April 15, 2019

The Honorable Roy Blunt  The Honorable Patty Murray
Chairman  Ranking Member
Subcommittee of Labor, HHS, Education  Subcommittee of Labor, HHS, Education
and Related Agencies  and Related Agencies
U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee  U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee
Washington, DC 20510  Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Shelby, Vice Chairman Leahy, Chairman Blunt and Ranking Member Murray:

As you develop the Fiscal Year (FY) 2020 Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services,
and Education, and Related Agencies Appropriations bill, we urge you to appropriate $670 million for the Institute of Education Sciences (IES).

IES is a semi-independent and nonpartisan agency of the U.S. Department of Education and
plays a critical role in developing the research base for and evaluating the effectiveness of the
nation’s education programs. IES helps make sure that taxpayers’ money is being invested in
efforts that are supported by rigorous research and demonstrated results. Local, state, and federal
governments invest billions of dollars on public education each year, and policymakers at all
levels depend on IES-supported evidence to inform the best decisions for these dollars.

Congress has demonstrated an increasing appreciation and commitment to the importance of
innovation, evidence, and evaluation when determining how to best spend Federal dollars,
especially in education. While we saw moderate increases to the Research, Development and
Dissemination (RD &D) and the National Center for Special Education Research (NCSER)
within the IES budget in FY 2018, overall IES has not recovered from the severe cuts to funding
due to sequestration and over the last few fiscal years has largely remained flat.

With largely flat funding, the ability of IES to foster new and innovative ideas to drive academic
achievement in our schools and better instructional practices for our teachers has been severely
reduced. This especially harms disadvantaged students by limiting the use of evidence necessary
for them to learn and succeed. If Congress wants to use evidence and evaluation to inform
decisions and drive results, IES will require steady and purposeful increases over a multi-year
period.

Although we appreciated the modest increase provided for IES in FY 2018, some programs are
still functioning at funding levels lower than in years past. IES research has produced great
results, but it has been highly constrained by limited investment. For example, for every 10
applications that IES receives, including those received by NCSER, only one is funded. Critical
research that meets IES’ high standards is not being funded to the detriment of educators and
students. Similarly, states seeking grants to improve their own administrative data systems have
been turned away. This means many pressing questions—including questions regarding school safety, serving non-traditional student populations, and creating affordable pathways for good-paying technical jobs that do not require a four-year degree—are left unanswered.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) has experienced severe funding constraints that impact the quality of its surveys, particularly as the agency faces declining survey response rates that prompt additional analyses to ensure that the data accurately describes target populations. While IES research has several studies on the higher education in the works, there is a lot that students and families still can’t know without additional investment in the NCES. Students and families want to better understand institutional outcomes for students, such as enrollment, completion, and post-college success across programs and majors. Additional investment in NCES would bring the added benefit of increasing transparency at our higher education institutions.

Hardest hit under IES has been NCSER. Despite a budget that is only two-thirds of what it was in 2005, research from NCSER helps inform educators and families of evidence-based interventions and strategies that support the development and academic success of children with disabilities. This includes strategies for improving early childhood special education; advancing reading, writing, and language development; supporting students with learning disabilities; educating students on the autism spectrum; and helping students transition to postsecondary education and careers.

The Regional Educational Laboratories (RELs) conduct applied research that is directly relevant to state and district administrators, principals and teachers. RELs also ensure that research is shared widely through its deep dissemination networks. Recent work across the REL network has focused on literacy, including the development of a rubric for evaluating reading/language arts instructional materials for kindergarten to grade 5; a self-study guide for implementing early literacy interventions; and a study on time to language proficiency for Hispanic English learner students. With additional resources the RELs could produce additional research-based materials so that educators may better serve these incredibly diverse regions.

Thank you for your attention to our request to appropriate $670 million for IES in FY 2020. Our education system will be stronger in the future if we provide meaningful, sustained support for rigorous education research and evaluation today.

Sincerely,

Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator

Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator