Big question as the Obama administration’s [leverage](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2013/10/09/leverage_ep.h33.html) begins to slacken: Will its signature grant programs, including Investing in Innovation and Race to the Top, continue beyond 2016, the president’s last year in office? The answer is still murky.

**The politics:** House Republicans have taken steps to [zero out](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/10/12/07spending.h31.html) Investing in Innovation (aka i3), Race to the Top, Promise Neighborhoods, and the School Improvement Grants. And none of those programs were reauthorized under the House GOP bill to renew the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, approved [here](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2013/08/07/37esea_ep.h32.html) by that chamber this summer.

But a number of Democrats have taken separate action to keep those programs going. For instance, all four of the marquee grant programs would be enshrined in law under a [bill](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2013/06/senate_committee_passes_democr.html) to renew the ESEA approved (with only Democratic support) by the Senate education committee.

**The bills:** And, to show their support, lawmakers have also introduced separate standalone bills that would keep the programs on the books beyond the Obama years. For instance, Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, has [put forth](http://www.harkin.senate.gov/press/relase.cfm?id=332895) legislation that would keep Promise Neighborhoods around, and there’s a House [companion bill](http://payne.house.gov/press-release/payne-introduces-promise-neighborhoods-act) by a trio of Democrats, Reps. Donald Payne of New Jersey, Mike Honda of California, and Robert “Bobby” Scott of Virginia. Sen. Kay Hagan, D-N.C., has [written](http://www.hagan.senate.gov/files/documents/HaganSTARAct.pdf) a bill that would largely extend the SIG program, with some modifications, including new money to reward high-performing schools with challenging populations.

**The latest:** Sen. Mark Begich, D-Alaska, in February released a [bill](http://www.begich.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2013/2/begich-introduces-two-bills-to-improve-education-in-alaska) that would continue the Investing in Innovation program, which is meant to scale up promising practices at the state and district level. And now, Rep. Jared Polis, D-Colo., a key ally of the Obama administration on K-12 policy, has released his own bill that would extend the life of i3, which received more than $140 million last year. We previewed the legislation when it was [still under development](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2013/09/lawmakers_seek_to_extend_the_i.html).

**The differences between these bills and the current i3 competition:** The Begich bill and Polis bill would include a 25 percent set-aside for rural schools. And the Polis measure would also put more federal focus on financing smaller grants to test out promising ideas with a more limited evidence track record, steering the funds to so-called “development” and “validation” grants (the smaller categories, meant to test out ideas with potential or some evidence).

The goal, Polis said in an interview, is to "leverage the small federal role [in education] by investing in high-impact, low-cost programs" such as i3. The focus on emerging organizations will ensure that the money is "not all locked by existing players," he added. Check out a [letter](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/Polis-i3-letter-10-23-13.pdf) from groups supporting the bill, including the Knowledge Alliance, the NewSchools Venture Fund, and Jobs for the Future.

Polis didn’t cite specific examples, but Teach for America, Success for All, and the KIPP charter school network have all been big i3 winners—all three are certainly well-known quantities in K-12 policy.


**Why legislation:** Strictly speaking, federal authorizing legislation isn’t needed for a program to get federal funding. Programs can—and have—received federal dollars without being authorized. And just because a program is put into law doesn’t mean it will get funded (and vice-versa). But it’s a demonstration of congressional support, which is never a bad thing for a program.

(To be sure, there’s already some legislative backing up some of the high-profile Obama grant programs, although they’re not yet in ESEA, which governs most K-12 programs. Investing in Innovation and Race to the Top were written into law using bare-bones legislative language through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. SIG was initially authorized under the No Child Left Behind Act. And Promise...
Building support for i3 down the road is part of the reason "we choose to introduce the bill," Polis said. The legislation will help ensure that "there's great awareness in congress for [this] very high-impact program."

The potential problem with legislation to keep Obama programs going? Most of these bills are designed to be attached to the reauthorization of the ESEA. That is at a stand-still right now, and folks are beginning to question whether a renewal will even be approved during Obama’s tenure.

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