



# Executive Memorandum

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## HOW THE SENATE CAN REFORM TITLE I TO EMPOWER PARENTS AND HELP CHILDREN ACHIEVE

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The Senate Education committee will soon consider the Title I program of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Members of the Senate have an opportunity to improve the program by significantly boosting parental involvement in education. Many Senators realize that ESEA has a long tradition of failing to show significant results. Senator Judd Gregg (R-NH) wants to help reverse that tradition by embedding portability and public school choice in this program. Committee members should consider the merits of these policy changes as they deliberate on ESEA.

**The Achievement Gap.** Title I was created during President Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty" as the cornerstone of the 35-year-old ESEA. It is aimed at narrowing the gap in academic achievement between low-income students and their peers by providing supplemental funding to poor school districts. More than \$120 billion has been funneled into Title I since its inception—the largest single federal investment in education. Despite this investment, the gap in academic achievement levels remains wide.

Even worse, a review of two longitudinal studies of Title I students conducted in the late 1970s and early 1990s found that, although the achievement of Title I students improved at the same rate as "nondisadvantaged" students, Title I had failed to close or narrow the achievement gap. And although a 1999 report from a congressionally mandated national assessment of Title I shows an increase in

reading and math scores, these improvements cannot be correlated to the Title I program.

Low-income students (who are eligible for the federal free/reduced-price lunch program) perform considerably worse on standardized tests than do their higher-income counterparts. Only 13 percent of fourth-grade Title I students who took the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress reading test scored at or above the "proficient" level, compared with 40 percent of higher-income students. Nearly 60 percent of the low-income students were unable to reach the basic level on the same test.

**A Better Policy.** A portability proposal offered by Senator Gregg as an amendment to ESEA would allow interested states to attach Title I dollars to students; the funds would follow students to a public or private provider of their choice if the services offered to them in the public school did not meet their needs. This policy change would accomplish two goals:

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First, it would make Title I a child-centered plan designed solely to meet the needs of all Title I students. Title I currently serves over 11 million students; only about half of these students live below the poverty line, leaving some 4 million poor students unserved because funds are targeted at needy schools, not at needy students. Meanwhile, almost half of the Title I funding to schools is used to hire poorly qualified teacher's aides. Most of the instructors on a district's Title I payroll rarely teach; instead, they serve as program coordinators at their schools.

Under current policy, education bureaucrats are deemed the most qualified judges of the way to educate a poor student, not the child's parents. Current law explicitly prohibits Title I funds from following needy students to the school of their choice. Under the Gregg proposal, a parent who is not satisfied with the quality of service in a Title I school would have a chance to take the money elsewhere, as long as it is used to boost the child's educational attainment.

Second, schools would have an incentive to offer poor students the best service possible. Parent who are unhappy with a school would have the freedom to use federal funds to hire an outside tutor, sign up for a good afterschool program, or invest in a research-based reading tool. The school would no longer be guaranteed federal funding if it continued to fail. Parents and students could escape failing schools.

Another proposal by Senator Gregg, already embodied in legislation enacted by the House (H.R. 2), would offer public school choice to parents in failing Title I schools and allow Title I funding to be used for transportation purposes. Under current law, a state can reconstitute a Title I school after it has failed to meet state performance standards for

two consecutive years. Approximately one-fifth of all schools receiving Title I funds are recognized as needing improvement, but there are insufficient penalties to motivate them to improve. In the 1996–97 school year, 6,905 Title I schools were identified for improvement. Under the Gregg proposal, school districts would be obliged to offer added choice to parents, a step in the right direction.

**Conclusion.** Title I has failed to accomplish its core mission: to close the gap in achievement between rich and poor students. As Maris Vinovskis, a professor at the University of Michigan and expert on Title I, told *The Los Angeles Times*, the “real losers in this are not just the taxpayers [but] the kids.... We haven't been able to deliver.” If the federal government wants to continue funding Title I, it must assure that every dollar spent on the program is spent serving and boosting the academic achievement of individual poor children. Otherwise, ESEA's Title I program will continue to waste taxpayer dollars while generations of disadvantaged kids remain trapped in the same cycle of poverty that burdens their parents.

President Johnson's dream—to close the achievement gap between the children of the rich and the poor—is still alive today. The desire for these children to succeed is nonpartisan. So long as federal Title I dollars are trapped in failed schools and wasted on failed programs, the achievement gap will remain wide. By making Title I dollars follow the students, instead of schools, and by making, at the very least, public school choice a real option for parents of Title I-eligible students, Congress could help realize that dream.

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