
FEDERAL AID TO EDUCATION AND THE POOR

Title I's \$118 Billion Fails to Close Gap

Program Has Been Unable to Lift Academic Level of Poor Students, Research Shows

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The federal government's largest education grant program, despite spending \$118 billion over the last three decades, has been unable to meet its goal of narrowing the achievement gap between rich and poor students, interviews and documents show.

Title I, which started with idealistic fervor in the 1960s' War on Poverty, provides \$7.4 billion each year to help one of every five pupils in the nation's public schools.

Recent evaluations by the U.S. Department of Education found that the extra computers, tutoring, and more than 132,000 classroom positions paid for by the massive investment have been "insufficient to close the gap" in reading and math performance between poor students and their more affluent peers.

The program has been "a failure up to now," said Maris A. Vinovskis, a University of Michigan education expert who has reviewed independent studies assessing the effectiveness of Title I. "The real losers in this are not just the taxpayers [but] the kids. . . . We haven't been able to deliver."

One reason, experts agree, is that Title I funds are spread too thin among the nation's poor students to do much good. And, of the billions of dollars allocated each year, most are spent on tutoring and other remedial efforts that have produced marginal improvement in test scores.

Much of the blame for the program's shortcomings has been directed at the more than 50,000 school aides and teacher assistants hired with Title I funds. A nationwide movement to replace these "paraprofessionals" with certified teachers has sparked controversy and led to considerable anxiety.

Under increasing pressure to show results, the program now finds itself on a collision course with its past—and the aides are caught in the middle, experts say.

"It's a classic situation where yesterday's reform becomes today's obstacle," said Jerome T. Murphy, dean of Harvard University's Graduate School of Education, who helped write Title I legislation 34 years ago.

Title I, which comes before Congress for reauthorization this year, was created to tackle perhaps the most daunting task in all of education: to help students overcome the inherent barriers that poverty poses to academic achievement.

While no one expects the federal government to eliminate such a formidable deficit, supporters contend that Title I has become a victim of unrealistic expectations. They credit the program with focusing attention on the needs of low-income students, but they also argue that Title I is no match for the challenges presented by poverty and problems such as racial tensions, language barriers, crime, violence, and drug use.

Title I "can change some services, but it cannot change the lives of hundreds of thousands of kids," said Jack Jennings, director of the Center on Education Policy in Washington and a former general counsel of the House Labor and Education Committee.

A special evaluation report last fall by the Department of Education found that the gap between 9-year-olds attending "high-poverty" and "low-poverty" schools either stayed the same or increased from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. This gap left poor students nearly four grade levels behind affluent pupils in reading and two levels behind in math.

In addition, a separate study commissioned specifically to assess Title I concluded in 1997 that the massive spending has had little effect on the achievement gap.

The 1997 Education Department report found that Title I failed to make a significant dent in the achievement gap from 1991 to 1994 in

part because it tolerates low academic standards for poor and minority students.

Many Title I programs “reinforced low expectations for student achievement,” the report says. “Students in high-poverty schools were exposed to a ‘watered down’ and non-challenging curriculum when compared to other students.”

Squandering of Funds on Clerks, Aides Cited

Also part of the problem, according to high-ranking education officials and other experts, is that schools squander Title I funds on clerical workers and classroom aides who lack the expertise to teach poor students the kind of high-level skills needed to compete with their more affluent peers.

Reformers have seized on these findings and urged the removal of classroom aides to pay for retraining teachers or to hire new ones. The push even comes from the top of the Clinton administration’s Education Department.

“It’s pretty significant that half of the instructional staff under Title I were paraprofessionals,” said Val Plisko, who supervises independent evaluations for the Education Department’s Planning and Evaluation Service. “For children who are most at risk, you want the best-educated, the most knowledgeable, the most effective teachers.”

Mary Jean LeTendre, a top federal education official who oversees Title I and other programs for disadvantaged students, said that in some cases employment of Title I aides has amounted to “a jobs program for members of the community.” She added, “I am one who believes that this program needs to be focused on the needs of the kids.”

LeTendre vowed in a recent interview to “work with every ounce of my energy” to shift Title I spending from aides to more qualified teachers. She added that federal officials are considering whether to eventually limit or prohibit the use of Title I funds to hire teacher aides.

Unfavorable Ratios of Aides to Teachers

In California, the latest available figures indicate that the ratio of aides to teachers paid for by Title I funds is 4 to 1. At Los Angeles Unified, the nation’s second-largest school district, the ratio is about 7 to 1. And most of the instructors on the district’s Title I payroll rarely teach; instead they serve as program coordinators at their individual schools, officials said.

The winds of change already are being felt at LAUSD, where all but 2 of 30 schools facing a takeover by the superintendent's office for dismal student performance are considered Title I schools. In all, 465 of 641 LAUSD schools have student populations that are predominantly poor.

Supt. Ruben Zacarias recently ordered the spending of \$10 million in Title I funds for extra tutoring at the district's lowest-performing schools. In an interview, Zacarias added that he may dip further into those federal funds to pay for other student intervention programs as well as teacher training—moves that he said might spell “crunch time” for teacher aides. “If the priorities mean that we’re going to have to reduce our . . . aides, then we’re going to have to bite that bullet,” he said.

At Pacoima Elementary, one of the 30 schools on Zacarias' list for academic probation, Principal Lawrence D. Gonzales is already tasting the gunpowder.

In a bid to kick-start student scores languishing in the bottom 25% of the LAUSD, Gonzales is investing \$100,000 of the school's \$800,000 Title I allotment into an intensive reading program for each of Pacoima's 70 classrooms. Some of the money comes from reductions in Title I classroom aides through attrition, said Gonzales.

“We have to put up or shut up,” he said.

But the retrenchment has been slow and difficult. Not only are LAUSD aides unionized, they are among the most visible and popular features of a Title I program that has become deeply embedded in some neighborhoods as a source of steady employment that increased the presence of adults in schools.

The Title I aides, who work for significantly lower wages than teachers, are widely used in classrooms to work one-on-one or with small groups of students to reinforce lessons. They also serve nonnative students.

Mary Castro has been on the Title I payroll as an aide for 22 years, the last 11 at James A. Garfield High School in East Los Angeles. The soft-spoken great-grandmother works seven hours a day shelving books, shushing students in the library, and preparing due-date notices.

Castro is one of 6,540 part-time paraprofessionals whose employment consumes nearly 40% of LAUSD's Title I budget this year. By comparison, 21% of the district's Title I funds are spent on instructors and teacher training. The remaining expenditures include instructional materials and support staff, such as school psychologists.

As part of its \$1.1 million annual allotment in Title I funds, Garfield employs 22 aides—all but five work in classrooms, budget figures show.

Since her job isn't directly related to classroom instruction, Castro may be a prime candidate for dismissal. At 62, Castro is not volunteering to quit her \$10.84-an-hour position.

"It's not easy to say I'd get another job, because I'm old," she said.

Nor is anyone likely to force her out at Garfield, which is facing administrative takeover due to dismal academic performance. Alex Fuentes, Garfield's Title I coordinator, said that downsizing would put him in a bind, even in cases of non-classroom aides like Castro.

"She's providing services—maybe not the services she did when she was young, but I'm not getting any complaints," said Fuentes. "What do you say to someone like that? 'Oh, Mary, it's time for you to go out to pasture?'"

Question at Heart of Rehabilitation Effort

Indeed, that question—with all its personal and policy implications—is at the heart of the latest push to rehabilitate Title I.

Considered the keystone of the War on Poverty, Title I was fashioned during the country's civil rights struggle by President Lyndon B. Johnson, who muscled it through Congress in a breathtaking 89 days as part of a sweeping school aid bill.

"I will never do anything in my entire life, now or in the future, that excites me more or benefits the nation I serve more," said Johnson, a former teacher, after he signed Title I into law in 1965 in front of a one-room schoolhouse in Texas.

The program was predicated on an academic truism: Family income is closely linked to educational success.

Johnson hoped to make up for the disadvantages of poverty by providing a jolt of federal dollars earmarked for extra tutoring and other add-on programs targeted at low-income students.

In a symbolic gesture, Johnson set the initial Title I appropriation at \$1 billion. The program has since grown to seven times that size.

Title I currently pays an average of \$685 per poor child as defined by the U.S. Census, but its spending formula has been so politicized that the actual amounts vary widely among states.

California, home of the largest concentration of impoverished students, receives only \$573 per pupil—an amount that is less than the funding provided to 49 other states and territories.

The money flows from Washington to 46,000—or nearly half—of the nation's schools. It is intended for students who are considered educationally “at risk.” In California, such students are identified as children from welfare families or children who qualify for free or reduced-price lunches.

The ultimate decision on how to spend the money, however, remains with each school. Across the country, school administrators have invested Title I dollars in “pull-out” programs, in which low-income students are taken out of their regular classes for 30-minute tutoring sessions each day that incorporate new materials and computers.

And they've hired more than 50,000 school and classroom aides. Typically, the aides were parents or activists from surrounding neighborhoods. They monitored lunchrooms, ran off dittos on the mimeograph, put up bulletin boards.

Teacher aides have had the biggest effect in the classroom, working individually with poor students to reinforce lessons. This is particularly true in elementary schools, where the aides have become fixtures.

As a condition of employment, more than 5,000 classroom “teaching aides” in Los Angeles are required to enroll in college courses or degree programs to become certified educators, said Margaret A. Jones, LAUSD director of specially funded programs.

“I've seen some teaching assistants who are better than some of the teachers we have,” Jones said, scoffing at the movement by critics to replace aides.

An additional 1,500 resource aides are not required to enroll in college courses, but some are still used in classrooms and contend they do a good job.

Sharon Watanabe has outlasted three principals and all but a few teachers as a \$12.26-an-hour Title I aide for the last 19 years at Hoover Street Elementary School, near downtown Los Angeles.

“I think I make a big difference in the classroom with the children because I've seen it,” said Watanabe, who works three hours each morning. “In the beginning of the year, some [students] wouldn't speak in English. Now they come up to me and make a conversation with me.”

Few have challenged such claims, especially during the 1970s and early 1980s, when test scores among minority students—who receive the bulk of Title I services—began catching up, narrowing the achievement gap by about a third. But in the mid-1980s, scores for minority

students stalled and the gap widened. Critics, particularly political conservatives, have heaped blame on Title I ever since.

“It’s a waste,” Chester E. Finn, Jr., former assistant secretary of Education under President Reagan, said in a recent interview. “It’s accomplishing nothing other than the expenditure of money.”

Finn noted that the program remains popular in Washington because Title I funds go to most congressional districts. “The fiercest fights in Congress are not over whether it accomplishes anything but over the distribution formula for the money.”

Complaints by Black Parents Are Described

Even longtime advocates such as Phyllis McClure, a former NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund monitor who kept a watchful eye on Title I compliance, now raise questions about the efficacy of the program. McClure recalled hearing complaints from black parents that the program was relegating their children to a second-class education.

“When black parents were taking their kids out of Title I because . . . they weren’t getting the regular math, they were getting something low-level . . . I changed my mind,” said McClure, who six years ago led a federal task force to assess Title I. “This program isn’t working as it was intended to work.”

In 1993, the Education Department released preliminary results of an ongoing, comprehensive study that measured Title I’s effect on 40,000 students and the achievement gap. The study found that Title I assistance “did not compensate for the initial deficiencies of the disadvantaged students.” It also pointed out that the lowest-achieving poor students often received instruction from Title I aides.

Some Title I advocates complain that aides are scapegoats for a program that, at last count, contributed only 2 cents of every local, state, and federal dollar spent on public education. Title I accounts for 42% of every federal dollar spent on education from kindergarten through high school.

Congress made sweeping changes in its 1994 reauthorization of Title I, requiring that students in the program be held to the same academic standards as other children. It also required for the first time that aides have at least a high school diploma.

LeTendre, the department’s director of Title I, said she was “incensed” that Congress set such a minimal requirement for aides who

often help instruct students. She said surveys show that only 13% of the Title I aides hold college degrees.

And while she applauded efforts that encouraged Title I aides to get their teaching degrees, she said it was an “absolute must” that more certified instructors be hired with program money.

A new comprehensive assessment of these reforms will not be finished until the spring; early indications are that the number of aides nationwide is declining.

But the cutbacks have not come easily.

After much coaxing and coalition-building, school officials in Pueblo, Colo., laid off 62 aides this summer, said Paul Ruiz, partner of the Education Trust, a Washington nonprofit group that helped broker the change. Most of those receiving pink slips were Latino “moms and dads, some of whom worked as teacher aides for 10, 15 years,” he said.

The money saved from the dismissal of school aides will be redirected into professional training for teachers, Ruiz said.

Education Trust abandoned a similar effort in Hartford, Conn., Ruiz said, where local officials could not muster the “political will.”