

COVID-19 and Policy Implications for NAEP 2021 July 30-31, 2020 Quarterly Meeting

Over the last four months, the National Assessment Governing Board, in collaboration with its partners at the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), has carefully considered the question of whether the 2021 NAEP Reading and Mathematics Assessments should proceed. The Board has consulted with key stakeholders and considered other key policy factors related to the Board's eventual determination about whether NAEP *should* proceed next year. All the while, NCES has continued to work with its contractors to prepare for an administration to keep open the possibility that NAEP *could* proceed, while Congress considers the fiscal impacts of administering NAEP next spring, which will weigh heavily on whether it *can* proceed.

As the Governing Board approaches a critical deadline in its decision-making about whether preparations for NAEP 2021 should continue to proceed, this document summarizes the Board's discussions to date and presents the key decisions points the Board will consider in its deliberations at the July 30-31 quarterly meeting.

This memo includes:

- Summary of Board Discussions to Date:
 - Health and Safety Issues
 - Budget Needs and Implications
 - Operational Needs and Concerns
 - Policy Factors
 - Condition of States, Districts, and Schools
- Considerations and Next Steps
 - Path 1: Continue to Proceed with Preparations for 2021
 - Path 2: Seek a Waiver from Congress to Postpone to 2022

Summary of Board Discussions to Date

Health and Safety Issues

A baseline assumption throughout the discussions about NAEP 2021 is that the administration can proceed if and only if health and safety considerations can be satisfactorily addressed. NCES has worked with its contractors (and their public health experts) to determine the safety protocols that must be implemented to minimize the risks of COVID transmission. These include hiring additional staff to administer the assessment while meeting social distancing requirements, procuring personal protective equipment (PPE) and conducting regular COVID testing for NAEP administrators, and implementing sanitation protocols for cleaning devices and other equipment. The estimates for additional appropriations necessary to conduct NAEP in 2021 are based on these critical mitigation steps.

The Board has applauded the efforts of NCES and its contractors to create comprehensive plans that address critical health and safety requirements. At the Board's request, experts in public health and infectious diseases will participate in a panel discussion on July 30th.

Budget Needs and Implications

Over the last four months, NCES has shared budget projections with the Board, noting that a one-time appropriation from Congress would mitigate the additional costs of attempting to conduct NAEP during

COVID-19. The funds would be used to cover the additional costs (described above) of administering a full Reading and Mathematics assessment in 2021. Without the additional appropriation, the only option for Reading and Mathematics in 2021 is to pursue a “thin sample” resulting in limited results at the state level and reduced reporting precision.

NCES has indicated that for each month that the 2021 assessment activities continue to proceed, there are some nonrecoverable costs; costs increase towards the end of 2020 in preparation for a January–March 2021 administration. This means that continuing the preparatory work necessary for a 2021 administration will become increasingly costly in the fall. Some Board members have suggested it would be worthwhile to continue with activities necessary to prepare for a 2021 administration, despite the nonrecoverable costs, so that the Board and NCES can make a more informed decision about whether to proceed based on the condition of schools in the new school year. Other Board members have noted their reluctance to accept additional appropriations during a national crisis or about the cost/benefit of these additional expenditures in 2021 relative to postponing to 2022.

Operational Needs and Concerns

NCES has presented information on potential risks to data quality, including impacts to validity, reliability, trend, and diminished sample sizes. By June, NCES had determined that without the additional one-time appropriation, NAEP 2021 Reading and Mathematics could proceed only with a “thin sample,” which is approximately 875 students per subject/grade/state. The thin sample approach would mean that results for fewer subgroups could be reported and there would be less power to detect achievement gaps. Additionally, NCES has shared input from the NAEP Design Advisory Committee and Validity Studies Panel about their assessment of the risks to data quality in 2021 and resulting recommendations for the administration.

NCES has also reported that a major operational challenge is obtaining stable student enrollment numbers in the fall that will accurately reflect student attendance in early 2021; this enrollment information is critical for selecting random samples of students to participate. At the July 30-31 meeting, the Board will receive updated information from NCES about operational considerations and the potential impact for data quality and reporting, including key milestones for determining whether a nationally representative sample can be obtained.

Policy Factors

From a policy standpoint, NAEP *could* yield valuable information in 2021 as the only nationally representative assessment that includes a national estimate of performance, cross-state comparisons, comparisons among student groups, and estimates of performance over time. Further, NAEP might report survey data from students, teachers, and school administrators on how learning experiences were affected by school closures, access to technology, and remote learning environments. With states unable to administer their state assessments in 2020 due to school closures and potentially seeking waivers for next year, key stakeholders have indicated that NAEP could provide a critical public service at a moment when our education system is experiencing massive disruption – and when that disruption is likely more significant for students from under-resourced families and communities.

The Board has prioritized hearing the input of NAEP’s most critical stakeholders: Congress, state education agencies, other state education stakeholders, and the large urban districts that participate in the Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA) program. At its June 29 special meeting the Board heard from states – via the Council of the Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) – and from TUDAs via the Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS).

Another key policy consideration is burden: schools and districts are experiencing intense pressures due to the pandemic, and the requirements of participating in NAEP, while minimal compared to state assessments, may pose undue burden on them at a time when they are already managing significantly more than in a typical school year.

Condition of States, Districts, and Schools

Whether students will be physically present in schools is a key factor in yielding representative samples nationally and within states, therefore it is a key factor driving risks to data quality and reporting. *Education Week* is tracking the announcements of the nation's largest school districts [here](#). As of July 23rd, 9 of the 15 largest school districts had announced plans for only virtual learning at the start of the school year, affecting over 2 million students. Four of the largest 15 districts are planning for a hybrid model, and 2 are undecided.

While earlier this spring one could only speculate about schools' operating plans for 2020-21, states and districts have now begun to announce their plans for fall 2020. State education agencies are providing guidance or reviewing district plans, while district superintendents will ultimately make decisions for students locally. Therefore, we are likely to see a patchwork of approaches across the country: some districts will be fully virtual while others will employ a hybrid approach, with students participating partially in-person and partially virtually. Additionally, some districts are planning for hybrid options that allow families to choose the model that best works for their circumstances. And, while the picture is changing rapidly, the trend appears to bend towards all-virtual instruction (at least in larger districts and in states experiencing surges in community spread of the virus).

Earlier this year, some districts indicated they might prioritize elementary and middle school in-person, leading to a question about prioritizing assessments and the contingencies needed per grade for NAEP to be feasible in 2021. Thus far, it is not clear whether variation by grade band will be widespread. Some districts with hybrid approaches plan to have elementary school students participate in in-person instruction for 2-3 days per week, with high school students in-person for only 1 day per week (e.g. this will be the case in many New York City public schools, depending on the size of the student population and the school building capacity).

Between October and November 2020, NCES will communicate with selected schools about administration; schools provide enrollment information to enable a sample of students to be randomly selected. If students are selected in the fall but not present in school buildings during the testing window (January - March), that creates significant risks to the representativeness of the results. The challenge is exacerbated if there are significant differences in the populations of students who are participating in in-person instruction versus those participating in at-home learning. Such a situation would introduce bias into the sample, and NCES reports there may be no technical solutions to adequately address this potential bias for the purpose of reporting official statistics.

As the Board heard in June, if NAEP were to proceed in 2021, the large urban districts that participate in the TUDA program would likely not take part in that portion of the assessment administration. (They could still potentially take part in the state sample.)

Considerations and Next Steps

In the May and June Board meetings, many members expressed that it was too soon to preemptively cancel the 2021 administration, recommending that the NAEP program plan concurrently for a 2021

administration as well as contingencies for postponing to 2022. If students are in the classroom in early 2021, then NAEP should proceed, as there is no better opportunity to learn about where the nation's students are in their education trajectories. Other members, however, recommend postponing until 2022 given what is known at the moment about the conditions of states, districts, and schools and due to the ongoing health crisis.

Over the summer more clarity has emerged about key factors informing the decision-making, including the perspectives of key stakeholders and updated information about school operations for next year. Yet, as with all decisions in the time of a global pandemic, the Board will be deliberating with incomplete and imperfect information. As noted, to further inform your deliberations, you will hear from public health experts during this meeting. You will also hear from Congressional staff, who are the policy directors from the education committee majority and minority offices.

Since your June meeting, more is known about the conditions of states, districts, and schools, and more information is expected in the coming days and weeks. Furthermore, Congress is actively negotiating on the funds that will be included in Phase IV of COVID aid – which may or may not include funding to allow NAEP to continue preparations for a full administration of Reading and Mathematics in 2021. The bill is tentatively scheduled to be on the Senate floor on July 30th and the House floor on July 31st, although that schedule is subject to change.

To inform your deliberations at this meeting, staff have prepared an overview of the potential paths forward: (1) to continue preparations for 2021, or (2) to seek a waiver from Congress to postpone to 2022.

Path 1: Continue Preparations for 2021

Because of Congressional interest in having NAEP results in 2021, if at all possible, a key consideration for the Board's deliberations is whether Congress will appropriate COVID funding to NAEP. In that case, your deliberations turn to questions around the possibilities that exist for continuing to prepare for a full administration in 2021. In this scenario, NCES would continue to monitor risks to participation, data quality, and other operational factors while continuing the preparatory work for assessment administration. Together, the Board and NCES would continue to consult with stakeholders, track key health metrics that are informing schools' decision-making, and monitor the operational status of schools. Based on this ongoing monitoring, the Board and NCES may determine that it is not feasible to continue to proceed and seek a waiver to postpone the administration until 2022.

The participation of states, schools, and students drives NCES' ability to obtain a representative sample; therefore, some of the most critical questions relate to milestones for drawing the sample, such as:

- What are the risks to state participation? NCES will send letters to states with the list of schools selected for the sample in August 2020.
- What are the risks to school participation? NCES and its contractors work with sampled schools from October to November to obtain the lists of enrolled students in order to draw a representative sample of students.
- What are the risks to student participation? NCES and its contractors work to identify the students for the sample after they confirm the enrollment list is correct (likely December into January).

While there are many other factors – including when more information will be available about whether schools will be open during data collection in January through March – these key milestones will provide specific information about the risks to obtaining a representative sample, both nationally and within states.

Path 2: Seek Waiver to Postpone to 2022

If Congress does not appropriate COVID funding to NAEP, or if the Board determines that it is no longer advisable to proceed with preparing for 2021 regardless of Congressional appropriations, your deliberations will take a different path.

In June, you heard from NCES about the “thin sample” approach, which is the only option available to proceed with a 2021 administration without additional funding. After stakeholder input and your deliberations in June, subsequent discussions with many of you individually, several joint staff conversations, and COSDAM’s discussion on July 17, it is the recommendation of Governing Board staff that the thin sample option be taken off the table. Under the best conditions, the thin sample would result in limited data for each state and may not offer sufficient precision in reporting to allow for meaningful comparisons. Further, the benefit (limited results) is not worth the cost, when accounting for potential burden on schools and the opportunity cost of potentially missing a full administration in 2022 (e.g. the more funds used to continue to prepare for 2021 means less funds are available for a full administration in 2022). Therefore, if funds are not appropriated, staff recommend the Board seek a waiver from Congress to postpone the Reading and Mathematics assessments for grades 4 and 8 from 2021 to 2022.

Under separate cover, you will receive two draft resolutions – one reflecting the “continue to prepare” path and one reflecting the “seek waiver” path. The Board may choose to take action on one or both at this meeting, depending on the status of Congressional appropriations.

The key questions for consideration in your July deliberations include: Given what is known at this time, **should we** continue to proceed with preparing for a 2021 administration so that NAEP can go forward if it is feasible to do so, or **should we** seek a waiver from Congress to postpone from 2021 to 2022? To the latter, the Board must consider the date by which a waiver must be received in order to enhance the likelihood of postponing to 2022 (versus 2023). As NCES monitors budget and expenditures, there is concern that the contingency plan of administering NAEP in 2022 will no longer be available as money is spent continuing to proceed with plans for 2021.

Board staff will update you with any new developments at the meeting on Thursday afternoon, July 30, before your discussions with Congressional staff and public health experts. Then you will have two hours on Friday morning, July 31, to deliberate on two actions:

1. Plans for 2021 Reading and Mathematics Administration (draft resolutions will be sent to Board members under separate cover)
2. Amendments to the NAEP Assessment Schedule for the timing of U.S. History, Civics, and Long-Term Trend for 17-year olds (see proposed amendments in this set of materials)

Action on NAEP Assessment Schedule

On Friday morning, July 31st, the Board will consider taking action on an updated NAEP Assessment Schedule that reflects the postponement of the 2021 U.S. History and Civics assessments at grade 8 and the 2020 Long-Term Trend (LTT) assessment for 17-year olds.

During the June 29th special convening of the Board, the Board agreed with a joint recommendation from Governing Board and NCES staff that the NAEP program should focus its efforts on trying to maximize the feasibility of the 2021 NAEP Reading and Mathematics assessments, and that the U.S. History and Civics assessments at grade 8 should be postponed to the soonest feasible date. These assessments are voluntary, and many states and districts have already indicated that they may refuse to participate, which would make it unlikely that NCES could obtain a nationally representative sample. The Board noted that additional information is needed about budget and other operational considerations before formally deciding whether these assessments can be moved to 2022 or 2023. Similarly, the LTT assessment for 17-year-olds was supposed to begin in March 2020 but could not be administered as scheduled when the majority of schools abruptly shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

At this time, there is still insufficient information about the NAEP budget and other operational factors that affect the timing of these postponed assessments, because decisions related to the administration of the 2021 NAEP Reading and Mathematics assessments and the budget for Fiscal Year 2021 are directly relevant and have not yet been made. For example, it is less expensive to administer the U.S. History and Civics assessments concurrently with the Reading and Mathematics assessments than on their own.

The Board could wait until more information is known to amend the NAEP Assessment Schedule, but there is currently a public misunderstanding from the Board's June 29th discussion that the 2021 administration of U.S. History and Civics is being cancelled altogether and will not be administered again until 2025. To address that misconception, staff recommend that the Board consider taking action to amend the NAEP Assessment Schedule by postponing the U.S. History and Civics assessments at grade 8 from 2021 to 2022, and postponing the LTT assessment for 17-year-olds from 2020 to 2022 (the attached version of the NAEP Assessment Schedule reflects these recommended changes). When additional information is known about the NAEP budget and other operational considerations, it is expected that the Board will revisit this decision at a future Board meeting.



National Assessment of Educational Progress

Schedule of Assessments

Draft July 2020

The *National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Authorization Act* established the National Assessment Governing Board to set policy for NAEP, including determining the schedule of assessments. (P.L. 107-279)

Year	Subject	National Levels Assessed	State Grades Assessed	TUDA Grades Assessed
2019	Reading Mathematics Science Transcript Studies	4, 8, 12 4, 8, 12 4, 8, 12	4, 8 4, 8	4, 8 4, 8
2020	Long-term Trend*	<u>9, 13 year olds</u>		
2021	Reading Mathematics Civics U.S. History	4, 8 4, 8 8 8	4, 8 4, 8	4, 8 4, 8
2022	Civics U.S. History Long-term Trend*	8 8 <u>17 year olds</u>		
2023	Reading Mathematics Science Technology and Engineering Literacy Transcript Studies	4, 8, 12 4, 8, 12 8 8	4, 8 4, 8	4, 8 4, 8
2024	Long-term Trend	~		
2025	READING MATHEMATICS Civics U.S. History	4, 8 4, 8 8 8	4, 8 4, 8	4, 8 4, 8
2026				
2027	Reading Mathematics SCIENCE Technology and Engineering Literacy Transcript Studies	4, 8, 12 4, 8, 12 4, 8 8	4, 8, 12 4, 8, 12 4, 8 8	4, 8 4, 8 4, 8
2028	Long-term Trend	~		
2029	Reading Mathematics CIVICS U.S. HISTORY WRITING	4, 8 4, 8 4, 8, 12 4, 8, 12 4, 8, 12	4, 8 4, 8 8 4, 8, 12	4, 8 4, 8 4, 8

NOTES:

* Long-term Trend (LTT) assessment ~~in 2020~~ not administered by computer until 2024. All other assessments will be digitally based.

~ LTT assessments sample students at ages 9, 13, and 17 and are conducted in reading and mathematics.

BOLD ALL CAPS subjects indicate the assessment year in which a new or updated framework is implemented, if needed.