

knowledge alliance

January 8, 2026

U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20202 USA

Dear Secretary McMahon,

As the Institute for Education Sciences (IES) considers the design of the upcoming [2027-2031 Regional Educational Laboratories](#) (REL) competition, [Knowledge Alliance](#) (KA) offers the following comments grounded in our members' experience supporting States and districts through research, evaluation, and technical assistance. KA is a non-profit, non-partisan organization composed of leading education research, evaluation, and technical assistance organizations dedicated to empowering schools, districts, and all 50 States with the tools and resources needed to improve learning and outcomes for every student. For more than 50 years, KA and its members have served as trusted, objective partners to State, local, and Federal policymakers.

KA is pleased to see IES moving forward with a REL competition and appreciates the Administration's recognition of the RELs' critical role in improving academic outcomes for students. Although Knowledge Alliance is not an offeror in the REL competition and was not formally invited to submit comments, we are providing the following input in response to the Request for Information (RFI) regarding the REL Program 2027–2031 cycle to share field-informed perspectives grounded in our members' extensive experience designing, operating, and partnering with RELs. KA's recommendations to this notice are also informed by KA's [response](#) to the U.S. Department of Education's recent request for feedback on Redesigning IES.

The RELs are a critical link to improving academic achievement as they are a crucial resource for States and districts, supporting data, research, and evidence needs tied to the most pressing challenges facing schools, districts and communities in driving student success. As the only Federally funded entities dedicated to providing research, evaluation, and research-related technical assistance driven by State priorities to improve student success, it is essential that the upcoming REL competition cycle positions the RELs to respond effectively to those needs. KA believes that minimizing other requirements not driven by State-expressed needs and reducing unnecessary bureaucratic burden is key to enabling RELs to provide timely, relevant, and continuous support to States and districts and drive student learning and success.

KA sees the draft 2027–2031 Performance Work Statement (PWS) as a meaningful step forward in several important aspects. In particular, the draft reflects a clearer

emphasis on State-driven work, stronger articulation of applied research and analytical support as core REL functions, and greater attention to aligning scope, planning, and budgeting through more structured approaches. The increased focus on transparency, improved coordination across Federally funded technical assistance investments, and intentional engagement with stakeholders will help ensure States are well-supported and more attention can be spent on State-driven activities to improve outcomes for students.

KA's comments below highlight aspects of the PWS that KA supports and hopes remain in the issued request for proposals (RFPs) followed by KA's recommendations in response to specific General Questions for RFI response included in the notice. KA's comments are offered in the spirit of building on improvements already put forth for this REL competition—refining design choices related to flexibility, dissemination, and oversight so that the REL program can more fully realize its goals of timely, responsive, and impactful support to States (and districts).

Coordination Between RELs and Comprehensive Centers (CC):

KA supports the inclusion of *Subtask 2.1 Coordinate and collaborate with regional Comprehensive Centers, other Department technical assistance providers, and IES investments*. Continued intentional coordination between RELs and CCs helps avoid duplication, align research, data, and technical assistance activities, and make more efficient use of Federal resources. Regular communication also allows RELs and Comprehensive Centers to present a more coherent, State-responsive support system that reflects shared priorities and timelines.

REL "Menu"-like Materials:

KA supports the inclusion of *Subtask 6.7 Develop supporting communications and branding materials*. KA has previously advocated for a clearly defined menu or brochure of REL activities as a potential mechanism for increasing transparency, predictability, and efficiency in planning and budgeting REL work. When designed well, such a menu or brochure can help enable faster initiation of work, clearer alignment between scope and cost, and more timely responses to State (and district) needs. KA encourages IES to include this subtask in the final PWS.

Toolkits:

Additionally, KA supports the decision in this competition cycle to make toolkits based on IES Practice Guides an optional task for the RELs rather than a required deliverable. KA recommends that this flexibility be maintained in the final PWS. To be clear, KA believes that the toolkits that extend the IES Practice Guides are an excellent resource for States, districts, and educators. Therefore KA encourages IES to consider the

development of additional toolkits through alternate grant or contract vehicles, as well as NCER grants that launch and study the efficacy of the toolkits.

Question 2: What changes would you suggest to the existing requirement to ensure REL work is responsive to the most pressing needs of State education agencies?

Streamline Reporting Requirements:

KA strongly supports appropriate accountability, quality assurance, and coordination for Federally funded work. However, the cumulative oversight, reporting, and approval requirements in the draft PWS go beyond what is needed to ensure accountability and quality and instead increase bureaucracy that will increase administrative costs and limit capacity and funds that should be focused on activities that support student academic success. This Administration, with a renewed focus on streamlined processes and improved efficiency, has an opportunity to examine the reporting requirements currently included in the PWS to ensure there is no unnecessary duplication or additional bureaucratic burden.

For example, the draft PWS includes numerous recurring reporting and documentation requirements—such as routine progress reports, detailed meeting documentation, and multiple review and approval steps—that require substantial staff time and contract resources but are not always directly tied to the most pressing needs of States. In combination, these requirements may slow the delivery of research, tools, and technical assistance to States, districts and students, particularly in contexts where timeliness is critical.

KA encourages IES to consider adopting into the PWS opportunities to streamline non-State-facing requirements, such as through clearer prioritization of decision-relevant reporting, reasonable page limits or standardized templates, and the optional use of AI-assisted tools to produce concise meeting and activity summaries with appropriate human review. In addition, streamlining requirements would foster a “Yes REL” culture where efficiencies gained through such approaches could be redirected, allowing RELs to say “yes” to deeper State engagement, faster product development, and more continuous support for State-aligned priorities that directly impact student success.

In general, KA encourages IES to consider how much REL staff time is devoted to documenting work for Federal oversight purposes rather than delivering work to States, and whether modest adjustments could meaningfully shift that balance. For more information, please see [KA’s Redesigning IES](#) suggestion: Foster a “Yes” REL Culture.

Firm Fixed Price Contracts:

KA notes the proposed shift to Firm Fixed Price (FFP) contracts for the 2027–2031 REL cycle. In principle, FFP contracting can streamline contract administration for both contractors and IES and allow RELs to focus more fully on delivering work to States and districts. However, the draft budget template and associated reporting requirements appear to retain many features typical of cost-reimbursement contracts, including detailed reporting of labor categories, loaded and unloaded rates, and labor hours. KA encourages IES to consider whether budget and reporting requirements can be better aligned with the objectives of FFP contracting.

Exempt RELs from the PRA:

If possible, KA encourages IES to consider mechanisms that exempt RELs from the Paperwork Reduction Act (PRA) since RELs collect information at the direction of their State partners. The purpose of the PRA is to provide notice and oversight when the *Federal government* initiates a request to collect information. In the case of RELs, however, data collection is typically *State-driven*. States themselves request the research, evaluation, or technical assistance and direct the information collection. Requiring PRA clearance in these instances is therefore duplicative and adds unnecessary administrative burden, creating delays and inefficiencies in reporting work that States have already asked RELs to undertake.

Question 4: What changes would you suggest to the existing requirement to ensure that RELs are as effective as possible in disseminating findings from rigorous research, so that educators can apply them to improve student outcomes?

Dissemination Innovation:

Consistent with KA's recommendations on redesigning IES, KA encourages IES to modernize and add flexibility to the dissemination strategies outlined in the draft REL PWS. While traditional dissemination products remain important, the current requirements emphasize linear, product-based approaches that may not fully reflect how educators and policymakers engage with evidence today. KA has previously emphasized the importance of dissemination strategies that prioritize usability, timeliness, and application: embedding dissemination throughout the research process, supporting interim and formative sharing of findings, and tailoring formats to specific audiences and decision points.

Over a five-year contract period, dissemination strategies must be sufficiently flexible to adapt to rapid changes in technology and evidence-use practices, including the responsible use of AI-enabled tools to improve accessibility and speed. Preserving

flexibility and aligning dissemination expectations with these principles would better position RELs to translate rigorous research into actionable insights that educators can apply to improve practice and student outcomes.

In addition, as RELs are expected to place greater emphasis on disseminating their work, IES should encourage REL staffing models that include personnel with demonstrated expertise in dissemination strategies and practices. Ensuring that REL teams include this specialized knowledge will strengthen the reach, accessibility, and practical use of REL products by States and districts to support student success.

KA appreciates the opportunity to provide IES with these recommendations to strengthen the REL program to ensure RELs are able to achieve their most important goal: supporting the needs of States and districts as they improve outcomes for students. Please reach out to me at rdinkes@knowledgeall.net with any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rachel Dinkes". The signature is fluid and cursive, with "Rachel" on the top line and "Dinkes" on the bottom line.

Rachel Dinkes
President & CEO
Knowledge Alliance