Ensuring Objective and Reliable Education Statistics
Reauthorization Priorities for the National Center for Education Statistics

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) provides information on the condition of education through administrative data collection, status and longitudinal surveys, and assessments. Founded in 1867, NCES is the second oldest and third largest by budget among the 13 principal federal statistical agencies.

**Desired Outcome** – We urge changes in the Education Sciences Reform Act (ESRA) in order to:

Ensure education statistics are objective, nonpartisan, trustworthy, and relevant because of their wide use for education decisions by families, students, and researchers as well as by school and education administrators, policymakers, and media.

**Reauthorization Priorities** – To meet this outcome, ESRA should:

- Provide NCES final authority over its budget allocation, hiring, IT, contracting, and publications. Following the model of federal statistical agencies, NCES should have full control over its operations to be clearly accountable, avoiding opportunities for inappropriate external influences.
- Preserve presidential appointment status and reinstate Senate confirmation for the NCES Commissioner. Senate oversight of the NCES commissioner appointment helps ensure a qualified leader and objective education statistics for our nation. Further, presidential appointment and Senate confirmation provides the commissioner with more authority to advocate for independence and relevance of NCES data.
- As part of publication autonomy, make NCES’ name and agency-specific logo the prominent name and logo on all NCES’ webpages, reports, and products. Because trust in a statistical agency is paramount, NCES’ name should be known and associated with its products.
- Restore NCES confidential treatment and protections of data. The quality of NCES data requires survey respondents to trust that NCES will protect their information.

Declining autonomy and stature —The 1988 Hawkins-Stafford Elementary and Secondary School Improvement Amendments Act made the NCES commissioner presidentially appointed and Senate confirmed and provided NCES sufficient autonomy to ensure objective and reliable products. Since then, NCES has lost protections, threatening its ability to produce high-quality, objective data. In addition, a weaker NCES makes it more susceptible to further weakening.

Strained staff and budget resources — NCES has a staff of approximately 95 people for a budget of $306 million. The budget-to-staff ratio of $3.2 million per FTE is eight times the median ratio of the other principal federal statistical agencies, as the top graph illustrates. The staffing crisis makes NCES overly dependent on external contractors to conduct planning, technical quality review and analysis functions that should be internal federal activities. Further, for the specialized expertise NCES needs, contractors are often more expensive than direct staff FTEs. NCES’ ability to carry out its work is also challenged by its more than 19% loss in purchasing power over the past 13 years, as shown in the bottom graph.