



The Unfinished Agenda: Full Funding for Title I

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The National Alliance of Black School Educators (NABSE) is a 4,000-member organization, comprised of a membership range of professionals in the field of education. Its structure is that of Commissions and Affiliates representing teachers, principals, school board members, retired educators, superintendents of schools, central administrators, higher education faculty and researchers. Its structure provides rich opportunities for coordinated conversations and actions that speak directly to the needs of children of African descent.

We have a number of concerns regarding Congressional deliberations on the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965.

Is the Alliance concerned about Congress' Commitment (many sessions ago) to fund special education at a 40% percent level? Of course. Is the National Alliance concerned about school infrastructure and deteriorating school buildings? Of course. Is it concerned about teacher quality and class size? Of course. Is it concerned about parents and their role in the education equation? Of course. Is it concerned about sample size, ELLs, and SES? Of course. Is NABSE concerned about high school reform and about school improvement? Of course. **The National Alliance of Black School Educators, however, is burning and passionately concerned about FULL FUNDING for Title I.** Currently, Title I makes up only two percent (2%) of federal K-12 spending.

It has only been 42 years since Congress and the Johnson Administration moved to establish Head Start and Title I to help eliminate the large educational gaps that had long persisted among students from different socioeconomic levels in our society. The notion was bold and courageous because, at that time, no country in the world was in possession of proven strategies for quickly closing such gaps or for making a moral commitment to address poverty through universal, free public education. Indeed, here in the United States, educators and policymakers did not yet have good national data on the



extent to which academic achievement differed among groups. The data that were available, however, suggested that children from less advantaged homes and communities and children without a rich construct of opportunity were experiencing much less academic success than they should or could. The Congress and the President had the wisdom to make substantial new investments in the education of less advantaged children.

At the core of NABSE's recommendations for the reauthorization and full funding of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) is the notion that parity and equity in student achievement and excellence in educational attainment for all citizens is dependent on the equitable and adequate targeting of federal dollars based on need and on a substantial investment in other education-relevant recourses that positively affect the educational experience of students. The popular press and much of the country's polity, equates poor Black and Latino students only with urban communities. The reality is that a significant number of children of African descent attend schools in very poor rural communities. Of the current 300 African American superintendents in the country, two-thirds head either poor rural or newly re-segregated school districts in suburban rings. Though we believe our recommendations will benefit every student in America, we speak specifically to the needs of poor students – minority and non-minority – who reside in rural and inner city America, in the recently re-segregated suburbs, or in the hills of Appalachia.

The stated purpose of the 1965 Title I Act includes the following:

In recognition of the special educational needs of low-income families and the impact that concentrations of low-income families have on the ability of local education agencies to support adequate educational programs, the Congress hereby declares it to be the policy of the United States to provide financial assistance to local educational agencies serving areas with concentrations of children from low-income families to expand and improve their educational programs by various means (including preschool programs) which contribute particularly meeting the special educational needs of educationally deprived children.



In short, Title I was designed to compensate for the disadvantages associated with children's economic status and deficiencies in learning associated with their home, school, or community experience. Ladies and gentlemen, these disadvantages still exist today – 42 years later. We included in our September 5th commentary, a recommendation for a very specific formula change. We will not repeat it here but we are including it in the written text.

We ask the Congress to explore and address funding in the section of Title I that provides for targeted grants and finances incentive grants. Currently, these grants are determined by concentration of poverty. This, of course, is the right focus. We are, however, as concerned as our other colleagues in the educational community, such as the American Association of School Administrators (see their 2009 Legislative Agenda), requiring the ways in which the concentration of poverty is defined. Currently, concentration of poverty is based on the number of poor students in a district or the percentage of poverty in the district, whichever is higher. Thus, districts with a given number of poor students may receive Title I funding even though they have a relatively small concentration of poverty and may in fact receive more Title I funding per student than smaller districts with much higher percentages of poverty. This is particularly troublesome because small districts with high concentrations of poverty have lower property wealth and require additional support to provide per pupil spending comparable to larger, wealthier districts.

We strongly believe that the weighting based on the number of poor students should be eliminated from this definition. Instead, we believe that school district allocations should be based on *their* percentage of poverty. That way, all districts at the same percentage of poverty will receive the same amount per student.

We have been here before. During the sixties and early seventies, in poor and minority communities (from the Delta in Mississippi, to the rural mountains of Vermont and New Hampshire, to the Appalachian communities of West Virginia, to the Urban Epicenters of Chicago, New York City, Los Angeles, Houston and Birmingham) citizens were engaged in making their once divided and isolated communities whole. Through various community actions and model city and school programs, visible progress was



being made and the horrible vestiges of segregation, isolation, and poverty were being chipped away.

Just as these efforts began to work and to show some promise, progress was halted by voices that said that the “Great Society programs” were a waste and failure. A campaign was forged to carry out an agenda that in fact blamed the victims, namely poor, disenfranchised families and communities for their plight.

This discussion is not about whether Title I is a success or failure. That is another argument, another story and another construct. NABSE can respond quite compellingly that Title I has been a strong force in impacting the lives of less advantaged students socially, emotionally and academically. As Jack Jennings so eloquently stated in past articles in both *The Kappan* and *Education Week*, that while eliminating the achievement gap is a worthy goal – and we agree that it is – that this is not the stated purpose of Title I, nor the standard for determining its success.

On another note, much has been made of the notion that “we’ve spent billions over 40 years.” For the 2007-2008 school year the total appropriation for Title I-A granted to school districts was 12.8 billion dollars, an increase of less than 1 percent or 124 million dollars over the previous year’s funding. Does money matter for poor students? Does parity cost? You bet! As Grissmer, Flanagan and Williamson conclude in their research for the National Center for Research the “the money doesn’t matter” argument doesn’t hold. There seems to be significant support for the thesis that money directed at disadvantaged students *does* bring higher academic scores but money directed toward more advantaged students may have a smaller or negligible effect.

The Grissmer study demonstrates that, if we look at the fact that 46 percent of Title I goes to the very poorest 15 percent of all schools, a more consistent story is emerging from the empirical data (a story we believe is not being told and can easily be ignored). What the research shows is that the largest gain in test scores over the past 35 to 40 years has been made by White, African American, and Hispanic economically disadvantaged children. This did not happen without federal support for the past two decades. Does money count? You bet! No, it is not the only variable, but it is a clear and present significant variable.



So what does it take to “get on with it” and to provide equity, access, and equal protection in the financial realm for all America’s poor children in public schools?

We recognize the inequities in per pupil spending between schools, between school districts, and between states. Many states have certainly begun to weigh in on this phenomenon. Still, as the federal government looks to strengthen its role in “School Reform” and “High Standards,” it must also provide an effective means to assist in assuring equity in funding for the poorest of America’s children through full funding of Title I.

What does full funding for Title I look like? What does it cost to educate a poor child? What should the federal government’s contribution be to assure that education-relevant recourses are available where there is a concentration of poverty, and where there are disparities in state and local funding?

Full funding for Title I would mean that school districts with high concentrations of poverty would be able to spend as much per pupil as districts with lower concentrations of poverty. This would require an allocation of resources specifically targeted at districts with higher than average percentages of pupils eligible for free or reduced lunch.

Based on a conservative analysis of 2005-2006 National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) Common Core of Data and U.S. Census data, looking at over 10,000 school districts reporting financial information and school demographics¹, school districts vary in their total current spending per pupil as well as their spending for instruction per pupil based on the districts’ concentrations of students in poverty. The chart below (Table 1) shows that in the average school district receiving Title I funds, 40 percent of

¹ Incomplete data from both the NCES and U.S. Census require a merging of two data sets (one from each source) and the removal of cases based on the following criterion. Districts were matched from the two data sets using their NCES Identification numbers. Districts with missing data were removed from the analysis. Additionally, districts reporting no revenue from Title I were removed as well as districts serving fewer than 25 pupils and fewer than 10 students eligible for free and reduced lunch. Finally, Regional, State, and Federal agencies charged with providing instruction were removed, limiting the data set to local school districts and supervisory school unions. Thus, while this data set began with over 17,000 districts, the final analysis looked at 10,578 districts. The majority of the districts were removed for lack of data, resulting in several states – Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, and Ohio – and some notable districts – e.g. New York City Public Schools - being excluded in this analysis. This stringent criterion also removed a large number of outliers, making for a conservative analysis.



its students are eligible for free or reduced lunch. Moreover, the average school district spends over \$9,200 per pupil, over \$5,600 of which is spent on instruction.

Table 1. District Spending per Pupil

	Percent of Pupils Eligible for Free or Reduced Lunch	Total Current Spending Per Pupil	Total Current Spending for Instruction Per Pupil	Percent of Total Revenue Comprised of Compensatory (Title I) Funds
Mean	40.3%	\$9,292.28	\$5,622.77	2.4%
Median	38.9	8,438.00	5,124.00	1.9

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 2005-2006 Common Core of Data and U.S. Census Bureau

Using the percent of pupils eligible for free or reduced lunch within a school district as an indicator of school district poverty, those districts having lower concentrations of poverty spend far more money per pupil with respect to both total spending and spending on instruction². Districts with higher concentrations of poverty, on the other hand, tend to have less money to spend per pupil compared to districts with lower concentrations of poverty. Districts where 13 to 21 percent of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch (a low concentration of poverty), spend on average over \$9,300 per pupil, \$5,700 of which is spent on instruction. Districts where more than 40 percent of pupils qualify for free and reduced lunch (above mean concentration of poverty), spent an average of \$9,000 per pupil – \$200 less than the average district and \$300 less than districts with lower concentrations of poverty did. Additionally, districts with above average concentrations of poverty spent, on average, \$5,400 on instruction – again, \$200 less than the average school district and \$300 less than districts with lower concentrations of poverty did. As shown in Table 2, districts with high concentrations of poverty (between the 50th and 90th percentiles of concentration of poverty) spent less per pupil both overall and specifically on instruction, when compared to the national average per pupil spending and spending in districts with lower concentrations of poverty. Moreover, while the overall levels of spending vary from state to state, this pattern of greater per pupil spending in districts with less poverty is consistent amongst states. We find this

² Districts with the highest concentrations of poverty (between the 90th-100th percentile) tend to spend as much per student as districts with low concentrations of poverty.



pattern to be troublesome and believe it to be a recipe for sustaining inequities in funding and a fostering of the permanent socio-economic divide.

Table 2. Per Pupil District Spending by District Poverty

Percent of Pupils Eligible for Free or Reduced Lunch (Each percentage grouping contains an equal number of school districts)		Total Current Spending Per Pupil	Total Current Spending for Instruction Per Pupil	Percent of Total Revenue Comprised of Compensatory (Title I) Funds
0.66-12.97%	Mean	\$10,882.11	\$6,695.36	0.536%
	Median	10,351.00	6,370.00	0.300
12.98-20.98	Mean	9,382.15	5,733.61	0.913
	Median	8,601.00	5,245.00	0.700
20.98-27.57	Mean	9,213.01	5,639.21	1.302
	Median	8,390.50	5,153.50	1.100
27.58-33.23	Mean	9,300.55	5,680.36	1.634
	Median	8,350.00	5,142.00	1.400
33.24-38.87	Mean	9,052.92	5,551.79	1.973
	Median	8,375.50	5,141.50	1.700
38.89-44.35	Mean	9,076.07	5,547.10	2.297
	Median	8,370.50	5,117.00	2.100
44.36-50.5	Mean	8,774.99	5,340.91	2.660
	Median	8,161.00	4,975.50	2.400
50.5-57.86	Mean	8,718.73	5,268.07	3.176
	Median	8,122.50	4,897.00	3.000
57.88-69.51	Mean	8,970.92	5,336.37	3.739
	Median	8,186.50	4,877.50	3.500
69.55-99.71	Mean	9,553.12	5,435.76	5.713
	Median	8,514.00	4,987.00	5.100

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 2005-2006 Common Core of Data and U.S. Census Bureau

What we find particularly disconcerting is that inequalities in per pupil spending persist regardless of the fact that those districts with higher concentrations of poverty tend to receive more Title I revenue per number of pupils eligible for free or reduced lunch compared to districts with lower concentrations of poverty. Thus, while students attending schools with higher concentrations of poverty may receive more targeted spending under Title I, their school districts still spend less per students overall compared to districts with lower concentrations of poverty. Moreover, despite having larger per pupil spending, districts with low concentrations of poverty still receive Title I funds. These Title I funds make up a small percentage of the overall revenue for districts with



low concentrations of poverty – districts that already have larger than average per pupil spending. As the concentration of poverty increases and the per pupil spending generally decreases, the proportion of overall district revenue comprised of Title I also increases.

Thus, at a time when the federal government is proposing cuts in education spending, we contend that more Title I money should be provided to districts serving high concentrations of students in poverty in order to equalize per pupil spending. As it stands, the lower per pupil expenditure in districts with high poverty means these districts have a diminished capacity to compensate for educational disadvantages related to poverty.

While a more complete state-by-state analysis must be undertaken in order to determine the cost of a sound basic education per pupil, a conservative estimate would call for a per pupil increase in Title I funding of between \$200 to \$300 per pupil attending school districts with higher than average concentrations of poverty. This increase in funding would allow such districts to begin to close the per pupil spending gaps that persist between themselves and districts with low concentrations of poverty.

Looking at a select group of states from the overall analysis (see Table 3), such an increase would necessitate a 45 percent increase in Title I funding (a three percent increase in overall Federal spending in school), specifically targeted at schools with higher than average concentrations of poverty – those schools in the greatest need. Moreover, this increase in funding would benefit students living in urban, suburban, and rural districts alike.

We believe that, while a significant number of our middle class students are enjoying the advantages of public schools, the children in school with high concentrations of poverty are not afforded the same advantages. Title I fails to provide support to districts that have low enrollment and low property wealth – districts unable to provide the same per pupil spending as larger, wealthier districts. In this way, the distribution of current Title I funding maintains and perpetuates a growing per pupil spending gap between districts of high concentrations of poverty and those of low concentrations of poverty. In order for Title I to fulfill its mission, this spending gap must be addressed.