

April 22, 2019

The Honorable Roy Blunt  
Chair, Appropriations Subcommittee on  
Labor, Health and Human Services,  
Education, and Related Agencies  
United States Senate  
Washington DC, 20510

The Honorable Rosa DeLauro  
Chair, Appropriations Subcommittee on  
Labor, Health and Human Services,  
Education, and Related Agencies  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington DC, 20515

The Honorable Patty Murray  
Ranking Member, Appropriations  
Subcommittee on Labor,  
Health and Human Services,  
Education, and Related Agencies  
United States Senate  
Washington DC, 20510

The Honorable Tom Cole  
Ranking Member, Appropriations  
Subcommittee on Labor,  
Health and Human Services,  
Education, and Related Agencies  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington DC, 20515

Dear Chairs Blunt and DeLauro and Ranking Members Murray and Cole,

I write to you as Executive Director of the American Statistical Association (ASA), the nation's oldest professional scientific association with over 18,000 members across government, academia and industry, to request you take measures to allow the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) to build its internal capacity, thereby making it more effective and agile.

We believe that allowing NCES to have more full-time staff will (i) result in taxpayer money being used more efficiently and effectively; (ii) help NCES build internal capacity and staff expertise; (iii) improve the quality of NCES information collections and analyses; (iv) provide more management flexibility to optimize operations; and (v) reinforce NCES' status as a principal federal statistical agency that "must maintain and develop in-house staff who are trained in statistical methodology" as described in the Office of Management and Budget's Statistical Policy Directive #1<sup>1</sup>.

Currently NCES is thinly staffed and overly dependent on external contractors. This is concerning because insufficient staffing diminishes the agency's ability to internally lead and oversee projects central to its mission to "collect, collate, analyze, and report complete statistics on the condition of American education"<sup>2</sup>.

For years the NCES Commissioner has been restricted in hiring because Institute of Education Sciences (IES) employees are included in the overall Department of Education (ED) salaries and expenses budget. This budgetary structure means that even if IES receives an increase in its

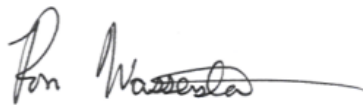
statistics and assessment lines, the NCES Commissioner still lacks the authority to hire full-time and permanent staff, leading to growing reliance on contractors.

Over time as NCES employees gradually retire or vacate their positions this problem compounds, resulting in diminished in-house expertise and technical knowledge as well as too few staff even to manage contracts effectively. For instance, twenty years ago NCES had 115 full-time and permanent staff<sup>3</sup>; in FY17 and FY18 there were only 95 full-time permanent staff members<sup>4</sup> to manage the agency's FY18 \$258.5 million budget for statistics and assessment<sup>5</sup>. This staff-to-budget ratio is particularly problematic for NCES; as a principal federal statistical agency, it is the ED's most important source of objective and independent data to inform policy decisions. If this situation continues, the ED in its entirety will be damaged as a result of reduced capability to internally produce objective data to inform evidence-based educational policy.

With the recent enactment of the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policy Act, the ED will soon need to appoint a senior advisor on statistical matters. As leader of the second oldest and third largest principal federal statistical agency – behind only the U.S. Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics in funding – the NCES Commissioner is uniquely positioned to assume this prominent role. The NCES Commissioner should be granted increased authority to hire and promote full-time and permanent staff to maximize internal capacity, technical knowledge and productivity.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration of this request and for your sustained commitment to the advancement of evidence-based educational policy. The ASA stands ready to work with you and your staffs to support these changes and we hope to meet soon for further discussion.

Sincerely,



Ronald L. Wasserstein  
Executive Director

CC: Members of the United States Senate and House of Representatives Appropriations Subcommittees on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies

1. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2014-12-02/pdf/2014-28326.pdf>
2. <https://nces.ed.gov/about/>
3. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/omb/inforeg/00statprog.pdf>
4. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/statistical-programs-2018.pdf>
5. <https://community.amstat.org/blogs/steve-pierson/2019/01/04/fy20-statistical-agency-budget-developments?CommunityKey=634529e2-a7c9-4921-ac16-7fde170e677a&Tab=>