



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION SCIENCES

NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS


MEMORANDUM

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Office of Management and Budget

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SUBJECT: Emergency Clearance of TIMSS/PIRLS 2011 Recruitment and Field Test Study

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) within the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), of the U.S. Department of Education, is requesting an emergency clearance for the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) field test.

Context

During the 2010-2011 school year, TIMSS and PIRLS, sponsored by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) and conducted in the United States under the auspices of the NCES, will be administered in more than 50 other countries. TIMSS will assess the mathematical and science knowledge of fourth- and eighth-grade students while PIRLS will assess the reading literacy of fourth-grade students. TIMSS and PIRLS are major resources for the United States in monitoring the performance of its education system, evaluating academic achievement of elementary and middle school students, and assessing opportunity to learn in comparison to other education systems around the world.

Although TIMSS and PIRLS are on different data collection cycles (TIMSS collects data every 4 years and PIRLS collects data every 5 years), their two cycles coincide in the 2010-2011 school year, necessitating a coordinated approach to data collection. As part of this coordinated approach, the United States will field test a sampling plan that will employ a design with a combined sample of schools at grade 4 in order to ascertain the feasibility of administering TIMSS and PIRLS in the same schools in the main assessment. In this approach, schools with three or four grade 4 classes will have two classes randomly assigned to one assessment, and the remaining classes assigned to the other assessment. Schools with one or two grade 4 classes will be randomly assigned to participate in only one assessment. Compared with having two independent samples, this approach should reduce costs and total burden time on schools by reducing the number of schools that will need to be contacted and will need to fill out a

questionnaire. In addition, it should reduce the amount of variance found in U.S. schools as compared to when only one of two classrooms in a school was chosen for an assessment.

Schedule

The international schedule calls for the joint TIMSS and PIRLS 2011 field test data collection in the United States to occur between March 1 and April 15, 2010, with the full-scale data collection scheduled to occur in April–May 2011.

Specific request

NCES is requesting that the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) approve on an emergency basis the PIRLS/TIMSS March–April 2010 field test, including recruitment of selected schools, school districts, and state education agencies for the field test starting in November 2009. In order to have a reasonable chance to meet the minimum number of schools for the PIRLS and TIMSS field test and to conduct a valid field test, including of the response rates under the proposed joint sampling plan, NCES must initiate contact with states and school districts as soon as possible after it receives the list of sample schools chosen by the IEA, in early November.

Reasons for emergency clearance

NCES is forced to request emergency clearance because the IEA, the international organizer of TIMSS and PIRLS, has an aggressive production schedule for these studies—one that does not permit time for the United States to meet the requirements of a regular OMB clearance request and participate in the March 1 - April 15, 2010 field test. Specifically, according to the IEA international production schedule, over which NCES has no control, the IEA provides the international portion of the TIMSS and PIRLS questionnaires in September for all participating countries: this is six months before the internationally scheduled field test commences. Given the need to submit study questionnaires for any OMB clearance request, NCES could not submit an OMB request any time prior to late September.

In October, the IEA reviews the national portions of the questionnaires submitted by each participating country, and provides the final approval for the complete questionnaires around November 1st, followed by the release of the (IEA-selected) sample of schools for each country's study. In order to be ready to begin the field test on time, on March 1st of the following year, NCES has to immediately begin printing recruitment materials, contacting states and, about a week later, contacting districts, to receive permission to contact the selected sample schools within their jurisdictions.

Increasingly, school districts require formal approval of school-based studies, a process that includes submission of study documents and plans and, in some cases, attendance at special meetings. These district-level approvals typically take 3 weeks or more before permission is given to contact schools. For example, in Texas and Florida, two of the states in which the field test will be conducted, Texas independent school districts usually require completion of district forms to seek approval and the Miami-Dade (FL) school district requires a write-up of a formal proposal as well as completion of forms for district approval. Only once district permission is granted can schools be contacted, and securing school participation after making contact can take several weeks. If school participation is too low, the process has to be repeated to try to recruit replacement schools.

The appropriate number of schools has to be recruited, student samples drawn, assessment dates and locations scheduled, and students notified before March. This is a very aggressive timeline and is beyond NCES's and the U.S. Department of Education's control. NCES does not control the international timeline, which does not take into account the need to go through the OMB clearance process because, among the over 50 participating countries, it is unique to the United States. In effect, the timeline of the study, including the delivery of draft materials for the field test are fully controlled by the IEA and not NCES.

Consequences

If NCES is not able to begin its recruitment efforts in November, it may not be able to meet the IEA field test timeline. This is to say, failure to receive OMB approval to contact states and districts in November 2009 may jeopardize NCES' ability to conduct meaningful field tests of the operation procedures (for combined sample of schools) and of the instruments in spring 2010. Failure to collect the TIMSS and PIRLS field test data would compromise the ability of the United States to ensure that its students are not at a disadvantage with regard to both studies' cognitive and non-cognitive items. This could compromise the reliability of the full scale study. The failure to collect reliable TIMSS and PIRLS data in the full scale study would, in turn, end the regular data collection and reporting cycle of these two studies in the United States that are critical to fulfilling NCES' mandate, and deprive U.S. policymakers and educators of national trend and international comparison information. Moreover, failure to collect full scale TIMSS data for the nation and four states will prevent the TIMSS-NAEP Linking Study and compromise the ability of NCES to investigate the relationship between student achievement on NAEP and TIMSS.

NCES is requesting OMB approval by November 2, 2009.

Thank you for your prompt consideration of our request. If you have questions, please contact Kashka Kubzdela of NCES at (202) 502-7411 (kashka.kubzdela@ed.gov).

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