



Ineffective Uses of ESEA Title II Funds

Funding Doesn't Improve Student Achievement

By Robin Chait and Raegen Miller

Title II of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, or ESEA, provides approximately \$3 billion to support state and district-level activities that improve teacher and principal quality and thereby improve student achievement. However, there is little proof that the program is achieving this goal. According to Andrew Rotherham of Education Sector, “tangible results from these efforts are scant, and there is little evidence that these funds are driving the sort of changes needed to help schools recruit, train, place, induct, and compensate quality teachers or changes that are aligned with broader human capital reform efforts in education.”¹

Part of the problem is that “the current Title II, Part A program provides funding that can be used for an enormous array of activities to improve teacher qualifications and quality.”² Most of the funding supports district-level activities (95 percent). Many of these activities are worthwhile, but funding is not specifically targeted to activities that are likely to yield a significant return on investment. In fact, districts use the bulk of their Title II funding to support professional development and class-size reduction,³ which both have questionable effects on student achievement when implemented on a large scale.

Specifically, in the 2008-09 school year, districts used 39 percent of funds to support professional development activities for teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators, and 38 percent of funds to pay highly qualified teachers to reduce class size.⁴ Districts have used their Title II, Part A funds primarily to support professional development and class-size reduction since they were first surveyed in the 2002-03 school year, but they have reduced their spending on class-size reduction and increased spending on professional development during that time period.⁵

Currently, there is very little empirical evidence on the effectiveness of professional development. A recent review of 1,300 studies conducted by researchers at the Southwest Regional Educational Laboratory found only nine studies that were sufficiently rigorous to include in their analysis.⁶ These nine studies did find positive effects, but they also found that “no professional development training lasting 14 or fewer hours had a positive impact

on student achievement; in contrast, professional development of extended duration (an average of 49 hours) boosted student achievement by about 21 percentile points.”⁷

A recent U.S. Department of Education survey of how school districts use Title II funds and the types of professional development provided to teachers (using all sources of funds) questions whether most teachers participate in professional development activities of extended duration. The survey found that “over 4.3 million teachers took part in full-day workshops, and more than 2.8 million teachers attended afterschool professional development activities”⁸ while only “1.6 million teachers took part in daily learning team sessions.”⁹

Moreover, another U.S. Department of Education survey found “a majority of teachers (57 percent) said they had received no more than 16 hours (two days or less) of professional development during the previous 12 months on the content of the subject(s) they taught. This was the most frequent area in which teachers identified having had professional development opportunities. Fewer than one-quarter of teachers (23 percent) reported that they had received at least 33 hours (more than four days) of professional development on the content of the subject(s) they taught.”¹⁰

Another recent high-quality study of professional development programs that focused on early reading instruction yielded disappointing findings. The study “found that while the programs did improve teacher knowledge, they had no statistically significant impact on second grade students’ reading test scores. This study is only one evaluation of two programs in 90 schools after one year of implementation, and perhaps later years of implementation will lead to greater dividends. The research is noteworthy, however, because it was a rigorous study of two high-quality professional development programs, and one would have expected some measurable effects in the first year.”¹¹

So it’s clear that there isn’t sufficient research to help districts design effective professional development programs. The research that does exist finds that the duration of professional development is extremely important, and from all indications, most professional development programs are not of sufficient duration.

Class-size reduction, which receives another large chunk of Title II funds, is popular with teachers and parents. But its extremely high cost raises questions about whether there are more cost-effective ways to boost student achievement. And research shows that giving students a highly effective teacher will have a much greater impact on their achievement than reducing class size.¹²

For example, one study found that “the average difference between being assigned a top-quartile or a bottom-quartile teacher is 10 percentile points” on a scale of mathematics performance.¹³ In contrast, “a random assignment evaluation of a classroom-size reduction in Tennessee found that schools could improve achievement by half as much—5 percentile points—by shrinking class size in early grades.”¹⁴ Research on the impact of

class-size reduction in later grades provides little support for its use as a strategy to raise student achievement. Furthermore, class-size reduction policies tend to exacerbate the shortage of effective teachers in high-poverty schools, thus undermining attempts to close achievement gaps.

Clearly, funds currently allocated through Title II of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act could be repurposed in ways that lead to greater improvements in student achievement and progress in closing achievement gaps. Until Title II can be overhauled to ensure that funds are applied in cost-effective ways that align with strategic goals, it would make sense to channel more funding to competitive grant programs that show greater promise in this sense.

Endnotes

- 1 Andrew Rotherham, "Title 2.0: Revamping the Federal Role in Education Human Capital" (Washington: Education Sector, November 2008) http://www.educationsector.org/usr_doc/Title_2.pdf
- 2 Robin Chait, "From Qualifications to Results, Promoting Teacher Effectiveness Through Federal Policy" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2009).
- 3 U.S. Department of Education, "Findings from the 2008-09 Survey on the Use of Funds Under Title II, Part A, July 2009" (Washington: U.S. Department of Education, 2009)
- 4 U.S. Department of Education, "Findings from the 2008-09 Survey on the Use of Funds Under Title II, Part A, July 2009" (Washington: U.S. Department of Education, 2009)
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 See Kwang Suk Yoon and others, "Reviewing the Evidence on How Teacher Professional Development Affects Student Achievement" (Washington: U.S. Department of Education) in Robin Chait, "From Qualifications to Results, Promoting Teacher Effectiveness Through Federal Policy" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2009).
- 7 Craig Jerald, "Aligned by Design, How Teacher Compensation Reform Can Support and Reinforce Other Educational Reforms" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2009)
- 8 U.S. Department of Education, "Findings from the 2008-09 Survey on the Use of Funds Under Title II, Part A, July 2009" (Washington: U.S. Department of Education, 2009)
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Linda Darling-Hammond and others, "Professional Learning in the Learning Profession: A Status Report on Teacher Development in the United States and Abroad" (Washington: National Staff Development Council, 2009), p. 5
- 11 Michael S. Garet and others, "The Impact of Two Professional Development Interventions on Early Reading Instruction and Achievement" in Robin Chait, "From Qualifications to Results, Promoting Teacher Effectiveness Through Federal Policy" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2009).
- 12 Dan Goldhaber, "Teacher Pay Reforms, The Political Implications of Recent Research" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2006)
- 13 Robert Gordon, Thomas J. Kane, Douglas O. Staiger, "Identifying Effective Teachers Using Performance on the Job" (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2006)
- 14 Alan B. Krueger, "Experimental Estimates of Education Production Functions." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 114 (2) (1999): 497-532 in Robert Gordon, Thomas J. Kane, Douglas O. Staiger, "Identifying Effective Teachers Using Performance on the Job" (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2006).