



National Center for Education Statistics

Priorities for the 117th Congress and 2021-2025 Administration

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

The principal federal statistical agency that tells us from pre-K through college:

- What students learn;
- What resources are available to students (teachers, counselors, advanced courses); and
- Many other facets of the nation's educational system.

NCES needs

- Technical staff
- Resources
- Independence from political and other undue external influence
- Authority to continue to integrate assessments of learning (the Nation's Report Card) with its other statistical activities.

Mission, Scope, and Products

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in the Department of Education's (ED) Institute of Education Sciences (IES) provides objective, reliable, and trustworthy statistics about the condition of education through administrative data collections, statistical surveys, longitudinal studies, and assessments. Founded in 1867, NCES is the second oldest and third largest in budget among the Office of Management and Budget's 13 principal federal statistical agencies. The NCES's combined statistics and assessment budget lines account for about \$260 million annually. The NCES is currently authorized through the Education Sciences Reform Act (ESRA), which has been due for reauthorization for many years. Its work covers a wide spectrum of topics, including the following:

- The Nation's Report Card (congressionally mandated)
- Condition of Education Report (congressionally mandated)
- Digest of Education Statistics
- Grants, services, resources to states for development of statewide longitudinal data systems
- Longitudinal studies tracing experiences of early childhood students, secondary students and transition to post high school, and college and beyond experiences

- Elementary and secondary finance, school universe, enrollments, graduates, staffing, private schools
- International school practices, education trends, assessment outcomes, governmental policies
- Higher education financed, students, finance, faculty, degrees, transcripts

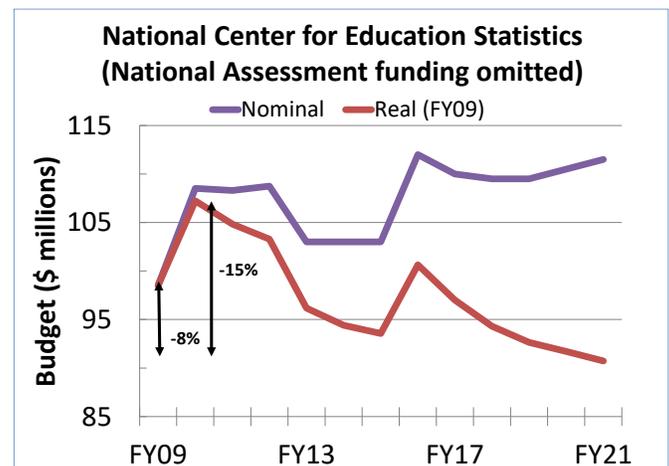
Opportunity: More trustworthy, objective statistics that are timely and local

Policymakers and the American people are confronted with an ever-increasing amount of education data from an expanding number of public and private sources. NCES is the trusted entity naturally positioned to place such diverse sources of data in context to produce actionable information—giving policymakers and the public insights into the condition and progress of education in their communities. NCES has provided objective, reliable education statistics for 150 years, but it has recently faced significant budget constraints due to relatively flat funding that limit the agency’s ability to fully analyze available survey data and meet the rising demand for more timely and location-specific statistics, particularly critical in understanding the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on education across the lifespan.

Federal interest in evidence-based policymaking is also escalating, most notably with the 2019 enactment of the bipartisan Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act. The “Evidence Act” focused on the role of the federal statistical agencies, in particular, directing the NCES Commissioner to serve as the department’s statistical official.

Challenges

- The NCES statistics budget line has [depreciated in value](#) 15 percent since 2010.
- The agency faces a [serious shortage of full-time equivalent staff](#) (FTE) trained in statistical science. In 2020, the agency had fewer than 95 FTEs to manage its \$260+ million statistics and assessment budget line. This is about nine times the median ratio of other principal federal statistical agencies.
- Because of both budget and staff constraints, NCES faces particular challenges whenever additional or alternative opportunities are presented, such as:
 - ✓ Conducting analyses of currently available data (e.g., education-related questions on COVID-19 in the US Census Bureau weekly Pulse surveys);
 - ✓ Redesigning and restoring the national study of postsecondary faculty (NSOPF)
 - ✓ Developing new data designs to address specific problems and populations;
 - ✓ Beginning a new cycle of a long-standing longitudinal series; or
 - ✓ Expanding on data sharing and linkages that could make existing data more complete and useful.



- The NCES autonomy and stature provisions put in place to ensure objective and reliable education statistics (reaffirmed after recommendations from a 1986 National Academies committee) have been undermined gradually and steadily over the last two decades:
 - ✓ NCES control over its publishing, reporting, and hiring have all been diminished, particularly since the 2002 Education Sciences Reform Act;
 - ✓ Privacy protection controlled by NCES for NCES data potentially threatened in light of National Archives and Records Administration requirements and language in the USA Patriot Act of 2001;
 - ✓ Senate confirmation for the NCES Commissioner was removed in 2012, and there have been several subsequent attempts to remove presidential appointment of the commissioner; and,
 - ✓ The latest administration budget request proposed to split off the NCES assessment of educational progress work into a separate agency, severing the important link of education inputs to what students learn and removing the legal guarantees of independence accorded a statistical agency for those assessment activities.

Priorities

- So that NCES can meet the opportunities and demands discussed above:
 - **Address staffing shortfalls** by allowing the NCES Commissioner to hire more FTEs with training in statistical science by allocating a specific S&E budget line to NCES like those for other independent subagencies in ED, such as the IG's office.
 - **Support additional investments** to NCES' statistics budget line so that NCES can provide objective and nonpartisan analysis of survey data, and ramp up to measure learning loss and educational institution response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Strengthen NCES's autonomy and stature in the following ways:
 - **Provide NCES authority over its budget allocation, information technology, hiring, and publications**, as outlined in [Statistical Policy Directive Number 1](#). Following the model of federal statistical agencies, NCES should have full control over its operations to be clearly accountable, avoiding opportunities for inappropriate external influences.
 - **Ensure that NCES controls the confidentiality of data and privacy protections.** The integrity of NCES as a statistical agency and the quality of NCES data require survey respondents to trust that NCES will protect their information and that it is beyond the reach of other federal agencies.
 - **Retain NCES assessment activities in NCES.** Assessments must be designed and implemented free of political influence and are most meaningful when associated with education inputs and descriptive statistics. Statistics will also be most informative and cost effective for the federal government and local education agencies when conducted as a complementary activity to other statistical activities by a single administrative unit.
 - **Facilitate more direct access of the NCES Commissioner to the Secretary of Education.** Such access and the presence of the commissioner in policy meetings of senior-level department officials would help ensure that independent data are used to better inform the Department's education policies and support the spirit of the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018. The commissioner of education statistics would contribute greatly to inform department-wide decision-making because of their

command of an extraordinary array of information on education at all levels and on a range of topics—from outcomes, to investment of resources for education, to characteristics of schooling. Further, the commissioner would be better situated to direct NCES resources to inform policy development by hearing first-hand senior-level policy discussions. Making the NCES commissioner equivalent in rank to assistant secretary would be commensurate with the contribution they would provide.

- **Preserve presidential appointment status and reinstate Senate confirmation for the NCES Commissioner for a fixed term of office.** Senate oversight of the NCES commissioner appointment helps ensure a qualified leader and objective education statistics for our nation. Further, presidential appointment and Senate confirmation with a fixed term provides the commissioner with more authority and stature to educate and advocate for independence and relevance of NCES data. Reinstatement is consistent with OMB guidance for the significant role of a “statistical official” provided for in the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act.

Endorsing Organizations

American Educational Research Association
American Statistical Association
Council of Professional Associations on Federal Statistics (COPAFS)
Consortium of Social Science Associations
Population Association of America/Association of Population Centers

Resources

- *The Washington Post*, [Understaffing threatens work at key U.S. education statistics agency, experts say](#)
- American Statistical Association, [Reauthorization Priorities for the National Center for Education Statistics](#)
- *Amstat News*, [National Center for Education Statistics Faces Program Cuts](#)
- [National Center for Education Statistics: Data to Help Our Schools, Students, and Families Thrive](#), American Statistical Association
- [Principles and Practices for a Federal Statistical Agency: Sixth Edition](#). National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2017.
- [Federal Education Data Collection--Celebrating 150 Years](#)

For other federal statistical agency priorities, please visit <https://www.amstat.org/ASA/Science-Policy-and-Advocacy/home.aspx#resources> or <https://copafs.org/activities-initiatives/>. For any questions on these documents, or to have your organization added as an endorsing or supporting organization, please contact Steve Pierson (pierson@amstat.org) or Paul Schroeder (paul.schroeder@copafs.org). For this document specifically, Felice Levine, executive director for the American Educational Research Association, should also be contacted: flevine@aera.net.