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FORUM

Should IES Advance a National-Interest Research Agenda?

Two scholars debate how best to leverage federal resources for local concerns

IN THE FIRST FEW MONTHS of the second Trump administration, the Department of Government Efficiency pushed into the U.S. Department of Education and executed substantial cuts to staff and funding. Many of those reductions fell on ED's research arm, the Institute of Education Sciences, which lost 88 percent of its staff and saw nearly every research contract canceled.

In the wake of this intervention, Secretary of Education Linda McMahon recruited Amber M. Northern, senior vice president for research at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, as a short-term adviser in charge of crafting a proposal to rebuild IES. The result of that months-long effort was *Reimagining the Institute of Education Sciences*, a report intended to address the issues that calcified IES's operations over 20 years. The dominant theme of Northern's report—reflected in the first of six recommended "big shifts"—is that "[r]ather than spreading resources across many disconnected projects, IES should focus on the most urgent education challenges, informed by state and district leaders."

In this forum, Kenneth Shores, an associate professor at the University of Delaware School of Education, echoes Northern's call for IES to pursue a more focused and relevant research agenda. But he contends that some questions of national importance won't bubble up from states and districts and that IES should develop mechanisms to identify and address them. Northern responds that prioritizing "national questions" would take IES down a murky, politicized path into territory that is not in the institute's core mission.

At the heart of their exchange lies the question: Should IES *primarily* help practitioners solve concrete problems identified by state and local practitioners, or should it also function as a national research institution with its own strategic agenda?



States and Districts Need IES to Lead Nationally Strategic Research

BY KENNETH SHORES



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States and Districts Need IES to lead Nationally Strategic Research

BY KENNETH SHORES

Recent cuts and restructuring at the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) and the U.S. Department of Education have forced a basic question onto the table: What purpose should a federal education research agency serve? The education department's drastic reduction in staffing in 2025, its stated goal of returning authority to states and local communities, and subsequent evidence of sharp decreases in IES capacity have all heightened that question's urgency. In this context, Amber Northern's *Reimagining the Institute of Education Sciences* performs an important service. It offers a framework for preserving a distinctive federal role in education research and for making IES more relevant and more useful to states and school districts.

Northern recommends organizing much of IES's work around pressing challenges identified by—and therefore already visible to—states and districts; that is essential but incomplete. In my view, the institute needs to adopt a broader organizing principle. IES should also exercise the expertise and leadership needed to identify questions of national import that local systems may experience only in fragments or as downstream symptoms of larger forces. That difference matters because state and local policymakers often encounter major societal changes primarily through the practical challenges they create in schools rather than as coherent research problems. Consider three developments currently affecting the K–12 system: artificial intelligence, demographic decline, and policies enabling greater pluralism in the delivery of publicly funded education. These three forces are already generating urgent practical demands on state and local school systems. Yet they also raise nationally consequential questions that require a more strategic federal research agenda—and therefore a different organizing principle from the one undergirding Northern's framework.

To illustrate the contrast between our approaches, I will start with the strongest points in Northern's proposal. She maintains the status of the National Center for Education Statistics as the nation's indispensable source of comparable public data, treats the National Assessment of Educational Progress as a central federal responsibility, supports multi-state collaboration, and calls for measurable national research objectives that span the four major centers through which IES funds research and development work. Her report honors the institute's mission to collect and disseminate national statistics and gives it a serious role in research and technical assistance. It also places political independence, rigor, and timeliness at the center of the redesign.

Northern's proposal centers above all on increasing the institute's responsiveness to the research priorities of states and districts as they define them. She calls for IES to organize its work around urgent challenges shared by most states, asks grantmaking to focus on practical significance, supports rapid-cycle research, and wants the Regional Educational Labs to become nimbler and more useful. She calls for the institute's two grantmaking research centers, the National Center for Education Research and the National Center for Special Education Research, to align on common priorities and links the institute's work to national benchmarks and national research objectives. That is a serious reconstruction agenda.

What's missing from Northern's vision, however, is a more explicit leadership function for IES in defining the national agenda for education research. In my view, the institute also needs to develop the

expertise and institutional capacity to discern when scattered local pressures reflect a larger national problem, when that problem warrants federal attention, and how inquiry should be organized over time and across IES centers. That role goes beyond mere responsiveness to state and local demand. It requires that IES provide a system-level view of what is affecting today's students, what is likely to matter for future cohorts, and how inquiry should be organized to benefit the country as a whole.

Notably, this approach contrasts with Northern's focus on state and local needs and departs from IES's earlier model. IES has long produced national public goods through its research centers, statistical infrastructure, program evaluations, and support for research on nationally important problems. Yet it did not consistently use explicit criteria to identify major societal problems, coordinate inquiry into them across its centers, or sustain that inquiry across presidential administrations.

This augmentation of the vision for a renewed IES retains the strongest features of Northern's proposed reorganization—including the statistical core, rigorous research standards, and a substantial federal role in grantmaking, evaluation, and evidence stewardship. But it adds an explicit national-interest mission inside the institute that would require a protocol for identifying nationally significant questions and ensuring enough continuity to make progress on answering them over time. This would entail dedicated time and space for surfacing such questions across the often-disconnected statistics, research, and evaluation units within IES and a mechanism for coordinating the work of its research centers when the exploration of a question spans data collection, grantmaking, and evidence synthesis. It would also require measures to keep those questions on the agenda long enough for evidence to accumulate—including across presidential administrations. With this added function, IES would remain responsive to states and districts while also operating as a federal hub for sustained inquiry into nationally consequential problems.

Three current pressures show why defining a national research agenda matters and how it differs from state- and district-led agenda-setting. Artificial intelligence, demographic decline, and educational pluralism all generate immediate demands on state and local decisionmakers. They also raise larger questions that those decisionmakers are less likely to identify as research priorities. Addressing the big questions will require the federal government to define the problem at national scale, align the research portfolio, and sustain inquiry across time.

Artificial intelligence raises national-interest questions about which skills will matter most for students' success going forward—and about how the value of different educational credentials and degrees will evolve over time. For states and districts, in contrast, the most salient questions are likely to involve which AI tools to procure, what rules to establish for their use in classrooms, and what guidance to provide teachers. Locally oriented research is likely to study how the implementation of specific AI tools affects instruction or student learning in particular settings. A federal agenda would instead seek to understand which human capacities gain value when generative systems can perform more routine reading, writing, and problem-solving tasks—and how best to measure those capacities. Which student assessments reveal the aspects of judgment, interpretation, originality, and social skills that will increasingly comprise humans' comparative advantage in the age of AI? Which credentials will continue to signal readiness to colleges and employers?



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Practical questions over artificial intelligence, demographic decline, and educational pluralism are generating demands at the state and local level that could be anticipated by authoritative federal research, Shores argues.

Demographic decline raises national-interest questions about socialization, family formation, and civic attachment. Schooling remains one of our country's few near-universal institutions contributing to socialization, civic formation, and habit-building, which gives falling cohort sizes and rising youth social isolation broader significance. States and districts encounter demographic decline primarily through the lens of enrollment loss and fiscal strain. Thus, locally defined research is likely to focus on enrollment management, smart staffing decisions, and when and how best to close schools. A federal agenda would tackle broader questions about how schooling functions when cohorts shrink and social attachment weakens: how schools affect social connectedness, family formation, and civic attachment, which indicators of those constructs deserve sustained national attention, and how the relationships among them change as cohort sizes fall.

Educational pluralism raises national-interest questions about public legitimacy and public obligation in the context of a more differentiated system of schooling. States grapple with this issue when dealing with private-school choice, charter policy, and stronger claims of parental authority. With a state-level perspective, research will likely emphasize financial sustainability, governance, or short-run achievement effects within school sectors. A federal agenda would ask a broader question about how to sustain public legitimacy when publicly funded education is delivered through a wide range of institutional approaches. Which government obligations follow public funding across sectors? Which forms of accountability preserve

public confidence when families pursue increasingly differentiated arrangements? Which legal and civic boundaries allow room for religious instruction, parental preference, and institutional diversity while sustaining a shared idea of public education? A federal research agenda would investigate the larger disputes over religion, parental claims, and common purpose that animate those debates.

Other federal research agencies already embrace this kind of national purpose. For example, the Department of Energy's_Genesis Mission defines national aims first and then builds research architecture around them. According to official descriptions, the Genesis Mission aims to accelerate scientific discovery, strengthen national security, drive energy innovation, and integrate supercomputers, facilities, AI systems, and unique data sets into a coordinated federal platform. Federal education research needs that same clarity of purpose but adapted to a decentralized sector. When national interests are at stake, when coordination can reap significant benefits, and when universities, philanthropies, businesses, and local governments will underprovide the necessary continuity and infrastructure, the federal government should do more than aggregate local demand. It should name the purpose and organize capacity around it.

Embracing a national-interest mission does raise a thorny governance question. A federal research agency should remain responsive to changes in governing priorities, but it also needs enough continuity to sustain inquiry whose value emerges only over time. Those goals can be reconciled through careful institutional design. An incoming presidential administration can set broad priorities and shift emphasis for new grantmaking, while multi-year funding windows, fixed-term fellowships, rotating external panels, and transparent selection criteria preserve continuity in the evidence base. That structure would allow democratic control without subjecting the research portfolio to a series of abrupt midstream reversals.

The future of IES turns on the question of federal purpose. Yes, the institute should become more responsive to states and districts. But it should also adopt an explicit national-interest agenda for questions that local demand will not reliably define or sustain. That twofold mandate would preserve the statistical core and support practical decisionmaking while giving sustained attention to nationally consequential questions that no single state, university, or philanthropy has reason to tackle for the country at large. Those questions are already pressing. A federal research agency should treat them with greater clarity, greater urgency, and a more explicit sense of national purpose. E

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IES Research Serves the National Interest with Evidence, not Values

by Amber M. Northern

It's been a pleasure engaging with colleagues—new and old—since my report, *Reimagining the Institute of Education Sciences*, was released in February 2026. After spending much of 2025 immersed in the work, I welcomed the range of responses it generated—supportive, critical, and everything in between. I therefore appreciate the opportunity to respond to Kenneth Shores's essay, "States and Districts Need IES to Lead Nationally Strategic Research." While he and I agree on much about a reimagined IES, we differ on what belongs in a federal research agenda, the risks involved in expanding its current scope, and the need for national-interest aims to serve applied purposes. Let's take those one by one.

Shores argues that IES should "discern when scattered local pressures reflect a larger national problem," offering three areas—artificial intelligence, demographic declines, and educational pluralism—to demonstrate how a national-interest agenda might differ from one set by states and districts. Yet the examples he characterizes as being of "national interest" are abstract and tend to hinge on normatively contested concepts that are riper for white papers and symposia than rigorous empirical research.

For example, in discussing educational pluralism, Shores suggests that a federal agenda should examine "how to sustain public legitimacy when publicly funded education is delivered through a wide range of institutional approaches," and should "investigate the larger disputes over religion, parental claims, and common purpose that animate these debates." But many of those concepts (public legitimacy, common purpose, and so on) are not easily observed or measured. More importantly, they rest on value-based assumptions that depend on one's political or philosophical priors. They often aren't "researchable" in the rigorous terms that a federal scientific agency should insist on.

This is not to say that such questions lack significance. Rather, they are more appropriately addressed by thought leaders and public intellectuals than by IES-supported economists, psychologists, and other quantitative researchers. It's true that IES has sometimes funded research on these kinds of questions in the past—but those efforts scarcely ever led to anything that improved schools or student learning. In fact, IES is most effective when it focuses on questions where strong evidence can accumulate and converge—not where disagreement is rooted primarily in definitions, values, or competing theories of the good.

Moreover, targeting areas that are especially vulnerable to politicization inevitably threatens the credibility of bona fide research. Shores suggests that a federal research agenda related to demographic shifts, for example, should examine "how schools affect social connectedness, family formation, and civic attachment." That may sound appealing on its face, but defining each of those outcomes is itself a deeply political exercise. Is social connectedness *increased* in a school that fosters bonds within similar peer groups—or *decreased* because it reduces students' exposure to different kinds of people? Does encouraging student activism *improve* civic attachment—or *weaken* it because it normalizes disruptions of core institutions? Is family formation understood to include traditional marriage, same sex marriage, household stability, and/or cohabitation patterns? Who's to say? Either way, a "national interest" agenda should not invite politicization in ways that jeopardize IES's role as an objective and trusted source of evidence.

The statutory mission of IES is to leverage its independent analyses and statistics gathering to provide



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State and local education concerns are best addressed with practical guidance that comes from evidence-based research devoid of ideological assumptions, Northern argues, such as in language and literacy instruction.

"scientifically valid research that is relevant to education practice and policy." That's been true since Congress enacted the Education Sciences Reform Act a quarter century ago, and it remains true today. Although IES also funds foundational and basic research, it does so in a more constrained and purpose-driven way than agencies such as the National Science Foundation or National Institutes of Health. For example, IES funds development research to design interventions and measurement work to determine the reliability of assessments, but these are nonetheless "use-inspired" portfolios. Their purpose is to pave the way to development of measurable constructs, testable relationships, and (eventual) applications.

That doesn't mean that every research question IES supports will directly address a need on the ground. But it does imply that the foundational research it chooses to fund should lay the groundwork for practical application later. In asking for IES to support more macro-level queries, we risk moving it away from the applied sciences, which have always been its North Star—even if translating and disseminating that work has at times proved difficult.

Finally, and related, Shores emphasizes a federal role in identifying both broader and deeper inquiries, but it remains unclear whether answers to those questions would meaningfully shape policy or practice in states and districts. For example, his framing of artificial intelligence as a sorting of human skills between the more irrelevant and the more valuable risks being inactionable without clear pathways connecting those insights to decisions about standards, assessments, staffing, accountability, and other levers.

In other words, questions of the national interest should be grounded in the state and local conditions that give rise to them in the first place, while honoring their interconnectedness with the larger education apparatus. A well-executed research portfolio embeds applied research questions within the policy and implementation contexts that determine whether evidence can be acted on. Doing so helps ensure that resulting knowledge is useful to the systems and people it is meant to support.

I have no issue with a national-interest agenda (though I think Shores's three examples are problematic)—but I think it is best understood as a national research agenda rooted in and encompassing a limited number of challenges widely shared by states and districts. Those challenges may include children not reading proficiently by 3rd grade, weak middle school math outcomes, or adolescents ill-prepared for the transition from high school to college or career. Yes, those priorities are decidedly narrower and more utilitarian than some might prefer. But, properly connected to systems-level questions about alignment, incentives, capacity, and institutional design, they can yield a concise research agenda that addresses the greatest needs of American students. If that isn't in the national interest, what is?

Amber M. Northern served as senior adviser in the Office of the Secretary at the U.S. Department of Education from June 2025 through May 2026.

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