

National Study of Special Education Spending

Supporting Statement for OMB Clearance
Request for Full-Scale Study Recruitment
Activities (Phase 1)

Part B: Data Collection Procedures and
Statistical Methods

April 2026



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Introduction

The Institute of Education Sciences (IES), within the U.S. Department of Education (ED), requests clearance from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) for a new data collection, the [National Study of Special Education Spending](#) (NSSES). The study will produce estimates for spending on special education services for students with disabilities (SWDs), both overall and by disability category, including expenditures made by states, districts, and schools. The NSSES also will provide policymakers and special education administrators with an up-to-date understanding of the key factors that influence special education spending, what this spending pays for, and to what extent federal appropriations from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA) cover special education spending.

IES contracted with the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) and its partner organizations—the National Opinion Research Center, at the University of Chicago (NORC) and Allovue, a PowerSchool company (Allovue)—to conduct this study. Together, AIR, NORC, and Allovue are hereafter referred to as “the study team.” The study team is currently pilot-testing the NSSES planned recruitment strategy, survey instruments, and other data collection procedures in an OMB-approved pilot study ([OMB# 1850-0952 v.10, v.12](#)). Preliminary results from the pilot test’s recruitment phase informed the methods and procedures described in this submission.

This is the first of two OMB clearance packages. This package is for clearance to contact state education agencies (SEAs), local education agencies (LEAs), and schools in summer and fall 2026 to request their cooperation and participation in the study and to collect the directory and enrollment data needed to sample students. A future package will request clearance to collect data from teachers, service providers, and LEA and SEA staff through survey instruments and administrative data files during the 2026–27 school year.

B.1. Respondent Universe and Sampling Methods

The NSSES sampling plan is designed to produce nationally representative estimates for average total spending per SWD at the level of precision that can inform policy. Producing these estimates requires collecting data from a large sample of districts, schools, and students so that the findings reflect the experiences of SWDs nationwide and support disaggregation by IDEA’s disability categories and other policy-relevant groups of districts and students. IDEA recognizes 13 federally defined disability categories, and even within these categories, students differ substantially in their needs and the services they receive (e.g., Barret et al. 2020; Cleveland and Markham 2024; Jackson et al. 2022; Maurer et al.

2024; McCabe 2024).¹ A large sample is needed because special education spending varies widely among students with different disabilities and levels of need (Chambers et al. 2003).²

The next section outlines the NSSES sampling plan's goals, followed by a section that describes the study's three-stage sample design.

B.1.1. Sampling Plan Goals

The NSSES sampling plan was designed to achieve the following goals:

- Generate a nationally representative estimate of average total spending per SWD for a universe of public school SWDs receiving special education, with no more than a 5 percent relative margin of error (RMOE).
- Generate average total spending estimates, with an 8 percent RMOE, for most of the 13 disability categories identified by IDEA,³ except for the deaf-blindness (DB), developmental delay (DD), Traumatic brain injury (TBI), and visual impairment (VI) disability categories (see section B.1.5 for further information about special assumptions for these categories).
- Generate a nationally representative estimate of average total spending per student for a universe of public-school students who do not receive special education, with no more than a 3 percent RMOE.⁴
- Support reporting average total spending per SWD for groups of students categorized according to a student's (a) enrollment in a charter or non-charter school, (b) grade-level band (elementary, middle, secondary), (c) placement in their least restrictive environment (LRE) or outside an LEA,⁵ and

¹ Barrett, C. A., Stevenson, N. A., & Burns, M. K. (2020). Relationship between disability category, time spent in general education and academic achievement. *Educational Studies*, 46(4), 497–512; Cleveland, C., & Markham, J. (2024). *Understanding Individualized Education Program (IEP) Goals at Scale* (EdWorkingPaper No. 24-992). Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University; Jackson, L., Agran, M., Lansey, K. R., Baker, D., Matthews, S., Fitzpatrick, H., Jameson, M., Ryndak, D., Burnette, K., & Taub, D. (2022). Examination of Contextual Variables Across and Within Different Types of Placement for Elementary Students with Complex Support Needs. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 47(4), 191-208; Maurer, K. J., Sturm, A., & Kasari, C. (2024). Classroom placements of students with disabilities in public day schools in a large school district. *Remedial and Special Education*, 46(2); McCabe, K. M. (2024). An Evaluation of Annual Goals for Rural Students Who Are Receiving Special Education Services: A Comparison of Disability Categories. *Exceptional Children*, 91(1), 32-49.

² Chambers, J. G., Shkolnik, J., & Perez, M. (2003). *Total expenditures for students with disabilities, 1999-2000: Spending variation by disability* (Report No. SEEP5). American Institutes for Research.

³ The disability categories identified by IDEA are autism spectrum disorder (ASD), deaf-blindness (DB), developmental delay (DD), emotional disturbance (ED), hearing impairment (HI), intellectual disability (ID), multiple disabilities (MD), orthopedic impairment (OI), other health impairment (OHI), specific learning disability (SLD), speech language impairment (SLI), traumatic brain injury (TBI), and visual impairment (VI).

⁴ A comparison sample of students who do not receive special education is needed to answer the study's research questions (RQs). For instance, RQ 1c asks, "How does spending to educate a SWD compare to spending for a typical general education student?" Part A of this submission (Section A.2) lists the study's core research questions.

⁵ The study will use federal reporting categories for the least restrictive environment (LRE) under IDEA, which use specific percentage-based categories to show where SWDs spend their time (> 80 percent in a general education classroom; 40 percent to 79 percent of time in a general education classroom; < 40 percent of time in a general education classroom; and separate school or residential placement).

(d) race/ethnicity. Average spending estimates for student groups will be reported for all SWDs and not disaggregated by disability category.⁶

- Support reporting of average total spending per SWD for groups of districts categorized by (a) average state per student education spending, (b) percentage of students experiencing poverty, (c) enrollment, (d) charter or noncharter status, and (e) locale (urbanicity). Spending estimates for the district groups will also be reported for all SWDs and not disaggregated by disability category.⁷

The precision targets set for the estimates are based on (a) a review of precision requirements and achieved precision for large-scale federal surveys and (b) interviews with subject-matter experts (SMEs) who would likely be end users for the estimates. Specifically, technical documentation published by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (ED/NCES) and other national surveys (including finance-oriented surveys) were reviewed to understand the way precision is typically expressed for key estimates—particularly the use of relative standard errors (RSEs) and RMOEs for dollar-based measures—and the range of precision levels commonly targeted and published. Input from SMEs about what level of precision would be viewed as credible and usable for policy and practice was also considered, including the importance of producing estimates with comparable precision across disability categories when feasible. Finally, candidate sample sizes were tested, using earlier design work to assess which RMOEs were achievable overall and by IDEA disability category under realistic assumptions, and then, balanced analytic needs with data collection feasibility and cost.

B.1.2. Sample Design and Expected Response Rate

The NSSES will use a three-stage sample design, beginning with a nationally representative sample of LEAs, followed by selecting schools within sampled LEAs, and then selecting students within sampled schools—including SWDs and a comparison group of students who do not receive special education. The starting sample will include 1,250 LEAs, 3,750 schools within participating LEAs, 10,949 SWDs, and 2,223 students who do not receive special education within participating schools. The LEA and school samples will be selected first so that those sites can be contacted for recruitment, and the student samples will then be drawn only from LEAs and schools that agree to participate in the study.

The expected combined LEA and school response rate is 80 percent, and the expected student-level response rate is 90 percent. Based on these assumptions, the responding sample is expected to include approximately 1,000 LEAs, 3,000 schools, 9,854 SWDs, and 2,000 students not receiving special education.

The sections that follow describe the sampling procedures.

B.1.3. Sampling LEAs

The primary sampling unit is the LEA because this unit of governance is largely responsible for educating SWDs, including coordinating services and resources among schools and private providers.

⁶ See Exhibit 4 for the expected RMOEs for the estimates across the various student groups.

⁷ See Exhibit 5 for the expected RMOEs for the estimates across the various district groups.

The LEA sampling frame was derived from the 2021–22 ED/NCES Common Core of Data (CCD) Public Elementary/Secondary School District Universe Survey, and includes LEAs identified as regular public school and charter school districts with at least one operating school.⁸ The LEA sampling frame excluded LEAs operated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, located in U.S. territories, and with fewer than 10 students.⁹ Hawaii and the District of Columbia, which operate as single school districts, and very large districts (> 50,000 students) were selected with certainty.

The CCD does not include child count information about the number of students in an LEA who receive special education. Instead, information about the total number of SWDs and the number of SWDs in each of IDEA's 13 disability categories was obtained from the U.S. Department of Education's 2020–21 Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC).¹⁰ LEAs with missing special education child count information and LEAs that reported having no SWDs were dropped from the sampling frame.¹¹

The resulting LEA sampling frame included 13,059 traditional public schools and 3,470 charter LEAs nationwide.

A nationally representative sample of 1,250 LEAs will be drawn from the sampling frame. LEAs will be stratified according to state and, insofar as possible, explicitly stratified within states by the following LEA characteristics: (a) charter LEA status, (b) LEA enrollment, (c) percentage of students in an LEA who were experiencing poverty, and (d) LEA locale (urbanicity). Within explicit strata, to ensure representation in the sample, LEAs will be implicitly stratified for other characteristics including (a) percentage of students receiving special education, (b) percentage of students identified as English language learners, and (c) grade levels served. LEAs will be systematically sampled from the sorted list of LEAs, according to the characteristics used for implicit stratification. The total LEA sample will be allocated to each explicit sampling stratum proportional to the square root of LEA SWD enrollment within the explicit stratum. This design balances the efficiency of estimates of LEA-level variables (e.g., special education administrative costs) and student-level variables (e.g., special education spending per student) and so provides unbiased student-level estimates.

The expected responding sample is 1,000 LEAs (80 percent response rate) and Exhibit 1 presents the expected number of responding LEAs and total student counts for each of IDEA's 13 disability categories. Not all responding LEAs enroll students in each disability category, and the expected number of responding LEAs with at least one student in a disability category is much lower for some low-incidence disabilities than other disability categories. In particular, the expected number of responding LEAs with students identified with DB is far fewer than for other disability categories; just 143 of the responding

⁸ Supervisory unions are included in the sampling frame for New York and Vermont because financial data from component districts within supervisory unions are unavailable.

⁹ These inclusion and exclusion criteria are consistent with those applied to other federally funded national survey studies with SWDs (e.g., Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study [SEELS]; Wagner et al. 2002; Link: https://seels.sri.com/designdocs/SEELS_Children_We_Serve_Report.pdf).

¹⁰ The CRDC categorizes students by their primary disability. The 2020–21 data do not include Illinois schools. As a result, information from the 2018–19 CRDC data collection will be used to sample LEAs in that state.

¹¹ A total of 1,596 LEAs were dropped because of having missing data on the CRDC or not having any students enrolled in special education.

sample of 1,000 LEAs enrolled at least one student with DB, and in these LEAs, the expected number of students with DB is just 273. This low incidence will make it difficult to identify enough students with DB to develop disability-specific spending estimates.

Exhibit 1. Expected number of responding LEAs and expected number of students receiving special education in responding LEAs, overall and by student disability category

Category	# of LEAs with SWDs	Expected # of SWDs in sampled LEAs
Overall (for all SWD)	1,000	1,660,055
Disability category		
Autism spectrum disorder (ASD)	977	197,248
Deaf-blindness (DB)	143	272
Developmental delay (DD)	570	58,881
Emotional disturbance (ED)	926	74,483
Hearing impairment (HI)	794	16,295
Intellectual disability (ID)	881	99,213
Multiple disabilities (MD)	706	22,994
Orthopedic impairment (OI)	658	8,120
Specific learning disability (SLD)	996	615,193
Speech or language impairment (SLI)	979	306,469
Traumatic brain injury (TBI)	601	4,029
Visual impairment (VI)	636	5,254
Other health impairment (OHI)	988	251,604

Source. U.S. Department of Education Civil Rights Data Collection (2020–21 school year)

B.1.4. Sampling Schools

In the second stage, 3,750 schools that enrolled at least one SWD will be randomly sampled from participating LEAs. Schools with at least one enrolled SWD, per information reported on the 2020–21 CRDC, are eligible for sampling. This approach ensures representation at both the LEA and school levels while improving operational efficiency by excluding schools that had no eligible students in the 2020–21 CRDC and thus would be expected to have few if any in the study year. If, during fieldwork, a sampled school is found to no longer enroll at least one SWD, the school will be excluded from the sample. As was noted above, this sample size is intended to generate a responding sample of about 3,000 schools in approximately 1,000 responding LEAs.

To address the very low incidence of students with DB, schools with at least one SWD experiencing DB will be selected with certainty in sampled LEAs. The remaining school sample size will be allocated to each LEA proportionally based on the square root of the LEA's SWD enrollment as a measure of size.

Schools within LEAs will be systematically sampled from a list sorted by school level, student enrollment, and school identification number.

B.1.5. Sampling SWDs

In the third stage, SWDs will be sampled from participating schools within sampled LEAs, using information from the student rosters provided by the LEA and sampling probabilities based on the distribution of SWDs across disability categories that were reported by schools in the 2020–21 CRDC data.

To determine the SWD sample size, a simulated student data file was built for the sampled LEAs and schools using information about the SWD counts for IDEA's 13 disability categories (from the 2020–21 CRDC) and other LEA and school characteristics (from the CCD). The simulated SWD sample also used information from the Special Education Expenditure Project (SEEP), the previous national study of special education spending conducted by the U.S. Department of Education (1999–2000), including average total spending for a SWD, the standard deviation for average total spending for a SWD, and the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) for spending to estimate the standard error for a national estimate of average total spending for an SWD, overall and for each disability category.¹² A variance inflation factor (VIF) was also applied because of unequal weights,¹³ and a student design effect was calculated as the clustering effect (for LEAs) multiplied by the VIF.¹⁴

Exhibit 2 shows the summary statistics for mean total spending per SWD from the SEEP that informed the sample design.

Exhibit 2. Key statistics for the total special education spending estimates from the SEEP that were used to develop the SWD sample design

Category	Mean total spending	SD	Minimum	Maximum	ICC
Overall (for all SWD)	19,005	12,837	3,584	475,858	0.346
Autism spectrum disorder (ASD)	30,064	65,547	5,740	280,121	0.351
Deaf-blindness (DB)	23,785	67,470	7,739	82,410	0.308
Developmental delay (DD)	21,215	11,157	8,634	52,848	0.338

¹² For sampling, observations for the highest 5 percent of spending within a disability category were trimmed to avoid influence from extreme values.

¹³ The formula used for this calculation was $\left(\frac{n \sum_{i=1}^n w_i^2}{\left(\sum_{i=1}^n w_i \right)^2} \right)$, where n is the total student sample size, and w_i is the sampling weight for sampled student i .

¹⁴ The formula used for this calculation was $(1 + (n - 1) * ICC)$, where n is the average number of students per district.

Category	Mean total spending	SD	Minimum	Maximum	ICC
Emotional disturbance (ED)	22,634	19,424	5,135	114,790	0.281
Hearing impairment (HI)	25,588	36,286	6,858	212,146	0.356
Intellectual disability (ID)	24,063	13,957	3,584	131,460	0.361
Multiple disabilities (MD)	32,152	42,092	6,348	295,533	0.321
Orthopedic impairment (OI)	23,989	21,735	6,273	205,213	0.557
Specific learning disability (SLD)	16,893	8,108	4,126	179,077	0.165
Speech or language impairment (SLI)	17,533	7,105	4,608	166,094	0.226
Traumatic brain injury (TBI)	26,468	55,101	3,962	124,957	0.063
Visual impairment (VI)	30,098	47,169	5,460	92,521	0.436
Other health impairment (OHI)	21,159	25,086	6,031	475,858	0.866

Note. Data from the 1999–2000 SEEP were used to calculate descriptive statistics (adjusted for inflation since fiscal year 2000, using the Consumer Price Index) and the intraclass correlation coefficients (ICCs) presented in this table.

Exhibit 3 shows the expected number of responding schools and student counts, and the expected RMOEs for disability-category spending estimates using the assumption about the standard deviation for total special education spending from the SEEP, overall and by student disability category.¹⁵ On average, five SWDs will be sampled in each school; however, to minimize respondent burden at the school level, the sample design sets a limit of no more than 20 SWDs sampled in a responding school.

A different approach will be used to sample SWDs with DB, DD, TBI, and VI.

- Students with DB receiving special education will be included in the overall student sample to ensure that these students are represented in the national estimates. Nationwide, there are fewer than 10,000 SWDs with DB,¹⁶ and fewer than 150 responding LEAs are expected to enroll at least one student with DB. For this reason, students with DB will be sampled with certainty. Because of

¹⁵ A key goal for the sample design is to support precise spending estimates for both the overall sample of SWDs and for each of the disability categories defined by IDEA. To determine the student sample size, a target RMOE of 5 percent was set for the overall estimate and a common target MOE for disability-specific estimates of 8 percent except for the DB, DD, TBI, and VI categories. While the sampling design aims for a common target MOE across disability categories, the relative MOE (RMOE) may vary based on the extent to which the actual mean spending, standard deviation, and intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) differ for the minimum/maximum sample size that was imposed for each category.

¹⁶ The National Center on Deafblindness reports that, as of December 1, 2021, there were 9,801 children and youth ages 3 to 21 with DB nationwide, as well as about 100 youth ages 22 to 26 in states that provided services under IDEA for SWDs over the age of 21 (Source: National Center on Deafblindness. [2022]. *2021 National deaf-blind child count report*. https://www.nationaldb.org/media/doc/2021_National_Deaf-Blind_Child_Count_Report_a.pdf).

the very low incidence of DB, sampling with certainty is not expected to yield a sufficiently large sample to report spending estimates specifically for this disability category.¹⁷

- Students with DD receiving special education will be included in the overall student sample to ensure that these students are represented in the national estimate; however, the study will not develop disability-specific spending estimates for SWDs with DD. Not all states use the DD category, and states that use this category to determine IDEA Part B eligibility apply the category to different age ranges.¹⁸ Instead, the sample design includes students with DD in the overall spending estimate; for this category, one student with DD will be sampled from each LEA that enrolls students with this disability.
- Students with TBI receiving special education will be sampled and included in the overall student sample to ensure that these students are represented in the national estimate. However, data from the SEEP suggests that the TBI category has larger variation in special education spending and the spending estimate for the TBI category is not expected to meet the 8 percent RMOE target.
- Students with VI receiving special education will be included in the overall student sample to ensure that they are represented in the national estimate; however, the study may be unable to generate national spending estimates for students with VI. Like students with DB, students with VI will be sampled with certainty, given the expected limited number of students in the sampled schools. Data from the SEEP suggests that the VI category has larger variation in special education spending than other disability categories.¹⁹ If this larger spending variation is still true, it will pose a challenge for obtaining an 8 percent RMOE for this category without sampling a very large number of students with VI.

Exhibit 3. Population of SWDs, expected number of responding SWDs, and RMOE, by disability category

Disability category ¹	Population of SWDs	Expected number of responding SWDs	RMOE
Total	6,233,821	9,854	2.7%
Autism spectrum disorder (ASD)	700,100	1,500	7.9%
Deaf-blindness (DB)	1,370	272	46.4%

¹⁷ The SEEP did not report spending estimates for SWDs with DB because of very low incidence, and our recommended sample designs for the NSSES assume that the study also will not report spending estimates for the DB category. However, SWDs with DB will be included in the overall student sample to ensure that these students are represented in the national estimates. For this reason, SWDs with DB will be sampled with certainty.

¹⁸ Nineteen states apply the DD category to children ages 3 to 9; 12 states apply the DD category to children ages 3 to 8; five states apply the DD category to children ages 3 to 7; five states apply the DD category to children ages 3 to 6; seven states apply the DD category to children ages 3 to 5; and one state applies the DD category to children ages 3 to 4. Three states do not use the DD category (California, Iowa, and Texas). SOURCE: Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center. <https://ectacenter.org/topics/earlyid/partbelig.asp>.

¹⁹ In the SEEP, VI was among the disability categories with the largest standard errors for the average total spending, and the SEEP sample of SWDs with VI was just 196 students nationwide.

Developmental delay (DD)	251,528	470	6.0%
Emotional disturbance (ED)	306,743	600	5.3%
Hearing impairment (HI)	59,827	2,000	7.6%
Intellectual disability (ID)	374,666	600	4.3%
Multiple disabilities (MD)	101,307	900	7.4%
Orthopedic impairment (OI)	29,220	600	7.6%
Specific learning disability (SLD)	2,233,666	600	2.7%
Speech or language impairment (SLI)	1,101,694	600	1.9%
Traumatic brain injury (TBI)	22,735	700	14.0%
Visual impairment (VI)	22,302	412	23.8%
Other health impairment (OHI)	1,028,663	600	6.1%

¹ Disability category is the primary disability identified on a student's individualized educational program.

Exhibit 4 presents test statistics for the NSSES sample design for SWD characteristics other than disability category, including (a) students enrolled in charter and non-charter schools, (b) student grade-level band (elementary, middle, secondary), (c) a student's placement in their least restrictive environment (LRE) or outside an LEA,²⁰ and (d) students' race/ethnicity.²¹ Although the sample design did not set an a priori target MOE for student groups, the expected RMOEs for the design are no more than 8 percent autism spectrum disorder for each student group, except for students who attend charter schools (11.8 percent) and students who attend a separate school, residential facility, or who are homebound or hospitalized (13.1 percent).

Exhibit 4 also reports the minimal detectable differences (MDDs; at 80 percent power) for comparisons between student groups. Although not a stated goal for the sample design, most MDDs for the student group comparisons are about 10 percent except for comparisons in spending for students who do and do not attend charter schools and students who attend a separate school compared with other LRE categories. In both instances, the expected number of responding students in the sample is very small (about 620 SWDs who attend charter schools and 443 SWDs who are in a separate school).

²⁰ The study will use federal reporting categories for the least restrictive environment (LRE) under IDEA, which use specific percentage-based categories to show where SWDs spend their time (> 80 percent in a general education classroom; 40 percent to 79 percent of time in a general education classroom; < 40 percent of time in a general education classroom; and separate school or residential placement).

²¹ Information on student characteristics was obtained from the 2020–21 CRDC data and included in the simulated student-level sample frame that was used to develop the test sample design. Student grade-level bands were defined as elementary, grades K to 5; middle, grades 6 to 8; and secondary, grades 9 to 12. LRE was defined using the categories that states use for reporting counts of SWD (ages 6 to 21) to the U.S. Department of Education's EDFacts Submission System.

Exhibit 4. Test statistics key student groups

Student groups		Sample design		
		# sampled students	RMOE	Relative MDD
Charter versus noncharter student	Charter SWD	620	11.8%	17.7% versus noncharter SWD
	Noncharter SWD	9,234	4.2%	17.7% versus charter SWD
	Total	9,854	2.7%	
Grade band	Elementary (K–5)	5,170	4.3%	11.5% versus middle
	Middle (6–8)	1,813	6.8%	14.1% versus secondary
	Secondary (9–12)	2,871	7.1%	11.9% versus elementary
	Total	9,854	2.7%	
LRE	> 80% general education class	5,493	4.0%	10.4% versus 40%–79% general education class
	40%–79% general education class	1,739	6.1%	11.7% versus < 40% general education class
	< 40% general education class	2,179	5.5%	20.0% versus separate school, residential facility, homebound, or hospitalized
	Separate school, residential facility, homebound, or hospitalized	443	13.1%	19.3% versus > 80% general education class
	Total	9,854	2.7%	
White versus non-White	White	4,496	4.5%	9.3% versus non-White
	Non-White	5,358	4.7%	9.3% versus White
	Total	9,854	2.7%	

Note. The relative MDD is the threshold for identifying a statistically significant difference between specific student groups, for a test at the 5 percent level with 80 percent statistical power.

Exhibit 5 reports test statistics for LEA groups. It first shows LEAs grouped by terciles based on (a) average state per student education spending, (b) percentage of students experiencing poverty, (c) LEA enrollment, (d) district charter or noncharter status, and (e) locale (urbanicity). The sampling procedure resulted in varying levels of precision for different LEA groups. Although the sample design did not set an a priori target RMOE for LEA groups, the expected RMOE is no more than 10 percent for all groups except for charter LEAs (14.0 percent), where the expected LEA sample size was small ($n = 100$).

Exhibit 5 also reports the MDDs (at 80 percent power) for comparisons between LEA groups. For most comparisons, the MDD is about 15 percent to 16 percent.

Exhibit 5. Test statistics for three-stage sampling design, by key LEA groups

LEA groups			Sample design	
			# LEAs	Relative MDD
State per student education spending	High (3rd tercile)	272	7.5%	14.3% versus medium
	Medium (2nd tercile)	346	6.7%	13.4% versus low
	Low (1st tercile)	345	6.6%	14.1% versus high
	Total	963	2.7%	
LEA enrollment	Large (> 2,500 students)	542	5.2%	15.0% versus medium
	Medium (1,000 students)	189	9.1%	18.1% versus small
	Small (< 1,000 students)	232	8.8%	14.6% versus large
	Total	963	2.7%	
% of students experiencing poverty	High (> 75% FRPL)	159	9.7%	15.4% versus medium
	Medium (25%–75% FRPL)	626	4.9%	15.1% versus low
	Low (<25% FRPL)	178	9.5%	19.3% versus high
	Total	963	2.7%	

LEA groups			Sample design	
			# LEAs	Relative MDD
LEA locale	Urban	197	8.7%	15.7% versus suburban
	Suburban	341	6.8%	12.8% versus rural/town
	Rural/Town	425	5.9%	15.0% versus urban
	Total	963	2.7%	
Charter versus noncharter LEA	Charter	100	14.0%	20.5% versus noncharter
	Noncharter	863	4.1%	20.5% versus charter
	Total	963	2.7%	

Note. FRPL = free or reduced-price lunch. The minimum detectable difference (MDD) is the threshold for identifying a statistically significant difference between specific student groups, for a test at the 5 percent level with 80 percent statistical power.

B.1.6. Sampling Students Who Do Not Receive Special Education

A national sample of students who do not receive special education is also included in the study's sample design. This sample is needed to generate national average spending estimates for students who do not receive special education, for comparison with spending estimates for SWDs.

A random sample of students who do not receive special education will be drawn from the sampled schools, using the student rosters provided by LEAs. The sample selection probabilities within schools will be determined using a probability-proportional-to-size approach, with the school sampling weight serving as the measure of size to equalize student selection probabilities across the sample. Eligible students on each school's roster will be randomly sorted, and students whose cumulative selection probability reaches an integer value will be selected. Assuming the average spending ratio of SWDs to students who do not receive special education is 1.91, based on the SEEP study, a maximum ICC (0.87) of SWD categories, and a minimum standard deviation to mean ratio (0.23) of SWD categories, a sample of 2,000 responding students who do not receive special education (the maximum number of SWDs sampled in a disability category) will achieve an RMOE of less than 3 percent.

B.2. Procedures for Collection of Information

The previous section addressed the study's sample design, including sample selection and precision requirements. This section describes the state, LEA, and school recruitment procedures.

Study recruitment will begin in July 2026 and continue through June 2027.²² Recruitment activities for LEAs and schools include (a) updating contact information, (b) identifying appropriate contacts within LEAs and schools that can coordinate their response, and (c) preparing and submitting the student directory and enrollment data that are needed to sample students who do and do not receive special education. AIR's partner organization, NORC, will have primary responsibility for the study recruitment.

B.2.1. State Education Agency Notification

In July 2026, NORC will send a notification letter and e-mail to each state's chief education official and the state special education official that both solicits the SEA's support and identifies the LEAs that have been selected to participate in the study (see Attachment A). The letter and email will notify the SEA that (a) the study is happening, (b) it is important, and (c) request support in recruiting LEAs as well as the SEA's participation in the study's SEA Resources Survey.

In addition, IES will identify ED-sponsored meetings or other gatherings at which SEA officials and state special education directors will be in attendance and will then use the opportunities to announce the study and field questions.

B.2.2. Local Education Agency (LEA) Recruitment

Before contacting LEAs, NORC will compile the necessary contact information for each sampled LEA and school, including its location (address) and the name, title, and e-mail address of the initial contact at the location. Verifying LEA and school names and contact information prior to recruitment activities will also provide a chance to confirm whether there have been LEA or school closures, mergers, or splits in the time between the creation of the sample frame and the recruitment phase.

LEA participation will be secured before approaching sampled schools. The timing for specific activities may be dependent on an LEA's specific requirements for participation. Most LEAs are expected to be recruited by December 2026.

NORC will begin LEA recruitment by sending a letter and study information materials via FedEx or priority mail and e-mail to LEA superintendents and special education directors (see Attachments A and C). Immediately after the initial contact, NORC will follow up (see Attachment B) by e-mail and then phone to confirm receipt, answer questions, identify LEA-specific research approval protocols, and

²² This is the first of two OMB clearance packages. This package requests clearance for main study recruitment activities. Most recruitment activities will be completed by December 2026, although some LEAs and schools may require recruitment activities in 2027. A separate package will be submitted for main study data collection, which will occur during the 2026-27 school year, when survey and administrative data will be collected from states, LEAs, and schools. Data collection with LEA central offices, as well as with teachers and other providers, will largely occur between January and June 2027.

secure participation. NORC will send weekly e-mails until a response is received. If the response is a refusal, NORC recruitment managers will classify it as a soft or hard refusal. Soft refusals, such as refusals due to lack of staff, will receive additional follow-up from refusal conversion experts. Hard refusals, such as direction objections because of study requirements, will be considered nonrespondents and all contact ends.

Additional activities to support LEA recruitment include the following:

- Send a Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) agreement to each LEA about the directory and enrollment data requested in the student rosters.
- Provide instructions for generating the student directory and enrollment data rosters needed for sampling, with experts at NORC and AIR available to offer technical assistance, including providing sample code for extracting data from administrative data systems. Rosters will be submitted via the government-hosted, secure IES data center.
- Prepare and submit LEA-specific research request applications for LEAs that require them.
- Offer an information session for LEA officials to learn more about the study.

B.2.3. School Recruitment

Generally, the approach to recruiting schools will mirror the methods used for recruiting LEAs. Like LEAs, some schools will take longer to recruit than others, and the timing of recruitment activities will depend on each school's circumstances.

Once an LEA agrees to participate, NORC will

- send initial notification to sampled schools within 7 to 10 business days after receiving the LEA's agreement to participate, with the communication referencing the LEA's participation approval;
- follow up with the school by e-mail and phone within 3 days after the school receives its mailing to confirm receipt, answer questions, and secure participation;
- send a weekly batch e-mail until personal contact is made with the school's point of contact; and
- request assistance from the LEA point of contact to connect with the school if contact (by phone or e-mail) is not made within 2 weeks after the mailing's being sent.

School principals or other school leaders will designate a "school coordinator" to manage data collection efforts, including prompting teachers and related service providers to respond to surveys.

The same refusal conversion procedure described for LEAs will be applied to schools.

B.2.4. Collecting Directory and Student Enrollment Rosters

As was described in Part A, section A.3, the study team will request student directory information and enrollment rosters from LEAs as part of the study's prefielding activities. See Attachment D for a list of the specific information that will be requested.

B.3. Methods to Maximize Response Rates and Address Nonresponse

This section describes methods for securing cooperation and maximizing response rates for the NSSES. To minimize potential bias from nonresponse and maximize response rates, the NSSES will implement recruitment and well-designed data collection procedures and materials that are based on approaches that have been used in similar nested, multistage designs conducted by the IES, within the U.S. Department of Education (ED).²³

B.3.1. Securing Cooperation

Cooperation issues loom large in any major school-based survey today. LEAs and schools face substantial administrative demands, while teachers are often heavily burdened and reluctant to spend time on nonteaching activities. The recruitment plan approaches LEAs and schools as collaborators and partners in the study. The study aims to establish rapport with LEAs and schools by appointing a school coordinator to serve as liaison between the study team and the schools.

In addition, achieving high initial response rates and maintaining cooperation throughout the study requires approaching LEAs and schools with respect and sensitivity. Incentives have proved to be effective tools in achieving high response rates, and the study plans to offer monetary incentives to LEAs and schools. See Section A.9 of this submission for a full discussion of incentives.

IES and the study team also garnered support from respected national education leaders, journalists, and organizations. *Education Week* published an article about the NSSES, featuring interviews with practitioners in the field who underscored the study's importance.²⁴ The study team will also highlight the study at education finance-related conferences and meetings and offer a learning webinar to SEAs and LEAs.

LEA information session. Early in the recruitment phase, AIR will offer an information session for LEAs to provide details about the study, as well as an opportunity to connect with LEAs and schools, generate interest, and answer specific questions about study participation. The session will communicate study needs, benefits, and timelines and provide a platform for LEA and school officials to interact with the study team to address their questions and concerns.

Experienced and prepared field staff. Successful recruitment depends on experienced field staff to carry out the recruitment contacts, including specially trained refusal conversion staff. All recruiters are trained to address a variety of participation concerns while also communicating the value of the study. Recruiters will be provided with the letters, contact information, e-mail follow-up templates, and study FAQs. These materials form a toolkit that enables recruiters to customize their contact with LEAs and

²³ The NSSES is like the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 2023–24 (ECLS-K:2024) in its nested design, with cooperation needed from schools, school coordinators, and teachers. In addition, the NSSES design includes an LEA component, and school participation is contingent on LEA participation.

²⁴ See <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/how-much-does-special-education-truly-cost-finally-an-answer-is-on-the-horizon/2024/08>

schools as needed. In addition, the recruitment team, LEAs, and schools can contact the study's principal investigator at any time for additional information. The study staff review cases of initial refusal and develop strategies to address and attempt to convert these refusals.

Conveying authority. Follow-up communication to schools reference the name of the person at the LEA who approved the study (when possible), ensuring that the recipient immediately understands the study's importance and the LEA's support for it. Providing this information up front encourages participation. Study information is presented clearly and specifically and emphasizes that the study team will work closely with LEAs and schools to accomplish the study with the least burden and disruption possible.

B.3.2. Methods to Maximize Response Rates

The main areas of focus to maximize response rates are the timing of the contact, research applications, obtaining formal approval, and refusal conversion.

Timing. All sampled LEAs will be contacted in the school year prior to the data collection. Securing cooperation early allows sufficient time for recruiting schools. Accordingly, early contacts allow the study to identify barriers to cooperation, such as required research applications and LEAs requiring refusal conversion. Early contacts also allow the study team to work around LEA and school schedules, minimizing contact during high-demand periods in the school year.

Research applications. Field recruiters will identify LEAs requiring special research applications to ensure that the study is able to meet deadlines and that study staff preparing the proposals use the required applications and procedures. The study team has also developed a general research application package that can be shared with LEAs for more straightforward submissions. This approach saves time and reduces administrative burden. Once submitted, applications are closely tracked, with regular follow-up with appropriate LEA personnel to monitor progress. Once the study is approved, recruiters review any special requirements within the LEA research proposal and response, to ensure that the study is compliant. For example, some LEAs may require explicit parent permission forms or prohibit school and teacher incentive payments.

Formal approval. For all LEAs, every effort will be made to obtain a signed approval letter from an LEA staff member, such as the superintendent or a special education official. Experience has shown that, when schools are contacted, they often inquire about who at the LEA level has approved the study. Providing a specific name and title in response helps facilitate the school recruitment process.

Refusal conversion. Refusal conversion efforts will be made on a flow basis as field staff receive refusal communications. The study team will meet with LEA staff to address any concerns, and ED will respond to these concerns when requested. In the NSES pilot study, after these meetings and follow-up from ED, NORC was able to recruit several LEAs that had initially refused to participate.

B.4. Tests of Procedures

Recruitment procedures were being tested in the NSES pilot study, which occurred during the 2024/25 and 2025/26 school years. Feedback from the pilot study's recruitment phase informed the methods and procedures described in this submission. For example, feedback from pilot participants has guided the development of parent permission forms and a FERPA agreement to provide assurances for directory and enrollment data collection and has clarified the engagement of charter school oversight entities and virtual schools in the study, the information needed for LEA research applications, and the way to convey the incentive. Information submitted to and approved by OMB about the pilot study recruitment is available in [OMB# 1850-0952 v.10, v.12](#).

B.5. Individuals Consulted on Statistical Aspects of the Design and Leading Data Collection/Analysis

The following individuals are responsible for the study design, collection, and analysis:

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