Imagine a national effort to improve the education of disadvantaged children that focuses extra funds on poorer schools, gives principals and teachers the authority to decide how best to help children, and encourages states to raise their academic standards and to hold accountable low-performing schools. Imagine, further, that school reformers view these funds as the "engine for reform" in the nation's most desolate schools.

This reform effort already exists in the form of a federal program known as Title I. Yet its fate hangs in the balance, as Congress debates whether to continue it and in what form. How can that be?

As the largest federal program of education aid, Title I provides approximately $8 billion annually to 45,000 schools in over 13,000 local school districts. Title I is the soul of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which expires this year.

During last fall's debate on education legislation in the U.S. House of Representatives, many members of Congress questioned the effectiveness of Title I, with some calling the program a failure. This criticism led to the House's passage of legislation that would allow 10 states to block-grant Title I funds with other funds. Under the "Straight A's" bill, states could take Title I money away from the poorest schools and divert it into programs not aiding disadvantaged children. Early this year, the U.S. Senate will have to decide whether to follow the House's lead.

Title I is a success, not a failure. But if the critics' erroneous point of view prevails in the Senate, millions of disadvantaged children and distressed schools will be dealt a severe blow. Children from minority groups will be especially harmed, since six out of 10 children who benefit from Title I are African-Americans and Hispanics.
To understand the success of Title I, we must begin with some basic facts. Title I is not a monolithic program in those thousands of schools, but rather a heterogeneous collection of local programs. Since Title I’s creation in 1965, local educators and school boards have had considerable flexibility to use Title I funds in ways they believe would best improve the education of disadvantaged children. For instance, a school could use all its funds for summer programs, for after-school tutoring, or for an intervention to raise student reading levels.

Further, state and local school officials decide the level of educational progress they expect disadvantaged children to attain through Title I-assisted activities. There is no national standard to measure the success or failure of any local Title I effort. In fact, it was not until 1988 that the Title I law required states to set any level of educational attainment for disadvantaged children and take action to assist schools failing to help those children.

Within these parameters of local control, Title I has made important improvements in the education of disadvantaged children:

- Title I focuses critical additional dollars on schools with low-income students. Congress’ General Accounting Office found that, thanks to Title I, education funding targeted on poor children was 77 percent higher than it otherwise would have been. Furthermore, 46 percent of Title I funds go to the very poorest 15 percent of all schools, and nearly three-fourths go to schools where the majority of children are poor, according to the U.S. Department of Education.
- Title I has helped to raise the academic achievement of minority and poor children. Recent research shows that additional funding has a greater impact on the achievement of minority and disadvantaged students than on the achievement of more advantaged students. The largest gains in test scores over the past 30 years have been made by African-American, Hispanic, and white disadvantaged children. In fact, one-third to one-half of the gap between African-American and white students closed during that period. A study by RAND linked these gains to the social and educational programs, including Title I, that made educational opportunities and resources more equitable.
- Title I has been essential in reforming schools, especially those in the poorest neighborhoods. Since 1994, all states have been raising academic standards, in part because Title I now requires them to adopt high standards for
disadvantaged children. At the local level, school reformers have noted that Title I is what makes local reform possible in our poorest schools.

Critics of Title I ignore all of these accomplishments. Instead, they say that Title I is a failure because it has not totally eliminated the achievement gap between minority and white children or between poor and more affluent students. Although eliminating this gap is a worthy goal, it has never been the stated legislative purpose of Title I, nor the national standard for measuring Title I’s success.

If Congress decides that eliminating the achievement gap should be the main goal of Title I, then other changes are also needed. Title I provides less than 3 percent of the country's total expenditures for elementary and secondary education. If Title I is expected to close the achievement gap, then conditions must be placed on how states and school districts use the other 97 percent of the funds.

For example, teachers with the most advanced degrees, the most classroom experience, and the highest level of certification are far more likely to teach in affluent areas than in poor ones. In addition, affluent schools can provide their teachers with greater opportunities to develop and improve their professional skills than high-poverty schools can. If Title I is expected to help poor children learn as much as more affluent children, the law must also require states to provide poor children with the same advantages as more affluent students.

In addition, students from more affluent families come to school more ready to learn, in part because they have greater access to high-quality early-childhood programs than poorer students do. Title I could be amended to require states to provide all poor children with universal access to high-quality child care and good preschool education. States could also remove any tax incentives or governmental subsidies for child care from more affluent families. The federal government could help by increasing funds for the Head Start program for poor children and eliminating federal tax subsidies to middle-class and upper-income families for child care.

These are but two examples of how we would have to level the playing field so that Title I could eliminate the achievement gap between poor and affluent students. Of course, local control of education would be diminished, but that's the price Congress would have to pay.
The option that makes the most sense is to expand Title I so it can do more of what it's already doing well: focusing additional dollars on poor schools, raising student achievement, and encouraging state and local school reform. The national government has found a way to work with state and local officials to improve the education of the disadvantaged, while respecting local control. Instead of creating a block grant with these funds, Congress and the president must renew Title I and expand it so that both equity and excellence can be achieved in American education.

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