

Institute of Educational Statistics
National Center for Education Statistics

SETTING PRIORITIES FOR FEDERAL DATA ACCESS TO EXPAND
THE CONTEXT FOR EDUCATION DATA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Passage of the Evidence Act in July 2019 opened opportunities to integrate administrative data across agencies. For the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), this opportunity to broaden the context for NCES data bases expands the potential scope for education research and enables enrichment of the information base for educational policy. In 2021, NCES charged the National Institute of Statistical Sciences (NISS) with convening a panel of experts to consider the potential benefits from linking information from other federal agencies with NCES data bases and to offer suggestions for establishing priorities for selecting data bases to be linked or integrated.

Specifically, the panel was asked to set priorities for accessing federal data outside the Department of Education, to identify the potential value and the challenges in establishing these links. The goals for enabling this enrichment of NCES data are to enhance primary education information and also to support external objectives that require education data. In responding to this task, the panel identified a number of domains of national interest to serve as examples and as a basis for focusing their deliberations and formulating recommendations. Several of these are included in the appendix to the full report.

The starting point for panel discussions was ultimately reiterated in their findings and conclusions.

- *Meeting the information needs of NCES stakeholders is critical to NCES continuing relevance as a data source – for researchers, policy makers, and IES/ Department of Education.*
- *Many critical issues involving education and education information can only be informed by integration of data from other sources with NCES data.*
- *Therefore, expanding the context for IES/NCES education data that is available to IES/NCES stakeholders is a matter of some urgency – not to be relegated to a wish list.*

The panel’s findings addressed determination of priorities, development of a process to guide data integration or file linkage, and investment of needed resources. Key findings follow in abbreviated form.

I

Focus on Key Questions for Addressing High Priority Issues

- **Provide** a solid information basis for addressing key contemporary issues for decisions by policy makers and other stakeholders, for advances in research directions, and for internal use by the Department of Education. This priority derives from the *importance of the questions* that require integration of data from external sources with NCES data.

- **Define** *importance* in terms of priorities and needs for information of the user community: Researchers, Policy Makers, Educators, Department of Education.

Expand the Context for NCES Studies and Data Resources

- **Create** a file or set of files of contextual information as a “backbone”, to be consistent over time and content, to link to multiple surveys and other data collections.
- **Recognize** the unique value of NCES longitudinal studies, in particular to establish an extensive core of information at both aggregate and micro-levels.

Fill the Important Gaps in Information

- **Access** external sources of information on current education preferences and practices to expand access to contextual information beyond CCD and IPEDS.
- **Identify** external sources with evidence of shifts in education preferences and practices, in particular alternatives and non-traditional options, population and teacher mobility, and large-scale disruptions, of which Covid-19 presents a prime example.

II

Define a Process for Prioritization

- **Establish** guidelines and criteria for requests for data linkage/integration encompassing the rationale, documentation requirements and expectations for release for use by other researchers.
- **Balance** issue importance with effort/resources/time. Consider both the impact of decisions dependent upon the linked files and the breadth of user community able to access these data. Add to development costs the continuing costs of user support, curation and maintenance of files and tools.
- **Attend** to privacy and data confidentiality, including not only individual person information but also small aggregates or highly cross-referenced data.

Maximize Effectiveness of Existing Research Resources

- **Promote** use of EDGE and other NCES tools by increasing visibility and accessibility on the website and expanding available tools and user support.
- **Improve** the website for locating research resources; rethink and restructure the website to advertise and provide direct access to these resources including tools, data collections and publications.
- **Facilitate** creation and sharing of linked/expanded NCES files by partnering within the Department of Education, with other federal agencies and with states.

III

Invest the resources in expertise and effort required.

- **Prefer**, as a general practice, tools for linkage over single purpose data sets.
- **Expand** and strengthen geo-based tools, for linking data from multiple sources, federal and non-federal.
- **Increase** personnel sufficiently to implement data integration and linkages with cartographer-statistician and computer scientist-statistician teams.
- **Develop** and enhance long-term inter-agency relationships around high priority common interests to expand the scope for of shareable information, micro-data and data-linkage and analysis tools
- **Eliminate** or work to overcome systemic hurdles, both technical and operational.