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Closing the Education Achievement Gap: Is Title I Working?

The Bush administration has increased funding for Title I by 40 percent since 2001, raising it to \$12.3 billion in the 2004 federal budget. Under Title I—the major provision of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act—the federal government has provided more than \$200 billion over the past thirty-eight years to schools with children from low-income families. The goal of this program, reauthorized by the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act, is to raise the academic achievement levels of children from low-income backgrounds to match those of higher-income students. But does the program really work?

In *Closing the Education Achievement Gap: Is Title I Working?* (AEI Press, June 2003), AEI scholars Marvin H. Kusters and Brent D. Mast demonstrate that the Title I program has had no systematic, positive effect on student achievement, and that it does not contribute significantly to closing the achievement gap for poor and minority students. While numerous congressional studies have examined Title I's effectiveness, *Closing the Education Achievement Gap* uses a new approach: It compares the achievement scores of individual Title I students with the scores of similar students who do not receive Title I benefits. Examining results from the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP)—results that include test scores and personal information—Kusters and Mast found no evidence that Title I improves the recipients' academic performance. In fact, they found that gaps in the achievement of low-income and minority children remain significant and have not declined since the mid-1980s. According to the authors, the data in this and other studies suggest that individual characteristics of students and their families make more difference in test scores than the additional resources at school.

The authors note that restructuring the program may be politically contentious despite the lack of improvement. They acknowledge the possibility that the incremental increase of Title I funds has been insufficient to produce higher scores; Title I funds may have been used to offset reductions in local education funds; the program may permit more funding for non-educational services; and it may also support employment of public school faculty. Regardless, Kusters and Mast stress that the critical issue is whether Title I appreciably raises test scores of students who receive federal funds and

on that point the evidence is clear: Title I neither cultivates greater achievement nor narrows the performance gap between low- and high-income students.

Over time, skeptics have questioned the link between funding, educational resources, and achievement, as supplementary resources provided under Title I failed to improve test scores and shrink achievement gaps. Efforts to evaluate and reform the program began early. Kosters and Mast note that there has been a trend recently toward a more flexible use of Title I resources such as the introduction of more systematic testing, new limited options for parental choice, and steps to increase parental and community awareness of the students' and schools' performances. With these changes, students are able to transfer between public schools but are restricted to options within their own school district. Worried that this may be a problem in urban areas where there are not enough good schools to absorb all students seeking transfers, the authors propose to use Title I funds to provide greater parental choice options than are currently available. For instance, students could be allowed to transfer to public schools outside their districts and use Title I money to attend private schools. In addition, the authors suggest that this experiment should be funded for at least five years to provide enough time for parents and both public and private schools to adjust.

Closing the Education Achievement Gap definitively proves the ineffectiveness of Title I, and Kosters and Mast lay the foundation for a better use of the billions in federal funds, which are added annually to the \$200 billion already spent throughout the life of the program without any measurable success.

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