

Staffing Crisis at the National Center for Education Statistics

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in the Department of Education’s (ED) Institute of Education Sciences (IES) provides objective, reliable, and trustworthy data about the condition of education through administrative data collections, longitudinal surveys, and assessments. Founded in 1867, NCES is the second-oldest and third-largest in budget among the Office of Management and Budget’s (OMB) 13 principal federal statistical agencies. *NCES is facing a staffing crisis that undermines the agency’s ability to do its job well and escalates costs. To address this problem, NCES needs more full-time equivalent (FTE) staff.*

NCES Staff and Budget

Twenty-five years ago, NCES had 130 full-time permanent staff; in FY20, there are 88 full-time permanent staff members, which is seven short of the 95 FTEs NCES is allowed to fill. In turn, the FY20 budget (statistics and assessment) is \$264 million—12 percent below its FY09 budget level of \$246 million, accounting for inflation.

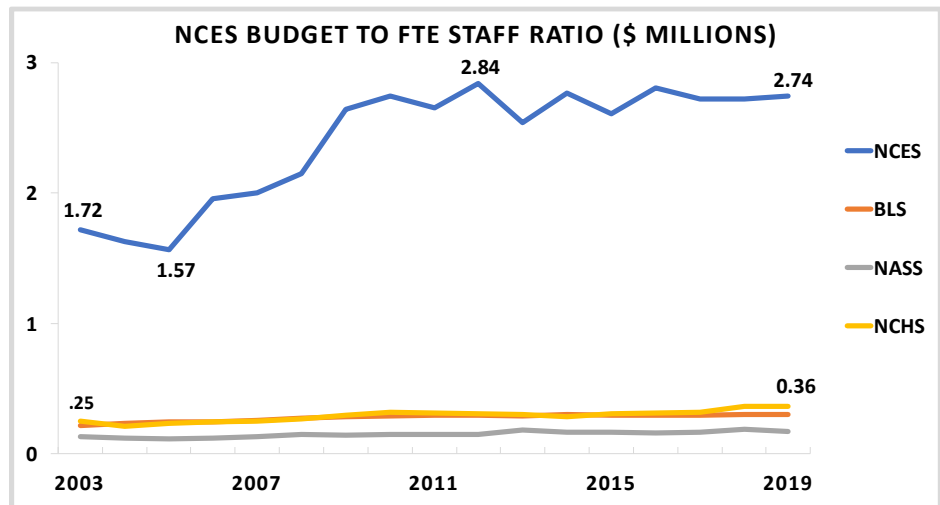
Staffing Crisis at a Tipping Point

NCES has an ongoing staffing crisis that has reached a point this year that could result in cutbacks and the termination of programs. The NCES budget-to-staff ratio is nine times the median ratio of the other principal federal statistical agencies, as the graph and table below illustrate. For example, the budget-to-FTE staff ratio at the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) in USDA is 16 times less than NCES, which suggests NCES is woefully understaffed compared to similar agencies. NCES’s extreme budget-to-staff ratio undermines its ability to cost-effectively lead and oversee education projects. It also makes NCES overly dependent on external contractors, which, for the specialized expertise NCES needs, are generally more expensive than FTEs. As NCES employees gradually retire or vacate their positions, this problem compounds, leading to diminished in-house expertise and technical knowledge, less efficient use of taxpayer money, and too few staff to manage contracts effectively.

Department “S&E Line” Restricts Number of NCES Employees

The NCES staffing crisis is a result of the ED budget structure, along with hiring freezes and bureaucratic delays. Specifically, the NCES and IES staff

number is determined through the ED Salaries and Expenses (S&E) line, which means NCES cannot increase its staff size to optimize operations. The FY20 S&E line for IES suggests NCES will soon lose more staff, which will further compromise the agency’s internal capacity and jeopardize the quality of education data.



Request

Enable NCES to hire more full-time and permanent staff.

Benefits

- Use taxpayer money more efficiently by relying less on expensive contractors
- Help NCES build internal capacity and staff expertise to solve complex problems
- Avoid the termination of, or cutbacks to, valuable education data programs
- Provide more management flexibility to optimize NCES's operations
- Reinforce NCES status as a principal federal statistical agency as determined by OMB and recommended in the National Academies' *Principles and Practices for a Federal Statistical Agency*

Reinvesting in Educational Data

With adequate FTEs, NCES could do the following:

- Offer new subject assessments on the National Assessment of Educational Progress
- Modernize online tools, helping make data available to outside groups
- Provide more granular data, including state-level assessments
- Update necessary equipment and increase frequency of data collections

Agency	Budget \$M		Staff Size		Ratio of FY16-FY17 Budget (\$M) to Staff	Ratio normalized to ratio median
	FY16	FY17	FY16	FY 17		
BEA	105.1	103.8	499	488	0.21	0.67
BJS	41.0	45.5	57	56	0.77	2.41
BLS	609.0	609.0	2,036	2,035	0.30	0.94
BTS	26.0	26.0	66	68	0.39	1.22
Census	1370.0	1457.0	5,808	7,265	0.22	0.68
EIA	122.0	122.0	326	341	0.37	1.15
ERS	85.4	86.8	346	348	0.25	0.78
NASS	168.4	171.2	1,038	1,037	0.16	0.52
NCES	261.0	258.5	93	95	2.76	8.71
NCHS	160.4	160.4	508	503	0.32	1.00
NCSES	58.3	59.7	50	52	1.16	3.65
ORES	25.9	24.0	67	64	0.38	1.20
SOI	37.8	34.3	117	140	0.28	0.88

The agency names in this table have been abbreviated as follows: Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA); Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS); Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS); Bureau of Transportation Statistics (BTS); Census Bureau (Census); Energy Information Administration (EIA); Economic Research Service (ERS); National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS); National Center for Education Statistics (NCES); National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS); National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, NSF (NCSE); Office of Research, Evaluation, and Statistics, SSA (ORES); Statistics of Income Division, IRS (SOI)