

NCES Collaborative Relationships That Improve Data Quality and Support State and Local Data Capacity

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This paper is part of a series on the role of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in the creation, curation, dissemination, and reporting of education-related data and statistics. Each paper in the series focuses on a set of related NCES studies or programs, or a larger theme, to describe NCES's contributions to measuring the condition and progress of education in the United States. Taken together, the studies and programs discussed contribute to the national education-related data infrastructure and produce a comprehensive source of high-quality data at the K-12 or postsecondary levels, or both. The papers are intended to be easy-to-digest syntheses of information available across a wide variety of sources. While they are not a complete, detailed description of NCES's work, they highlight the value of NCES's activities in order to inform discussions about the future of NCES and education statistics produced at the federal level. The American Statistical Association (ASA) is a leading voice in those discussions, supporting the development of these papers to complement its [Vision and Strategy for Remaking the National Center for Education Statistics](#), as part of its project for [Re-envisioning the National Center for Education Statistics](#). The other papers in this series describe NCES's [foundational data](#) and [data collected from and about school staff](#).

Key Takeaways

- Collaborative relationships (both long-term and one-time partnerships and joint projects) with data providers and data users (e.g., states, localities, education institutions, and researchers) are essential to NCES's ability to produce relevant, trusted, and accurate education statistics, central to its mission of informing decision-makers at all levels on the condition and progress of education.
- NCES maintained collaborative relationships—spanning preschool (PK)-12 and postsecondary education—that collectively improved data best practices, built data infrastructure, developed common standards, and connected different entities within the United States' decentralized education data ecosystem, creating the national education data infrastructure that exists today.
- Because participation in these collaborative relationships is voluntary and competes with many priorities, the relationships must be cultivated with resources, trust, and a sense of value and purpose.
- NCES's collaborative relationships were terminated or significantly reduced in early 2025. While their outputs to that point remain publicly available and the data infrastructure they helped build continues to serve states, localities, and education institutions, they are no longer identifying and addressing issues that impact the education data ecosystem. The effect of their absence on data infrastructure and the quality of education statistics will be seen over time.

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Overview of NCES’s Collaborative Relationships with State and Local Education Agencies, Institutions of Higher Education, and Researchers

Data on education are created and compiled by different entities within the United States’ decentralized education data ecosystem, including the federal government, state and local education agencies (SEAs and LEAs/districts), education institutions, school staff, researchers, and even students and parents. To help produce objective, accurate, and relevant statistics from these data, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) cultivated collaborative relationships among many of these entities. For example, NCES served SEAs and LEAs by providing them with support to meet their internal data needs. A primary way NCES did this was by coordinating activities among states to reduce costs for operating statewide student longitudinal data systems (SLDS). In turn, SEAs and LEAs provided data from their systems to NCES and other offices within the Department of Education to meet federal data reporting requirements. NCES then generated statistics from those data that SEAs and LEAs could use to benchmark themselves. The mutually beneficial relationships that NCES cultivated with its data providers and data users within the data ecosystem facilitated the development of education data infrastructure over time and improved various dimensions of data quality, including coherence, accuracy, reliability, relevance, and integrity. This resulted in better data for decision-making¹ at the federal, state, local, and institution levels.²

This paper discusses specific collaborative relationships NCES has had with state and local education agency staff, institutions of higher education, and researchers that resulted in better data for decision-making and that, over time, have become integral to the development and maintenance of the national education data ecosystem.³ Before doing so, it highlights the reasons why NCES is ideally situated to cultivate such relationships.

¹ Through the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 (The Evidence Act, Public Law 115–435), Congress requires that federal agencies make their data available and develop statistical evidence to support policymaking. States have similar requirements through federal and state law. These requirements work in tandem with NCES’s longstanding mission as the nation’s collector and provider of statistics on the condition of education in the United States. *Effective* policymaking requires high-quality evidence because “inferior quality data can result in misleading information and poor decisions” (FCSM 2020).

² For a complete discussion of data quality and its dimensions, see the [FCSM Data Quality Framework](#).

³ Most of the collaborative relationships described in this paper were terminated or have been dormant or significantly reduced in scope as of March 2025. However, the outputs of the relationship are publicly available on the NCES website and continue to be resources for stakeholders in the education data ecosystem. The paper variously uses past and present tense in recognition of these circumstances.

How did NCES's collaborative relationships promote better data quality?

The federal government relies on different sources within the education data ecosystem for the information needed to generate official education-related statistics, evaluate education policy, and make programmatic decisions, including the allocation of funding. For example, for NCES's Common Core of Data (CCD), which provides foundational statistics on all public PK-12 education institutions in the United States, LEAs first submit administrative data to SEAs. SEAs then submit those data, most in aggregate form, to NCES. After NCES processes the data, it makes them available to other federal offices for their needs, such as the calculation and distribution of Title I funding. Thus, the quality of federal data is highly dependent on the quality of data provided by others. NCES's collaborative relationship activities improved the quality of education data by addressing some key factors associated with data quality.

Willingness to participate and relevance for data providers. NCES generates statistics on topics specified by Congress in the Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002 (ESRA, 20 U.S.C. § 9541), which hold varied degrees of relevance for different education stakeholders. Lack of relevance can negatively affect participation in voluntary collections, and with a few notable exceptions, participation in NCES data collections is voluntary. The success of NCES data collections—and, therefore, the accuracy and reliability of the data NCES collects and disseminates—are dependent upon the willingness of education agencies, educational institutions, and individuals to provide requested information. Willingness is increased when participation is not overly burdensome, when respondents see value in their participation, and when respondents feel the information collected is relevant for themselves or the broader education system. Through collaborative relationships, NCES and the data providers built a mutual interest in collecting data that were of high quality and could be used to meet both the federal government's and the data providers' various analytic and reporting needs. Also, with better understanding of why information was collected and the format in which it had to be provided, reporting burden was reduced.

Consistency and standardization. There is a diverse array of institutions and education organizations operating within the education data ecosystem, all of which have their own data needs and methods for collecting data. This can result in variation in the information collected and maintained. In order to produce high-quality national-level statistics, as well as data that are comparable across student groups, schools, districts, and states, the data reported by respondents must be coherent, or consistent—that is, reported based on the same definition, using the same response values or categories, in every instance in which the data are collected (e.g., by respondents within a given data collection as well as across time). Through collaborative relationships with its data providers, NCES gathered feedback on the information the providers already collected and worked with them to standardize the way information was collected and reported.

Relevance and utility for data users. NCES data must be relevant to a diverse array of institutions, education organizations, and individuals for the data to be used for research and policymaking; without relevance, there is no value in collecting the data. Through collaborative relationships with its data users, NCES gathered feedback on the information the users needed, allowing NCES to collect and disseminate relevant information in a way that was more accessible.

NCES's Role in Coordinating Collaborative Relationships That Resulted in Better Data and the Emergence of a National Education Data Infrastructure

NCES's location and purpose within the education data ecosystem made NCES well situated to facilitate the development of mutually beneficial relationships with and among entities composing the ecosystem, as well as lead in the development of a national education data infrastructure.

- *Trusted actor.* As a national governmental body, NCES had the resources and reputation to coordinate across all educational institutions and state and local education agencies in the United States.
- *Long-term commitment and investment.* The federal government has produced education statistics with a mission to report on the “condition and progress of education” for more than 150 years.⁴ Congress reaffirms the importance of this mission each year by funding NCES's work through the appropriations process. The federal government, which provides information for the public good, has the resources and stability necessary for long-term investment in the collection and dissemination of high-quality data across time. As a result, data infrastructure and standards can be maintained and enhanced long term, and changes in important education indicators can be evaluated across time. Traditionally, SEAs, LEAs, and education institutions at both the K-12 and postsecondary levels have had confidence that the federal government would be a source of assistance as they made significant investments in their own data systems and adopted data standards.
- *Methodological and content area expertise.* Located within the U.S. Department of Education and staffed by content and methodological experts who understood education data and had expertise in data governance, NCES was uniquely positioned to partner with education stakeholders to produce high-quality data. This positioning is also why Congress tasked NCES with chronicling the school reform efforts of the 1990s, which emphasized assessment, accountability, and reporting, and then working with states to build their capacity to collect and report the standardized data needed to assess the effectiveness of those reforms.⁵
- *Consistency resulting in higher-quality data.* Having one organization organize data quality activities helps to ensure consistency in the data provided by a diverse array of

⁴ The first Department of Education was created in 1867 by Congress, which charged the Commissioner of Education to submit a report to Congress on the condition and progress of education in the various states and territories ([Federal Education Data Collection: Celebrating 150 Years](#)). Over time, the organization producing education statistics has carried a variety of names, but its mission to submit to Congress information on the condition of education has remained unchanged. Today this organization is the National Center for Education Statistics.

⁵ The Improving America's Schools Act of 1994, Pub. L. No. 103–382, tit. IV, § 404(a)(1)(A), 108 Stat. 3518, gave NCES the responsibility for collecting, analyzing, and reporting data on state and local education-reform activities. It also reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in a form intended to support state standards-based reform. (For more, see [Overview and Inventory of State Education Reforms: 1990 to 2000](#)). Building state capacity is the purpose of the State Longitudinal Data System (SLDS) grants and technical assistance, for which Congress gave NCES responsibility in ESRA.

institutions and education organizations. Consistency is critical for valid comparisons across student groups, schools, districts, states, and countries.

- *Efficient coordination of activities, reducing overall burden and improving data quality.* Having one organization coordinate activities related to data best practices, including the development of collection and reporting standards, among educational entities at all levels is efficient; reduces burden on states, districts, and postsecondary institutions because they do not have to do this work separately and independently; and results in higher-quality data (relevant, coherent, accurate, reliable, and secure) that are useful for a variety of stakeholders.

NCES's Collaborative Relationships

This section describes specific collaborative relationships, which are summarized in Table 1 below. Some of the relationships were long-standing while others were one-time projects focused on a specific goal. For each relationship, an overall description⁶ and examples of key activities are provided, and the benefits of the relationship and its activities are discussed. Links to resources for more detailed information can be found in the section “For More Information.”

Table 1: Overview of NCES collaborative relationships

Partnership/project	Legal authorization and/or requirement	Area of focus related to data quality or capacity ¹			
		Best practices	Data systems infrastructure	Developing data standards	Facilitating connections among SEAs/LEAs ²
National Forum on Education Statistics (NFES)	P.L. 100-297 20 U.S.C. § 9547	P	I	P (SCED ³)	P
National Postsecondary Education Cooperative (NPEC)	P.L. 100-297 20 U.S.C. § 9547	P			
Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems (SLDS)	20 U.S.C. § 9607 (Grants); 20 U.S.C. § 9543(a)(4) (Technical Assistance)	P	P	I	P
Common Education Data Standards (CEDS)	20 U.S.C. § 9543(a)(5)	P	P	P	P
Data collection coordinators	20 U.S.C. §9543(a)(4) 20 U.S.C. §9543(b) 20 U.S.C. §9544(a) 20 U.S.C. §9622(b)(6)	P			
One-time special projects: Graduation rates	20 U.S.C. §9543(a)(9)	P		P	

¹ P = Principal focus of the partnership/project. I = The partnership/project included work addressing this area as part of its efforts to improve data quality and/or capacity but it was not a principal focus of the partnership/project.

² SEA = State Education Agency. LEA = Local Education Agency.

³ SCED = School Courses for the Exchange of Data.

⁶ Much of the description for these collaborative relationships is taken directly, sometimes verbatim, from publicly available NCES sources.

National Forum on Education Statistics (NFES)

Description

The National Forum on Education Statistics (NFES, referred to as the Forum) was established by NCES in 1989⁷ as a voluntary organization comprising staff from federal, state, and local education agencies who engaged in activities to improve the accuracy, comparability, and utility of elementary and secondary (i.e., PK-12) education data. Forum activities covered different types of education data used for a wide range of purposes, including internal SEA/LEA/institution administrative purposes, federal reporting for statistical and accountability purposes, and programmatic purposes: for example, to inform policy decisions at the state and local levels. Forum members collaborated to develop free resources on education data issues of interest to schools, SEAs, and LEAs. These resources included best practice guides, online courses, videos, printable templates for data tasks, and the School Courses for the Exchange of Data (SCED) course classification system.

As of early 2025, when the Forum became inactive, the Forum membership included NCES staff; representatives from SEAs and LEAs in each of the 50 states (who were appointed by their respective chief state school officers), the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico, as well as representatives from education agencies in the outlying areas (American Samoa, Guam, Northern Mariana Islands, U.S. Virgin Islands); and national organizations with an interest in elementary and secondary education data. The Forum met regularly to address both general and specific education data issues relevant to NCES and programs within the U.S. Department of Education, SEAs, LEAs, and schools.

The Forum achieved its mission and objectives primarily through the deliberations and work of the Forum Steering Committee, which included the NCES project leader; three standing committees that were designed to address the major interests of members of the Cooperative System, each of which included an NCES staff member; and the input of Forum members at large.⁸ While non-NCES steering and standing committee members generally decided on the topics to be addressed and the resources to be produced each year, NCES staff, with the support of a contractor, coordinated and facilitated all of the Forum work, from managing the process by which Forum members and officers (e.g., chair, vice chair) were nominated and selected, to scheduling, hosting, and facilitating all meetings, and providing resources for the development of all Forum products, including quality assurance reviews before product release on an NCES-hosted website.

⁷ The National Cooperative Education Statistics System was first established by the Hawkins-Stafford Education Improvement Amendments of 1988 (Public Law 100-297) to “produce and maintain, with the cooperation of the states, comparable and uniform educational information and data that are useful for policy making at the federal, state, and local levels.” It was reaffirmed in ESRA, 20 U.S.C. § 9547.

⁸ [National Forum on Education Statistics - About the Forum](#)

Highlighted Activities

➤ [School Courses for the Exchange of Data](#) (SCED) course classification system

One of the most significant products produced by the Forum was the School Courses for the Exchange of Data (SCED) course classification system. SCED provides a systematic, consistent schema for identifying, or coding, courses offered at the elementary, middle, and secondary levels. It is based on a five-digit course code that provides a basic structure for classifying course content. Additional SCED elements and attributes provide descriptive information about each course.

Secondary SCED codes first were developed and released in 2007, and “prior-to-secondary” codes (i.e., those reflecting elementary and middle school courses) were added in 2011. The coding system was designed to be flexible and allow for updating as course offerings and descriptions change over time. Until 2025, SCED was voluntarily maintained and updated regularly by a work group comprising Forum members using a systematic process that maintained the structure and integrity of the established SCED standards, to ensure the codes continued to reflect current course offerings and SEA/LEA/institutional needs. Without such coordinated and systematic updating, SCED is at risk of becoming unstandardized and outdated and, therefore, of little value.

➤ Forum Guides

Each year, the Forum members collaboratively decided upon a set of data-related topics of interest to the field, for which work groups would produce best practice guides. Several guides produced in recent years are listed below.⁹

- The [Forum Guide to Data Quality](#) provides best practices for creating, improving, and maintaining data quality as agencies regularly review (and when needed, revise) their methods for working with data.
- The [Forum Guide to Data Literacy](#) was designed to help education agencies understand and build data literacy skills and a culture of data quality among various stakeholder groups, such as administrators, teachers, students, parents and other caregivers, school board members, legislators, and community groups.
- The [Forum Guide to Data Governance](#) highlights the multiple ways that data governance programs can benefit education agencies. It addresses the management, collection, use, and communication of education data; the development of effective and clearly defined data systems and policies to handle the complexity and necessary protection of data; and the continuous monitoring and decision-making needed in a regularly shifting data landscape.
- The [Forum Guide to Education Data Privacy](#) was developed as a resource for SEAs and LEAs to use in assisting school staff in protecting the confidentiality of student data in instructional and administrative practices. SEAs and LEAs may also find the guide useful in developing privacy programs and related professional development programs.
- The [Forum Guide to Discipline Data](#) is intended to help education agencies improve the effectiveness of efforts to collect, manage, and use discipline data, including using discipline

⁹ Guide descriptions are taken nearly verbatim from [National Forum on Education Statistics - Publications](#). A full list of Forum publications can be found at this link.

data to improve student outcomes and reporting accurate and timely data to the federal government.

- [Using Education Indicators: A Forum Guide for State and Local Education Agencies](#) highlights best practices for using indicators, adjustments over time to the collection and use of indicators, shifts in types of relevant indicators, and what possibilities LEAs and SEAs see for the effective use of indicators in the future.
- The [Forum Guide to Metadata](#) examines the ways in which metadata can be used by education agencies to improve data quality and promote a better understanding of education data.

Benefits of Forum Activities

✓ Forum activities were initiated, facilitated, and coordinated by NCES, while Forum members decided which specific topics to address and which products to develop each year. Thus, the federal government provided the leadership necessary for state-to-state collaboration that would not have been possible if states had to facilitate (and fund) this collaborative work with their own resources. In addition, the Forum products reflected the needs of those working with data in PK-12 schools, making them relevant for and providing a direct benefit to the field. Because the content was written by practitioners, the materials also use language familiar to the field, making them accessible to the audience.

✓ Coordination of efforts by NCES through the Forum saved SEAs and LEAs significant funds over the years as they did not have to independently develop data structures and practices. Thus, not only did Forum activities make data operations more efficient at the national level, they also streamlined operations for the individual SEAs and LEAs. These coordination activities are most appropriately located within the federal government because they benefit all states without any one state having to bear the burden thereof.

✓ Data collectors and providers in SEAs and LEAs have free access to expert guidance on processes and practices that result in higher-quality data. Widespread use of the best practice guides results in greater consistency in data processes and practices across SEAs and LEAs, which can result in more consistent and, therefore, more comparable data reported to the federal government and available for their own use.

✓ Use of the Forum-produced materials reduces burden at the state and local levels. For example, information on data-related best practices could be disseminated more easily because the materials were readily available; SEA and LEA staff did not need to create these materials themselves, saving their organizations time and money. As another example, the SCED coding structure could be shared widely and understood easily, thereby reducing burden by reducing the need for multiple rounds of data translation and data checking.¹⁰

✓ The Forum provided a mechanism for staff from different organizations at different levels within the decentralized U.S. educational data ecosystem to work together, voluntarily, toward a common goal of improving data available for decision-making at the local, state, and national levels. It was a collaborative effort through which SEA and LEA staff could encourage

¹⁰ [Forum Guide to Understanding the School Courses for the Exchange of Data \(SCED\) Classification System](#)

data-related best practices in their organizations, rather than a top-down effort of forced compliance from the federal government.

✓ Forum activities, particularly the annual meeting organized and funded by NCES, created opportunities for mutually beneficial conversations among federal staff and SEA/LEA staff.

- SEA/LEA staff shared their experiences with one another, which promoted the voluntary expansion of data-related processes and practices that worked well across SEAs/LEAs.
- Feedback from SEAs/LEAs helped the federal government better understand the data needs and data-related challenges of SEAs/LEAs. For example, NCES staff requested feedback from Forum members on challenges they would face when implementing the [2024 Office of Management and Budget’s revised standards for collecting and reporting data on race and ethnicity](#). With information on data-related challenges, NCES staff could evaluate areas where data quality might be negatively affected and strategize ways to address those challenges, with the goal of improving data quality. Fewer challenges resulted in less difficulty to participate, which tends to lower perceived burden and increase willingness to participate.
- SEA and LEA staff interacted directly with federal staff from Department of Education program offices outside of NCES (e.g., staff working on the Civil Rights Data Collection, staff from the Student Privacy Office) during discussions on data-related topics of critical importance that were organized by the Forum. For example, training on data security and student privacy with staff from the Office of the Chief Information Officer and/or the Privacy Office was frequently included in webinars and meeting presentations. Emphasizing these topics helped to promote a strong culture around data integrity, which is a dimension of data quality. It also helped to address Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)–related concerns some SEA and LEA staff expressed about providing student information to others.¹¹ With training on how to provide student information without violating FERPA, SEAs and LEAs were more willing to do so, resulting in more complete data reported for statistical and research purposes.

✓ NCES articulated the value of School Courses for the Exchange of Data (SCED) across many documents, including reports and FAQs. According to NCES, SCED is “widely used in the PK-12 education data community because of its usefulness in facilitating the exchange of transcript information, establishing and maintaining longitudinal data systems, and providing a standard for course comparisons. SCED also benefits organizations that use PK-12 course information for program monitoring and college admissions and facilitates education research at different levels, including National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) transcript studies.”¹² Further, it can “streamline data reporting processes and promote the collection of

¹¹ FERPA generally prohibits educational institutions from disclosing student information without parental consent, with specific exceptions. NCES’s statistical data collections are exceptions, but this is not always clear to SEA/LEA staff.

¹² [Forum Guide to Understanding the School Courses for the Exchange of Data \(SCED\) Classification System](#)

useful, high-quality data. SCED provides a structured method for transferring course information as students relocate or advance from one education setting to the next.”¹³

- Student mobility can present challenges to school systems that need to understand the curriculum to which students transferring into their systems have been exposed. The development and annual updating of SCED provided a common framework for categorizing and understanding the diverse array of courses offered across the approximately 13,000 school systems in the United States.
- Use of SCED by practitioners and researchers also allows for a better understanding of the differences in coursework to which students are exposed, which can help to explain differences in achievement and other educational outcomes, as well as uncover areas of inequity.
- School systems have used SCED for a variety of activities. For example, the Iowa Department of Education has used data aligned with SCED to produce annual statistics on the percentage of students taking particular courses, including AP courses; as inputs into the calculation of a student’s Regent Admission Index (RAI) score, which is used to determine whether the student can be automatically admitted into Iowa State University, the University of Iowa, and the University of Northern Iowa; to respond to data requests from legislators, researchers, and the public; and to ensure that schools are meeting state legal requirements to offer and teach courses in a number of curricular areas in grades 9 through 12 every year. It has also created a crosswalk between teacher licensure endorsements and SCED.¹⁴

National Postsecondary Education Cooperative (NPEC)

Description

Established by NCES in 1995,⁷ the National Postsecondary Education Cooperative’s mission was to “promote the quality, comparability, and utility of postsecondary data and information that support policy development at the federal, state, and institution levels.”¹⁵ NPEC members came from all sectors of the postsecondary education community, including federal agencies, postsecondary institutions, associations, and other organizations with a major interest in postsecondary education data collection. They advised on the content of NCES postsecondary data collections, as well as the information that was released, including in what format, from these collections.

NPEC was composed of two panels: NPEC-IPEDS and NPEC-Sample Surveys (NPEC-S). NPEC-IPEDS was tasked with developing a research and development agenda for the Integrated

¹³ [SCED Frequently Asked Questions](#)

¹⁴ For more detail on Iowa DOE’s use of SCED, as well as the ways in which other states have used SCED, see the [Forum Guide to School Courses for the Exchange of Data Uses and Benefits](#).

¹⁵ [National Postsecondary Education Cooperative \(NPEC\) | IES](#)

Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), a mandatory data collection¹⁶ through which NCES collects information from all Title IV postsecondary institutions in the United States. NPEC-Sample Surveys was designed to provide high-level guidance on studies collecting information from statistically selected samples of postsecondary students and institutions, including the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS),¹⁷ the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS), and the Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study (B&B). These sample-based studies focused on postsecondary students, rather than institutions, and collected detailed information about the students' postsecondary educational experiences and outcomes that could not be collected through IPEDS. The two longitudinal studies followed students over time to investigate the long-term effects of postsecondary education, including taking out loans to pay for it.

The NPEC panels also intermittently produced products for use by postsecondary data providers, users, and institutional representatives. Panel meetings were convened as needed to inform upcoming IPEDS and sample survey data collections.

Highlighted Activities

➤ NPEC-IPEDS provided input on IPEDS data collections. For example, the panel advised on improving the IPEDS admissions survey ([Improving and Expanding the IPEDS Admissions Survey Component](#)); the feasibility of combining three separate IPEDS survey components (the IPEDS Graduation Rates [GR], 200% Graduation Rates [GR200], and Outcome Measures [OM] surveys) into one to reduce burden on institutions ([Developing a Single Student Outcome Survey Component: Merging IPEDS Graduation Rates, Graduation Rates 200, and Outcome Measures](#)); and improving College Navigator ([Unlocking Potential: Recommendations for Improving the College Navigator Tool for the Future of Higher Education](#)).

➤ NPEC-S provided input to improve and enhance NCES postsecondary data collections other than IPEDS. For example, in 2017, the panel released a paper called [Leveraging Administrative Data to Strengthen NCES Postsecondary Sample Surveys](#), which considered the benefits of adding data from different administrative data sources to the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS).

Benefits of NPEC Activities

✓ Participation in IPEDS is required for all postsecondary institutions in the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and other jurisdictions that participate in any federal student financial aid program authorized by Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended. That makes IPEDS a key vehicle for obtaining complete data on different aspects of postsecondary education that can be reported by institutions. For this reason, requests from Congress, the

¹⁶ The Higher Education Act of 1964, as amended, requires postsecondary institutions that receive funding allocated through Title IV to provide data annually to the Department of Education; currently the data are provided through the IPEDS collections.

¹⁷ NPSAS meets a Congressional mandate for the Commissioner of Education Statistics to collect and report data on use of federal funding to pay for postsecondary education, as required in the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 (HEOA 2008, 20 U.S.C. §1015(a)(k)).

Executive branch, researchers, and other entities interested in higher education data to add new content to IPEDS are not uncommon. However, participation in IPEDS creates reporting burden for postsecondary institutions, and the additional burden on Institutional Research offices and any staff responsible for federal reporting has to be evaluated when proposals for content are considered. A key consideration is whether institutions already collect and maintain the content being requested; if not, institutional burden would be increased, sometimes significantly, by adding new content as an IPEDS reporting requirement. Having a group of experts external to the federal government (NPEC-IPEDS) advise on the types of research IPEDS should facilitate, and therefore what content it should include, helped ensure that the burden from reporting would be worthwhile because of the valuable data it would produce for decision-making.¹⁸

✓ Participation in NCES postsecondary data collections other than IPEDS is voluntary. When the burden of participating is higher, participation tends to be lower, which can negatively affect the quality of the data collected because the data would not be complete. Thus, NCES staff had to be particularly sensitive to the reporting burden for NPSAS, BPS, and B&B. Similar to NPEC-IPEDS, having a group of experts external to the federal government (NPEC-S) advise on the types of research these studies should facilitate, and therefore what content they should include, helped ensure that the burden from reporting would be worthwhile because of the value of the data collected.

✓ NPEC provided a mechanism for postsecondary education data users (e.g., institutional research staff at institutions of higher education, academic researchers, and staff at postsecondary associations) to tell NCES staff what data already being collected were useful, what data already being collected were no longer useful and/or had data quality issues (for example, inaccuracies in what was being reported), and what data were not being collected but should be in order to address gaps in understanding of the postsecondary education context and experiences. This helped NCES ensure that the data being collected and disseminated were relevant and accurate.

✓ Feedback from staff at postsecondary institutions who were responsible for providing data to the federal government (either to NCES or to program offices for accountability purposes) helped NCES staff better understand the institutions' challenges in responding to data requests. For example, when new data elements were proposed for inclusion in a data collection, postsecondary institution staff could indicate whether their institution already collected the information and in what format, or whether their institution would need to begin collecting the information and how long it would take them to be able to meet new reporting requirements. With this information, NCES staff could strategize ways to address institutions' challenges, with the goal of making reporting easier and improving data quality. NCES staff could also decide not to collect new information if doing so would be overly burdensome and/or the quality of the data collected would not be good enough to justify their collection.

¹⁸ External input on IPEDS and other NCES data collections is also received in other ways, such as requests for public comment through the Federal Register process and through technical review panels convened by data collection contractors.

✓ NPEC reports contained direct, informed recommendations from people in the field who provide data and/or use NCES data and products. This gave NCES actionable information to improve the accuracy and utility of postsecondary education data available for decision-making.

Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems (SLDS)

Description

In Title II of the Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002, Congress directed the establishment of a program to “award grants, on a competitive basis, to state educational agencies to enable such agencies to design, develop, and implement statewide, longitudinal data systems to efficiently and accurately manage, analyze, disaggregate, and use individual student data” (ESRA, 20 U.S.C. § 9607). In response to this statute, NCES established and administered the Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems (SLDS) Grant Program, staffed by NCES program officers and supported by contracted program analysts.¹⁹ Between 2006 and 2023, the SLDS Grant Program awarded approximately \$934 million in competitive grants to help states design, develop, implement, and expand their longitudinal data systems covering early learning through the workforce (P-20W). Based on the principle that better decisions require better information, the state longitudinal data systems were intended to “help states, districts, schools, educators, and other stakeholders make data-informed decisions to improve student learning and outcomes, as well as to facilitate research to increase student achievement and close achievement gaps,” by enhancing “the ability of states to efficiently and accurately manage, analyze, and use education data, including data from individual student records.”²⁰ By including workforce data in longitudinal data systems in five of the grant rounds (2009, 2010, 2012, 2015, and 2023), the SLDS program supported states’ efforts to understand the labor market outcomes of learners in their states.²¹

In addition to grants, the SLDS program provided a range of data-related services and resources. Authorized through 20 U.S.C. § 9543(a)(4), the SLDS state support team (SST), comprising state data systems experts working on contract with NCES (the equivalent of up to 10 full-time staff, matched in each grant round to state needs and program requirements),²² provided technical assistance related to data systems and data use efforts to all states, including those without active SLDS grants. The SST hosted and facilitated technical assistance calls, webinars, workgroups, workshops, and on-site visits. It also produced best practice briefs

¹⁹ The staffing level in February 2025 was three NCES program officers supported by four contracted program analysts (see [SLDS Staff: Program Officers and Program Analysts](#)). The number of NCES and contractor staff varied across the years the SLDS program was fully active.

²⁰ [Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems Grant Program - About the SLDS Grant Program](#)

²¹ States could propose to add “Workforce” data to their systems in the FY09, FY10, and FY12 grant rounds. In FY15 and FY23, states could apply for “College and Career” funding, which included workforce data. Notably, states used grants focusing on infrastructure also to build out their workforce data capacity. For example, Wyoming used an FY20 infrastructure grant to build dashboards displaying [postsecondary education workforce outcomes in the state](#) and continued that work with an FY23 infrastructure and interoperability grant.

²² See [State Support Team Points of Contact](#) for information on staffing in February 2025. The number of contractor staff on the SST varied across the years the SLDS program was fully active.

and templates with information on effective practices, which were disseminated through the SLDS Public Domain Clearinghouse. Areas of SST assistance included, but were not limited to, project planning and management, stakeholder engagement, data governance, system design, data use, and sustainability. SLDS funding was also used to establish and maintain the U.S. Department of Education’s Privacy and Technical Assistance Center (PTAC), which provided technical assistance regarding privacy, confidentiality, and security practices related to student-level data systems and other uses of student data.²³

Highlighted Activities

➤ As of February 2025, before the SLDS program became inactive at NCES, all 50 states, Washington, DC, American Samoa, Guam, the Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands had received at least one SLDS grant. Grants awarded from 2006 through 2012 were aimed at building state longitudinal data systems and linking data across levels (e.g., PK-12 and postsecondary) and person types (e.g., teachers and students), while grants awarded from 2015 to 2023 were focused on improving the infrastructure of existing SLDS and effectively using the data housed within them.²⁴

➤ The [SLDS Public Domain Clearinghouse](#), created by NCES and housed on the Institute of Education Sciences²⁵ website, is a repository of publicly available resources related to building data systems, maintaining them, and using the data within them. Some of these resources were developed by NCES SLDS staff and/or the NCES SLDS State Support team (through a contract with NCES). Other resources, particularly those that highlight state data policies and practices, reflect collaborative input from SEA staff and were developed with the guidance and support of the SLDS team. The resources include:

- Decision-making tools and templates, such as [the Data Governance Policy and Process Implementation Tool](#), a document with guiding questions and an action planning template to help data governance teams build well-developed, documented, and fully implemented policies and processes for managing data. The tool helps data governance teams to identify gaps, address barriers, and employ strategies to implement a specific policy or process successfully.
- Best practice guides, such as [Scalable Data Use Reporting Standards: A Summary of Best Practices](#), which summarizes tools and guidelines created to support reporting standards and best practices that standardize how resources are shared across states.
- Toolkits, such as one describing resources for [designing, using, and sustaining longitudinal data systems](#).
- Spotlights on specific states’ state longitudinal data systems—for example, on [North Carolina’s Early Childhood Integrated Data System \(ECIDS\)](#).

²³ The SLDS team informed the creation of PTAC based on the requirement in SLDS authorizing language that the SLDS grant process “ensures technical quality (including validity and reliability), promotes linkages across states, and protects student privacy consistent with section 183” 20 U.S.C. § 9607(c)(1). NCES believed this type of assistance was critical for states as they were linking data across sectors and systems for the first time. Although PTAC is currently located in the Department of Education’s Office of the Chief Privacy Officer, NCES staff working on both SLDS and the Forum closely coordinated with staff in the Privacy Office.

²⁴ [About the SLDS Grant Program](#)

²⁵ NCES is one of four centers within the Institute for Education Sciences.

- Webinars on relevant topics of interest or importance for states—for example, on [Key Elements of Effective ECIDS Data Governance](#) and [Using SLDS Data to Support College Admissions](#).
- Through 2025 the SLDS team hosted an annual best practices conference that served as a forum for dialogue, collaboration, and the sharing of best practices among representatives from the states, Washington, DC, and territories.
- Through PTAC, education stakeholders had access to a Student Privacy Help Desk, which offered assistance on student privacy issues to the education community via phone or email; privacy and security training materials developed by Department of Education staff with expertise in student privacy; technical assistance webinars and site visits from department staff with expertise in student privacy; and privacy-focused regional meetings and forums. PTAC and the SLDS Grant Program coordinated closely to support states' efforts to ensure student privacy. For example, PTAC staff reviewed data security and privacy documentation provided by states with their SLDS annual performance reports and participated in SLDS site visits, which included a meeting about data security and privacy.

Benefits of SLDS Activities

- ✓ Developing any data system, especially one at a scale as large as the state level, is resource intensive. With funding provided by the federal government, state education agencies were able to invest in the staff and infrastructure needed to develop their systems, thereby building data capacity. Without the SLDS program, it is likely that SEAs with fewer resources would not have been able to develop or expand their own systems, making their ability to respond to federal data requests more difficult and resulting in a lack of high-quality data for decision-making. NCES started tracking SLDS capacity in 2012. By 2020, the last year for which SLDS capacity data are publicly available, the number of states that could automatically link K-12 and early childhood data had risen from 8 to 32.²⁶ By 2020, 36 states could automatically link K-12 and postsecondary data, up from 9 in 2012. Nineteen states could automatically link both postsecondary and workforce data to K-12 data, up from just 5 in 2012.²⁷
- ✓ NCES was a trusted source of technical assistance related to data system development and data use, including what is legally permissible under FERPA and other federal privacy laws. Grantees could draw on the expertise and experience of NCES and contractor staff, all of whom previously had worked in or for an SEA, while developing their large-scale data systems. Each grantee was assigned specific NCES and NCES contractor staff to provide personalized

²⁶ NCES asked states if they had an automatic linking process in place to differentiate automatic processes that could link groups of records across systems from more manual processes. While reporting on more manual, less automatic processes may have yielded reports of high(er) state capacity, the SLDS program was primarily interested in identifying where infrastructure supporting an automatic cross-sector data linkage existed, given the SLDS program's mandates for "improving and automating statistical and data collection activities" and making grants to "efficiently and accurately manage data."

²⁷ Connecting K-12 data to workforce data is complicated by the lack of comparable identifiers in both sets of data. As a result, it can be challenging to follow students who enter the workforce directly from K-12 education over time. The SLDS program provided technical assistance to states on different approaches for following students, such as using [DMV data to help bridge K-12 and workforce data records](#).

assistance from someone who was knowledgeable about their state's system. Without this centralized assistance, *states have to contract for technical support individually*, which is more expensive and can lead to inconsistencies across data systems and in guidance about allowable uses.

✓ By funding PTAC, NCES made it possible for *any* state, district, PK-12 school, or postsecondary institution to receive free assistance on student privacy issues, including those related to FERPA. This enabled these education stakeholders to obtain support on issues that they might not have known they needed, before any student privacy issues that emerged rose to the level of requiring federal intervention from the Department of Education's Student Privacy Officer, who was responsible for ensuring that SEAs, LEAs, and education institutions were complying with federal privacy laws. Providing this assistance also reinforced the fact that data security and privacy are critical considerations in data governance and data use that should be built into an SLDS program rather than considered as an add-on after a system is built.

✓ Data collected across states became more standardized (coherent), accurate, and reliable. NCES staff, with their expert knowledge of federal reporting requirements (e.g., for *EDFacts*²⁸), could advise grantees on how to ensure their systems collected and maintained data that met those requirements: for example, by ensuring that data elements used required data definitions and response formats. Also, the SLDS program staff coordinated with the *EDFacts* team to address data quality issues: for example, to identify *EDFacts* data collections that were particularly challenging for states and to provide direct support related to *EDFacts* collections during SLDS grant check-in calls and on-site visits. Development and use of SLDS therefore improved the quality of data reported to the federal government and available for states' own uses.

✓ With a top-level view of all states' efforts related to longitudinal data systems, NCES staff were able to highlight effective practices and uses of data, making connections between state-level staff, so states could learn from one another. For example, NCES coordinated a [webinar](#) highlighting efforts by North Dakota, Idaho, and Iowa to use SLDS data to support college admissions. Representatives from these states also shared lessons they learned about implementing their college admissions programs and planned enhancements. Case studies published by the SLDS team demonstrate the value of SLDS data by showing how states have used data from their SLDS to inform their decision-making. For example, Idaho uses data from their SLDS to identify students who qualify for direct, automatic admission to its state postsecondary institutions, as well as to evaluate the formula used to identify those students.

✓ Coordination with other SEA- and LEA-facing support programs throughout the Institute of Education Sciences and across federal data system initiatives, including the Forum (discussed above), Regional Education Labs (RELS), *EDFacts*, CEDS (discussed below), the Department of

²⁸ *EDFacts* is the centralized system used by the Department of Education (ED) to efficiently collect data from SEAs for statistical and accountability purposes. As the primary data collection agency within ED, NCES was responsible for the administration of *EDFacts*.

Labor (DoL), and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) reduced redundancies in and identified needs for technical assistance activities. Examples include the following:

- The Forum members and SLDS team collaborated to produce the Traveling Through Time series, a four-volume introduction to the SLDS program (see, for example, [Traveling Through Time: The Forum Guide to Longitudinal Data Systems Book III: Effectively Managing LDS Data](#)).
- SLDS program officers involved the ED*Facts* and PTAC teams in planning support for SLDS grantee teams to provide opportunities to discuss data quality, use, and privacy.
- SLDS program officers collaborated with the DoL's Workforce Data Quality Initiative Grants and with the HHS's Preschool Development Grants Birth Through 5 to proactively address data linkage concerns and data quality issues and to help states use grant funds to build interoperable data systems. The SLDS program encouraged state early childhood and workforce data experts to attend the SLDS Best Practices Conference and receive shared technical assistance, which sometimes included presentations by HHS and DoL representatives.

Common Education Data Standards (CEDS)

Description

The Common Education Data Standards (CEDS) is an education standards and data management program aimed at standardizing a specified set of the most common education data elements used within and across P-20W institutions and sectors. It provides data collectors and users "the ability to communicate via a common language ... using consistent and comparable data throughout all education levels and sectors."²⁹ The program fulfills Congress's requirement that NCES determine "voluntary standards and guidelines to assist state educational agencies in developing statewide longitudinal data systems that link individual student data ..., promote linkages across states, and protect student privacy ... to improve student academic achievement and close achievement gaps (ESRA, 20 U.S.C. § 9543(a)(5)." The CEDS program includes multiple components, including a common vocabulary, data models that reflect that vocabulary, tools to help education stakeholders understand and use education data, an assembly of metadata for other education data initiatives, and a community of education stakeholders who collaborate to expand the standards and use CEDS resources.

CEDS evolved from NCES's Handbooks, which were developed in the 1970s "to improve the consistency of data definitions and data maintenance, so that education data can be more accurately aggregated and analyzed. The Handbooks were intended to serve as a reference document for K-12 public and private education agencies, schools, early childhood centers, and other educational institutions, as well as for researchers involved in the collection of education data."³⁰

²⁹ [Why CEDS - why-ceds.pdf](#)

³⁰ [Common Education Data Standards \(CEDS\)](#)

CEDS was initially developed by NCES with the assistance of a CEDS Stakeholder Group that included representatives from states, districts, institutions of higher education, state higher education agencies, early childhood organizations, federal program offices, interoperability standards organizations, and key education associations and nonprofit organizations. Over time, NCES staff were instrumental in growing the community of education data practitioners using CEDs; developing and implementing systematic processes for proposing, evaluating, and making changes to CEDS; and producing tools and resources to make it easier for states and other entities to build new data systems based on CEDS or incorporate CEDS into their existing data systems.

Like SCED, it is a voluntary effort that supports “the effective exchange of data within and across states, as students transition between educational sectors and levels, and for federal reporting.”³¹ Whereas SCED is focused specifically on course descriptions and codings for K-12 education, CEDS is more expansive. It is not limited to K-12 education or students/individuals and covers numerous data elements that might be commonly included in states’ data systems: for example, programs offered by an educational institution in which a student might be involved, credentials awarded to a student, information about school facilities, information about available learning resources, and institutional accreditors.

Highlighted Activities

- [CEDS Ontology](#) is a searchable list of terms or fields applicable to, and therefore that may be used within, an education-related data system. The list includes terms, definitions, option sets, relationships, and technical specifications. The machine-readable, connected, semantic structure moves beyond a flat list of definitions, enabling systems to understand not just *what* data mean but *how* they relate to everything else in the education ecosystem.
- The [CEDS Data Models](#) include the ontology, an integrated data store for transactional storage of data based on the standard, and a CEDS Data Warehouse that states can use for longitudinal storage of their data and efficient reporting. Together, these models support users’ needs, from adopting a standard for greater data clarity to using CEDS-aligned data for reporting, to implementing a CEDS Data Warehouse to meet data collection, storage, and reporting needs.
- CEDS Align, Connect, and myConnect are online tools useful for education stakeholders who are compiling and managing data that they want to align with the common standards. For example, Align enables stakeholders across the P-20W spectrum to align (or map) their data dictionaries to CEDS. The alignment creates a map that can be used with CEDS reports to see how a data dictionary aligns with the CEDS standard or with other standards in the field. The reports can also help states identify where data properties are missing or where duplicate collection efforts are occurring within their systems. Connect helps stakeholders across the P-20W spectrum to analyze data for research and policy purposes by providing a mechanism for

³¹ See [Common Education Data Standards](#) and [Common Education Data Standards \(CEDS\)](#).

defining and calculating metrics and indicators such as graduation rates, program enrollment, and academic outcomes.

➤ Generate is a tool that aligns state-provided data with CEDS standards (and therefore with data from other states whose data align with CEDS and need or want to share data with one another) to generate the data files that are required to be submitted to the Department of Education through the *EDFacts* program.

➤ CEDS includes an open-source community of education stakeholders where anyone can obtain CEDS resources, free of charge, to build their data systems. Members of the community collaborate to revise or expand the standards, data models, and tools to meet their needs by following a standardized process for revisions and additions. The CEDS community includes participants from throughout the education data ecosystem, including, for example, state P-20W teams, federal program offices, researchers, and vendors in the education data space.

Benefits of CEDS Activities

✓ Public and private entities from across the P-20W education spectrum participated in the creation of the standards and developed a process by which the standards could be revised and enhanced over time. Thus, the standards reflect the consensus of those who would use them, which makes them more likely to be used. NCES coordinated the development work, including the collaboration of a diverse set of educational entities.

✓ As the facilitator of the U.S. Department of Education's data collections through the *EDFacts* system, NCES ensured that CEDS were consistent with *EDFacts* reporting requirements for attributes such as data definitions and response formats. As a result, states can use the data in their systems to meet federal government requirements with no additional burden. States are assured that their data align with federal requirements as long as the data are aligned with CEDS, and the quality of the data submitted to the government is therefore improved.

✓ Data aligned with CEDS will be more consistent regardless of who provides the data at the local or state level. This improves data quality and "increases data interoperability, portability, and comparability within and across states, districts, and higher education organizations,"³² making data linkable across sources and more useful. States can more easily share data with one another.

✓ In contrast to some sets of data standards, CEDS provides stakeholders with standards at all levels of education (P-20W), thereby allowing the stakeholders to design data systems covering the full education spectrum with one comprehensive standard set. Not all states have fully integrated pre-K through postsecondary data systems. CEDS allows states to connect their separate internal systems. Additionally, CEDS is flexible enough to allow for the expansion of standards from other areas, such as workforce or juvenile justice data, increasing the potential policy and research questions that can be investigated within and across states' data systems.

✓ The CEDS Community fostered by NCES allows stakeholders to learn from one another and reduce the burden associated with building data systems. For example, Connect provides

³² [Common Education Data Standards -](#)

an opportunity for stakeholders to share reports and information on how they calculated different measures, such as aggregate counts. Similarly, states can work together to build and expand the CEDS Data Warehouse, reducing development time and ensuring that the CEDS Data Warehouse can be adapted to meet evolving user needs.

✓ The tools built by NCES reduce the burden associated with building data systems and conducting analyses of data within those systems. For example, Connect has reports designed to provide stakeholders with options for linking CEDS properties across different data connections and provides transparency about calculated fields for data users.

✓ CEDS was developed to be vendor-system agnostic, enabling states to have reliable, interoperable data regardless of their data-related vendor partners.

Data Collection Coordinators

Description

In an effort to produce higher-quality data by increasing participation in data collection and standardizing reporting, NCES organized four groups of data collection coordinators comprising members of the education community to provide direct support for several of its large-scale data collections. These coordinators are state education agency and postsecondary institution staff assigned by their organizations to fulfill the NCES coordinator role and so they have expert knowledge of the education system at their respective levels within the specific context in which they work. NCES is authorized to organize these groups by statutes Congress included in ESRA with the recognition that better data result when those who collect and provide the data are trained in statistical procedures and concepts and receive technical assistance (20 U.S.C. §9543(a)(4), 20 U.S.C. §9543(b), 20 U.S.C. §9544(a) and 20 U.S.C. §9622(b)(6)).

One group, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) state coordinators, is composed of SEA staff who help coordinate school sampling and in-school data collection for schools in their state that are selected to participate in NAEP. A second group of coordinators, key workers, includes staff at postsecondary institutions responsible for responding to the IPEDS survey components, as well as the other NCES postsecondary data collections. A third group, EDFacts coordinators, consists of official representatives of state education agencies who are responsible for reporting PK-12 data to the U.S. Department of Education, including information submitted for the non-fiscal Common Core of Data (CCD) surveys. A fourth group, parallel to the EDFacts coordinators—the state fiscal data coordinators—is responsible for responding to the fiscal CCD surveys.

Highlighted Activities

➤ NCES staff trained all coordinator groups, gave them written data reporting guides, and provided technical assistance to ensure they understood the reporting requirements, including reporting deadlines, definitions for data elements, and how to use the reporting systems. NCES providing the training not only improves data reporting consistency but also saves states considerable resources since they do not have to each develop and operate their own training programs. This increases efficiency of use for taxpayer dollars.

Benefits of Coordinator Activities

✓ Coordinators have experience in the education field, are well trained, and are assigned by their states and institutions specifically to support required NCES and other federal data collections. In many cases, the same individuals fulfill this role for their state or institution year after year. They also work to ensure complete reporting for their state or institution. As a result, data reported to the federal government are more complete, more reliable, and more accurate than they would be if reporters were not trained, if they changed from year to year, and/or if their reporting role was ad hoc.

✓ Having firsthand knowledge of and experience with NCES data collection processes and procedures in their specific educational context, NCES data coordinators are an important source of feedback on what goes well during data collection and, perhaps more importantly, what does not go well and should be improved. Improvements in processes and procedures result in better quality for the data collected.

✓ The coordinators' existing relationships with NCES have allowed NCES to periodically request their assistance on projects outside of an actual data collection. For example, NCES developed and periodically updated the Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP), which is a schema for standardized coding of fields of study and program completions.³³ CIP codes are used heavily in IPEDS reporting. For this reason, IPEDS keyholders, who typically are staff in postsecondary institutions' Institutional Research offices, have been included in the periodic CIP revision process. For example, for the 2010 revision, keyholders were asked to "identify instructional program titles that they would like to add to the CIP, provide a rationale for inclusion, and suggest a program description."³⁴

Special Projects: Creation of a New Graduation Measure

Description

In the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, Public Law 107–110), Congress required states to begin calculating and reporting Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), an accountability measure comprising multiple components, including a standardized graduation rate "defined as the percentage of students who graduate from secondary school with a regular diploma in the standard number of years." At the time, NCES was not reporting a graduation rate defined in this way, and only a few states had the data needed to calculate such an "on-time" graduation rate. Congress included a requirement in the Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002 that NCES determine the "methodology by which states may accurately measure graduation rates" as defined in NCLB (20 U.S.C. §9543(a)(9)). Thus, NCES began a project to identify existing measures of high school completion, including the data held by states to calculate graduation rates, evaluate alternative measures, and recommend a measure that would meet NCLB requirements. Through the National Institute of Statistical Sciences (NISS), NCES convened a

³³ See <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/cipcode/default.aspx?v=56> for more information on CIP.

³⁴ [Introduction to the Classification of Instructional Programs: 2010 Edition \(CIP-2010\)](#)

task force to conduct this work. The task force included representatives from state and local school systems, academic researchers, and staff from national research organizations.

Highlighted Activities

➤ The task force produced a two-volume technical report documenting its work. Volume 1 detailed its review of existing measures of high school completion, as well as a set of proposed interim proxy measures that could be used until all states had the data needed to calculate an accurate on-time graduation rate. Volume 2 detailed the technical work that was conducted to inform the selection of an interim graduation rate, the Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate (AFGR).³⁵

➤ The task force concluded that student-level information about secondary school attendance and completion that accounted for student mobility was needed to calculate an accurate on-time graduation rate. This rate, comparable across states and calculated according to the recommendations of the task force, the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR), was first reported for the 2010-11 School Year.³⁶

Benefits of the Task Force

✓ NCES worked in partnership with experts in the field to develop a more informative measure of secondary school retention and completion than was previously being reported. ACGR is based on the status of individual students after four years in secondary education, accounting for their mobility across schools and districts, rather than being a more basic measure of the percentage of students who graduate in a given school year.

✓ Obtaining input from staff at the state and local levels allowed NCES and the task force to better understand the needs of states for graduation data and the completeness and quality of the data held by states. This resulted in more informed recommendations about what states could feasibly report accurately and in what timeframe.

- More specifically, NCES and the task force partnered with two states that already had student record data systems with the data needed to calculate an accurate on-time graduation rate. Using these data, the task force was able to calculate and compare the accurate on-time graduation rate to proposed proxy interim measures in order to better understand the strengths and weaknesses of each measure and make informed recommendations about which to adopt. In addition, per NCES, “the processes required to manipulate the data helped identify the level of specificity required in record keeping and data documentation to successfully use student-record system data.”³⁷ It also revealed differences across the state systems—for example, in the way data were stored and challenges in using the state data as it was maintained at the time to define

³⁵ See [User’s Guide to Computing High School Graduation Rates, Volume 1](#) and [User’s Guide to Computing High School Graduation Rates, Volume 2](#)

³⁶ [Public High School Four-Year On-Time Graduation Rates and Event Dropout Rates: School Years 2010–11 and 2011–12-Introduction](#)

³⁷ [User’s Guide to Computing High School Graduation Rates, Volume 2](#)

first-time freshmen and regular graduates. This information would inform later guidance to all states about how to define these two groups for reporting as well as the format for reporting, which resulted in more accurate, more consistent data.

Future Possibilities³⁸

1. NAEP state coordinators provide invaluable support for NAEP in their states, helping to ensure the success of each NAEP data collection. A parallel group of coordinators could be established for NCES's non-NAEP voluntary PK-12 studies to increase and improve participation in those studies.
2. Expand coordination between CEDS and SLDS to all NCES data collections, as well as federal studies outside of the Department of Education that collect education-related information, to increase comparability and the possibility for direct linkages between NCES/federal data and data from SEAs/LEAs/institutions. For example, IPEDS has been mapped to CEDS. The 2019/2020 SLDS Capacity Survey³⁹ indicated that 17 states had or were implementing processes to use their SLDS data to support reporting for IPEDS, with an additional 7 states planning to implement this functionality. Adding IPEDS data collection requirements to the Generate tool could facilitate states' efforts.
3. Increase technical assistance provided through the SLDS grant program and CEDS to help states identify where data collected through NCES PK-12 data collections could be provided by SLDS systems. Similarly, obtain input from all the groups with which NCES has an established collaborative relationship about administrative data that are not currently but could be reported to NCES. This could reduce the need for the collection of such information through surveys, thereby reducing data collection burden, and improve data quality across NCES and state reports.
4. Expand the cooperative education system work to collect feedback on data needs and data challenges from a group larger than the individuals who participate in NFES and NPEC. This could help ensure that NCES data are relevant and useful for a larger group of data users and facilitate easier participation for a larger group of data providers.

For More Information

[Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002](#) (full text)⁴⁰

[National Forum on Education Statistics](#)

[National Postsecondary Education Cooperative](#)

[State Longitudinal Data Systems \(SLDS\)](#)

[Common Education Data Standards \(CEDS\)](#)

³⁸ This "Future Possibilities" section includes ideas that have been proposed in the past, including some that NCES had been working on prior to March 2025, to encourage thinking about ways to enhance or improve NCES processes and products. To implement them, NCES would have to reestablish the collaborative relationships that have been dormant or terminated since March 2025.

³⁹ [Profile of State Data Capacity in 2019 and 2020: Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems \(SLDS\) Survey Descriptive Statistics](#)

⁴⁰ The version of ESRA available at www.congress.gov, [PLAW-107publ279.pdf](#), is missing subsections of section 9573, Confidentiality.

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