



# Summary of an ASA Roundtable on Revitalized National Center for Education Statistics: Philanthropy Representatives

*Held virtually February 27, 2026*

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## **Overview and Framing**

The American Statistical Association convened a roundtable of philanthropic funders to discuss the future of the National Center for Education Statistics and its role within the broader education data and evidence ecosystem. The meeting was moderated by Nancy Potok, former Chief Statistician of the United States. The roundtable was made possible with support from Lumina Foundation. Chris Mullin of Lumina Foundation and Adam Gamoran of the William T. Grant Foundation—which is also supporting the [ASA project to re-envision the NCES](#)—hosted the roundtable.

The roundtable had two interlocking purposes: to build toward a shared vision for a modernized NCES, and to explore how philanthropic resources and convening power can contribute to that vision — while being clear that philanthropy cannot and should not attempt to replace the role of the federal government. Participants represented a range of philanthropic organizations with investments in education data, research, and evidence-based policy. To facilitate richer discussion, we agreed that participant names would not be made public.

Two operating assumptions framed the discussion. First, that the federal education statistics function will be rebuilt — the question is not whether, but when and in what form. Second, the

better prepared the field is when that opportunity arises, whether under this administration or a future one, the more likely it is that the rebuilt system will reflect and best meet the needs of our nation. As one participant put it, rebuilding NCES will "take a village" — no single actor, whether ASA, philanthropy, Congress, or the research community, can do it alone. Broad coalition-building across all these constituencies is essential.

This was the second in a series of roundtables ASA is convening with different stakeholder groups as part of a larger project to develop an envisioning roadmap for the future of NCES. The conversation was shaped in real time by the mid-meeting release of a long-anticipated [report from Amber Northern](#), who was appointed by the Department of Education to reimagine the Institute of Education Sciences (IES). Reactions to that report are addressed in a separate section below.

### **Presentation by Former NCES Commissioners Peggy Carr and Lynn Woodworth**

Former NCES Commissioners Peggy Carr and Lynn Woodworth provided the substantive foundation for the discussion, drawing on their decades of combined experience leading the agency.

Carr opened with a historical note. When Congress created the Department of Education in 1867, in the aftermath of the Civil War and during Reconstruction, it declared that the condition and progress of education in the country mattered enough to measure. That founding mission — to gather, document, and report on the state of education across the states — has never changed. It makes NCES the second oldest statistical agency in the federal system, and it gives the current moment a certain weight: what is at stake is not just a bureaucratic function but a 158-year-old commitment to educational accountability.

Woodworth noted that NCES's statutory obligations remain fully in force. The agency is still required by law to report to Congress every June 1st, still expected to produce data that are comparable across jurisdictions, and still charged with being the authoritative source on topics including fairness, equality, and equity. The disruption of recent months has not changed what NCES is supposed to do — it has only interrupted its ability to do it.

Both commissioners were candid about NCES's limitations prior to the current disruption. Carr described NCES's strength as a kind of productive boringness — reliable, neutral, consistent across administrations, transparent in its methods — but acknowledged that this same quality had become a trap. Woodworth pointed specifically to timeliness and innovation as areas where the agency had fallen short, noting that reliable and consistent is not the same thing as unchanging, and that NCES had faced significant bureaucratic hurdles that constrained its ability to modernize.

Their central argument was that the current disruption, as damaging as it is, creates an opportunity that should not be wasted. Rather than simply trying to restore NCES to what it was, the field should seize this moment to envision what it should become. If designing NCES from scratch today, Carr argued, it would not be built around paper and pencil data collection or static

reports. It would be designed as a secure, privacy-protected, AI-enabled statistical backbone for the country — with stabilized infrastructure, modern data collection and analytic capabilities, secure linkage authority across education, workforce, health, and justice, and genuine two-way partnerships with states and districts rather than one-way reporting relationships. Woodworth emphasized that achieving this vision would require state engagement and buy-in, stakeholder input, congressional action in some areas, and, at minimum, the support of whatever administration is in power.

## **Key Themes from Discussion**

### *The federal role in the education data ecosystem is unique and irreplaceable*

A foundational point, made emphatically and repeatedly, is that the federal government's role in education data collection cannot be replicated by any other actor. Only the federal government can produce the kind of longitudinal, regular, reliable, nationally comparable statistical information the country requires. To put the scale in concrete terms: the annual budget of IES is approximately \$800 million. The entire endowment of one of the larger philanthropic organizations represented at the table is \$400 million — enough to fund roughly six months of IES. Private philanthropy, working individually or collectively, cannot make up for what the federal government does. This is not a counsel of despair but a clarification of roles: philanthropy's job is not to substitute for the federal government but to help create the conditions under which the federal government can fulfill its responsibilities well.

### *Start with purpose, not mechanics*

Several participants pushed back, gently but clearly, on the tendency in these conversations to jump quickly to technical solutions — data standards, linkage protocols, API infrastructure — before establishing why any of it matters. The more productive starting point, they argued, is the big picture: what is the Department of Education for, and what statistical production aligns with that purpose? NCES was created during Reconstruction partly as a way to measure how the country was doing at integrating schools and educating people who had previously been denied access to education. That founding purpose suggests the kinds of questions a reimagined NCES should be equipped to answer: How are we doing on segregation? How effectively is education lifting children out of poverty? What are the long-term workforce and life outcomes of students at different points in the system? Starting with these questions, rather than from the existing portfolio of data collections, is more likely to produce a system that is both technically sound and broadly valued.

### *Data linkage and modernization are the central technical opportunity*

With that purpose established, participants converged on data linkage and modernization as the most important technical opportunity. The ability to connect education data with workforce, health, nutrition, criminal justice, and other domains would enable the country to answer questions that are currently unanswerable — and that are increasingly central to the national conversation about the value of education. Participants noted, for example, that the post-

secondary policy conversation has shifted from access to completion to value, and that answering the value question requires robust connections between education data and employment outcomes data held by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Department of Labor, the US Census Bureau, and the Department of Treasury.

Realizing this vision faces real obstacles. Current law prohibits NCES from collecting data for individuals — it can conduct surveys with samples but cannot build the kind of comprehensive student-level database that would enable strong linkages with workforce, health, and other data systems. Changing this would require congressional action. The Foundation for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act was cited as an existing legislative lever that could facilitate some of these changes, and the National Secure Data Service (NSDS) — established as a pilot at the National Science Foundation and envisioned as a data linkage infrastructure connecting federal data systems — was noted as a promising but underfunded vehicle.

On the standards and interoperability side, participants highlighted the foundational importance of common data identifiers and dictionaries. CIP codes, the Common Core of Data for public K-12 schools, the Private School Survey for private K-12 schools, and IPEDS for higher education were all cited as examples of how cross-state consistency enables states to compare themselves to peers and develop better policy — often in ways that go unrecognized. A common data dictionary across NCES surveys and administrative data collections was identified as a high-value, underappreciated need. The PSEO Census project was offered as an instructive existing model: already operating across 40 states on a voluntary basis, it links postsecondary student-level data to employment outcomes and could potentially be expanded through an NCES partnership without new congressional action — an important consideration given uncertainty about Congress.

#### *Equity and civil rights data must be protected and prioritized*

Participants were consistent and emphatic that equity and civil rights data represent a non-negotiable core function of federal education statistics. NCES has historically played an important role in supporting civil rights enforcement — through its formal partnership with the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights, it has helped improve the quality and reliability of the Civil Rights Data Collection, which monitors educational equity, student access to courses, and discipline, and provides data required under the Civil Rights Act of 1964. A reimagined NCES must be capable of tracking outcomes related to segregation, poverty, and socioeconomic mobility, and of producing data that supports civil rights enforcement at a systems level. This theme would take on additional significance later in the meeting when the Amber Northern report was released, as participants noted that equity and civil rights considerations were largely absent from it.

#### *Realism about what is achievable and when*

Running alongside the visionary discussion was a thread of pragmatism about what is actually achievable given the current political and resource environment. One participant observed that the vision for a modernized, fully linked, AI-enabled NCES reads well on paper — and indeed,

much of it has appeared in previous reports and plans — but that the gap between vision and resources has always been the central problem, predating the current disruption. Even before recent cuts, there were not enough resources to execute these ideas. This is not a reason to abandon the vision, but it does shape the strategy: identifying what can be done now, what requires waiting for a different political moment, and what philanthropy can do to help move specific pieces forward without overreaching.

The release of the Amber Northern report mid-meeting added a new dimension to this question, discussed in the following section.

### **Real-Time Reaction to the Release of the Amber Northern Report**

Among the most striking aspects of this roundtable was the release, mid-meeting, of a long-anticipated report from Amber Northern on the future of IES. Northern had been appointed by the Department of Education to lead a reimagining of IES, and her report had been expected for several months. Its arrival during the roundtable itself — with participants glancing at it in real time while the discussion continued — gave the latter portion of the meeting additional energy.

Initial impressions, based on a quick scan rather than careful reading, were cautiously positive. In addition to the report recognizing that IES is created by law and must fulfill certain statutory functions, Appendix D was noted as particularly significant: it includes a legal reference for every single NCES data collection, providing a documented basis for the argument that these collections are mandated in law — something participants felt could have been overlooked or ignored.

The report's most notable gap, in participants' view, was twofold: the near-complete absence of equity and civil rights considerations and its recommended shift away from longitudinal studies. Participants suggested that some of the philanthropic organizations represented at the table might be well-positioned to publicly note what is missing from the report, doing so in a constructive rather than adversarial way.

More broadly, the report's release was seen as shifting the strategic landscape in a useful direction. Prior to its release, the field had been somewhat on the defensive, pushed by more conservative voices toward a "cut and trim" framing focused on reducing NCES's footprint. The Northern report, whatever its limitations, provides a more centered baseline — one that acknowledges the value of federal education statistics and the agency's statutory obligations. Participants saw this as a more productive starting point for advocacy and for the visioning work that ASA and its partners are pursuing.

### **Role of Philanthropy**

The discussion of philanthropy's role was explicitly framed as exploratory — a brainstorm about possibilities rather than a set of commitments — and should be understood in that spirit.

The foundational point, established early and returned to throughout, is that philanthropy cannot replace the federal government in data collection. What it can do is play a catalytic role: helping

to create the conditions under which the federal government can act effectively, filling specific gaps that are within philanthropic scope, and building the coalitions and advocacy capacity that will be needed to move the policy environment.

Several concrete directions were identified. On the infrastructure side, philanthropy could support the costing out of the modernization timeline — translating the vision for a reimaged NCES into a concrete implementation plan with a price tag — and could potentially fund specific catalyst activities identified in the Northern report as near-term opportunities. The NSDS was mentioned as a vehicle where philanthropic investment could help move data linkage infrastructure forward. Funding standardized data-sharing agreements between states and the federal government was another specific suggestion, with the observation that getting lawyers in a room to work out these agreements is exactly the kind of tractable, bounded problem that philanthropy can fund.

On the advocacy side, participants made a distinction that felt important: the most effective philanthropic contribution may not be technical but political. Building a broad, grassroots "advocacy for data" campaign — one that engages the business community, state and local governments, and other non-traditional allies around the big themes of why education data matters, rather than the technical details of how it works — was identified as a high-value opportunity. The point was made that the technical community already understands why common data standards matter; the challenge is building a broader coalition that cares about it, and that requires starting from shared values and big-picture outcomes rather than from the statistics themselves.

Other specific ideas included: building peer-to-peer networks among states coordinated around common frameworks and standards, using models like the CCSSO Community of Innovation and the PSEO Coalition, which could accelerate state-level action and inform the future direction of NCES; exploring the creation of a "Friends of NCES" group to handle the kind of public outreach and champion-building that the agency itself lacks the authority to perform; and preserving and lifting methodological lessons from existing longitudinal studies during the current period of disruption, so that important insights are not lost.

A recurring theme was the importance of coordination among funders — ensuring that different philanthropic bets, whether on federal, state, or non-governmental data infrastructure, are complementary rather than competing, and that ASA can play a coordinating role in that effort.

## **Next Steps**

Several next steps were identified at the close of the meeting, again with the understanding that these reflect the direction of discussion rather than firm commitments. ASA convened a follow-up meeting within approximately one week to allow participants to digest the Northern report and begin identifying specific areas where philanthropic action may be most valuable — including both areas of alignment with the report and gaps that the philanthropic community may want to address. ASA is also developing an envisioning roadmap document, informed by this and other roundtables, that will aim to identify areas of consensus across stakeholder groups

and lay out a strategic path forward for NCES within the broader education data ecosystem. Congressional outreach is planned, with talking points to be developed for participants who wish to engage their members of Congress on these issues. Some participating organizations indicated they may consider making public statements about the equity and civil rights dimensions missing from the Northern report.

### **Closing Reflections**

The roundtable ended on a note of genuine energy and engagement. Participants who had entered the meeting somewhat cautiously — uncertain what was being asked of them and what realistic action looked like — left with a clearer sense of the stakes, the landscape, and their potential role. The unexpected arrival of the Northern report mid-meeting added both urgency and, cautiously, a measure of optimism: the baseline for advocacy may be more workable than previously anticipated. The work ahead is substantial, and the uncertainties are real. But the conversation confirmed that there is a committed and capable community ready to engage — and that with coordination, strategic clarity, and a willingness to build the broad coalitions this effort requires, meaningful progress is within reach.