

**Institute of Education Sciences
National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance**

Evaluation Principles and Practices

January 2017

Introduction

The Institute of Education Sciences (the Institute) at the U.S. Department of Education (the Department) was established by the Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002 (ESRA).¹ ESRA authorizes the Institute, through the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, to conduct evaluations of Federal and other education programs, focusing especially on their impact on student academic achievement in mathematics, reading, and science (Sec. 171).²

ESRA sets a high standard for the independence, relevance, quality, transparency, and ethics of evaluations conducted by the Institute. Here we affirm the Institute's commitment to these foundational principles and describe key ways in which they are put into practice.

Independence

Earning and retaining public trust in the credibility of evaluation findings is essential. ESRA establishes the authority of the Institute to release reports without approval from the Secretary of Education or any other office of the Department (Sec. 186). The Institute makes full and routine use of this authority and takes additional steps to protect independence in the design, conduct, analysis, and reporting of its evaluations by:

- Awarding evaluation contracts competitively to experts external to the Department who are free from conflicts of interest.
- Conditioning the release of reports only on approval from the Institute's Standards and Review Office, as opposed to agency leaders or program staff. ESRA requires that evaluation reports be subjected to rigorous peer review before being released to the public (Sec. 186). The Standards and Review Office, which is independent of the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, oversees the scientific peer-review process. Consistent with ESRA, the Standards and Review Office seeks to ensure that reports are not only of high scientific merit (Sec. 173) but also objective, secular, neutral, and non-ideological, as well as free of partisan political influence and racial, cultural, gender, or regional bias (Sec. 114).
- Releasing reports to the public as soon as practicable once they have received approval from the Standards and Review Office.

¹ To view the Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002 [20 USC §9501 et seq.], see <https://ies.ed.gov/pdf/PL107-279.pdf>. The sections of ESRA cited in this document correspond to the original section numbers found at this link.

² The Institute's evaluations are distinct from its research grants, which support field-generated scientific investigations. Although grant-funded research may shed light on the impacts of education programs, they are not government-commissioned evaluations. Evaluations carried out by the government and its contractors are the focus here.

Relevance

While the Institute is committed to its independent evaluation authority, it is also committed to conducting evaluations that are responsive to legislative requirements and relevant to the diverse interests and needs of Department and program leadership and staff; agency partners such as states, territories, tribes, and grantees; and other interested audiences. The Institute seeks to ensure the relevance of its evaluations by:

- Engaging with Department and program leaders to identify evaluation topics and questions of importance; providing progress updates while the evaluation is underway; and informing them about findings once the evaluation is completed.
- Reviewing the literature and consulting with experts so that consistent with ESRA, evaluations can generate relevant evidence for audiences both inside and outside of the Department (Sec. 173).
- Ensuring that all evaluations are conducted and reported in as timely a manner as possible, without sacrificing quality.

Quality

The Institute adheres to the highest possible standards of quality for conducting scientifically valid education evaluations, as required by ESRA (Sec. 173). An evaluation is high quality if it results in credible and understandable answers to the evaluation questions of interest. For example, any inferences about cause and effect must be well founded. Consistent with ESRA, the Institute strongly prefers experimental designs for evaluations that assess the impact of education programs but will employ other research methodologies that allow for the strongest possible causal inferences when random assignment is not feasible (Sec. 102).

Quality applies to all types of evaluation—including impact and implementation—and to all stages of an evaluation—including design, data collection, data analysis, and reporting of results. The Institute uses a number of strategies to ensure that its evaluations are high quality in all these respects.

- The Institute recruits and maintains an evaluation workforce with training and experience appropriate for planning and overseeing a portfolio of high-quality evaluations. To accomplish this, the Institute recruits staff with advanced degrees and experience in a range of relevant disciplines and content areas. The Institute assigns staff to evaluations that best fit their areas of expertise and provides professional development opportunities so that staff are current with methodological advances and research in their content areas.
- The Institute seeks to ensure that the contractors who conduct its evaluations have appropriate expertise and capacity. Institute staff specify the requirements to ensure a high-quality evaluation in the criteria for selecting contractors. Institute staff assess the technical merit of proposals to ensure that only well-qualified contractors are selected. Institute staff closely oversee the entirety of the evaluation and provide technical assistance to contractors on a frequent basis.
- The Institute convenes technical working groups comprised of leading experts in areas relevant to particular evaluations. The working groups provide periodic guidance to

Institute staff and the contractor during the design, analysis, and reporting phases of the evaluation.

- As required by ESRA, evaluation reports are subjected to a rigorous peer-review process before being released to the public (Sec. 186). The Institute’s Standards and Review Office is responsible for this process. As ESRA required, procedures for peer review of reports were approved by the Institute’s board, the National Board for Education Sciences.³ The peer-review process ensures that all reports are thoroughly vetted by scientific experts for scientific merit before publication, consistent with requirements set forth in ESRA (Sec. 173).

Transparency

To ensure that government leaders and the public have access to information about ongoing and completed evaluations, the Institute posts brief profiles on its website.⁴ The profiles provide pertinent information about each evaluation, such as its cost, anticipated timeline, background and purpose, evaluation questions, methods, data collection, and key findings.

All published evaluation reports are also deposited in ERIC—the Institute’s online database of education research—to ensure that they are permanently available to the public.

Consistent with ESRA’s requirement for data availability (Sec. 184), the Institute seeks to make the data from its evaluations available to qualified individuals for the purpose of reproducibility and secondary analysis. At the same time, the Institute strictly adheres to all applicable laws that protect the confidentiality and privacy of education data, including the requirements explicitly set forth in ESRA (Sec. 183). The availability of evaluation data is subject to these restrictions.

Ethics

Department staff and contractor staff who oversee scientific activities have a responsibility to behave in an ethical manner and to safeguard the dignity, rights, safety, and privacy of study participants. These responsibilities are outlined in the Department’s Scientific Integrity Policy, to which all Institute staff are expected to adhere.⁵ ESRA prohibits the establishment of a nationwide database of individually identifiable information on individuals involved in studies (Sec. 182) and places special emphasis on protecting the confidentiality of individually identifiable information about students, families, and schools (Sec. 183). Other federal laws, such as The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), similarly protect the privacy of student education records.⁶ The Institute’s evaluations comply with both the spirit and the letter of these laws, as well as other relevant requirements such as regulations governing research involving human subjects.

³ To learn peer-review process, see https://ies.ed.gov/director/sro/peer_review/report_review.asp.

⁴ See <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/projects/evaluation/index.asp>.

⁵ For more information on the Department’s policy, see https://ies.ed.gov/aboutus/scientific_integrity.asp.

⁶ For more information on FERPA, see <https://www2.ed.gov/ferpa>.