

# Title I

*A landmark anti-poverty program enters middle age with a new focus on achievement and accountability*

# at 40

**It is** the largest, most far-reaching federal K-12 program, with \$13 billion sent annually to school districts to help educate children living in poverty. It has been the source of debate for more than four decades, raising questions about local control, federal spending on schools, and the labeling and achievement of low-income students.

And the debates surrounding Title I show no signs of subsiding today, 40 years after it was enacted as a linchpin of President Johnson's war on poverty. In fact, as the program moves into middle age, new questions have emerged about the federal role in education, specifically in terms of Title I's ability to help close the achievement gap.

As the centerpiece of the No Child Left Behind Act, accountability is now the dominant theme for Title I, not the flexibility for which it was originally known. And with an increased focus on academic standards and achievement come new questions about the program's funding requirements and potential for success.

"NCLB has broadened the expectations of what Title I can accomplish," says Kenneth Wong, a Vanderbilt University professor who codirected a national study of the implementation of Title I schoolwide programs. "It started as a funding stream, but it has been broadened, changed, and restructured so that it now encompasses multiple goals."

Christopher T. Cross, a senior fellow at both the Center on Education Policy and the Education Commission of the States, says changing views about the government's ability to affect poverty have made Title I's effectiveness difficult to evaluate over time.

"We have seen a lot of evolution in how people are thinking about poverty since 1965," Cross says. "Our understanding today is much more sophisticated, and the requirements today are much different than they were then. In many ways, we are

trying to retrofit the issues of today into the framework of a law that was enacted in a different era for different purposes with a different understanding of the problem."

## **More funding stream than program**

U.S. schools won the funding lottery in spring 1965 when Congress approved Title I as part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. An unprecedented \$1 billion in new money, designed to help eliminate poverty by providing additional resources to educate the nation's neediest children, was sent to districts with few strings attached.

Today, almost 70 percent of U.S. school districts receive Title I funds, according to the U.S. Department of Education. The money is spread across all of the nation's 435 congressional districts, for a total of more than 19,000 schoolwide Title I programs.

The initial funding was a boon to poor Southern school districts and large cities that were struggling to integrate, says Jack Jennings, a former Democratic legislative aide who worked on various Title I reauthorizations from 1967 to 1994.

"People try to make the analogy between 1965 and NCLB, but it's almost a flipped analogy," says Jennings, now president and CEO of the Center on Education Policy. "The big difference was that the initial Title I was a billion dollars in new money to schools across the country and the requirements were very loose. With NCLB, the requirements are very demanding and there's very little money."

Cross, who was Republican staff director of the House Committee on Education and Labor in the 1970s and an assistant secretary of education under the first President Bush, says the program's legacy is "a very mixed picture," in part because of how the initial legislation was written and then amended in subsequent reauthorizations of ESEA.



“It’s often been said that Title I, up until 2001 and NCLB, was much more of a funding stream than it was a program,” Cross says. “That’s why the whole issue of evaluating it and coming to grips with whether it was resulting in children learning has been so hard to cope with.”

Jennings says the government’s broad-brush attempt to eliminate poverty makes it difficult to determine how Title I has specifically helped children. But he notes that the poverty rate dropped dramatically in the first 20 years of the program before it stalled.

“In many ways, Title I has been successful, if you believe that we have a mechanism in place that helps in the education of low-income children,” Jennings says. “You would not have had NCLB, with its emphasis on raising achievement and narrowing the achievement gap, if you hadn’t had Title I all those years. NCLB wouldn’t be there today if it wasn’t for Title I.”

### **A problem of disjointedness**

In some ways, observers say, the early days of Title I were like dealing with a difficult child. With few limits on how money could be spent, Title I programs focused more on activities outside the classroom than on academics. Scandals erupted in the late 1960s and early 1970s over schools purchasing audiovisual equipment and other supplies with Title I dollars.

Congress, which at the time reauthorized the legislation every three years, started tightening the rules in the early 1970s. States were given authority to review local programs. Districts were required to rank schools for inclusion in Title I and provide matching funds.

The districts responded to the changes by setting up classrooms that served only Title I students, a form of isolation that Wong says “created a problem of disjointedness.”

“Oftentimes the students were given different sets of tests, dif-

ferent sets of curriculum, and remedial instruction by noncertified teachers,” Wong says of the Title I classes of the 1970s and ’80s. “The kids in Title I classrooms were actually not learning that much because they missed out on the main curriculum.”

Evaluations of Title I, particularly from conservatives, have been especially harsh. In the American Enterprise Institute’s 2003 *Closing the Education Achievement Gap: Is Title I Working?* authors Marvin Kusters and Brent Mast say Title I has had “little or no positive effects” on achievement and “no convincing indication of improvement over time.” Kusters and Mast suggest school choice programs—including vouchers—would be a better way to serve disadvantaged youth.

Sandra J. Stein, author of *The Culture of Education Policy*, says Title I’s emphasis on poverty has resulted in a system of labeling that is negative for many students. Her book, which details the program’s evolution and impact on federal policy, says Title I resulted in some “perverse incentive structures” that encouraged failure and mediocrity rather than academic success.

“Because this was one of the first federal interventions in education, there was a struggle to define who it was meant to serve,” says Stein, academic dean of New York City’s Leadership Academy. “Once they created a category of children to be served, then they had to decide what to call them. ... This created categories in the minds of educators, and with that went a whole host of associations and expectations that you have for academic performance.”

### **Accountability and outcomes**

Title I’s ongoing evolution is natural, given that the legislation is revised now every six or seven years and power in Congress shifts from Republican to Democratic and back again.

As part of the Reagan-era deregulation, Title I was largely marginalized throughout much of the 1980s. Its name was

changed to Chapter 1, and monitoring and paperwork requirements were reduced. But by the 1988 reauthorization, Congress put back many of the original provisions, restored the original name, encouraged schoolwide Title I programs, and added one key component: accountability.

That accountability feature, strengthened in the 1994 reauthorization and a key component of No Child Left Behind, requires Title I schools to show that low-income students are making strides in achievement through an increased emphasis on testing.

"It created a different delivery system for Title I that addresses outcomes," Wong says of the accountability measures of the past two decades. "And schoolwide programs have proven to be more effective, because they're able to pull together teachers to share information about the learning process or the lack of progress among kids. It just works much better."

Key to the ongoing debates for Title I are the complicated funding formulas, which target money to concentrations of high-poverty districts while remaining broad enough to generate continued congressional support for the program. Some believe this has resulted in a watering down of Title I's impact on urban and rural areas with high concentrations of poverty.

"The concentration of poverty is uneven around the 15,000 school districts across the country," Wong says. "In Chicago, St. Louis, or Philadelphia, you have clusters where there are 100 percent poor kids. When you go down the list in those areas, you run out of money, and you have schools with 60 percent of their kids in poverty who receive nothing."

Noel Epstein, editor of the 2004 book *Who's in Charge Here? The Tangled Web of School Governance and Policy*, is particularly critical of the formulas. Because Title I funds schools, not individual students, he says, up to half of children who would qualify for Title I assistance receive no additional aid.

"Nearly half of low-income children get no assistance. That's outrageous," says Epstein, former education editor at the *Washington Post*. "They talk of closing the gap. Nobody's trying to close the gap between the rich and the poor. They're just trying to narrow it on the most elementary terms."

Cross, who worked with Jennings on the Title I reauthorizations in 1974 and 1978, says the legislation has never been designed to follow individual students. Rather, Title I continues to be set up to provide funding to a large number of districts, a political reality when you're trying to get legislation through Congress.

"The fights when I worked on the Hill were much more about the formula of how the money would be allocated—who was going to be the winner, who was going to be the loser—than they were about what has been accomplished with the money," Cross says. "That has changed because of NCLB. And now that we're moving to a child-centered focus, it may change again. But it hasn't yet."

### Coming full circle

So, as it moves into middle age, what's next for Title I?

Wong's study of schoolwide Title I programs, released in

2002, recommended that Congress target individual students, not larger umbrella programs, and use the money to hire better teachers in high-poverty schools. If money were targeted in this way, he believes, the poorest schools would have the necessary resources.

"Our study found that if you are poor and go to a poor school, you are doubly jeopardized," Wong says. "If you are low income and go to a typical school, then you are fine, because you are exposed to peers who have other kinds of support, who are socialized, and the schools have a better group of teachers and curriculum. It is the double jeopardy that I'm particularly concerned about."

Despite the criticism of Title I, few believe the program will ever be abolished. The biggest questions are whether the federal government's increased role and more funding will have an impact on achievement—arguments that have been ongoing for 40 years.

Cross says then-U.S. Sen. Robert F. Kennedy tried to include a requirement that annual testing be part of the original Title I legislation but "got nowhere with it" because schools were worried about the potential for federal takeover. Today, under NCLB, schools that don't meet adequate yearly progress face sanctions, including takeover, and must allow students to transfer to another school of their choice.

"It's ironic, but the same arguments that were being made in 1965, that the federal government was being too intrusive and that it would lead to the takeover of schools, are the same ones we're hearing today," Cross says. "It's remarkable how much the same arguments that existed then do today as well."

Jennings notes, with some irony, how Title I has "sort of come full circle" because of NCLB.

"I think Title I will continue to be very significant, because NCLB is not going to fade away," he says. "The hope has to be, at least on my part, that if the federal government has taken Title I and made it central to American education, that the federal government will pay much more of the bill to help in the education of high-poverty students."

As education costs rise, the federal government is paying more of the bill. But whether Title I increases will be enough is a debate that surely will continue throughout 2005 and beyond.

President Bush's budget proposal, released in mid-February, includes a \$603 million increase for Title I. The proposed 4.7 percent hike comes amid cuts to other education and government departments, but critics say it is not enough to keep pace with the cost of paying for Title I.

Jennings, who has criticized the Bush administration's approach to funding since NCLB was signed into law, notes that the increase is not enough to operate Title I properly.

"Title I can work," he says. "In many ways, it has worked. And it's not going away. The key is finding ways—and resources—to make it work better."

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