

The National Coalition

for

Public Education

NCPE Opposes Title I Portability Measures

NCPE opposes any and all efforts to make Title I funding “portable” by allowing the money to follow a child to any public or private school. Such proposals would undermine Title I’s fundamental purpose of assisting public schools with high concentrations of poverty and high-need students. Some portability proposals would allow the funds to move to both public and private schools, which is simply a voucher by another name. Other Title I portability proposals would limit the funds to public schools, but they are designed to make it easier to implement private school vouchers in the future. Accordingly, we oppose any measures to create or support Title I portability in legislation—even if the funds would be limited to public schools.

Title I Portability Is a Stepping Stone Toward Vouchers

Intent Matters

In the 113th Congress, several efforts were made in both the House and Senate that would have changed the Title I formula to divert these funds to public schools and private schools.

Senator Lamar Alexander, current chairman of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP), attempted twice to turn Title I into a voucher by dramatically changing the Title I formula to permit portability to any public and private school. Although both attempts failed, this remains a priority for Senator Alexander.

In the House, then-Majority Leader Eric Cantor successfully offered a portability amendment on the House floor to the House Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) bill. Although that amendment would have allowed Title I funding to flow only to public schools, news coverage and speeches he gave at the time indicate that he originally wanted to propose Title I portability to both public and private schools but lacked the votes needed for passage. Thus, it is clear that the Cantor amendment was intended as a stepping stone toward vouchers.

Dismantling the Title I Funding Formula Would Make It Easier to Transform Title I into a Voucher

Currently, Title I dollars flow to the states, which then distribute the dollars to districts based on the number of students in poverty and the percentage of total students in poverty in each district. This weighted formula ensures that large, highly affluent districts do not receive a greater share of Title I funds than poorer, smaller districts. As a result, districts within the state receive different allocations of Title I funds.

With portability, however, every eligible child within a state would receive the same amount of Title I funds regardless of the district he or she attends. This would undermine the very purpose of Title I, which is to ensure that students in high poverty districts receive a greater allocation of funds. It would also both allow the dollars to be more easily transferred to private schools and make it considerably easier for the state to combine this standardized funding stream with other state funding streams. In short, states with existing voucher programs could simply tack on Title I funding to create large-scale voucher schemes.

Title I Portability Would Harm Public Schools and Students in Poverty

Portability Undermines Congressional Intent for Addressing Achievement Gaps in Poor Schools

Congress adopted Title I in 1965 to ensure that districts and schools serving large concentrations of students in poverty received a greater portion of federal funds to address the compounded impact of poverty on student learning. High-poverty districts and schools benefit from increased federal investment by taking advantage of “economies of scale” to combine resources for school-wide services and whole school reforms targeted at economically and academically needy groups of students. To fulfill congressional intent, today’s Title I funds are given directly to school districts to provide coordinated programs and services to groups of academically struggling, low-income students.

Portability would completely change the formula for distributing money to districts and schools, and eliminate the concept of Title I-eligible schools altogether. The state would be able to fully disregard—and school districts then denied the ability to address—the unique needs of schools and communities with a concentration of students in poverty when distributing Title I funds throughout the state. Instead, the funds would be allocated on a per-student basis. This dilutes the effect of these limited federal funds on combatting concentrations of poverty.

Portability Would Undermine the Ability of Educators to Target Federal Funds to the Neediest Students

Portability would make Title I programs incredibly inefficient and undercut attempts to effectively support learning and achievement outcomes for high-need students. Districts would be severely hindered in their ability to effectively use federal funding to address the academic needs of students resulting from systemic poverty in their neighborhoods and communities. Further, it would make it difficult for districts to target federal dollars toward groups of students who most need services and supports and who could most benefit from an early investment of additional federal resources.

Under current law, districts make local decisions about how to best use the Title I funding they receive, including deciding to “pool” Title I funding so that the highest poverty schools in the district receive the funds. This allows Title I-eligible schools to operate school-level programs of sufficient size and scale to improve academic achievement. For decades districts have chosen to invest their Title I funds primarily in their highest poverty elementary schools because addressing student learning needs at the earliest age possible produces the greatest return on investment. Portability would divest local school districts of important decision making authority – including the decision to “pool” funds—that would have a direct, and often negative, effect on learning opportunities for high-need students in those districts.

Currently, districts can also further target their federal dollars toward specific students within a school based on their academic needs. This means a student who enters first grade with little to no prior schooling would have access to more Title I services and professionals than his or her peers who are not as academically challenged. If, however, Title I portability became law, a district could not plan to dedicate more Title I dollars to high-need students in the same way.