Summary of an ASA Roundtable Envisioning a Revitalized National Center for Education Statistics

Thought Leaders from Across the Education and Broader Data Ecosystem

Held virtually May 1, 2026
June 30, 2026, written with the assistance of AI

Overview and Context

The American Statistical Association convened this virtual roundtable as the third in a series of engagements designed to inform and support a revitalized National Center for Education Statistics. The discussion brought together thought leaders from across the education and broader data ecosystem, to envision what a modernized NCES should become — not as a standalone federal office, but as the anchor institution of a national education data ecosystem that includes federal agencies, Congress, state and local education agencies, postsecondary institutions, researchers, and other data users. See box inset for participants.

The framing of this roundtable built directly on the two that preceded it. The first roundtable, convened with staff from think tanks and data policy groups across the ideological spectrum, established broad agreement that the federal role in education statistics remains essential and that NCES — or a functional equivalent — should continue to exist. The second roundtable, convened with philanthropic funders, established that there is an appetite and opportunity to coordinate philanthropic investments in support of a revitalized NCES and the broader education data ecosystem. With the foundation built from these two roundtables in place, this third roundtable was designed to envision what a modern, healthy national education data ecosystem should look like and what NCES's role within it should be.

To structure the conversation, participants received in advance information about the ASA project, including its desire to have community input on a vision for a renewed NCES. In addition, they received background papers presenting a range of models for how a revitalized NCES and the broader data ecosystem might be organized — one paper focused on the PK-12 context and another on postsecondary and workforce. The papers are hyperlinked in the resource box in the lower right. Participants were not asked to debate or vote on the models but to react to them as a way of generating ideas. The session opened with a welcome, information about ASA's project on developing a shared vision for a future NCES, individual introductions, and structured prompts regarding actions aimed at revitalizing and modernizing NCES. After this opening session with the full group, participants broke into two breakout groups — one focused on PK-12 data and one on postsecondary and workforce data— before reconvening in plenary to share and react to points highlighted from each group's discussion.

Moderator: Nancy Potok, CEO, NAPx Consulting; Chief Statistician of the United States, 2017-2020.
Participants:

1. Claire Bowen, Urban Institute
2. Chris Chapman, former NCES associate commissioner
3. Jennifer Engle, Georgetown University
4. Ramanathan V. Guha, Microsoft
5. Travis Hoppe, GroundVue
6. Beth Jarosz, Georgetown University
7. Jordan Matsudaira, American University
8. Morgan Polikoff, University of Southern California
9. Stephen Provasnik, former NCES deputy commissioner
10. Dale Richards, Child Trends
11. Akisha Osei Sarfo, Council of the Great City Schools
12. Sean Simone, former NCES associate commissioner
13. Judith Singer, Harvard University
14. Kathy Stack, KB Stack Consulting
15. Chris Woolard, Ohio Department of Education and Workforce

The discussion and this summary follow Chatham House rules, presenting themes and ideas from the roundtable without attributing comments to individual participants or organizations. We first summarize responses to the opening prompts and then themes that emerged in the breakouts groups and closing discussion.

Opening Responses — If You Were the Next NCES Commissioner and Provocative New NCES Features

In response to a prompt asking participants what action they would take first as the next NCES Commissioner, they offered responses that clustered around several themes that carried through later discussions.

A primary theme that emerged was strong support for prioritizing the development of

Resource Box

- Potential models for developing national education statistics: a continuum of differing roles across organizations, states, and federal government, Chris Chapman and Stephen Provasnik
- Making the Case for a National Postsecondary Interstate Statistical Network, Sean Simone.

an NCES-specific strategic plan that clarifies the agency's mission, sets priorities for its portfolio, and explicitly addresses a set of tensions that some participants noted have been present in the agency for decades: continuity versus innovation; statistics production versus facilitation of education research; and top-down planning versus bottom-up engagement.[1] With respect to setting priorities for its portfolio, one concrete action mentioned was to take stock very quickly of the status of the different data collections and tie them to research questions, map the questions to existing administrative data, determine what are the remaining questions that can only be answered by data NCES is able to collect, and focus work on the latter.

A second theme within the responses focused on trust and independence — ensuring that NCES can do its work free from political interference, and rebuilding credibility with the full range of data users, from researchers and policymakers to educators, families, and the general public.

A third theme focused on data linkage, modernization, and making better use of the data that already exist. Participants noted that a large amount of education-relevant data is already being collected across federal agencies, states, and institutions — the challenge is that the data are siloed, inconsistently formatted, and difficult to connect across systems. Building a more connected data ecosystem, leveraging administrative data already held by states and other federal agencies, and organizing the data infrastructure around the questions that matter most for policy rather than around the existing portfolio of collections were mentioned as specific actions that could be taken.

A fourth theme addressed technical capacity and staffing — reducing the agency's over-reliance on contractors and (re)building in-house expertise in statistics, data science, privacy, and emerging technologies including artificial intelligence (AI).

A fifth theme was the need to rethink how NCES delivers data to the public, making data easier to access and use so that the data can get into the hands of people who need and want it. The public increasingly accesses information through AI chatbots and other tools rather than through agency websites, and a revitalized NCES should build its data infrastructure with that reality in mind — including through protocols that make federal data accessible to the AI systems already in use.

Taken together, the opening responses pointed toward a vision of NCES as a trusted, scientifically autonomous, technically capable, interconnected with the rest of the rest of the education data ecosystem, and user-oriented federal statistical agency — one that is strategic about what it does, modern in how it does it, and clear about why it matters.

[1] NCES developed a strategic plan in response to the 2022 envisioning report from an expert panel of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) and had been updating it periodically until March 2025. Roundtable participants were not provided or asked to comment on that plan, and it is no longer publicly available as a comprehensive document. For this reason, most participants were unaware that a plan existed and discussion proceeded as though there was none.

Participants then responded in the chat to a second prompt: what is the most provocative feature of a rebooted NCES that you want the group to discuss, whether you agree with it or not? The responses reinforced several themes that emerged from responses to the first prompt while also presenting some bolder ideas. On data infrastructure, participants supported the compilation of administrative data from states and other federal agencies to create core datasets for NCES, focusing survey efforts only on areas that administrative data do not or cannot cover. Among those would be modernizing the large-scale longitudinal studies that involve data collection from multiple stakeholders and are used for external, policy-relevant research. On governance and independence, one participant raised the provocative idea that NCES should be separated entirely from the Department of Education and made an independent entity. Another suggested that routine data collection and special studies are not the same kind of work and may not need to live within the same agency— an observation that connects to the longstanding tension between NCES's statistical and research functions that would surface repeatedly in the breakout discussions. On equity, participants pointed out the need for disaggregated data to measure inequities along racial and income lines. They also flagged AI's growing impact on education as a priority area for new measurement. On technical modernization, participants called for considering non-traditional data sources such as school board meeting records and social media from which information that would be useful to NCES stakeholders could be gleaned. They also called for regular structured communication between future Commissioners and Congress about operational needs and resources.

Thematic Areas of Agreement

In the breakout discussions and plenary session that followed them, the themes from the prompts were reinforced and expanded . In this section, we first elaborate on the global themes and then discuss topics that merit further exploration.

The Federal Role in the Education Data Ecosystem Remains Essential and Distinctive

Participants agreed that the federal government's role in education statistics cannot be replicated by any other entity. Only the federal government can produce nationally comparable, longitudinal, and reliable statistical information at the scale the country requires, and only it can provide standard setting and other forms of technical leadership across the national education data ecosystem. This is not merely a matter of resources, though resources matter enormously — it is also a matter of credibility, expertise, standards-setting capacity, and the ability to coordinate across jurisdictions and agencies in ways that no state, philanthropic organization, or private entity can do alone.

The discussion was clear that state longitudinal data systems are a valuable and growing asset, but not a substitute for federal statistics. States vary widely in capacity and the state systems cannot answer many questions on their own. And they depend on NCES standards and support to achieve comparability. Strengthening federal and state systems simultaneously — rather than treating them as alternatives — should be a shared goal.

A Revitalized NCES Must Be Strategic About Its Mission and Portfolio

Participants again expressed strong and consistent support for developing a clear strategic plan for NCES — one that starts from the questions the country needs answered rather than from the existing portfolio of data collections, and that makes deliberate decisions about what to prioritize, what to modernize, and what to retire.

One participant noted that NCES's mission was clearest when it was tracking progress toward a specific, known national education goal. For example, the first federal agency to produce education statistics was founded during Reconstruction to monitor progress toward universal schooling across the states and territories. The participant noted that, since roughly 2010, there has not been a clear national education goal around which NCES could center its activities. Part of the strategic planning work ahead is understanding what questions the nation most urgently needs education data to answer — and building the NCES portfolio around those questions rather than around institutional history. Agreeing on what such questions are would also help NCES address the longstanding tension between statistics gathering for its own sake and the broader goal of facilitating education research.

The strategic plan should involve broad input — from state and local education agencies, from the research community, from Congress, and from data users at all levels — so that NCES's priorities reflect the needs of the full ecosystem rather than any single constituency.

Data Linkage and Modernization Are Central to Meeting Future Information Needs

A major theme of both breakout groups and the plenary discussion was the need to improve data linkage and interoperability, starting from the data that already exist rather than always building anew. One participant shared questions for which finding the full answers goes beyond the boundaries of existing data systems, and thus require data linking: How do students move through the PK-12 system into postsecondary education and the workforce? What are the long-term outcomes — in employment, earnings, health, and civic life — of different educational pathways? Where do inequities persist, and what interventions close them? These questions require linked data, and they require longitudinal data. They require a federal institution with the authority, standards, and infrastructure to make linkage possible.

Participants expressed particularly strong support for longitudinal studies as a uniquely federal contribution. Only the federal government can conduct nationally representative longitudinal studies at the scale needed to answer these questions, and participants called for doubling down on this capacity, with modernization, rather than allowing it to erode further. Longitudinal data enable research answering policy questions that cross-sectional data — even repeated cross-sectional data — simply cannot.

The background models generated productive discussions in both breakout groups. Features that participants found promising included building on NCES's existing standards infrastructure rather than starting from scratch, strengthening and expanding state-federal data partnerships, and exploring models in which states hold data but federal standards enable consistent

querying and aggregation. One model — drawing on the National Vital Statistics System (NVSS) as an analogy — prompted particularly useful reflection. Participants with direct operational experience noted that NVSS involves significant practical challenges that are not always visible from the outside, and cautioned against adopting the analogy uncritically. Others saw genuine promise in the underlying concept of states retaining records while federal standards enable the production of national statistics. The group agreed the idea of an NVSS-like model for education data deserves more focused discussion, and a follow-up conversation is planned.

Several participants noted that legal barriers to data linkage remain significant even under existing federal frameworks designed to encourage data sharing. The Evidence Act encourages federal agencies to share data for evidence-building purposes, but the legal and governance obstacles have not been fully resolved in practice. Removing those barriers — or working around them creatively — will require sustained effort and, in some cases, congressional action.

On the technology side, participants suggested a range of promising approaches: secure linkage techniques, federated querying, improved APIs, AI tools for harmonizing standards and other uses, web scraping, non-traditional administrative data sources and public records as useful sources of information even where full statistical inference is not possible, and protocols that make federal data accessible through existing AI tools. Participants cautioned that technology alone cannot solve governance, trust, or capacity problems — but that failing to keep pace with technological change will be problematic in several ways.

Trust and Public Legitimacy Must Be Rebuilt and Protected

Participants returned repeatedly to the challenge of trust. Public trust in federal data institutions is low, and many believe that the current disruption has made it lower. But participants highlighted a dimension of the trust problem that is less often discussed: trust is eroding not only among the general public but among LEAs and SEAs themselves. When the agencies that provide data to NCES begin to question the integrity, independence, or usefulness of what NCES produces, participation in data collections may decline and data quality may suffer. This makes rebuilding trust not merely a communication challenge but an operational and institutional one.

Trust requires protection from political interference in statistical work and transparency about methods, data protection practices, and the uses to which data are put. And it requires that NCES communicate clearly and accessibly with the full range of its audiences, not only with technical experts. If the public does not understand what NCES does, why its data matter, and how data are protected, modernization efforts will struggle to gain the legitimacy they need.

Equity and granularity were mentioned as relevant to the trust and legitimacy discussion. Some participants stated that national averages are insufficient when they obscure persistent inequities by race and ethnicity, income, geography, disability, language status, and other dimensions. A revitalized NCES must be able to produce and disseminate granular data that make inequities visible. At the same time, more granular data carry greater privacy risks,

particularly for small populations, and participants recognized the need for careful disclosure protections and responsible access frameworks.

Participants also raised the importance of distinguishing levels of data authoritativeness. A revitalized NCES will operate in a world where many kinds of data are available — official federal statistics, state administrative data, provisional or experimental estimates, non-traditional sources such as social media. Helping users understand what they are looking at, and what it can and cannot tell them, is a trust issue as much as a technical one. Participants discussed that implementing a tiered framework for data quality and authoritativeness could allow more types of data into the ecosystem without undermining the credibility of official statistics.

Scientific and Technical Capacity Is a Prerequisite for Everything Else

Participants were emphatic that rebuilding NCES's internal capacity is not a secondary concern — it is the foundation on which everything else depends. The recent loss of experienced staff through reductions in force has depleted institutional knowledge that took decades to accumulate and will take sustained effort to rebuild. That rebuilding should begin immediately.

The current over-reliance on contractors is a structural problem with cascading consequences. It drives up costs, creates siloes across statistical programs, limits the agency's ability to innovate, reduces operational flexibility, and leaves the agency without the internal expertise needed to oversee complex technical work or make sound procurement decisions. Multiple participants with direct experience inside NCES or comparable federal agencies described this as one of the most fundamental challenges the agency faces — and one that must be addressed if any of the other goals discussed are to be achieved.

A revitalized NCES needs a staff large enough to include the full range of necessary expertise in statistics, data science, education research, privacy, AI, dissemination, and user-centered design. One participant drew a memorable analogy to the Artemis II mission: one of the reasons it succeeded was the deliberate embedding of scientists throughout the operational team, not just in advisory roles. A revitalized NCES should be able to operate similarly — embedding statistical, scientific, and education expertise throughout its work, not just at the top or in formal advisory structures. A dedicated scientific advisory committee and a structured data user community would further strengthen the connection between NCES's work and the needs of those it serves.

Finally, participants emphasized that state capacity is part of this picture too. A modernized federal-state data partnership will only work if states have the technical, human, and financial capacity to participate effectively. NCES's historical role in supporting state capacity — through grants, standards, technical assistance, and shared infrastructure — is itself an essential part of the mission, and one that deserves renewed investment.

Tactical approaches to revitalizing NCES

The roundtable closed with a sense that the field is at a genuine inflection point — one where the disruption of the current moment, as damaging as it is, creates an opening to improve what

existed before. Several forward-looking ideas emerged from the discussion that deserve sustained attention as ASA and its partners develop the envisioning roadmap.

Running through all of these discussions was a shared assumption that a revitalized NCES should be built for the current technological and data environment, not rebuilt in the image of what existed before. Participants pointed to the need for an agency that meets users where they are — making federal data more easily accessible, including through AI tools and tiered access protocols, building for the cloud era, and communicating data in ways that serve non-expert audiences as well as researchers. The more specific suggestions made below all take that premise as their starting point.

A more immediate action may be to start small and demonstrate what changes in practice and procedure are feasible. Because the rebuilding of NCES and agreement on a vision will take years, one participant suggested running pilots with groups of states that are willing to try new approaches — testing new models for data collection, linkage, and sharing, building trust incrementally, and generating evidence about what works before attempting to scale up. This kind of iterative approach may be the most prudent and realistic path forward in a resource-constrained and uncertain environment.

A second area concerns ecosystem governance — who convenes and coordinates the broader national education data ecosystem, and how. NCES has historically played this role through standards-setting (e.g., the Common Education Data Standards), grant programs, and forums like the National Forum on Education Statistics. A revitalized NCES might need more explicit and durable governance structures — more formal partnerships, coordination mechanisms, and shared infrastructure — to make the ecosystem function effectively as a whole, particularly as the number and variety of data actors continue to grow.

The impact of AI on education itself was also raised. Several participants noted that AI is already affecting teaching, learning, and educational institutions in ways that are not yet well understood — and that we may not even know what we should be measuring. A revitalized NCES will need to grapple not only with AI as a tool for data collection and dissemination, but with AI as a subject of measurement in its own right. Building the flexibility and capacity to track AI's impact on education — before we fully know what that impact looks like — may be one of the most important investments the field can make.

Finally, the path from voluntary to required standards deserves sustained attention. Much of what makes the national education data ecosystem function depends on standards that states and institutions adopt voluntarily. Participants broadly agreed that a more interoperable and connected ecosystem will require stronger and more consistently applied standards, but getting there — through federal mandates, funding incentives, consensus processes, or some combination — is a significant undertaking that will require its own planning, consultation, and groundwork.

Next Steps

The ASA team will continue engaging with the roundtable participants and broader community — through additional roundtables, consultations, and written products — as it develops its vision paper for a revitalized NCES and begins to develop an implementation roadmap. As noted in the roundtable closing, part of what the ASA project is doing is building a village: a community of people who believe NCES is valuable and are willing to help make the case for its revitalization in the many places where that case will need to be made. Participants are encouraged to remain engaged and to consider themselves part of that effort.