

Response to the Request for Information on

Redesigning the Institute of Education Sciences

Docket ID: ED-2025-IES-0844

October 15, 2025

Submitted to:

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Introduction

Mathematica welcomes the opportunity to respond to the U.S. Department of Education’s (ED’s) request for information on how the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) can “modernize its programs, processes, and priorities” to better serve the needs of American students. Our response is informed by our work with IES over more than two decades, which has enabled us to closely observe what has worked well and what could be reimagined. Mathematica has conducted large-scale evaluations for IES, developed the review standards and key product lines for the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC), and operated two Regional Educational Laboratories (RELs).

Our response is organized as follows: First, we provide an overarching recommendation about the need for an IES-wide logic model and strategic plan. Next, we provide specific recommendations to better meet the needs of state and local leaders, educators, parents, researchers, and state education agencies. Finally, we offer ideas for how to maximize the utility of federal and other program evaluations.

Response

Overarching recommendation: Develop (1) a logic model showing how IES’s components work together to accomplish its mission and (2) a five- to 10-year “road map,” consistent with that logic model, that outlines strategies for achieving the mission

IES’s website describes [six broad types of work](#) that IES conducts, but it does not explain how those efforts intersect, the audiences for each type of work, or how IES’s investments lead to improved students’ outcomes. A key aspect of reimagining IES should be making these connections and envisioned results clear. This clarity will help IES’s centers function more cohesively, guide IES in setting goals for centers and programs, and contribute to realistic stakeholder expectations for what a federal education entity with an appropriately restrained role and modest resource levels can achieve.

The logic model would show how IES’s components are envisioned to work together to provide an infrastructure for education data, research, and evaluation that leads to evidence-informed practice and policy. It would describe, at a basic level, what each center and initiative contributes, the core audiences for each center and its products, and the “handoffs” to other entities that will take those products the next step toward improving students’ outcomes. For example, the logic model could make clear that a core audience for National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) survey data is policymakers, who use those data to understand patterns of education need and progress. The logic model should also clarify where IES’s efforts stop—that is, where it hands off its products to other entities that are best positioned to drive change at the state and local levels. We also recommend ancillary communications materials that explain the logic model and illustrate it with examples of how IES investments support understanding of education challenges, enable research and development, are summarized and translated for broader audiences, and build state and local evidence capacity in targeted ways.

Next, we recommend that IES create a road map outlining its strategic vision for achieving each aspect of its mission during the next five to 10 years. This road map should explain concretely how each center is anticipated to contribute to the strategy, including a set of shared education priorities that each center will aim to address, and clear, measurable goals for how the centers should support or influence their core audiences. Fundamentally, this document would summarize how IES intends to “place its bets” during an upcoming period of time, within its legislative authorities. We recommend that IES consider identifying a few topics as special priorities, with the understanding that having priorities means that some roads are not taken, or are taken less often. IES-wide priorities could help discipline the investments each center makes.

While such a road map could send IES in new directions, it might also make explicit some IES “bets” that have until now been mostly implicit. For example, for most of its history, IES-funded research has tended to focus on **evidence-based instruction as a key lever for improving achievement**. A road map could explicitly prioritize improved instruction in one or more core subject areas, such as reading, mathematics, science, or civics. This approach would retain some continuity with prior IES investments and help the centers better focus and coordinate their efforts.

To illustrate how the centers could better coordinate their work to align with strategic priorities, the following examples describe what each center’s contributions could be if mathematics instruction was a strategic priority:

- **The National Center for Education Statistics.** NCES could conduct new, deep-dive, nationally representative data collections that provide detailed information on mathematics teacher preparation, the educator workforce in mathematics, the current state of K–12 mathematics instruction (including use of evidence-based practices), and mathematics courses taken in grades 7–12. NCES could coordinate the data collection design with the other centers to enable a wide range of research and evaluation. For example, the National Center for Education Evaluation (NCEE) could plan for evaluations on topics of national import using the data, and the National Center for Education Research and National Center for Special Education Research could incentivize secondary analyses of specific instructional strategies or student populations. For NCES to take on a focused data collection like this—without new resources—other data collections might need to be reconfigured.
- **The two IES research centers—the National Center for Education Research and the National Center for Special Education Research.** Research grant competitions could focus strategically on specific mathematics challenges, perhaps with input from states and professional associations of mathematics educators. For example, the research centers could incentivize research studies of instruction and teacher preparation in mathematics by awarding competitive points or designating a specific percentage of available research funds for those priorities.
- **The National Center for Education Evaluation.** NCEE evaluations must respond to the evidence needs of the administration and Congress, in addition to serving the field more broadly. Consistent with federal interest, for example, NCEE could continue to build its portfolio Title II evaluations on effectiveness studies of innovative approaches to recruiting, training, and supporting highly capable preservice or in-service mathematics teachers.

- **NCEE’s Knowledge Utilization Division—WWC.** As IES develops priorities in math instruction that will guide coordinated efforts, the WWC could be one source of input. By reviewing evidence on specific mathematics instructional issues where there is adequate research, the WWC could provide an authoritative understanding of what the field knows and where there are knowledge gaps. The WWC could also help IES set realistic goals by assessing the promise of existing strategies for improving outcomes, and help to form a balanced investment strategy that might include big bets, less risky investments likely to produce only modest gains, solutions at scale, and small pilots. IES can also use the WWC’s standards for rigor and reporting—as well as information it would like to have about contrast and implementation—to ensure IES’s investments in causal inference studies will produce useful, action-oriented information. Then, as new investments in NCES data, grant-funded research, and NCEE evaluations yield evidence about how to improve mathematics instruction, the WWC could prioritize reviewing, synthesizing, and interpreting that evidence for its key audiences.
- **NCEE’s Knowledge Utilization Division—RELs.** Although they ultimately respond to states’ needs and interests, the RELs could also benefit from being better aligned to a set of IES priorities and more clearly defining their audiences. The REL program has struggled in part because its mission is too broad; RELs are called to serve all educators, in all roles and places, from prekindergarten to postsecondary, on all topics, as needed. Continuing the mathematics instruction example, IES could require or encourage each REL to devote a certain percentage of effort to mathematics instruction, achieving this goal through the authorized activities of applied research, technical support, and dissemination, perhaps with some additional direction (such as special focus on a key lever for change, perhaps intensive tutoring, teacher preparation, or instructional coaching). It will also be important to clarify expectations for the RELs’ key audiences for this effort, as well as which audience members they should seek to reach in their region and with what intensity, given the resources at hand.

Specific recommendations for better meeting the needs of state and local leaders, educators, parents, researchers, and state education agencies

In addition to developing and communicating a clear logic model and road map, we recommend that IES consider the following approaches and strategies:

- **Balance responding to short-term needs with investments in data and foundational research that will pay off in the long term.** We recommend a balanced portfolio approach. We believe there is value in seeking to meet immediate needs through data collections and research that produce results quickly. In doing so, IES should ensure that the outcomes of interest are appropriate for shorter or rapid-cycle studies. At the same time, IES should avoid shortchanging longer-term investments in research and development to understand, develop, and test solutions for enduring education issues, such as instruction, parent engagement, progress through schooling, and school-to-workforce transitions. This research and development can take years, especially when outcomes are not immediate, but it can make an outsized contribution to developing useful, tested strategies for classrooms and schools.
- **Help build evidence capacity at state agencies, such as by providing support for agency data and evaluation staff and published learning agendas.** One of IES’s signature contributions has been to increase standards for education research and to support rigorous training for hundreds of education researchers. In some cases, researchers—or their students—now serve at state education agencies as in-house staff generating and using evidence, and

additional trained researchers would likely be interested if more roles were available. IES could fund an “evidence lead” position within each state to serve as a point of contact for connecting the state with data, evidence, and supports that address their needs. Separately, through research training grants or RELs, IES could offer additional training, support, or communities of practice designed for state agency staff in these evidence roles.

IES could play a valuable role in helping states develop and update state education learning agendas—that is, a set of questions that could be answered with empirical evidence (such as [this example](#) from Tennessee). A search of state education agency websites suggests that most states do not have a documented learning agenda. These agendas could benefit states in several ways, but they could also serve as a valuable source of information for IES about states’ most pressing learning needs. IES could synthesize these learning agendas to identify common learning needs across states and regions, assess critical gaps not being addressed by states, and set research priorities aligned with states’ high-priority needs. This approach could help correct one of IES’s most vexing challenges: a lack of regular, representative input directly from states about their needs. Direct information from states can complement what IES already learns via projects proposed by researchers and contractors.

- **Clarify the special contributions of the RELs, focusing as appropriate to reflect their limited resources.** It is essential for IES to provide the RELs with a clearer, tailored charge that complements what state education agencies should be able to provide for themselves. We recommend that RELs be tasked with providing research, technical support, and tool development that reflects *advanced* methods and content-area expertise—that is, skills and knowledge that state staff should not be expected to have. For example, under this approach, a REL would not develop basic survey questions for a state program, because states would likely have the internal capacity for that; however, the REL might develop a sampling plan, calculate statistical power under various assumptions, or conduct advanced statistical analysis if requested by the state. Potentially, each REL could also be required to have on-call experts in core instructional areas and to conduct some work in those areas. Further, the dissemination role for RELs might focus on sharing the results of their work with state and district leaders, as it is likely that other entities are better positioned to disseminate research to broad audiences of educators. We argue that tailoring the REL task—and establishing clear expectations for what RELs can accomplish—is essential, given recent appropriation levels. REL funding was lower in 2024 (\$59 million) than in 2011 (\$69 million), and in real dollars, RELs are even further behind (the REL appropriation would be almost \$100 million now if resources had kept pace).
- **Clarify the audiences for the WWC products.** We recommend the WWC focus its products and dissemination on educators in the best position to use evidence to drive change in instruction, including state and local education agency leaders and faculty in teacher preparation programs. These leaders, in turn, are best positioned to reach classroom educators with information about evidence-backed strategies. This focus would help the WWC use its resources wisely to reach targeted but strategically important audiences. WWC dissemination should emphasize the active ingredients—the core practices and implementation features that drive impact—rather than brand-name programs or products. Because materials evolve and decision makers often look to refine what they already use, naming the ingredients of effective interventions equips decision makers to adapt with fidelity to what works. The WWC should also adopt a clearer signal of evidence strength that helps decision makers calibrate the size of their bets. Evidence ratings should aim to convey risk in simple terms to empower decision makers to make wise investments.

- **Support other entities to disseminate evidence “the last mile” to audiences that IES does not expect to reach directly.** IES has labored under unreasonable expectations that educators across America should know about IES and report that they use its products. This expectation is unreasonable, because the prekindergarten to postsecondary education system is vast, far exceeding the size of IES and its body of work. IES does not have the capacity and resources to take research “the last mile” to every classroom in America. As IES considers how to improve mechanisms for disseminating and scaling evidence-based practices, we recommend that it clarify the primary audiences for its work, and support the work of intermediaries to help carry its messages to other audiences. For example, through grant funding, it could support the work of professional associations of educators, education leaders, teacher preparation programs, or education policymakers to incorporate findings from relevant IES research or WWC materials into communications materials, presentations, mentoring or fellowship programs, podcasts, and other media. IES might also use these grants to obtain feedback on topics needing more research or effective communication strategies that could inform IES’s research grant programs and contracts.

Recommendations for maximizing the utility of federal and other education program evaluations

Through its evaluation function, IES has an important opportunity to build evidence that is useful to federal policymakers, including ED officials and congressional staff, and that can help settle significant questions of national import about effective uses of federal resources. In recent years, NCEE’s evaluation portfolio has evolved in helpful ways, with more studies explicitly examining whether programs are being as intended by federal policymakers and the barriers and facilitators to implementation. As resources allow, we recommend IES also plan large-scale demonstration evaluations that assess the feasibility and impact of approaches that the federal government incentivizes or encourages. Examples of seminal evaluations that IES commissioned related to federal policy are a study of the effects of two alternative routes to certification on student achievement and a study of the effects on student achievement of incentivizing effective teachers to transfer to lower-performing schools. These studies not only informed federal policymakers, they were also useful to states and localities considering these approaches to boosting student achievement.

We recommend that IES redouble its efforts to release evaluation reports in a timely manner. Although we applaud IES’s new approach to more succinct and visually engaging evaluation products, its implementation of this approach has created unnecessary delays and confusion. We recommend that IES take a more graduated approach to transitioning evaluation products to new formats and expectations, with the goal of producing timely evaluation reports while giving evaluators more opportunity to gain expertise with the process.

As it rebuilds, IES should consider streamlining its staff review of evaluation reports, aiming for fewer rounds and layers. We recognize that IES staff feel a responsibility to ensure reports that carry the IES logo reflect well on the agency. As it considers approaches, IES might learn from other federal entities that commission and publish research, such as the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) at the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. OPRE’s review and publication process is much less onerous, with fewer layers of agency review and a lighter touch with required revisions.

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