

January 27, 2015

The Honorable John Kline
Chair, Education and the Workforce
Committee
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC, 20515

The Honorable Bobby Scott
Ranking Member, Education and the
Workforce Committee
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC, 20515

The Honorable Lamar Alexander
Chair, Committee on Health, Education,
Labor, and Pensions
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray
Ranking Member, Committee on Health,
Education, Labor, and Pensions
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Kline, Ranking Member Scott, Chairman Alexander, and Ranking Member Murray,

We write to you as former heads of federal statistical agencies to urge you to strengthen the accountability and responsibilities of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in the reauthorization of the Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences (IES).

As the foundation for policy making and policy administration, objective and credible statistical data are vital to our democracy, economy, governance, and well-being. All sides of a policy debate should be able to look to the statistical data as objective and high quality. Any perception that the data have been influenced by a partisan perspective undermines the policy making and its administration.

The independence of a federal statistical agency is a critical element in an agency producing objective and credible statistical data as pointed out in new guidance from the White House Office of Management and Budget directive for federal statistical agencies (<http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2014-12-02/pdf/2014-28326.pdf>) and the National Academy of Science in its *Principles and Practices for a Federal Statistical Agency*. Statistical agencies should have complete control over the data collection, analysis, and publication. Such autonomy should include control over an agency's planning, budget, press releases, and information technology. As two of us said in a recent *Roll Call* column:

“such autonomy affords the agency the ability not only to withstand improper outside influence but also, just as importantly, to deflect the perception of such.” Further, the “prestige and vetting provided by presidential appointment and senate confirmation strengthen an agency head's position to stand by the integrity of the data and to inform policy making with useful data.”

http://www.rollcall.com/news/erosion_of_federal_statistical_agencies_puts_sound_policy_at_risk-237421-1.html

One way to achieve this is to assure that both parties find a leader acceptable because of his/her technical qualifications and integrity, through a Senate confirmation.

You and your committees have oversight over NCES—one of the largest and most prominent federal statistical agencies. NCES is also second oldest. Established in 1867 under the label “department of education,” its sole function (then located in the Department of the Interior) was statistical:

"That there shall be established at the City of Washington, a department of education, for the purpose of collecting such statistics and facts as shall show the condition and progress of education..."

NCES stature and relevance are now at risk. The concern goes back to the 2002 legislation for the creation of the Institute of Education (IES) when responsibilities NCES previously held were transferred to IES or circumscribed in that legislation. For example, NCES authority over its publications—including press releases—and budget control were removed under that law. Further, the presidentially appointed, senate-confirmed commissioner was made to report to the presidentially appointed, senate-confirmed IES director, who, in turn, reports to the presidentially appointed, senate-confirmed Secretary of Education. In 2012, senate confirmation of the NCES commissioner was removed. In the 113th Congress, the House passed legislation to transfer the NCES commissioner's appointment from the President to the IES director.

As you consider IES reauthorization, we urge that you take steps to strengthen NCES's responsibility for its critical statistical functions. More specifically, we urge that you:

- Restore Senate confirmation and keep presidential appointment of the NCES Commissioner;
- Give direct responsibility to NCES for decisions over the scope, content and frequency of data compiled, analyzed and disseminated by the Center;
- Ensure that NCES is accountable for a balanced data collection and reporting program through direct responsibility for developing budget plans within the U. S. Department of Education and for allocations of available appropriations for statistics;
- Authorize the NCES commissioner to make final decisions on review procedures and release of statistical reports and data;
- Authorize NCES to compile data and make analyses of statistics, keeping a clear distinction from policy interpretations or political uses of data;
- Require NCES to take direct actions that protect the integrity and confidentiality of its data, and not assign that function to IES; and
- Permit NCES to call on consultants, experts, and others for advice on planning and execution of its data collection program.

The changes that would need to be made to Strengthening Education through Research Act could be relatively minor but would have enormous impact for NCES and the overall federal statistical system.

If your committees were to allow NCES independence and stature to be weakened, you would be undermining one of the oldest and largest federal statistical agencies. We are also concerned for the signal your committees would be sending about the importance of objective statistical data in the policymaking process. As we approach the 150th anniversary of the founding of NCES, it is important to keep in mind its historical roots to ensure education policy is based on a strong foundation of statistical data.

Sincerely,

Vincent Barabba, Director, U.S. Census Bureau, 1973-1976, 1979-1981
Jack Buckley, Commissioner, National Center for Education Statistics, 2009-2013
Lynda Carlson, Director, National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2000-2012
Guy Caruso, Administrator, Energy Information Administration, 2002-2008
Bruce Chapman, Director, U.S. Census Bureau, 1981-1983
Cynthia Clark, Administrator, National Agricultural Statistical Service, 2008-2014
Emerson Elliott, Commissioner, National Center for Education Statistics, 1984-1995
Martha Farnsworth Riche, Director, U.S. Census Bureau, 1994-1998
Lawrence Greenfeld, Director, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2002-2006
Robert Groves, Director, U.S. Census Bureau, 2009-2012
Jay Hakes, Administrator, Energy Information Administration, 1993-2000
Calvin Kent, Administrator, Energy Information Administration, 1990-1993
James Lynch, Director, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2010-2012
Steve H. Murdock, Director, U.S. Census Bureau, 2008-2009
Richard Newell, Administrator, Energy Information Administration, 2009-2011
Thomas Petska, Director, Statistics of Income, 2002-2009
Kenneth Prewitt, Director, U.S. Census Bureau, 1998-2000
Fritz Scheuren, Director, Statistics of Income, 1980-1994
Jeffrey Sedgwick, Director, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2006-2008
Mark Schneider, Commissioner, National Center for Education Statistics, 2005-2008