



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

# Fiscal Years 2022–2026 Learning Agenda

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# NOTE TO READERS

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**The Department's Learning Agenda can also be found in Appendix B of its FY 22-26 Strategic Plan.**

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For more information about the Department's Learning Agenda, email [evidence@ed.gov](mailto:evidence@ed.gov).

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# APPENDIX B

## FY 2022–FY 2026 Learning Agenda

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### Introduction

If ever there has been a time when high-quality evidence about how to strengthen the nation’s education system was needed, it is now. The COVID-19 pandemic has drawn attention to long-standing inequities in the resources communities have to address the public health crisis; pivot effectively to hybrid or remote learning; and support the well-being of students, educators, and families as the pandemic threw into disarray all aspects of life and work. Although additional data are needed to understand the full impact of the pandemic, several reports suggest students belonging to populations that were already underserved have borne the brunt of its effects.

Recovery—and then building a better education system that more equitably, efficiently, and effectively meets the needs of every student—is a critical challenge for educators and education policymakers alike. It requires better, more granular, and more timely evidence about what is happening in schools and communities; new insights into what works to improve student outcomes; an increased awareness of how to scale what works and to support states and districts in using effective practices; and an increased use of evidence to continuously improve the Department’s programs.

Importantly, evidence, promising innovation, and exploration must be a central focus of the Department’s work. Taken together, they are the initial stages of a larger evidence-building pipeline. That pipeline encourages the development of novel evidence-based strategies, adaptations of those strategies in response to emerging evidence of promise, and the application of successively more rigorous evidence-building techniques to evaluate the capacity to improve student outcomes. Several Department offices and programs, including the Grants Policy Office, the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education’s (OESE’s) Education Innovation and Research (EIR) Program, and the Institute of Education Sciences’ (IES’) field-initiated grants and data collections (e.g., the National Assessment of Education Progress’ (NAEP’s) 2021 School Survey and School Pulse Study), already incorporate elements of this pipeline into their approaches to evidence building.

The *Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018* encourages all federal agencies to build and use evidence in support of fulfilling their missions and improving agency operations. In this Fiscal Year (FY) 2022–FY 2026 Learning



Agenda, the Department proposes six focus areas for evidence building that are critical to strengthening the nation’s education system. By building evidence in these areas, the Department will be better able to ensure every student has access to high-quality learning opportunities that meet their unique needs. Consistent with the Department’s Strategic Goals and Agency Priority Goals (APGs), the Department’s six focus areas include:

<b>Focus Area 1:</b>	Address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students, educators, and faculty.
<b>Focus Area 2:</b>	Promote equity in student access to educational resources, opportunities, and inclusive environments.
<b>Focus Area 3:</b>	Support a diverse and talented educator workforce and professional growth to strengthen student learning.
<b>Focus Area 4:</b>	Meet students’ social, emotional, and academic needs.
<b>Focus Area 5:</b>	Increase postsecondary value by focusing on equity-conscious strategies to address affordability, completion, post-enrollment success, and support for inclusive institutions.
<b>Focus Area 6:</b>	Effectively manage federal student aid programs.

## Stakeholder Engagement

Portions of this FY 2022–FY 2026 Learning Agenda that relate to reopening, recovery, and renewal in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic have been informed by substantial Department outreach to stakeholders in the early days of the Biden–Harris Administration, including educators, education policymakers, state and local leaders, education researchers and related organizations, and advocacy organizations. Components specifically related to federal student aid are informed by outreach to academic researchers, federal student aid advocates, and staff across the executive branch.

Contemporaneously with the development of the Department’s Strategic Plan, the Department published a [Request for Information](#) in the *Federal Register* to solicit feedback on the Learning Agenda’s six focus areas. The Department received more than 30 comments, including from individuals, universities, university-based researchers, philanthropies, advocates, and advocacy organizations.

Although a substantial portion of that feedback was consistent with the Department’s proposed areas of emphasis—most notably supporting an equitable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic that supports the learning and development of all students—some



stakeholders raised themes that are not pronounced in this version of the Learning Agenda (e.g., early childhood education). Importantly, the Department considers this Learning Agenda a “living document.” Following its initial publication, the Department will continue its stakeholder outreach efforts and internal discussions to further refine it. The most up-to-date version of this Learning Agenda will be available at <https://www.ed.gov/data>.

Finally, needs-sensing activities revealed that several national associations and advocacy organizations had developed—or had plans to develop—learning agendas specific to their area of interest. To the extent that those learning agendas are broadly consistent with Department’s interests and goals (e.g., tutoring and summer learning), the Department looks forward to exploring opportunities for collaboration.



# Focus Area 1:

Address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students, educators, and faculty.

## Alignment to Agency Strategy

APG 1:	Address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students, educators, and faculty.
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## Background

Although the full extent of COVID-19’s impact on the nation’s education system and its students has yet to be fully understood, the breadth and depth of its effects are coming into view. At the elementary and secondary education levels, evidence from formative assessment providers suggests that [achievement in the wake of the pandemic lags](#) that which would have otherwise been expected. Worryingly, the [net effect](#) appears to be an exacerbation of existing gaps in equity, disadvantaging student groups that were already underserved. At the nation’s colleges and universities, an analysis of [year-on-year enrollment trends](#) suggests many students delayed or paused their studies. Here too, there are signs of the pandemic’s differential impact, where some of the [greatest enrollment declines were noted](#) among college students who were Black or Brown or who attended community colleges.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic’s impact, Congress made historic investments in elementary, secondary, and postsecondary education. Describing how states, districts, and institutions of higher education (IHEs) used those funds in service of reopening and recovery is of interest to policymakers and taxpayers alike.

## Priority Learning Questions

The Department proposes a series of priority learning questions (PLQs) related to this focus area, which align with APG 1. Given the differential impact of the pandemic on underserved students and the schools and institutions that serve them, findings from these PLQs should be disaggregated when possible and appropriate. These PLQs are:

- 1.1 To what extent has the COVID-19 pandemic been associated with changes in students’ opportunities to learn and achievement at all levels of education,



particularly for the most underserved students, and how have those conditions changed as the nation shifts to recovery? (APG 1)

- 1.2 How have states, school districts, and IHEs used federal funds administered by the Department to support reopening and recovery, and what is the relationship between those uses and important student outcomes of interest (e.g., student engagement, student achievement, retention, and attainment), particularly for the most underserved students? (APG 1)
- 1.3 What policies, programs, services, and practices effectively engage students with their schools in their learning in efforts to support their social and emotional well-being and mental health and in other services those schools provide, both generally and in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic? (APG 1)
- 1.4 What policies, programs, services, and practices effectively accelerate student learning in core academic subjects in elementary and secondary education, including reading, mathematics, science, and English language arts in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic? (APG 1; also see PLQ 4.3, which deals more generally with supporting student achievement)
- 1.5 What policies, programs, services, and practices effectively support the professional practice and general well-being of educators, faculty, and other instructional leaders in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic? (APG 1)

## Short-Term Activities

The Department began a series of data collections to address PLQ 1.1 and portions of PLQ 1.2. This includes new survey research conducted by IES' National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and its National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (NCEE) and both new and existing annual reporting requirements coordinated by the Office of the Chief Data Officer (OCDO) and NCES. Specifically, this work includes [NAEP's The Nation's Report Card](#), NCEE's forthcoming [Implementation of Key Federal Education Policies in the Wake of the Coronavirus Pandemic](#) and [Study of District and School Uses of Federal Education Funds](#), and OCDO's [Education Stabilization Fund Public Transparency Portal](#).

IES' National Center for Education Research (NCER) has funded several field-initiated grants that are also related to PLQ 1.1. They include [Understanding Pennsylvania's Educational Inequities in the time of COVID-19](#), [Equity in Virginia's Public Education System: A Longitudinal Examination Spanning the COVID-19 Shutdown](#), and [Children's Longitudinal Development from Pre-K through High School as Disrupted by COVID-19](#).



Work related to PLQ 1.3—in particular, the role of families in student engagement—is underway as part of NCEE’s [Evaluating Implementation of the Statewide Family Engagement Centers Program](#) study.

Finally, NCES has awarded supplemental funding to 10 Statewide Longitudinal Data System grantee states to support efforts to respond to data and data system needs resulting from the pandemic. Projects funded through these supplemental awards include exploring impacts on family literacy and college access, identifying the status of students’ internet access and digital devices, and understanding the school-level capacity to support online learning.

## Long-Term Activities

PLQs related to the potential impact of federal education funds on student or institutional outcomes (PLQ 1.2); policies, programs, services, and practices associated with successfully reengaging students (PLQ 1.3); and the accelerating of their learning in core academic subjects (PLQ 1.4) are addressable primarily in the long term. This is due, in part, to the lag in relevant student outcome data (see the Anticipated Challenges and Proposed Solutions section for this focus area). It is also because rigorous evidence-building activities take time to design, procure, implement, and evaluate.

To that end, IES has already begun work on a series of long-term research and development activities related to pandemic recovery. Exemplar activities include a collaboration with the National Science Foundation to fund research on the use of cutting-edge artificial intelligence technologies to improve services for students with disabilities; NCER’s [Research Networks Focused on Critical Problems of Education Policy and Practice](#) and [Improving Pandemic Recovery Efforts in Education Agencies](#); two [IES Learning Acceleration Challenges](#) focused on improving upper elementary mathematics performance for student with disabilities and middle school science performance among the lowest-performing students; the National Center for Special Education Research’s (NCSE’s) [Research to Accelerate Pandemic Recovery in Special Education](#) grants program; NCER’s [Using Longitudinal Data to Support State Education Recovery Policymaking](#) competition; an anticipated NCEE *Impact Study of Using Technology to Accelerate Math Learning*; and the forthcoming School Pulse Panel, which will replace the 2021 NAEP School Survey described previously.



The Department continues to consider evidence-building activities related to educator well-being, as described in PLQ 1.5.

Finally, when appropriate, the Department will consider the use of the Secretary's Supplemental Priorities in grant competitions relevant to this focus area. This includes the use of evidence in project design and grantee evidence building.

### **Anticipated Challenges and Proposed Solutions**

The greatest challenge facing evidence-building activities in this area concerns the availability of student outcome data. These data are not systematically available to the Department, largely due to pandemic-related assessment waivers. When assessment data are available, there is often substantial lag between the assessment's administration and its availability for analysis at the Department level. As a result, some questions may not be able to be answered at the national level, in a timely manner, or both, which may hamper some policy considerations.

Grant and contract-funded research conducted at state and local educational agencies that have continued to collect and store formative (interim) or summative assessment data provide one window into pandemic recovery. More information about students' performance in the wake of the COVID pandemic will be generated by upcoming analyses of data recently collected by NAEP or an inability of existing district and state data systems to collect and store information that could complement student summative assessments (e.g., diagnostic assessment data).



## Focus Area 2:

Promote equity in student access to educational resources, opportunities, and inclusive environments.

### Alignment to Agency Strategy

Strategic Objective 1.1	Prioritize the equitable and adequate distribution of resources to communities of concentrated poverty in an effort to provide underserved students with high-quality educational opportunities.
Strategic Objective 1.3	Support states, school districts, and institutions of higher education to promote and protect students' nondiscriminatory and equal access to education, as provided by Federal civil rights laws.

### Background

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, a growing body of evidence has suggested that certain student populations have been underserved by the nation's education system. There is evidence that this includes, but extends well beyond, disparities in student achievement on federal or state assessments. Evidence from the Department's Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC), for example, suggests that:

- Black, Latino, and American Indian/Alaska Native students are [more likely to attend schools with concentrations of inexperienced teachers](#) than their White and Asian peers.
- Black students and students with disabilities are [disproportionately subjected to seclusion, restraint, and exclusionary discipline](#).
- Black and Latino students as well as students with disabilities [often have less access to and participate less frequently in](#) rigorous courses that prepare students for college and careers.
- Students of color, students with disabilities, and English learners (ELs) are disproportionately held back in high school, which may decrease their odds for subsequent postsecondary success.

Similarly, [research has highlighted additional disparities](#)—like funding between districts within a single state—that tend to systematically disadvantage students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. [Newly available data on school-level per-pupil](#)



[spending](#) makes it possible to explore the extent to which those patterns hold true within districts.

## Priority Learning Questions

The Department proposes to prioritize a series of PLQs related to this focus area, which are in alignment with strategic objectives 1.1 and 1.3. These PLQs are:

- 2.1 To what extent, and for what reasons, do the nation’s learners experience inequities in access to, participation in, or the outcomes of education programs and services supported by the Department? *(strategic objective 1.1)*
- 2.2 What policies, programs, services, and practices are effective in ensuring all students have equitable access to resources and resulting opportunities to learn supporting academic achievement and readiness for college and careers? *(strategic objective 1.1)*
- 2.3 What policies, programs, services, and practices are effective in building safe, well-disciplined, and supportive learning environments that protect the emotional and physical well-being of all learners and are free of discrimination? *(strategic objective 1.3)*

## Short-Term Activities

Several short-term activities support the Department’s efforts to address PLQ 2.1. The Department collected [2021–2022 CRDC](#) data in winter 2021–2022. These data will provide a critical update to a wide range of measures that will help the Department better characterize the state of equity in the nation’s schools, districts, and states. Simultaneously, a Department working group focused on the implementation of President Biden’s [Executive Order on Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government](#) is currently cataloging available resources to build a public-facing equity dashboard based on the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine’s 2019 [Developing Indicators of Educational Equity project](#). Other notable data collections, including those related to states’, districts’, and IHEs’ use of recovery and other federal education funds, also include one or more items specifically related to equity and maintenance of equity.

Assessing and understanding equity in student access to educational resources and opportunities to learn is a focus of multiple research studies funded by IES. For example, with NCER funding, the [Oregon Department of Education](#) is examining



whether their On-Track to Graduation initiative, established in 2016–2017, is linked to more equitable outcomes for their high school students. NCER’s long-standing investment in [research focused on ELs](#) has contributed to the Department’s understanding of equal access for this population of students, including how policies and practices affect academic outcomes. A meta-analytic study due to be completed by summer 2022 will provide information on the degree to which the [timing of reclassification of ELs](#) affects student education outcomes.

NCSEER has both completed and ongoing research to address disparities in special education. This includes the development and testing of interventions to reduce racial/ethnic disproportionality in school discipline and special education referrals and a study examining whether and to what extent disparities in disability identification have changed over time in the United States. The latter explores disabilities generally and for specific conditions; the school-, district-, and state-level characteristics that relate to these disparities; and whether receipt of special education services is associated with increased academic achievement, behavior, and socio-emotional functioning.

### **Long-Term Activities**

The Department has several evidence-building activities underway related to better understanding how to ensure all students have access to the resources they need to achieve their full potential (PLQ 2.2) and safe, supportive, and inclusive learning environments (PLQ 2.3).

In FY 2019, NCEE launched [The Effects of a Systematic Approach to Improving Quality in Afterschool Programs: An Impact Evaluation to Inform the 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program](#), designed to provide safe and supportive learning environments that promote social and emotional skills, particularly among students who have been underserved.

NCER has made a series of investments focused on ELs’ access to high-quality instruction (PLQ 2.2). It is supporting two national research and development centers that were launched in FY 2020, are located at [WestEd](#) and the [University of Houston](#), and are addressing the needs of ELs in secondary settings. These centers are examining the degree to which course-taking patterns and systems-level policies support or impede ELs’ access to the general curriculum and advanced course-taking in secondary school. The centers are examining policies in Michigan, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania,



Massachusetts, New York, and Texas. By FY 2025, the two centers will have developed and tested curricular materials and professional development models for English language arts, mathematics, social studies, and science designed to ensure ELs are simultaneously learning critical content and English.

IES has recently awarded a series of research grants through both NCER and NCSE that are responsive to building evidence related to PLQ 2.3. Of particular note is an NCSE-funded [network of projects studying multitiered systems of supports](#) that integrate both academic and behavioral supports to address the needs of children with, or at risk for, disabilities. This work complements existing impact studies that identify students who need additional supports to be successful in general education classroom, including NCEE's [Evaluation of Preschool Special Education Practices](#) and [Impact Evaluation of Training in Multi-Tiered Systems of Support for Reading in Early Elementary School](#). As noted in the Department's forthcoming Annual Evaluation Plan, the Department also anticipates developing a new Impact Evaluation of Training and Assistance for Staff Supporting Students with Disabilities in the General Education Classroom.

Finally, when appropriate, the Department will consider the use of the Secretary's Supplemental Priorities in grant competitions relevant to this focus area. This includes the use of evidence in project design and grantee evidence building.

## **Anticipated Challenges and Proposed Solutions**

The Department's preliminary scan of data available to fully implement its planned Equity Dashboard suggests that several elements may not currently be available through the Department's existing data collections, most notably those related to equitable access to high-quality early learning programs and readiness for kindergarten. As the project moves forward, the Department will explore the extent to which it has the authority needed to collect those and other equity-related data or whether they may be available from other federal or nonfederal sources so that they do not represent persistent gaps in the Department's understanding of education equity.



# Focus Area 3:

**Support a diverse and talented educator workforce and professional growth to strengthen student learning.**

## Alignment to Agency Strategy

Strategic Objective 2.1	Strengthen and diversify the educator pipeline and workforce.
Strategic Objective 2.2	Identify and promote evidence-based practices or strategies that support diverse districts (including rural districts) with high rates of poverty in recruiting, selecting, preparing, and retaining well-qualified (including in-field fully certified) and effective teachers, principals, paraprofessionals, and specialized instructional support personnel.
Strategic Objective 2.3	Support the professional growth, retention, and advancement of talented, experienced educators and other school personnel and their capacity to meet the social, emotional, mental health, and academic needs of underserved students.

## Background

Teachers are essential to the learning and development of the students they serve. However, mounting evidence suggests that the educator workforce faces a number of challenges that place the success of students—particularly those who have been underserved by education systems—at risk. First, [evidence from states](#) suggests that many are experiencing significant teacher shortages, particularly in mathematics, science, career and technical education (CTE), and special education. Problems arising from teacher shortages are exacerbated by a second concern: inequities in the distribution of well-qualified teachers within and across school districts and schools. [Evidence suggests](#) schools in communities experiencing poverty and those that enroll higher proportions of students of color are more likely to employ teachers with fewer years’ experience, who are not fully certified, or who are not certified in the subject area in which they are currently teaching. Finally, the teacher workforce does not reflect the [racial and ethnic diversity](#) of the nation’s student body, though we know that educator diversity benefits all students.

## Priority Learning Questions

The Department proposes a series of PLQs related to this focus area, which align with strategic objectives 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3. These PLQs are:



- 3.1 What policies, programs, services, and practices are effective in preparing, recruiting, and retaining a well-qualified educator workforce that is (1) equitably distributed within and across school districts and schools, particularly with respect to educators working in districts with high rates of poverty and rural districts, in high-demand fields (*strategic objective 2.2*) and (2) prepared to provide underserved students the social, emotional, academic, and other supports they need to be successful in work and life? (*strategic objective 2.3*)
- 3.2 How can the education workforce come to reflect the diversity of the nation's learners? (*strategic objective 2.1*)

## Short-Term Activities

Activities within NCEE and OESE's Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) Program are building (and will continue to build) evidence related to PLQ 3.1. Notably, NCEE is nearing completion of its [Impact Study of Feedback for Teachers Based on Classroom Videos](#). This randomized control trial focuses on the efficacy of virtual coaching to improve classroom management, instructional practice, and student achievement. The ongoing work of the SEED Program is notable because, unlike some Department grant programs, SEED grantees are required to develop project evaluations that are consistent with What Works Clearinghouse standards, which are capable of generating "moderate" or "strong" evidence per the *Every Student Succeeds Act*. Relevant SEED Program projects include those focusing on the teacher pipeline (PLQ 3.2) as well as improved instructional approaches, including developing culturally responsive learning environments; strengthening social and emotional learning; and supporting science, technology, engineering, and mathematics instruction.

NCSEER grantees are [investigating the preservice experience of special educators](#) and how it relates to teacher workforce entry and retention as well as the academic outcomes of the students with disabilities they teach. The findings will help determine how teacher education programs can better support special education teacher candidates and prevent the high level of turnover experienced among these professionals.

NCER has recently funded several new research projects explicitly addressing PLQ 3.1. One new award to the [Massachusetts Department of Education](#) is examining the extent to which Massachusetts' preparation and licensing systems prepare teachers to be effective in improving outcomes for students of color. Another project is exploring the [characteristics of cooperating teachers](#) to the later outcomes of the student teachers



they supervise. Another is seeking to understand how to get the most useful [information from professional references for teacher applicants](#) at the time of hiring. Two other new projects are explicitly examining [what teachers need to learn and do](#) to adequately teach students of color.

NCES is currently processing pandemic-specific information collected within the [2020–2021 National Teacher and Principal Survey \(NTPS\)](#) and collecting additional data from teachers, which include a sample of public and private school principals and teachers and, importantly for PLQ 3.2, detailed demographic information about building leaders and classroom educators. NTPS is the Department’s only source of information about the demographic characteristics of teachers. The absence of district- or school-level data complicates making strong conclusions about the extent to which there are differences in the racial/ethnic composition of school communities and the educators who are a part of them.

### **Long-Term Activities**

Work is ongoing at NCEE to build evidence related to PLQ 3.1 through its [Impact Evaluation of Teacher Residency Programs](#). In this randomized control trial, students will be randomly assigned to instructors prepared in residency or nonresidency programs. Student outcomes (including achievement) and educator outcomes (including retention) will be studied.

NCEE is also building evidence related to PLQ 3.1 through a larger [Impact Evaluation to Inform the Teacher and Student Leader \(TSL\) Incentive Program](#). Using data from 2017 TSL grantees, this study will explore the program’s implementation with an emphasis on the use of teacher leaders. Separately, a group of districts and schools have been recruited to implement a specific teacher leader model similar to the one used by 2017 TSL grantees. This randomized control trial will allow the Department to estimate the impacts of a popular educator development strategy on both student and educator outcomes, including retention.

NCSEER has funded two grants focused on the prevention of burnout and improvement of instructional quality among special educators. One grant is [adapting and testing an existing burnout intervention](#) for special educators and another is [evaluating an evidence-based and commercially available program](#) to determine whether it has beneficial effects for special educators and their students with disabilities. NCSEER is also



supporting grants focused on professional development for paraprofessionals. One such project involves [developing and testing a professional development package](#) to train supervising teachers to utilize coaching to improve paraprofessionals' instruction for students with developmental disabilities. Another involves [evaluating the efficacy of a coaching intervention](#) to determine whether it improves paraprofessionals' behavioral intervention practices and the behavioral and academic outcomes of students with or at risk for externalizing behavior disorders.

Notably, the education workforce includes individuals within the education sciences who are engaged daily in the generation of evidence to support education practice. NCER has been systematically attempting to diversify the workforce within the education sciences through its research training investments. In addition to requiring that IES pre- and post-doctoral training programs include a plan for recruiting diverse fellows, NCER supports two programs specifically focused on diversifying the education science community. The [Pathways to the Education Sciences Research Training Program grants](#) are awarded to Minority-Serving Institutions and their partners to create education research training programs that prepare fellows for doctoral study. As of fall 2020, about 70 percent of the participating fellows identified as non-White. Since the program was launched in FY 2016, about 60 percent of the program's alumni have gone on to graduate study. In addition, NCER recently invited applications to its newest training program, [Early Career Mentoring Program for Faculty at Minority Serving Institutions](#).

Finally, when appropriate, the Department will consider the use of the Secretary's Supplemental Priorities in grant competitions relevant to this focus area. This includes the use of evidence in project design and grantee evidence building.

## **Anticipated Challenges and Proposed Solutions**

The primary challenge facing generating evidence on the diversity of the teacher pipeline (PLQ 3.2) is the lack of data at the federal level on educators' race/ethnicity. Although the Departments' *EDFacts* system currently collects the number and qualification of teachers—and the number of various support staff—race/ethnicity is not collected for any school staff. As a result, it is impossible to align data on the race/ethnicity of students in a school or district with the educators who serve them. This is an area of exploration for the Department in the coming year. For example, NCES has other collections with data important to PLQ 3.2 and is exploring partnerships that could improve the school- or district-level data.



# Focus Area 4:

Meet students' social, emotional, and academic needs.

## Alignment to Agency Strategy

Strategic Objective 3.1	Support the development and implementation of multitiered systems of supports to increase students' engagement; social, emotional, and mental health; well-being; and academic success.
Strategic Objective 3.2	Foster supportive, inclusive, and identity-safe learning environments and ensure the individual needs of underserved students are met through appropriately designed instruction, evidence-based practices, and related supports and services.
Strategic Objective 3.3	Strengthen learning environments, support professional development, and improve educator credentialing for emergent bilingual students and multilingual learners.
Strategic Objective 4.4	Improve the alignment across secondary, postsecondary, and career and technical education programs, including through transparent and effective transition processes, inclusive pathways, and clear credentialing requirements.

## Background

Learning and development across students' life spans include several deeply interrelated factors, including each individual's social, emotional, academic, and career development. Prior [research](#) suggests that attending to each, in particular those related to social and emotional learning (SEL), may be a promising strategy for improving a wide range of outcomes for all students. For groups that have been underserved by education systems, prioritizing access to programs and services shown to bolster SEL, academic achievement, and career development may be particularly important.

## Priority Learning Questions

The Department proposes to prioritize a series of PLQs related to this focus area, which are in alignment with strategic objectives 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, and 4.4. These PLQs are:

- 4.1 What policies, programs, services, and practices are effective in promoting students' SEL and development so that every student can reach their fullest academic potential? (*strategic objectives 3.1 and 3.2*)
- 4.2 What policies, programs, services, and practices associated with secondary CTE programs are effective in promoting student success in secondary education,



postsecondary education, and the workforce, including that of underserved students? (*strategic objective 4.4*)

- 4.3 What policies, programs, services, and practices support the design of learning environments and educational experiences that are effective in reducing gaps in student opportunity and achievement, including those that are responsive to the assets and needs of underserved students? (*strategic objectives 3.1 and 3.2; see also PLQ 1.4, which addresses this question within the specific context of the COVID-19 pandemic*)
- 4.4 What policies, programs, services, and practices best support the learning and development needs of multilingual learners, including Native language acquisition? (*strategic objective 3.3*)

## Short-Term Activities

IES' research centers have a long history of supporting rigorous evidence building related to policies, programs, services, and practices that support SEL and development. NCER and NCSEER have made more than 240 research awards in their [Social and Behavioral Context for Academic Learning](#) and [Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Competence](#) grant programs. Building on this program of research, the National Center for Rural School Mental Health has created an [Early Identification System \(EIS\) intervention hub](#) that matches prevention strategies and interventions for students in elementary, middle, and high schools. In FY 2023 and FY 2024, the project team will test the efficacy of the fully developed EIS model. While the hub and model are being tested in rural areas, the intervention strategies included in the hub are likely valuable for educators in multiple settings. IES has also invested in developing reliable and valid measures of SEL. An example includes [SELweb](#), which directly assesses kindergarten through grade 6 students' understanding of others' emotions and perspectives, their social problem-solving skills, and their self-control. A new IES project will extend and validate the [use of SELweb with middle schoolers](#). Grants like these and the others supported by IES research centers provide actionable evidence relevant to PLQ 4.1.

NCER is also actively investing in supporting students' career development, including through rigorous research on CTE programs and program evaluations of relevant federal policies (PLQ 4.2). The [Career & Technical Education Research Network](#), jointly funded by NCER and the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE), is conducting and sharing information about the impact of CTE on student success in



secondary education, postsecondary education, and the workforce. Teams are already generating evidence that meets What Works Clearinghouse standards and indicates positive impacts of participation in CTE. In addition, the network provides [training](#) for CTE practitioners and state agency staff. This training is designed to strengthen their capacity to access, understand, and use CTE data and research as well as conduct their own research, including causal research.

NCEE and OCTAE are collaborating to build evidence related to career preparation and success (PLQ 4.2) as part of NCEE's [National Evaluation of Career and Technical Education under Perkins V](#). This includes the potential to conduct one or more impact studies of interventions designed to promote career development and the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to succeed in 21st-century careers. The specific strategies to be tested will be finalized in FY 2022 in a collaboration between OCTAE and NCEE. Additionally, at least one impact study is under consideration of interventions that meet the specific career and academic needs of students participating in adult education programs. Evidence arising from these projects is expected in FY 2026 and beyond.

Ongoing work in NCEE supports both academic and SEL in ELs. In FY 2022, the Department will begin to release publications and products related to an ongoing evaluation of a strategy designed to improve the academic achievement of ELs (PLQs 4.3 and 4.4). This randomized control trial, NCEE's [Academic Language Impact Evaluation](#), contrasts student achievement outcomes of third and fourth graders who participated in the program versus their peers who did not.

### **Long-Term Activities**

Elsewhere in the Department, programs like EIR have leveraged their grantmaking activities to build evidence related to SEL (PLQ 4.1) and academic learning (PLQ 4.3). For example, as part of OESE's FY 2020 EIR Program, the Department awarded \$46 million to support mid-phase grants that include an emphasis on SEL. As part of the [FY 2021 EIR competition](#), the Department sought evidence-building activities that promote SEL skills that prepare students to be informed, thoughtful, and productive individuals. Evidence arising from these projects is expected in FY 2026 and beyond.

Several notable IES activities will yield new evidence related to reducing gaps in student achievement between FY 2024 and FY 2026 (PLQ 4.3). In late FY 2024, the Department anticipates releasing evidence of the implementation and effectiveness of two programs



focused supporting literacy among students in underserved populations as part of its [National Evaluation of the Comprehensive Literacy State Development and Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy Programs](#). By FY 2026, NCEE anticipates releasing evidence from its anticipated Impact Study Using Technology to Accelerate Math Learning. This study will test the effectiveness of promising improvement strategies designed to accelerate student learning in Title I schools—such as those that use innovative education technologies to supplement mathematics instruction.

Between FY 2024 and FY 2026, NCEE will continue to build and share new evidence related to supporting ELs (PLQ 4.4). These activities build on NCEE’s ongoing descriptive [Study of Educational Policies, Supports, and Practices for English Learners: Implementation of Title III and Social and Emotional Learning](#). During this time, NCEE anticipates sharing early learnings from its new Impact Study of Strategies to Improve English Learner Achievement, as described in the Department’s forthcoming *FY 2023 Annual Evaluation Plan*.

Finally, when appropriate, the Department will consider the use of the Secretary’s Supplemental Priorities in grant competitions relevant to this focus area. This includes the use of evidence in project design and grantee evidence building.

## **Anticipated Challenges and Proposed Solutions**

Many evidence-building activities have been negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting impacts of the pandemic on states, schools, and districts. Studies that rely on student achievement data to measure interventions’ efficacy have been particularly affected due to changes in state testing plans. However, a wide swath of research that depends on the collection of data—including data on social and emotional outcomes—from students and educators has been placed at risk. As a result, several studies have been delayed by one or more calendar years. As the nation’s schools move toward reopening and recovery, student, educator, and other critical data should become increasingly available and allow work to resume.



# Focus Area 5:

Increase postsecondary value by focusing on equity-conscious strategies to address affordability, completion, post-enrollment success, and support for inclusive institutions.

## Alignment to Agency Strategy

Strategic Objective 1.4	Promote greater access and supports for youth and adults to engage in learning, succeed in postsecondary education, and increase their employability in high-demand occupations.
Strategic Objective 4.1	Support educational institutions and state systems in efforts to raise academic quality and college completion for all students, especially for underserved students, such as first-generation students, students from low-income backgrounds, students of color, and students with disabilities.
Strategic Objective 4.3	Increase equitable access to secondary and postsecondary programs that have clear on-ramps to both high-quality jobs and additional high-quality postsecondary educational opportunities.
Strategic Objective 4.4	Improve the alignment across secondary, postsecondary, and career and technical education programs, including through transparent and effective transition processes, inclusive pathways, and clear credentialing requirements.
APG 3	Reduce disparities in attainment of high-quality degrees and credentials.

## Background

Earning a postsecondary credential, on average, benefits both students and society. Decades of research (e.g., [Learn more, earn more: Education leads to higher wages, lower unemployment](#) and [It's Not Just the Money: The Benefits of College Education to Individuals and to Society](#)) have documented that earning a college degree is associated with a meaningful wage premium when compared to a high school diploma, less frequent use of public benefits, and increased rates of civic participation. Although many barriers can hinder students' abilities to access postsecondary education, the *Higher Education Act of 1965* (HEA) (Pub. L. 89-329) sought to remove one in particular: poverty. HEA's Title IV section on student assistance established the basic framework of today's financial aid system, comprising federal grants and loans as well as campus-based aid programs. Reauthorizations of HEA and related legislation have also created a set of programs meant to support students' successful transition to and completion of a postsecondary credential (e.g., TRIO programs). In addition, to help understand the



use of Title IV funds, HEA requires conduct of a survey of students about how they are financing their postsecondary education and problems they may be facing in doing so. NCES conducts the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) at least every four years to address this requirement.

In the more than 50 years since HEA's passage, at least some of its promise has been realized: the percentage of adults ages 25 to 29 who have earned a bachelor's degree or higher has, for example, more than tripled. Also, information from NPSAS shows the use of Pell Grants authorized under Title IV have become more pervasive over time and across different types of students, supporting access to postsecondary education for millions of people. However, significant concerns about students' access to and success in postsecondary education remain. By [2016](#), only 7 percent of high-income students who were in grade 9 in 2009 had never enrolled in some form of postsecondary education compared to 44 percent of their lowest-income peers. Once admitted, graduation is far from guaranteed. Fewer than two out of three (63 percent) of all beginning students who entered a four-year college in [2013](#) planning to earn a bachelor's degree had done so within six years, and up to 41 percent of all beginning students who entered a two-year college in [2016](#) were no longer enrolled after three years with no education credential to show for their attendance. In addition, the amount borrowed for postsecondary students who completed or expected to complete their postsecondary degree programs [increased from the mid-1990s to 2015–2016](#), illustrating that postsecondary degrees are increasingly accompanied with increased student loan debt.

## Priority Learning Questions

The Department proposes to prioritize a series of PLQs related to this focus area, which are in alignment with strategic objectives 1.4, 4.1, 4.3, and 4.4, and APG 3. These PLQs are:

- 5.1 How can equitable readiness for and access to postsecondary education best be improved for underserved students, including through federal college access programs? (*strategic objective 4.3 and APG 3*)
- 5.2 What policies, programs, services, and practices support engaging adult learners in postsecondary education that can increase their employability in high-demand and high-wage careers? (*strategic objective 1.4*)



- 5.3 What policies, programs, services, and practices support students’ seamless and cost-effective transition both between secondary and postsecondary education and training as well as between postsecondary institutions?  
*(strategic objective 4.4)*
- 5.4 What resources, supports, and services do students, including those at the greatest disadvantage, receive to support their successful completion of a postsecondary credential? Additionally, which policies, programs, services, and practices are effective in achieving that goal? *(strategic objective 4.1; see also focus area 6 for the role of federal financial aid programs in the success of postsecondary students)*
- 5.5 What resources, supports, and services do postsecondary institutions—including Minority-Serving Institutions, Tribal colleges or universities, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and institutions that are under-resourced—receive to enable them to achieve their academic mission? Additionally, which policies, programs, services, and practices are effective in achieving that goal?  
*(strategic objective 4.1)*

### Short-Term Activities

The Department is currently addressing PLQ 5.1 by building evidence in two college access programs. Most immediately, NCEE anticipates releasing the results of its [Text Ed: A Study of Text Messaging to Improve College Enrollment Rates Among Disadvantaged Adults](#) impact study in early FY 2023. Deployed within the Department’s Educational Opportunity Centers Program, this randomized control trial explores the extent to which texting is effective in encouraging disadvantaged adults to file a *Free Application for Federal Student Aid*® (FAFSA®) filing and enroll in postsecondary institutions. A second study, the results of which are expected to be released in late FY 2023, focuses on the Department’s Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP). Uniquely, GEAR UP provides scholarships in support of college access. More information on grantees’ use of the scholarship component, including both challenges and successes associated with its administration, has the potential to improve outcomes associated with the program.

NCER’s work bridges PLQs 5.1, 5.3, and 5.4. It supports the [Center for the Analysis of Postsecondary Readiness](#), which has been focused on understanding the national landscape of developmental education as well as research on mathematics pathways, multiple measures placement, summer bridge programs, and computerized



mathematics remediation. Within the center, NCER is currently supporting a long-term follow-up study of students who participated in the Dana Center Math Pathways project while enrolled in developmental education on a host of postsecondary outcomes, including year-to-year persistence, credit attainment, completion of a degree or certificate, and transfer to a four-year institution. NCER’s [College Completion Network](#) is refining and evaluating interventions for increasing the number of students who earn degrees in open- and broad-access institutions. The network’s lead will be preparing a synthesis of findings from NCER-funded projects focusing on college completion that can support the Department’s understanding of what policies, programs, services, and practices best support the successful completion of a postsecondary credential. The network’s website includes a set of [resources](#) with information about individual projects.

## Long-Term Activities

In the President’s [FY 2022 Budget Request](#), the Department proposed a substantial new investment in its Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education Program to support evidence-based innovations designed to improve student success (PLQ 5.4). Importantly, this new grant program is proposed to follow the tiered evidence approach used elsewhere in the Department, including its EIR Program. This program—if implemented as hoped—has the potential to build rigorous evidence about “what works” to support students’ completion of a postsecondary credential and to scale effective practices. The Department is currently evaluating evidence-building approaches that would be most relevant to PLQ 5.5, which focuses on institutional support programs authorized under Title III and Title V of HEA.

Building evidence for PLQ 5.2, NCEE’s [Assessing Evidence of Effectiveness in Adult Education: Study of Career Navigator Training](#) leverages prior work that cataloged potentially effective practices in adult education. This randomized control trial seeks to understand the potential of career navigators to improve adult education outcomes. Specifically, it asks whether offering robust training to career navigators can improve adult learners’ college enrollment, credential attainment rates, employment rates, and earnings.

Newly funded research investments at NCER are explicitly addressing links between postsecondary education and employability in high-demand careers. For example, the Department anticipates that the following three projects will have findings of specific



relevance to PLQ 5.2: [Postsecondary and Labor Market Effects of Career and Technical Education in Baltimore City Public Schools](#); [Sub-baccalaureate Career and Technical Education: A Study of Institutional Practices, Labor Market Demand, and Student Outcomes in Florida](#); and [Evaluating the Longer Term Impact of Early College High Schools on Workforce and Life Outcomes](#).

In addition, one newly funded project will directly inform PLQ 5.3. The [Evaluation of the Texas House Bill 3 Financial Aid Application Requirement for High School Graduation](#) project will provide practical information regarding implementation of a statewide financial aid graduation requirement, how implementation of the policy varies across schools and districts, the means through which the policy is supported by the state education system, and how implementation of the policy is related to students' high school and postsecondary outcomes.

NCSEER has recently begun to fund research in postsecondary education for students with disabilities, including through its Transition to Postsecondary Education, Career, and/or Independent Living Program. When complete, research in this area is intended to result in evidence to support access to, persistence in, progress through, and completion of postsecondary education or evidence to support learning, achievement, and higher order thinking in postsecondary courses.

Finally, when appropriate, the Department will consider the use of the Secretary's Supplemental Priorities in grant competitions relevant to this focus area. This includes the use of evidence in project design and grantee evidence building.

### **Anticipated Challenges and Proposed Solutions**

The Department's evidence-building work in higher education stands to benefit should Congress adopt the President's FY 2022 Budget Request to, through appropriations language, create a pooled evaluation authority for programs authorized by HEA. This authority would allow the Department to conduct more, and more rigorous, evaluation of programs designed to improve college opportunity for students traditionally underserved by education systems.

In the meantime, the Department is considering how to best build evidence related to PLQs 5.1 and 5.6 in the face of two challenges. First, the Department has identified data quality concerns related to performance reporting within some TRIO Programs.



Better understanding the extent of those concerns is needed before the best solution (or solutions) can be identified. Second, some statutory constraints limit the Department's capacity to build evidence related to TRIO. Specifically, grantees cannot be required to induce oversubscription or to deny service to any eligible student. As a result, program evaluations that rely upon randomization or delayed implementation are limited. In their place, the Department seeks to test effective practices that can be rigorously evaluated with the help of TRIO grantees (i.e., grantees are randomly assigned to implement, or not, a proposed access or success intervention).



# Focus Area 6:

## Effectively manage federal student aid programs.

### Alignment to Agency Strategy

APG 2:

Effectively manage federal student loans.

### Background

[Research](#) has documented the economic and noneconomic benefits associated with earning postsecondary certificates and degrees. Title IV of HEA (Pub. L. 89-329) established the fundamental components of today’s federal student aid programs, including need-based grants and loans. Subsequent HEA reauthorizations have expanded the number and types of student aid programs, who can benefit from those programs and by how much, and how students and parents who borrow for postsecondary education repay their loans. As of the end of FY 2020, more than [43 million borrowers](#) were responsible for more than \$1.56 trillion in federal student loan debt, and about [7.5 million borrowers](#) whose loans are in the federally managed portfolio were in default.

Today, questions concerning virtually every aspect of federal student aid programs abound. Most are concentrated in five areas: (1) who benefits from student aid programs; (2) how the Department can support access to programs among those who stand to benefit the most; (3) to what extent student aid programs make earning a postsecondary credential affordable; (4) how the Department can ensure that students and parents who borrow for postsecondary education successfully manage their loans; and (5) how the Department works with institutions and vendors, such as student loan servicers, to effectively administer federal student aid programs. For many observers, including the Department, the latter two questions are particularly critical.

As part of its own Strategic Plan, the Department’s Federal Student Aid (FSA) has [committed to](#) “provid[ing] world-class customer experience to the students, parents, and borrowers we serve,” acknowledging the critical role of third-party servicers in the success of the Department’s student loan programs and the importance of ensuring servicer performance.

### Priority Learning Questions

The Department proposes to prioritize a series of PLQs related to this focus area, which are in alignment with APGs 2 and 3. These PLQs are:



- 6.1 What policies, programs, and practices are effective in informing students and families about, and supporting their access to, federal student aid programs, and which are effective in increasing students' enrollment in, persistence in, and completion of postsecondary programs? (APG 3)
- 6.2 How does awareness of, access to, and use of need-based grants and other forms of federal student aid affect students' enrollment, retention, completion, and indebtedness? (APG 3)
- 6.3 What policies, programs, services, and practices are associated with improving students' and borrowers' experiences and academic and financial outcomes when they engage with FSA and its processes (e.g., income verification) and partners (e.g., loan servicers)? (APGs 2 and 3)
- 6.4 What policies, programs, services, and practices associated with student loan administration and effective servicing and servicer oversight effectively improve borrower academic and post-completion outcomes, reduce delinquency and default, and/or improve borrowers' satisfaction with the loan repayment experience? (APG 2)
- 6.5 What are the characteristics of borrowers who struggle to repay their loans and the institutions they attend, and what are notable features of their repayment experience— including the plans they select and the features of those plans— and their repayment trajectories? How can repayment trajectories and adverse outcomes most accurately be predicted? (APG 2)
- 6.6 How targeted are current federal student aid programs to the students and purposes they are meant to serve, and how would changes to current needs analysis methods and other aspects of the grant and loan programs alter the incidence of student aid? (APG 3)

## Short-Term and Long-Term Activities

The Department is actively exploring how to prioritize evidence building within this focus area. Evidence building is already underway related to PLQ 6.4, including work inspired by the Department's use of its [Experimental Sites Initiatives](#) authority. Examples include an extension of NCEE's [Evaluation of the Pell Grant Experiments Under the Experimental Sites Initiative](#) to better understand the wage outcomes of short-term occupational training; [Evaluations of Federal Financial Aid Information and Delivery Strategies: An Experiment Requiring Additional Loan Counseling for Student Borrowers](#), designed to understand how to better help borrowers manage their debt;



and [An Experiment in the Federal Work Study Program to Encourage Student Jobs in the Private Sector](#), which seeks to understand how flexibilities in the use of federal work-study funds affect students' work experiences and academic outcomes.

Further, the Department supports several NCES longitudinal studies of high school and postsecondary students that have been used to study factors associated with deciding to enroll in postsecondary programs and factors associated with successful completion of those programs. The most recent high school study was initiated in 2009 (the [High School Longitudinal Study of 2009](#)). While funding and staffing limits have prohibited recent follow-up collections, information is available about these high school students through 2016, including information about their dual enrollment during high school, their nondegree postsecondary education enrollment and completion, and factors related to accessing and completing postsecondary education more generally. A new high school cohort is about to start. The Department also supports a longitudinal study of beginning postsecondary students (the [Beginning Postsecondary Student Longitudinal Study](#)) that provides information about challenges students face staying enrolled and completing their programs and how they manage their student loan debt.

## **Anticipated Challenges and Proposed Solutions**

Evidence building related to federal student aid programs has historically been complicated by a variety of factors. In some instances, the perception that benefits of rigorous evaluation are outweighed by the costs (e.g., burden on institutions or Department staff) has prevented evidence building. In others, evidence building has been slowed due to a lack of financial resources to support contract research or of federal staff resources to conduct research on their own or oversee contractors when available.

Notably, the recent passage of the *Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2022* has begun to address some of the financial barriers to evidence-building in this area. Section 312 of the general provisions associated with the Department's FY 2022 appropriation allows the Secretary to reserve up to 0.5 percent of funds authorized for many programs authorized by HEA to "carry out rigorous and independent evaluations and to collect and analyze outcome data for any program authorized by the HEA." Should this authority be continued in the future, it would represent a significant step in more consistently generating high quality evidence related to federal student aid programs.

