

Support for Elementary and Secondary Education

The federal government provides modest but important support for schools. That support has eroded in recent years, however, with appropriations for the Education Department’s elementary and secondary education programs falling by 13 percent from 2010 to 2017, after adjusting for inflation.

While the federal government provides a modest share of overall education funding, it provides a larger share of funding to schools to serve low-income students and students with disabilities — two groups that face significant challenges. Roughly 41 percent of children ages 5 to 17 are low-income according to recent Census data, and roughly 13 percent of public school students are in special education programs.³⁵ Federal funding helps boost resources and educational offerings and support for these students. It also helps direct resources and attention to discrete areas important for student success, such as improving teacher preparation and ongoing supports and after-school programs for disadvantaged students.

About three-quarters of appropriations for elementary and secondary education programs are for two large grant programs to local school systems (via states) aimed at promoting educational success for disadvantaged students and students with disabilities:

- “Title I” grants to local schools, which are based primarily on a school’s number of low-income students, provide additional services and support to help disadvantaged students succeed. They serve almost 24 million students in more than half of all public schools.
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) grants, which help cover the cost of special education services to meet the needs of more than 7 million children with disabilities, in accordance with federal law.

Other Education Department appropriations for elementary and secondary education support grants to aid in the recruitment, training, support, and retention of high-quality teachers, after-school programs for students in high-need schools, and Impact Aid payments to assist school districts with financial burdens resulting from concentrations of federal properties and facilities, to give just a few examples.

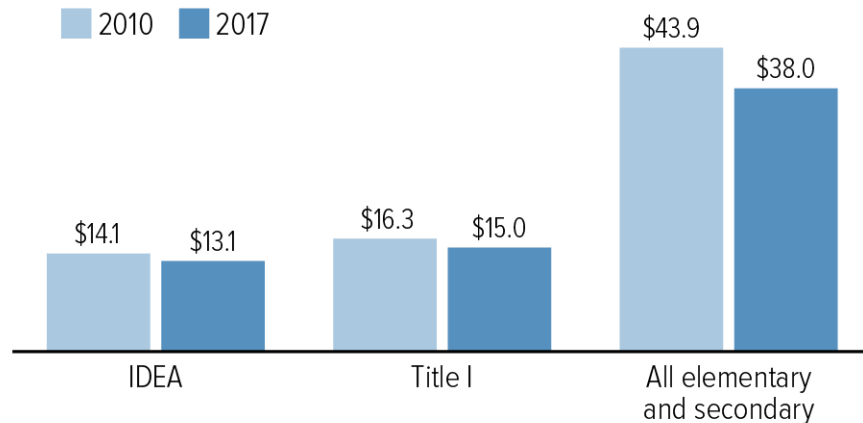
Elementary and secondary education funding rose during the first part of the last decade, following enactment of the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act, but then generally began to slip backwards. In inflation-adjusted terms, the 2017 total is 21 percent below the high point in 2004 and 13 percent below the 2010 level. Each of the two main grant programs described above has lost 8 percent of its purchasing power since 2010. (See Figure 9.)

³⁵ Low-income is defined as below 200 percent of the federal poverty level. The latest estimate for low-income school-aged children is for 2015 and from the Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey Detailed Tables for Poverty, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/cps-pov/pov-01.2015.html>. The latest estimate for special education is for academic year 2014-15 and from National Center for Education Statistics, “2016 Digest of Education Statistics,” Table 204.30, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/tables/dt16_204.30.asp.

FIGURE 9

Federal Funding for Elementary and Secondary Education Has Eroded in Recent Years

In billions of 2017 dollars, fiscal years



Note: Excludes funding from the 2009 Recovery Act. For comparability, 2017 funding level for Title I grants excludes school improvement grants, which were consolidated within the Title I grants program beginning in 2017 under the Every Student Succeeds Act. IDEA = Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Funding for IDEA grants includes grants for services to infants and preschoolers, as well as a small sum of funding for national activities.

Source: CBPP based on U.S. Department of Education and enacted appropriations

The Every Student Succeeds Act, passed in 2015 with strong bipartisan support, reauthorized most federal programs to aid elementary and secondary education, overhauling rules for accountability and assessment and revising various grant programs while retaining a focus on ensuring access to a quality education for all students. The law attempted to strike a balance between giving school districts and states more flexibility in designing systems to measure schools' and students' success while still measuring students' academic achievement in ways that identify schools that leave some or all students behind.

With additional funding, more resources could be directed to schools serving large numbers of disadvantaged students — schools which are often under-resourced and struggling — to ensure that students have access to high-quality teachers, rigorous coursework, and the supports necessary for them to succeed. Similarly, more resources could be directed to schools to help support students with disabilities.