



COVID-19 Policy Implications for NAEP 2021

June 26, 2020

Background

Since the May Quarterly Board meeting, there have been new developments on several fronts that inform the next set of discussions around whether and how NAEP 2021 can and should proceed. Perhaps most importantly, the deadline for making a decision about NAEP Reading and Mathematics in 2021 is now August 28. Those two additional months (from the original deadline of July 1) will allow the Governing Board and NCES to continue exploring what might be possible to provide the nation with the data it desires and expects, particularly in these uncertain educational times.

Progress has also been made in conversations with stakeholders. Governing Board staff and NCES alike have held numerous conversations with state and district stakeholders. We have also spoken with national experts who are doing their best to identify data needs alongside all the other needs of schools during this time, from preparing classrooms for social distancing to managing schedules in ways that will be safe for students, families, and staff. Many stakeholders have indicated that NAEP data may provide a lot of value in helping them understand the impact of the pandemic on student educational progress, particularly given uncertainties about plans for their own state assessments in 2021. While none of the stakeholders were sanguine about the challenges of conducting NAEP under the conditions predicted for next year, they also noted the degree of uncertainty about what schools will look like in the winter of 2021 and how state and local leaders are preparing for a range of potential scenarios.

Like the rest of the country, the NAEP program is subject to the many questions that remain about what school openings will look like in the fall and what the state of the country will be related to openings and closures due to COVID-19 during the winter flu season. That said, the goal is and remains to seek as much information as possible to make decisions about whether the planned NAEP assessments should and can proceed in 2021, and that goal will drive your discussions at the June 29 special meeting of the Governing Board.

This memo outlines:

- 1) Key Developments since the May Quarterly Meeting
- 2) Objectives for June 29 Special Meeting of the Governing Board
- 3) Potential Policy Considerations

Key Developments

Since you met on May 14-15, there have been several developments that should further the Board's discussions regarding 2021 NAEP:

1. During the May Quarterly Board meeting, NCES had indicated that a decision about whether and how to proceed with 2021 activities was needed no later than July 1; the June 29 special Board meeting was scheduled to ensure that the Board had an opportunity to provide input in advance of this deadline. Fortunately, NCES has been able to extend the timeline for making a determination about whether NAEP can proceed with a full administration of the 2021 Reading and Mathematics assessments until August 28. We will use the June 29 Board meeting to provide important updates and continue discussion of time-sensitive issues related to whether planned NAEP activities for 2021 should proceed, but no decisions are needed at this time.
2. The set of potential options for 2021 is becoming clearer, and the key determining factor in the short-term is whether Congress will appropriate the additional funding needed for NAEP to conduct a full Reading and Mathematics administration in 2021. Based on the anticipated timeline for additional stimulus legislation, we are likely to find out whether Congress will provide funding before the August 28 decision point.
3. At their request, IES, NCES, and Board staff have spoken with staff from the Senate HELP Committee and the House and Senate Appropriations Committees about the impact of COVID-19 on NAEP 2021 and the resources needed to conduct a full Reading and Mathematics administration next year.
4. At its May meeting, the Board charged staff to seek stakeholder input. Since that time, NCES and Board staff have consulted with a range of stakeholders from states, TUDAs, Congress, and the education community more broadly. As well, the joint staff have used the Board's questions at the May meeting to inform next steps and to seek the additional information necessary to respond to those questions.

Objectives for June 2020 Board Discussion

The meeting is intended to help Board members better understand the potential options and timeline for making decisions about planned NAEP assessments in 2021. No action is expected at this meeting; rather, we will prepare for potential action at the next quarterly meeting on July 30-31, 2020.

More specifically, the objectives for the Governing Board's discussions at this meeting include:

- Discuss the salient policy factors that need to be considered as part of potential future decisions, particularly in light of new information since May
- Agree on next actions
- Provide any additional guidance to staff to support the Board in this process

To help facilitate the discussion, the rest of this memo outlines some potential issues for consideration.

Potential Decision Framework

You will recall from the May Board meeting that NCES has helpfully distilled the major considerations for determining the best path for NAEP in 2021 into three big questions: Can we proceed? Could we proceed? Should we proceed? New developments related to those questions are noted below.

- 1) Can we proceed?** Does NCES have the budget and personnel resources to field a successful data collection? **NCES Commissioner holds the lead responsibility** with input from the Governing Board.

June 2020 Update: If Congress appropriates additional funds prior to August 28, then we can proceed with a full sample for Reading and Mathematics in 2021. If the necessary funds are not received by August 28, then we can only proceed with much smaller samples which will produce minimal state results.

- 2) Could we proceed?** What is the likelihood that NCES can collect reliable and valid data at the national, state, and TUDA levels? **NCES Commissioner holds the lead responsibility** with input from the Governing Board.

June 2020 Update: Regardless of whether Congress appropriates additional funds prior to August 28, NCES will continue to monitor predictors of data quality, including the status of schools and state, school, and student participation.

- 3) Should we proceed?** What is the cost-benefit of proceeding with NAEP 2021 as planned during the health crisis? **Governing Board holds the lead responsibility** with input from NCES Commissioner.

June 2020 Update: If Congress appropriates additional funds to enable us to proceed with full samples for Reading and Mathematics in 2021, the Board will continue to monitor reputational risks of proceeding as additional information becomes available. If Congress does *not* appropriate those funds, the Board will need to discuss the cost-benefit of proceeding with minimal state results (aka “thin sample”) versus seeking a waiver from Congress to postpone these mandated assessments to 2022.

Based on stakeholder feedback about participation in the voluntary assessments planned for 2021 – U.S. History, Civics, and Long-Term Trend for 17-year olds – the Board should also begin discussions about the advisability of proceeding with these assessments in 2021 or considering postponing them until 2022. Because there are downstream implications to the assessment schedule related to all of these decisions, no official action is expected or needed on June 29.

Potential Policy Considerations

With the deadline extended to August 28, the Board has time to further consider its position regarding NAEP 2021. As noted above, the Board's decisions around this question are informed by issues of data quality and any reputational risks to the gold standard to which NAEP holds itself.

NCES has worked closely with its NAEP contractors to clarify mitigation steps and contingency plans for the impacts of COVID-19 on NAEP operations. They have also conducted analyses and received input from technical experts on key questions of operational and technical feasibility. Whether or not Congress provides additional funding through a one-time appropriations will play an important role in NCES' decisions about what is feasible from an operational and budgetary standpoint.

The Governing Board will need to weigh:

1. Benefit against burden for the 2021 voluntary assessments in U.S. History and Civics, alongside the best time to reschedule the Long-Term Trend assessment for 17-year olds;
2. Benefit against risk of thin sample, i.e., minimal state data; and
3. Reputational risks to NAEP if it proceeds in 2021 (for a full sample or thin sample in Reading and Mathematics and/or voluntary assessments in U.S. History and Civics).

At the conclusion of the June 29 meeting, the Board will have further clarified its policy goals and priorities with regard to NAEP 2021. Further, the Board will have heard from stakeholders who can shed light on the current thinking of states, large urban districts, and others about NAEP participation in 2021, as well as hearing from our NCES partners about what they see as operationally and technically feasible.

No decisions are required on June 29, but the Board will leave the meeting more informed about the decisions ahead.