

DQC Recommendations on ESRA Reauthorization

April 2023

The Education Science Reform Act (ESRA) serves an important role in setting a standard for rigorous education research, supporting analytic capacity, and providing critical investments in statewide longitudinal data systems (SLDSs). However, the field's needs and expectations for investments and support have evolved in the two decades since ESRA was reauthorized in the following ways:

- States have moved beyond the original, siloed vision of the SLDS program, developing integrated (i.e., cross-agency) data systems that extend from early childhood into the workforce.
- Forty-seven states adopted new student data privacy laws, increasing the demand for technical assistance on how to securely share student data for the learner's benefit.
- The Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act was enacted, invigorating the federal government's focus on the use of data and evidence to inform decisionmaking and investments.
- The public sector expects the research community to be more active partners in identifying short- and long-term actions that can improve the education and workforce services provided in communities.

Updates to ESRA must ensure that the time, resources, and human capital involved in producing data and research return value to stakeholders. The Strengthening Education through Research Act (SETRA) included many critical updates and remains a good starting place for renewed ESRA reauthorization conversations. Additional changes that build on SETRA can enable the Institute for Education Sciences (IES) to provide access to information that meets the most pressing needs of the moment and improves state capacity to do the same. Specifically, the Data Quality Campaign (DQC) recommends the following actions:

- Updating and expanding the SLDS grant program to provide more resources and align with how states are managing their data infrastructure;
- Expanding IES's role in building state and local capacity to use data and evidence;
- Increasing support for state and local agencies to implement data privacy requirements;
- Including a more intentional focus on cross-sector data linkages, especially data that addresses pathways through education and the workforce; and
- Improving cross-agency collaboration at the federal level.

Update and Expand the SLDS Grant Program

The SLDS Grant Program needs to be updated and expanded to provide more resources and to align with how states are managing their data infrastructure, specifically expanding program eligibility from just state education agencies (SEAs) to Governors, their designees, or other entities managing the SLDS. States also need new investments to modernize their SLDS to meet the changing education, workforce, and other needs of individuals within the state. Additionally, as states increasingly seek to operate their systems outside of agency silos, a new program strategy must ensure that states can easily allocate funds where they are needed most to sustain and improve the human and technical capacity necessary for continued development.

Recommendations:

- **Increase funding for the SLDS Grant Program.** Support more states and more significant projects by establishing a fixed and higher (at least \$100 million) authorization level for the program.
- **Make funds available to additional organizations.** Expand the eligible applicant pool for SLDS grants beyond SEAs by including "the Governor, or other data governance bodies or organizations managing or overseeing a State's SLDS as determined and designated by the Governor."

- **Ensure the program can accommodate varied state needs.** Ensure states have the flexibility to address their greatest data needs, while also signaling priorities that all states might benefit from (e.g., improving data integration, updating source systems such as postsecondary data systems, improving credential transparency, providing access through dashboards and individualized tools, supporting staff capacity to manage, use, and protect data, promoting cross-agency data governance).

Build State and Local Capacity to Use Data and Evidence

To maximize investments in data and research, IES must support improvements in state and local capacity to use data for evidence-based decisionmaking, invest limited resources wisely, and identify policies and practices that lead to better opportunities and outcomes for individuals. Revisions to existing IES programs provide an opportunity to expand IES's role in addressing state and local needs in the following ways:

Recommendations:

- **Emphasize the role of IES in building state capacity.** ESRA can do more to address IES's role in building state and local capacity through its general charge and how it is governed.
 - ESRA's existing six functions (in section 112) speak to performing research and strengthening national capacity but lack a focus on providing practical support to SEAs and local education agencies (LEA). Consider adding functions speaking to:
 - Building national, state, and local capacity to analyze, use, and disseminate data.
 - Strengthening state and local capacity to conduct, develop, and disseminate research (or add "state and local" to function (4)).
 - The National Board for Education Sciences plays an important role in advising and setting priorities for IES but could expand its membership to include representatives that give the Board a better understanding of emerging issues and needs. Statutorily, the Board must contain 15 voting members, including a wide range of members knowledgeable about the educational needs of the United States. While IES activities are important to students and statewide data governing bodies, neither of which are currently represented in this group.
- **Expand the role of Regional Education Labs (RELs):** The RELs' mission should be expanded to focus on supporting states not just through conducting research but also in data analysis and evaluation activities. RELs, given their regional nature, are particularly well positioned to provide additional capacity and on-the-ground assistance to help state and local agencies work through their own data challenges. In other words, the RELs should be providing direct service to states driven primarily by needs that states identify rather than an external research agenda. Revise the RELs' mission language to say "Central Mission and Primary Function.—Each regional educational laboratory awarded a contract under this section shall— (1) support state educational agencies, local educational agencies, and, as appropriate schools funded by the Bureau, in conducting applied research, data analysis, and evaluation activities; expanding data analysis and the use of data; and implementing privacy requirements regarding, at a minimum. . ."
- **Strengthen the Comprehensive Centers.** ESRA authorizes the establishment of Comprehensive Centers (through grants, contracts, or cooperative agreements) to provide technical assistance to states on the implementation of federal laws. Increasing the capacity of state and local agencies to use data and evidence and provide access to a variety of stakeholders is paramount. ESRA should strengthen the Comprehensive Centers to improve their efficiency and effectiveness and expand access to information required by education and workforce leaders in the following ways:

- Give priority to Comprehensive Center applicants that plan to establish research-practice partnerships (RPPs).
 - Include a state chief information officer or equivalent, chief privacy officer, or other data leader on each Comprehensive Center's advisory board.
 - Build capacity for data use by making existing research more actionable for local users, by translating it and helping them learn how to use it.
 - Require or create incentives for the national Comprehensive Centers to focus on integrated data support, including data privacy, security, and use.
 - Consider a standalone network of data support centers that can provide targeted technical assistance on state and local data needs and expand state capacity to analyze and use data to improve opportunities and outcomes.
- **Invest more funding in RPPs.** IES could better support locally relevant research by encouraging and supporting state and local agencies to enter into RPPs. By including a focus on conducting research through RPPs in the National Center for Education Research's (NCER) duties and by directing the RELs to support these research arrangements, IES can help state and local agencies better understand what works to support students in their particular context. Supporting RPPs should include not just investment, guidance, and promotion of collaborations but also direction on how to access and securely link data in ways that enable the operation of a successful RPP. As a result, state and local agencies will be able to answer their most pressing questions, make decisions based on timely, actionable information, and support evidence-based continuous improvement.

Increase Support for Data Privacy

The landscape of data privacy laws and policies is complex, and states often cite real or perceived privacy barriers as getting in the way of enhancing their SLDSs to better support accessing and using linked data. More could be done to provide additional support to state and local entities to implement privacy requirements. Capacity building in the field is the best way to strengthen privacy protections while ensuring data can be used to strengthen education and workforce systems.

Recommendations:

- **Codify robust privacy language.** SETRA included additional, robust privacy language, and the next reauthorization of ESRA should adopt the bipartisan language included in that draft.
- **Formally authorize PTAC.** The Committee should authorize, fund, and build capacity in federal technical assistance centers focused on privacy, specifically ED's Privacy Technical Assistance Center (PTAC), improving PTAC's utility to leaders and policymakers. Any legislative language related to PTAC should ensure that it maintains sufficient autonomy and flexibility to address the most pressing needs of the field and produce resources that support best practice approaches to protecting privacy while enabling data use.
- **Invest in regional privacy support.** Consider prioritizing data privacy technical assistance as part of each regional comprehensive center or REL.

Focus on Education and Workforce Pathways

People do not operate in silos, and yet agency supported programs, data collections, and technical assistance often target specific sectors instead of streamlining and integrating supports across sectors to ease people's transitions between education and the workforce. States can navigate some of their longitudinal data needs but rely on the federal government to assist in addressing priorities or challenges that states cannot tackle on their own. These needs can be supported by investments in and support for research and data activities that are designed with more intentional connections across education and the workforce.

Recommendations:

- **Include adult learners in research topics.** The NCER Commissioner is authorized to support no fewer than eight national research and development centers, which must conduct work on several topics. Consider adding adult learners to the topics on which the NCER Commissioner and the national Center must conduct research. The RELs should also prioritize research regarding adult learners when identified by states as a pressing need.
- **Expand support, research, and technical assistance that addresses state postsecondary needs.** The NCES Commissioner is tasked with data collection on several postsecondary topics, including postsecondary opportunity and financial aid. This collection could be expanded to include postsecondary outcomes, impact of public benefit programs on completion/outcomes, and other relevant topics related to postsecondary and workforce outcomes that meet state data needs.
- **Collaborate with other agencies to help states address gaps in their data systems.** NCES should support SEAs and other state agencies participating in integrated SLDSs to obtain lawful and appropriate access to data only available through federal sources. This data includes:
 - Military enlistment information;
 - Wage and employment records across state lines (accessible through unemployment insurance records, census records, or other applicable sources); and
 - Postsecondary enrollment, persistence, and completion data across state lines.

Improve Data Coordination across Federal Agencies

Improved federal collaboration leads to better state collaboration. As Congress considers ways to improve federal capacity to use data, ESRA reauthorization should include a coordinated strategy to strengthen state and local data capacity. Among other actions, this support includes promoting best practices, addressing systematic barriers, and breaking down silos across sectors and agencies.

Recommendations:

- **Direct IES to coordinate with other federal agencies to break down silos.** IES should work with the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, Agriculture, and Commerce to identify solutions that address longstanding barriers to data collection and education and workforce research (e.g., sharing WIOA and SNAP E&T data). This interagency coordinating effort could also include developing uniform, joint guidance on data standards, definitions and privacy.
- **Direct ED to collaborate with other federal agencies on new data processes.** Through IES, the Office of the Chief Data Officer, or another appropriate office, ED should collaborate with OMB and other federal agencies to institute new approaches to intergovernmental problem solving that bring together policymakers, researchers, program administrators, data and evaluation experts, grants administrators, and service providers from different levels of government to:
 - Understand the barriers to cross-program coordination, outcome-focused innovation, and use of data and evidence to improve effectiveness and efficiency in grant programs;
 - Determine which barriers are the result of Congressional statutes, regulatory and administrative requirements, or myths and misinterpretations of federal requirements.
 - Identify actions to overcome the barriers—focusing on what can be implemented without legislation—to strengthen state and local capacity to redirect resources from unproductive activities to activities that improve outcomes and cost effectiveness; and
 - Devise pilots¹ in a few high-priority areas that can serve as a proof of concept for broader adoption of streamlined, outcome-focused reporting that improves accountability for results while reducing reporting burden.

¹ The “exceptions” provision in 2 CFR 200.102 could provide the authority to create such pilots.