

Institute of Educational Statistics
National Center for Education Statistics

POST-COVID SURVEYS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Covid-19 pandemic and the consequent changes to lifestyles and education practices have focused the American attention intensely on education and learning, both processes and progress. The shifts from in-classroom to virtual learning and from social to asocial learning and isolated environments have profoundly affected students and teachers as well as education administrators at all levels who are faced with making decisions based on whatever information is available. In consequence the context for national surveys and assessments through the remaining pandemic period and into the post-Covid era will in many ways be new, while contextual changes already underway are accelerated.

Important changes are variously attitudinal (i.e., increasing reluctance to participate), transactional (i.e., desires for *quid pro quo* for participation), content-related (i.e., information on measures of learning delays and strategies for recouping), and technological (i.e., greater familiarity and facility with electronic media and virtual classrooms).

The expert panel identified three broad areas for addressing these changes:

- Recognition and Trust of IES/NCES
- Relationships with Educators, Respondents and other Stakeholders
- Opportunities Arising from Technical Advances and Available Technologies

Broad recommendations in each of these areas are given below. More specifically targeted recommendations appear in the final section of the full report and are appended in abbreviated form to this summary.

Major difficulties with data collection ultimately manifest in non-response; and this is of significant concern when it impacts data quality. For NCES the impact is most acute at the school district level where refusal eliminates all district schools from all (non-mandatory) surveys and assessments. Therefore the expert panel framed part of its discussion specifically at the district level and offered some specific recommendations.

Recognition and Trust

First and foremost, IES/NCES needs to function and to be recognized as a single entity rather than a loose assemblage of independent surveys, assessments and data resources. In particular, this includes branding with a universal, single, authoritative brand (logo, letterhead, introductory phrase for study and personnel identification, etc.) that dominates individual survey/assessment identifications and contractor brands. This will allow IES/NCES to unify the recruitment process (especially at the district level) for the upcoming (multi-year) collection of surveys and assessments. When IES/NCES is

consistently presented as a single entity, requests for particular studies can draw on the overall value of IES/NCES surveys, assessments, data releases and publications.

Second, IES/NCES needs to actively listen to the full range of stakeholders to ascertain the value to them of IES/NCES surveys, and to hear their unmet wants, needs and requirements. The panel notes that the collective of IES/NCES stakeholders is extremely varied: government, corporate and public, including policy and decision makers, educators at all levels – administrative oversight through classroom – plus parents and students who are the survey respondents. IES/NCES currently engages effectively with groups of stakeholders, but this is not the case for all.

Third, IES/NCES needs to facilitate and expand its reliance on trusted voices in the communities of respondents, educators and education decision-makers. These range from professional organizations to community-oriented individual coordinators (following the successful NAEP model) for a few districts with highest probability of inclusion (e.g., Los Angeles County) and for populations that self-define (e.g., Native American, by region). Advocacy from trusted voices can explain and support the importance of the survey to an uninterested or a skeptical population. Such advocates also provide IES/NCES with information on reluctance.

Relationships and Participation

Survey success depends on approval and agreement at every one of multiple levels from state to student. And at each level, the question is: “What is in it for *me* [my school/district/state]?” A satisfactory response is predicated on a two-way relationship rather than a one-way data flow.

Financial incentives (above the level of pizza lunch for the class) are not feasible. Non-financial incentives include: input to data queries/information needs, information returns with local relevance, dual use of survey information by school and NCES, recognition as “proud participant,” and input to NCES website products (like “kid zone”). A potentially attractive feature to facilitate participation is the efficiency via simultaneous negotiation for multi-survey (multi-year) package, especially with the attractive provision of limiting/eliminating repeated requests within a few years to the same schools for participation. The key here is for open input from administrators, educators and even parents on what would be valuable returns.

One example is the new study with NICHD that offers direct benefit to students who participate. A different example would be setting up brief, rapid response surveys (“pulse”) surveys by polling participating districts for topics requiring information for upcoming decisions.

The challenge here is to achieve a balance between disclosure risk and plaudit for participation; different kinds of solutions may be needed at different levels.

Opportunities

As the year of the pandemic wears on in “virtual mode,” schooling, work, shopping, other ordinary activities and much communication are primarily electronic, with consequent overall rise in level of competence with electronic media. This creates the opportunity for mounting surveys virtually, with the particular mode suited to the respondent (for example, computer/tablet for students; mobile app for parents, online for teachers) and the data collection type and stage (such as computer for initial survey contact attempt, videocall for follow-up; online data transfer for administrative data).

Preparing for such data collections implies taking advantage of technological possibilities to streamline the process. User Experience (UX) research is extensive and is not just about access or ease of use. Engagement is a major focus, producing advances in the forms of animation, conversation, responses to free-form inquiry, prediction and individual feedback. Designing data collection software “instruments” *ab initio* to take advantage of these capabilities can short circuit irrelevant items, prepopulate items from federal data files and public sources, verify responses that deviate from expectation, create dialogues, prompt or amuse along the way, and allow free instead of preprogrammed responses by using automated text readers during data compilation. Taking electronic data collection as the starting point, paper versions can still be created from these as needed.

Hardware evolution means that once required a computer, then a tablet, now only needs a flash drive. Extensive experience with virtual environments means that surveys can be largely managed remotely and/or on a broader scale or a shorter time frame with no loss (even potential gain) in individual attention to respondents.

Advances in statistical theory and practice for surveys comprise the third major collection of opportunities. For example, combining non-probability surveys with traditional probability survey designs can potentially improve precision and coverage without increasing cost. Combining information across multiple probability surveys also makes sense when recruitment is consolidated and the survey designs can be integrated.

Summary of Primary Findings and Recommendations

CENTRAL CONCEPT

IES/NCES: *Implement a recognized functionally coherent and transparent structure to replace/reorganize loosely connected collection of separate surveys and assessments*

RECOGNITION AND TRUST

Create: A single universal brand for IES/NCES, dominating all individual study or contractor identifications. Inclusion of NAEP under this brand will strengthen recognition.

Consolidate: Recruitment with sole recruiter for all surveys and assessments; negotiate for program rather than individual survey/assessment.

Facilitate: Advocates for IES/NCES, from professional education associations to more local “trusted voices” including (a few) coordinators for largest districts and for special populations.

RELATIONSHIPS

Create: Partnership relationships with education administrators and educators to incentivize participation and to invite input on process, content and feedback.

Undertake: Study to characterize NCEs data uses and users; and a formal study of non-responding school districts to ascertain motivation and identify barriers.

Design: Useful, prompt feedback with local relevance.

Offer: Option to schools to expand a survey/assessment to their (entire) population, with centralized processing, returned with a demographic data file and a summary report or a school profile for assessment or other privacy-protected data.

Find: Ways to create pride in participation at every level; design to circumvent/minimize potential for disclosure.

OPPORTUNITIES

Transition: To electronic/virtual mode data collection with paper form and format only created as needed. Don't request information that is already available (from federal data files or public sources); only request corrections to prepopulated items.

Consider: Using dual frame sample designs, and/or panel designs to avoid redundancy and to integrate across surveys.

Consider: New designs incorporating data from non-probability sample to provide preliminary (stage 1) information while retaining probability samples (stage 2) for estimates.

Develop: Rapid new "pulse" surveys for quick topical information needed for upcoming decisions or summaries.

Work: With OMB to speed approval process, especially for pulse surveys, by separating the approval process into template approval (burden evaluation) and item bank or items (content evaluation).

Create: Analysis tools for schools to calculate local "expectations" based on national data but adjusted to local school characteristics.