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No One to Hand It To: NCES Expertise One Year After the RIF

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In August 2025, the last career staff of the National Center for Education Statistics left the Department of Education. Since then, the conversation about NCES has been about programs: which collections were paused, which were restored, which releases slipped. Very little has been said about the people, and almost nothing about what they knew.

In August, Agora Education Research surveyed everyone we could reach who separated from NCES during the reductions that began in late 2024. We contacted 91 former staff individually and heard back from 79 percent of them. This is an unusually high response rate, and one that reflects how much this group wants the record kept. They were, overwhelmingly, long-tenured people: nearly two-thirds had spent ten years or more at NCES, and half had worked more than a decade on the single collection they knew best.

What they told us is that the loss was not primarily a loss of positions. It was a loss of knowledge that had no one to go to.

More than two-thirds held expertise that was theirs alone

We asked a question no personnel record can answer: were you the only person at NCES who performed a particular function, or who held knowledge of a particular system, method, or collection's history?

One in five said yes, unambiguously. Nearly half more said possibly and that at most one or two colleagues shared what they knew. Together, more than two-thirds of respondents report having held expertise that was unique or nearly so.

These are not vague claims. Respondents described being the only federal employee maintaining a specific reporting system, the only remaining person who had ever worked on a particular survey component, the sole holder of a collection's design history, the only staff member who understood a licensing and disclosure review process end to end. Read together, they describe an agency operating with many single points of failure — and then losing them at once.

> Half of respondents had worked more than a decade on the collection they knew best. Nearly two-thirds spent ten years or more at NCES.

Where they went

A little under three in five respondents are working in some capacity today: full-time, part-time, or on contract. About a third are retired. A small share remains unemployed and looking.

The retirements are the part worth pausing on. Only a small minority of those who retired describe it as having happened roughly when they planned. The overwhelming majority left on a timetable set for them.

Those who found work did not find it easily. Among respondents who applied for positions, more than half submitted more than twenty

applications before receiving an offer. Some reported more than a hundred. The obstacles they named most often were a shortage of openings in their field, salary expectations, and — tellingly — that their skills were specific to federal statistical work.

Compensation fell. Nearly three in five respondents earn less than they did at separation, and more than two in five are down by at least a quarter. A quarter of the group reports a decline of more than half. A very small number of respondents did earn more than previously.

The capacity left the field

The sharpest finding for anyone concerned with federal education statistics is not where these people went, but what they are doing now.

Only about a quarter of respondents say education data or statistics remains the central focus of their work. Roughly the same share say their current work involves it not at all. Another quarter describe it as a partial or occasional part of what they do now, and the remaining quarter are not working.

Those still working were asked whether they still use the specific technical skills they used at NCES — survey methodology, disclosure avoidance, large-scale assessment, statistical programming. About half say very few or none.

This is what distinguishes a workforce reduction from a capacity loss. The expertise did not relocate to a university or another agency. In a substantial share of cases, it simply disappeared.

The window has not closed

One finding cuts the other way, and it may be the most consequential in the survey.

Asked whether they would return if NCES were rebuilt and they were offered a comparable position, more than four in ten respondents said yes or probably yes. Another three in ten were unsure. Fewer than one in five ruled it out.

A year on, with many in lower-paid work and some not working at all, a substantial share of the people who ran federal education statistics would come back.

That is a wasting asset. Every month, more of them settle into new work, complete a transition into retirement, or conclude the chapter is closed. Any serious plan to rebuild NCES's capacity is competing against that clock. The roadmap work now underway would do well to account for it.

What comes next

This piece reports closed-ended findings only. Respondents also wrote at length about which collections they believe are at risk, what knowledge left with no successor, and what they want the education research community to understand. That material is being coded now and will appear in a full report.

One caveat should be highlighted. Several respondents told us they answered the open-ended questions vaguely on purpose, because NCES programs were small enough that a few details would identify an individual. They are almost certainly right, and the people most likely to have self-censored are those with the most specific knowledge. What we report should be read as a floor.

About this survey

Agora Education Research identified 95 individuals who separated from NCES during the reductions beginning in late 2024 and were checked against the February 2025 IES staff roster. Of these 95, we obtained working contact information for 91 and reached them individually by email between August 6 and August 24, 2026. Four individuals could not be reached at any address and are reported as a coverage limitation rather than as nonresponse.

Seventy-two people responded, a rate of 79 percent. A shortened four-question version was offered to nonrespondents in the final week; those responses are included in the employment and current-field figures only. Item denominators range from 54 to 62 depending on the question and on where respondents stopped, so the effective response rate on individual items is lower than the unit rate. Because we did not collect identifying attributes, respondents and nonrespondents are not compared here; a nonresponse analysis will accompany the full report.

Findings are reported in aggregate. No figure representing fewer than five people is published, and no respondent is identified by branch, title, or job history. Respondents reviewed this piece before publication.

Agora Education Research is a nonprofit focused on federal education statistics. Several Agora staff are former NCES employees and fall within the survey frame; they responded as ordinary respondents.

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