Unlocking Title III: How Vendors Can Better Serve English Learners

*The Federal Program Offers Support for School District Programs Focused on Language Instruction, PD, and Family Engagement*

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Staff Writer

Though federal Title III funds make up only a small portion of the overall support that goes to English learners, school districts want to spend that money in ways that create a big impact for the 5 million students that fall under this category — making up nearly 10 percent of the student population in U.S. public schools.
Totaling about $890 million, Title III grants are designed to pay for supplemental resources to improve instruction for and the academic achievement of English language learners.

Funds are required to be spent in three categories: supplementing language-instruction programs; providing professional learning for educators on behalf of multilingual learners; and family and community engagement – all within the context of increasing English proficiency.

It is one of the more restrictive federal title programs, compared to those like Title I, which offer states and school districts more leeway to spend on a long list of priorities. For that reason, it’s essential for vendors to understand the rules surrounding the program, as well as the shifting demands in how states and districts are seeking to spend their share of the funding.

The Title III program is likely to be one of several key sources of funding that school systems examine as school districts face deadlines to commit and spend their share of a massive tide of federal emergency stimulus aid this year and next.

What Vendors Need to Know When It Comes to Title III

State and district leaders pointed to several aspects of the federal program that education companies need to be aware of.

Know districts’ funding limitations. The amount that districts receive varies each year. Multi-year contracts with vendors may be one way to ensure stability despite fluctuating funds, but vendors can’t expect districts to lock themselves into products that they may not have funding for the following year.

Be intentional about the populations served. Districts are looking for products that are designed for English learners from the start, rather than retrofitting existing products so they serve this population. Products must also truly support language development, rather than simply

Supplemental Spending, Only

The U.S. Department of Education disburses Title III funds to states based on their English learner and immigrant student enrollment, a number that changes annually. Ninety-five percent of those dollars are allocated to districts.

The remaining 5 percent is used for priorities at the state level, like staffing program supervisors to review the grants and to assist districts in laying out their
spending plans, and for supporting the fiscal office to distribute the funds.

“Vendors often ask if we can do some kind of state contract with Title III, but we don’t hold the dollars - the districts do, so most of that is going to have to happen directly with districts,” said Kristin Calaff, executive director of multilingual and migrant education for the Washington State Board of Education, which currently receives about $500,000 in Title III funding.

An important feature of the program, however, is that money must be used in a way that’s supplemental, or in addition to, federal, state, and local funds, rather than as a replacement to them.

Those restrictions “can feel limiting,” said Tanya Franca, coordinator of ESOL programs for the Greenville County School District, which has the largest multilingual learner population in South Carolina. “If districts aren’t implementing things at the base level for multilingual learners out of the general fund, what you want to use Title III for can’t be supplemental.”

Districts with more English learners have a larger amount of funding to work with. That can leave districts with small numbers of those students, but substantial needs, with fewer options.

Closing a ‘Huge Gap’ in PD

For many districts, a large portion of funds go toward professional development, which is considered a supplementary service. This includes bringing in instructional coaches offering general academic support, to qualify for Title III dollars.

Consider integration of funds. Vendors should be aware of how their products and services can be integrated with other title programs and other sources of funding so that dollars can be stretched to meet achievement goals.

Make your case with evidence. District leaders typically demand research and data showing that the product specifically helps with increasing English academic achievement for multilingual learners.

Know the eligibility rules. Vendors should reference state guidelines and consult with state education departments if they have questions about what is allowable under Title III, especially if they’re going to be working with multiple districts throughout the state.

Aim for rigor. Language development needs to be tied in with grade-level content. “Products can’t just be about remediation – it has to be interpreted as support, not as lowering the rigor,” said Gabriela Uro, director for English language learner policy and research at the Council of the Great City Schools.
or sending teachers to conferences and workshops to develop skills to support multilingual learners.

In states such as South Carolina, there’s no requirement for certified teachers to have coursework or certification in ESOL, creating a major need for Title III-funded PD in working with these student populations.

“There is a huge gap for our classroom teachers because they don’t have the professional learning of how to make content accessible to a multilingual learner,” Franca said.

A majority of Greenville’s Title III funds, at $95.76 per English learner, goes toward district-level instructional coaches and professional courses for teachers.

The training is necessary to support the district’s 17,000 multilingual learners (21 percent of its student population), who come from more than 104 countries, speaking 79 different languages, Franca said.

Using Title III money largely for professional development is a growing trend among school districts, said Gabriela Uro, director for English language learner policy and research for the Council of the Great City Schools, a coalition of the nation’s largest urban public school systems.

English-learner teachers often already have the credentials they need to work with multilingual students, Uro said. But when English learners spend most of their day with general education teachers, those instructors need the training to support these student populations as well.

“It’s very minimal funding, which is why when it comes time to spending those dollars, districts have to be very strategic,” she said.
Supporting Family Engagement

Greenville County Public Schools also commits a large part of its funding to family and community engagement, an increasing area of focus in districts receiving Title III money since the pandemic, which brought about greater family involvement in their children’s education.

There are opportunities for creative use of the money. Parents in the district who want to learn English themselves have access to a Rosetta Stone license, funded through Title III money.

The district also uses grant money to provide newcomer kits – bags that consist of items a student who is new to the United States might need to continue learning at home. This includes two pairs of headsets – one for the parents so they can learn along with the child – as well as bilingual books, flashcards, and picture dictionaries.

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Hampton Bays Public Schools in New York, a district of 2,000 students, in which 31 percent of that population is comprised of English language learners, also focuses on bringing families into their students’ education.

During the height of remote learning through the pandemic, the district dedicated funds toward technology and access to software to support English language acquisition.

“Those tools are now being incorporated into the classroom and extended beyond the school day,” said Diane Fox, director of bilingual and alternative education, “so that students have access to programs at home with their parents as well.”
One State’s Experience

The state of Washington has seen a large influx of newcomers to its schools. Last year, 11,000 students arrived from Ukraine and Afghanistan alone.

Districts in the state receive $140 per English learner through Title III, and they're using that money to fund things like summer programs, which provide additional support for the students who are new to the country.

American Indian and Alaska-native students also make up a substantial portion of Washington’s school population, though some districts are required to consult with federally recognized tribes before they can determine what services to provide.

*Districts are looking into ways they can braid funding from different title programs, as supplemental Title III dollars are quite limiting.*

Despite a strong need for supplemental multilingual services, the state saw a trend of underspend of Title III in the last few years, said Kristin Calaff, executive director of multilingual and migrant education for the state's board of education.

“Because districts were flooded with extra funds [during the pandemic], they were setting aside their Title III,” she said.

Continuous carryover of funds year over year was allowed during the pandemic, she said, but rules are changing. Going forward, districts can still carry over funds, but only on a one-year basis.

“If you’re not spending [funds] upfront, then it’s not being used to support students throughout the entire year,” Calaff said. “I’m hopeful that now we're in more of a budget crunch, people will start to recognize the purposefulness of trying to spend early in the game.”

Maximizing Available Money
District leaders often come to Calaff with questions about how funds can be used, as the supplemental nature of the funds can be limiting. Examples she’s heard from district leaders include whether they can pay certain positions’ salaries out of Title III, and how they can purchase software if title grants fluctuate each year.

It’s a case-by-case basis, she said, but it always comes back to whether the funds are being used supplementally, as opposed to in a supplant manner.

“We recommend that people do a braiding of funding ... to support a variety of needs in the school,” Calaff said. “Title III can provide support, as long as there’s already support for those programs, specifically, as well.”

Greenville’s Franca also encourages integration into other funding streams, as Title III dollars are limited in amount and in what is considered allowable.

“If you’re not looking at Title I, II, IV – how the funds could supplement and help each other — you don’t get as much progress,” Franca said.

For assistance in how Title III funds can be used, both independently and in tandem with other title programs, schools and vendors alike can look to districts’ federal programs coordinators, who are designated to oversee the facilitation of the title programs, said Ronn Nozoe, CEO of the National Association of Secondary School Principals.

“Those are the people who know the [policies] the best,” he said. “States also have to post their plans online, but it might be hard to read through and make sense of all of it.”

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