

Title I -- Opportunities for Improving the Quality of Education of Students

On October 20, 1994, President Clinton signed into law the "Improving America's Schools Act." Title I, the largest primary and secondary federal education program (over 7 billion dollars in FY 96), was reauthorized in this legislation, which among other things, rewrote the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Although Title I was established in 1965 to provide "extra" educational services to the nation's poorest and lowest achieving students, history indicates that for over 30 years, the program has failed to meet its potential. The 1994 rewrite was designed to change that conclusion dramatically.

Title I now provides parents, advocates, and school communities with a tool for broader school improvements. With renewed energy and collective advocacy, communities can work to ensure that Title I is used to provide a quality education for our nation's low-income students.

A Framework for Program Quality

The reauthorized Title I provides strong legal handles for ensuring a quality education for students served by Title I funds. The law requires States to use the same high standards for these students as they do for all other students. It requires schools and local education agencies (LEAs) to develop programs that will enable students to meet the standards, as measured by performance on State assessments which are aligned with the standards. Further the law calls for high quality professional staff to teach Title I students a challenging curriculum, and effectively designed individual assistance to students who are having difficulty achieving the standards. Parents have the right to be involved in planning their children's education, and to see that their children's schools comply with the requirements of Title I. Through a series of requirements about the content of their Title I programs, the reauthorized law charges schools and LEAs with ensuring that Title I students are not given a second rate education. And the law mandates that schools and LEAs succeed in providing quality programs which enable Title I students to meet the state standards. Schools and LEAs which continually fail their students will be put in improvement -- during which they must work to make their program more effective.

Schools and LEAs which are in improvement and continue to fail will have sanctions imposed against them, including, for example, the reconstitution of school staff or the withholding of funds.

These better legal handles do not guarantee improved Title I programs. Without effective advocacy to ensure proper implementation, Title I students across the country could be cheated out of the quality education the new law promises. One need only examine Chapter 1 implementation after the 1988 reauthorization to understand the risk. Although

the 1988 law was designed to ensure the active participation of parents in the decision-making process, Chapter 1 programs were often run with minimal input from parents concerning the core elements of the program. Many programs did not, as the law required, ensure integration between the students' Chapter 1 and regular classes, nor did they ensure that students were taught the "basic and advanced skills that all students were expected to master." Many program pulled students out of regular classes and taught them watered-down curricula which virtually guaranteed that students would never catch up to their peers, further undermining the goals of the program.

Title I programs could face the same fate unless parents, advocates, and educators understand the new requirements and are committed to ensuring that they are fully implemented.

Schoolwide Programs

The reauthorization relaxes the requirements schools must meet in order to become schoolwide programs. Schools that have at least a 50% low-income school population can use their Title I funds to improve the educational program of the entire school, instead of targeting the funds on only those students who are most at risk of failing to meet the standards. With proper implementation, this represents great possibility for change. The law makes many specific requirements of schools implementing schoolwide programs, including that; schools use reform strategies based on effective means of improving the achievement of children; schools have an effective and accelerated curriculum; students be taught by highly qualified professional staff members who have the appropriate professional development opportunities they need to provide effective instruction to Title I students; Title I be coordinated with other programs; and schools provide individual assistance to students within a schoolwide program who need extra assistance to meet the State standards. Without hard work on the part of entire school communities to ensure that these requirements are met, and that Title I is the catalyst for real reform, Title I funds in schoolwide programs have the potential to become general aid to existing mediocre programs.

Planning for schoolwide programs is an in-depth process for which the law also spells out specific requirements. The law requires that a school implementing a schoolwide program conduct a needs assessment, and develop a comprehensive plan to meet the needs of various constituencies in the school. The law prescribes an important role for parents in the schoolwide planning process; parents must jointly develop the plan with school staff. Advocates must ensure that the schoolwide program planning process is used as an opportunity for entire school communities to engage in a substantive dialogue about the needs of low-income students, and determine collectively how to meet those needs.

Without efforts to ensure that all constituencies are involved in substantive ways in every stage of planning schoolwide programs, and ensuring through rigorous evaluation that

requirements of the law are adhered to, schoolwide plans will be little more than words on paper with little impact on the direction of the programs, and schoolwide programs will be little more than general aid.

Targeted Assistance Schools

Targeted Assistance Schools present different challenges to parents, advocates, and schools. These programs, either because the school does not have a high enough population of low-income students to qualify for schoolwide status or because a school community chooses not to run a schoolwide program, must use their Title I funds to serve those students who are most at risk of failing to meet the state standards. While Targeted Assistance Schools may not create the same obvious incentives for broad-based school reform, Congress was clear during the reauthorization that these programs are to be changed, dramatically if necessary, to comply with a series of requirements aimed at ensuring that Title I students in these more "traditional" programs are receiving a high quality education. Students served by Title I programs in these schools must be enabled to meet the State standards. Schools must use effective instructional strategies that help provide accelerated, high-quality curriculum and minimize pulling students out of class. The Title I program must be coordinated with the regular programs and taught by high quality professional staff. Further, the school must put into effect strategies for increasing parent involvement, such as the provision of family literacy services. Through these requirements and others, Congress charged schools with implementing creative strategies for enabling those students who are furthest behind to meet the State standards for all students. This offers schools an opportunity to develop new curricula and pedagogy, design after school and summer programs to supplement students regular education, and work closely with parents to ensure that they have the tools necessary to participate fully in their childrens education. Without the involvement of broad constituencies in the planning and implementing of these programs, they could easily become the stereotypical Title I programs, pulling students out of science, math, language arts, social studies, or other classes daily to teach them a watered-down curriculum in an ineffectual add-on reading or math program.

Parent Involvement

The law also offers great possibilities in the area of parent involvement. Each school and each local education agency must have a written parent involvement policy, jointly developed with and approved by parents, which, among other things, outlines how parents will be involved in all aspects of the planning and review of Title I programs. The school level policy must include a school-parent compact which outlines how schools, parents, and students will share the responsibility for ensuring student achievement. Parents must also jointly develop the written schoolwide program plan and the local education agency Title I plan. The term "joint development" should mean that parents sit

down as partners with school staff to engage in a serious examination of the needs of Title I students and to discuss the best ways for a school or LEA to ensure that those needs are met. History proves, however, that the interests of parents are often marginalized. Frequently, schools and LEAs expect one or two parents to represent the views of all Title I parents, providing no real opportunity for bringing together broad groups of parents to participate in informed decision-making. Too often, parents are presented with a Title I plan after it has been developed, and told that if they do not approve it, the school or LEA will not get any Title I funds that year.

Title I Programs Should Be Implemented Now

Title I went into effective July 1, 1995. Yet in many places, Title I programs still resemble the old Chapter 1 model, based on extensive pull-out programs in reading and math, low expectations for students, and few links to real school reform. It is critical that parents and their advocates get involved in the important decisions that are shaping how this law is implemented from now until 1999, when this reauthorization ends. Many of the decisions about how Title I programs will be shaped through at least 1999 are being made now, as schools, LEAs, and SEAs work to develop their Title I plans, schools and LEAs draft their parent involvement policies, and school communities write their school-parent compacts. State Title I plans are written only once during the reauthorization period, with amendments made as needed. Thus, ensuring that the plans are of high quality and take into account the needs of all Title I students in the State is critical. At the same time, many states are in the process of making fundamental decisions about how to implement education reform using systems of standards and assessments decisions which affect Title I. Many of these decisions are long-term, and thus will have an impact on Title I during the entire reauthorization period.

Title I programs should look different than Chapter 1 programs in many ways. There should be an accelerated curriculum taught by high quality teachers. Title I programs -- or whole school programs in the case of schoolwide schools -- should enable all students served by Title I to meet high standards. Parents should be deeply involved in the planning, review, and improvement of Title I programs, including planning for the improvement of the whole school in schoolwide programs. The entire school community should talk about what the standards are and how they will determine whether students are meeting the standards. If students are not meeting the standards, parents and schools must work together to come up with a plan for making sure they can improve.

In short, Title I provides good handles for improving the core quality of education for low-income students. But without the hard work on the part of entire school communities, the admirable goals of Title I and the specific requirements the law makes will not be met.