Committee on Education and the Workforce
U.S. House of Representatives

Hearing

Education Research:
Exploring Opportunities to Strengthen the Institute of Education Sciences

September 10, 2013

Written Statement of

Dr. Bridget Terry Long, Ph.D.

Xander Professor of Education and Economics
Academic Dean, Harvard Graduate School of Education

Chair, National Board for Education Sciences

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

My name is Dr. Bridget Terry Long, and I am the Academic Dean and Xander Professor of Education and Economics at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Beyond my expertise as a researcher and faculty member, I am also the Chair of the National Board for Education Sciences, the advisory board of the Institute of Education Sciences (IES). The National Board for Education Sciences is independent of IES, and we are tasked with advising the Director and reviewing and evaluating the work of IES. In this way, we provide a critical but also constructive perspective on the activities of IES.

My testimony reflects discussions and recommendations made by the Board as well as my observations as an experienced educational researcher who has interacted with IES on many levels. My comments today aim to provide an objective assessment of the role of IES, its contributions, and areas for improvement.

<u>The Role of IES</u>

In our current environment, educational research has become even more important as the penalties of poor achievement and lack of opportunity have never been greater. As we work to raise student achievement, foster productive learning environments, and bolster the social contributions of our schools and universities, the knowledge, inventions, and partnerships created through educational research are essential—it is through research that we determine the best ways to produce the needed gains and help to make tough decisions about how to use our limited funds. Before we can debate what policies we should implement, we first need a clear

understanding of the facts and to have an accurate sense of the real costs and benefits of any policy or program. In essence, research is the foundation for improving education.

During the short history of IES, it has filled an essential role in providing and encouraging the necessary conditions for high-quality education research. While its impact is evident in many ways, I focus my comments on three main contributions. First, IES has taken the role of creating a series of public goods that no one else would or could do without concerns about possible bias. Second, it has led the way in efforts to reevaluate and redefine the standard of what is considered good evidence. Third, IES has influenced the kind of educational research that is done by making possible large-scale studies, pushing researchers to work closely with practitioners to ensure relevance and usability, and holding an unwavering focus on serving the national good.

(1) Creating Necessary Public Goods

As a federal entity, IES has taken leadership to provide several key public goods needed to support a strong educational system and research. By public goods, I mean things that benefit us all, but many of these goods would not otherwise be produced without government intervention. For example, IES provides the foundations of factual information and research with the collection of clear, consistent, high-quality data through the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).[1] It is through the efforts of IES, which conducts its work free from political influence, that we are able to understand trends in our student populations, schools and universities, and an array of inputs and outcomes that span early childhood to adult education. These data also make possible a wealth of research conducted on every aspect of education.

Additionally, IES serves as a repository and distribution center of research, both studies funded by IES and those that are not. The dissemination and communication of objective information is a critical one for the nation. The education space is filled with many organizations, companies, and individuals who have varying objectives, agendas, and degrees of expertise. Therefore, it can be difficult to sort between the many studies, reports, and assertions to determine what is fact versus what is fiction. Moreover, the research community often lacks the training and incentives to translate complex research for a lay audience. In such a crowded space, IES stands as the best authority of rigorous research free from influence. It has helped to clarify what is known about issues related to large educational debates. Moreover, it has been helpful in discerning between conflicting and confusing reports on important issues. It has used its convening power to bring together researchers from various backgrounds to discuss the issues and coordinate research.[2] It has also conducted evaluations of federal initiatives.[3]

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[1] Before the creation of IES, the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) led efforts to collect educational data. IES has built upon these surveys in its current activities.

[2] For example, the National Center for Education Research (NCER) serves as a hub to facilitate collaboration among a diverse, interdisciplinary group of researchers who are a part of the Reading for Understanding Initiative (RfU).

(2) Setting the Standards of "Good Evidence"

Before the creation of IES, many lamented that educational research was failing to answer important questions in convincing ways. The varying quality of research and lack of attention to certain issues led some to dismiss the educational research base as inadequate. IES has changed this dramatically by leading a critical assessment of past research and initiating a number of debates about what are appropriate methods and standards of rigor for the different approaches to educational research.

One concrete example of this has been the push for randomized controlled trials (RCTs), which are considered the gold-standard of research and often used in the field of medicine. Prior to IES's leadership, RCTs were rarely conducted in education and not valued among many researchers. However, by pushing the field, providing support, and engaging researchers to develop ways of conducting such analyses while still being sensitive to needs of students and practitioners, educational research has progressed in fundamental ways with new important evidence on the effects of key programs and interventions. For example, in my own work with several colleagues, which was partially funded by IES, we demonstrated that providing low- and moderate-income families with streamlined personal assistance to complete the federal college financial aid application had large effects on college attendance and persistence. Because we used a randomized controlled trial design, we were able to establish convincingly that our intervention was not only the cause of the educational gains; importantly, the program was also inexpensive.[4]

IES continues to engage the field in conversations about rigor in educational research. This is demonstrated by technical working groups that are establishing standards for specific research methodologies and helping to ensure that evaluations provide unbiased and causally-valid assessments.[5] It is also worth noting that IES has developed a rigorous peer review process for evaluating grant proposals.

NCER is funding six research teams to advance theories and develop interventions to improve reading comprehension from pre-K through grade 12. Five of the teams are testing interventions to improve reading comprehension through a variety of curricula, supplemental materials, and professional development opportunities.

[3] For instance, in September 2012, NCEE released the *State and District Receipt of Recovery Act Funds: A Report from Charting the Progress of Education Reform—An Evaluation of the Recovery Act's Role*, which documents how funding was spent and includes the characteristics of funded schools and districts, amounts, etc. It is part of a larger study of major Federal funding efforts and reflects an NCEE effort to get interim reports out to the public more quickly.

[4] Bettinger, Eric P., Bridget Terry Long, Philip Oreopoulos, and Lisa Sanbonmatsu. (2012) "The Role of Application Assistance and Information in College Decisions: Results from the H&R Block FAFSA Experiment," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, vol. 127, no. 3, pp. 1205-1242.

[5] NCEE formed the technical methods group to work on issues and strategies that assure evaluations of education interventions provide unbiased and causally valid assessments. The technical methods working group aims to advance and provide guidance for those specialists who are embarking on evaluations in education. More information is available here: http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/tech_methods/

(3) Encouraging Relevant, Rigorous Research for the National Good

IES has used its resources and convening power to focus the field on research that is both rigorous and focused on shedding light on the major problems facing the country. By setting priorities and crafting calls for research proposals (i.e., Requests for Proposals or RFPs), IES has sent signals to the field about important topics that need answers, rigorous standards that must be upheld, and the importance of conducting research in partnership with practitioners. Additionally, it has made possible research studies that would not have otherwise been conducted.

While there are private foundations and other organizations that support educational research, most focus on only a handful of topics and fund projects of limited size. But education is all encompassing, from the wide array of types of students, environments, needs, and goals, and there is much work to be done. With a national platform, IES has the unique ability to leverage researcher and practitioner expertise by signaling and providing incentives to conduct studies on issues of importance for the country. One way it has done this is by designing research competitions that focus on the major issues and areas of education. Along with this has come IES's emphasis on the importance of external validity in research, meaning that it has called for researchers to be accountable to external audiences on how the findings for one set of schools might be applicable to another set of schools.

IES has also been able to support large-scale projects that could not be easily funded by others. To learn more certain issues, studies must be large in scale and compare the experiences of districts across states or large populations of students. Without support from IES, this type of work would often not be possible, and the knowledge base that is being built as a result of this work has been valuable in improving student outcomes. Taken together, IES has both insured research on a breadth of topics while also making possible large-scale studies that have been incredibly beneficial to our understanding of how to help students.

Another way IES has influenced the research community is by highlighting the importance of partnerships between researchers and schools, districts, or state educational agencies. Because the delivery of education is the result of many actors, research can often be improved by being designed and conducted while working with practitioners. Additionally, by working closely with the field, researchers are much more likely to produce research that is relevant and useful in practice. However, such work can be difficult to manage and implement. IES has pushed and supported such connections to the benefit of the research being conducted.[6]

Finally, it is important to note that IES has been instrumental in attracting talent to the study of education. With the signals it sends about important issues in education and the support it gives for research, IES has helped to attract a growing number of researchers with the tools and

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[6] For instance, in 2012, IES created the Research-Practitioner Partnerships in Education Research program, which supports partnering around issues and problems of practice identified by the state and local education agencies. It is administered by the National Center for Education Research (NCER) as part of the research grant program.

resources to support high-quality research and partner with the field. IES is helping to produce the next generation of scholars and innovators who will help to solve important problems in education.

The Strengths, Challenges, and Continuous Improvement of IES

The accomplishments of IES are numerous, and the researchers and innovators supported by IES funding will continue to have positive impacts on the lives of students as well as many other parts of our society. Nevertheless, in light of the Board and IES's commitment to continuous improvement, it is clear more can and needs to be done. In this spirit, the Board has worked to advise, review, and advance the activities of IES. The Board has matured to be an important place of feedback and expertise, and my comments here reflect continuing discussions between the Board and IES staff about how to address challenges facing the organization.

As I noted earlier, the dissemination and communication role of IES is an important one. IES has filled a gap for the nation by providing clear, objective information and making it available to the public. While IES is a strong producer and supporter of information of value, it is still building capacity and expertise on how to disseminate that information, including methods that use the latest technology and outreach methods. This is a challenging feat. Unlike many other fields, education has large range of stakeholders and multiple audiences to address, including policymakers; practitioners from teachers to superintendents to state agencies; researchers; and students and their families. Each group needs different kinds of information in different forms.

The Board and IES staff believe strongly in the dissemination role of IES, and we have held a number of discussions on how to improve efforts. There are many examples of success and promise. For example, the Practice Guides distill a wealth of research into clear steps teachers can take to improve the learning of their students.[7] The What Works Clearinghouse was created with the idea of helping the public understand research results and whether they were completed using rigorous methods. The dissemination of recent data reports and grant competitions include webinars and video media.[8]

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[7] One example of a Practice Guide is *Teaching Elementary School Students To Be Effective Writers*, which was released by the What Works Clearinghouse. It offers a framework and examples, and is part of NCEE's interest in providing practice guides that are narrowly focused and useful to classroom teachers.

[8] For example, to explain the new NAEP Technology and Engineering Literacy (TEL) assessment, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), created a video. The video describes what the assessment covers, gives examples, and makes clear that the goal of the assessment is to learn whether students have the skills needed to address the challenges of our evolving society. Additionally, an online tutorial allows users to get a sense of the test. More information is available here: http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/tel/

However, more could be done in terms of reaching out to the many audiences of educational data and research, and there are many efforts underway at IES to address this challenge. They include:

- Revisions to the website to make it easier to find important research and facts. For instance, a new contract was awarded this year to manage and enhance the What Works Clearinghouse.[9] Additionally, as part of the RFP for the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), the contractor is expected to redesign the IES website to improve search capabilities and provide basic orientations to key topics and references for relatively inexperienced users.[10]

- IES added new requirements to research grant competitions for researchers to develop dissemination plans for their studies. Moreover, NCSER released a report on how to make research more understandable, and it was presented to its grant recipients.[11]

- Establishing a grant competition to create a *Research and Development Center on Knowledge Utilization*. This Center will explore questions of how education researchers can make their work more relevant and useful to practitioners located in state and local education agencies and in individual schools. This work is meant to address concerns that often there is only limited adoption of evidence-based practices.[12]

Related to the issue of dissemination is the relevance and usability of the research produced and funded by IES. This has been a major focus of IES, and there are many instances of the Institute meeting this goal. As noted above, the growing attention to the importance of partnerships has broadened the number of studies done in concert with schools and districts, and this approach increases the likelihood that the results will be relevant and useful for practitioners. Still, this has been an area of constant reevaluation, and there have been many activities recently to improve this function of IES. For example:

- Revising and renegotiating the contracts for the Regional Education Labs (RELs). For example, earlier this year, IES released revised criteria for REL proposals and products. The criteria focus on issues related to the technical rigor of products (e.g., data quality, analysis methods), the relevance of the work (i.e., whether it provides evidence that can inform a practitioner's action or decision), and the readability of the products (i.e., whether the information is clear for its intended audiences). NCEE has also been working

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[9] Report from the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (NCEE) to the NBES concerning activities from March to May 2013.

[10] Report from the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (NCEE) to the NBES concerning activities from October 2012 to February 2013.

[11] The report entitled, *Translating the Statistical Representation of the Effects of Education Interventions into More Readily Interpretable Forms*, can be found here: http://ies.ed.gov/ncser/pubs/20133000/

[12] More information is available here: http://ies.ed.gov/funding/ncer_rfas/randd.asp

to build the capacity of the REL program by conducting webinars to help the RELs meet increasing standards in writing, collaboration, and measurement.[13]

- Just recently, on August 12, 2013, IES convened a Product Feedback and Development Meeting with stakeholders from across the country to get suggestions about how to improve the usability and relevance of the products and services of the WWC and RELs.[14]

As an independent body tasked with providing constructive feedback to IES, the Board has been pleased with the fact that our feedback and that of others on these issues has been incorporated into the work of the Institute, and we believe these activities will help to strengthen IES's impact.

Another challenge facing IES is balancing the need to work in many areas with the reality of having limited resources. Because it is important to understand so many facets of education and the populations it impacts, it can be difficult to prioritize some areas over others or to decide not to fund research in some areas at all. Touch choices sometimes have to be made. For instance, this year, IES will not hold research competitions in special education.[15] However, IES is not taking a haphazard approach to this dilemma. Recent discussions between the Board and IES staff have concerned if and how the Institute might decide to prioritize funding decisions. Moreover, IES is attempting to understand and improve the impact of the overall portfolio of research supported with IES funding. Together, we have been examining the research portfolios of NCER and NCSER to understand how IES might better target its research funding.

Revising ESRA: Recommendations from the NBES

At the June 20, 2012 NBES meeting, Board members discussed specific recommendations to revise ESRA. These recommendations build from previous suggestions made by the Board in May 2008 with several additional changes and revisions. Most notably, we suggest:

- Establishing a requirement that the IES Director submit a biennial plan of activities to the Board for advice. Currently, the IES Director is only required to submit his or her priorities to the Board every six years. Although the Board has many informal opportunities to provide feedback to the Director based on the strong working

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[13] Report from the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (NCEE) to the NBES concerning activities from March to May 2013.

[14] More information is available here: http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/event.aspx?sid=28

[15] The National Center for Special Education Research (NCSER) will not hold research or research training competitions for FY 2014. Researchers interested in the study of children, youth, and adults with disabilities may be eligible for funding under the NCER competitions.

relationship between the current Board and current Director, the expectation of more frequent formal feedback should be documented.

- Changing the term of a Board member to commence from the date of confirmation so that members have a full four years of service

- Automatically extending by one year the terms of Board members whose successors have not yet been appointed; this would help to ensure that the Board always has a sufficient number of members to be effective

- Giving the Board hiring and evaluation authority over the NBES Executive Director to ensure this role is independent of IES given the assessment duties of the Board

- Allowing for flexibility in the pay of the IES Director and Commissioners by making these positions eligible for "critical pay" under the Federal Workforce Flexibility Act of 2004

- Removing privacy protection for individual schools in data reports, a protection that does not exist in any other federal statue or regulation. The current prohibition on revealing school identity means that useful information must be omitted from evaluation reports.

A full list of our recommendations and a marked-up copy of ESRA have been entered into the official record.

Conclusions

In summary, to have an informed populace and clarity on how best to educate our children and ourselves, there must be a robust foundation of high-quality data, rigorous, objective research and strong communication of evidence on what works and what does not. It is clear that IES has made substantial contributions to our understanding of how to improve education and is engaged in activities to address the challenges it faces. There is more work to be done, and as noted by our recommendations, the Board believes some changes to ESRA would improve the functioning of IES and the Board for the continued benefit of the country.