



Educating Disadvantaged Children: Focusing Policy for Results

Disadvantaged children—the students for whom Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act was designed—are one of our nation’s untapped resources for our future. Do we have the courage to create an education system to bring their potential to reality?

We, the National Association of State Title I Directors (NASTID), believe that, all too often, the federal government’s efforts to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act get caught up in details.

The federal government’s efforts need to focus on the most critical elements of the Title I program.

NASTID members are the state officials who implement the nation’s Title I program to assure that every child has access to a basic education—an education that is essential to each child’s future ability to learn, function, and produce.

As President Obama, his administration, and the 111th Congress set an education agenda for the nation, we ask them to focus on three core elements:

- standards, assessments, and accountability
- financial systems of support
- teacher effectiveness.

These core elements, in our experience, are in need of change in order to build a more effective program to reach our neediest and most at risk future citizens.

Standards, Assessment, and Accountability

NASTID strongly supports accountability for improved student performance for children in Title I schools. The academic standards for these children must be the same as those for children in more advantaged schools. NASTID believes that the current system could significantly improve by making the following changes.

Establish National Standards and Assessments in Reading/Language Arts, Mathematics, and Science

These standards and assessments should be rigorous and benchmarked to international standards. Performance levels should also be established at the national level. Adoption of a national approach will:

- reduce costs associated with individual state-level efforts
- allow comparison of progress among the states
- provide a measure of national progress in bringing children in high poverty schools to proficiency

- provide parents and the public a clear picture of how schools, districts, and states are doing.

Establishment of standards should include the input of consumers of our graduates—businesses and higher education.

In addition to the national standards and proficiency levels, expectations for progress should be set and progress toward meeting those expectations monitored. However, no single rate should apply in all circumstances. Rather, a program of continuous improvement should be established and, as goals are reached, new and higher goals and progress points set.

States may, if they wish, add items to the national assessments. For the purpose of Title I accountability, however, only the national items will be used.

Redefine State Responsibilities

How to reach these standards, the setting of incentives and corrective actions, and other issues related to the accountability system should be left to the states. Prior to the enactment of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), many states had accountability systems, often based on state legislative requirements.

Some states are now operating *both* state and national systems. This duality wastes resources and confuses parents and the public. States are the agencies responsible for education and should carry out that responsibility as they see fit. The federal role should be to set the standards and assessments and hold *states* accountable for performance. Accountability for *districts and schools* would be left to the states. Further, improvement activities should be related to the areas

identified by assessments rather than to the entire school.

Assess Special Needs Students

It continues to be a challenge to fully incorporate students with disabilities and English language learners (ELL) in the assessment and accountability systems. Valid alternative assessments have proven elusive. Current time requirements for inclusion of ELL students in regular assessments do not take into account the great variances among these children. For instance, an ELL student starting school in kindergarten has vastly different needs from a student beginning U.S. education in grade nine. Similarly, setting arbitrary percentages for exclusion of children with disabilities also has problems. Decisions on inclusion of these students in regular assessments should be made by experts in those fields.

Disaggregation of results for various groups should be continued and requirements strengthened so states cannot establish procedures that dilute the impact of the provision. Provisions related to inclusion or exclusion of various groups from accountability requirements should be uniform throughout the country, rather than differing widely from state to state.

Financial Systems of Support

One major impact of our current economic challenges will be more students becoming eligible for Title I services. School districts will have greater need for federal funds to reach these students. Given this need to expand the program, it is important to improve our use of funds and strengthen the supplemental nature of the program—as well as ensure that comparability of services is maintained.

Expand Title I to Middle and High School

There is a crucial need to expand Title I services to middle and high school students. While some middle school and high schools currently provide Title I services—often in separate high school districts that receive Title I allocations—Title I remains essentially an elementary school program.

The theory that services at the elementary school level are sufficient to carry Title I students through to success in the upper grades is not valid. The importance of this issue cannot be overstated. According to the Alliance for Excellent Education, the national rate for completion of high school within four years is an unacceptable 71%. However, the graduation rate for Hispanic students is 58%, for African American students 55%, and for American Indian students only 50%. On both moral and economic grounds, this trend cannot continue. Therefore, we urge additional efforts to put services in place in the higher grades, whether as part of Title I or as a separate program.

Expand School Improvement Funds

As several reports from the Center on Education Policy have documented, the current school improvement funding system is seriously flawed. Deducting school improvement funds for districts which were scheduled to receive increases works against our improvement goals.

In NCLB, Congress moved to have the Census Bureau make annual estimates of the numbers of Title I children in each school district so that allocations could be adjusted to population changes. Under the current system, however, those districts

that gained in the number of poor children see their increases reduced or eliminated by the required state reservation of funds for school improvement. NCLB does contain another authority for school improvement — and additional funds have been appropriated—but the reservation requirement remains in place. Funds for school improvement should come from a separate authority—not from district allocations—and should not be bound by general requirements that inhibit proper and sensible use of the funds.

We support providing annual updates of the estimates of poor children in each district in order to better allocate funds to districts in greatest need. However, use of a single year's estimate has resulted in a great deal of variation in allocations. Districts and states receive significant increases one year, only to lose funds the next year. We suggest that three-year averages be used to make allocations. This measure would smooth out the volatility and likely result in more stable allocations.

Fund States' Additional Responsibilities

With NCLB, states were given more responsibility for accountability. Certain activities related to accountability were extended to all schools, not just those receiving Title I funds. It is time to recognize the cost to states for this substantial additional responsibility and to increase funds for state administration. We cannot carry out all our responsibilities well with the current level of support.

Equalize Funds

Researchers at the University of Washington have raised serious questions about the methods used to measure financial comparability, a provision designed to ensure high poverty schools receive their fair share of state and local funds before Title I funds are provided to them. Specifically, researchers have provided information that the use of the same salary amount for all teachers at various degree levels—rather than actual salaries—does not provide equal funds to poor schools whose teachers have fewer years of experience and a lower salaries. NASTID supports strengthening the financial comparability provision so poor schools receive their fair share of state and local funds.

Teacher Effectiveness

We need to increase the effectiveness of teachers currently in high poverty schools as well as improve recruitment and retention of effective teachers.

NCLB has properly identified improving the effectiveness of teachers as a main component of student academic achievement improvement. Rather than tying effectiveness directly to student outcomes, however, NCLB seeks to measure that effectiveness through proxies, such as having a major in the subject taught, or through administration of competency tests. Four things need to be done:

- First, we need to improve means to assess teachers' effectiveness based on how well their students perform academically.

- Second, we need to get effective teachers in our neediest schools.
- Third, we must retain the most effective teachers in our neediest schools. This goal will require incentives for high performing teachers to go to (and stay in) schools with high poverty enrollments.
- Fourth, we need to identify teachers who are less effective and provide means to improve their performance. If that effort fails, we need to remove them from the classrooms.

Provide Incentives That Work

Research shows that financial incentives alone are not sufficient. Other incentives might include increased retirement credit for years served in those schools, increased opportunity for long-term professional development, and opportunity for participation in other federally sponsored activities (e.g., such as serving as readers for some federal discretionary programs). In addition, the work environment in many high poverty schools must be improved.

Coordinate Professional Development

Currently, NCLB requires that local school districts use funds received under Title IIA (Teacher Training and Recruitment Fund) in schools identified as "in need of improvement" under Title I or other high need schools. Title I funds are also provided for this purpose. The interaction of the two sources of funds to improve teacher quality is not always easily accomplished.

Furthermore, the existence of two separate authorities and two separate program administrations complicates the delivery of services in a coordinated manner.

Finally, a recent report by the Education Sector questioned the effectiveness of Title IIA noting that, in general, it “is not especially aligned with leading edge (teacher quality) efforts.”

Therefore, we recommend that current Title IIA, except Subpart 5 related to National Activities, be folded into Title I with the stipulation that funds be used for professional development for teachers and principals, along with other Title I funds used for that purpose. This change will:

- better target Title IIA funds to the neediest schools
- provide a unified professional development program for Title I schools
- enable districts and schools to better carry out their responsibilities for improving teacher effectiveness.

In addition, the Campaign for Educational Equity at Teachers College, Columbia University stresses the need for professional development that:

- improves teacher proficiency in regard to academic standards
- improves ability of teachers to effectively teach students from diverse backgrounds.

NCLB required the use of professional development based on scientific research without noting what that development might entail. Title I needs to encourage professional development based on solid research. There is widespread agreement that good professional development is:

- job-embedded
- content-centered
- ongoing, rather than episodic or sporadic.

Teacher training institutions need to put more focus on teaching in high poverty schools. Federal incentives can encourage more good teachers to go to high poverty areas. School systems need to better coordinate with higher education programs.

Long-term Success

Changing NCLB and providing the resources—both financial and professional—that our disadvantaged students need to be successful is essential for the long-term health of our nation.

We believe that this effort can be accomplished by focusing on three “big-picture” facts:

- standards, assessments, and accountability
- resources
- teacher quality.

Far too often during the reauthorization process, our discussions focus on technical compliance issues—how this noun will work, or who does what in which order. We believe that the nation must focus on developing national standards, increasing attention on high need populations, and focusing on teacher effectiveness.

A national set of standards will ensure that every child gets access to the education he or she needs to become a successful learner. No child should be held back from learning just because of where he or she lives.

Additionally the Elementary and Secondary Education Act should include specific programs targeting high need populations to build the secondary section of this Act. We should target resources to the schools with large numbers of students who drop out of school. Title I does currently provide some resources for middle and high schools, and this provision either needs to be expanded or a separate program should be created.

Central to the program is the teacher. Simply put, we need to have better information on how well students are learning and what needs to be changed. While we have been looking at time-on-task and the educational background of the teacher, we need to support teachers' needs for improved academic standards, Teacher training to work with a diversity of student needs, and ongoing professional development.

Do we have the vision and courage to create an education system to bring all students' potential to reality? Implementing these changes will decrease the achievement gap — enabling students to be more competitive nationally and globally. ■

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