
Appendix C: School Improvement Team (SWP School) Focus Group Protocol and Consent Form

School Improvement Team (SWP School) Focus Group Protocol

School:	Interviewer:
District:	
State:	
Interviewee(s):	Date/Time:
Interviewee(s') Role(s): (select all that apply) <input type="checkbox"/> School improvement team member (indicate position at school) <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____	

Information for the Interviewer

For more than 50 years, Title I of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* has aimed to improve the prospects of children in high-poverty schools by providing additional funding for their schools to develop educational services that will improve student outcomes.

Although the Title I policy began by targeting services to eligible students—low achievers in high-poverty schools—the program has increasingly emphasized schoolwide services based on research showing that schools can improve student outcomes by adopting whole-school strategies. Title I's schoolwide program (SWP) provisions allow schools the flexibility to serve all students in the school and thereby design whole-school reforms. Unlike their targeted assistance (TA) counterparts, SWP schools also are allowed to commingle Title I funds with funds from other federal, state, and local programs. This study aims to obtain a better understanding of how SWP flexibility may translate into programs and services that can improve student performance.

PAY ATTENTION TO:

- **Title I Interventions.** How SWP school uses Title I funds to select and implement interventions (RQ1)
- **Resource Allocation.** How Title I funds are allocated to the school (RQ2)
- **Decision Making.** How decisions are made about how to use and allocate Title I funds and who is involved (RQ2)
- **Schoolwide Programs.** How SWP school uses Title I funds in ways that would not be permissible in TAP schools (RQ3)
- **Professional Development.** State and district supports to school leaders on Title I (RQ2)
- **Policy Context.** Relevant state and district policy factors that affect Title I implementation (RQ2, RQ3)

By the end of this interview, you should have details and examples for each of these areas.

Introduction

Key points to convey to the respondent:

- This is a study conducted by American Institutes for Research on behalf of the U.S. Department of Education. The purpose of the study is to explore the implementation of Title I programs, focusing on the interplay among school decision making, use of funds, and implementation of educational practices supported by Title I and other funds.
- **This is not a compliance study; our purpose is solely to provide policymakers and the general public with insight regarding local experiences with Title I programs.**
- We are conducting case studies of Title I schools in a subset of the nation's states and districts. We also are administering nationally representative surveys of district officials and school principals to collect data from a wider range of respondents. In addition to the case studies and surveys, our team is reviewing state and district resources and policy documents available to guide the implementation of Title I schoolwide and targeted assistance programs.
- The study's results will be discussed in a final report that will be available publicly. The main purpose of this study is to share your perspectives and experiences with policymakers as they continue to refine policy and technical assistance on important issues related to Title I.
- We will not include any information in our public reporting that identifies your district. However, officials at the U.S. Department of Education will know that districts in your state participated in this study. In addition, staff from the U.S. Department of Education will see notes from our interview, but the notes we share will be reviewed and edited to ensure we do not include any information that could identify you or your district.
- We know that you are very busy, and we appreciate your time. We anticipate that this interview will take approximately 60–90 minutes.
- We would like to record this conversation so that we can be sure we have an accurate record of our conversation. We will not share this recording with anyone outside the research team, and we will delete the recording after the final report is complete. Is that okay with you?
- You may discontinue your participation in this interview at any time. Throughout the course of the interview, if we touch on topics that you believe to be sensitive for any reason, please bring that to our attention, and we will not include these comments either in public reporting or in discussions with the U.S. Department of Education.

If asked why or how the district was selected for the study:

- The districts and schools for the study were selected on the basis of a number of factors. We wanted to include larger and smaller districts and schools that are located in different regions of the country and include both Title I schoolwide and targeted assistance programs. We also selected schools on the basis of school characteristics, including school level (elementary, middle, and high), enrollment, and demographics, to ensure variation in the sample.

School Context

I would like to start with some questions about your school's context and history so that I can understand your school better.

Question	Probe for:	Listen for:
1. How would you describe your school to someone who has never been here before, including your school's strengths and challenges?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><i>What are the demographics of your school?</i><i>What are the school's recent successes?</i><i>How would you describe the degree of teacher and staff turnover?</i><i>How would you describe parent and community involvement in your school?</i><i>For a rural school:</i> <i>What challenges does being in a rural setting present?</i>	
2. How would you describe the surrounding community and the neighborhoods that your students live in?		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><i>Is the community stable?</i><i>Is the neighborhood safe?</i>

Efforts to Improve Student Outcomes

Note to Interviewer (for reference only, NOT to be read to respondent): Review the school's Title I plan prior to the interview. Keep the improvement efforts listed in the plan in mind in proceeding with this line of questioning and probe as appropriate. **But**, only proceed with probing on these activities based on the respondent's familiarity with Title I-supported strategies.

Question	Listen for:
3. Please describe your role(s) at the school relating to school improvement.	SPECIFIC EXAMPLES <ul style="list-style-type: none"><i>More funding, resources, state or district support</i><i>Greater expertise among staff</i><i>Staff capacity to serve needs of students</i><i>Other</i>
4. Generally speaking, what do you think your school needs to improve student performance?	

Question	
5. Could you describe the specific services or strategies your school is implementing to improve student outcomes?	<p>Probe for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>How have you prioritized these strategies?</i> • <i>Are these long-standing or newly initiated approaches to improving student outcomes in your school?</i> <p>SPECIFIC EXAMPLES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic or non-academic interventions to address needs of low-performing students • Personnel such as content specialists or coaches • Personnel to reduce student-teacher ratios (e.g., aides or paraprofessionals) • Other personnel like school counselors or behavior specialists • Extended day programs • Social-emotional support or wraparound services • Academic and/or non-academic interventions to address needs of English learners, students with disabilities • Other supplies, materials, technology • Community or family programs • Facilities improvements
6. Why did your school prioritize...(list the efforts that the respondent described as a priority)?	<p>Probe for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>State initiative or mandate</i> • <i>District initiative or mandate</i> • <i>School needs-assessment results</i> • <i>Knowledge of research or evidence base</i>
7. Can you talk to me about how all of these strategies fit together?	<p>Probe for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Do the strategies provide a coherent approach to improving outcomes for students?</i> • <i>Do the strategies complement one another?</i> • <i>Are there tensions among the strategies?</i>

Question
<p>8. Thinking about the services and strategies we've just discussed, how does Title I support these efforts?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Probe for: • <i>Does Title I enable the school to better support student achievement? How?</i> • Listen for: • <i>Title I provides extra resources to fund/support services and strategies</i> • <i>Title I encourages coherent needs assessment and planning</i> <i>Title I allows for the commingling/coordination of funds to support improvement efforts</i>

Use of Funds and Decision-Making Process

I would like to now talk more about the Title I planning process and how decisions are made related to use of Title I funds to support your school improvement efforts.

Question	
<p>9. Please describe your role in the Title I planning and decision-making process.</p>	<p>Probe for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What activities are you involved in?</i> • <i>Are there certain areas of Title I planning and budgeting in which you hold more or less influence?</i>
<p>10. How would you describe the level of flexibility that the district affords you in the Title I planning and decision making process?</p>	<p>Probe for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Does the district require you to use an established template? If yes, how much flexibility do you have within this template?</i> • <i>Are there any district-mandated activities that need to be included in your plan?</i> • <i>To what extent does the decision-making authority sit with the district, the school, or is it shared?</i>
<p>11. To what extent does the Title I planning process for your school rely on data?</p>	<p>Probe for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What data are used?</i> • <i>Does your school conduct a needs-assessment?</i> • <i>How are the needs of your school communicated to the district?</i>

12. For the 2015-16 school year, what did the data tell you about the needs of your school?

Now, I'd like to talk more specifically about the types of strategies, services, and resources that Title I funds are used for in your school.

13. I understand X staff in your school are supported by Title I funding this school year (pull from survey data). Is this correct?

Probe for:

- *Was there anything in the data that surprised you?*

14. Could you please describe the roles and activities of each of these personnel.

Probe for:

- *The types of staff that were reported on the survey, including:*
 - *Teachers*
 - *Paraprofessionals*
 - *Instructional coaches*
 - *EL specialists*
 - *Curriculum coordinators*
 - *Assessment coordinators*
 - *Administrative staff*
 - *Data analysts or technology support staff*

Probe for:

- *Which teachers and/or students do they support?*
- *What kind of supports do they provide?*
 - *Direct instruction to students*
 - *Social/emotional support to students*
 - *PD or other support for teachers*
 - *Parental or community engagement*

15. I understand that Title I funds are used to fund other types of resources or services to support your improvement efforts (pull from survey data). Can you please describe what these types of non-personnel supports are?

Probe for:

- *The type of non-personnel supports reported in the survey:*
 - *Instructional approaches or curricula for reading/ELA*
 - *Instructional approaches or curricula for math*
 - *Instructional approaches or curricula for other subjects*
 - *Instructional approaches or curricula for special populations of students (EL students, students with disabilities)*
 - *Extended day activities*
 - *Parental engagement*
 - *Supports for data use*
 - *Other?*
- *Who is responsible for purchasing these materials and supplies?*
- *How are they distributed to staff or accessed by staff?*
- *How are they used to support your school's efforts to improve student outcomes?*

Commingling and Coordination of Title I Funds

Notes to Interviewer (for reference only, NOT to be read to respondent):

- **Re-emphasize that this is not a compliance study** and that the study's purpose is solely to provide policymakers and the general public with insight regarding local experiences with Title I programs.
- **Review extant data** about the school's use of funds, including the school's Title I plan. Look for whether Title I funds are used in conjunction with any other federal categorical program funding, such as Title III, IDEA, Title II, or any state funding streams with similar purposes.
- **Review guidance on how SWP schools can use Title I funds.** SWP schools are expected to use the flexibility available to them to integrate services and programs with the aim of upgrading the entire educational program and helping all students reach proficient and advanced levels of achievement. In addition to coordinating and integrating services, SWP schools may combine most federal, state, and local funds to provide those services. By combining (sometimes referred to as commingling) funds from federal, state, and local sources, an SWP school can address its needs using all of the resources available to it. This gives a school more flexibility in how it uses available resources to meet the specifically identified needs of its students. Exercising this option is intended to maximize the impact use of the resources available to carry out the SWP.

I would now like to learn more about how Title I funds may be coordinated with other state, local, or federal funds, or commingled with other funding sources to support efforts to improve student outcomes and meet the needs of your students.

Question

16. Are you aware of the extent to which Title I funds are used together with funds from other sources to support your efforts to improve student outcomes (for example, other federal, state, or local funds)?

Probe for:

- *What are the other sources of funding?*
- *Are these funds coordinated or are they commingled?*
- *If funds are not coordinated or commingled, why not?*

17. Are you aware of any challenges that your school has faced related to using Title I funds, or trying to coordinate or commingle Title I and other funds?

Probe for:

- *If yes, have you been able to address these challenges?*
- *What would need to be in place for you to address or mitigate these challenges in the future?*

District Policy and Support for Title I

Question	Probe for:
18. Please describe any technical assistance or professional development you have received from the state or district on Title I.	<p>SPECIFIC EXAMPLES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Online resources</i>• <i>Guidance documents</i>• <i>Trainings or workshops</i>• <i>Focus of support (for example, decision making, use of funds, selecting interventions)</i>• <i>How widely available are these supports?</i>• <i>What other supports would be helpful?</i>

Conclusion

Question
19. Is there anything else you would like to share about your school's Title I program?

Thank you so much for your assistance with this important project!

Study of Title I Schoolwide and Targeted Assistance Programs

Informed Consent

Purpose

American Institutes for Research (AIR), under contract with the Policy and Program Studies Service (PPSS) of the U.S. Department of Education, is conducting a study of school decision making, use of Title I funds, and implementation of education practices in Title I Schoolwide (SWP) and Targeted Assistance (TAP) programs. Specifically, the proposed study will provide a comparative analysis of SWP and TAP schools that looks at the school-level decision-making process, implementation of strategic interventions, and corresponding resources that support these interventions. To this end, the study will employ multiple data collection strategies.

To assist with the study, we are asking school improvement team members to participate in focus groups. You will be asked about the following topics: the process by which decisions concerning educational resource allocation are made; how funding flexibility under Title I policy is used; the interventions and educational resources used that are supported by Title I and other funding sources; and, how state and district policies affect both how funds are used to support the subsequent strategies and the resources that are used at schools. The focus groups are designed to last approximately 60 minutes.

Risks and Discomfort

There are few anticipated or known risks in participating in this study.

Benefits

Your participation in the study will contribute to an understanding of the interplay between school decision-making, use of funds, and implementation of educational practices supported by Title I and other funding sources.

Participation

Participation of Title I districts and their schools in this study is required under Section 8306(a)(4) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. However, you may choose not to respond to certain questions or discontinue the focus group at any time.

Privacy

Responses to this data collection will be used only for research purposes. No part of the study involves evaluation of any individual. The reports prepared for the study will summarize findings across the sample and will not associate responses with a specific district, school, or individual. We will not provide information that identifies you, your school, or your district to anyone outside the study team, except as required by law. If there is information that you do not want shared directly in any reporting, please let me know.

We would like your consent to record this focus group. Recordings will be kept in a secure location and will not be accessed by anyone outside of the study team. The audio recordings will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study. You can participate in the focus group but decline to have it recorded. Additionally, if you elect to have the focus group recorded, you may stop the recording at any time.

More Information

If you would like more information about this study, you may contact the Project Director, Kerstin Carlson Le Floch, at the American Institutes for Research at 202-403-5649 or at klefloch@air.org. For questions regarding your rights as a subject participating in this research, please contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at IRBChair@air.org or toll free at 1-800-634-0797.

Informed Consent

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Print Name: _____

Position: _____

District/School: _____

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