Testimony of Sara Schapiro, Alliance for Learning Innovation (ALI)

Prepared for the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies

---

April 9, 2025

Thank you, Chairman Aderholt, Ranking Member DeLauro, and members of the Subcommittee, for inviting me to speak today. I'm Sara Schapiro, Executive Director of the Alliance for Learning Innovation (ALI), a bipartisan coalition that brings together nearly 100 education nonprofits, philanthropic foundations, and industry leaders to advocate for building a better research and development (R&D) infrastructure in education. I'm grateful for the opportunity to speak today about how, in Fiscal Year 2026, a $900 million investment in the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), and $284 million for the Education Innovation and Research (EIR) program, can continue education R&D's outsized impact on improving student learning.

America faces a critical education crisis. The "Nation's Report Card" reveals that one-third of eighth graders cannot identify a text's main idea, while one-quarter of fourth graders score "below basic" in math. These alarming data points, collected by the federal Institute of Education Sciences (IES), reflect a significant decline in student achievement from 2019, especially in STEM fields, which threatens both our national security and economic competitiveness.

At the same time, federal investments in education R&D have shown significant results over the last 20 years. For example, in 2024 Alabama adopted a literacy curriculum based on the science of reading, which is a body of evidence developed through federal education R&D investments. As a National Academy of Education report notes, IES was "charged with focusing on improving reading comprehension for students in pre-K through grade 12." These investments created practice guides for teaching foundational reading skills and informed curriculum development for students with intellectual disabilities or autism. The resulting knowledge base helped states craft literacy initiatives with impressive outcomes: Mississippi's ranking in 4th grade reading improved from 49th to 21st between 2013 and 2022, and Louisiana's from 50th to 16th between 2019 and 2024. State Superintendent Carey Wright, who led Mississippi's impressive literacy gains, is now implementing similar efforts based on the science of reading in Maryland. These states followed the science of reading principles developed and publicized as a result of federal education R&D investments and their students are now reaping the rewards.

Examples like these make clear that federal support for education R&D can provide parents, teachers, and school leaders the data they need to make better decisions about which programs would most benefit their students. This approach respects local autonomy and ensures evidence-based practices drive decision-making. Education R&D is critical to the development of innovative school models, democratizing research, and identifying ways to address serious challenges—like 70 percent of schools nationwide not having enough special education teachers, or persistent chronic absenteeism rates across the country. Moreover, federal R&D investments help our nation seize burgeoning opportunities like incorporating AI into the classroom and strengthening student career pathways.

As the Executive director of the Alliance for Learning Innovation, I see an opportunity to work with stakeholders on both sides of the aisle to update the federal government's approach to investing in education R&D. I'm working with partners and our nearly 100 coalition members to draft a blueprint envisioning a revitalized and rebuilt federal education R&D system. From conversations with state education leaders and many others, I hear consistent themes about what the federal government is best positioned to do to support states and local school districts to dramatically improve student outcomes.

In conceiving a blueprint for the future of federally-supported education R&D, ALI has identified three essential pillars. The federal government should:

1. **Invest in world-class data systems to promote transparency and evidence-based decision-making in school districts across the country.** This means leveraging the valuable work of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) that dates back to the 1800s to improve transparency about K-12 education through statistics, including data on school spending, while also maintaining robust national data infrastructure. This includes broadly bipartisan statistical efforts, like the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), or the Nation's Report Card, which reveals how students across the country are performing academically in a way that can be evaluated across states and over time. The federal government can also more strategically incentivize state longitudinal data systems to link data across state agencies and better understand how different interventions impact the lives of students, leading to well-informed policy decisions across birth to college and career.
2. **Support state and local education leaders to know and implement what works in education**. The federal government should leverage decades of best practices identified through federal education R&D and make this information broadly available to parents, teachers, and school leaders to provide high-quality instruction to American children. A survey of district school leaders found "that education research was valuable (95%), credible (85%), and relevant to their work (87%). However, participants were split regarding whether there was a 'disconnect' between the worlds of research and practice." This disconnect is an area where the federal government can do a better job ensuring that the findings that come out of the research it supports actually make their way into classrooms. Through greater transparency about federal education R&D

investments, and by increasing the accessibility and usability of resources like the What Works Clearinghouse, I am optimistic we can make meaningful improvements here.

3. **Facilitate breakthroughs in education innovation to help the U.S. retain its competitive edge.** Drawing inspiration from DARPA and other advanced research project agencies, the federal government should support collaborative, interdisciplinary R&D to solve education's steepest challenges. Through strategic funding of early-stage education R&D projects not yet viable for private investment alone, the federal government can catalyze innovative AI-driven advances in teaching and learning, complementing traditional public-private partnerships. I'm encouraged by existing programs, like EIR, the Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR), and IES's new Accelerate, Transform, and Scale Initiative, that have invested in early-stage technologies to drive innovation.

To ensure our federal education R&D infrastructure robustly supports students and parents, in the Fiscal Year 2026 House Labor-HHS appropriations bill, the Alliance for Learning Innovation respectfully requests:

- At least $900 million for the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), supporting critical initiatives like NAEP, the Accelerate, Transform, and Scale (ATS) initiative, the Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems (SLDS) grant program, and the School Pulse Panel.
- $284 million for the Education Innovation and Research (EIR) program to advance career-connected learning and emerging technologies.

Lastly, the Alliance for Learning Innovation encourages Congress to ensure IES and other federal agencies have the appropriate staffing levels needed to ensure good stewardship of tax-payer resources and functioning of congressionally-mandated programs critical to support all students.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony on behalf of the Alliance for Learning Innovation coalition.