

# From Uncertainty to Action: Planning for Title I and State Funding Shifts

A practical guide for district and school leaders in 2026





# Introduction: Making Smart Decisions in Uncertain Times

As you finalize budgets and purchasing decisions for the 2026-27 school year, you're likely doing so with less certainty than you'd prefer. While the basic mechanics of Title I and related funding streams remain familiar, the conditions around them have been harder to read.

Over the past year, funding delays, unresolved appropriations, and competing proposals have made it more difficult to plan ahead. That challenge is compounded by the reality that staffing, contracts, and instructional investments often need to be decided months before final allocations are known.

This guide isn't meant to restate what district leaders already understand about Title I. Instead, it brings together what's happening across federal policy, state funding dynamics, and enrollment patterns, and offers a practical way to think through decisions that still need to be made.

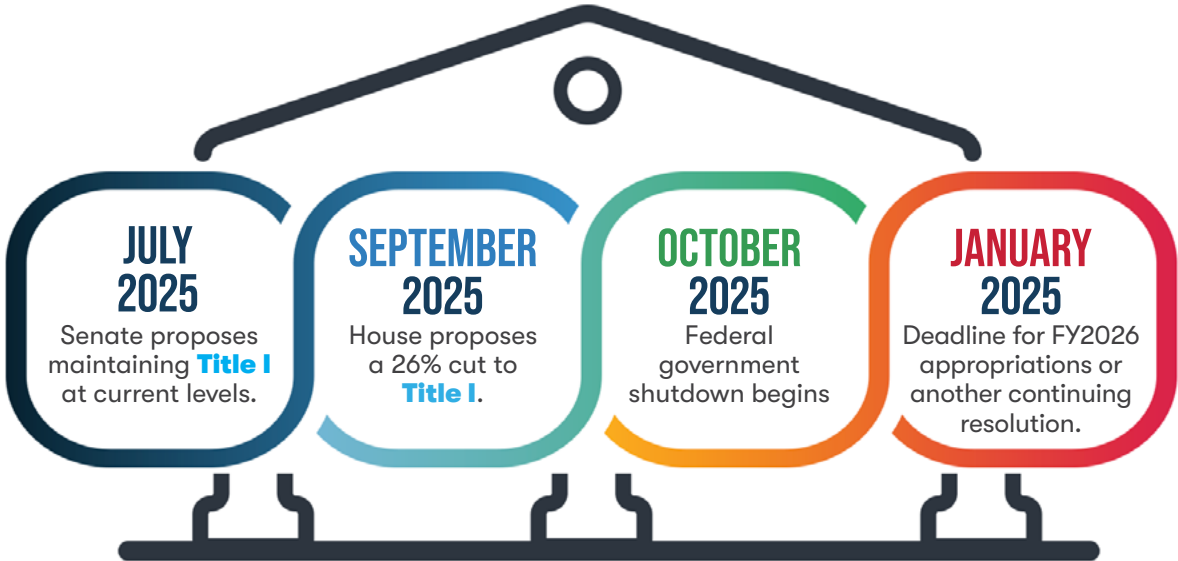
The goal is simple: help you protect the supports that matter most to students, even when the funding picture is still coming into focus.

## Part 1 The Current Federal Funding Landscape

### What Happened in 2025

The federal funding picture shifted in very real ways in 2025, and districts felt the impact almost immediately. In early July, the Trump administration suspended the release of more than \$6 billion in federal education funds, including Title II-A (teacher development), Title III-A (English learners), Title IV-A and IV-B (after-school programs, student enrichment), and Title I-C (migrant education), just before their scheduled July 1 release to states.

#### Federal Funding Timeline and Proposals (2025-2026)





After bipartisan congressional pressure and lawsuits from multiple states, these funds were released in late July. Even so, the multi-week delay forced districts to delay hiring, cancel summer programs, or use reserves to maintain operations.

Importantly, Title I-A, the largest federal education program serving low-income schools, was not affected by this delay because it is forward-funded, with allocations typically becoming available beginning July 1. Even so, the episode served as a reminder that federal funding decisions can shift quickly, often without notice.

Beginning October 1, 2025, the federal government entered a 43-day shutdown, the longest in U.S. history, after Congress failed to pass FY2026 appropriations. The government reopened in mid-November under a continuing resolution that funds agencies at FY2025 levels through January 30, 2026.

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## Where We Stand Now (January 2026)

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Congress must resolve FY2026 appropriations by January 30 or pass another CR. These decisions will shape Title I allocations for the 2026-27 school year, which become available for obligation beginning July 1, 2026.

The funding proposals from different branches of government vary dramatically:

- House Appropriations Committee (September 2025): Proposed a 26% cut to Title I and 15% overall reduction to the Department of Education
- Senate Appropriations Committee (July 2025): Proposed maintaining Title I at current levels with modest adjustments
- Administration Budget Request (May 2025): Proposed maintaining Title I-A and IDEA funding at approximately current levels while consolidating several other K-12 programs into a simplified funding structure that would increase state flexibility

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## The Timing Challenge You're Facing

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Here's your dilemma: You need to finalize spring 2026 purchasing decisions and hiring commitments for the 2026-27 school year before you have clarity on FY2026 Title I allocations. In practice, that means some of the most important decisions are made while key information is still incomplete.

Even if Congress passes appropriations by January 30, state-level allocations to districts typically aren't finalized until March or April, and school-level allocations come even later. Yet many of your contracts, vendor commitments, and hiring decisions need to be locked in by April or May.

This creates real risk. You're being asked to commit resources based on assumptions that may not hold.

## State-Level Variations

Federal uncertainty doesn't land the same way in every state. Some states have stronger reserves or more flexible aid formulas that cushion districts from federal volatility. Others are experiencing compounded pressure from state revenue challenges, rising pension and healthcare obligations, and ongoing debates over funding formulas and school choice policies that affect how state dollars flow to districts and schools.

Understanding your state's specific fiscal position, formula design, and policy trajectory is essential context for planning Title I investments.



### State Factor

Flexible Aid Formulas  
Allows for quicker  
adjustments to funding  
changes.



### Impact on Funding Stability

Revenue Challenges  
Increases pressure  
on districts to  
make cuts.



### Strong Reserves

Rising Pension  
Obligations Diverts  
state funds away  
from education.



### Cushions districts from federal volatility.

School Choice Policies  
Affects how state  
dollars flow to districts  
and schools.

## The Counting Problem

Many districts are also grappling with a quieter challenge: the data used to determine funding doesn't always line up with what educators see every day. In some cases, official poverty measures suggest stability, or even decline, while student needs remain steady or continue to grow.

### Several structural factors can contribute to this disconnect:

- Census-based poverty estimates used in federal formulas may lag real-time economic conditions
- Proxy measures used for school-level allocations can affect how need is identified within districts
- Enrollment and participation shifts can influence counts even when student needs remain high

This creates a planning challenge: Your Title I allocation may decrease based on formula data that doesn't reflect the reality in your classrooms. You need strategies that maintain core supports even as official counts shift.



# Part 3 5 Strategic Principles for Decisions That Hold Up

In this kind of environment, many districts rely on a small set of shared principles to guide decisions when perfect information is not available. These principles help leaders make trade-offs, communicate clearly, and protect the supports that matter most to students.



## Principle 1: Prioritize Evidence-Based Interventions

When resources are uncertain, double down on what’s proven to work. Interventions with rigorous evidence of accelerating student growth, particularly in foundational literacy and math should be protected. These aren’t just compliance choices; they’re investments that justify protection even if allocations shift because they deliver measurable returns for students.



## Principle 2: Build Funding Flexibility

Reduce dependence on any single funding stream for mission-critical positions and programs. If a position is fully funded by Title I today, develop a plan to share that cost with state or local funds over 1 to 2 years. This approach does not mean abandoning Title I. Instead, it helps ensure that proven supports can continue even if one funding source becomes unstable.



## Principle 3: Plan for Multiple Funding Scenarios

Develop high, medium, and low funding scenarios at both district and school levels, with clear, pre-discussed adjustments for each. To support planning, consider a range of funding scenarios rather than relying on a single forecast.

Scenario	Description
High Scenario	Title I maintains current levels (~\$18B nationally).
Medium Scenario	Title I is reduced by 5-15%
Low Scenario	Title I is reduced by 20-26%, reflecting proposals during FY2026 negotiations

For each scenario, identify which positions, programs, and purchases would be protected, which would be scaled back, and which would be eliminated. Having these conversations in advance with leadership teams, principals, and boards allows you to move quickly once allocations are finalized rather than scrambling in June.



## Principle 4: Communicate with Clarity and Care

Be transparent with staff, families, and your community about the funding uncertainties you’re navigating and how you’re making decisions to protect student outcomes. People appreciate honesty about constraints when they can see you’re prioritizing what matters most based on evidence and impact.



## 1 Step 1: Map Your Current Situation

Before making decisions, get clear on where you stand:

- Document current Title I allocations by actual enrollment trends, and qualitative assessments about student need
- Identify which positions and programs are funded by Title I versus other sources, and note which are solely dependent on Title I
- Highlight mismatches between official poverty counts and observed student challenges
- Review contracts with end dates or renewal decisions coming up in the next 90 days

This creates a baseline for evaluating which supports are most vulnerable to funding shifts and where you have flexibility.

## 2 Step 2: Categorize Your Investments

Review every Title I-funded position and program through the lens of evidence and impact. Sort them into three categories:

- **Protect:** Focus on high-impact supports with strong evidence of accelerating student growth and clear alignment to strategic priorities.
- **Improve / Streamline:** Look for valuable supports that could be delivered more efficiently, better coordinated, or more tightly aligned to current needs.
- **Sunset / Reinvest:** Identify initiatives with limited evidence of impact, significant redundancy, or weak alignment to today's student population.

This categorization forces clarity about what you'll fight to maintain if allocations shift.



# 3

## Step 3: Make Strategic Purchasing Decisions for 2026-27

With this analysis in hand, make smarter decisions for spring 2026:

### For immediate purchasing decisions:

- Prioritize multi-year contracts for proven interventions only where you have confidence in sustained need and some level of funding diversification
- Focus on literacy and math acceleration programs with rigorous evidence of rapid growth. These investments justify protection even in tighter budget scenarios and provide the strongest return for students

### For hiring decisions:

- Structure offers with start dates aligned to when you'll have allocation clarity (July-August vs. June commitments where possible)
- Consider whether high-impact positions could be structured as shared roles across schools or funded through blended sources to build in resilience
- Prioritize filling positions tied to interventions with proven results in your context over maintaining every historical position

### For program commitments:

- Invest in literacy acceleration programs with documented evidence of significant student growth, as these justify protection even in reduced-funding scenarios
- Delay launching ambitious new initiatives until you have FY2026 clarity, unless they're funded through sources you're confident will remain stable (state funds, local reserves)
- Consider phased implementation options for new programs that allow you to scale based on actual allocations

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## Step 4: Plan Ahead for 2027 and Beyond

While your immediate focus is on 2026-27 decisions, position for the longer term:

- Monitor congressional appropriations progress closely through February-March 2026 for early signals about Title I's trajectory
- Engage state associations and national networks to ensure your voice is part of policy discussions
- Begin conversations with your board about potential shifts in federal funding structure or targeting requirements, and how these might affect your allocation methodology
- Consider whether your current district-level allocation formula still serves students equitably if overall Title I funding shifts significantly



## Conclusion: Leading Through Uncertainty

You're making high-stakes decisions for your 2026-27 school year while significant questions about federal funding remain unresolved. That's genuinely difficult, but it's also an opportunity to build a more resilient approach to resource allocation.

By focusing on evidence-based interventions with proven results, diversifying funding sources for critical supports, and building scenario-based plans with clear decision rules, you can move forward with confidence. When you protect what actually accelerates student learning and communicate clearly about the trade-offs you're navigating, you maintain community trust even when circumstances are challenging.

The federal landscape will continue evolving through spring 2026 and beyond. But your mission remains constant: ensuring every student has access to the instruction, support, and opportunities they need to succeed. The framework outlined here is meant to support that work even as the broader funding picture continues to evolve.

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### Sources & References

This guide reflects publicly available information and research available as of early 2026. Key sources informing this analysis include:

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