

Federal Spending on Disadvantaged Students Does Not Work, New Brookings Paper Finds

The \$14 billion Title 1 program not meeting goals; Buys the equivalent of 10 hours of teacher time

As House and Senate negotiators continue to hammer out a potential conference agreement that rewrites the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (known as No Child Left Behind), a new Evidence Speaks report questions whether the largest program in the bill – the \$14 billion Title I program – is effective at improving student outcomes or that its funds are being used for their intended purpose.

In “[Why Federal Spending on Disadvantaged Students \(Title I\) Doesn’t Work](#),” Brookings Nonresident Senior Fellow Mark Dynarski and Professor of Education Kirsten Kainz of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill note that Title I, which provides funding to states and districts to improve education specifically for disadvantaged students, has not been proven to be effective in terms of improving student achievement, nor have its funds been used for effective services and activities.

Funding for the program per student is quite low -- averaging about \$500 to \$600 a year, which the authors estimate is an additional 5 percent. Given the large gaps in achievement between students in poverty compared to those who are not -- the equivalent of more than two grade levels by 4th grade, “spending another \$500 seems unlikely to close these kinds of gaps much or at all,” the write. “Narrowing these gaps will mean investing more in research to identify effective approaches, or increasing Title I spending by five to eight times more per student, or both. Focusing effective interventions on the neediest students may provide a way forward that is consistent with fiscal realities.”

In addition, large proportions of school principals report using Title I funds for teacher professional development (81 percent), which many studies have shown to be ineffective and which teachers also do not find valuable. Other services on which principals spent Title I funds include after-school and summer programs, technology purchases, and supplemental services, which also have been shown to be ineffective, and class-size reductions, which are unlikely to be of the size needed to generate effects found in previous research.

The authors note that a reasonable goal of closing NAEP score gaps by the equivalent of a year could cost in the ballpark of about \$4,000 a year per student. “That’s a big increase, and unless Congress wants to spend \$100 billion a year on Title I, the increase needs to be coupled with a focus on fewer students.” They suggest constraining the eligibility rate at which a school becomes eligible for a Title I school-wide program to be the highest 25 percent of schools, or fewer, in terms of poverty, and using those targeted resources on programs that have been proven to work.

“Districts and schools that are recipients of Title I dollars are being asked to tackle disparities of longstanding social and historical origin issues with little money,” Dynarski and Kainz write. “The program sends token amounts to schools, which use the amounts to funds services that research has found to be ineffective. Educators may appreciate the added resources, but attaching lofty expectations to the resources seems out of touch, as if Washington does not understand that \$500 for a student does not go a long way in schools.” They add that, in comparison, the average public school teacher earns about \$50 an hour, meaning that Title I spending buys a student about 10 hours a year of a teacher,

which is not nearly enough to close the achievement gap, given that the cost to educate an economically disadvantaged student to reach the same achievement level as other students ranges from 25 to 100 percent more, according to estimates.

“It is time to modernize this enterprise. If we want Title I to close achievement gaps, policy needs to provide sufficient funding, clear definitions and metrics for desired outcomes, and better guidance about effective programming, which means continued investments in research to identify effective and ineffective programs. The Senate bill includes language that moves in this direction. It calls for researchers to be on peer-review panels that will assess state plans; for states to review local plans to ensure they are identifying and implementing evidence-based methods and are monitoring and evaluating their implementation, and for local agencies to collect and use data to adjust programs.”

Brookings’ Evidence Speaks is a weekly series of reports and notes by a standing panel of distinguished researchers with a commitment to elevating the role of methodologically rigorous research in the formation of education and social policy.