

Archived Information

Objective 4.1: Our customers receive fast, seamless service and dissemination of high-quality information and products.

National Need

National Concerns. The Department's many customers look to our agency to provide services and products that support their education efforts. Whether they are state education agencies, teachers, parents, institutions of higher education, adult learners, school boards, school districts, principals, technical assistance centers, students at all levels, or others whom the Department serves directly or indirectly, our customers expect access to high-quality services, products, and information. We are committed to an active feedback process, which will enable us to have an ongoing dialogue with the American public and to respond to their needs. In response to Presidential Executive Order 12862: Setting Customer Service, the Department adopted standards focused on responsiveness to requests, providing information in alternative formats, and dissemination of timely and accurate information.

Our Role. Although the Department continues to serve the majority of our customers through state and local intermediaries, technology has allowed the Department to engage in more direct contact. Through the Internet and our front-line call centers, the Department is able to reach and serve more customers than ever before. The Department's role as a direct provider of services and products has and will continue to increase as we strive to identify and serve the needs of our customers.

Information call centers such as the Department's general information call center (1-800-USA-LEARN), the ED-Pubs call center (1-877-4ED-Pubs), and the student financial aid information call center (1-800-4FED-AID) continue to respond to numerous customer inquiries each year. We strive to provide useful and accurate information on demand, answer questions, and provide useful publications. We provide Braille and large-print publications, TTY access for individuals unable to use a phone, and videotapes of the Secretary of Education's town meetings. Our regional offices represent the Department to communities and at local meetings and communicate to the Department information about issues of local and regional interest.

Our Performance

How We Measure. The four indicators for customer service describe ED's customer service activities, focusing on Web resources, call centers, and customer satisfaction. One of the most important aspects of this objective is the need to integrate customer service, not only into our most popular and used services, but throughout all of ED's activities. The indicators in this objective seek to track specific performance in increasing public access to information and increasing customer satisfaction with the Department's products, services, information, and assistance.

Indicator 4.1.a. The Department continues to increase public access to information, as measured by Web site visits and number of customer inquiries at major front-line call centers.

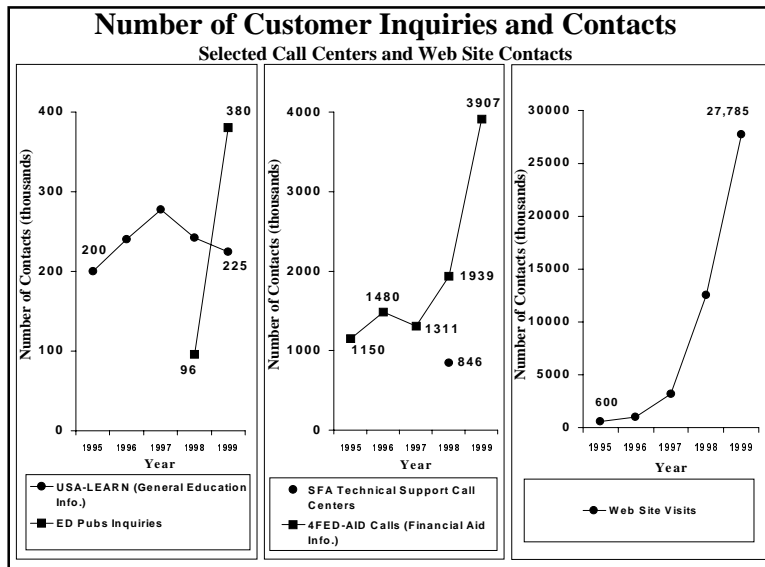
Assessment of Progress. The target has been met. Figure 4.1.a.1 shows that public access to ED information is increasing, and the volume of visits to the Department's Web site increases more than two-fold each year. The volume of inquiries received at the Department's major call centers has increased as well.

To address an increased number of inquiries from its Spanish-speaking customers, many of the Department's major call centers have hired bilingual staff. After a cross-agency team reviewed our inventory of Spanish-language materials, additional publications were developed and/or translated into Spanish.

The Student Financial Assistance programs have undertaken a new initiative, "One Call Does It All," to streamline its phone services to its customers. Among the first steps in this initiative is the centralized collection of data for the SFA Technical Assistance call centers. This collection reflects the combined efforts of more than 200 staff at five major call centers serving postsecondary educational institutions. It reflects our commitment to expand postsecondary access to the informational resources necessary to exchange data with student aid systems.

As expected, the USA-LEARN phone line had a 20 percent decrease in call volume since 1997 as publication requests have moved to the ED Pubs phone line.

Figure 4.1.a.1



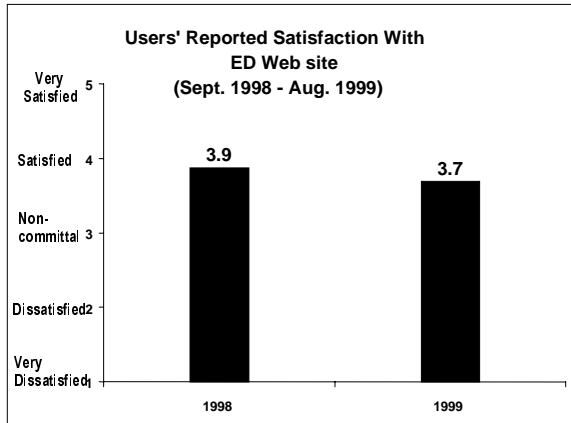
Source: System-generated data.
Frequency: Continuous. **Next Update:** MIS Reporting Cycle. **Validation procedure:** System reports cross referenced and fixed to billing records for review. **Limitations of data and planned improvements:** Web visits do not distinguish between repeat visitors and new visitors. We plan to increase capacity to keep up with growth in customer demand.

Indicator 4.1.b. The Department will continue to increase customer satisfaction with Department products, services, and information.

Assessment of Progress. Progress has been mixed. While the Department continues to gather more qualitative data about customer needs and satisfaction, data from the Department's major customer points of contact (its Web site and front-line call centers) indicate that customers are generally satisfied with the Department's delivery of service, information, and products. Figure 4.1.b.1 shows that there has been a small drop in satisfaction scores of visitors to ED's Web site. We attribute the drop in the 1999 satisfaction score to the general increase in expectations among Internet users and a shift in survey respondents from administrator-managers and researchers to students and parents. We suspect that students and parents may react to the availability (or nonavailability) of aid, even though it is not a reflection of the Web site. This may yield a lower average satisfaction than the ratings from teachers and researchers, who seem to be

pleased with the content of the site. While there has been a shift in the expectations and the profile of customers using the Department's Web site, it continues to receive high ratings in our annual Internet survey.

Figure 4.1.b.1



Source: National Library of Education. *Frequency:* Annual. *Next Update:* 2000. **Validation procedure:** System-generated data. **Limitations of data and planned improvements:** Data reported from self-selected respondents of visitors to the Department's Web site.

Upcoming improvements include addition of a site map, a tour of Department Web highlights for K-12 teachers; a page dedicated to Spanish-language resources; a page of key resources for parents, students, and teachers; and expansion of the Education Resource Organizations Directory to include curriculum materials, centers, and education libraries.

Although the Department's publications ordering center, ED Pubs, has been in operation for less than 2 years, customers rated its service and products above the National average for both the public and private sector in the first annual government-wide customer satisfaction survey.

In 1999, 29 Federal agencies (including the Department of Education) that provide more than 80 percent of the government's services participated in the first government-wide customer satisfaction survey. The American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) is a well-respected approach to measuring customer satisfaction. The survey focuses on customers' expectations and perceived quality. Figure 4.1.b.2 shows that the private sector received an overall score of 72, and the Federal government received a score of 68.6. The Department's ED Pubs publications ordering call center received an overall satisfaction score of 80.

The Department's student aid information call center (1-800-4FED-AID) added an automated customer service survey to its phone number. The survey measures responses to questions (on a scale of 1 to 5 with 5 being high) about courtesy, speed of answer, and overall services. More than 85 percent of respondents rated the 1-800-4FED-AID call center as either a 4 or 5 in all three categories.

Figure 4.1.b.2



Source: First Annual Government-wide Customer Satisfaction Report. *Frequency:* Annual. *Next Update:* 2000. **Validation procedure:** Model used by the global accounting firm Arthur Andersen, the University of Michigan, and the American Society for Quality. **Limitations of data and planned improvements:** None noted.

Indicator 4.1.c. The Department's front-line call centers will provide prompt service to customers.

Assessment of Progress. The target has been exceeded. While customer demand has increased significantly in the last 3 years at the Department's major call centers, the amount of time a customer waits to speak with a Department customer representative has actually decreased.

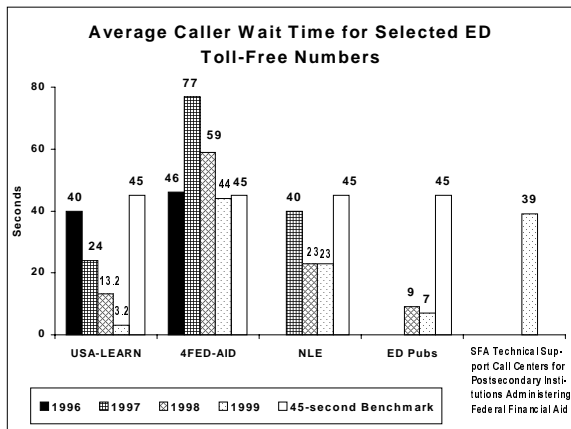


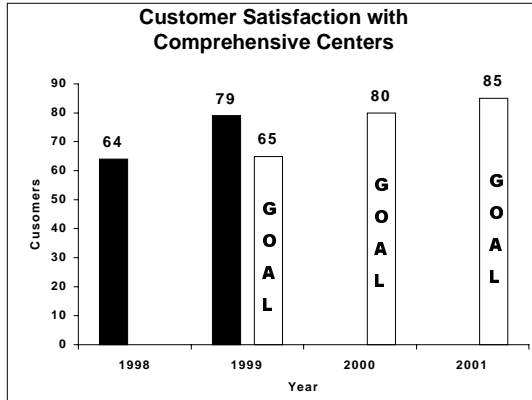
Figure 4.1.c.1

Source: System generated data. *Frequency:* Continuous. *Next Update:* Media and Information Services Reporting Cycle. **Validation procedure:** System reports are cross-referenced and are fixed to billing records for review. **Limitations of data and planned improvements:** Call wait time definition used by all call centers portrayed in this indicator is the amount of time a customer waits to speak with a customer service assistant after the customer selects the prompt to speak with a customer service assistant.

Indicator 4.1.d. Surveys of states and school districts will increasingly rate the Department's technical assistance, including assistance from the Comprehensive Centers and integrated reviews, as very useful in improving their performance.

Assessment of Progress. Target exceeded. Satisfaction with the usefulness of technical assistance provided by the technical assistance centers has continued to increase. This is a function, we believe, of more closely coordinating the centers' activities with the ED Strategic Plan so that the Department sends a more consistent message to our customers. We also have been focusing on developing a national capacity in which all the components of our technical assistance networks function together instead of as isolated parts. In 1999, 14 integrated state reviews were conducted using a new protocol. Representatives of 13 states gave the integrated review a 4 on a scale of 1 to 5, where 5 is most satisfactory. The new protocol appears to be a major success. See also the positive performance of the laboratory network reported in Goal 4.3.

Figure 4.1.d.1



Source: Report on Center evaluation 1999. *Frequency:* Annual *Next Update:* 2000 **Validation procedure:** Data reviewed by contractor and ED staff. **Limitations of data and planned improvements:** Data from 1998 are responses from state and Federal program administrators. Data from 1999 are responses from state and local program administrators.

How We Plan to Achieve Our Objective

How ED's Activities Support the Achievement of This Objective.

To ensure that customers have easy access to Department information and products, the Department has adopted the strategies of equipping our employees with the resources they need to serve our customers, promoting accountability for customer service performance, improving our systems that allow our customers to have easy access to products and information, increasing our use of customer feedback for improving systems and processes, and addressing the needs of customers with disabilities.

In 1999, the Department received three of the Vice President's Hammer Awards. The Information Resource Center received the award for providing the public with easy access, through its 1-800-USA-LEARN number, to quality information and friendly services and for helping the Department and its private- and public-sector partners to engage the public in improving education across America. The Department's Satellite Town Meeting received its Hammer Award for being the only ongoing forum where any member of the public can call in and ask a question of a cabinet secretary, and for its ability to share best practices, successful programs, and innovative education projects. The Department's publication ordering center, ED-Pubs, received the Hammer Award for providing customers with one-stop service for ordering all of the Department's publications. We will build upon these successes in the following ways:

- **Equip employees with the resources they need to respond to customer requests.**
 - To help Department staff directly serving the public, the Department will continue developing its Front Line Forum. The Forum will allow employees to engage in discussions about challenging customer service issues, review updated information, and facilitate the use of new online tools and customer feedback. The initial development of the Front Line Forum began in the fall of 1999 by bringing managers and staff from services across the agency together, many for the first time.
 - To provide managers with the additional resources they need to focus on customer needs, we are developing a Customer Service Best Practices Intranet site that includes internal and external models.

- **Promote commitment and accountability for customer-focused performance among ED managers and staff.**
 - To guide managers in identifying and meeting customer needs with their staff, we will complete the development of *Customer Focus: A Manager's Guide to Action Planning*.
 - We will aid managers in conducting customer-focused conversations with staff by creating a new customer service toolkit for managers.

- **Continuously improve systems that allow customers to easily obtain materials, services, and information products.**
 - We are developing subject-specific mini-catalogs that target a specific area of interest for the ED-Pubs System. In addition, a mini-catalog of ED's most popular titles in alternate formats is also being prepared.
 - To increase availability and reduce cost, we are establishing a listserv to forward electronic notification of newly available publications and/or electronic copies of publications to a mailing list of people who have indicated an interest in receiving news and/or products electronically.

- **Ensure that customers with disabilities have access to services and information.**
 - We are continuously ensuring that customers have access to the information and services they need in the ways that they need them, including live service and self-service, convenient hours, bilingual staff and Spanish menu prompts, TTY access, and products in Braille and large print.

We continue to operate the Alternate Format Center to produce materials in Braille and audiotape and have expanded capacity to include limited production of large-print documents.

- Implemented NexTalk, a computer-based networked TTY system in 15 offices, including the major call centers for student loans, ED information, civil rights enforcement, and rehabilitation services, as well as on internal customer service lines such as the computer help desk and budget services. A total of 223 employees now use the networked TTY system.
- In FY 2000, ED will continue to use the Alternate Format Center to fulfill customer requests for materials in Braille, audiotape, and large print. The NexTalk TTY system will be introduced to an additional 300 employees. Disability access training will continue to be offered, and an estimated 200-300 additional employees will receive it. Assistive-listening systems will be purchased and installed in all 10 regional offices to provide access for hard-of-hearing customers.
- The Department provided disability access training to 237 employees, including staff in eight regional offices. The training included information on how to provide customer service for customers with disabilities.
- The Department purchased and installed assistive-listening systems that can be used for ED events in all headquarters offices. It also continued to provide sign-language interpreters and real-time captioning on request for all ED-sponsored events in headquarters and regions.

■ **Develop a system for using feedback to improve customer service.**

- To ensure consistency in our measurement and reporting of call center satisfaction, we will introduce an automated customer-quality survey system into some of ED's call centers.
- To ensure that timely and useful information is available to ED managers, we are incorporating customer-satisfaction measures into key policy and organizational activities and preparing an annual report on customer satisfaction by key customer groups (e.g., teachers, grantees).
- To ensure that appropriate resources are devoted to customer satisfaction within the Department, a measure of progress on customer satisfaction will be included in the performance agreements of senior officers.
- To ensure that continuous and timely information about grantee performance is available to ED program managers, a customer survey will be included as part of our system of electronically transmitted grantee performance reports.
- To develop and redesign products to better meet the needs of ED's customers, ED-Pubs will use Customer Satisfaction Survey feedback forms extensively.
- As a part of its One Call Does It All initiative, the Schools Channel of Student Financial Assistance has formed workgroups to establish new benchmarks for its call center operations and to set uniform standards for service levels. When these standards are set, it is likely they will have a significant effect on the call center data for the year 2000.

How We Coordinate with Other Federal Agencies

Many state and local education agencies look to the Department of Education (ED) for help with their various education needs. To help our customers with the service, information, and products they need, ED collaborates with many other Federal agencies. A few of these collaborations include:

- **National Partnership for Reinventing Government (NPRG).** ED continued to work NPRG to network with other Federal agencies on best practices for customer service delivery.
- **Federal Resources for Educational Excellence (FREE).** FREE was created in response to the Presidential Directive for a single entry point for computerized Federal government information. ED plays a leadership role in coordinating the activities of more than 30 Federal agencies.

- **Interagency collaboration.** One of the most important ED Interagency collaborations is the Federal Support to Communities Initiative aimed at helping children and parents during after-school hours. The Initiative is housed and supported by the National Partnership for Reinventing Government (NPRG) and is governed by an executive committee of representatives from 15 Federal agencies. ED and DOJ have developed, published, and widely disseminated *Safe and Smart: Making the After School Hours Work for Kids*, which provides research evidence for the effectiveness of after-school programs. ED has collaborated with the USDA to ensure that 21st Century program grantees are knowledgeable about available food subsidies for which they are eligible.
- **Federal Publisher's Committee.** Continue work with the Federal Publisher's Committee to keep ED aware of the changes in the printing requirements and printing technologies for government agencies.
- **Government Printing Office (GPO) Depository Library System.** To keep our information and publications available to all customers, ED continues to work with this library system to ensure that all ED documents printed by GPO are deposited in the public domain for use by all taxpayers and citizens. We are currently looking, with GPO, at how non-print documents will be captured for public distribution and access through the Depository Library System and are considering replacing microform versions of documented with electronic versions for better access by depository libraries and their customers.
- **General Services Administration's Consumer Information Center (CIC).** ED will continue work with the CIC to develop, promote, and distribute ED publications to the public.

Challenges to Achieving Our Objective

Customer preference for printed products still remains high. The Department will need to produce documents in dual formats during this time of transition from print to Web-based products. Web-based products are becoming more popular because of their greater flexibility (e.g., inserted links, search capabilities within a document). Because we recognize the potential in Web-based products, we are continuing to make all publications and products totally available, easily accessible, and printable off the Web.

Rapid increases in the introduction of new technology make it easier to provide better services to a greater number of customers. Electronic distribution of publications will enable the Department to provide increased numbers of products than was possible with print distribution.