



March 24, 2026

Mr. Scott Kupor  
Director, Office of Personnel Management  
1900 E St. NW  
Washington, D.C. 20415-1000

Re: RIN 0348-AB92, “Managing Senior Professional Performance”

Dear Mr. Kupor:

The Partnership for Public Service submits these comments on the Office of Personnel Management’s proposed rule “Managing Senior Professional Performance,” RIN 0348-AB92 (Feb. 24, 2026). The Partnership is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization committed to building a better government and a stronger democracy. We have advocated across administrations for federal law, regulations and programs that improve the government’s ability to attract, hire and retain a talented workforce that effectively serves the public.

While we support effective performance management reform, this proposed rule is counterproductive to that goal. Its central proposal—allowing forced distribution of ratings—will likely drive critical technical or highly-skilled talent out of government at precisely the moment when advances in AI, quantum computing and other technologies make retaining senior-level (SL) and scientific or professional (ST) employees more essential than ever to serving the American public and remaining globally competitive.

### **Forced Distribution Undermines the Purpose of Senior Professional Classification and Weakens the Federal Talent Pipeline**

The SL and ST classifications exist to make the federal government competitive in recruiting exceptional, specialized talent through enhanced pay, and to manage that talent in ways suited to their niche expertise.

Forced distribution is counterproductive across the federal government workforce—as we have argued in our comments on its use for the Senior Executive Service (SES)<sup>1</sup> and non-

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<sup>1</sup> Partnership for Public Service, Comment Letter on Proposed Rule, *Assuring Responsive and Accountable Federal Executive Management*, Docket No. RIN 3206-AO81 (June 2, 2025), [https://ourpublicservice.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Partnership-for-Public-Service\\_Comments-on-OPM-Proposed-Rule-on-SES-Performance-Management.pdf](https://ourpublicservice.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Partnership-for-Public-Service_Comments-on-OPM-Proposed-Rule-on-SES-Performance-Management.pdf).

SES employees<sup>2</sup>—but is even more damaging and incongruous when applied to senior professionals, because these jobs are often so singular and specific in their necessary expertise that they make little sense to be compared directly to other employees.

Effective performance management for SL and STs means aligning highly technical job expectations—say, a senior technologist in Quantum Cryptography—to organizational priorities and tracking against those specific goals. Their roles were designed as SL or ST because they bring a unique value to the enterprise that is difficult to slot into other categories. Shoehorning them into the mold of other categories contradicts the rationale for having a separate classification in the first place. If they must align more closely to either the SES or non-SES appraisal system, it makes more sense to align them with non-SES appraisal which accounts for a much wider range of competencies than with SES appraisal, which focuses on executive management competencies.

While OPM notes the number of SL/STs have risen in recent decades (an increase that can justifiably be explained by the ever-increasing pace of technological advancement), at just 0.1% of the federal workforce (around 2,000 employees out of ~2 million civil servants), they are an incredibly small population, but one that contributes outsized value in expertise. They are hired in and classified as such with an inherent expectation, more than other types of employees, that they will all be high performers – experts in the top of their fields who can lead technically in making scientific breakthroughs and maintaining America’s competitive edge in emerging technologies.

Forcing these employees to compete against each other in a ranked distribution will inevitably result in lower ratings and reduced incentives for highly qualified experts in niche fields – many of whom may leave government as a result. The SL/ST pay premium exists because federal compensation already trails what these employees could earn in the private sector, especially for those with advanced degrees<sup>3</sup> (which SL/STs disproportionately hold). Most of them choose government service out of a commitment to the public good but cannot disregard their own livelihood or providing for their families. Forced distribution widens the compensation gap further, making an already difficult recruiting challenge even harder.

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<sup>2</sup> Partnership for Public Service Partnership for Public Service, Comment Letter on Proposed Rule, *Performance Appraisal for Non-SES Federal Employees*, Docket No. RIN 3206-AP06 (March 24, 2026), <https://ourpublicservice.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/Partnership-for-Public-Service-comments-on-Office-of-Personnel-Management-on-Performance-Appraisal-for-Non-SES-Employees-proposed-rule-RIN-3206-AP06.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Congressional Budget Office, *Comparing the Compensation of Federal and Private-Sector Employees in 2022* (April 2024), <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/60235>.

## **Mandating Quarterly Progress Reviews Adds Unnecessary Administrative Burden**

While we agree that ongoing, regular feedback is essential to effective performance management and encourage quarterly—or likely more often than that—check-ins between supervisors and employees, we do not agree with OPM’s proposal to *require* quarterly progress reviews for senior professionals. In other parts of this rule, OPM wants to align SL/ST appraisal most closely with the SES system, but even SES performance management only requires “at least one progress review” per year<sup>4</sup> and OPM provides no justification for why SL/ST should be held to a different check-in standard than SES or non-SES employees.

Feedback should be encouraged but should be left to the employee and rating official to decide what cadence works best given individual roles and outcomes. Mandating quarterly reviews imposes real costs on both sides of the process. Rating officials for most SL/ST employees are already senior leaders with limited bandwidth. The added burden on senior professionals themselves becomes yet another disincentive to government service—and a needless one—at a time when the government can ill afford to lose this talent.

## **OPM Should Use Its Demonstration Project Authority Before Implementing Untested Reforms That Risk Government Losing Critical Talent**

We urge OPM to use its existing statutory authority under 5 U.S.C. 4703 to design, conduct and evaluate demonstration projects to test reforms. OPM has used this authority productively in the past, including to successfully test pay-for-performance systems,<sup>5</sup> but has not issued final approval on a demonstration project since 2009.<sup>6</sup>

We appreciate the goal of reducing policy redundancy. But before finalizing other rule changes—modeling SL/ST appraisal on the SES framework, eliminating mandatory Level 1 reviews and establishing new Performance Review Boards—OPM should gather evidence that these reforms will be effective and not produce unintended consequences at scale. The stakes are especially high for senior professionals, as errors here risk eroding America’s competitive edge in defense, national security and critical emerging technologies.

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<sup>4</sup> 5 C.F.R. § 430.307 (2025).

<sup>5</sup> GAO, *Human Capital: Implementing Pay for Performance at Selected Personnel Demonstration Projects*, GAO-04-83 (Jan. 2004), <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-04-83>.

<sup>6</sup> Personnel Demonstration Project; Alternative Personnel Management System for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food Safety and Inspection Service, 74 Fed. Reg. 5,044 (Jan. 28, 2009).

Based on our research and experience working with federal agencies on workforce issues, the Partnership believes that a well-functioning federal performance management system relies on three interdependent attributes: purpose, people, and process. Meaningful reform requires addressing all three together, not in a piecemeal approach.<sup>7</sup>

- 1) Purpose – There must be clear outcomes from performance management.
- 2) People – Supervisors and managers must have the competency, commitment and capacity to make the system work in practice.
- 3) Process – The performance management system must be user-friendly and efficient while maintaining due process and fairness.

Durable performance management reform requires more than changes to rating scales and distribution formulas. It requires investment in the supervisory capacity, goal-setting practices, HR infrastructure and administrative processes that determine whether the system actually improves employee and organizational performance.

We urge OPM not to implement untested and likely counterproductive reforms on a workforce as critical to American competitiveness as the senior professional corps.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit these comments. As always, the Partnership stands ready to assist as OPM considers and evaluates reforms to improve the effectiveness of our government.

Sincerely,



Max Stier  
President & CEO  
Partnership for Public Service

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<sup>7</sup> Partnership for Public Service Partnership for Public Service, Comment Letter on Proposed Rule, *Performance Appraisal for Non-SES Federal Employees*, Docket No. RIN 3206-AP06 (March 24, 2026), <https://ourpublicservice.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/Partnership-for-Public-Service-comments-on-Office-of-Personnel-Management-on-Performance-Appraisal-for-Non-SES-Employees-proposed-rule-RIN-3206-AP06.pdf>.