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# Qualified Teachers Mean Quality Reading for Needy Kids

*Dr. Timothy Shanahan, an International Reading Association Board member, delivered this address at the Legislation and Education Forum at the 1999 MRA conference in Grand Rapids on March 13.*

**A**s a member of the Board of Directors of the International Reading Association and a former Title I teacher, I am happy to be here today. I've been pleased to hear of the strong commitments to public education of both the Democrats and Republicans in Washington as described by Mr. [Rep. Peter] Hoekstra and am heartened that Title I reauthorization will have such strong political support. Despite all of the recent attention to the Reading Excellence Act, Eisenhower Professional Training Grants, and other important federal legislation that supports reading education, the Title I reauthorization matters more to reading educators than any other federal program. Because of this importance, the Board of Directors of IRA has taken an 11-point position on Title I. That position statement is included here, so my remarks will just highlight a few major emphases or concerns.

Title I since its inception in 1965 has been based on the recognition that economically disadvantaged children do not do as well in learning as children from more advantaged backgrounds. The idea was that federal funds would be used to support compensatory education and that this would lead to educational enrichment or an increase in amount of schooling for needy children. These funds were meant to help compensate for the limitations in support evident in poor schools.

Over the years there have been important changes in funding formulas and requirements, but the idea of using educational funds to try to offset economic disadvantage has been and should continue to be a cornerstone of this essential program.

How has Title I done over the years? Well, I think it is fair to say that this noble plan has fallen far short of its goals. As Secretary of Education [Richard W.] Riley (1999) recently pointed out, "We have a stubborn achievement gap between the well-off and the poor." We cannot be certain how bad education might be today in our inner cities and rural areas without Title I, but it is evident that it has failed to close these stubborn achievement gaps in reading and mathematics. Rich and poor are still far apart. Of course, these problems are great, and it would be difficult for any one program alone to solve them. Although dollars have increased for Title I, the numbers of poor children in our society have increased as well. Similarly, because mobility can be so high in poor areas, no program administered within a single school is likely to succeed. But the problems with Title I are not all financial or demographic, they are also pedagogical.

Over the years, studies have identified features of Title I programs that work. For instance, many Title I programs are pull-out programs in which children go from one teacher



to another during the school day. Although certain pull-out models provide education of sufficiently high quality to improve things for kids, most do not. Programs that provide children with more education, rather than just "education down the hall," appear to do best. It makes little sense to move the child from a classroom teacher to a Title I teacher just to receive the same old instruction.

The International Reading Association recognizes the need for local autonomy on education—and in fact, the board statement forthrightly calls for a protection of professional decision-making. But we reject the notion that there is no need for federal regulations and rules regarding this program. Title I has a public purpose, and it is essential that monies be expended towards the accomplishment of that purpose, and that local administrative deci-

***One study indicates that fully 20 percent of aides provide instruction without any teacher supervision. ... Most aides lack instructional training, and in fact, most don't have a high school education.***

sions be consonant with those purposes. Block grants, ed-flex, and deregulation sound great in principle in that they seem to offer flexibility of response to students' needs, but in practice it is evident that some kinds of appropriate regulation and oversight are needed if educational success is to be accomplished.

What Congressman Hoekstra and his colleagues must remember is that the federal purpose and local purposes might not match.

The federal expenditure is to help poor children, but without any controls or accountability, there is no way of ensuring that these dollars go to the children in greatest need. In practice, we know local administrators find it difficult, even impossible, not to respond to local demands from the squeakiest wheels in their communities. So, let's say my Title I school is 80 percent poor and 20 percent middle class. Twenty percent of my parents—mainly the middle class ones—are demanding additional services for their kids, and the other 80 percent (mainly the poor ones) don't even come in for annual parent conferences. Regulation is needed to make certain that I do not use these specific tax dollars to target the needs of the middle-class kids at my school or that I not devote these funds to programs, such as arts or music programs, that would be nice to have, but that would not improve the chances of the poor kids.

Over the years, we have observed a huge increase in the number of Title I aides and paraprofessionals hired by schools (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). At this point, the number of aides rivals the numbers of Title I certified teachers, and because we have been increasing the numbers of aides (but not teachers), the role of qualified teachers is being eclipsed. Of course, the use of Title I aides to serve as teacher helpers and clerks and to fulfill similar roles is a valuable use of Title I money. But that isn't how these aides are being used in many districts. One study indicates that fully 20 percent of aides provide instruction *without any teacher supervision*. The average Title I aide provides instruction for approximately 31 students per day according to another study. Most aides lack instructional training, and in fact, most don't have a high school education.

Earlier I noted that just sending kids to an equally qualified teacher was not much compensation, but the idea of sending needy children, with the greatest learning challenges, to "teachers" who lack training and certification—in other words, less knowledgeable and less qualified—is a national bait-and-switch trick with your tax dollars. This is a misuse of public funds, understandable in terms of local decision-making (uncertified aides can be hired for less money than a teacher), but a clear violation of the spirit of this legislation and a horrible loss for the children who get inadequate teaching because of it. I wonder how many of our federal legislators would be willing to staff their offices entirely with low



education-low salary workers. The benefit to them, of course, would be that they could hire so many more people, but I wonder if we would see any differences in the quality of the services that they provide to their constituencies?

IRA calls for few regulations, but the ones that we do support require the delivery of Title I instruction by *qualified* teachers, instead of uncertified aides and paraprofessionals. IRA calls for ongoing professional development for these teachers to ensure the quality of their educational responses to children's needs. IRA calls for school-wide Title I programs that address the needs of children at risk of failure, rather than just adding to a school's bottom line with federal largess. Block grants will just throw money at our very real educational problems rather than targeting those monies on solving the problems in ways that have proven to be most effective. IRA calls for greater accountability in Title I programs, and greater, more targeted parent involvement efforts. But, when it comes to making specific instructional and assessment decisions about the learning needs of specific children, IRA says these decisions should be local. We should not try to impose some specific instructional strategies on Title I teachers, but should recognize that teachers who are working with a child will be the one who can best make such decisions. We ask respectfully for a continuation of federal support for Title I, but we want this to be done in ways that will increase the chances of reading excellence for disadvantaged kids. They deserve nothing less. Our children deserve nothing less. America deserves nothing less.

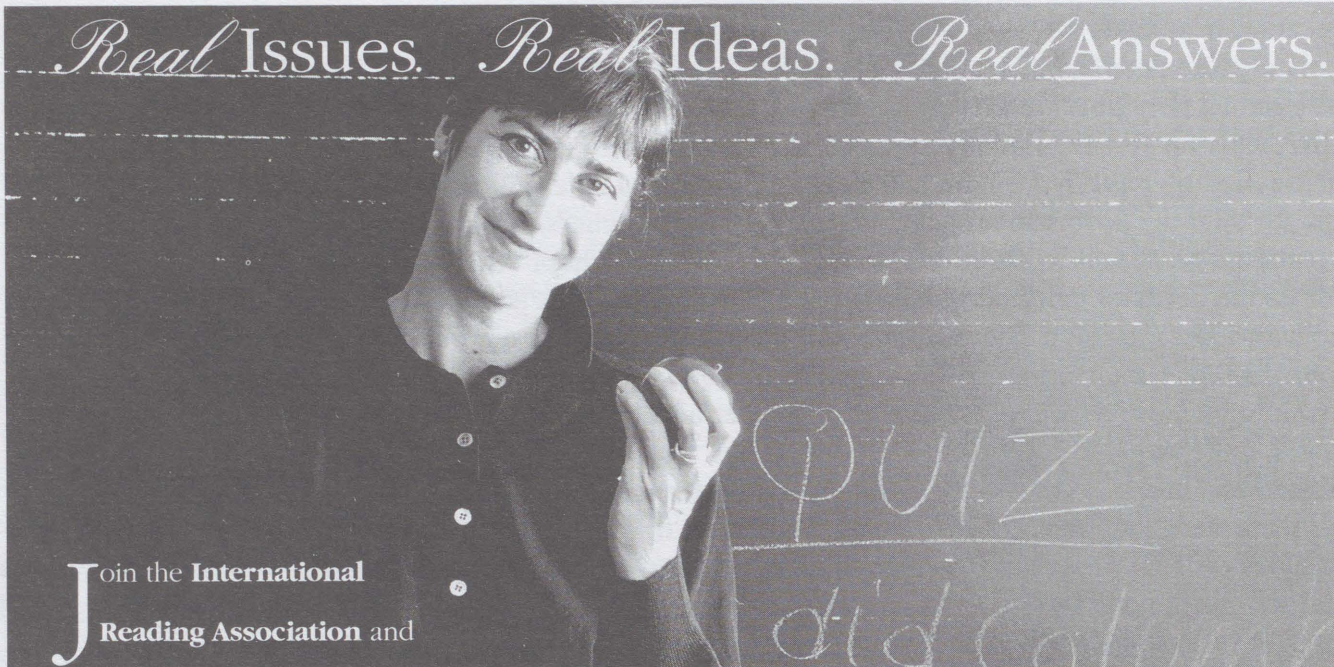
Thank you.

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