

Goal 5. Continuous Improvement of the U.S. Education System:

Enhance the education system’s ability to continuously improve through better and more widespread use of data, research and evaluation, evidence, transparency, innovation, and technology.

Goal Leader: Amy McIntosh, Acting Assistant Secretary, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development (OPEPD)

Public Benefit

Education stakeholders, ranging from students and parents, to teachers and principals, to superintendents and the Secretary, need access to timely, appropriate, relevant, and actionable information. Information sources, which can range from datasets to rigorous evaluations and research studies, must be accessible through reliable technology and must reach needed audiences through dissemination, while applying appropriate controls to protect student privacy. The Department must continue to invest in its information resources so that internal and external stakeholders can use this information to make evidence-based decisions.

States continue to develop systems that will collect, manage, and appropriately report the valid, reliable data that are essential to achieving improvements across education, but there is much more work to do. The Department continues ongoing efforts to develop effective SLDS, design voluntary CEDS to increase interoperability, and develop the capacity of institutions and staff to utilize data to improve teaching and learning outcomes. It is not enough to support only the development of the systems and structures that will provide education agencies across the nation with the data necessary to generate accurate pictures of student performance and other critical elements, from early learning programs through postsecondary institutions and the workforce. The Department must continue to lead the national discussion of how these systems are best and most appropriately used to support students, improve instruction, address inequities, develop future teachers, and inform practice; all while ensuring the privacy of the nation’s students is safely protected.

Additionally, the Department must serve as a model for how data are disseminated. Information that SEAs and LEAs report to the Department should be made accessible, where possible, to inform the public and help with local decision-making, but these data must be shared in ways that protect student privacy and that are in compliance with federal and state privacy laws. The collection, storage, maintenance, and use of data must be responsible and must appropriately protect student privacy. Stewards and users of data must remember that these data describe real people and ensure that systems protect the rights of those people. The Department will help practitioners in the field ensure they are properly protecting privacy and communicating with parents and students about the proper use and management of student data.

The Department continues to prioritize the use of “evidence-based” practices through its competitive programs while supporting the creation of new evidence through rigorous project evaluations. This approach helps ensure that scarce dollars have their intended impact and also empowers states and districts to become more dynamic learning organizations, especially in areas with little existing rigorous evidence. Additionally, the Department continues to provide tools to stakeholders that help them understand what types of which strategies and interventions are effective for various “problems of practice.”

Better use of information, both for policy-makers, but also educators, depends on access to reliable technology. The Department’s vision for 21st-century learning requires that schools have a 21st-century technology infrastructure anchored around high-speed Internet to allow for innovation and personalization in the classroom. This vision is supported by the remarkable progress we have made towards the President’s ConnectED initiative goal to connect 99 percent of students in the nation’s schools to high-speed broadband by 2018. States, districts, and schools must have such infrastructure to incorporate cutting-edge methods for strengthening curriculum quality and delivery to meet more rigorous college- and career-ready standards; improving student access and engagement; developing comprehensive, formative, and summative assessment systems; and enhancing data management systems.

Analysis and Next Steps

Objective 5.3: Research, Evaluation, and Use of Evidence. Invest in research and evaluation that builds evidence for education improvement; communicate findings effectively; and drive the use of evidence in decision-making by internal and external stakeholders.

Objective Leaders:

Margo Anderson, Associate Assistant Deputy Secretary, Office of Innovation and Improvement (OII)

Ruth Neild, Delegated Duties of the Director, Institute of Education Sciences (IES)

Explanation and Analysis of Progress:

Systemic improvement requires research and evaluation so that decision makers at the national, state, and local levels have reliable evidence to inform their actions. While the Department’s research programs are its primary driver for learning what works, the Department also seeks to build evidence by incorporating grantee-led evaluations into other programs. Requiring that more discretionary grants build on and generate evidence of effectiveness will increase the likelihood that scarce program dollars have a positive impact on student outcomes. A list of evaluations completed in FY 2015, as well as a summary of other relevant upcoming evaluations, can be found in appendix E.

The Department’s Evidence Planning Group (EPG) continues to identify opportunities for discretionary grant programs to use evidence-related priorities or selection criteria in competitions. In FY 2015, a total of eight competitions in OII, OESE, and OPE encouraged evidence-based projects through eligibility requirements, competitive preference priorities, and selection criteria. In addition, nine competitions in OII, OESE, and OPE asked that applicants design evaluations of their proposed projects that will produce evidence. The Department surpassed the FY 2015 performance target for programs rewarding evidence in grant competitions. In addition, the EPG has met with each of the Department’s grant-making offices to discuss appropriate uses of evidence in FY 2016 competitions. The Department projects that over 10 competitions will reward evidence in their FY 2016 competitions.

The metric above tracks the Department’s progress in incentivizing applicants to build on evidence of “what works” and to generate new evidence in the course of their grants. Two other metrics—one related to the WWC and one to ERIC—track the Department’s progress in reviewing studies of education effectiveness against rigorous standards and in making high-quality education research widely available and easily accessible. The Department believes that progress in these metrics will contribute to the information flow that is essential to promoting promising areas of education research and development.

The WWC reviews and summarizes studies of the effectiveness of education interventions. During FY 2015, the WWC surpassed the Department’s target by reviewing more than 600 studies. Reviews of studies submitted by applicants to Department grant competitions contributed to the larger-than-anticipated number of studies reviewed. In addition to its regular reviews of IES-funded research studies, in FY 2015 the WWC also began to review studies produced by the i3 program’s first cohort of grantees. These grantees, originally funded in 2010, began to share their results of the independent evaluations of their projects this past year. The WWC also expanded its capacity to review higher volumes of studies by offering additional reviewer training and awarding a new contract for grant-related study reviews.

Likewise, in FY 2015, ERIC continued to prioritize acquisition of peer-reviewed, full-text education research and secured many new agreements with content providers to enable ERIC to acquire the full text of peer-reviewed research articles supported with FY 2012 or later research funding from IES. This work contributed to surpassing the FY 2015 annual performance target by more than 5,000 full-text, peer-reviewed resources. ERIC also has incorporated a search function that allows users to identify studies in the ERIC database that were reviewed by the WWC and that met standards. In this way, the greater integration of the Department’s WWC and ERIC investments contributes to the “virtuous cycle” of using and producing research evidence.

Challenges and Next Steps:

The process to collect data and track progress against the goal is iterative, and properly using evidence to award competitive grants entails a shift in culture and capacity building across the Department. Building evidence into competitions is also resource-intensive in terms of program staff capacity, grantee capacity, availability of sufficient numbers of WWC-certified reviewers, and the review process. Grantees vary in their comfort with and understanding of evaluation and use of evidence, yet the Department has limited resources to support grantees in conducting rigorous evaluations that would produce evidence of effectiveness. Finally, targets for this objective are based on reasonable projections about which competitive grant programs may make new awards in this fiscal year, but the actual dollar amount awarded will depend on final appropriation amounts and other funding decisions and trade-offs, so performance targets may not increase in a linear fashion each year.

The Department’s leadership will continue explaining to internal stakeholders how the new evidence framework in Education Department General Administrative Regulations (EDGAR) can be used in upcoming discretionary grant competitions to reward evidence. For example:

- EPG is meeting with program offices throughout the Department to identify ways to incorporate evidence into discretionary grant competitions.
- EPG is also exploring ways to support program offices that choose to incorporate evidence and build capacity departmentwide. For example, EPG worked to establish a departmentwide contract that would provide for technical assistance to grantees on their evaluations, particularly impact evaluations that are intended to produce studies that meet WWC standards. This contract vehicle is now operational for programs planning FY2016 competitions. Additionally, IES has collaborated with program offices to recruit peer reviewers familiar with the WWC standards, which will increase scrutiny of applicants’ proposed plans for rigorous evaluations. Finally, OII and IES are providing training to Department staff on logic models and other elements of the evidence framework to better inform our work at the Department and to provide better assistance to our grantees.

- IES continues to use its various resources intentionally to support program design and evaluation. For example, in FY 2015, IES managed the development of a [guide](#) for planning and conducting strong quasi-experiments and offered a [webinar](#) on the topic. Regional Educational Laboratory Southeast will offer a five-part webinar series FY 2016 on designing strong studies of the impact of professional development. The series is geared toward applicants to the Department’s discretionary grant programs that require evidence.

To increase the number of individuals who are certified WWC reviewers, the WWC has been developing an on-demand online reviewer certification course. Previously, all training was held in-person and offered a few times per year. Demand is high for this credential, and the WWC has not been able to train all interested individuals. This new approach will allow anyone to take the training online and complete a multiple-choice exam on WWC standards. This system will allow many more individuals to receive training, at a considerably reduced per-person cost.

Continuous Improvement of the U.S. Education System Indicators of Success	Baseline	2013 Actuals	2014 Actuals	2015 Actuals	2015 Current Year Target	Current Year Results	2016 Out-Year Targets	2017 Out-Year Targets
5.3.A. Percentage of select new (noncontinuation) competitive grant dollars that reward evidence ¹	FY: 2012 6.5%	9.35%	15.9%	29.4%	11.0%	MET	18% ²	20%
New APG Metric: Number of completed project evaluations from grantees from select discretionary grant programs in a given fiscal year that meet What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) Evidence Standards ³	FY: 2015 2	NA	NA	2	NA	NA	10	20
5.3.B. Number of peer-reviewed, full-text resources in the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC)	FY: 2013 23,512	23,512	27,292	36,197	31,192	MET	35,692	40,892
5.3.C. Number of reviewed studies in the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) database ⁴	FY: 2013 9,535	9,535	10,310	10,889	10,235	MET	NA	NA
New Metric: Number of visits to the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) website	FY: 2015 1,822,000	NA	NA	1,822,000	NA	NA	1,967,760	2,164,536

NA = Not applicable.

TBD = To be determined.

Academic Year (AY) is a collegiate year spanning August–May; School Year (SY) spans August–July and is aligned with a P–12 school year; Fiscal Year (FY) corresponds to a federal fiscal year; Calendar Year (CY) spans January–December.

Data Sources and Frequency of Collection:

5.3.A. Forecast Report issued by the Office of the Chief Financial Officer (OCFO) and final Funding Reports from relevant programs; annually

5.3.B. Education Resources Information Center (ERIC); quarterly

¹ Metric is aligned to an APG.

² The out-year performance targets are increased from what was reported in the *FY 2014 Annual Performance Report and FY 2016 Annual Performance Plan*.

³ Metric is aligned to an APG.

⁴ Metric being removed at the end of the FY 2015 reporting period and being replaced with the metric identified as “New Metric” directly below it. If there is no corresponding “New Metric” identified, new metric TBD. Please refer to appendix B for details pertaining to the removal and addition of metrics. The proposed FY 2016 and 2017 targets for the metric being removed were 10,585 and 10,935, respectively.

5.3.C. What Works Clearinghouse (WWC); quarterly