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The Failure of Title One

The federal government's largest education program, despite spending \$118 billion over the past 30 years, 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 during the War on Poverty in the 1960s, provides \$7.4 billion each year to help one of every five pupils in the nation's public schools.

Recent evaluations by the US 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 specialist 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, the specialists 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 the 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 finds itself on a collision course with its past, and the aides are caught in the middle, specialists said. "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.

Unrealistic Expectations

Title I, which comes before Congress for reauthorization this year, was created 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 program, 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 Dept. of Education found that the gap between 9-year-old students 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 the impact of Title I concluded in 1997 that the massive spending has had little impact on the achievement gap. The 1997 Education Department report found that Title I failed to make a significant dent in the achievement gap between 1991 and 1994 in part because it tolerates low academic standards for poor and minority students.

Also part of the problem, according to high-ranking education officials and other specialists, 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.

The Title I aides, who work for significantly lower wages than regular teachers, are widely used in the classrooms to work one-on-one or with small groups of students to reinforce lessons. They also serve as interpreters, bridging the gap between English-speaking faculty and waves of non-native students.

Title I pays an average of \$685 per poor child as defined by the US 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 \$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.”

The ultimate decision is how to spend the money, however, remains with each school. During the 1970s and early 1980s 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 student stalled and the gap widened. Critics, particularly political conservatives, have heaped blame on Title I ever since.

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

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. 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. (*Boston Globe*, 1/24/99)

Comment: We wrote back in March 1988: "Although over \$49-billion was spent on Title I between 1966 and 1986, there has been little, if anything, to show for it. The money was supposed to help culturally deprived black children in inner cities to improve their learning. Yet the SAT scores for blacks still lag far behind those of white students. In fact, functional illiteracy among blacks is increasing due mainly to the teaching methods used in the schools. The growing education underclass is probably the result of this money being spent to increase educational malpractice. Educational malpractice is very expensive. It requires special textbooks, special teachers, special programs. Without the federal money, most school districts would not be able to afford it!"

It did not take a rocket scientist to see that Title I was a failure. It is also worth noting that it was in the 1980s that Whole Language reading programs were introduced wholesale into American schools. These programs have created such academic devastation, that state legislatures in California and elsewhere have had to intervene with laws requiring schools to teach phonics. Title I students have been the primary victims of this educational malpractice, which is something educationists refuse to admit even exists. And as long as this reality is ignored, nothing of significance will be done to improve the academic achievement of American children in reading.