



i3 Brings Innovation to Education

Congress Should Appropriate Additional Funds to the i3 Program

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K-12 education in America needs to get better fast. Last year, 30 percent of America's high school students failed to graduate on time. Studies rank American 15-year-olds 24th internationally in terms of math achievement. And America has fallen from 3rd to 15th place since 1975 in turning out scientists and engineers—two careers that are critical in today's economy.

Dumping money into schools is not the solution. Nor is it an efficient use of taxpayer dollars. One novel approach is delivering results quickly through a smart use of federal funds. Competitive grant programs have been shown to boost student results and turn around low-performing schools. These grants, which require schools to meet certain eligibility criteria and submit to an application process, do not replace general federal funding for high-poverty schools. Instead, they target extra dollars to high-need schools that prove they can deliver outcomes.

The Investing in Innovation Fund, or the i3 Fund, is a type of competitive grant program that takes on the challenging mandate of improving achievement at low-performing schools. This is an approach that Congress should support. It doesn't throw dollars at the problem and hope that something sticks. It adopts a focused plan that encourages schools to develop and adopt innovative solutions that, among other things, increase high school graduation rates and close achievement gaps.

There is already proof that innovation can improve education outcomes. Most teachers believe that giving students books to read over the summer can stop the learning decline that occurs while students are not in school. A recent study challenges this conventional wisdom. It finds that students who receive books without feedback and support do not improve. Instead, it innovatively suggests that teachers pair books with instructional materials, and it uses evidence to support that this new approach works.

And the i3 Fund has the added benefit of supporting what should be a key government priority—encouraging innovation. Innovation is a critical ingredient for economic success.

About 50 percent of GDP growth since World War II is related to innovation. It makes sense that federal interventions in K-12 education should support innovative practices just as they do in other sectors such as science, technology, and higher education.

The i3 Fund is an example of government doing what works to promote innovation without wasting taxpayer dollars on poor investments. It recognizes that while innovative approaches generally hold great potential, not all innovative practices generate results. Its focus on testing and evaluating instills a mechanism for supporting those innovative practices that work and cutting funding for those that don't work.

This well-thought out plan strikes the challenging balance between innovation and accountability by adopting a range of funding based on three different grant categories. Small grants are reserved for potentially transformative innovations that, often because of their newness, are not supported by data showing how well they will perform. Recipients of these grants are required to have a system in place that measures the performance of their pilot programs, thus ensuring accountability while providing the education community with new and useful data. On the other end of the spectrum, applicants for the largest grants are subject to the most rigorous performance metrics before they receive a single federal dollar. Applicants must show that their innovative solution for improving school performance already works, and that their strategy can be scaled up to the national level.

This mix of innovation, performance, and competition lays the groundwork for ensuring that taxpayer dollars are put to their highest use. It's a carefully designed program that targets funding at approaches that generate high returns, such as expanded learning time programs. It also delivers results quickly; the application process means schools that do receive funding already have a clear vision and a ready plan for implementation. And the i3 Fund's emphasis on performance metrics holds recipients accountable for outcomes that are sustainable even after their federal grants are completed.

The i3 Fund is a relatively new program—first-year funding was secured last year, and the program is now accepting grant applications—but competitive grant programs have a history of getting results quickly. Sometimes these results materialize even before a single dollar is spent. Simply establishing the conditions for funding creates a strong incentive for schools to achieve a minimum expectation of performance. Funding requirements for Race to the Top, another new competitive grant program, compelled states to reform their education laws in order to be eligible for funding. This reform occurred quickly and even before a single federal grant was issued. Similarly, the i3 Fund's evidence and testing requirements encourage schools to develop best practices for measuring and assessing performance even before they apply for an i3 Fund grant.

American schools need a government that it is committed to approaches that deliver results. The president's blueprint for education reform is a positive step toward achieving this objective. It calls for a large increase in federal funding for competitive grant programs while calling for cuts to spending programs that don't generate results.

Congress can play its role in supporting these efforts in one of two ways. It can reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which would provide support for the i3 Fund. Or if it does not reauthorize ESEA, congressional appropriations committees can fund the program through their own processes, just as they have done in the past for important programs that do not have authorizing language. But the i3 Fund will run out of money if ESEA is not reauthorized this year and if congressional appropriations committees fail to fund the program. Ending the i3 fund will effectively end support for innovative practices in education—practices that hold the promise of rapid and much-needed improvements in low-performing schools.

Congress's role does not end with appropriating money to the i3 Fund. A future challenge for Congress will be to assess whether competitive grant programs such as the i3 Fund continue to generate results. For the i3 Fund, accountability means proving that innovative practices it supports today are actually adopted and scaled up. But assessing whether the i3 Fund can maintain its results is a question for the future. Today, it is working. And it is the type of program that Congress should be supporting. It would be a sad commentary on accountability and reform if we can't fund programs that improve school performance, especially when these programs have the results to demonstrate it.