

NCES Data Collections That Are Foundational to the Nation's Education Data Infrastructure

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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 [collaborative relationships that improve data quality and capacity](#) and [data collected from and about school staff](#).

Key Takeaways

- Foundational education statistics—e.g., counts and demographic characteristics of students, schools, staff, and institutions—are the backbone of the national education data infrastructure, central to the production and interpretation of other education statistics.
- NCES maintains data collections spanning K-12 public and private schools, staff, and students, as well as postsecondary institutions, staff, and students—providing a comprehensive and consistent picture of U.S. education that no other entity produces.
- These foundational data serve a wide range of users—from Congress and federal agencies allocating funding, to researchers, private organizations and businesses such as those that rate educational institutions and real estate agencies, and families searching for schools—because NCES makes them publicly available, free of charge, from a single authoritative source.

Overview

In 1980, there were about 40,877,000 students enrolled in public schools in the United States. By 2024, this number had risen by 8.5 million students (to 49,387,000), though there had been a notable decrease after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the fall of 2019, the number of students enrolled in public schools had reached an all-time high of 50,796,000.¹ Across this

¹ These statistics on the number of students enrolled in public school across time can be found in [Table 203.10](#) of the *Digest of Education Statistics 2025*.

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same general time period, the number of public schools increased by about 13,500 to meet the need for increased capacity to educate our nation’s students.² We know this foundational information about the U.S. educational system because of the work of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).

Foundational educational statistics as conceived of in this paper, such as the numbers and demographic characteristics of students, educational staff, and educational institutions, are those that describe the most basic educational characteristics of the overall U.S. population, as well as those of the U.S. educational system, both the organizations and individuals within it. Foundational education data have been collected and reported by the federal government since 1867. NCES is the primary federal statistical agency responsible for collecting, reporting, analyzing, and disseminating statistics related to education in the United States and in other nations, including foundational education data. Section 153 of the Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002 (ESRA, 20 U.S.C. § 9543) includes a list of specific topics about which NCES must produce “full and complete statistics (disaggregated by ... population characteristics ...) on the condition and progress of education, at the preschool, elementary, secondary, postsecondary, and adult levels in the United States.” Without foundational data, NCES would be unable to produce full and complete statistics on any education-related topic, let alone the ones required by Congress via ESRA. For example, accurate national-level statistics on “access to, and opportunity for, postsecondary education, including data on financial aid to postsecondary students (20 U.S.C. 9543(a)(1)(E))” cannot be produced without knowing how many students are enrolled, or want to enroll, in postsecondary education and how many postsecondary institutions exist. Also, these data serve as a foundation for the national data infrastructure, functioning as the backbone supporting both international and subnational comparisons on key measures such as assessment results, accountability metrics, and postsecondary outcomes.

This paper describes several NCES sources of foundational data that provide information needed to understand the fundamental condition of education in the United States. Before doing so, it highlights the reasons why NCES is ideally situated to collect and disseminate such information.

NCES’s Role in Producing Foundational Education Data

- *Authoritative, trusted source.* As a national government entity:
 - NCES is the authoritative source for these foundational data that constitute basic indicators of the educational characteristics of the U.S. population and educational system.
 - NCES has the resources and trusted reputation to coordinate the collection of these data across all educational institutions, state education agencies (SEAs), and local education agencies (LEAs) in the United States. This contrasts with entities that focus

² The number of public schools in the 1980-81 school year was 85,982 (see [Table 88](#) in the *Digest of Education Statistics 1995*). In the 2022-23 school year, there were 99,388 public schools (see [Table 216.10](#) in the *Digest of Education Statistics 2023*).

- on data in a specific domain, such as one educational sector (e.g., public or private), level (PK-12 versus postsecondary), or state.
 - NCES has the authority to participate in international education projects as an official representative of the United States. This is not a function that can be fulfilled by other entities such as state or local governments, nongovernmental organizations, or private industry.
- *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.³ 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 could 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 understand education data, NCES is uniquely positioned to partner with education stakeholders to produce high-quality data.
- *Mission focus on producing high-quality data for public good.* Organizations produce data to meet their organizational needs and goals. NCES’s mission, as specified in law, is “to collect and analyze education information and statistics in a manner that meets the highest methodological standards” and to provide data that “are objective, secular, neutral, nonideological, and free of partisan political influence and bias.”⁴ Further, as a federal statistical agency, NCES is required to adhere to federal regulations related to open data and data quality. NCES’s policies and procedures, which are designed to adhere to these legal mandates, as well professional responsibilities such as those laid out in [Principles and Practices for a Federal Statistical Agency: Eighth Edition](#), result in data produced for the public good that are valid, reliable, and can be trusted.
- *Consistency resulting in higher-quality data.* Having one organization collect these data ensures consistency in the data provided by a diverse array of institutions and education organizations. Consistency (i.e., having data reported based on the same definition, using the same response values or categories, in every instance in which the data are collected)

³ 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.

⁴ 20 U.S.C. § 9541 (151)(b)(1)(3).

is critical for producing high-quality data that enable valid comparisons across student groups, schools, districts, states, and countries. For example, across the United States there is a wide variety of PK-12 school configurations in terms of grades served and whether the schools are identified as elementary, middle, secondary, or high schools by their districts. NCES applies a common definition of these educational levels to all PK-12 schools, thereby assuring that any analyses tied to school level, across both public and private schools, are based on consistent school groupings.

- *Efficient provision of a public good.* Having one organization collect these data and provide them as a public service to others is efficient and customer oriented. With one source collecting and disseminating information that is useful for a variety of stakeholders, the following are achieved:
 - Duplication of effort is minimized and data can be updated on a regular basis.
 - Stakeholders have one source they can consult for their data needs. If NCES does not have the data for which a stakeholder is looking, expert NCES staff can point the stakeholder to another data source or can inform the stakeholder that such data do not exist.
 - State and local governments, including education agencies, as well as educational institutions interested in understanding how they compare to their peers, do not have to compile data across different sources to generate comparisons.
 - Data are available to anyone, regardless of resources, rather than being a commodity available only to those who can pay for them.

Six Sources of Foundational Data:⁵ Overview and Exemplar Findings

This section briefly describes six sources of foundational data that Congress has tasked NCES to collect and report. The Common Core of Data (CCD) and Private School Universe Survey (PSS) provide foundational data on PK-12 schools, students, and staff, while the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) provides similar foundational data for postsecondary institutions. The Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates (EDGE) program provides foundational data on the spatial context of education in the United States. The October Supplement of the Current Population Survey (CPS) provides foundational data on educational enrollment and attainment of the U.S. population. *Education at a Glance* compiles data to provide internationally comparable foundational statistics for the United States and other countries. For each data source, exemplar NCES findings⁶ are provided below Table 1 in the descriptions of the studies. The examples were chosen to show some of the most

⁵ Descriptions are largely taken directly from NCES sources, sometimes verbatim, particularly from source descriptions in the *Digest of Education Statistics* and the *Condition of Education*.

⁶ Until early 2025, most statistics cited in this section had been updated annually or biannually. NCES has published updated statistics for some, but not all, of these statistics since then. Though the statistics presented here may be a year or more old, in most cases they are the most recently published as of the time this paper was written. Exceptions are instances where older data published in the *Digest of Education Statistics* and *Condition of Education* are featured because they provide additional detail or have a more reader-friendly presentation compared to more recent sources.

fundamental information in, as well as variation across, the sources. Each source contains data on many other topics. Links to resources for more detailed information can be found below in the section “For More information.”

Table 1: Overview of NCES Foundational Data Sources

Source	Population(s) of interest	Data providers	Data produced	Method of data collection or compilation	Data collection frequency
Common Core of Data (CCD)	All PK-12 public schools, school districts, and states	Public schools, local education agencies, state education agencies	Characteristics of public school districts, public PK-12 schools, public PK-12 school staff, public PK-12 school students, and public school finances	Data are provided from schools to districts and from districts to states. Representatives from SEAs then enter data from their compiled administrative records into an online data collection system, EdPass (for nonfiscal data), or complete surveys (for fiscal data).	Annually
Private School Universe Survey (PSS)	All K-12 private schools	K-12 private schools	Characteristics of private K-12 schools, private K-12 school staff, and private K-12 school students	Staff from individual private schools complete surveys sent directly to the schools.	Every 2 years
Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS)	All Title IV postsecondary institutions	All Title IV postsecondary institutions	Characteristic of the institution, including students, certifications offered/earned, faculty, facilities, tuition, and expenditures	Representatives from individual Title IV postsecondary institutions enter data from administrative and student records into an online data collection system.	Annually for each survey component
Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates (EDGE) program	All PK-12 and postsecondary institutions in the United States, public school districts	Local education agencies, state education agencies ¹	Geographic locale classifications, school geocodes, school district boundaries, other types of data to support spatial analysis	Varies by component: State representatives and district superintendents provide school boundary information in a way that is convenient for them; information is compiled from other sources.	Annually or every 2 years, depending on component
Current Population Survey (CPS), October Supplement	Household members age 3 and older who are not in the armed forces	A representative age 15 or older from each household in a sample of about 60,000 households	School enrollment and educational attainment	A member of each sampled household completes an in-person or telephone interview.	Annually
Education at a Glance	Populations and education systems of OECD ² countries	Representatives from OECD member countries	Education-related statistics about a country's population and educational system	Representatives from member countries submit country-specific statistics to the international report developer.	Annually

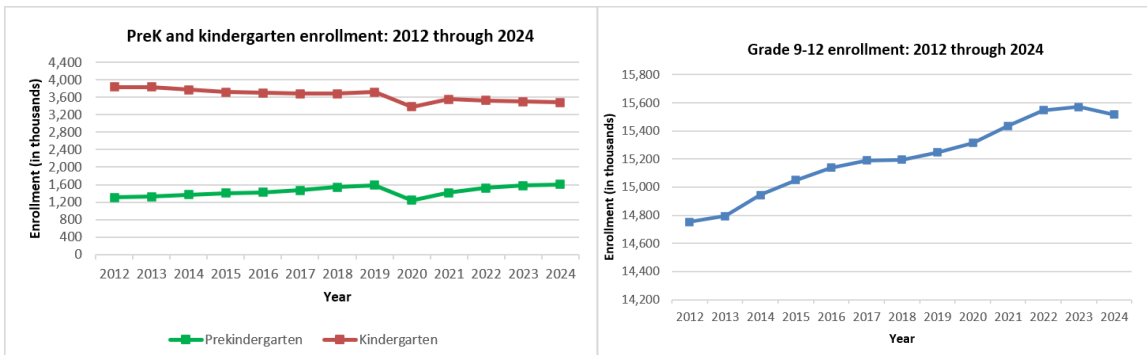
¹ Much of the information used in the EDGE program is compiled from other sources, such as the CCD, PSS, and IPEDS. An exception is the School Attendance Boundary Survey, which collects information directly from the providers.

² Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

Common Core of Data (CCD)

The CCD is a group of annual public elementary/secondary data collections. The purpose of the data collections is to provide basic statistical information on students receiving a public education from prekindergarten through grade 12 and their schools, as well as information on the funds collected and expended for providing public elementary and secondary education. Every year the CCD collects information from all SEAs on all public elementary and secondary schools and education agencies in the United States, to include SEAs in the 50 states, the District of Columbia, the Department of Defense Education Activity, Puerto Rico, American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. For nonfiscal CCD data, representatives from each SEA/entity submit information from their administrative records into an online application, EdPass, as part of the larger *EDFacts* data collections. Descriptive data about staff and students are aggregated at the school, school district, and state levels in the CCD nonfiscal surveys. Information about educational revenues and expenditures is collected at the school, school district, and state levels in the CCD fiscal surveys.

Findings on PK-12 public school enrollment: From fall 2014 to fall 2019, total public elementary and secondary school enrollment increased by 1 percent, from 50.3 million to 50.8 million students. In the first full school year of the coronavirus pandemic, total enrollment dropped by 3 percent to 49.4 million students in fall 2020. Total enrollment remained at around 49.4 million students in fall 2021, rose to 49.6 million students in fall 2022, and then fell for two consecutive school years, back to 49.4 million students in fall 2024. In fall 2024, total enrollment ranged from fewer than 100,000 students in Vermont, Wyoming, and the District of Columbia to 5.5 million students in Texas and 5.9 million students in California.⁷



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "State Nonfiscal Survey of Public Elementary/Secondary Education." Published in the 2025 *Digest of Education Statistics*, Table 203.10.

In the fall of 2020, enrollment in grades PK-8 fell after years of increases. This decrease was particularly evident for prekindergarten and kindergarten enrollment. In contrast, enrollment for the high school grades (9 through 12) increased and continued to do so until the fall of 2024, when it decreased for the first time since 2011.⁸ Kindergarten enrollment rebounded somewhat in the fall of 2021 but has declined every year since then, and overall PK-8 enrollment was in lower in fall 2024 (33.9 million students) than in fall 2020 (34.1 million students). In contrast to these decreases, enrollment in public prekindergarten has been increasing. In fact, fall 2024 public prekindergarten

⁷ Data from the CCD published in the [2024](#) and [2026](#) editions of the *Condition of Education*, indicator [Public School Enrollment \(cga\)](#).

⁸ Data from the CCD published in the *Digest of Education Statistics* [Table 203.10](#).

enrollment exceeded fall 2019 enrollment, which was the all-time-high at the time. Complementary data from the American Community Survey show that, between 2023 and 2024, the overall school enrollment rates increased for 3- to 4-year-olds (from 49 to 50 percent) and 5-year-olds (from 85 to 86 percent).⁹

Why this matters: Detailed data such as these are critical for making informed policy decisions about the public school system, such as actions needed to adequately meet the demand for teachers and facilities space. Having annual data that allow for an examination of trends is particularly important for understanding both current and expected future capacity needs. For example, while trend data show increasing enrollment in public prekindergarten, this increase has not led to an increase in overall PK-8 enrollment in recent years. In addition, there has been an overall 2 percent decrease in total public elementary and secondary school enrollment in the decade from fall 2014 to fall 2024, though total enrollment had been steadily increasing until the onset of the pandemic. Thus, while policy decisions that assume reduced capacity needs in the short-term may be warranted, it may be prudent to wait for more years of data to see whether overall enrollment returns to pre-pandemic levels, or whether lower overall enrollment will be sustained over time, before making decisions about capacity needs in the long term.

Finding on Title I eligibility: In school year 2021–22, about 63 percent of traditional public schools and 62 percent of public charter schools were Title I eligible.¹⁰

Why this matters:¹¹ Title I, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act provides supplemental financial assistance to school districts for children from low-income families. Eligibility for Title I funds and within-LEA allocations are determined by the Within-District Allocations Under Title I, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.¹² The percentage of public schools that are eligible to receive such funds is an indicator of the extent to which schools are educating low-income students who likely have increased needs relative to their more advantaged peers. Also, differences in the percentage of schools eligible for Title I across school years can be used by policymakers to determine whether the amount of Title I funding made available to schools should be increased, decreased, or held constant based on current levels of student need, which would result in a change in the share that each state/district receives if percentage allocations out of a fixed source of money are held constant. Lastly, not all Title I-eligible schools participate in Title I programs, due to rules governing within-LEA allocations and state and district flexibility for allocating Title I funds. Comparing the percentage of schools eligible for Title I funds to the percentage that actually receive and use the funds can be indicative of whether states and districts are fairly allocating Title I to schools, as well as whether schools are taking advantage of one of the most significant federal investments in students.

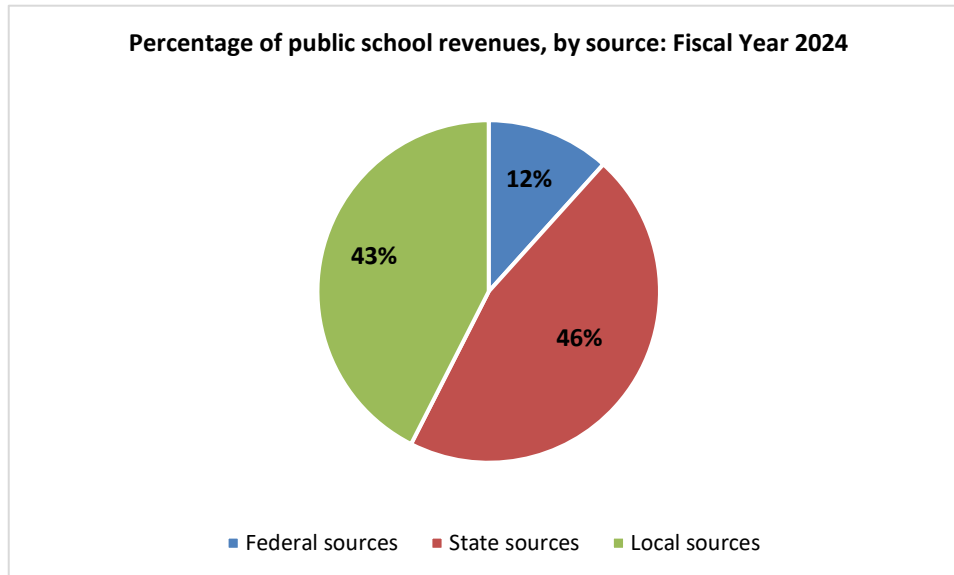
⁹ Data from the American Community Survey (ACS) published in the 2026 [Condition of Education](#).

¹⁰ Data from the CCD published in the 2024 *Condition of Education*, indicator [Characteristics of Elementary and Secondary Schools \(cla\)](#).

¹¹ Much of the text in this section comes directly from the 2024 *Condition of Education*, indicator [Characteristics of Elementary and Secondary Schools \(cla\)](#).

¹² For more information, see [Within-district Allocations Under Title I, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, As Amended, Non-regulatory Guidance](#).

Findings on public school revenues:¹³ In Fiscal Year 2024, school districts received \$121.2 billion from the federal government for public elementary and secondary education, which is a decrease of 7.5 percent from the federal revenue received in Fiscal Year 2023 after adjusting for inflation. About 12 percent of elementary and secondary public school revenues came from federal sources, 46 percent came from state sources, and 43 percent came from local sources, primarily property taxes.



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "National Public Education Financial Survey (NPEFS)," FY 24, Provisional Version 1a.

Why this matters: Funding for public education is one of the most significant education-related policy issues. There has been considerable debate over time about whether public PK-12 education funding is equitable and results in funding being available and allocated for students as needed. For example, it is argued that reliance on property taxes as a substantial source of education funding perpetuates or exacerbates educational inequalities.¹⁴ Any informed policy discussion on this issue must begin with accurate information about funding, both the sources of it and how it is allocated across states, districts, and pupils. NCES collects and provides this accurate information through its CCD fiscal surveys.

Private School Universe Survey (PSS)

The purpose of PSS is to provide basic statistical information on students receiving a private education from kindergarten through grade 12 and their schools. Every 2 years the PSS collects information directly from private schools that educate students in any of grades K through 12¹⁵ in the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Representatives from each private school

¹³ Data from the CCD published in [Revenues and Expenditures for Public Elementary and Secondary School District School Year 2023–24 \(Fiscal Year 2024\)](#).

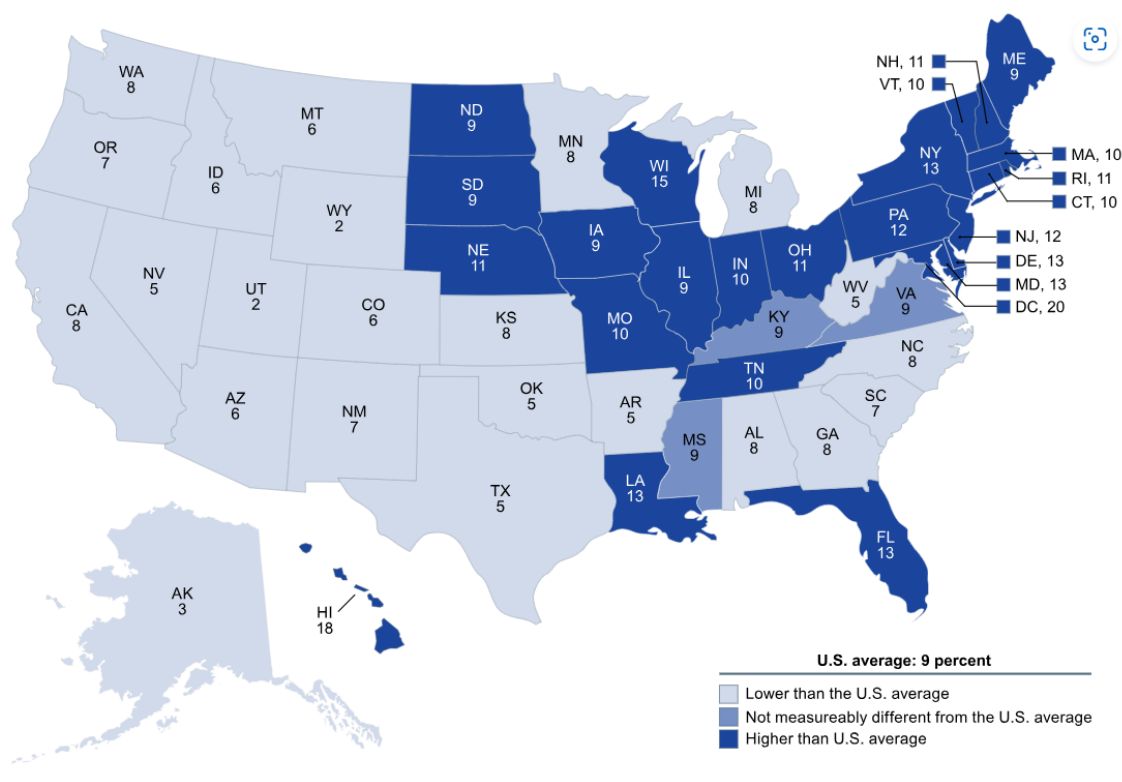
¹⁴ See, for example, [Debating America's School Funding: Sources, Amounts, and Priorities | GovFacts](#) and [Public Education Funding in the U.S. Needs an Overhaul: How a Larger Federal Role Would Boost Equity and Shield Children from Disinvestment During Downturns | Economic Policy Institute](#).

¹⁵ The population of schools included in the PSS does not include those that only offer education below the kindergarten level. However, if a school offers prekindergarten in addition to educating students in a higher grade, the data collected includes information on the school's prekindergarten students and programs.

complete an online or paper survey. Descriptive data about the schools, staff, and students (such as enrollment by grade, race/ethnicity, and sex; number of teachers; program emphasis; and school religious orientation or affiliation) are collected at the school level.

Findings on K-12 private school enrollment: In the fall of 2021, some 4.7 million K-12 students (9 percent of combined public and private school K-12 students) were enrolled in private schools. Across the 50 states and the District of Columbia, the percentage of K-12 students enrolled in private schools ranged from 2 percent in Wyoming and Utah to 20 percent in the District of Columbia.¹⁶ In fall 2023, the number of students enrolled in private schools was about 5.1 million, representing about 9 percent of combined public and private school K-12 students.¹⁷

Percentage of kindergarten through grade 12 students enrolled in private schools, by state: Fall 2021



Why this matters: While the law requires that all children and youth in the United States be provided a free public education, the U.S. educational system includes educational options besides the public school system, including private schools. Information on where families choose to educate their children is critical for understanding public school capacity needs and can be indicative of the availability of options for non-public education and whether the public school system is meeting students' educational needs.

¹⁶ Data from the PSS published in the 2024 *Condition of Education*, indicator [Private School Enrollment \(cgc\)](#).

¹⁷ Calculation based on data in [Characteristics of Private Schools in the United States: Results From the 2023-24 Private School Universe Survey](#) and the *Digest of Education Statistics* [Table 203.10](#).

Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS)

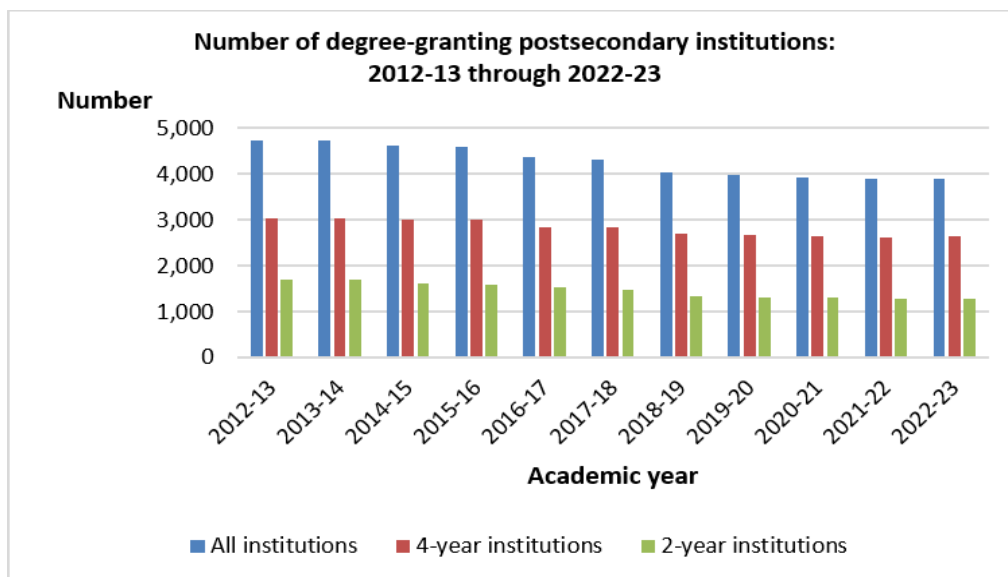
The purpose of IPEDS is to provide basic statistical information¹⁸ on public and private postsecondary institutions, their staff, and their students. It consists of interrelated survey components that provide information on postsecondary institutions,¹⁹ student enrollment, student financial aid, programs of study offered, retention and graduation rates, degrees and certificates conferred, and the human and financial resources involved in the provision of institutionally based postsecondary education. Three times per year (fall, winter, and spring) IPEDS collects information directly from the universe of 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. Representatives from each postsecondary institution enter data from their administrative and student records into an online data collection system.

Findings on number of postsecondary institutions:²⁰ In academic year 2022–23, there were 3,896 degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the United States that participated in Title IV federal financial aid programs: 2,628 were 4-year institutions that offered at least one program at the bachelor’s or higher degree level and 1,268 were 2-year institutions that offered associate’s degrees and certificates. A decade earlier, in academic year 2012–13, there were 830 more degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the United States (4,726) that participated in Title IV federal financial aid programs: 3,026 were 4-year institutions that offered at least one program at the bachelor’s or higher degree level and 1,700 were 2-year institutions that offered associate’s degrees and certificates.

¹⁸ The collection and reporting of data from postsecondary institutions is required by the Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended (20 USC 1094, Section 487(a)(17) and 34 CFR 668.14(b)(19)). The Act specifies that the data collected must be released “in a form that is easily understandable and allows parents and students to make informed decisions based on the costs for typical full-time undergraduate students.” Thus, the data are not collected strictly for statistical purposes. However, in addition to providing the data to the Office of Postsecondary Education to meet the requirement of the Higher Education Act, NCES processes and releases the data as statistical products. This dual use of the data requires that the data be collected according to statistical standards even though they are not collected for exclusively statistical use. The dual use of the data eliminates the need to collect identical or almost-identical data twice. This both saves the government money and reduces reporting burden on the postsecondary institutions.

¹⁹ IPEDS also collected data on academic libraries at postsecondary institutions through the 2024–25 academic year.

²⁰ Data from IPEDS published in the 2023 *Digest of Education Statistics*, [Table 317.10](#). More recent data on number of institutions can be found in [IPEDS data tables](#), though the population of institutions is not strictly comparable to that used in the Digest table.



Source: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Institutional Characteristics component, Fall 2012 through Fall 2021 (final data) and Fall 2022 (provisional data), 2023 *Digest of Education Statistics*, Table 317.10.

Why this matters: The number of postsecondary institutions that grant degrees and offer federal financial aid is a key indicator of educational opportunities and options for individuals who want to pursue a degree and may need financial assistance to do so. Increases or decreases in this number represent expansion or contraction, respectively, of postsecondary opportunity and options. Trend data indicate options overall have been decreasing for about 15 years, though the decrease is more consistent and pronounced for 2-year institutions than for 4-year institutions.

Findings on undergraduate degree fields:²¹ In 2021–22, approximately two-thirds of the 1.0 million associate’s degrees conferred by postsecondary institutions within the United States were concentrated in three fields of study: liberal arts and sciences, general studies, and humanities (383,300 degrees); health professions and related programs (177,400 degrees); and business (113,100 degrees). Of the 2.0 million bachelor’s degrees conferred in 2021-22, some 58 percent were concentrated in six fields of study: business (375,400 degrees); health professions and related programs (263,800 degrees); social sciences and history (151,100 degrees); biological and biomedical sciences (131,500 degrees); psychology (129,600 degrees); and engineering (123,000 degrees).

Why this matters: Data on the fields in which students are obtaining degrees indicate the demand for specific programs at postsecondary institutions, as well as whether students are graduating in fields aligned with the needs of the labor market.

²¹ Data from IPEDS published in the 2023 *Digest of Education Statistics*, Tables [321.10](#) and [322.10](#) and [Table 322.10](#). Also, *Condition of Education* indicator [Undergraduate Degree Fields \(cta\)](#).

Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates (EDGE) Program

EDGE uses spatial data collected by NCES and the U.S. Census Bureau to create geographic locale classifications, school geocodes, school district boundaries, and other types of data to support spatial analysis.²² A key EDGE collection that enables the calculation of much of the spatial measures is the School Attendance Boundary Survey (SABS). Conducted by NCES in coordination with the Census Bureau, SABS collects information about attendance boundaries for public schools and school districts in the United States. Every two years, state representatives and district superintendents provide school boundary information using a method that is most convenient for them, such as use of an NCES-developed mapping tool, submission of digital shape files, and even submission of hard-copy maps. These data allow for the generation and compilation of statistics about the geographic areas in which schools and school districts are located in order to facilitate the investigation of spatial variation within school districts and allow reporting of a wide variety of Census-collected population statistics at the school district level. The SABS data also enhance the rest of the CCD data system by permitting linkages between CCD data and geospatial data.

Findings on school locale:²³ In fall 2022, public schools in rural areas represented 28 percent of all public schools in the United States, while they enrolled 20 percent of all public school students. Fewer students were enrolled in rural areas than in suburban areas (39 percent of total enrollment) and cities (30 percent). In contrast, more students were enrolled in rural areas than in towns (11 percent of total enrollment). In fall 2012, public schools in rural areas also represented 28 percent of all public schools in the United States but enrolled 18 percent of all public school students.

Why this matters: The location (locale, i.e., in a city, suburb, town, or rural area) of a student's school is a key indicator related to many aspects of their educational condition and experiences, such as access to resources and opportunities which, in turn, affect their educational and labor outcomes. For example:²⁴

- Considering options for school choice: in 2019 a lower percentage of elementary and secondary public school students in rural areas was enrolled in public charter schools compared to public school students in suburban areas and cities. Similarly, the percentage of all elementary and secondary school students enrolled in private schools was lower in rural areas than in suburban areas and cities.
- Looking at teacher qualifications: public school teachers in rural areas tended to have lower educational attainment than teachers in cities and suburbs in 2020-21.
- Looking at career and technical education (CTE): in 2019 a higher percentage of high school graduates in rural areas took CTE courses while in high school compared with graduates in cities and suburban areas, both overall and for many individual subject areas, including agriculture, food, and natural resources; architecture and construction; business and marketing; human services; information technology; manufacturing; and transportation, distribution, and logistics.

²² This type of geospatial data by EDGE is required for policymaking and statutory purposes and works to ensure the Department's compliance with the Geospatial Data Act of 2018 (P.L. 115-254).

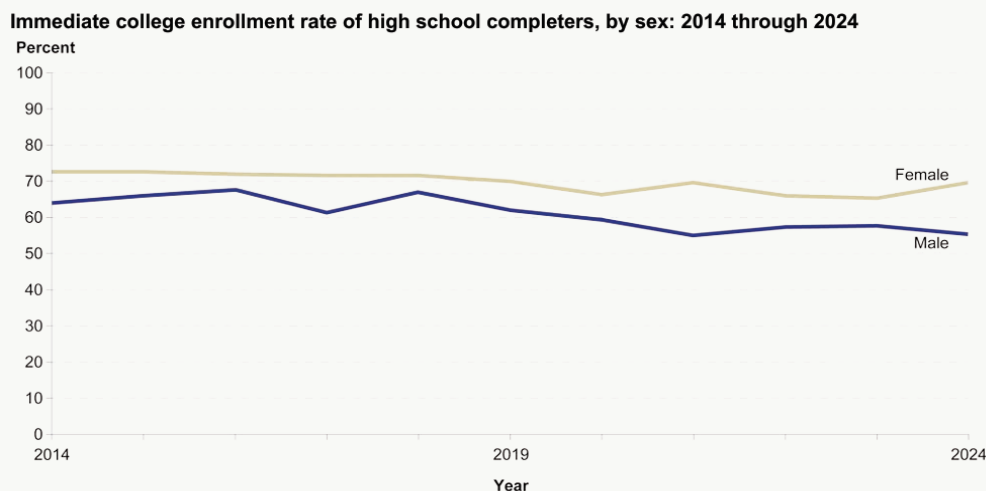
²³ Findings produced by EDGE based on data collected in the CCD published in the 2023 Digest of Education Statistics, [Table 214.40](#).

²⁴ These exemplar statistics come from NCES's [Education Across America](#) indicators.

Current Population Survey, October Supplement

NCES sponsors the October Supplement to the Current Population Survey (CPS), a monthly survey of 50,000–60,000 households conducted by the Census Bureau, part of the U.S. Department of Commerce, for the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), U.S. Department of Labor. Each year, the basic CPS collects monthly data on household membership, household characteristics, demographic characteristics, and labor force participation of the civilian noninstitutionalized population 15 years of age and over. The October supplement collects information on school enrollment status and related education topics for household members 3 years old and over, thus providing current estimates of school enrollment and of the social and economic characteristics of students. A representative age 15 or older from each household in a sample of about 60,000 households participates in either an in-person or telephone interview depending on the round of data collection and preference. The joint, cooperative collection of these data by Census, BLS, and NCES reduces both government costs and respondent burden.

Findings on enrollment in postsecondary education:²⁵ The immediate college enrollment rate for high school completers in October 2024 was 63 percent, down from 68 percent a decade earlier in 2014. This decrease was primarily due to a decrease in the immediate enrollment rate in two-year institutions, from 25 percent to 21 percent. In addition, in every year from 2019 through 2024, a higher percentage of female high school completers than male high school completers immediately enrolled in college, with the gap being about 14 percentage points in 2024 (69 percent for females and 55 percent for males).



NOTE: *Immediate college enrollment rate* is defined as the annual percentage of high school completers who are enrolled in 2- or 4-year institutions in the October immediately following high school completion. High school completers include 16- to 24-year-olds who graduated with a high school diploma as well as those who completed a GED or other high school equivalency credential. Data are weighted estimates of the population. Data in this figure represent the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Data are based on sample surveys of the civilian noninstitutionalized population, which excludes persons in the military and persons living in institutions (e.g., prisons or nursing facilities).
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (CPS), October Supplement, 2014 through 2024. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2025*, table 302.10.

Why this matters: Analysis of data collected across decades shows that whether someone attends postsecondary education and obtains a credential/degree has a significant effect on many life outcomes, such as employment status, profession, current and cumulative life-time earnings, and even marriage and fertility rates. As a result, policymakers, educators, and industry are interested in

²⁵ Findings from the CPS published in the [2026 Condition of Education](#).

understanding the rates and patterns of postsecondary attendance and receipt of some kind of credential, whether it be a two-year degree, a four-year degree, or some type of professional certification. Differences in the immediate college enrollment rate by student characteristics, which can lead to undesirable group differences in life outcomes, may indicate group differences in opportunities, resources, and/or motivation that can be addressed with effective policies and practices. By supporting the collection and reporting of these data, NCES provides the information needed to track trends in enrollment and evaluate whether policies or practices aimed at addressing gaps in enrollment have been effective. For example, one pattern of current policy concern is that females are immediately enrolling in postsecondary education at higher rates than males, a trend that NCES reporting shows became evident at a national level in the late 1990s and that NCES continues to track.²⁶

Education at a Glance

NCES was²⁷ a global partner in the publication of *Education at a Glance*, a report of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) that is considered “the authoritative source of information on the state of education worldwide.”²⁸ The report, which includes comprehensive, internationally comparable data on the structure, financing, and performance of education systems across OECD countries and partner economies, facilitates international comparisons on key educational measures such as the output of educational institutions, the impact of learning across countries, access and participation in education, financial investment in education, and school organization. NCES staff made significant contributions to this report as a leader in the development of its format and content, as well as by providing U.S.-specific data and statistics.

Findings on the international age at first enrollment in postsecondary education: Across OECD countries, the average age for students first entering tertiary education (postsecondary education in the United States) is 22, but most start when they are younger. There is significant cross-country variation. In Denmark, for instance, the average age of entry is slightly above 25, the highest among OECD countries. In contrast, students in Belgium, Japan, the Netherlands, and the United States typically begin tertiary education before the age of 20. In the United States, the relatively high share of students enrolling in short-cycle tertiary programs (e.g., associate’s degree programs)—which often attract younger entrants—contributes to this lower average age.²⁹

Why this matters: Understanding the characteristics of the U.S. educational system and the educational experiences of the U.S. population relative to its international peers has long been a policy concern due to the impact of education on global competitiveness in areas such as science, medicine, and technology, as well as on general economic prosperity. This concern was amplified in

²⁶ [Table 302.10](#) in the *Digest of Education Statistics* provides immediate college enrollment rates by sex going back to 1960. Independent analyses show a trend of male–female differences starting in 1996, with the differences being statistically significant in 21 of the 29 years from 1996 to 2024.

²⁷ As of the publication of this paper, it appears NCES no longer plays an active role in the publication of this report due to the reduction in staff, data collections, programs, and projects experienced in February and March 2025.

²⁸ [Education at a Glance 2025 | OECD](#)

²⁹ [Education at a Glance 2025](#)

[A Nation at Risk](#), a seminal 1983 report that concluded the U.S. education system was not producing a globally competitive workforce and emphasized the “need to understand the American education system as compared to other education systems around the world.”³⁰ NCES’s international activities, such as its collaboration in the production of *Education at a Glance*, provide the kinds of internationally comparable data called for in *A Nation at Risk*. For example, the transition from secondary to tertiary (i.e., postsecondary) education is one of the most significant changes in a young adult’s life. Understanding the composition of the postsecondary population in the United States relative to other countries on characteristics such as age, which is related to factors such as maturity, availability of resources, and competing responsibilities, can help explain differences in experiences and outcomes during this transition phase as well as the long-term impacts of postsecondary education, including whether it is producing a globally competitive workforce.

Exemplar Uses of NCES Data Highlighting Their Value

- *Used to evaluate the need for and impact of policies, products, and services.* Statistics such as the numbers of schools, teachers, and students in the United States—both overall and broken down by school characteristics (e.g., sector, locale, enrollment), teacher characteristics (e.g., certification), and student characteristics (e.g., age distributions by grade, race/ethnicity)—are used by policymakers to evaluate the need for and impact of potential policies, including estimating the potential cost of implementation. Such information is also used by nongovernmental public and private organizations to understand the potential need or desire for their products and services.
- *Used to create directories of education institutions.* NCES makes data collected in CCD, PSS, and IPEDS available in data files and online search tools that constitute official, comprehensive, complete directories of K-12 schools and postsecondary institutions.³¹ These directories are used by policymakers, families, other federal agencies, researchers, and private industry for various purposes. Examples include the following:
 - *School searches.* Families search for public and private K-12 schools by geographic identifiers such as city, state, or ZIP code to identify schools where they live or might move. At the postsecondary level, students and their families search for postsecondary institutions by characteristics such as location, enrollment size, cost of tuition, religious affiliation, and programs/majors offered. This information is provided in NCES’s [College Navigator](#). These postsecondary institution data also underlie the Department of Education’s [College Scorecard](#), which includes additional information such as median earnings of graduates to help inform decisions about postsecondary education.
 - *Private entity rating and marketing.* Organizations that rate schools (e.g., Great Schools,³² U.S. News and World Report³³) draw on NCES data to create their school

³⁰ [The International Activities Program](#)

³¹ See [Search for Public Schools](#), [Search for Private Schools](#), and [Search For Schools and Colleges, College Navigator - National Center for Education Statistics](#).

³² [School Ratings & Reviews for Public & Private Schools | GreatSchools](#)

³³ [2026 Best Colleges: Find the Best School for You](#)

- lists and develop rating models. Similarly, organizations that rate states on educational metrics (e.g., WalletHub³⁴) draw on NCES data to develop rating models. Also, real estate agencies identify local schools in areas surrounding homes for rent or for sale.
- *Survey frame development and recruiting.* NCES and other federal agencies such as the National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics use the official lists of educational institutions as survey frames for selecting national and/or state-level representative samples of schools for large-scale studies, such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and the National Survey of College Graduates. Nongovernmental researchers use the lists to identify educational institutions for recruitment into their own studies.
 - *Used by other federal agencies.* The Census Bureau uses school district boundary information as part of its fundamental address sampling process for the American Community Survey and to produce data that states need for redistricting.
 - *Used in funding allocations.* These basic foundational data are used in allocations of funding across the federal government. For example:
 - School boundary information is used in the calculation of small area estimates of school district poverty, which are then used to calculate Title I allocations dispersed from the federal government to SEAs.
 - Locale codes (rural, urban, suburban, town) assigned to schools and school districts are used to identify schools and districts eligible for rural-focused grants, such as the Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP) grants.
 - The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) asks schools to provide an NCES identification number when they apply for funding from the FCC's e-rate program; having an NCES ID number assures the FCC that an entity qualifies as a school, which is a condition for eligibility.
 - *Used at the state and local levels to understand location-specific educational conditions.* State and local governments, as well as state-focused research and advocacy organizations, use data compiled by NCES to help understand the condition of education in their state/district and how they compare to the nation and to their peers. Examples include the following:
 - Oregon used NCES data to compare enrollment trends in their K-12 public schools during the COVID-19 pandemic to trends in other states.³⁵
 - Advance Illinois used IPEDS data to compare Illinois to other states on key metrics related to postsecondary education.³⁶
 - The Center for the Future of Arizona used CCD information to organize education data by school and school district in a publicly accessible dashboard.³⁷

³⁴ [Most & Least Educated States in America in 2026](#)

³⁵ [Falling Enrollment During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)

³⁶ [Advance+Illinois The+State+We're+in+2025-Digital.pdf](#)

³⁷ Center for the Future of Arizona [More Data Tools](#)

- *Used by researchers to understand the condition of education nationally and across states.* Researchers and research organizations use foundational NCES data to look at the educational landscape nationally, as well as within and across states. For example:
 - The Learning Policy Institute used CCD and PSS data, including indicators of school locale, to examine the distribution of public and private schools in West Virginia as context for situating policy discussions about school vouchers.³⁸
 - The James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal used IPEDS data to examine and compare college retention and graduation rates across the 50 states and the District of Columbia.³⁹
 - The Brookings Institute used CCD and PSS data to examine K-12 enrollment shifts across districts with differing racial and economic profiles.⁴⁰
 - The Pew Research Center used CCD and PSS data to examine the characteristics (enrollment, student demographics, teacher characteristics) of traditional public schools, public charter schools, and private schools nationally, as well as enrollment in each type of school at the state level.⁴¹
- *Used to understand the U.S. condition of education relative to other countries.* National governments and international organizations consult these data as an authoritative source of internationally comparable information needed for a variety of purposes, such as policy considerations, business decisions, etc.

Future Possibilities

1. The amount of information collected in IPEDS has expanded significantly beyond what is required in the Higher Education Act of 1964, as amended. Consideration could be given to eliminating certain data or survey components to reduce reporting burden on postsecondary institutions.
2. Develop a postsecondary student-record data system that would allow NCES to use student-level data already maintained by institutions. This would allow NCES to compute aggregated institution-level statistics, thereby reducing reporting on institutions, which currently do these calculations themselves for reporting to the federal government.
3. Create a federated (decentralized) system for collecting and maintaining data that is accessible by the federal government, state and local governments, and nongovernmental researchers to conduct analyses.
4. Automate the collection of school and district attendance boundary information by scraping it from district websites, thereby reducing or eliminating the need for the school attendance boundary survey.

³⁸ Learning Policy Institute [Distribution of Public and Private Schools](#)

³⁹ [50-State-College-Graduation-Rates.pdf](#)

⁴⁰ [Declining Public School Enrollment | Brookings](#)

⁴¹ [Facts about Public, Private and Charter Schools in the US | Pew Research Center](#)

For More Information

[Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002](#) (full text)⁴²
[Common Core of Data](#)
[Current Population Survey](#)
[Education at a Glance](#)
[Education Demographics and Geographic Estimates Program](#)
[Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System](#)
[Private School Universe Survey](#)
[Condition of Education](#)
[Digest of Education Statistics](#)
[Handbook of Survey Methods](#)

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⁴² The version of ESRA available at www.congress.gov, [PLAW-107publ279.pdf](#), is missing subsections of section 9573, Confidentiality.

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Reader's Note

As noted at the beginning of this paper, it is intended to be an easy-to-digest synthesis of information available across a wide variety of resources—in many cases pulling directly (sometimes verbatim) from NCES sources. It is not a comprehensive description of NCES's work. For example, there are millions of statistics that can be generated with NCES data, and so the included exemplar findings and external uses are intended to show key and varied uses of the data rather than provide a comprehensive inventory of all uses. Similarly, this paper is not a comprehensive bibliography of published work. Readers interested in more detail are encouraged to visit the resources provided in the section "For More Information." Lastly, the "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 data collections and products.

About the Author

Dr. Gail M. Mulligan is an education researcher who worked at the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), within the U.S. Department of Education, for 22 years. Before taking an early retirement offer from the Department in 2025, she was NCES's Chief Statistician, working with other senior leaders to set priorities for the center, and coordinating and overseeing center-wide activities related to confidentiality, privacy, data security, and statistical product review and approval. Prior to that, she served as the Branch Chief overseeing NCES's longitudinal studies and the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, the study director for the Early Childhood Longitudinal Studies Program, and the study director for the National Household Education Surveys. She holds a bachelor's degree in Anthropology and Spanish and master's and doctoral degrees in Sociology, all from the University of Notre Dame.