National Assessment Governing Board

Collection and Reporting of Background Data by the
National Assessment of Educational Progress

Policy Statement

Introduction

As the Nation’s Report Card™, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is an ongoing, congressionally authorized program to collect data through surveys on the academic knowledge and skills of American students. Its primary goal is to report fair and accurate information on student achievement in reading, mathematics, and other subjects taught in elementary and secondary schools. This information is to be made available in a clear and timely manner to members of the public, policymakers, and educators throughout the country.

Since it began in 1969–70, NAEP has administered, in addition to cognitive questions, background questionnaires that provide information for reporting categories and that collect non-cognitive data on students, their family background, teachers, and schools. These have enriched reporting of the NAEP and increased the precision of NAEP results. The background data have also been used in secondary analyses. However, because NAEP tests a cross-section of students at a particular time with no follow-up of the students tested, the assessment can only show correlations or associations rather than causal relationships between background factors and achievement.

By statute (P.L. 107-110, as amended by P.L. 110-279), the NAEP shall include, “whenever feasible, information collected, cross-tabulated, compared, and reported by race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, disability, and limited English proficiency.” The statute provides that NAEP may “not evaluate or assess personal or family beliefs and attitudes” and may “only collect information that is directly related to the appraisal of academic achievement and to the fair and accurate presentation of such information.” These provisions are intended to prevent intrusive, inappropriate, or unnecessary questions being asked about students and their families.
The law requires that the National Assessment Governing Board take steps to ensure that all NAEP questions are “free from racial, cultural, gender, or regional bias, and are secular, neutral, and non-ideological.” However, a House-Senate Conference report, accompanying the legislation, says the law does not preclude the use of “non-intrusive, non-cognitive questions,” with a direct relationship to academic achievement.

The NAEP is conducted by the Commissioner of Education Statistics under the policy guidance of the Governing Board. The Governing Board's specific areas of responsibility include: (1) assessment objectives and test specifications; (2) the methodology of the assessment; (3) guidelines for reporting and disseminating results; and (4) “appropriate actions needed to improve the form, content, use, and reporting” of the NAEP. Under the statute, the Governing Board has “final authority” on the appropriateness of all NAEP items—both cognitive and non-cognitive.

To carry out these responsibilities, the Governing Board hereby adopts guiding principles, policies, and procedures for the collection and reporting of background data by the NAEP.

**Guiding Principles**

**Principle 1**
Background data on students, teachers, and schools is needed to fulfill the statutory requirement that NAEP include information, whenever feasible, disaggregated by race or ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, disability, and limited English proficiency. In addition, background data are collected to enrich the reporting of NAEP results by examining factors related to academic achievement. However, the collection of such data should be limited, and the burden on respondents kept to a minimum. It must always be considered in light of NAEP’s primary purpose: providing sound, timely information on the academic achievement of American students.

**Principle 2**
All background questions must be directly related to academic achievement or to the fair and accurate presentation of achievement results.

**Principle 3**
Issues of cost, benefit, appropriateness, and burden shall be carefully considered in determining the background questions to be asked and the samples to which they shall be administered.

**Principle 4**
In accordance with law, questions shall be non-intrusive and free from bias, and must be secular, neutral, and non-ideological.
Principle 5
No personally identifiable information shall be included in NAEP reports or data releases.

Principle 6
Decisions on the retention or addition of background items shall draw on technical studies on the reliability and validity of current and proposed questions and on the contribution such items make to the precision of NAEP results.

Principle 7
Consideration should be given to obtaining background information from non-NAEP sources and to avoiding duplication with other federal surveys.

Principle 8
Questionnaires should be revised to keep background questions timely and related to academic achievement. Those questions showing little change over time and/or a stable relationship to achievement should be deleted or asked less frequently and to limited samples, unless required to assure the precision of NAEP results.

Principle 9
Questions should not address personal feelings and attitudes.

Principle 10
Since security considerations do not apply, background questionnaires shall be readily available to the public.

Principle 11
Interpretation of results shall be limited in official NAEP reports and must be strongly supported by NAEP data. Because of the survey nature of the assessment, reports may show correlations and generate hypotheses, but may not state conclusions as to cause and effect relationships.

Principle 12
Background questions for NAEP assessments shall be prepared in accordance with frameworks and specifications adopted by the Governing Board.

Principle 13
The Governing Board shall review and approve all background items before they are administered in NAEP surveys or pilot and field tests.
Policies and Procedures

Framework and Specifications

The Governing Board shall adopt a general framework for background questionnaires and specifications for the questions on selected topics and in specific subject areas.

Since this is a new area of responsibility for the Governing Board, the process of developing a framework for background questions and specifications will begin with commissioned papers on relevant issues, such as the reliability and validity of current background questions, their contribution to improving the precision of NAEP results, their value and limitations for educational research, and changes that may be needed in response to the No Child Left Behind legislation. Following consideration of these issues, the Governing Board shall define the scope of background questionnaires and adopt a process for preparing a framework and specifications. This work will include the active participation of teachers, education researchers, state and local school administrators, assessment specialists, parents of children in elementary and secondary schools, and interested members of the public.

Background Question Development

In preparing background questions, the National Center for Education Statistics shall follow adopted frameworks and specifications and consider the review criteria adopted by the Governing Board. NCES may use cognitive laboratories of students, teachers, and school officials to help determine the clarity and burden of proposed questions. Ad hoc advisory committees may also be established, comprised of teachers, parents, technical experts, and others interested in NAEP. Steps shall be taken to determine the reliability of questions used.

Governing Board Review and Approval of Background Questions

Background questions for all NAEP pilot tests, field tests, and operational use shall be reviewed and approved by the Governing Board. The category of respondents, e.g., students, schools, and grade level, shall clearly be designated, as will the NAEP samples, e.g., national, state, or district, in which the questions will be asked.

For each questionnaire there shall be an explanation of its intended use in NAEP reporting and analysis and of the hypothesized relationships between the background items and student achievement that demonstrates the need to know such information. Technical data shall be presented on the reliability and validity of questions and, if applicable, on their contribution to improving the precision of NAEP results. The Governing Board will use the explanations and data presented along with the review criteria in this policy statement in determining the appropriateness of background questions.
The Reporting and Dissemination Committee shall have primary responsibility for the review and approval of background questions. The Assessment Development Committee will participate in the approval of questions relating to specific subject-matter assessments. Ad hoc committees of Governing Board members may be established by the Governing Board Chairman for background question review. Questions may also be reviewed by external advisors, including teachers, parents, and technical experts. Recommendations on background questionnaires shall be subject to final approval by the full Governing Board.

**Criteria for Governing Board Review**

The following criteria for review and approval of background questions are based on the most recent revision of the authorizing statute of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (P.L. 107-110, as amended by P.L. 107-279) and the Guiding Principles of this policy statement:

- **A.** Background information is needed to fulfill the statutory requirement that NAEP report and analyze achievement data, whenever feasible, disaggregated by race or ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, disability, and limited English proficiency. Non-cognitive data may enrich the reporting and analysis of academic results, but the collection of such data should be limited and the burden on respondents kept to a minimum.

- **B.** All background questions shall be related to the primary purpose of NAEP: the fair and accurate presentation of academic achievement results.

- **C.** Any questions on conditions beyond the school shall be non-intrusive and focused on academic achievement and related factors.

- **D.** Questions shall be free from racial, cultural, gender, or regional bias.

- **E.** All questions shall be secular, neutral, and non-ideological. Definitions of these terms, accompanied by clarifying examples, are presented in Appendix A, as adopted in the Governing Board Policy on NAEP Item Development and Review.

- **F.** NAEP shall not evaluate or assess personal feelings or family beliefs and attitudes.

- **G.** Issues of cost, benefit, appropriateness, and burden shall be carefully considered in determining which questions to include in background questionnaires. These factors shall also be considered in determining the frequency with which various questions shall be administered and whether they shall be included in both national and state samples.
H. Background questions that do not differentiate between students or have shown little change over time should be deleted or asked less frequently and to limited samples.

Public Access to Background Questions

Since security considerations do not apply, all background questionnaires shall be readily available to parents, teachers, state and local officials, and interested members of the public. Such questionnaires shall be available before field tests and operational assessments or at any other time members of the public wish to obtain them. Background questions in operational use shall be posted on the Internet prior to each assessment, accompanied by explanations and rationales.

Reporting of Background Information

The presentation of background data in official NAEP reports shall be straightforward and impartial. Because of the survey nature of the assessment, reports may show correlations and generate hypotheses, but may not state conclusions as to cause and effect relationships. Any composite indices including demographic and socioeconomic factors shall be presented to the Governing Board for approval before use as reporting categories in NAEP data releases and reports.

Background data should be available for extensive secondary analyses by scholars and researchers, who are responsible for conclusions reached. Responses to background questions shall be presented and tabulated on the Internet, although, if necessary, posting may be delayed for a brief period after release of the principal NAEP results.
APPENDIX A

Definitions of Secular, Neutral, and Non-ideological

Item Review Criteria

From Governing Board Policy on NAEP Item Development and Review—5/18/02

Items shall be secular, neutral, and non-ideological. Neither NAEP nor its questions shall advocate a particular religious belief or political stance. Where appropriate, NAEP questions may deal with religious and political issues in a fair and objective way. The following definitions shall apply to the review of all NAEP test questions, reading passages, and supplementary materials used in the assessment:

**Secular** — NAEP questions shall not contain language that advocates or opposes any particular religious views or beliefs, nor shall items compare one religion unfavorably to another. However, items may contain references to religions, religious symbolism, or members of religious groups where appropriate.

Examples: The following phrases would be acceptable: “shaped like a Christmas tree,” “religious tolerance is one of the key aspects of a free society,” “Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a Baptist minister,” or “Hinduism is the predominant religion in India.”

**Neutral and Non-ideological** — Items shall not advocate for a particular political party or partisan issue, for any specific legislative or electoral result, or for a single perspective on a controversial issue. An item may ask students to explain both sides of a debate, or it may ask them to analyze an issue, or to explain the arguments of proponents or opponents, without requiring students to endorse personally the position they are describing. Item writers should have the flexibility to develop questions that measure important knowledge and skills without requiring both pro and con responses to every item.

Examples: Students may be asked to--

- compare and contrast positions on states’ rights, based on excerpts from speeches by X and Y;
- analyze the themes of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s first and second inaugural addresses;
- identify the purpose of the Monroe Doctrine;
- select a position on the issue of suburban growth and cite evidence to support this position;
- provide arguments either for or against Woodrow Wilson’s decision to enter World War I;
- summarize the dissenting opinion in a landmark Supreme Court case.

The criteria of neutral and non-ideological also pertain to decisions about the pool of test questions in a subject area, taken as a whole. The Governing Board shall review the entire item pool for a subject area to ensure that it is balanced in terms of the perspectives and issues presented.