES communications by moving away from various “newsflash” lists to targeted outreach by audience and topic. Additionally, create aggregated bulletins, such as an annual “Top Research Findings from IES” that highlight the 3-5 most important and actionable research findings across the entire portfolio. Distribute this bulletin widely to educators, administrators, policymakers, and the education media.

Big Shift 5: IES should build mechanisms by which the applied research and technical assistance work of its Regional Educational Labs (RELs) is responsive, timely, and coordinated, as well as shared across the country.

The Regional Education Labs (RELs) are tasked with research, development, dissemination, and technical assistance activities as defined in [U.S.C. 9564](#). Discussions about the value of the RELs have long been contentious, and opinions among state chiefs and practitioners reflect this division. The feedback is generally more negative than positive, with stakeholders' opinions varying significantly depending on their specific REL. A few RELs receive notably more positive feedback than others. Those tend to allow states and districts to set the direction for the research

“Having worked in two different states and having seen two different RELs, the difference is night and day.” ~ State chief

(though not the methodology) and employ researchers who can both translate findings into practical terms and provide implications for classrooms.

In an ideal world, many state chiefs would prefer that their portion of the REL allotment be awarded directly to them so that they could choose their own research and TA services from in-state providers they know and trust. This is not possible under our current law and would require congressional action to change. Therefore, the recommendations below aim to improve the existing system.

- Align the Department’s research and technical assistance services (including RELs) under a shared coordinating structure (or Hub) so that the ecosystem of support the Department provides is more efficient, effective, and responsive to state and local needs.¹⁰
- Establish a Hub advisory board including state-level representatives and others to oversee its work, which should include the development of a performance framework for ED-funded technical assistance and methods for soliciting and sharing feedback from states on the services they are receiving.
- Set aside a window, before awarding of contracts, in which interested entities can meet with state representatives from each REL region to discuss their capabilities, expertise, and experience in serving needs similar to the region, so that states can write support letters for their provider of preference that can be considered “recommended” in the scoring criteria for peer reviewers.
- Clarify that one or more states in the region are allowed to come together with a research partner(s) and serve as their own REL provider and compete with other would-be providers.
- Where feasible, support local partners rooted in the region. Some practitioners expressed a preference for funding partnerships that include local organizations to hold the REL contracts or TA grants (in the case of Comp Centers) to ensure sustainability and relevance.

“The REL in the Midwest is located in Chicago. That isn’t building the Midwest’s local infrastructure and network.” ~ State chief

¹⁰ This change can feasibly be enacted through rulemaking and contractual changes.

To enhance state and local research capacity, universities could compete, through statutorily required IES training programs, to offer new master’s degree programs in educational research, focusing on rigorous program evaluation, causal inference, and data analysis.¹¹ Graduates of evaluation-oriented training programs would act as translators and boundary spanners to bridge research and practice, while also facilitating the flow of evidence-based practices from IES into the field. Grant continuations would be largely based on success in placing students in state and local agencies.

Big Shift 6: Narrow the scope of the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) to the development of practice guides and tools and ensure that its evidence base is better utilized.¹²

The WWC has become less relevant over the years due to several issues. It relies heavily on the accumulation of studies, but there is little incentive for researchers—who typically want to break new ground—to conduct replication studies to build evidence for any single intervention. The WWC's intended audience includes practitioners, researchers, vendors, and parents, but understandably, it struggles to meet the diverse needs of these groups.¹³ The website's organization is not intuitive, making it difficult for users to navigate. Perhaps most salient, many users now rely on AI and popular search engines for evidence searches, highlighting the need for IES to adapt to this new reality.

“The IES practice guides were highly useful but not well disseminated to the folks who needed them.”
~ Education advocate

The WWC should focus on developing practice guides and tools supported by the evidence and discontinue the *ad hoc* review of individual studies and interventions. The guides were

¹¹ IES is statutorily mandated to “establish and maintain research, evaluation, and statistics fellowships in institutions of higher education...that support graduate and postdoctoral study onsite at the Institute or at the institution of higher education.” See ESRA section 189 [20 U.S.C. 9579]. The recommendation is to decrease the funding for doctoral fellowships and increase funding for a competition to re-envision masters’ education programs with an evaluation focus. These new competitive programs would include rigorous requirements in educational evaluation, as evidenced by strong course descriptions and syllabi, as well as a history of collaboration with state and local education agencies. Students might also be required to conduct a light analysis of internal programs in SEAs and large districts as part of their university training.

¹²The WWC is not specifically referenced in ESRA, but broad statutory support is established in Section 171 (b)(3), which creates the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (NCEE). Part of this center's mission is to “support synthesis and wide dissemination of evaluation, research, and products developed.” Also, 20 U.S.C. 9562 (ESRA Sec 172) says that NCEE is to “award a contract for a prekindergarten through grade 12 mathematics and science teacher clearinghouse.”

¹³ This challenge is not surprising given that the WWC is intended to be a Randomized Intervention Studies Database (RISD) in which researchers are likely familiar, but not laypersons.

repeatedly described as the most useful activity conducted by the Clearinghouse. Instead of reviewing individual studies or interventions, IES should use AI to synthesize cumulative findings on a topic once sufficient evidence has accumulated. Then it can determine how many studies merit review using WWC standards¹⁴—and ultimately, development of a practice guide.

“WWC is not designed to deliver what people expect of it.”

~ Education nonprofit leader

To better fulfill its mission, the WWC should enhance its database to be more user-friendly with machine-readable datasets and an application programming interface (API), enabling integration with educational apps and research tools. Utilizing large language models (LLMs) can help practitioners efficiently search for vetted evidence-based information.

All of these shifts are in service of a greater national need. The 2024 national NAEP scores revealed that students across all tested grades and subjects were still lagging pre-pandemic performance levels of 2019. Compared to 2022, data from 2024 revealed that no state achieved reading gains in either 4th or 8th grades, while nationally, 8th-grade math scores remained stagnant. Alarming, one-third of 8th graders are not reading at *NAEP Basic* levels, the highest percentage ever recorded.

Unlike much of the federal work that’s directed in education, IES does not process funds for schools, higher education institutions, or students in need who attend either. Its setup is different, designed to focus on independent research and statistics gathering—and leveraging those insights to benefit education stakeholders. This education community, including IES, must now ask itself tough questions about how it can do better to confront the nation’s academic challenges. The full report contains many recommendations on that front with the goal to propel student outcomes forward, shoulder to shoulder with the states, districts, and researchers that partner with IES.

¹⁴ The WWC standards will still need to be periodically reviewed as methodological advances are made, especially around the use of AI in research.

Organization of the Report

This report's recommendations are organized by the respective IES Center responsible for implementing them.

Part I covers the bedrock principles of IES, Part II includes recommendations for NCES (including NAEP), Part III for NCER, Part IV for NCEE, and Part V for NCSE. There are also four appendices:

- Appendix A: a standalone list of report recommendations only
- Appendix B: suggestions for internal improvements
- Appendix C: changes for future ESRA reauthorization
- Appendix D: a list of NCES datasets

In some cases, recommendations apply to both IES research centers (NCER and NCSE). Most of these recommendations can be addressed within the existing statutory guidelines of the Education Sciences Reform Act (ESRA) of 2002. Where this is not the case, it is noted—and as indicated above—key recommendations for ESRA Reauthorization appear in Appendix C.

Part I: Bedrocks of IES

Executing on the big shifts in the prior section will be a heavy lift. These are not nips and tucks, as IES is struggling in multiple ways to remain relevant and responsive.

But let's also remember that it is an entity worth redemption and revitalization, precisely because its work has the potential to empower those who deliver education to the American people, meaning state and local leaders, school leaders, teachers, and the broader public, including parents.

Some of the bedrocks of IES revitalization that must carry forward include its independence, scientific integrity, statistics infrastructure, and rigorous research across diverse settings.

Independence

IES was created by the Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002 with a clear and deliberate purpose: to serve as an independent, nonpartisan, evidence-focused entity within the U.S. Department of Education. Specifically, its activities are to be “objective, secular, neutral, and nonideological,” as well as “free of partisan political influence and racial, cultural, gender or regional bias” [[20 U.S.C. 9511\(b\)\(2\)\(b\)](#)]. ESRA deliberately established IES outside the policy and programmatic priorities of the U.S. Department of Education, giving it a Director with a fixed six-year term, a separate governing body known as the National Board for Education Sciences (NBES), and statutory protections to ensure its research agenda, methods, and reporting were insulated from political influence (e.g., unlike program offices, IES does not follow the Secretary of Education's priorities). This autonomy is one of its greatest assets, enhancing respect for IES and its signature program—the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP—and positioning them as the crown jewels of the federal government's work in education.

Scientific Integrity

IES's work is grounded in the production of high-quality, independent research, particularly through randomized controlled trials and other causal research designs. From its establishment, IES prioritized empirical rigor, a commitment solidified by its inaugural director, Grover (“Russ”) Whitehurst, who emphasized the importance of RCTs and other causal methodologies. This dedication to scientific rigor has continued under successive IES leaders and Center commissioners. It has also led to the development of transparent, publicly posted standards for scientific rigor, peer review, and evidence quality.

Statistics Infrastructure

Virtually everyone agrees that IES has an imperative, via NCES, to continue to collect critical information about schools, students, teachers, and education programs from early childhood through post-secondary education, adult education, and the workforce. The federal government currently provides the only mechanism for producing comparable, comprehensive, and publicly accessible data across all states and sectors (including the Nation’s Report Card). NCES finance, IPEDS, and CCD datasets are among the most utilized data in the country. NCES investment in states’ data infrastructure, through the SLDS program, is key in supporting data-driven decision-making at the state and local levels.

These statistics are critical data points that inform policy decisions, guide educational practices, and help ensure accountability within the education system. In an era where evidence-based strategies are paramount, these data help identify trends, measure progress, and highlight areas that need improvement. They also have the potential to enable those who run schools to get a greater return on investment for taxpayer dollars.

Rigorous research across diverse settings

By undertaking a variety of comprehensive studies, IES provides a solid foundation for developing effective educational policies and informing effective practices. This nationwide perspective enables policymakers to compare educational outcomes across different regions and consider reforms based on extensive evidence rather than isolated examples. Investing in rigorous research across diverse populations and settings increases the chances that all students, regardless of their background or location, benefit from the latest advancements in education.

IES should preserve its capability to study interventions across varied educational contexts, regions, and populations. This approach allows for the examination of various factors such as policy environments, differences in resources or community factors, and variation in implementation conditions—all of which could affect outcomes. Studying programs in only a handful of districts produces results that may not apply to other settings or could overgeneralize from atypical settings. Moreover, the ongoing accumulation of research and data at IES builds an ever-

*“We want to reflect on the enormity of what IES has accomplished in the last 20 years. In this short time, IES has developed a strong evidence base of rigorous causal studies—over 400 efficacy and effectiveness trials to date, in addition to many hundreds of strong quasi experiments—and, to do so, has trained an entire new generation of scholars, as well as building the expertise of existing scholars, to take on this work.” ~
Research and evaluation organization*

stronger body of evidence that can track changes over time and provide historical context for new findings.

All of that said, the impact of education research—or any type of research for that matter—isn’t always immediately apparent, and it’s exceedingly difficult to draw a direct line from research findings to specific changes in schools, not just because of the inherent nature of research but also because the implementation of such changes depends on the users of the information. Nevertheless, having access to such information and findings is crucial for the future of American education, its citizens, and the U.S. economy.

So, even if we can’t draw a straight line from A to B, does IES research appear to make a difference? Yes, it does. Some illustrative examples appear in the sidebar, *IES in Action*.

The U.S. Department of Education has been described as a big bank with a small research shop attached to it.¹⁵ It’s a fitting description, as just 0.3% of the Department of Education spending in FY 2024 was by IES. Regardless, some of those dollars served beneficial ends, while others did not. Let's aim to achieve the former to the fullest.

¹⁵ “The Student Debt Crisis and the U.S. Department of Education: How a Government Agency Shirks Oversight Responsibility and Operates Like a Big Bank,” Jobs With Justice, accessed November 24, 2025, https://www.jwj.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Student-Debt-and-ED-Fact-Sheet_final.pdf; Amy Sherman, “Trump order takes steps toward closing Education Department, but only Congress can end it,” Politifact, The Poynter Institute, March 21, 2025, <https://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/promises/maga-meter-tracking-donald-trumps-2024-promises/promise/1651/abolish-the-education-department/article/3164/>; “Improving Education Outcomes by Empowering Parents, States, and Communities,” The White House, March 20, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/03/improving-education-outcomes-by-empowering-parents-states-and-communities/>.

IES in Action

Below are examples of recent educational research supported by IES through its NCER and NCSEER research centers, with results that have been shown to be effective and implemented on a larger scale.

NCER-supported investments in literacy and mathematics aim to strengthen instructional practices. NCEE practice guides such as [Providing Reading Interventions for Students in Grades 4–9](#) (published March 2022 with roughly 73,155 downloads in 2023-2024) and [Assisting Students Struggling with Mathematics: Intervention in the Elementary Grades](#) (published in March 2021 with roughly 38,411 downloads in 2023-2024) draw on two decades of evidence generated with IES research funding. A couple examples of notable *individual* NCER interventions with strong evidence currently operating at scale:

[A2i \(Assessment to Instruction\)](#). Closing achievement gaps between high and low performing readers remains a persistent challenge across our nation. A2i combines technology and professional development in order to individualize reading instruction and has [demonstrated effectiveness](#) at helping readers achieve reading proficiency by the end of third grade. The intervention is now available through [Scholastic](#).

[ASSISTments](#). Like mastering foundational reading skills by third grade, mastering algebra by eighth grade is a key to success in high school and beyond. [ASSISTments](#) transforms how teachers assign homework, enabling personalized mathematics instruction. Developed, tested, and scaled with NCER funding, this transformative approach [improves mathematics outcomes](#) for middle school learners. A [recent NCER-funded replication study](#) confirmed the impact of ASSISTments with learners in North Carolina. According to the [latest](#) reports, the intervention supports over 20,000 teachers and their 500,000 students in grades 3-10.

IES-supported evidence points the way to improving college and career outcomes. Programs such as Early College High Schools and [P-TECH](#) have been the focus of NCER-funded studies. Both programs have grown across the nation as evidence of their impact on postsecondary outcomes continues to accrue (e.g., twenty-eight states now have P-TECH models). Also, recent findings of the long-term impacts of CUNY ASAP have driven uptake across the nation:

CUNY ASAP (Accelerated Study in Associate Programs) is a 3-year program that provides student support services, financial support, and structured career pathways. [Multiple NCER studies](#) have demonstrated the short- and long-term efficacy of this program. [A recent synthesis](#) from an [NCER-funded study](#) examining the impact of ASAP across six colleges in two states finds that ASAP students are more likely to enroll in college and attain college degrees. Based upon this evidence, the model is now being implemented across the country, including in [Maryland](#), [North Carolina](#), [West Virginia](#), and [Colorado](#).

NCSER has conducted seminal work in demonstrating what students with disabilities can achieve with appropriate supports. Case in point: The Class-wide Function-based Intervention Teams (CW-FIT) was developed with the goal of improving teachers' classroom management. Across elementary school and middle school, the intervention has shown to be effective in improving the social-behavioral outcomes of students with or at risk for disabilities and has been widely implemented in over 45 states.

Similarly, other research challenged the longstanding belief that the needs of students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities are too complex for the general education classroom. The Early Literacy Skills Builder intervention, for instance, was first developed and piloted and then evaluated in 2015, significantly improving reading outcomes among students with severe intellectual disabilities when delivered in general education classes via a buddy program. The intervention has since been commercialized and is being used in over 2,000 schools.

NCSER investments are equipping school professionals with the tools and resources needed to address the growing complexity of student needs. For instance, as states experienced delays in identification and provision of special education services, NCSER funded work to develop a more efficient process for diagnosing autism spectrum disorder (ASD) through a telehealth model, aiming to reduce waitlists and facilitate earlier access to intervention. To date, the intervention has facilitated the evaluation of over 500 children, and average wait times have decreased from 15 months to just 1 month.

Part II: NCES

NCES and Data Modernization

Federal initiatives in the United States to gather, analyze, and interpret educational data have deep roots dating back to the 19th century. The Office of Education, established in 1867, began the work of compiling national statistics on enrollment, literacy, and school conditions, laying the groundwork for today's comprehensive education data systems. Over the years, the federal role in education research and assessment evolved through several institutional changes, including the creation of the National Institute of Education (NIE) in 1972, which was later reorganized into the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) in 1985.¹⁶

With the passage of the Education Sciences Reform Act (ESRA) in 2002, the Institute for Education Sciences (IES) was established as the primary independent research arm of the U.S. Department of Education, with the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) as its primary statistical division. Over the years, NCES staff have largely shifted from directly collecting, analyzing, and presenting statistics to overseeing external contractors who perform these tasks. While this model works well for labor-intensive surveys (like operating helpdesks and call centers), some administrative data collections—or aspects of them—could be handled in-house. (See [Appendix B](#) for more on *Decreasing the Reliance on Contractors*).

NCES is commended for publishing some of the most utilized data in the education field. Unfortunately, those data are typically slow to gather, process, and release. Information is not as timely or relevant as it could be for informing policy decisions and educational practices. Moreover, the various data sets managed by NCES are not designed to integrate, creating silos that hinder comprehensive analysis and understanding.

“The systems within the NCES data collections do not speak to each other. They are siloed.”
~ Education researcher

Modernizing NCES is essential to overcome these challenges. By adopting more advanced data collection and processing technologies, the agency can ensure quicker turnaround times, making data more current and actionable. Implementing systems that allow different data sets to communicate makes for more holistic insights and facilitates a better understanding of educational trends and needs that can be acted on.

Importantly, the potential benefits of modernization—improved data accuracy, better resource allocation, and more effective educational strategies—can be leveraged without adverse risks to

¹⁶ Prior to its current home at IES in 2002, NCES lived at the Department of the Interior (1869-1939), the Federal Security Agency (1939-1953), the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (1953-1980), and the newly created Department of Education (1980-2002). It got its official name in 1974.

privacy. With robust data security measures in place, NCES can protect sensitive information while harnessing modern technologies to enhance its capabilities.

Problem: The data that we need to power educational improvements evolves with time, and our data collection and processing methods must do the same. In short, many of the NCES products have not kept pace with evolving needs. In this way, modernization is not only a technological upgrade. It is looking at NCES data collections with fresh eyes so that educational opportunities and practices are informed by the most accurate and current data available.

In that spirit, here are several recommendations for the statistical functions at IES.

Recommendation: Conduct a thorough review of current administrative and survey data collections to ensure they are relevant today: identify gaps, streamline processes, and consider discontinuation as warranted.

IES should establish an advisory group, which would include members of the National Board for Education Sciences (NBES), to evaluate thoroughly all data collections and surveys conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).¹⁷ This group, comprising researchers, policymakers, tech and AI experts, and education stakeholders across the P-20W continuum, would be tasked with determining whether these data collections continue to meet the educational needs of the nation. Currently, NCES surveys, assessments, and administrative datasets form a loosely connected collection that lacks an organizational or conceptual structure.

The advisory group would examine each data product to discern its relevance, identify duplicative data requests, highlight inconsistencies in definitions, and pinpoint areas where data are lacking.

The overarching goal would be to transition from a fragmented system to one characterized by coordinated frames and operations that support continuous improvement of individual and collective datasets. Furthermore, this comprehensive plan should delineate how the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) will manage this transition.

Key to this work is determining whether existing data collections—administrative, survey, longitudinal, or otherwise—are sufficient for current and future demands. What many see as

¹⁷ The National Board for Education Sciences (NBES) is the advisory board that oversees the Institute of Education Sciences, including providing guidance on its priorities, reviewing procedures for peer review, suggesting dissemination approaches, and recommending individuals to serve as commissioners of the IES centers, among other tasks. Reconstituting the board with exceptionally qualified staff who are eager to roll up their sleeves should be a priority.

“statutorily required” data collections are, in fact, how NCES has chosen to operationalize flexible and often nondescript “shall” statements in ESRA or other legislation. The only data statutorily required by name in ESRA are the NAEP assessments.¹⁸ The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) is specifically authorized in Title IV of the Higher Education Act (HEA) and to be administered by NCES.

Moreover, ESRA gives broad latitude to NCES to decide data elements, the frequency of data collection, and the delivery and reporting of such data. For instance, directives to “issue regular and...special statistical reports on education topics, particularly in core academic areas of reading, mathematics, and science...” are operationalized in multiple ways, including special topical reports or via the Digest of Education Statistics. The charge for “acquiring and disseminating data on educational activities and student achievement (such as the Third International Math and Science Study¹⁹), in the United States compared with foreign nations,” has been operationalized as US participation in TIMSS, PISA, PIRLS, and PIACC.²⁰ The National Post-Secondary Student Aid Survey (NPSAS) looks to be tied to a data reference about “access to, and the opportunity for, postsecondary education, including data on financial aid to postsecondary students” ([20 U.S.C. 9543 \(a\)\(1\)\(E\)](#)).

The point isn’t that these data collections are without merit. But we should periodically update the “bread and butter” collections on which we’ve come to rely (CCD, CCD-Fiscal, IPEDS, CPS, PSS, EDGE files).²¹ Multiple stakeholders noted that workforce training programs have not been

¹⁸ Incidentally, ESRA mentions a report “on the condition and progress of education” ([20 U.S.C. 9545\(b\)](#)), which should cover many topics delineated in Sec. 153 of ESRA, and is to be released each summer. That requirement has been operationalized as the Condition of Education report.

¹⁹ The Third International Math and Science study was the name for TIMSS until 1999, when its name was changed to Trends in International Mathematics and Science.

²⁰ Respectively, these are the Trends in International Mathematics and Science (TIMSS), Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA); Progress in International Reading Literacy (PIRLS), and Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIACC). Barring the full diagnostic review, this report does not weigh in on which data collections should be kept, streamlined or discontinued. That said, participation in the latest TIMSS study, to be completed by December 2029, will cost a combined \$22.8 million, with contracts going to RTI and an education entity in Netherlands that runs the test internationally. See here: “Contract Summary: 91990021F0001,” USASpending.gov, accessed November 21, 2025, https://www.usaspending.gov/award/CONT_AWD_91990021F0001_9100_GS00Q14OADU217_4732; and “Contract Summary: 91990025C0106,” USASpending.gov, accessed November 21, 2025, https://www.usaspending.gov/award/CONT_AWD_91990025C0106_9100_-NONE_-NONE-. Participation in PISA, PIRLS and PIACC is covered under one contract for \$42.1 million. See “Contract Summary: 91990019F0025,” USASpending.gov, accessed November 21, 2025, https://www.usaspending.gov/award/CONT_AWD_91990019F0025_9100_GS00Q14OADU223_4732.

It is not out of the realm to suggest that NCES consider participation in one international assessment at regular intervals (as opposed to 3-5) for benchmarking purposes. It might also consider alternating its participation to another international test in subsequent years.

²¹ Formal names: Common Core of Data (CCD); Common Core of Data – National Public Education Financial Survey (CCD-Fiscal); Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS); Current Population Survey (CPS); Private School Survey (PSS); Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates Files (EDGE Files).

a major focus for IES’s postsecondary education data collections. Given the recent coordination between ED and the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), they urged IES to update its current postsecondary collections to include workforce training programs offered by colleges and universities. Others remarked that reporting for the K-12 school finance survey is not consistent, with some states adhering to the latest accounting standards and others not. NCES and Census could streamline state reporting by adopting the most recent Generally Accepted Accounting Procedures and including state-published reports as recommended by the Government Accounting Standards Board.²²

This soup-to-nuts review should also ensure that the data collected in NCES addresses the knowledge gaps in the high-priority areas identified by IES for focused attention across the centers.

Prior to March 2025, IES ran four longitudinal studies: The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Class (ECLS-K:2024); High School & Beyond (HS&B); High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (HSL:09); and Beginning Postsecondary Longitudinal Study (BPS). In addition, NCES partnered with the National Science Foundation to pilot the National Training, Education, & Workforce Survey (NTEWS). Again, ESRA gives broad latitude for IES to conduct “longitudinal and special data collections necessary to report on the condition and progress of education,” but no particular requirements. Once more, each of these longitudinal studies has its advantages, but it’s also true that some have similar, overlapping purposes (e.g., the two high school collections) and others collect data from up to five different respondents on similar topics, which is likely excessive. Further, methodologists have questioned whether a repeated cross-sectional design (such as that used in the Current Population Survey)²³ or standing up one “super panel” with various cohort types would be more efficient than tracking three or four separate panels of the same students over time—while still meeting the end goals.

“The longitudinal studies are the main source of knowledge of trends and status in US education. They provide information on changes and give us tracking ability.”
 ~ Education researcher

²² Stakeholders also reported that NCES data collections are lacking when it comes to data on earnings and debt, time to degree, student transfers, and job placement rates.

²³ The Repeated Sectional (RCS) design in the Current Population Survey involves the administration of the same or similar questions to a new sample of respondents at successive time points (typically monthly). This design allows researchers to analyze aggregate trends over time without the costs of tracking individual-level changes. Each survey represents an independent cross section, enabling analysis of how the distribution of characteristics changes over time. The RCS design tracks trends and establishes casual inferences by maintaining both the representativeness and comparability of samples.

To state the obvious, tracking individuals over time can be quite costly compared to administrative data collections. For instance, according to public data on [USAspending.gov](https://www.usaspending.gov), recent costs for two longitudinal and two administrative datasets are as follows:

Longitudinal (both cancelled):

The High School and Beyond Longitudinal Survey 2022 follows a nationally representative cohort of Fall 2022 9th graders as they complete high school and into their postsecondary years. The first follow-up was planned for the 2025-2026 school year, which would have been the students' senior year. The current award amount for the base year and first year follow-up was \$48.0 million.²⁴

The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study 2024 tracks the kindergarten class of 2023-2024 and was to have followed their progress until they reach 5th grade in 2028. The current award amount was \$46.6 million.²⁵

Highly utilized administrative datasets (active):

The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) 2022-2027 award is \$42.8M.²⁶

The Non-Fiscal Common Core of Data (CCD) 2019-2024 award is \$6.5 million.²⁷

Understanding the costs and benefits of each data collection allows us to better discuss trade-offs and explore alternative approaches to collecting what we value. To that end, all contract costs should be added to the IES website and placed in a prominent location, ensuring they are easy to find.

Problem: Existing data sharing agreements between NCES and states vary greatly in their terms, scope, and data elements covered, which can lead to inefficiencies and confusion between data providers and NCES, especially when agreements must be negotiated repeatedly.

Recommendation: Develop standardized data-sharing agreements with SEAs and LEAs.

²⁴ This grant was originally known as HS&B:20 but was delayed until the 2022-23 school year due to Covid-19. "Contract Summary: 91990018F0018." [USAspending.gov](https://www.usaspending.gov), accessed November 21, 2025, https://www.usaspending.gov/award/CONT_AWD_91990018F0018_9100_GS00Q14OADU217_4732.

²⁵ "Contract Summary: 91990019C0002," [USAspending.gov](https://www.usaspending.gov), accessed November 21, 2025, https://www.usaspending.gov/award/CONT_AWD_91990019C0002_9100_-NONE_-NONE-.

²⁶ "Contract Summary: 91990022F0021," [USAspending.gov](https://www.usaspending.gov), accessed November 21, 2025, https://www.usaspending.gov/award/CONT_AWD_91990022F0021_9100_GS00Q14OADU217_4732.

²⁷ "Contract Summary: 91990019F0355," [USAspending.gov](https://www.usaspending.gov), accessed November 21, 2025, https://www.usaspending.gov/award/CONT_AWD_91990019F0355_9100_91990019A0008_9100.

IES should develop reusable, standardized data-sharing agreements with SEAs and LEAs, modeling them on successful federal-state systems²⁸ to enable the flow of linkable data. They might also pilot “value-exchange” incentives, such as providing technical assistance or analytic services back to SEAs and LEAs to encourage their participation in data-sharing partnerships.

Problem: The current state of data collection and reporting across states and agencies is highly fragmented. Without standardized definitions and structures, the data gathered from different sources are difficult to compare and integrate, reducing their capacity to inform policy and practice.

Recommendation: NCES should ensure that data are consistently structured and have standardized definitions.

Related to the above, NCES should continue support of common data standards, including open-sourced CEDS (Common Education Data Standards), which support exchange and comparison of data within and across states and agencies. NCES funds and facilitates the collaborative group that works to maintain and enhance the use of CEDS.

By aligning data elements to CEDS, states can take advantage of tools developed in other CEDS-aligned states. For example, several CEDS-aligned states have partnered to build reports and data dashboards to support IDEA compliance efforts. Those dashboards are effectively “plug-and-play” for any CEDS-aligned state since all of them are using the same data field names and data definitions. With common data standards, states can avoid reinventing the wheel for their own systems. (Much of the EdFacts data collection is already expressed in CEDS terms.) Still, additional frameworks related to regulatory, governance, and technical interoperability must work in tandem with common standards and definitions.

Despite the strong case for CEDS use, the accompanying CEDS software is not meeting the demands of what current technology can do, especially in a cloud-enabled environment. NCES should consider transferring CEDS to another entity that can modernize the software, via a competitive contract opportunity, with input from the existing CEDS partnership.

“The technology was built for a world that wasn’t cloud-enabled. It is very hard to use the CEDS software.” ~ Education data analyst

²⁸ The National Vital Statistics System is one long-established partnership where states collect birth, death and marriage records using standardized agreements and reporting protocols to the National Center for Health Statistics at HHS.

Other common language frameworks exist that standardize data elements for interventions, complementing CEDS. For instance, the Blueprint for Inclusive Research and Development in Education (BIRD-E) is an open-source document that standardizes key data elements such as population type, family and community background, and implementation supports.

A couple of other potential advantages to common data elements: 1) IES might consider requiring that grantees express research questions in CEDS so that similar outcomes might be more easily compared across studies; 2) Their use in NCES data collections could inform impact evaluations conducted by NCER and NCSER grantees.

Problem: NCES’s methods of disseminating data have not kept pace with evolving technologies, making it more difficult than needed for policymakers and researchers to access data they can use for improvement.

Recommendation: Utilize APIs to improve data accessibility.

NCES should make its data more easily accessible by developing new or expanding existing application programming interfaces (APIs), which are protocols that allow different software programs to communicate and interact within certain boundaries (e.g., “summarize all literacy interventions for grades 3-5 with positive effects”).

Stakeholders bemoaned that the current process of downloading and building data sets to answer key questions often involves drawing on information from multiple sources within ED, including files from Federal Student Aid (FSA), the College Scorecard, and IPEDS. If users were able to instead identify variables of interest across these sources through an API or other shared interface, the process would be considerably streamlined. Critically, this change would ensure that data linkages across institution-level data from FSA and IPEDS would be readily accessible, given the different identifiers these data sources currently use. An API that harmonizes these varied sources would assure policymakers, researchers, and the public that linked datasets were accurately merged. (The College Scorecard already maintains an API that could serve as a baseline for these combined data.)

“Setting up an API would be a dream as it would give immediate access to data as the systems speak to one another without human interaction.”

~ Education researcher

Expanding usability also means preparing government data for safe use in AI. Artificial intelligence experts, for example, recommend that government data be both machine-readable and machine-understandable. Machine-readable means publishing in formats that AI systems

can read, while machine-understandable means publishing documentation and metadata to provide AI systems with the context needed to *interpret* government data. In line with the recent guidance published on AI.gov, federal agencies are encouraged to create, curate, and publish their own AI evaluation datasets for use by the public. For example, the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) repository is already machine-readable with API access, but apparently not machine-understandable. It would benefit users if ERIC was equipped to parse queries, fetch results, and summarize responses.

Less intensive recommendations to enhance the usability of NCES data collections include the development of more user-friendly data tools for interaction and continuation of support for non-technical audiences.

Finally, researchers would benefit from an online space to share and access open data resources. One suggestion was the development of an online portal where they could share analysis approaches, measurement tools, and other sources of useful information, fostering collaboration and synergy among various research teams and grantees.²⁹

Problem: Currently, IES products are often out-of-date upon release, diminishing their utility for practitioners and policymakers.

NCES acknowledges the necessity for more prompt data dissemination. They have made improvements in recent years, such as releasing data files³⁰ prior to the completion of associated reports and issuing “First Look” reports, which provide initial summaries from major education studies and data collections.

Recommendation: Increase the speed at which data are collected, vetted, and shared.

IES could hold itself even more accountable by publishing various preliminary data files on a predictable, public schedule. But that doesn’t solve the underlying issues that may be driving delays. Stakeholders expressed concerns about the extensive time required for data validation against statistical standards, in addition to the report reviews conducted by IES. The process of communicating with states to correct and resubmit data, as well as handling various submission formats, further contributes to delays. A few suggestions:

²⁹This is related to but not the same as the IES requirement that principal investigators provide study data and documentation in a shared repository. That requirement allows researchers to upload materials to any number of existing data repositories. The current suggestion calls for one shared space.

³⁰ The higher education accreditation community, in particular, would appreciate an expanded release of provisional data to improve timely oversight of IHEs.

- Require a common submission form for all states;
- Automate data validation and error checking by leveraging AI-integrated institutional interfaces so that incomplete or clearly inaccurate data are immediately flagged;
- Co-craft an action plan with those providing the data to speed up delays; and
- Allow 3rd party entities to report to IES directly on behalf of institutions.

“We must do better with [data collection]. In many areas, it’s very simple measures and metrics, but still slow because of how long it takes for the data to come out.” ~ Education researcher

Regarding the last bullet, allowing third parties to report data to IES on behalf of institutions could expedite data release *and* improve accuracy. IES should establish frameworks for third-party reporting agents, including institutional consent protocols, data security, privacy standards, accounting and audit mechanisms, and so on.

NCES and SLDS Grants

Problem: Despite improvements, significant problems remain within state longitudinal data systems due to a lack of interoperability, outdated technology, and the inability to integrate AI, implementation, or other data types (audio/video files)—all of which hinder more accurate and timely decision-making.

NCES has sponsored competitive grants to develop and strengthen state longitudinal data systems (SLDS) since 2005, and these investments have served to catalyze the development of systems that once barely existed.³¹ The awards are issued as cooperative agreements, meaning that NCES maintains involvement with awardees to share knowledge, provide technical assistance, and encourage collaboration among states.

Like all IT infrastructure, SLDS needs technological upgrades, especially as these systems grow increasingly more complex and sophisticated over time.

Recommendations: Support technological investments that upgrade and modernize SLDS infrastructure and delivery mechanisms.

IES should incentivize states to modernize their SLDS infrastructure and delivery mechanisms by investing in technology upgrades. This could include integrating AI, adopting other new

³¹ SLDS grants are required in [20 U.S.C. 9607](#).

technologies, and incorporating implementation data on state and district interventions and policies. States are interested in updating their systems to accommodate Workforce Pell integration, too. Modernization efforts should also include robust data dashboards that translate the state administrative data into useful information for the public.

“With emerging AI, states could receive real-time analytic feedback. It can create a living system of continuous improvement rather than a static reporting process.” ~ Tech developer

Problem: Despite years of building their SLDS, some states have still not linked their K-12, postsecondary, and workforce sector data. As a result, policies and programs may be less effective, resources misallocated, and opportunities for improvement missed.

Recommendation: Expand the types of grantees that can receive SLDS grants.³²

Whether it is due to a lack of capacity, resources, or political will, many states still do not have a functional longitudinal data system. One theory is that, by requiring the grantee to be an SEA, it is more difficult to get the postsecondary and/or workforce sectors to come to the table. As it stands, the K-12 data systems tend to be in the best shape, likely due to SEA’s unique grantee status. It would be advantageous if Congress expanded the eligibility criteria for grantees to include other entities that inherently operate from a statewide perspective and collaborate across various sectors.

That would mean that the following could be SLDS grantees:³³

- a state educational agency;
- the office of the governor;
- a state agency, data governance body, or public sector organization designated by the governor;
- an outlying area (e.g., U.S. territory);
- or a consortium of previously listed entities.

“The core part of the problem may be that the SLDS program needs to stop being a K-12 program and become a P-20-W program.”
~ National education organization

This change in eligibility better aligns the program with states’ current efforts, which are to modernize systems to connect data from early childhood through the workforce (P–20W).

³² This change would require Congressional action.

³³ This idea was introduced in the Advancing Research in Education Act in 2023. “S.3392 – AREA Act,” Congress.gov, December 2023, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/senate-bill/3392/text>.

Problem: Many states are struggling to implement interoperable longitudinal data systems due to limitations in their current infrastructure and a lack of cross-sector collaboration. This challenge is compounded by an SLDS program that restricts the ability of states to willingly share data and resources efficiently.

Recommendation: Integrate into SLDS grants a priority that addresses interoperability among states.

Numerous states have formed multi-state collaboratives to network, collectively solve shared problems, and/or participate in shared technical assistance as they seek to modernize their data infrastructure.

Some are also working together in tech coalitions to develop federated data systems. These are structures that allow multiple independent data sources to work together as a “virtual database” without requiring data to be centralized. Each participating entity retains control and ownership of its data, while this new, virtual layer translates user queries and retrieves results from each separate source in real time, using privacy-enhancing technologies. The specific type of output (aggregated data, de-identified records, synthetic data records) depends on the negotiated data use agreements among state partners. For instance, adjacent states have joined to exchange geolocation and employment data because their populations overlap relative to where they live or work.

As it stands, SLDS grants cannot support regional compacts or multi-state applications for collaborative work, as they are individually awarded to states. Introducing a new eligibility category (per above) that includes a “consortium of previously listed entities” could allow multi-state partnerships to apply for SLDS grants, including enabling them to build the necessary software together to facilitate their collaboration. Oddly enough, ESRA Sec. 208[c][1] specifies that SLDS grants should “promot[e] linkages across states,” while protecting student privacy, which is precisely this aim ([20 U.S.C. 9607 \(c\)\(1\)](#)).

“In the last grant round, some states asked if we could work together, and we were told no. The reason given was because of accountability for the grant. It wouldn’t be pooled funds, and operating with other people would create a dependency leading to failure. Instead of seeing it as having a consolidated grant planning project with deliverables and shared responsibility.” ~ State chief information officer

The potential benefits to research stemming from interoperability among states are many. It allows for larger, more diverse study samples, which increases statistical power and the generalizability of findings. States can more easily replicate studies conducted in another state, evaluate them in their contexts, and benchmark performance against their peers. They are more likely to adopt evidence-based programs faster because they can learn from one another. Interoperable datasets also generate significant long-term cost savings once set up. For instance, investments in shared infrastructure—such as data standards and analysis tools—benefit multiple states simultaneously, plus research cycles are accelerated, which also saves money. Moreover, some states already use a federated approach to allow their districts or agencies to share data without centralizing student-level records, so they are familiar with how they work.

“One of the conditions upon state[s] receiving SLDS funds is that they will link other sector data to K-12. So that is a lot of grant money being given to states that is not being upheld.” ~ Education data advocate

NCES could assist by providing a technical toolkit that addresses aggregation and comparison of data across states, including information about data dictionaries, standardized APIs for data exchange, and data reconciliation methods to keep data synchronized.³⁴

Problem: The SLDS systems are getting increasingly more complex, and we can’t risk leaving their users and beneficiaries behind.

Recommendation: Enhance technical assistance for SLDS grantees.

Two specific types of technical assistance provided by IES were frequently cited as highly beneficial for participants. One is the assistance related to the SLDS program, known as the State Support Team (SST).³⁵ Historically, the SST has offered direct support to states in developing, using, and maintaining their data systems.

As indicated, the SLDS infrastructure needs upgrades, but so do the humans using it, particularly the skills they will need to effectively utilize more complex datasets with enhanced capabilities. State leaders also express a need for information about cross-agency data governance—due to

³⁴ Having the ability to link SLDS with federal datasets such as NAEP, IPEDS, and wage records was a recurring suggestion, but technical and legal challenges persist. More work is needed to clarify standards, protocols, and privacy compliance.

³⁵ The other is the NCES Forum (National Forum on Education Statistics) and specifically the Stats-DC annual conference which is hosted by the Forum.

political hurdles in sharing data across agencies—and for legal guidance (especially around FERPA).

Finally, training on developing secure research access protocols for SLDS (see below) would also be helpful.

Problem: Many states lack the capacity to leverage the SLDS that they painstakingly built.

Recommendation: Incentivize states to make better use of their SLDS data for both public and research purposes.

Fewer than half of states have developed public-facing dashboards that provide useful statistics for the public, such as high school GPA averages, college participation rates, employment rates by sector, and labor force participation. These dashboards and tools make SLDS data actionable for families, educators, and policymakers.

In addition, many states without internal research capacity make it difficult (knowingly or not) for external researchers to collaborate with them to identify the types of questions that states need their SLDS to address.

“Investing in state data systems without giving access to data isn’t an improvement.”
 ~ Education advocate

To help, IES can continue to allow SLDS funds for dashboard and tool development. It can also require or incentivize state applicants to provide secure, controlled researcher access to their SLDS data. For states that need more time on the latter, SLDS cooperative agreements allow IES to track their progress on authorizing data access with suitable safeguards.

Finally, IES could require grantees to acknowledge in IES-supported studies whether they accessed SLDS data and in which state(s), so that those states are publicly recognized for their cooperation.

Data Integration Among Federal Agencies

In a section calling for more useful and integrated data to drive education improvement, it seems fitting to conclude with a challenge for federal agencies to follow suit.

Numerous stakeholders expressed strong interest in NCES helping to facilitate cross-agency data alignment with the Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, and Commerce (among others) to forge connections between education data and workforce, health, and demographic records. Ideally, they wanted a cross-agency data system that collected participation and

performance outcomes for *all* federal postsecondary education and workforce development programs to better understand the “national education-to-employment ecosystem.”

That wish has been in the making for many years.

The latest serious effort is the National Secure Data Service Demonstration (NSDS-D) project, whose goal is to inform efforts “that would streamline and innovate data sharing and linking to enable decision-making at all levels of government and in all sectors.” The NSDS intends to create a national secure data platform in which each federal agency can agree to a standard application process that won’t require approved researchers to solicit permissions from each agency to access the platform. It is scheduled to launch (fingers crossed) in 2027.³⁶

³⁶ Successful precedents illustrate that cross-agency data sharing can occur, including the Post-Secondary Employment Outcomes (PSEO) project at the Census Bureau, which links education and earnings data for longitudinal analysis and Opportunity Insights, which integrates IRS, Census, and education data to study intergenerational mobility.

National Assessment of Education Progress

The National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), a nationally representative assessment of what students know and can do in core subjects, is widely viewed as the single most important activity of IES. At least since close attention began to be paid to student and school performance after *A Nation at Risk* (1983), NAEP has been the barometer most watched and most trusted by educators, researchers, and policymakers.

NAEP, first administered in 1969, is a congressionally mandated assessment administered by NCES. Its rigor, content, and integrity are overseen by the 26-member National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB) who are appointed by the Secretary of Education. Its consistent framework and methods provide a reliable measure of student achievement over time, enabling state comparisons as well as monitoring the performance of large school districts and charter schools. Frequently referred to as the “Nation’s Report Card,” it’s a major source of public accountability in K-12 education.

As NAEP has evolved, however, and expanded its mission (to test more subjects, to provide more frequent reports, to integrate technology, etc.), it has become extremely complex, and some of its practices are antiquated. It has struggled to balance the tension between maintaining its 30-plus year trendlines for reading and math and the need for innovation and cost efficiency. And with the advent of AI, the imperative to modernize it can no longer be ignored.

The National Assessment Governing Board is developing a “NextGen NAEP” process designed to modernize the assessment. Their goal is a new NAEP test that is more agile, efficient, and actionable.

Specifically, their plan seeks to:

- 1) “...maintain the integrity of NAEP assessment development, administration and reporting, and NAEP’s sterling credibility as an independent, non-partisan source of ‘truth’ while improving efficiency and cost effectiveness; and 2) generate prototypes for how advancements, including AI, can transform NAEP processes and tools, expedite development and reporting timelines, and make NAEP data and reporting more useful and actionable.”

These are wise objectives, and the recommendations below build upon them and upon a 2022 review of IES and NAEP by the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM).³⁷

Problem: Both NAEP’s external test administration platform and its internal operational infrastructure are outdated, finicky, and in desperate need of modernization.

Recommendation: Ensure that NAEP assessments can work on any platform.

The functionality of NAEP “on the ground”—i.e., in the classrooms where students take the tests—sorely needs a major upgrade. It needs to be compatible with any platform but today it works only on the customized platform created by the current NAEP vendor. Instead, the test items should function seamlessly across different devices and types of inputs (mouse, keyboard, touchpad). The tools embedded in the test need to work properly regardless of the hardware or software, including its accessibility features. These features must also function seamlessly across operating systems and secure browsers.

On the operational side, NAEP data related to test design, item development, test administration, and analysis are each held by the respective contractors. Moving to an integrated infrastructure—both internally and externally—will require systems engineering expertise, as all these platforms must continue to evolve with technology.

Problem: NAEP processes are cumbersome and inefficient. It can take up to 6 years to move from a revised content framework to actual test administration.

Recommendation: Pilot test AI strategies to determine how to improve processes and shorten timelines while maintaining privacy, accuracy, and integrity. Then implement a new system.

NAGB and NCES should bring assessment and AI experts together to research and test options for AI in all aspects of test development, administration, scoring, analysis, and reporting. The potential of AI to streamline previously laborious processes is promising. Technology experts, for instance, say it should be possible soon to submit a bank of test questions to AI, then have it 1) describe the skills being assessed; 2) tie them to an existing NAEP framework(s); 3) lay out the progression of skills; 4) identify the content gaps relative to the framework; and 5) design new items that better measure where students are and need to be.

³⁷ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *A Pragmatic Future for NAEP: Containing Costs and Updating Technologies*. The National Academies Press, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED617942.pdf>.

However, these promising advancements come with their own set of challenges. The NAEP program must not sacrifice its integrity or credibility in the process and must carefully evaluate the risks and costs associated with AI-based innovations. For example, one significant challenge is modeling item difficulty. Experts warn that without thorough field-testing, which is both costly and time-consuming, AI may struggle to accurately predict how easy or hard an item will be for real students to answer.

Problem: A lack of transparency regarding the structure of NAEP contracts and the associated costs of key tasks raises concerns about inefficiency and impedes innovation.

Recommendation: Move the NAEP contracting process under the purview of a newly constituted contracts and acquisitions management office within IES.

Under the [internal recommendations](#) in the appendix, we recommend that IES use its contracting authority to bring contracts and acquisitions management in-house. By law, IES can exercise independent contracting authority,³⁸ and it should apprise itself of the legal, operational, and political steps required to exercise that authority—and move in that direction. It should hire and train a small team of contracting experts who, because they are knowledgeable about the mission and substance of IES work—and would be embedded in the agency—could streamline the contracting process.

This change would be particularly helpful to NCES as they hold the external contracts for NAEP testing. Currently, NAGB has its own contracting authority for NAGB-specific duties—such as the development of new content frameworks—which it finds quite helpful. It allows them to research benchmarked cost estimates, investigate broader market competition, and collaborate closely with program staff to understand their needs better. If NCES (through IES) had similar authority for the NAEP contracts, significant savings would likely be realized. This is partly because the larger department's contracts and management staff are not experts in NCES's specific needs for NAEP. In a nutshell, the lack of communication and mutual understanding between the existing contracting office and NAGB/NCES staff leads to inefficient and costly contracting practices.

Moreover, there needs to be more transparency with contract costs. The National Academies correctly stated in 2022 that “NCES and NAGB should develop clear, consistent, and complete

³⁸ ESRA section 113 ([20 U.S.C. 9513](#)) says that the IES Director is delegated all functions, including contracting authority, to carry out IES functions: “*the Secretary shall delegate to the Director all functions for carrying out this subchapter.*” Also Section 171 (c): “**Grants, contracts and cooperative agreements:** In carrying out the duties for this part, the Director may award grants, enter into contracts and cooperative agreements and provide technical assistance” ([20 U.S.C. 9561\(c\)](#)).

descriptions of current spending on the major components of NAEP, including contract structure, contractual spending, and direct spending on government staff and other costs. These cost descriptions should be used to inform major decisions about the program to ensure that their long-term budgetary impact is supportable.”

As with many IES contracts, true costs are hard to track down, especially finding the related pieces from multiple subcontractors.³⁹ Compounding this challenge, long-time contractors and subcontractors have joined together in what is referred to as the “NAEP Alliance” and generally no other competent bidders enter procurement competitions. Worse, the Alliance has made its members all but indispensable due to the proprietary elements of what they have built. That said, not many outfits have the manpower necessary to pull off a nationwide assessment that requires widespread participation.⁴⁰ The current test-administration model requires trained NAEP staff and contractors from one Alliance partner to travel to schools to administer the test, which is expensive and labor-intensive (estimated by NASEM to represent 28.6 percent of NAEP’s budget).

To its credit, NAEP is transitioning to using school devices to administer the assessment and is exploring what it would take operationally and feasibly to train local school staff to proctor the exam.⁴¹ These potential savings and others would be even more telling in the light of historical costs.

Problem: NAEP testing in subjects other than reading and math are not customary—and in many subjects and grade levels, NAEP does not supply state-level data, only national.

Recommendation: If anticipated cost efficiencies are realized, savings might be used to support state-level NAEP administration in subjects beyond reading and math.

ESRA requires that reading and math be assessed in grades 4 and 8 every two years and in grade 12 at “regularly scheduled intervals.” Then, “to the extent time and resources allow,” additional assessments, including but not limited to those in history, civics, economics, and science, might also be administered.

³⁹ Case in point: NASEM included figures for annual NAEP item development (\$16.3 million) and reporting (\$17.6 million) only to have the former NCES commissioner respond that the costs were inaccurate (but supply no corrections). This was followed by a subsequent commitment to provide, for “stakeholders involved in the oversight of program resources,” a document that describes NAEP’s cost structures. To put it bluntly, the lack of public transparency fuels suspicion that the NAEP Alliance is overcharging NCES.

⁴⁰ For the 2024 NAEP national, state, and large urban district samples, roughly 235,000 fourth graders participated from 6,100 schools and 230,000 eighth graders from 5,400 schools.

⁴¹ Early feedback from the states is that local proctoring could damage voluntary participation, as well as perceptions of quality. Additional problem solving is in the works.

Among various stakeholders, there is a strong desire to test more frequently in other subjects, specifically NAEP assessments that include *state-level results* in civics, U.S. History, and science, in hopes of driving greater attention, change—and yes, shame—in states. Of course, the NAGB Board has the ultimate say in what additional subjects it may choose to test.

They will surely have to wrestle with issues of feasibility as well as cost. It's challenging to convince schools of the value of NAEP participation, and the cost of additional NAEP tests, especially those with large enough samples for state-level results, has traditionally been high.

NAGB wants to offer "less burden and more value" for states. So much so that they hope to be able to accommodate additional subjects like civics and history through new cost-saving measures and out-of-the-box solutions.

NASEM has provided NAGB and NCES with suggestions in the past. One was to administer reading and mathematics together to carve out more time for additional subjects. The NASEM authors suggested doing so would add only 30 minutes to the current time required for either the math or reading test, totaling 90 minutes,⁴² while reducing the sample size needed and administration costs. Other stakeholders have suggested extending the timeframe for administration of the reading and math tests from two to four years, but that requires Congressional action. Regardless, both ideas apparently have their critics—but the Board seems energized to find better solutions.⁴³

Problem: The way NAEP data are presented in the NAEP Data Explorer (NDE) is more cumbersome and complicated than necessary, while the state-level reports are too static.

⁴² See *A Pragmatic Future for NAEP: Containing Costs and Updating Technologies*, National Academies, p.3, <https://www.nationalacademies.org/publications/26427>: "Currently, each student takes two blocks of test questions in one subject—for example, either reading or mathematics—and is given 30 minutes to respond to each block for a total of 60 minutes. Instead, the report recommends the program should increase testing time to 90 minutes to allow time to cover two different subjects and gather more information from each sampled student."

⁴³ Some stakeholders suggested that some states might be interested in piloting a handful of NAEP items on their state assessments. That is intriguing but extremely complicated and requires much more deliberation than can be provided here. These comparisons might provide compelling evidence for state leaders to enact policy changes, as is now happening in many places in reading. On the technical side, the larger sample size would improve the reliability of the results by increasing statistical power. Nevertheless, the political implications of even a voluntary pilot involving a few states cannot be underestimated, particularly because participation in NAEP is a federal mandate in reading and math. The risk is that it will be perceived as the federal government requiring states to change their state tests to include specific content.

Recommendation: Enhance the functionality and user experience of the NDE and the data visualization capabilities of the state-level reports.

Complaints suggest NDE lacks the intuitive navigation, responsiveness, and interactive visualizations common in other data tools. The NDE is built for researchers, not policymakers or the public, but they aren't happy with it either. They would like to be able to simultaneously filter by several variable types—such as performance by region, gender, race, and school type—and view interactions between them. The general public, on the other hand, needs simplified, interactive dashboards that display trends, comparisons, and insights clearly and concisely. Essentially, we need tailored presentations of the data to cater to different audiences.

“While I have used the NAEP Data Explorer (NDE) for years, it has always been terribly unfriendly and difficult. ...If we want NAEP data to be widely and validly used, the NDE must be revamped.” ~ Former NAGB member

It makes sense to integrate these tools directly into the report card rather than hosting them on a separate website. Additionally, the data should be better optimized for AI-powered search systems, enabling easier querying by users. Improving the [NAEP Data Service API](#) would facilitate accessibility by allowing more user-friendly integration and linkage of NAEP data.

*“If NAEP is not linked and made interoperable, AI will do it, with potentially serious reporting challenges to the reliability, validity and accuracy of NAEP results and what they mean.”
~ Former NAGB member*

Similarly, there's plenty of room to improve the visual presentation of state-level NAEP reports. NCES provides state-level reports that summarize student performance across subjects and grade levels. The [Data Tools](#) section shows results over time, key finding statements, scoring gaps by states, and state demographics, among other elements.⁴⁴

The available resources, however, could be improved by better data visualizations and dashboards that allow users to explore trends and subgroup performance more dynamically, including filters for states, years, and demographics. One can imagine, for instance, stacked bar

⁴⁴ The NAEP reports also include “Experiences and Opportunities in Education” which provide “contextual information about whether students have access to the necessary resources, support systems, and conditions to acquire knowledge, skills, and experiences aligned with educational goals.” This information is culled from the [student, teacher, and school questionnaires](#). A few stakeholders suggested that NAEP profiles also report in this section data on family structure, which is already collected, albeit awkwardly. The current question asks students if they live with two parents, single mother, single father, stepfamily, foster family, etc. There is also interest in refreshing the various background questionnaires to capture data on use of AI, screen time, and other present-day concerns.

charts for side-by-side comparisons of proficiency levels by states that are overlaid with national averages; heat maps displaying performance by state and subgroups that reveal geographic and demographic patterns; and scatterplots that juxtapose NAEP scores against state spending or other metrics to uncover potential correlations.

Problem: States could use more help in disseminating NAEP results in ways that resonate with parents, educators, and the public.

Recommendation: NAGB should ensure that its communication with stakeholders is more actionable.

NAGB could provide states with customizable templates for reporting their NAEP results to district leaders, educators, and families. These templates might include talking points explaining what NAEP is, why it is important, and how NAEP might be used to support “gold standard” benchmarking. These resources might also include links to other IES resources, such as WWC practice guides. Furthermore, NAGB might consider enlisting State NAEP coordinators or NAEP’s State Policy Task Force to help amplify NAEP’s impact.

*“NAEP results, especially the ones which disappoint, have a remarkable ability to capture public and political attention, thereby drawing serious discussion to improving education.
~ Former NAGB member*

Finally, changes in the timing of NAEP report releases can improve the usability of results. Main NAEP assessments are administered between January and March, and the data are released 9 to 12 months later. However, if reports (including trend lines) could be released before the academic year begins, perhaps by mid-July, it would make it easier for states and districts to use NAEP results to advocate for needed changes.

Part III: NCER

The National Center for Education Research (NCER) has been instrumental in advancing educational research by funding studies that have provided critical insights into teaching methods, learning processes, and educational policies. These contributions have advanced significant developments in areas such as early childhood education, literacy, and STEM education. However, NCER's wide-ranging research agenda has dispersed its efforts too thinly, hindering knowledge building and data integration across studies and limiting the impact of its funded research.

Moving forward, NCER has the potential to significantly enhance its impact by streamlining its focus to a handful of high-priority educational challenges identified by the Institute of Education Sciences and informed by states and districts. By prioritizing multi-state and multi-district collaborations—as well as rapid cycle research—NCER can rigorously evaluate and refine promising interventions and policies that reflect the diverse needs of local conditions. This focused approach will foster a more cohesive strategy and leverage the strengths of each IES center to address specific aspects of identified challenges, ultimately leading to more effective solutions and better educational outcomes for America's students.⁴⁵

Making NCER's Work More Relevant

Problem: The primary issue facing NCER is its diffuse research agenda, spread thin across numerous broad topics, which makes it challenging to evaluate progress on education challenges and maximize the impact of funded research.

Recommendations: NCER should concentrate on several high-priority educational challenges identified by IES and shared by most states, which would enable the development of coherent strategies and scalable, context-sensitive solutions.

This approach involves prioritizing multi-state and multi-district collaborations to rigorously evaluate and refine promising interventions and policies, ensuring they are adaptable to diverse local conditions—and leveraging the topical overlap with statutorily-required Federal R&D Centers.

⁴⁵ Both NCER and NCSER are research centers and therefore, many of the recommendations in this section also apply to NCSER. The NCSER section includes a listing of these shared recommendations and refers readers back to this section for additional detail.

Below are 3 specific recommendations to address the problem:

Recommendation A: Focus NCER grantmaking on IES’s 3-5 high-priority areas.

Rather than spreading resources across countless disconnected projects, IES should focus on the most urgent educational challenges (e.g., in reading, mathematics, college/career pathways, and CTE) that most states have in common. Informed by various publicly available state education documents, this list should encompass no more than five pressing academic challenges that the nation’s students are struggling with, and that would best prepare them for post-secondary and workforce success.⁴⁶

In recent years, NCER has allowed grantees under its Education Research Grants Program to submit applications under roughly a dozen broad topics. This wide-ranging approach has led to a scattered research agenda, as efforts are spread across many areas without a coherent strategy. Consequently, there has been little opportunity to integrate related findings and data across IES centers to leverage collective insights. Without a unified focus, it becomes nearly impossible to set measurable goals as an education community, evaluate overall progress towards them, and ultimately maximize the impact of funded research and data collection projects.

But with just a handful of critical research topics, imagine how each could be adapted to the mission of each IES center. For example, if early literacy is an identified challenge: NCES would query its various data collections to report useful information about the status of early literacy in the United States, including variation across states and districts and among key student subgroups;

NCER would support rigorous experimental studies on early literacy programs and policies; NCSER would study literacy interventions tailored for students with disabilities; and NCEE would provide both technical assistance to states and districts on existing evidence-based practices and evaluate the implementation and impact of new early literacy programs at scale—including those supported by NCER and NCSER-funded research. IES staff would publish the takeaways of

*“We need a national grant-making structure that translates state learning goals into IES national research goals.” ~
Education Researcher*

⁴⁶ NCER and its National Research and Development Centers are given a wide range of topics and priority areas to cover in ESRA (see [20 U.S.C. 9533\(c\)\(2\)](#)). However, it need not examine all of these areas at once. Furthermore, a portion of its total grantmaking (perhaps 20 percent) can be focused on unsolicited grants and/or rapid turnaround projects that address the priorities in ESRA section 133, while the rest of the portfolio can address the 3-5 high-priority areas.

its collective insights in multiple outlets via simple graphics and online interactive elements, rather than a traditional PDF report.⁴⁷

Recommendation B: NCER should prioritize multi-state and multi-district awards to help scale the most promising interventions, resources, and policies.

Scaling successful educational initiatives across diverse contexts is inherently difficult, in part because it is rarely possible to cleanly isolate the specific elements of an intervention that drive its success. Local conditions—ranging from available resources and staffing patterns to student demographics and teacher expectations—interact with an intervention in complex ways, making straightforward replication unrealistic. Yet these challenges are exactly why examining the same intervention across different contexts is so valuable: doing so reveals how contextual factors shape implementation and outcomes and helps distinguish which components are essential and which can be adapted.

To thread this needle, NCER should encourage states and districts to collaborate in rigorously evaluating promising interventions and policies across a range of real-world settings. This collaborative approach uses variation as an asset: by studying how an intervention functions under different conditions, researchers can iteratively refine the theory of action, identify core components that must remain intact, and determine where flexible adaptation is appropriate. As opposed to isolated, one-off research projects, this approach supports learning teams who can build toward scalable, context-sensitive solutions. All that said, this intent-to-scale strategy would likely mean fewer but larger total awards per relevant competition.

“[IES should] allow [states] to partner with who we want to, to do the research we need and tie it into our state learning agenda.” ~ State chief

Multi-state or multi-district collaboratives would ideally apply as a team of educational leaders and researchers, with support from technology and non-profit partners as needed. After identifying their high-priority area, states and districts would work with research partners to define the specific questions and priorities that reflect their unique policy contexts and challenges relative to that priority.

In addition to universities, eligible entities for NCER grants include LEAs, SEAs, non-profits, for-profits, and school boards, provided they meet the program's eligibility and administrative requirements to responsibly manage the funds. District and state leaders believe that serving as

⁴⁷ IES should develop measurable, national research goals based on this handful of priorities and task the “Hub” (see Part III: NCEE) with routinely reporting on the progress of those goals (based on the work of IES-funded projects) through user-friendly infographics and dashboards.

the fiscal agent would help ensure the relevance of the research to them and prioritize their full participation, though they have rarely served in that role.

Additionally, we propose that the Education Innovation and Research (EIR) program, which is currently overseen by the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE), be transferred to IES through a reorganization. The EIR program funds innovative, evidence-based projects aimed at improving outcomes for high-need students. It operates as a three-tiered competition (early-phase, mid-phase, expansion-phase) where funding levels correspond to the strength of prior evidence. This approach aligns with the goals of the IES's Accelerate, Transform, Scale (ATS) program, focusing on building and scaling promising interventions, and would be a valuable addition to NCER's portfolio.

Building tools and technology platforms to support robust R&D in SEAs and LEAs requires rethinking how IES supports the development of state longitudinal data systems (as mandated in [20 U.S.C. 9543 \(a\)\(4-5\)](#)), so that system-wide impacts can be measured, scaled, and integrated. (See more in "[NCES and SLDS Grants](#)").

Recommendation C: Align Federal Research & Development Centers with High-Need Areas, as feasible.

NCER is statutorily required to "support not less than 8 national research and development centers" ([20 U.S.C. 9533 \(a\)\(11\) \(c\)](#)). They are to address one of eleven broad topics,⁴⁸ but each can also be assigned "additional topics of research consistent with the mission and priorities of the Institute and [NCER]." Given their mandate to "address areas of national need," it makes sense that some research topics may overlap with the high-need topics to be identified by IES. To the extent that they do not overlap, consistent with above, they can be assigned additional topics of research.

"I don't trust vendors and don't want to listen to them." ~ District superintendent

The R&D Centers have significant flexibility under ESRA to conduct "scientifically valid research," in keeping with the broader mission of NCER. Nonetheless, they are specifically mandated to include research and development "in educational technology areas." Many practitioner- and tech-affiliated stakeholders noted the plethora of new educationally focused digital tools, primarily AI-driven, that remain largely unevaluated.

⁴⁸ They include adult literacy; assessment and accountability; early childhood; English language learners; improving low achieving schools; innovation in education reform; state and local policy; postsecondary; rural education; teacher quality; reading and literacy.

Consequently, one of the eight R&D Centers could address an unmet need by developing a taxonomy of tech tools and resources used in K-12, postsecondary, and workforce settings. This center would research the best methods for assessing the quality and effectiveness of these diverse tools and resources.⁴⁹ Its tool taxonomy might categorize aspects such as primary functionality (e.g., personalized learning, tutoring, automated grading, lesson planning), type of AI technology, educational level, and implementation factors (e.g., educator preparedness, data governance needs, legal requirements).

“So many technology tools are being sold with no evidence on the tool.”
~ Research professor

As for evaluating quality and effectiveness, the WWC criteria would serve as a useful starting point, although they would need to be supplemented and tailored to account for other relevant areas, such as cost-effectiveness, alignment with existing student and teacher goals, technical reliability, and compatibility with current learning management, student information, and open resource systems.

The aim is to establish empirical standards for what constitutes high-quality evidence for educational tools and resources that can be used to 1) evaluate existing products; 2) design and test improved products; 3) inform funding decisions using these standards.⁵⁰

All 8 of the R&D Centers would also be charged with communicating with the Hub (see [Part IV: NCEE](#)) to ensure that what they are learning is broadly disseminated across states.

Problem: Virtually no one thinks that the results of IES research are being communicated in ways that work for practitioners.

What’s more, a nontrivial number of stakeholders say it is not within IES's capacity to solve the “last mile” challenge. Given that IES's core functions and strengths lie in comprehensive data collections and rigorous studies, they say it is not ideally suited to convert research evidence into actionable policy or practice, except in limited cases where it has already demonstrated

⁴⁹ Other organizations are also operating in the AI space but not doing evaluative standards work. For instance, IES funded four R&D centers through its Using Generative Artificial Intelligence to Augment Teaching and Learning in Classrooms (U-GAIN). Those centers fund tools to support middle school STEM education; teachers’ math and science lesson planning; elementary school reading comprehension; and personalized literacy supports in grades K-2. Digital Promise awards certifications for products with lower evidentiary claims, including Tier 3 (“promising evidence”) or Tier 4 (“evidence that demonstrates a rationale”). The National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), the Consortium for School Networking (CoSN), and the Council of Great City Schools (CGCS), are working on AI standards relative to managing risks or policies around procurement, privacy, etc.

⁵⁰State chiefs were particularly interested in including standards such as these in their RFPs for vendors to respond to.

success, such as the WWC practice guides (see [The What Works Clearinghouse](#)). We think there is a middle ground and offer several improvements below.

Recommendation: Require key findings to be reported in user-friendly formats.

Grantees should be *required* to report key findings in one or more user-friendly formats, such as policy briefs, one-pagers, interactive figures, short videos, and infographics. Grantees should also be required to present results directly to their intended audience by, for instance, participating in podcasts and webinars popular with educators and writing practitioner-oriented articles, blog posts, and opinion pieces. Additionally, grantees should be encouraged to collaborate with practitioner groups, non-profits, educational advocacy organizations, or leadership groups that already maintain close relationships with states and districts. These connections can help enhance collaboration and ensure that evidence-based information is shared in ways that are relevant and impactful.

“The ‘last mile’ challenge is not within IES’s capacity to resolve. Recipients of evidence have to want it and be ready to make use of it. What IES can do is make sure that its research is easily found by people looking for evidence.”

~ Education policy expert

Currently, applicants to the Education Research Grants Program (the flagship competition) must describe:

- How input from stakeholders has informed the development of their application.
- How, if funded, they intend to further engage stakeholders in the research process and in the dissemination of results.
- Their history of implementing similar engagement and dissemination strategies, if any.

These are sensible requirements but need to go further.

On the topic of “dissemination,” nearly everyone agreed that teachers were a tough group to reach and that we couldn't expect them to come to us. In fact, veterans of research-to-practice partnerships wanted to ban the “d” word and replace it with “engagement,” which implied a two-way street: Practitioners and researchers co-developing and co-producing knowledge in a collaborative “roll up your sleeves” model where rigorous research focuses on solving persistent “problems of practice.” This close, long-term cooperation builds trust over time and

“We have informally banned the word ‘disseminate’ as it implies a one-way transferring of knowledge. If research is not relevant, not delivered on time, and not part of the routine, then who cares?”

~ National education network leader

prioritizes usable, relevant, and timely information for practitioners, enhancing better application of findings in classrooms.

Of course, that's not always feasible, and there were other suggestions for making research useful to practitioners. These included embedding evidence into existing routines and tools used by educators, such as learning management systems (Google Classroom, Canvas), state standards, curriculum materials, and other instructional resources. The intent is that evidence not be an add-on but thoughtfully integrated into systems that teachers are already accustomed to using.

It was generally agreed that user-friendly policy briefs and other accessible formats and tools are quite useful for lay audiences, as is emphasizing the practical implications of research in mass media and educator-oriented magazines. Research jargon can be challenging for many, but summaries of key takeaways and short descriptions of how results may apply to teachers and students are valuable. Interactive figures, short videos, and infographics are useful, too, as is presenting results where the intended audience gathers, such as teacher podcasts and webinars.

Unfortunately, grantees often lack relationships with practitioner or policy groups to collaborate and share information, so they should consider applying with partners who do. It makes sense to work through intermediaries or trusted third parties who already work closely with states and districts, including advocacy organizations and non-profits. These parties might also partner with researchers to co-author practitioner-facing materials to strengthen relevance and applicability.

To ensure that dissemination activities are taken seriously, NCER grant payments should be tied to specific dissemination deliverables that grantees have committed to.

Grantmaking in NCER

Problem: Relying on a single annual grant competition for the flagship research program is problematic for several reasons: 1) it can take up to 10 months to be funded after applying, which can cause researchers to lose their state and district partners who were ready to start at application time; 2) applicants must wait an entire year to reapply if they narrowly miss the mark; and 3) it creates a bottleneck, resulting in longer review times and further delaying the start of accepted projects.

"[S]tates don't want to wait for us to write a proposal next summer to get money the following summer to potentially study something the following summer. They want information now." ~ Education researcher

Recommendations: Streamline the grantmaking application process.

IES can streamline grantmaking application processes by piloting two innovations: 1) implement two-stage, binding submissions to reduce upfront burden and accelerate decision-making; and 2) accept grant applications multiple times during the year.

Two-stage submissions: NCER currently uses an optional Letter of Intent (LOI) vehicle that is non-binding, which serves as an opportunity for NCER program officers to discuss project plans with applicants designed to improve the quality of their full proposal.⁵¹ While applicants appreciate the opportunity to speak with NCER, these conversations do not guarantee that a proposal will be funded. And when applicants are rejected, they must wait a full year to resubmit an application at the next annual invitation.

“The concern with grantmaking is how long it takes and how after a few years, people from districts move on from the questions they had.”
~ Education researcher

Replacing the optional Letter of Intent (LOI) with a binding pre-proposal or prospectus, like those used by many educational foundations, would enable NCER staff to better identify research projects that are the best fit for any given competition and reduce the time that applicants spend on full proposals. This change would reduce the costs and time at IES associated with bringing every compliant proposal through the peer review process. It would also reduce opportunity costs for applicants as it takes significant time and burden, for instance, to calculate the time spent on research tasks and/or activities. Researchers would benefit by deferring detailed budget calculations and administrative tasks until they are invited to submit a full proposal, saving them hours of upfront effort.

Alas, as the report was being finalized, we learned that the Office of General Counsel (OGC) previously advised IES that they could not legally require binding LOIs for a grant competition. In their legal opinion, it effectively discourages any eligible applicant from applying to a competition. All we can say is that it would be helpful if this were not the case.

Incidentally, unsolicited applications are able to go through a streamlined two-stage process since they are not part of a competition: first is the submittal of a short prospectus detailing the problem, project, and potential contribution, as well as why it falls outside existing competitions. The prospectus is referred to two research centers within IES, both of which must submit “go forward” votes before the applicant is asked to submit a full proposal that moves to peer review. It is this “binding” aspect of the prospectus that is recommended for all grant competitions.

⁵¹ Small Business in Innovation Research (SBIR) in IES, some NSF grants, and some USDA grant competitions mandate an LOI.

Multiple grantmaking windows: NCER runs its major grantmaking competitions annually, but more frequent opportunities (2-3 times) could make for more consistent and efficient operations, in part due to fewer proposals to review each time. Given the risk of dwindling funds later in the year, applicants might simply be advised to submit at earlier junctures “for best consideration” and/or given the opportunity to have their proposal automatically rolled forward to the next window if funding runs out. NCER might experiment with multiple submissions (or even rolling submissions) with one of the smaller competitions and gather field input for continued improvements. Implementing multiple submission windows could enhance the quality of studies by allowing proposals that peer reviewers deem to need only slight modifications a two-week resubmission option. This change would require that peer reviewers be called to serve at different intervals throughout the year (more on Peer Review in [Appendix B](#)).

“The annual cycle once a year for grant reviews is limiting and makes it hard to make revisions and keep research moving. You submit a grant, and review takes up to a year...”
 ~ Education researcher

Recommendation: Carve out room for a variety of smaller, mid-size, and large grant awards with varying timelines and commensurate grant requirements.

In a similar vein, adopting a more flexible approach to grantmaking with rolling submissions and multiple review windows would create opportunities for grants of various sizes and corresponding requirements. Essentially, smaller grants should have shorter application processes and quicker award times. Here is a suggested framework:

- Rapid cycle grants: Up to 1 year and \$250K-\$500K, aimed at pilot studies, iterative prototype or intervention testing, and initial data collection. Application: Maximum 5-8 page project narrative. Award window: 6-8 weeks.
- Mid-size grants: 2-3 years and \$500K-\$3M, designed to generate credible evidence on specific questions. Application: Maximum 8-10 page project narrative. Award window: 3-5 months.
- Large grants: 4-6 years and \$3M-\$6M, intended to produce generalizable findings on comprehensive outcomes. Application: Maximum 12-15 page project narrative. Award window: 6-8 months.

“We need to make the research cycles shorter.”
 ~ District official

It also makes sense to welcome applications with budgets ranging from \$100K to \$249K for a time period up to three years, as researchers work under varying conditions that can facilitate efficiencies.

Problem: Some funded projects, outside of those intended for foundational or methodological research competitions, are still too theoretical or tangential in nature to merit investment.

Recommendation: Prioritize practical significance.

IES should revise the “Significance” criteria in research applications so that it prioritizes the practical significance of the research,⁵² including the potential to augment student outcomes, over and above the existing “theoretical and empirical rationale.”

Grant applicants in most NCER competitions are told that, “Strong applications will address a significant challenge in education and provide a compelling theoretical, empirical, and practical rationale for the new program, practice, or policy.” Given the NCER focus on applied science, the practical rationale should be elevated over its theoretical and empirical roots as opposed to considering each equally.

Similarly, reviewers evaluate both the scientific rigor and practical significance of proposed research—both of which are obviously key. However, even if research is suitably rigorous, it can nonetheless address a question that few practitioners or policymakers care about. Hence, NCER might also consider including “practical significance” as a required element in a binding prospectus (see [Grantmaking in NCER](#)) so that it functions as a “must have” before an invitation to submit a full proposal.

In research terms, this recommendation simply translates to, “Weight external validity (do the results matter in practice?) higher than internal validity (is the research rigorous?).”

Problem: Even when gold standard study designs demonstrate strong impact, we know too little about why they work and under what conditions.

Recommendation: Continue to fund implementation studies as part of impact projects.

When robust, randomized control and quasi-experimental designs result in strong positive findings, the natural follow-up question is why? Thankfully, impact studies in NCER and NCSER already require an implementation study to be included as part of the initial application.

Implementation studies explore how the intervention, policy, or program was delivered, factors that help or hinder its delivery, the resources and support needed to ensure fidelity of implementation, and how the educational context influences implementation.

⁵² Other federal agencies include a similar requirement in grant applications known as a “broader impacts” criterion.

Problem: Extending, replicating, or learning from other studies is much harder when the location of the shared data is not widely known.

Recommendation: Communicate more openly about data sharing repositories.

Data sharing in shared repositories has been a requirement for IES-funded research since 2012, per the ED Public Access to Research Policy. The issue is that the whereabouts of the study data and documentation are not directly communicated nor easily found. Researchers can send their data and materials to one of many existing data repositories or make the information available on university, state education agency, or school district websites.

“[We need] studies that build on each other rather than starting from scratch.” ~ Professor of cognitive science

Given the wide array of options, NCER and NCSER should devise a process by which the whereabouts of project data, code, and analytic models can be transparently and routinely communicated. This would allow future projects to extend and/or replicate findings. Linking studies through common data standards and interoperability frameworks would also enable the education research community to deepen and expand shared knowledge about a mutual topic. Breaking down data silos is key to connecting the dots between related research studies.

Research Methods Grants

Problem: The education community does not have a clear hold on how AI will impact education research.

Recommendation: NCER should consider a call for Research and Methodology grants to investigate how AI can transform the research and development process itself.

Some scholars are using AI in secure data environments to help clean their data sets, perform initial analysis, and identify data patterns. After reviewing the results, many are pleased with AI's capabilities. AI also shows significant promise in creating “synthetic” datasets to simulate learning processes, model the effects of educational interventions, and speed up progress in the field of learning science. Nevertheless, rigorous research is essential to ensure that AI can accurately represent real-life classroom scenarios and assist in various phases of the research process faithfully while maintaining privacy standards.

Problem: Large national surveys often lack the power to produce reliable small-area or subgroup estimates needed by states and districts for local planning. This lack of granular information limits the ability of decision-makers to take targeted actions for improvement.

Recommendation: A repeated suggestion was for NCER to develop expertise in combining survey data with complementary sources to improve predictions at more localized levels.

NCES has historically awarded grants and contract work related to methodological innovations in data production, including survey and data collection methodologies.

Developing expertise in producing estimates for smaller units of analysis is a specific need. As one stakeholder explained:

Adopt and scale the use of model-based estimation to produce more granular small-area and subgroup estimates, combining survey with complementary sources to improve timeliness. In other words, use modern statistical models to “fill in the gaps” by combining survey results with other kinds of data. This will produce more detailed and timely data about smaller groups—like specific counties, school districts, or demographic subgroups. For example, the Census Bureau uses ACS responses with administrative records like tax filings to estimate poverty rates for individual school districts even if only a few residents there were surveyed.

Rapid Cycle Research

Problem: Traditional large-scale studies, while valuable for establishing long-term effects, can take several years to produce findings. By the time results are available, the context, policies, or technologies may have shifted, limiting their usefulness for decision-makers who need timely data to inform solutions to real problems.

Furthermore, even if we could accelerate the research process, there is little motivation for product developers to create tools grounded in solid evidence because the market doesn't reward them. Since most innovations are produced in the private sector, they are typically proprietary, which significantly limits the potential for widespread research and development. This proprietary nature restricts the sharing and further advancement of new technologies and methods, as there are limited spillover R&D efforts to extend or improve upon the initial innovation.

Recommendation A: IES should continue its initial investment in rapid-cycle research that supports and helps scale cutting-edge educational tools and approaches.

Education needs evidence that keeps pace with innovation and classroom realities. Rapid-cycle research is designed to generate timely, actionable evidence through streamlined study designs that can be completed in weeks or months rather than years. The re-envisioned IES must make room for these shorter-term, high-reward projects.

Further, advancements in artificial intelligence make it an exciting time to be in the business of teaching and learning—and IES has an important role to play in developing the evidence base for AI-fueled products and other innovations.

The Accelerate, Transform, Scale Initiative in IES was originally created to support education R&D to develop scalable solutions to improve outcomes for learners. Under that umbrella, Seedlings to Scale (S2S) grants were built to invest in innovative products, policies, and processes in a focus area. Through three phases of increasing funding and time duration, S2S supports ideas as they grow from seedlings to scalable solutions.⁵³ Unlike a commercialized approach, an approach like ATS provides developers with incentives and requirements to utilize evidence and data and to work alongside practitioners to create and fine-tune their solutions.

IES should catalyze a body of evidence that can be used by commercial investors, regardless of whether the results of IES-supported rapid turnaround studies yield new products or processes. These projects could include early-stage methods such as A/B testing, smaller-scale studies, and better techniques that tailor learning to individual needs.

Rapid-cycle development projects should prioritize solving significant, real-world challenges, especially those that the market is not incentivized to solve, such as how to support innovation in rural America; address the “AI divide” in smaller, less resourced schools; implement personalized learning for students with disabilities; and support project-based learning that integrates local contexts.

“[P]rivate investment in quick turnaround research is limited. IES can fill an important gap by bringing together developers, educators, and researchers to tackle challenging problems in education with research and development that leads to innovative and scalable solutions.” ~ Education technology expert

⁵³ That said, some stakeholders say that the three-phase-award approach of S2S was itself too long and artificially segmented, which could hinder efficiency. The program could also benefit from acknowledgement that the evidence base differs vastly by topic and that we need more rapid cycle research for less-studied areas.

Recommendation B: IES should consider piloting a “rapid response” grant mechanism within IES.

The timeline for awarding rapid-cycle research grants should honor the essence of its name. Other federal programs have successfully implemented rapid funding and review cycles by issuing well-defined RFPs, requiring a succinct prospectus evaluated by peers for expedited review, and incorporating a ready-to-start implementation plan in full proposals. Incremental (or staged) funding, tied to project milestones, helps maintain momentum. As indicated, the award timeline for those working with school districts needs to be closer to 6-8 weeks versus 6-8 months.

Recommendation C: Intensify efforts to expand the pool of research and development expertise within the IES ecosystem.

By championing multidisciplinary teams comprising researchers, educators, and product developers skilled in study design, learning engineering, solution development, market readiness, and educational practice, ATS-type projects are more likely to bridge the “research-to-practice gap” that often impedes scaling. This expansion should include researchers affiliated not only with universities but also with for-profit and non-profit organizations.

IES might also consider establishing a “rotator program” inspired by NSF’s model to incorporate advanced technological, scientific, cognitive, and behavioral expertise into the institute. Visiting scientists, engineers, AI experts, and other tech developers would shape new directions within the IES-funded portfolio, provide high-quality technical assistance to interdisciplinary applicant teams, and ensure that IES programs reflect innovative ideas and state-of-the-art technical methods. These temporary program officers and directors, granted authority under the Intergovernmental Personnel Act, would maintain connections to their home organizations, returning with new insights and experiences.

Recommendation D: Continue support of digital learning platforms (DLPs) to fuel rapid-cycle research, but reconsider how they are funded.

Digital learning platforms (DLP) are web-based portals that provide educational content, tools, and resources for students and/or educators in one place (e.g., Google Classroom, Canvas, Blackboard, Coursera). IES supports five of these platforms through [SEERNet](#), providing researchers a means for rapid cycle testing of interventions based on hypotheses that make use of extensive user data from interactions, and which can often support randomized experiments to different conditions embedded within the platform’s features.

“We need rapid cycle products as defined by the field, not technology.” ~ Education researcher

Continued support of DLPs and similar efforts in this space can do much to generate scalable, valid, and replicable evidence on how online tools impact the learning process, student motivation, and various student outcomes. That said, the support of digital learning technologies vastly accelerates the research process, so NCER should support research partnerships to improve *existing* products that are already scalable and fund research projects in years 1 and 2, if teams are ready, rather than years 3-4.

Building State and Local Research Capacity

Problem: IES is statutorily required to “maintain research, evaluation, and statistics fellowships in institutions of higher education...that support graduate and postdoctoral study,”⁵⁴ ([20 U.S.C. 9579](#)). But graduate students who obtain doctoral degrees in education research are typically less likely to seek employment in state and local education agencies than graduate students who obtain master’s degrees in education. Moreover, numerous studies have found that master’s degrees in education themselves do not enhance the effectiveness of teachers,⁵⁵ who often get these degrees for the pay bump associated with them.

Recommendation: Incentivize a remake of the master’s in education degree to teach empirical knowledge and skills to help build state and local research capacity.

To enhance state and local research capacity, universities could compete, through statutorily required IES training programs, to offer new master’s degree programs in educational research (e.g., Master of Science in Educational Program Evaluation). The programs would focus on rigorous program evaluation, causal inference, and data analysis. Program renewals would be based in large part on successfully placing students in SEAs and districts.

Programs would need to demonstrate rigorous program requirements in educational evaluation, including evidence of selective admissions, strong course descriptions and syllabi, as well as a history of collaboration with state and local education agencies.⁵⁶ Students would

⁵⁴ IES will likely need to decrease the funding for existing doctoral fellowships—at least temporarily—in order to adequately jumpstart a competition to re-envision education masters’ programs with an evaluation focus.

⁵⁵ Steven Rivkin, Eric Hanushek, and John Kain, “Teachers, Schools, and Academic Achievement,” *Econometrica* 73, no. 2 (March 2005): 449, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3598793>; Dan Goldhaber and Dominic Brewer, “Why Don’t Schools and Teachers Seem to Matter?” *The Journal of Human Resources* 32, no. 3 (1997), 520, <https://doi.org/10.2307/146181>; Dan Goldhaber and Dominic Brewer, “Does Teacher Certification Matter? High School Teacher Certification Status and Student Achievement,” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 22, no. 2 (2000), 138-139, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1164392>; and Douglas Harris and Tim Sass, “Teacher training, teacher quality, and student achievement,” *Journal of Public Economics* 95, no. 7-8 (August 2011): 810-811, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2010.11.009>.

⁵⁶ Just to clarify, IES would incentivize the establishment of training programs that grant a certificate to individuals who complete the IES-funded training, but the students receive degrees from the university-designed programs.

learn about rigorous program evaluation, causal inference, basic econometrics, randomized control trials, implementation studies, and so on within the context of education programs and interventions. They might be required to conduct a light analysis of internal programs in SEAs and large districts as part of their university training.

Once placed in SEAs and large districts, they would be ambassadors for research and evaluation throughout their organizations. They would function as “translators and boundary spanners” who understand and value both research and practice and can develop relationships in both camps. They would also act as intermediaries between IES and their own education employers, facilitating the flow of evidence-based practices from IES to school districts, nonprofits, and state agencies. IES might sponsor an annual event for all current students and alumni, where they could share their experiences and successes, hear about the latest research, and develop relationships with researchers and their counterparts in other states, further enhancing the likelihood of multi-state collaboratives for research purposes. It would become a vast network, whereby IES could eventually have a direct line of relationships with thousands of educational entities.

“These evaluators [from new master’s programs] would facilitate internal research within education agencies and help build stronger bridges with external researchers.”
~ Education researcher

Part IV: NCEE

The National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (NCEE) evaluates educational programs and assesses their effectiveness (including mandated evaluations of federal programs); provides research and technical assistance services to states and districts; reviews and summarizes extant education research for practitioners and policymakers; and operates the National Library of Education and related services. But NCEE is primarily known for its oversight of the statutorily required Regional Educational Labs and the non-statutory What Works Clearinghouse, both of which are the focus of this section.⁵⁷

The Regional Educational Labs (RELs)

RELs are tasked with research, development, dissemination, and technical assistance activities as defined in [20 U.S.C. 9564](#). RELs are among the most contentious elements of the ESRA legislation, and opinions among state chiefs and practitioners reflect this division. The feedback is generally more negative than positive, with stakeholders' opinions varying significantly depending on their specific REL. A few RELs receive notably more positive feedback than others. They tend to allow states and districts to take the lead in the direction of the research (not the methods) and employ researchers who can translate findings into practical terms and aren't hesitant to provide implications for practice.

In an ideal world, many state chiefs—not surprisingly—would prefer that their portion of the REL allotment be awarded to them directly so that they could choose their own research and TA services from in-state providers they know and trust. In [Appendix C, ESRA Reauthorization](#), we discuss these ideas and others for a day when Congress might choose to consider them.⁵⁸ For now, let's improve within the system we've got.

"[Our REL has] been beneficial as they've allowed us to be in the driver's seat...It's going to be better if districts have control, so the district doesn't feel like a by-product." ~ District supervisor

⁵⁷ That said, there is debate about whether Sec 172 of ESRA, which requires IES to "award a contract for a prekindergarten through grade 12 mathematics and science teacher clearinghouse," is the mandate (or not) for WWC. [See [20 U.S.C. 9562\(a\)\(7\)](#)].

⁵⁸ For what it's worth, state chiefs also inquired whether the groups of states participating in REL regions could be reconfigured so that states could choose their region. ED could choose to engage in rulemaking to amend these geographical regions, which were set in 1988 in [34 C.F.R. § 707.2\(a\)](#) (select the PDF and see page 30793). States also wanted the flexibility to choose the REL provider that best fit their needs.

Problem: A challenge lies in the lack of clarity on the ground regarding the respective roles and purposes of the RELs and Comp Centers.

The RELs in IES and the Comprehensive Centers in OESE have overlapping but complementary roles. Although statutes give both the authority to provide technical assistance, RELs are explicitly obligated to conduct research and generate evidence, while the Comp Centers are to provide technical assistance, support compliance with federal law, and host convenings. What was intended as a beneficial overlap, however, has often turned into “turf wars” and mission creep for each.

“The two systems [RELs and CC’s] are not on the same cycle, which makes it harder to get them to work together. They have different trajectories, timelines, and priorities.”
 ~ State chief

IES awards contracts to ten statutorily required, geographically organized regional education labs, with participating states specified in [34 C.R.F. § 707.2\(a\)](#).⁵⁹ In recent years, the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE) has awarded cooperative agreements via competitive grantmaking to comprehensive centers of varying types, including those that are regionally-based (law requires at least one comprehensive center per REL region), topically-based, and most recently, a coordinating National Comprehensive Center.

The Educational Technical Assistance Act of 2002 expects RELs and CCs to collaborate. It states that “Each comprehensive center established under this section shall coordinate its activities, collaborate, and regularly exchange information with the regional educational laboratory in the region in which the center is located...” However, in practice, former REL and Comp Center staff say that incentives to cooperate are few because competition between the two leads to each perceiving the other “as coming for their grant [contract]” at the next cycle. Instead of passing along a request from a state or district partner to the other entity better qualified to execute it, they often take the task on themselves to better compete for resources, attention, and influence within the region.

“The overlap in their scopes of work means that the same vendors compete for REL contracts and Comp Center cooperative agreements. While both RELs and CCs have statutory and program requirements to share their activities with one another, the current system makes it highly likely that they will be direct competitors with strong incentives to share as little as possible with one another.” ~ Former REL employee

⁵⁹ Download the PDF link in the hyperlinked site. The information first appeared in Vol. 53, No. 157 of the Federal Register in August 1988. The ten geographic regions outlined on page 30793 are still used to this day.

Recommendations: To facilitate collaboration, three key issues need attention.

First, **IES should clarify the RELs' role** in conducting applied research to improve teaching and learning and clearly define the program's key activities, including supporting SEAs and LEAs in data analysis and utilizing high-quality research. Similarly, the Comp Centers should prioritize technical assistance, implementation support, and organizing convenings. Of course, these respective roles aren't bright lines in the sand and the two entities need to operate with a degree of flexibility.

Second, **IES and OESE should synchronize the award cycles of the RELs and Comp Centers** so that they begin and end simultaneously. Different timelines hinder alignment of mutual goals. A shared cycle would promote joint planning, shared priorities, and coordinated delivery of research and technical assistance. Program officers should also require RELs and Comp Centers to develop joint annual work plans outlining their respective roles and strategies for addressing research and TA needs in the region.

"[RELs and Comp Centers] used to be on the same cycle. So, getting them [back] on the same cycle would be great. But it would be difficult unless they are under the same agency."

~ Former REL employee

Third, to foster cooperation, **IES and OESE should bring both entities under a coordinating structure.**⁶⁰ Elsewhere

in this report, we recommend moving Comprehensive Centers from OESE to IES to further coordination, which could be handled through department reorganization.

It would also be beneficial if the Department's research and technical assistance services could be under a single coordinating structure so that the ecosystem of support the Department provides is efficient, effective, and responsive to state and local needs.

This structure, perhaps coined the National Education Research Hub (NERH), would coordinate federal research and development and technical assistance services across states. It would address a problem caused by the overlapping roles and responsibilities of the RELs and CCs, which creates a complex landscape for state chiefs and practitioners. Since both entities are authorized to provide technical assistance, but with distinctions in their primary objectives—RELs focusing on research and evidence generation, and CCs on implementation support and other technical assistance—it is not uncommon for the lines between them to blur. This ambiguity results in stakeholders sometimes not knowing which organization they are working with or benefiting from.

⁶⁰ Putting them on the same cycle will not require ESRA reauthorization.

Additionally, some states and districts have more exposure to one entity over the other, leading to inconsistencies in the types of support they receive. The Hub would help to streamline these roles, enhance clarity, and ensure that both RELs and CCs operate in a more coordinated and complementary manner.

It would be headed by a joint-advisory body of state-level representatives (LEAs, SEAs, postsecondary, workforce, practitioners)—with overlap from NBES and NCC membership for continuity, as relevant.⁶¹

Helpful to this arrangement is statutory language in ESRA that requires the IES Director to implement a plan for performance metrics in REL contracts before awards are granted. The resulting data should be compiled by IES, with the Hub’s assistance, and progress towards those metrics visualized via REL-specific pages hosted by the Hub. These metrics might also inform or become a part of IES’s national research goals. In future years, the Hub would propose adjustments to the performance framework to IES for future REL cycles, based on stakeholder feedback and emerging best practices in technical assistance.

Specifically, then, the Hub would be responsible for:

- Co-developing with IES a performance framework for ED-funded research and technical assistance—and methods for soliciting and sharing feedback from states on the services they are receiving.⁶²
- Arranging an optional window, before contract awards, in which interested entities can meet with state and district representatives from each REL region to discuss their capabilities, expertise, and experience in serving needs similar to the region; states might also choose to write support letters for their provider of preference, which could be specified as “recommended” in REL applications;
- Providing RELs and Comp Centers with IES’s focused priorities and evaluating the extent to which they are meeting them in the context of the region’s needs; including
 - Verifying that they have worked with leadership in the region to carve out their specific research questions and TA needs, as they apply to the IES priority areas;

“I think you need a national hub, and for cross-state synergies, to learn from the good RELs.”

~ Former IES leader

⁶¹ ESRA currently requires individual REL and CC boards to hold RELs and Comp Centers accountable for meeting the needs of the region. The goal would be for members of each to participate in this joint coordinating body to help with complementarity between the two. It is also possible that the National Comprehensive Center might take on these roles if the Comp Centers are reorganized at IES and contracts are renegotiated.

⁶² As indicated in [Appendix B](#), IES should pilot outcomes-based and performance-based contracting, where payment to contractors is contingent upon achieving specific results agreed upon by IES, the client, and the contractor. This approach has the potential to enhance customer satisfaction and drive higher-quality outcomes.

- Soliciting feedback from practitioners and state leaders to inform/adjust ongoing REL research agendas and sharing that feedback with the servicing RELs/CC's to ascertain alignment with evolving states' needs;
- Ensuring that REL/CC work produced on behalf of states is accomplished in a timely and effective manner;
- Sharing the high-quality and relevant work products that IES/RELs/CCs have completed on behalf of states/state collaboratives, so that each state can benefit from them; including
 - Identifying interventions, policies, and strategies that have demonstrated sufficient efficacy evidence to not only be shared but to inform future grant competitions with the aim of scaling;
 - Sponsoring joint meetings and feedback loops between RELs, Comp Centers, and state stakeholders to monitor progress, adjust priorities, and learn from the highest functioning RELs/CC's; and
- Providing data dashboards that capture progress and completion of state, state collaborative, and national IES research goals.

“States feel underserved as our REL is not very responsive to states and the current system isn’t nimble.” ~ State chief

Problem: A single state or two can dominate a REL region, overshadowing other participants. This “power play” is a result of the engagement level (or lack thereof) of the state chief and/or big district leaders, which can vary greatly between regions. In some cases, proactive state chiefs or district superintendents drive the agenda, while in others, their less responsive peers open the door for the coalition to steer the work independently. In still other cases, state and district leadership may try to be involved later in the process, leading to frustration when their REL's work does not align with their specific needs at that time.

Recommendation: Allow Flexibility in REL Providers.

IES should convey clearly that one or more states within a region can come together with a research partner(s) of their choice and compete with other potential providers to serve as their own REL provider.

Eligible applicants for REL contracts include "research organizations, institutions, agencies, higher education institutions, or partnerships among these entities, or individuals with the proven ability or capacity to carry out the described activities, including regional entities" ([20 U.S.C 9564 \(c\)](#)). For instance, state education agencies might collaborate with one or more higher education institutions in their state to compete for the REL serving their region.

"Our REL seemed kind of distant from us, which wasn't helpful. They built their own capacity, not our local or regional capacity." ~ District superintendent

Furthermore, there was a preference among some practitioners for funding partnerships rooted in their region, with local organizations holding the contracts or the grants (in the case of Comp Centers) to ensure sustainability and relevance. They felt that awarding funds to contractors in another region missed the entire point of addressing regional sustainability to conduct and learn from research. If a regional entity managed the sponsored revenue, it could funnel dollars in ways to support public agencies or nonprofits in building research capacity. Some state and district leaders strongly believed that regional partners needed representation with the RELs, as they would be there long after the out-of-town REL provider left and could facilitate and sustain research collaborations with the remaining partners.

That said, some individuals with REL experience felt that their regions didn't have qualified regional partners (at least without a supporting network), while others cared more about the expertise and capacity of the REL provider than where they were located.

"I always found the WWC to be a nice construct, but it never really informed my work. The work has to be made more actionable for practitioners." ~ Education technology leader

The What Works Clearinghouse (WWC)

Problem: The WWC has seen a decline in its user base over the years due to multiple issues. It relies heavily on the accumulation of studies, but there is little incentive for researchers—who typically want to break new ground—to conduct replication studies to build evidence for any single intervention. By design, the number of studies that meet the highest tier of evidence to be deemed most effective is significantly lower compared to those meeting the lower tiers. The WWC's intended audience includes practitioners, researchers, vendors, and parents, but understandably, it struggles to meet the diverse needs of these groups.⁶³ The resource-intensive nature of WWC's evidence review process can take up to three years for comprehensive

⁶³ This challenge is not surprising given that the WWC is intended to be a Randomized Intervention Studies Database (RISD) in which researchers are likely familiar, but not laypersons.

products. The website's organization is not intuitive, making it difficult for users to navigate. Perhaps most salient, many users now rely on AI and popular search engines for evidence searches, highlighting the need for IES to adapt to this new reality.

Recommendation: Narrow the scope of the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) to the development of practice guides and tools and ensure that its evidence base is better utilized.⁶⁴

The WWC should focus on developing practitioner guides and tools supported by the evidence and discontinue the *ad hoc* review of individual studies and interventions. The guides were repeatedly described as the most useful activity conducted by the Clearinghouse. Instead of reviewing individual studies or interventions, IES should use AI to synthesize cumulative findings on a topic once sufficient evidence has accumulated. Then it can determine how many studies merit review using WWC standards⁶⁵—and ultimately, development of a practitioner guide.

“The practice guides are the best part [of WWC].” ~ Former IES leader

To better fulfill its mission, the WWC should make its existing database more user-friendly through machine-readable datasets and an application programming interface (API), which allows other systems to retrieve and use its data seamlessly. An API would allow WWC data to be integrated into learning management systems that could show evidence summaries alongside instructional materials; ed tech procurement platforms that help districts see evidence ratings before purchasing tools; or data visualization dashboards that display trends in effectiveness by interventions or subgroups of students.

“[Looking at] the practice guides, they’re the most popular product at IES.” ~ IES staffer

Additionally, utilizing large language models (LLMs) to gather data from the WWC site and other evidence-based resources would help practitioners efficiently search for vetted evidence-based information. For instance, a user could get information across data sources to a prompt such as, “Summarize all literacy interventions for grades 3-5 with positive effects.”

⁶⁴ The WWC is not specifically referenced in ESRA, but broad statutory support is established in Section 171 (b)(3), which creates the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (NCEE). Part of this center's mission is to “support synthesis and wide dissemination of evaluation, research, and products developed.” Also, ESRA Sec 172 says that NCEE is to “award a contract for a prekindergarten through grade 12 mathematics and science teacher clearinghouse.” [20 U.S.C. 9562 (a)(7)].

⁶⁵ The WWC standards will still need to be periodically reviewed as methodological advances occur, especially around the use of AI in research.

Finally, the WWC could improve dissemination by encouraging practitioner-serving organizations with the relevant expertise to use WWC criteria to vet popular interventions (some of which is already occurring).

Part V: NCSER

Authorized in 2002 through the Education Sciences Reform Act (ESRA), the National Center for Special Education Research (NCSER) is one of the four centers within the Institute of Education Sciences (IES). NCSER and the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) serve as the primary entities in the federal government for conducting and supporting research on children and youth with disabilities. NCSER has traditionally supported rigorous, long-term research to identify solutions and build evidence intended to improve the academic, behavioral, and developmental outcomes for children with disabilities, from birth through post-secondary education, as well as improve the effectiveness of special education programs. As of 2023, approximately 15 percent of students aged 3-21 nationwide are identified as having disabilities.⁶⁶

Before ESRA, special education research was housed entirely in OSEP.⁶⁷ However, ESRA transferred these research functions to IES to consolidate and strengthen federal education research activities. Like NCER, NCSER is a grantmaking entity but operates with a significantly smaller annual budget, ranging from \$55-65 million, compared to NCER's \$205-245 million. Despite this budget difference, stakeholders generally preferred—like Congress—to have NCSER as a separate entity. They feared that research on children with disabilities would get “lost” in NCER and/or that merging the two would result in fewer dollars for an already small-budget entity.

Overall, the special education community felt that research in special education has dramatically improved individual outcomes over the past 20 years, in part due to NCSER's commitment to rigorous research. This cumulative research has had a significant impact, especially in terms of economic mobility and job outcomes for infants, toddlers, children, and individuals with disabilities.

Because it is a grantmaking entity, NCSER shares many of the recommendations already offered in [Part III](#) for NCER. For the sake of brevity, we will not repeat them in full in this section but instead include the short, bolded recommendations that are expanded upon in [Part III](#). NCSER's three primary challenges relate to special education policy, responsible AI use, and cross-agency data sharing.

⁶⁶ Veronique Irwin et al., “Report on the Condition of Education 2024,” *National Center of Education Statistics*, (May 2024): 17, <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2024/2024144.pdf>.

⁶⁷ OSEP has traditionally invested in leadership training, compliance monitoring, and technical assistance. It has also bridged research to practice through model demonstration centers, which test evidence-based practices in “real world” school and district settings.

Strengthening NCSER's Portfolio and Collaborations

Problem: The NCSER portfolio tends to be heavy on the study of interventions for students with disabilities but not on the role of special education policy in influencing those interventions.

Recommendation: **Revise the NCSER portfolio to include more research on special education policies in alignment with IES's high-need areas, while reducing the emphasis on interventions.**

NCSER has accumulated scholarship on a wide array of programs and practices, including academic interventions in reading, writing, and mathematics; behavioral interventions like peer mediation and positive behavior supports; and assistive technology accommodations such as extended time on tests and use of screen readers. However, largely missing are studies of special education policies and their impact on outcomes.

Stakeholders emphasized the importance of moving beyond isolated interventions to comprehensive change. Studying special education policies is vital because these policies can systematically influence student outcomes. Such policies might include the impact of special education funding mechanisms, teacher preparation and retention policies, transition policies addressing school to post-school outcomes, inclusion mandates, and policies that encourage public reporting and transparency of special education outcomes.⁶⁸

In addition, NCSER should align its new portfolio with IES's high-need areas as they relate to the field of special education and students with disabilities.

Problem: AI tools promising to address disabilities are inundating the market with little attention to quality control.

Recommendation: **As advised in [Making NCER's work more relevant](#), one of the eight mandated R&D Centers could conduct research to determine the most effective methods for evaluating the quality and effectiveness of the various AI-powered tools and resources that are emerging in the market.**

⁶⁸ Recently, NCES was funding policy analyses that utilized data from state longitudinal data systems in their SLDS grant program. Policies related to special education might also be captured in SLDS.

Stakeholders expressed both optimism and caution regarding AI and educational technology. While there is potential for tools to support early assessment and intervention (e.g., for dyslexia and autism), concerns were raised about the quality and evidence base of most products on the market. Both practitioner- and tech-affiliated groups noted the plethora of these new educationally focused digital tools, primarily AI-driven, that remain largely unevaluated.

“So many technology tools are being sold with no evidence on the tool.”
~ Research professor

There is a need for practical guidelines to help educators evaluate AI tools, ensure that they uphold ethical standards, and involve individuals with lived experience in their development and testing. We heard this outside of the field of special education too, which is why we included it as a potential focus for one of the eight mandated NCER-supported R&D Centers in [Making NCER’s Work More Relevant](#). The Center’s aim would be to establish empirical standards for what constitutes high-quality evidence for educational tools and resources that could be used to 1) evaluate existing products; 2) design and test improved products; 3) inform funding decisions using these standards.

Especially relevant to NCSER is ensuring that tools and products are developed with the user in mind, supporting precise solutions matched to specific types of learning differences. This involves co-designing these tools with individuals with disabilities to ensure that they meet real needs and are usable in diverse settings. These types of inputs could become part of the evaluation criteria for assessing AI tools and resources.

“We are creating this learning tool...to help children with reading comprehension support. But it’s not ready. But schools want to buy it.” ~ Ed tech developer

Problem: NCSER is limited in its understanding of how various factors, such as health, nutrition, and social services, impact educational outcomes for children with disabilities.

Recommendation: Strengthen cross-agency connections that span education, health, and social services agencies—all of which often have a role in addressing the needs of children with disabilities.

Children with disabilities often face challenges that extend beyond the classroom. Academic outcomes are closely related to health, nutrition, family stability, and access to social services.

Because these factors influence learning, NCSE’s effectiveness could be improved by integrating insights from health and social services. For example, linking school records with Medicaid or public health data could help understand how chronic health conditions affect reading or math interventions.

“Link health and education datasets to give a whole-child view and enable precision interventions to accelerate research progress in areas like autism or ADHD and understanding of how humans learn.” ~ Tech developer in special education

Many health and social service agencies—such as HHS, HUD, and Census Bureau—maintain longitudinal records on children’s health, use of services, and social conditions, while state longitudinal data systems maintain numerous academic indicators over time. Cross-agency collaborations would allow NCSE to study not just education in isolation, but education as it interacts with health, social, and family systems — dramatically increasing the relevance, effectiveness, and impact of research for children with disabilities. It would also pave the way for integrated policy solutions, rather than siloed approaches, which could lead to more sustainable improvements.

All of that said, these cross-agency data sharing agreements can be cumbersome, though not impossible. Interoperability between systems is always an issue, but many states are making headway. Read about other federal efforts underway in [Data integration Among Federal Agencies](#).

Common Themes

There were several common themes in our conversations with the special education community that echoed broader conversations. One was the challenge of implementing evidence-based practices at scale within school systems. Hence, they wanted additional focus on system-level implementation of interventions and practices. Special education advocates also see a need for more responsive and timely research that meets the immediate needs of states and districts, rather than lengthy proposal cycles.

There is also a tension between maintaining rigorous research standards and ensuring practical usefulness in the field of special education. While stakeholders emphasized the importance of high methodological standards, such as those set by WWC guidelines, they also acknowledged the unique constraints in special education research. These constraints include small sample sizes, high variability of needs even within the same diagnosis, ethical considerations that prevent denying services for control groups, and less standardized outcome measures like IEP goals versus state test scores.

Lastly, whereas other groups wanted IES to help “match” practitioners and researchers with shared interests, the special education community wanted NCSER to recognize formally districts and schools that were either models for IDEA-based inclusive practices or actively testing interventions for students with disabilities. They saw this recognition as a way to highlight exemplary work and signal to researchers those jurisdictions that are open to collaboration.

As indicated, many of the recommendations pertinent to grantmaking apply to both NCSER and NCER (see *Say it Again*). Further details on each can be found in [Part III](#).

Say It Again

Making NCSER’s Work More Relevant

1. NCSER should concentrate on several high-priority educational challenges identified by IES and shared by most states, which would enable the development of coherent strategies and scalable, context-sensitive solutions.
2. Focus NCSER grantmaking on IES’s 3-5 high-priority areas as they relate to special education or students with disabilities.
3. NCSER should prioritize multi-state and multi-district awards to help scale the most promising interventions, resources, and policies.
4. Require key findings to be reported in user-friendly formats.

Grantmaking in NCSER

1. Streamline the grantmaking application process.
2. Carve out room for a variety of smaller, mid-size, and large grant awards with varying timelines and commensurate grant requirements.
3. Prioritize practical significance.
4. Continue to fund implementation studies as part of impact projects.
5. Communicate more openly about data sharing repositories.

Rapid Cycle Research in NCSER

1. IES should continue its initial investment in rapid-cycle research that supports and helps scale cutting-edge educational tools and approaches.
2. IES should consider piloting a “rapid response” grant mechanism within IES.
3. Intensify efforts to expand the pool of research and development expertise within the IES ecosystem.
4. Continue support of digital learning platforms (DLPs) to fuel rapid-cycle research, but reconsider how they are funded.

Conclusion

The need for an effective and independent IES is especially critical now, as the Department of Education streamlines its work with partner agencies and as discussions about its long-term future continue. Program offices within the federal government are driven by policy priorities and compliance responsibilities. But IES's mission is fundamentally different: to conduct rigorous, objective research and statistics in service of the public good, not a particular administration.

That does not mean the current system is worth defending. IES needs thoughtful changes to better serve students, parents, and states. These changes—over 50 recommendations detailed in this report and appendices—vary in scope and magnitude, but they must be seriously considered for IES to become the entity the nation needs during this time of academic crisis.

As states are being asked to shoulder more responsibility for their education systems, IES needs to offer them opportunities to build their own research and technical assistance capacity. And as the Department sensibly shrinks its administrative footprint, states may depend even more on such reliable, neutral support and solid, timely information that they can use to monitor, manage, and improve their own schools.

IES is eager to turbocharge its capacity to meet the information needs of states. By concentrating on students' greatest needs, producing uber useful and timely statistics for the nation, monitoring state progress against national benchmarks, advising states on their data systems, supporting multi-state collaborations, and providing technical assistance grounded in quality data, IES can help states and districts build the analytic capacity and tools they need to make effective educational decisions. It can also strengthen its shepherding and support of the Nation's Report Card, which affords states the thermometer by which to gauge and calibrate their own successes and challenges.

It is neither partisan nor ideological to say that decisions about children, teachers, and schools must be grounded in rigorous evidence. This small statistics and research shop remains committed to that mission, even as it needs to undergo significant reforms to carry out that mission much faster and better.

Acknowledgements

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Appendices

Appendix A: List of Report Recommendations

Below is a list of all recommendations, organized by center.

NCES

NCES and Data Modernization

1. Conduct a thorough review of current administrative and survey data collections to ensure they are relevant: identify gaps, streamline processes, and consider discontinuation as warranted.
2. Develop standardized data-sharing agreements with SEAs and LEAs.
3. NCES should ensure that data are consistently structured and have standardized definitions.
4. Utilize APIs to improve data accessibility.
5. Increase the speed at which data are collected, vetted, and shared.

NCES and SLDS Grants

6. Support technological investments that upgrade and modernize SLDS infrastructure and delivery mechanisms.
7. Expand the types of grantees that can receive SLDS grants.
8. Integrate into SLDS grants a priority that addresses interoperability among states.
9. Enhance technical assistance for SLDS grantees.
10. Incentivize states to make better use of their SLDS data for both public and research purposes.

Data Integration Among Federal Agencies

11. Facilitate cross-agency data alignment with the Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, and Commerce (among others) to forge connections between education data and workforce, health, and demographic records.

National Assessment of Education Progress

12. Ensure that NAEP assessments can work on any platform.
13. Pilot test AI strategies to determine how to improve processes and shorten timelines while maintaining privacy, accuracy, and integrity. Then implement a new system.
14. Move the NAEP contracting process under the purview of a newly constituted contracts and acquisitions management office within IES.

15. If anticipated cost efficiencies are realized, those savings might be used to support state-level NAEP administration in subjects beyond reading and math.
16. Enhance the functionality and user experience of the NDE and the data visualization capabilities of the state-level reports.
17. NAGB should ensure that its communication with stakeholders is more actionable.

NCER

Making NCER's Work More Relevant

1. NCER should concentrate on several high-priority educational challenges identified by IES and shared by most states, which would enable the development of coherent strategies and scalable, context-sensitive solutions.
 - a. Focus NCER grantmaking on IES's 3-5 high-priority areas.
 - b. NCER should prioritize multi-state and multi-district awards to help scale the most promising interventions, resources, and policies.
 - c. Align Federal Research & Development Centers with High-Need Areas, as feasible.
2. Communicate more openly about data sharing repositories.
3. Require key findings to be reported in user-friendly formats.

Grantmaking in NCER

4. Streamline the grantmaking application process:
 - a. Two-stage submissions.
 - b. Multiple grantmaking windows.
5. Carve out room for a variety of smaller, mid-size, and large grant awards with varying timelines and commensurate grant requirements.
6. Prioritize practical significance.
7. Continue to fund implementation studies as part of impact projects.
8. Communicate more openly about data sharing repositories.

Research Methods Grants

9. NCES should consider a call for Research and Methodology grants to investigate how AI can transform the research and development process itself.
10. A repeated suggestion was for NCES to develop expertise in combining survey data with complementary sources to improve predictions at more localized levels.

Rapid Cycle Research

11. IES should continue its initial investment in rapid-cycle research that supports and helps scale cutting-edge educational tools and approaches.

12. IES should consider piloting a “rapid response” grant mechanism within IES.
13. Intensify efforts to expand the pool of research and development expertise within the IES ecosystem.
14. Continue support of digital learning platforms (DLPs) to fuel rapid-cycle research, but reconsider how they are funded.

Building State and Local Capacity

15. Incentivize a remake of the master’s in education degree to teach empirical knowledge and skills to help build state and local research capacity.

NCEE

The Regional Education Laboratories (RELs)

1. To facilitate collaboration, three key issues need attention:
 - a. IES should clarify the role(s) of the RELs.
 - b. IES and OESE should synchronize the contract cycles of the RELs and Comp Centers.
 - c. IES and OESE should endeavor to bring them under a unified coordinating structure.
2. Allow Flexibility in REL Providers.

The What Works Clearinghouse

3. Narrow the scope of the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) to the development of practice guides and tools and ensure that its evidence base is better utilized.

NCSER

Strengthening NCSER’s Portfolio and Collaborations

1. Revise the NCSER portfolio to include more research on special education policies in alignment with IES’s high-need areas, while reducing the emphasis on interventions.
2. As advised in [Making NCER’s work more relevant](#), one of the eight mandated R&D Centers could conduct research to determine the most effective methods for evaluating the quality and effectiveness of the diverse AI-powered tools and resources that are emerging in the market.
3. Strengthen cross-agency connections that span education, health, and social services agencies—all of which often have a role in addressing the needs of children with disabilities.

Appendix B: Internal Recommendations

In discussions with various individuals and groups, it's natural that some information shared pertains to the internal processes of IES based on their own experiences with it. While some of this information may seem like "inside baseball," its potential impact on improving IES operations should not be underestimated. These recommendations involve contract management, IT staffing, data storage, peer review, external contracting, and internal communications.

Contracting: IES should exercise its internal contracting authority

Problem: There is no standardization in practices among contracting officers at the Office of Contracts and Acquisition Management (CAM), whose employees report to the Office of Finance and Operations (OFO). These roles are challenging to staff, and retaining experienced employees in these positions can be difficult. CAM delays can cause gaps in service—bottlenecks for which it is not accountable. The lack of communication and mutual understanding between CAM and IES makes for inefficient and costly contracting.

Recommendation: Use IES's contracting authority to bring contracts management in-house.

By law, IES can exercise independent contracting authority.⁶⁹ It should be apprised of the legal, operational, and political steps required to exercise that authority and move in that direction. It should hire and train a small team of contracting experts who, because they are knowledgeable about the mission and substance of IES work—and would be embedded in the agency—could streamline the contracting process. For instance, an internal contracting team would be aware of efficiencies and innovations in one contract that could be relevant to another. Even a 15% reduction in contract costs equates to \$150M, which far surpasses the salaries of five internal contracting staff.

Contractual training should go beyond basic acquisition rules and include both a technical and nuanced understanding of research work to accurately gauge costs. This new office should implement standardized operating procedures, including standardizing acquisition toolkits and templates across IES (some of which has already been developed) to ensure consistency and reduce confusion for staff, vendors, and contractors.

⁶⁹ ESRA section 113 ([20 U.S.C. 9513](#)) states that the IES Director is delegated all functions, including contracting authority in [20 U.S.C. 9512](#), to carry out IES functions.

Problem: Many IES contracts are too rigid and don't incentivize meeting goals.

Recommendation: IES should pilot outcomes-based and performance-based contracting, where payment to contractors is contingent upon achieving specific results agreed upon by IES, the client, and the contractor.

This approach has the potential to enhance customer satisfaction and drive higher-quality outcomes. That said, awareness and understanding of these types of contracting vehicles is low, so potential contractors might need to receive training about them before they apply.

Along these same lines, IES might allow for modular contracts that can be scaled up or down based on performance, relevance, or emerging needs. Changing circumstances are the norm and agreements should reflect that reality. The bottom line is that flexibility should be built into contractual arrangements to allow for mid-course corrections, adaptive deliverables, and iterative research cycles—in service of meeting the measurable outcomes and goals linked to the work.

Problem: The lack of visibility regarding how funds are allocated within contracts, especially for areas such as research expenses, staffing, and overhead costs, makes it difficult to assess return on investment or to compare costs between different vendors.

Recommendation: Embed transparency measures into contracts and awards.

IES should design a public-facing contract dashboard to improve contractor transparency. They might require contractors to provide a cost breakdown of how their award was spent, part of which could be publicly released to incentivize transparency and realistic fee-for-service spending. Public tracking of research timelines, deliverables, and performance metrics could also help build trust and efficiency.

Problem: IES contracting can favor incumbent researchers and entities, limiting the ability of new research entities or organizations to participate in grants or contracts. CAM formulas minimize risk and favor vendors that deliver products, and the government is often unwilling to risk awarding a contract to an entity with less demonstrated experience. This can stifle competition and innovation, as the incumbents know they will continue to receive a contract and may not be as incentivized to deliver products/services as efficiently as they might have if they were competing with other viable entities.

Recommendation: Lower barriers to entry to encourage new or smaller entities to apply for IES grants.

To facilitate innovation and diversity of research entities, IES can encourage or require established contractors to partner with smaller entities seeking to enter the field or who represent local needs or interests. Such a partnership could see established contractors help newer and/or smaller research entities with applications, research, and evaluation. IES can also embed requirements for collaboration with SEAs and LEAs into proposals to improve local relevance and research collaboration. Revising the formulas to reduce preference on past performance would also help.

Problem: Multiple contractors have developed and now manage IES’s IT systems and tools. The ongoing cost to manage and troubleshoot these systems is often excessive and puts IES at the mercy of contractors simply to “flip a switch.”

Recommendation: IES should initiate a hybrid approach to IT staffing, with some systems remaining with contractors and others targeted for in-house transfer.

IES should assess which IT functions could come in-house by taking inventory of its contractor-managed systems and classifying them as mission-critical or not. Mission-critical and public-facing systems should remain where they are for the time being, but IES should develop a staffing and management strategy that does not leave these most important systems beholden to the presence (or absence) of a specific contract or contractor.

IES should determine whether less critical systems require specialized roles, hard-to-recruit skills, or immediate expertise—and likely put those at the bottom of the transfer list too. For the remaining systems, compare short, mid, and long-term costs for current contractors versus projected federal IT staff. Then start small by piloting one in-house team of federal IT staff (e.g., 2–3 people) focused on one manageable system, with contractors assisting via formalized agreements for training, documentation, and shadowing.

Troubleshoot data storage issues

Problem: Similarly, contractors are often collecting data in their systems, rather than IES systems, which likely creates excess risk and excess cost.

Recommendation: Explore options towards in-house data collections.

On behalf of NCES and NCEE, IES should explore opportunities to in-source its data collection systems in a way that allows multiple studies to use a common solution, versus paying for multiple servers and systems to house data. Examples might include purchasing a single commercial software platform that can be hosted and managed by IES and used by multiple contractors to conduct their work, increasing standardization and (hopefully) reducing costs.

“NCES needs to be able to hold its own data. This public data is being held by the contractors.”
 ~ Former IES staff

Office of Science: Peer Review

The Office of Science within IES is responsible for conducting scientific peer review of IES reports and overseeing the scientific peer review process of research grant applications. This section provides recommendations related to those roles.

Grantmaking Peer Review Process

Problem: The peer review process has a strong commitment to scientific rigor, as it should. But there needs to be a better balance between scientific rigor and speed, efficiency, and effectiveness.

Recommendation A: Set targets for the length of peer review (overall or certain components) and experiment with process improvements to achieve them.

The Office of Science has expressed interest in increasing the use of its own “process” data as a data source to inform internal improvements. As part of that process, it should continue to gather internal metrics on average durations for each step of the review process to identify potential bottlenecks and set goals for improvement.

A rough outline of steps to the current peer review process follows:

1. Process applications, including conducting responsiveness and compliance screening and reviewing appeals for applicants deemed non-responsive or non-compliant.
2. Assign applications and reviewers to review panels (and sometimes to sections of a panel).
3. Review conflict of interest declarations and determinations.
4. Assign applications to reviewers (considering conflicts of interest) and release applications to the reviewers.
5. Reviewers submit initial reviews of applications (written narratives and scores).

6. Prepare triage and order of review by the Office of Science.
7. Hold a panel meeting that includes final discussion and scoring.
8. Prepare and release final scores and summary statements.
9. Prepare a peer review report by the Office of Science and transmit it to NCER or NCSEER.

Using data related to the time required to complete each step above, the Office of Science should establish maximum timelines for each. The goals might be, for large competitions, to reduce the total peer review period from 6-10 months to 4-5 months, and for small competitions, from 6-8 weeks to 4-5 weeks. (See [Grantmaking in NCER](#) for proposed award windows.)

Several approaches might be considered to accelerate peer review. Given that elements of the peer review are supported by contractors, financial incentives should be offered to contractors to meet compressed deadlines without compromising quality. Additionally, IES should continue to learn from peer agencies. For example, NIH has recently published its Simplified Peer Review Framework for NIH Research Project Grants, which streamlines categories for review and may provide useful guidance to the IES peer review process. We also recommend that IES consider the use of AI to simplify the administrative steps (#1-4 above), improving efficiency and decreasing labor. Finally, to ensure continuous improvement in peer review, the Office of Science might establish performance metrics (e.g., time-to-decision, applicant satisfaction) and implement post-review surveys from grantees (reviewers already provide input) to improve future peer review cycles.

Recommendation B: Recruit reviewers who have experience in both research and policy.

Numerous interviewees pointed to the need to cast a wider net for participation on review panels, both to avoid the insular nature of expert panels and to verify the usefulness of the research to other stakeholders.

Prior efforts to recruit researchers in state education agencies and school districts should be redoubled, as it is critical to include the perspectives of those who work at the intersection of research and policy.

Recommendation C: Make the project budget a required evaluation category.

Past IES peer reviewers expressed an interest in the project budget being a required category for evaluation versus a more holistic assessment. As researchers who conduct similar studies, peer reviewers are often well-positioned to evaluate whether proposed costs are realistic, justified, and aligned with the work plan and research goals. All proposals could benefit from another perspective on budgetary considerations.

One other tangentially related idea about costs: Since peer review meetings were successfully conducted online during the Covid pandemic, they should continue to be held virtually. Moreover, IES's PRIMO system, which facilitates the scientific peer review process, creates efficiencies for IES and needs continued support.

Finally, the peer review criteria should be adjusted to reflect inclusion of any of the grant application recommendations in Sections II and III, such as instituting a binding Letter of Intent or prospectus and holding more than one large annual competition.

Decreasing the Reliance on Contractors

A common critique is that IES is too reliant on contractors and should instead hire more staff in-house. This critique is particularly aimed at the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), which oversees various federal data collections.

Past IES/NCES leaders felt that reliance on contractors made NCES less efficient and timely because the data collections handled by external contractors are project-specific and occur in cycles. If NCES managed those data collections, staff could be reassigned from one project to another based on the ebbs and flows of each collection. In contrast, contracted staff can only be reassigned within the limits of their contracts, which typically do not allow for this type of cost-effective flexibility. Additionally, having contractors adds extra layers of review, as they have their own processes for checking data production, analysis, and reporting, on top of those already in place at NCES and IES. The high overhead costs of hiring contractors also contribute to these frictions.

It makes little sense, however, for NCES to take on the most expensive components of longitudinal survey collections in-house, as they require staffing-intensive activities, such as operating helpdesks, call centers, and mailing operations. Those collections, or at least the staffing-intensive elements of them, should be outsourced (if continued).

But some of the administrative data collections—or aspects of them—could feasibly be handled in-house. For example, states already submit non-fiscal CCD through NCES's EdFacts portal, while the Census collects CCD fiscal data on behalf of NCES, which then resolves any errors. Integrating CCD fiscal data into EdFacts would centralize all K-12 performance, demographic, and financial data within one system, reducing state and district reporting burden by streamlining submissions through a single portal. It would also enable faster linkage of financial and programmatic data.

As an example, NCES could consider handling the state-level finance data collection (National Public Education Financial Survey or NPEFS), given that it involves a limited number of

respondents. (That said, education finance experts have noted that the voluntary nature of this survey limits its utility and questioned the usefulness of an aggregated figure when school-level data are available.) Finally, NCES might assist with parts of the IPEDS data collection to reduce the need for external contracting. While managing the help desk for over 6,000 higher education institutions may not be practical, conducting technical review panels to gather input on data issues and improvements could be.

Improve internal communications

Multiple respondents, through the Request for Information, commented about ways that IES could improve communication about its work. Those comments are presented verbatim below.

- “IES should proactively announce new research studies in press releases, mass emails, and social media.”
- “IES invests millions of dollars in evaluations but often the findings are only distributed through a single newsflash list.”
- “Instead of having 40 different newsflash lists that are contract and program specific, IES should make distribution lists based on audience and topic.”
- “IES should partner with trusted messengers and influential organizations...for distribution purposes.”
- “IES should publish an annual “Top Research Findings from IES” publication that highlights the 3-5 most important, actionable research findings each year from the entire portfolio...”
- “IES had one person for communications for 4 Centers plus the overarching IES. Lack of investment in communications has severely diminished the impact of IES investments and led to misconceptions about what IES does since IES does not control the narrative. IES needs to better articulate its values, share success stories, and engage with policymakers.”

In addition, multiple stakeholders wanted IES—perhaps through its communications office—to maintain a listserv that advertised “matchmaking opportunities” for state leaders, district leadership, and independent researchers interested in collaborating on shared research priorities.

Appendix C: ESRA Reauthorization

Originally authorized in 2002, the Education Sciences Reform Act (ESRA) has not been reauthorized since. Should Congress choose to reauthorize it, it should contemplate the following modifications.

Suggestions for improving research and technical assistance to states

As outlined in the main report, the feedback regarding the Regional Education Laboratories (RELs) was largely negative. Many state chiefs expressed dissatisfaction with being contractually bound to a specific REL based on geographic boundaries that did not align with existing collaborations. Additionally, concerns were raised about the responsiveness and varying capabilities of the RELs. Some state chiefs preferred the flexibility to obtain services from other RELs or local vendors. Consequently, statutory changes in ESRA are needed to facilitate more flexible technical assistance for states.

*“I think the RELs are a huge waste of money. I’d scrap them if you are able.” ~
Former IES leader*

As background, recall that Section 174(b) of ESRA states that the RELs are identified in Section 941(h) of the Educational Research, Development, Dissemination, and Improvement Act of 1994. However, this section does not define the actual regions and only requires that a REL serves a region of at least 4 contiguous states. The REL regions are actually listed in 34 C.F.R. § 707.2(a), which appeared in the Federal Register in August 1988.⁷⁰ Those ten geographic regions are still used to this day.⁷¹

Should Congress choose to reauthorize ESRA, it should eliminate the geographic regions and the requirement that REL funds be routed through IES contracts to vendors. These changes would allow for more flexible arrangements—ranging from minor adjustments to significant

⁷⁰ “Part 707 – Regional Education Laboratories,” 53 Fed. Reg. 30793 (Aug. 15, 1988), *available at*: <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/FR-1988-08-15>.

⁷¹ The REL Regions, as outlined in the Code of Federal Regulations, are as follows:

- (1) Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Puerto Rico, Rhode Island, Vermont, Virgin Islands.
- (2) Delaware, District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, Pennsylvania.
- (3) Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia.
- (4) Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina.
- (5) Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, Wisconsin.
- (6) Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas.
- (7) Colorado, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Wyoming.
- (8) Arizona, California, Nevada, Utah.
- (9) Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, Washington.
- (10) American Samoa, the Federated States of Micronesia, Guam, Hawaii, the Marshall Islands, and Palau.

changes. On the minor side, eliminating or redefining the current regions would enable states to partner with other states with whom they have historically worked.

A more significant (and flexible) approach would permit states to select their own “learning partners.” These partners could be existing regional entities, universities, research institutions, non-profits, or other organizations based on expertise and suitability. Essentially, this change would create fifty state-level RELs. In practice, it would involve providing direct awards to states so that they could obtain their own research and technical assistance services.

The REL contract budget is determined in part by the number of K-12 students in each state. ESRA section 174(a) says, “*The amount of assistance allocated to each laboratory by the Evaluation and Regional Assistance Commissioner shall reflect the number of local educational agencies and the number of school-age children within the region served by such laboratory, as well as the cost of providing services within the geographic area encompassed by the region*” ([20 U.S.C. 9564\(a\)](#)).

Instead of allocating the funds to a REL contract based on each state's student population, stakeholders proposed the idea of allocating these funds directly to states to purchase research and technical assistance services. Despite its popularity, this adjustment would also complicate the coordination and sharing of research and technical assistance activities across states, hence the importance of the proposed “Hub” (see [Part IV: NCEE](#)), which would coordinate these functions.

Changes to SLDS Grants

The current Statewide Longitudinal Data System (SLDS) grants are awarded to individual state education agencies that must serve as the fiscal agent (per ESRA), which limits opportunities for regional or multi-state collaboration.

In theory, multiple states may collaborate on a single grant project, but they face one of two unappealing options: Either one SEA must operate as the fiscal agent without any increase in funding for the partnership, or they must apply separately and risk one or more state collaborators not receiving funding. As explained [in SLDS grant documentation](#),

Multiple States may collaborate on a single grant project with one State serving as the fiscal agent; however, the funding cap does not increase for multi-State collaborations. Each grant application is evaluated individually on its own merits, based on the reviewer scoring rubric. There is no scoring advantage for multiple applicants to request funds to develop separate parts of a larger project, nor a guarantee that all or any applicants will be funded....

Requesting funding for a project that relies upon another applicant's project being funded runs the risk that one or more States may not be funded. If only one State receives funding for a specific deliverable that includes multi-State collaboration, we will work with the grantee to ensure the original intention of the grant is fulfilled regarding those deliverables. This is done on a case-by-case basis.

As a result of this grant structure, it is difficult for states to come together to build interoperable data systems. **Introducing a new SLDS eligibility category that includes a "consortium of state education agencies" and raises the funding cap to reflect multi-state efficiencies would enable states to develop together the necessary software to facilitate their collaboration.**⁷² In fact, ESRA specifies that SLDS grants should “promot[e] linkages across states,” while protecting student privacy, which is precisely the goal ([20 U.S.C. 9607 \(c\)\(1\)](#)). This change would help ensure technical quality across states, enhance the timely generation of data, and improve the ability of states to track shared indicators, such as student mobility across state lines.

"Other Transaction Authority" for Innovative Programs

IES has made efforts in the past to secure Other Transaction Authority (OTA) to enhance flexibility for its innovative programs. This authority allows agencies to fund cutting-edge research and prototypes, collaborate with non-traditional providers, negotiate intellectual property terms, and generally proceed at the necessary pace for modern advancements. Federal entities are generally granted OTA to obtain advanced R&D and prototypes from commercial sources, particularly when entities are unable or unwilling to follow federal procurement regulations. OTA, once reserved for NASA, has now been granted by Congress to multiple agencies, including NIH, DOT, TSA, and others.⁷³

“[S]ome of the hesitation around open science is they just take your stuff, create a thing, market it, profit off it. And then research scientists are left with good data to write a paper.” ~Tech developer

IES funding is delivered through traditional grants and procurement contracts. However, new initiatives under the Accelerate, Transform, Scale (ATS) portfolio, including the Seedlings to Scale program, and projects under the Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) program, would

⁷² Beyond a consortium of state education agencies, expanding the grantee eligibility to other state-level entities such as governors, data governance bodies, public sector organizations, etc. could also foster collaboration across sectors.

⁷³ The other federal entities that have OTA include the Department of Defense (DOD), Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), Department of Transportation (DOT), Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Transportation Security Administration (TSA), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Department of Energy (DOE), and National Institutes of Health (NIH).

greatly benefit from OTA. This authority would also support additional rapid research projects recommended in this report.

The Accelerate, Transform, Scale program within IES aims to implement successful, evidence-based educational interventions quickly, ensuring that effective strategies are widely disseminated.⁷⁴ The Seedlings to Scale program, on the other hand, focuses on nurturing early-stage educational ideas and prototypes, providing support to develop them into scalable solutions. The Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) program helps small businesses engage in research and development with the potential for commercialization, which helps them with a competitive edge.⁷⁵

For the Accelerate, Transform, Scale program, OTA would enable rapid implementation of educational interventions by allowing for quicker awards and adaptive funding. Similarly, the Seedlings to Scale program would benefit by funding prototypes more efficiently and enabling entrepreneurs to pivot quickly when necessary, ensuring that only the most promising educational concepts are scaled up. Further, the SBIR program would be able to accelerate its support for small businesses, fostering innovation and potential production at a faster pace.

“IES needs Other Transactional Authority...This is outside the grantmaking lane. The current framework requires more creative thinking from IES and its stakeholders. [OTA] would expand what IES would want to do. It is better for research.” ~ Former IES staff

As recommended in [Appendix B, Internal Recommendations](#), we urge IES to use its existing contracting authority to bring contracts and acquisitions in-house. Doing so would dovetail nicely with a request for Congress to extend OTA to select programs in IES, as new contracting officers could be hired with specific experience in these and other contracting vehicles. OTA would need to be specifically authorized in law, either “permanently” through ESRA reauthorization (or another bill that amends ESRA) or annually through appropriations.

⁷⁴ In the Explanatory Statement accompanying the fiscal year (FY) 2023 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 117–328), Congress directed IES to invest in quick-turnaround high-reward, scalable solutions intended to improve education outcomes for all students—which was operationalized as ATS.

⁷⁵ Recent studies show impressive results for the SBIR program: “From Seed Funding to Scale,” Study Group, August 2025, https://www.study-group.org/files/ugd/e901ef_8e1b7854d0b44e9d94af3715375ccae6.pdf.

Appendix D: NCES Datasets*

	Dataset / Survey	Category	Frequency	Broad Statutory Support	Brief Description:
1	Beginning Post Secondary Longitudinal Study	Postsecondary	Longitudinal	NCES Duties: ESRA § 153: "...statistical data on the condition and progress of education, at the preschool, elementary, secondary, postsecondary and adult levels in the United States" and §153 (a) (7) "conduct longitudinal and special data collections necessary to report on the condition and progress of education"	The Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS) currently surveys cohorts of first-time, beginning students at three points in time: at the end of their first year, and then three and six years after first starting in postsecondary education.
2	CCD Fiscal	K-12 Administrative	Annual	NCES Duties: ESRA §153(a)(1): "...the financing and management of education, including data on revenues and expenditures"	The CCD Fiscal data includes state, district, and school-level data on total revenues, total expenditures by function, per pupil expenditures, assets, and more.
3	CCD Nonfiscal (Directory, Membership, Staff, etc.)	K-12 Administrative	Annual	NCES Duties: ESRA§153 (a)(1): "...statistical data on the condition and progress of education, at the preschool, elementary, secondary, postsecondary, and adult levels in the United States"	These data, gathered annually from states and jurisdictions, provide basic descriptive statistics on public elementary and secondary schools, districts, and states, including student enrollment, staff counts, and school characteristics, but exclude financial information.

	Dataset / Survey	Category	Frequency	Broad Statutory Support	Brief Description:
4	Current Population Survey (CPS)	Census Bureau*	Monthly	USC Title 13 - Census (not IES) but also NCES Duties: ESRA §153 (a)(B): “state and local early childhood school readiness activities” and §153(a)(L): “access to and opportunity for, early childhood education”	
5	ECLS-K:2024	Early Childhood / Longitudinal	Cohort-based	NCES Duties: ESRA §153 (a)(B): “state and local early childhood school readiness activities”	
6	EDGE – School & District Boundary Files, Open GIS Data, Poverty Estimates, and Census Block Equivalency Files	Geospatial / Administrative	Annual / Rolling	Not a data collection; data needed for numerous grant programs	
7	High School and Beyond (HS&B):22	K-12 Surveys	Periodic	NCES Duties: ESRA§153 (a)(1): “...statistical data on the condition and progress of education, at the preschool, elementary, secondary, postsecondary and adult levels” and §153 (a) (7): “conduct longitudinal and special data collections necessary to report on the condition and progress of education”	Serves as a primary source to understand how high

	Dataset / Survey	Category	Frequency	Broad Statutory Support	Brief Description:
8	High School Transcript Study	K-12 Surveys	Periodic	NCES Duties: ESRA§153 (a)(1)(N): “student participation in and completion of secondary and postsecondary vocational and technical education programs by specific program area”	The study provides information about the types of courses that high school graduates take, how many credits they earn, their grade point averages, and the relationship between course-taking patterns and graduates' achievement based on their performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in 12th grade.
9	High School Longitudinal Study of 2009: HSLs:09	Longitudinal	Cohort-based	NCES Duties: ESRA§153 (a)(1): “...statistical data on the condition and progress of education, at the preschool, elementary, secondary, postsecondary and adult levels in the United States”	Nationally representative, longitudinal study of 23,000+ 9th graders in 2009 into adulthood, with a first follow-up in 2012 and a second in 2016. The third follow-up was scheduled for 2025. Data are collected about academic and occupational outcomes, as well as attitudinal data about schooling and motivations during life transitions.
10	ICILS	International	Every 5 years	NCES Duties: ESRA§153 (a)(1)(K): data on “the existence and use of educational technology and access to the Internet by students and teachers in elementary and secondary schools” and 153 (a)(6): collect data on “educational activities and student achievement in the United States compared with foreign nations”	ICILS is an international assessment project that measures the computer and information literacy (CIL) and computational thinking (CT) skills of eighth-grade students and gathers data on teacher and school practices related to information and communication technology. We participated in 2023. The next administration is in 2028.

	Dataset / Survey	Category	Frequency	Broad Statutory Support	Brief Description:
11	IPEDS	Postsecondary	Annual	Higher Education Act Title IV. Also, ESRA sec. 153(a)(1)(e): “access to and opportunity for postsecondary education, including data on financial aid to postsecondary students” and §153 (a)(1)(N): “student participation in and completion of secondary and postsecondary vocational and technical education programs by specific program area”	IPEDS is a system of 12 interrelated survey components conducted annually that gathers data from every college, university, and technical and vocational institution that participates in the federal student financial aid programs.
12	NAEP (Main, Long-Term Trend)	NAEP	Biennial/Periodic	ESRA §303 and specifically (a) “carry out...a National Assessment of Educational Progress, which collectively refers to a national assessment, state assessments, and a long-term trend assessment in reading and mathematics”	The Nation's Report Card is the largest nationally representative and continuing assessment of what America's students know and can do in various subject matters.
13	NHES (Household Education Surveys)	K–12 Surveys	Every 3–4 years	NCES Duties: ESRA §153 (a)(1)(M): collect data on “the availability of, and access to, before school and after school programs”	The National Household Education Surveys Program (NHES) collects nationally representative, descriptive data on the educational activities of children and families in the United States, including before and after-school programs and homeschooling.

	Dataset / Survey	Category	Frequency	Broad Statutory Support	Brief Description:
14	National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey: NPSAS '24	Postsecondary	Every 4 years	ESRA §153(a)(1)(E): collect data on “access to, opportunity for, postsecondary education, including data on financial aid to postsecondary students”	The National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) examines the characteristics of students in postsecondary education, with a special focus on how they finance their education.
15	National Training, Education, & Workforce Survey (NTEWS)	K–12 Surveys	Pilot Period	NCES Duties: ESRA§153 (a)(1)(N): “student participation in and completion of secondary and postsecondary vocational and technical education programs by specific program area” Sponsored by NSF with NCES and administered by Census.	Collects information on educational enrollment and attainment, nondegree credential types (vocational certificates, occupational licenses, and industry-recognized certifications), work experience programs such as apprenticeships and internships, employment characteristics, and demographic characteristics.
16	NTPS (National Teacher and Principal Survey)	K–12 Surveys	Every 2–3 years	ESRA §153(a)(1)(F-H) “data on in-service professional development;” “the percentage of teachers who meet the applicable state certification and licensure requirements;” “conditions of the education workplace and the supply of and demand for teachers;” “the nature of violence affecting ...school personnel”	The NTPS is a system of related questionnaires that collect data on core topics, including teacher and principal preparation, classes taught, school characteristics, and demographics of the teacher and principal labor force every two to three years.

	Dataset / Survey	Category	Frequency	Broad Statutory Support	Brief Description:
17	Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIACC)	International	Every 10 years	NCES Duties: ESRA §153 (a)(1) collect data on “the condition and progress of education at...the adult levels” and 153 (a)(6): collect data on “educational activities and student achievement in the United States compared with foreign nations.” Developed by OECD, conducted in the U.S. by NCES	The Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), also known as the Survey of Adult Skills, is a large-scale international study of key cognitive and workplace skills of adults.
18	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS)	International	Every 5 years	NCES Duties: ESRA §153(a)(6): collect data on “educational activities and student achievement in the United States compared with foreign nations.”	The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) is an international assessment and research project designed to measure reading achievement at the fourth-grade level, as well as school and teacher practices related to instruction. Since 2001, PIRLS has been administered every 5 years, with the United States participating in all past assessments.
19	Program for International Student Assessment (PISA)	International	Every 4 years	NCES Duties: ESRA §153(a)(6): collect data on “educational activities and student achievement in the United States compared with foreign nations.”	The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) is an international assessment that measures 15-year-old students' reading, mathematics, and science literacy.

	Dataset / Survey	Category	Frequency	Broad Statutory Support	Brief Description:
20	Private School Universe Survey (PSS)	K–12 Surveys	Biennial	ESEA§117 “services for private children are to be comparable to those of public-school children;” NCES Duties: ESRA §153(a)(4): “assisting public and private educational agencies...in improving and automating statistical and data collection activities”	The purpose of the Private School Universe Survey (PSS) is, a) to generate biennial data on the total number of private schools, teachers, and students; and b) to build an accurate and complete list of private schools to serve as a sampling frame for NAEP’s inclusion of private schools.
21	School Pulse Panel (SPP)	K–12 Surveys	Monthly	NCES Duties: ESRA §153(a)(1)(A): collect data on “state and local education reform activities”	The School Pulse Panel (SPP) surveys public K-12 schools on high-priority, education-related topics once a month during the school year.
22	School Survey on Crime & Safety (SSOCS)	K–12 Surveys	Every 2–3 years	NCES Duties: ESRA §153(a)(1)(H: i-iii): collect data on “the incidence, frequency, seriousness, and nature of violence affecting students, school personnel, and other individuals participating in school activities”	The School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS) is the primary source of school-level data on crime and safety.
23	Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS)	International	Every 5 years	NCES Duties: ESRA §153(a)(6): collect data on “educational activities and student achievement in the United States compared with foreign nations.”	TALIS is composed of two questionnaires—one for teachers and one for their principals—that ask questions about their backgrounds, work environments, professional development, and beliefs and attitudes about teaching.

	Dataset / Survey	Category	Frequency	Broad Statutory Support	Brief Description:
24	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)	International	Every 4 years	NCES Duties: ESRA §153(a)(6): collect data on “educational activities and student achievement in the United States compared with foreign nations.”	TIMSS is an international comparative study of student achievement in math and science at the 4th and 8th grades.

**This table does not reflect contractual changes made in spring 2025 or later.*