

# Ensuring Academic Rigor

## *or Inducing Rigor Mortis?*

### Issues to Watch in Reading First

#### SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

- Reading First is more prescriptive than its predecessor Reading Excellence and most other federal education programs because it contains more extensive evaluation requirements and because it stipulates that all activities using Reading First funds must include all five components of reading. These components are defined in the act as phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.
- Through Reading First, the U.S. Department of Education (USED) has the potential to have a strong impact on states, districts, and schools. In a 2004-05 state survey conducted by the Center on Education Policy (CEP), 40 out of 49 states said that USED was enforcing Reading First strictly or very strictly. In a nationally representative survey of school districts conducted by the Center, half of the districts that received Reading First grants reported changing their reading program to qualify for grants. And in case studies done by the Center, educators at the school level also reported that Reading First was affecting reading instruction, although these reports varied as to how helpful Reading First was in improving reading instruction.
- Relatively little attention has been paid to Reading First, according to CEP survey data and other indicators. But the program is a “sleeper” that could have a significant impact because of its budget, the involvement of all states, and its unusual degree of specificity for a federal education program.
- States are remarkably consistent in their selection of specific instruments for assessing students’ reading progress. Moreover, CEP’s review of a selection of 10 initial and final state grant applications shows that several states added two specific instruments to their applications after the peer review process. After this review, 9 of the 10 states were using the first instrument and 8 of 10 were using the second. It is not clear whether this is due to pressure from reviewers or states learning more about the quality of the instruments.
- Coordination with other reading initiatives has seemingly not been a priority to date, although our review of the final grant applications of 15 randomly selected states shows that all states had at least 4 other reading initiatives in place and one state had as many as 16.

- Key issues to watch include the following:
  - The degree to which Reading First helps states, districts, and schools revamp their reading instruction or restricts instruction to particular reading programs, assessments, and materials
  - The extent to which the activities associated with Reading First are coordinated with or isolated from other initiatives designed to improve reading, such as Title I
  - The uses of the evaluation of Reading First to inform participants about how to improve reading or to punish states, districts, and schools for poor performance

## BACKGROUND, PURPOSE, AND SOURCES FOR THIS STUDY

The Reading First Act gives all states the opportunity to benefit from an additional \$1 billion in federal funding for education. Enacted in 2002 in Title I, Part B, subpart 1 of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), Reading First aims to improve reading in the early elementary years by providing states with additional grants targeting reading. States may retain up to 20% of their Reading First funds for state-level activities, such as professional development for teachers, technical assistance to districts, and general administration of the grant. States distribute the remainder through competitive grants to local school districts with high poverty and high concentrations of children in grades K-3 who read below grade level. To receive grants, districts must meet all the requirements of the Act, such as using scientifically-based reading programs, materials, instructional strategies, professional development, and assessments.

By the end of October 2003, all 50 states and the District of Columbia had received Reading First grants. These grants continue for six years, pending a mid-grant evaluation. According to the Reading First database maintained by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, a total of 1,415 districts and 4,774 schools in those districts participate in the program.

Even with its welcome increase in funding, controversy surrounds Reading First. Some have seen the Act as a positive call for states, schools, and districts to get strict about using effective, research-based methods and materials to teach reading. As reported in *Education Week* ("Majority of States Told To Revise Reading Plans," 2002, Oct. 2), federal officials said that Reading First would correct the failures of past, federally funded reading programs, which failed to promote research-based teaching.

Others, however, have seen Reading First as too rigid, as promoting a particular philosophy for teaching reading which relies heavily on phonics and decoding, and as funneling funds to particular consultants and textbook companies. For example, in another *Education Week* article ("In Crowd Gets Large Share of Contracting Work," 2004, Sept. 8), some education researchers said that the Reading First Act has unfairly limited participating districts and schools to using particular materials and assessments.

While it is too early to determine the full effects of Reading First, policymakers, administrators, and educators need to know whether Reading First makes reading instruction more rigorous and thus more effective, or whether it restricts reading instruction, so that rigor mortis sets in and programs become ineffective. This report defines areas of Reading First that policymakers and educators should pay special attention to over the next few years.

To identify these areas, we have drawn on the following sources:

- State and district surveys conducted by CEP for our broader 2005 study, *From the Capital to the Classroom: Year 3 of the No Child Left Behind Act*
- Case studies conducted in 2004 by CEP of district and school-level implementation of NCLB
- An overview of all state grant applications
- An in-depth review of 15 randomly selected state grant applications
- A review of revisions to state grant applications from 10 representative states selected from the southern, eastern, and western portions of the country
- Other national data and media reports

In the following section entitled “Setting the Stage,” we compare Reading First to its predecessor, the Reading Excellence Act, and provide information about current state perceptions of Reading First. Because it is too early for a full evaluation of Reading First, the rest of this report reviews aspects of Reading First that should be watched over the next few years. These aspects include:

- Effects on states, districts, and schools—will Reading First help revamp reading or unnecessarily restrict efforts to improve?
- Coordination with other programs—will initiatives to improve reading be isolated or integrated?
- Evaluation procedures—will assessments of states, districts, schools, and students be informative or punitive?

## SETTING THE STAGE

### A Comparison of Reading First and Reading Excellence

In many respects, Reading First replaces the Reading Excellence Program, which was enacted under the Clinton administration. Both focus on improving the reading achievement of children in the early elementary grades. But Reading First has a considerably broader reach, more funding, and more prescriptive evaluation requirements than the previous grant, as shown in the comparison of the two initiatives in **Table 1**.

In addition, while the components of reading found in Reading First are quite similar to elements of the Reading Excellence definition of reading, the Reading First Act is more prescriptive. It requires that each of the components be addressed explicitly in all activities funded by Reading First. Development of motivation to read, part of the focus in Reading Excellence, is not one of the components of reading in Reading First.

The broad scope of Reading First ensures that this legislation will affect every state and many of the neediest schools and districts in the country. The \$1 billion price tag makes it one of the most expensive initiatives for young children, while the evaluation requirements make it one of the most strictly regulated. This broad scope and large price tag, in and of themselves, make Reading First worthy of study.

**Table 1: Comparison of Reading First and Reading Excellence**

READING FIRST IN 2005	READING EXCELLENCE IN 2002, THE LAST YEAR OF OPERATION
Provides grants to all states and DC	Provided grants to 13 states
Distributed \$1 billion	Distributed \$328 million
<p>Specifies the components of reading that must be explicitly addressed in all funded activities of districts and schools:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Phonemic awareness</li> <li>■ Phonics</li> <li>■ Fluency</li> <li>■ Vocabulary</li> <li>■ Comprehension</li> </ul>	<p>Required that funds be used for “reading,” defined as a complex system of deriving meaning from print requiring:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Skills and knowledge to understand how phonemes, or speech sounds, are connected to print</li> <li>■ Ability to decode unfamiliar words</li> <li>■ Ability to read fluently</li> <li>■ Sufficient background information and vocabulary to foster reading comprehension</li> <li>■ Development of appropriate active strategies to construct meaning from print</li> <li>■ Development and maintenance of motivation to read</li> </ul>
Instructional activities must be based on scientifically based research	Instructional activities must be based on scientifically based research
Specific accountability provisions, including reporting progress on state tests and on the National Assessment of Educational Progress	Less specific accountability provisions, allowing states to specify the evaluation instruments

Source: Center on Education Policy, June 2005

## State Perceptions of Reading First

We have gauged state perceptions about Reading First based on questions from our larger NCLB study. In our state survey, 40 out of 49 states said that USED was enforcing Reading First strictly or very strictly. Of all the major NCLB requirements, only the requirement to track whether districts and schools are making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) was cited by more states as being strictly or very strictly enforced by USED, as shown in **Table 2**. This means that more states viewed Reading First as more strictly enforced than the NCLB requirements for public school choice, supplemental tutoring services, or highly qualified teachers.

Despite the strictness of USED’s enforcement of Reading First, relatively little attention has been paid to it so far. Few states mentioned Reading First in response to three open-ended questions in our survey:

- What are the three positive effects of NCLB in the state? Which NCLB requirements have contributed to these positive effects?
- Which three requirements of NCLB present the most serious implementation challenges for the states? Why?
- Which three requirements of NCLB, if any, would you change or eliminate? Why?

Although the majority of the 49 states surveyed responded to these three open-ended questions, only two states cited Reading First in the question about positive effects. One state praised the “extensive professional development for Reading First coaches.” The other state commented, “The Reading First initiative has provided [our state] with funds to train teachers in the essential components of reading, to administer reading assessments, and to provide for professional development.” No state mentioned Reading First in either the question about implementation challenges or the question about recommendations for changes. Similarly, national coverage of NCLB during the past year has rarely focused on Reading First. For example, the Education Commission of the States has been tracking state policy activity on NCLB since 2002; Reading First is not one of the 40 elements tracked.

**Table 2: Number of States Giving Various Ratings to the U.S. Department of Education’s Enforcement of NCLB Provisions**

	NOT AT ALL STRICTLY	SOMEWHAT STRICTLY	STRICTLY	VERY STRICTLY	DON'T KNOW
Adequate Yearly Progress	1	7	16	25	0
Reading First Program	0	2	18	22	7
Public School Choice	4	11	14	14	5
Supplemental Educational Services	2	11	19	11	6
Highly Qualified Teachers	2	16	20	8	4
Paraprofessional Qualifications	1	21	12	8	5
Scientifically Based Research	9	17	11	4	8

Table Reads: Twenty-two states reported that the U.S. Department of Education is enforcing the adequate yearly progress provisions very strictly.

Source: Center on Education Policy, December 2004, State Survey, Item 41

## REVAMPING OR RESTRICTING READING

### Stipulations within the Act

Perhaps the most unique feature of Reading First is the strict manner in which states have had to ensure that district reading programs are “scientifically based” and contain “the essential reading components.” While neither the USED nor the Reading First Act officially endorses any particular reading programs, Reading First does limit recipients to using only programs, materials, instructional strategies, professional development, and assessments that contain all five essential reading components and that meet the Act’s definition of scientifically based.

In the past, federal programs and USED steered clear of any limits on curriculum, since this has traditionally been a province of state and local officials. Federal statutes have routinely contained provisions barring a federal role in curriculum or instruction. This prohibition is continued in NCLB. Section 6301 states that:

Nothing in this Act shall be construed to authorize an officer or employee of the Federal government to *mandate, direct, or control* a State, local educational agency or school's specific *instructional content, academic achievement standards and assessments, curriculum, or program of instruction*, as a condition of eligibility to receive funds under this Act (emphasis added).

However, the Reading First Act requires that the reading activities it supports contain all of the “essential reading components.” Section 1208 of the Act defines those components as:

- Phonemic awareness
- Phonics
- Vocabulary development
- Reading fluency, including oral reading skills
- Reading comprehension strategies

The Education Department guidance for Reading First (April 2002, Question B-1) contains definitions of these terms and specifies that “explicit and systematic instruction” be provided in all five components. This requirement reaches beyond new activities instituted in response to Reading First to affect existing state and local reading efforts. Specifically, section H-12 of the guidance requires local districts to demonstrate that the Reading First activities “will not be layered on top of non-research based programs already in use.” The intent is that Reading First will be *the* reading program for children benefiting from Reading First funding.

In addition, all state professional development and technical assistance supported with Reading First funds must address all five components of reading. These state services are likely to reach beyond districts and schools receiving Reading First subgrants and affect a large number of non-Reading First districts and schools.

While the terms “curriculum” and “instruction” are somewhat vague, and it can be argued that the Reading First requirements allow for state and local decision making on the specific approaches to be used, the federal government has taken a significant step in including these requirements in the Act and guidance.

Unlike Reading First, guidance for other programs has taken a hands-off approach to curriculum. For instance, in describing program approaches in guidance for Title I, USED has focused on administrative arrangements, such as pull-out programs or schoolwide approaches, but has not addressed content beyond required assessments in reading/language arts, mathematics, and soon, science. Academic standards and assessments have been left to the states to determine. Likewise, legislation and guidance for the Comprehensive School Reform program, also authorized by NCLB, have described elements of school reform, such as professional development and use of external technical assistance providers, but have shied away from dictating academic content.

Even the Reading Excellence Act, Reading First's predecessor, encouraged states to consider a wide variety of curricula. The Office of Elementary and Secondary Education's archived information on Reading Excellence states that a research-based approach to reading—

... does not require selection of specific program models. In fact, most funded grantees in FY 1999 did not propose to select comprehensive models developed by others. Instead, funded states, districts,

and schools will assess the reading research and identify specific content and instructional strategies to implement in grades K-3, with supporting family literacy activities for preschool and early elementary grades. (<http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/REA/overview.html>, modified June 4, 2003)

It is important to note that neither Reading First nor USED requires states or districts to use a particular reading program. Reading First does, however, require states to make certain that schools receiving Reading First funds adopt a “scientifically-proven” curriculum that contains the five components, and requires this program to be the basic early reading programs for those schools. Will these requirements lead to effective reading instruction or will state and district initiatives be stifled, resulting in programs that don’t meet the particular needs of students?

## Revisions of State Grant Applications

USED, consistent with statutory provisions, arranged for a peer review of the state applications for Reading First grants. This peer review, along with information presented by USED to state leaders, resulted in remarkable consistency across the states in certain areas. Two areas, in particular, show dramatic consistency—the use of the *Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS)* in the states’ assessment designs for Reading First and the use of *A Consumer’s Guide to Evaluating a Core Reading Program Grades K-3: A Critical Elements Analysis*.

DIBELS is included in *Analysis of Reading Assessment Instruments for K-3*, a publication by the Institute for the Development of Educational Achievement, College of Education, University of Oregon. The assessment measures a student’s ability to identify and produce letter sounds, to connect those sounds to letters, and to read fluently at grade level. It does not focus on vocabulary, comprehension, or motivation to read. Also a product of the University of Oregon, the Consumer’s Guide offers criteria and procedures for evaluating and selecting reading programs which include the five components of reading for school-wide use.

Our review of all state grants showed that 37 states required use of DIBELS as part or all of local school district assessments and 5 additional states included it on a list of assessments from which local districts make selections. As for the Consumer’s Guide, in their approved applications 42 states indicated they would use it at the state and/or local levels. Only 2 states specifically mentioned the use of other instruments, both of which were developed by the individual state. The remaining states did not mention a specific instrument.

In order to examine the influence of the peer review process on the use of these two items, CEP compared the original applications with the final versions in a sample of 10 states. **Table 3** compares the inclusion of DIBELS and the Consumer’s Guide in the original and approved applications.

In each case, 4 of the 10 states added DIBELS and the Consumer’s Guide to their applications after initial review, and none dropped either item. In all, 9 of 10 states are using DIBELS and 8 of 10 are using the Consumer’s Guide. It is not clear from this analysis exactly why states added DIBELS and the Consumer’s Guide. Revisions could be due to the states’ belief that, in retrospect, DIBELS and the Consumer’s Guide are the best instruments to use or could be due to pressure from reviewers. In either case, now that states are using DIBELS and the Consumer’s Guide, state satisfaction with the instruments needs to be explored.

**Table 3: Examples of States That Included in Their Reading First Application Specific Assessment and Evaluation Tools**

STATE	DIBELS		CONSUMER'S GUIDE	
	ORIGINAL APPLICATION	APPROVED APPLICATION	ORIGINAL APPLICATION	APPROVED APPLICATION
AR	yes	yes	no	no
CO	no	no	yes, for training	yes, for school district use
KA	no	yes	no	yes
KY	no	yes	no	no
MD	yes	yes	yes	yes
MO	—	—	no	yes
NE	no	yes	yes, for training	yes
NY	yes	yes	yes	yes
NC	no	yes	no	yes
RI	no	yes	no	yes

Source: Center on Education Policy, June 2005

### Changes Required of District Programs

Perhaps as a result of the emphasis on particular instruments during the review process, many states have provided districts with lists of approved or recommended programs. These state suggestions often result in districts amending their practices to improve their chances of qualifying for Reading First funds. According to our survey, half of the districts receiving Reading First funds reported changing their reading programs to qualify for a subgrant. As shown in **Table 4**, changes in the reading program were common across district types and sizes, except for suburban districts; only 18% of suburban districts reported changing their reading program, according to our NCLB survey.

To understand the types of changes districts made, our survey posed an open-ended question asking districts to specify exactly what part of their reading program had to be changed to qualify for a Reading First subgrant. Of the 29 districts responding to this item, the following numbers reported changes:

- Seventeen reported that they had to adopt a new reading curriculum.
- Nine reported that they had to make changes to the way reading was being taught in the district; for example, by changing the amount of time allocated to reading instruction or teaching only in small groups.
- Five districts said that they had to train staff or hire new staff.
- Three districts reported that they had to make changes to the reading assessments they used for students.

The responses above total more than 29 because some districts reported making more than one change.

**Table 4: Percentage of Districts That Changed Their Reading Program in Any Way to Qualify for a Reading First Subgrant in 2004, by District Type and District Size**

TOTAL (all districts)	50%
<b>DISTRICT TYPE</b>	
Urban	59%
Suburban	18%
Rural	67%
<b>DISTRICT SIZE</b>	
Very Large	61%
Large	45%
Medium	55%
Small	46%

Table reads: Fifty percent of districts receiving a Reading First subgrant reported that they had to change their reading program to qualify for a subgrant.

Very large district student enrollment = 37,741 – 1,049,831

Large district student enrollment = 10,449 – 37,740

Medium district student enrollment = 3,504 – 10,448

Small district student enrollment = 200 – 3,503

Source: Center on Education Policy, December 2004, Year 2 Fall District Survey, Item 46

In our case studies conducted for our broader study of NCLB, several districts and schools mentioned using Reading First grants, and their responses were mixed. For example, in the three Reading First schools in the Kansas City, Kansas, Public Schools and in Carson Elementary in the Chicago Public Schools, educators have been able to integrate Reading First activities with their other reading initiatives. Orleans Central Supervisory Union in rural Vermont, in contrast, found Reading First much less flexible. **Box 1** provides an in-depth look at Reading First in two of these settings.

## COORDINATION WITH OR ISOLATION FROM OTHER INITIATIVES

While Reading First appears to be creating change in states and districts receiving funds, these changes are not specifically coordinated with other federal programs affecting reading. In our review of 15 final state applications, states listed many different reading initiatives occurring statewide. No state had fewer than 4 such initiatives, and one state had as many as 16 different initiatives. Furthermore, coordinating multiple state reading initiatives was cited as a problem prior to Reading First by 7 out of 15 states.

However, Reading First pays little attention to other programs that also provide assistance in reading. The guidance does talk of coordination, and state applications address this issue, but the applications deal mostly with coordination between Reading First and the Reading Excellence Program, which preceded it.

Of particular note is the separation from Title I, which provides substantial support for early reading programs. While coordination might be taking place at the school, district, and state levels, as well as at the federal Departmental level, the programs are

**Box 1: Mixed Impressions in Districts and Schools****CARSON ELEMENTARY IN CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS FINDS READING FIRST FLEXIBLE**

A Reading First grant is helping Carson Elementary School in Chicago bring the latest reading research to bear on language instruction in both English and Spanish, school officials reported. The grant also facilitates collaboration among teachers. The 2004-05 school year marked the staff's third year of participation in Reading First, with the school's partner National-Louis University. That year, eight core teachers, one per grade level, attended a monthly all-day Saturday workshop at National-Louis and then brought their learning back to the staff at Carson. The eight core teachers will have the opportunity to earn a master's degree in reading as part of this partnership.

While National-Louis at first had not designed the program to work with English language learners, the program soon reached out to all students and teachers at Carson. "The university has grown by working with us," Principal Kathleen Mayer said. "At first, they just wanted to work with our 'regular' kids, but we said, 'We don't have any regular kids.'"

Other staff confirmed that Reading First is helping English language learners and teachers. "Good reading strategies are good reading strategies, whether it's English or Spanish," said Assistant Principal Ann Tysiak.

"There's a lot of sharing of ideas," added Rosa Alvarez, a teacher who participates in the program. "I think that's one of the best ways to learn."

**ORLEANS CENTRAL SUPERVISORY UNION IN VERMONT FINDS READING FIRST INFLEXIBLE**

The Orleans Central Supervisory Union applied for and received a federal Reading First grant to improve reading achievement in the elementary schools. Four of the six schools received subgrants, and the supervisory union used Title I funds to purchase Reading First materials and training for the two schools that did not receive subgrants.

Educators in Orleans reported ambivalence about Reading First. On the one hand, teachers and principals interviewed expressed appreciation for the materials and "excellent" training being provided and the intense focus on reading instruction. On the other hand, some of the educators expressed dismay that they had to take "three steps backward" due to the federal program's emphasis on basic skills and decoding at the expense of literature.

They also noted that the reading assessments required were of low quality and not aligned with the district's grade-level expectations or the state assessment. Teachers and principals indicated that they were required to spend more time on reading and significantly less time on non-assessed subjects such as science, social studies, music, and art. They attribute this in part to Reading First, which requires 90 minutes of reading a day, as well as to a new math program that requires 90 minutes a day, and the general increase in testing reading and math. Moreover, because the Reading First grant was used to purchase a "scripted" program (Houghton-Mifflin) and does not allow for teacher flexibility, at least one elementary school is no longer embedding science and social studies into reading.

*Source: Center on Education Policy, December 2004, Case Studies*

separately run and staffed. Reading First has a small staff in the immediate office of the Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education, while Title I is housed in the Student Achievement and School Accountability Programs office, also in the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. Curiously, Early Reading First, designed as a preschool companion for Reading First, is in the Student Achievement and School Accountability office, along with Title I. The placement of programs in various offices does not, of itself, prevent coordination. However, the similarity between the goals of Reading First and Title I, and the emphasis Title I has always placed on early elementary reading programs, makes very close coordination a necessity. In addition, states tend to parallel the organization patterns of the Department when it comes to managing federal programs. Hence, states have persons in charge of Reading First as well as directors of Title I. Finally, many Reading First grants go to schools that have been identified for improvement under Title I.

In the field, coordination between the two programs is sometimes overlooked. For instance, the North Central Regional Education Laboratory maintains a website devoted to technical assistance for Reading First. In its discussion of the key elements of the program and the provision of resources for states to share with local school districts, no mention is made of coordination with Title I or any other federal, state, or local program. Reading First appears to stand alone. Will this isolation continue and will it cause implementation problems for states and districts?

## INFORMATIVE OR PUNITIVE EVALUATION

Reading First requires states and districts to collect two different types of evaluative information. First, states must require Reading First districts and schools to track individual student progress and make decisions based on this data. Second, states must report overall school, district, and state progress using a set of instruments different from those used to make decisions about individual students. Tracking of overall progress must include the use of state tests of student achievement.

As discussed earlier, Reading First grant applications require participating districts and schools to identify research-based assessments that will be used to track student progress. Testing of individual students should include screening, diagnostic, monitoring, and outcome testing. Schools and districts then must use this testing to make decisions about instruction for particular students.

Some states will use these tests to track student progress longitudinally. Virginia, for instance, has used the PALS Early Literacy screening instrument since 1997. Not all states, however, have a common Reading First assessment system for all districts, and not all states will track individual students' growth from year to year over the course of the entire grant. Therefore, not all will be able to determine whether individual district programs are effective statewide.

Similarly, states differ in the types of assessments they have approved for district and school grants. Therefore, state-to-state comparisons of these data will be difficult. However, Reading First does require collecting additional data for evaluating state and national progress.

Specifically, the law requires states to conduct annual evaluations and issue a mid-point progress report three years into the state grant. According to the Reading First guidance, these evaluations require states to submit to the Department a report on the progress being made, including information on the following:

- State and district progress reducing the percentage of students served by Reading First who are below grade level in reading
- Evidence from states and districts showing that the percentage of all students meeting or exceeding proficient levels in reading has increased significantly

It is important to note that factors not accounted for by these data may influence the implementation of Reading First and student achievement, such as leadership within the school, staff collaboration, and community support. Perhaps to mediate these difficulties with the data, the law requires that the midterm reports be reviewed by an expert review panel, which under the Reading First guidance is appointed by the U.S. Secretary of Education and the National Institute for Literacy. On the basis of the report, USED will then determine if the state is making sufficient progress to warrant continuation of the grant.

Three studies will evaluate Reading First nationally. First, USED has contracted with Abt Associates and MDRC, two research organizations, to conduct a quasi-experimental impact study examining the effects of Reading First on student achievement in a nationally representative sample of schools. The study will provide initial results in late 2006 and is expected to run throughout the grant. Second, Abt Associates will also assist with a Reading First implementation study for USED. The study will survey a nationally representative sample of Reading First schools about how they are implementing their grants. An interim report is expected in spring of 2006, with the final report scheduled for summer 2007. Finally, RMC Research Corporation will evaluate the extent to which reading standards are aligned with the essential components of reading in a sample of 20 states in grades K-3.

In addition to these three evaluative studies, USED has contracted with the independent evaluators, American Institutes for Research (AIR), to monitor Reading First nationally. AIR will help collect Reading First state testing data and is expected to visit all states and a selection of districts to monitor implementation.

## ISSUES TO WATCH

As Reading First progresses toward its mid-grant review, CEP has identified three main issues that should be watched: the effect on reading programs, coordination with other programs, and evaluation procedures. How these issues play out may determine whether Reading First is positively revamping reading instruction across states or negatively restricting that instruction.

This influence may not be limited to the early grades. Striving Readers, a new discretionary grant program aimed at improving the reading of middle and high school students, will no doubt look to Reading First as a model. Authorized as part of the fiscal year 2005 appropriations legislation, the Striving Readers program under Title I, Part E, Section 1502 will award \$24 million in grants in 2005. The President is requesting that Congress provide \$200 million for the initiative in FY 2006.

The implementation and results of Reading First need to be monitored closely, if policymakers, administrators, and educators are to learn from state and local experiences with implementation. These lessons will help Reading First operate more effectively and efficiently in the second half of the grant. They will also help Striving Readers hit the ground running. Most importantly, making sure that Reading First works well will help generations of readers to come. The Center on Education Policy plans to monitor Reading First activities and address the following questions in each of the three critical issue areas identified.

## Revamping or Restricting Reading

1. We know that the majority of states report that Reading First is strictly or very strictly enforced by USED. However, only one evaluation cycle has taken place. How flexible will states and districts perceive Reading First to be over time? Will states, districts, and schools view the degree of strictness as having a positive or negative effect on reading achievement?
2. How effective do states and districts find their chosen reading programs?
3. How effective do states and districts find their chosen individual student assessment systems?
4. Although Reading First targets students in K-3, specific reading programs might expand to upper elementary grades as well to maintain continuity between grade levels in the same schools. How many schools and districts expand Reading First in this way? How satisfied are states and districts with this expansion, if it occurs?
5. Orleans Central Supervisory Union in Vermont reported shifting instructional time to reading and away from other subjects. How typical is this shift among Reading First districts and how effective do districts find the shift?

## Coordination with or Isolation from Other Initiatives

1. How will Reading First and Title I be coordinated at the school and district levels? Will states and districts find this coordination effective?
2. In areas with both Early Reading First and Reading First grants, how will the programs be coordinated? Will states and districts find this coordination effective?
3. Will Reading First districts change their Title I reading programs to use approved or recommended Reading First programs in Title I? If so, how effective will they find this change?
4. Will any new mechanisms be put in place at the federal and state levels to make certain that Reading First, Early Reading First, and Title I work together to improve reading instruction and performance?

## Informative or Punitive Evaluation

1. In the view of districts, will the assessments for individual students, such as the DI-BELS assessment, be useful for instructional decision making?

2. What do the state and national assessment instruments, such as state tests and NAEP tests, show about progress in reading? In the view of states, are these assessment instruments adequate for evaluating Reading First progress?
3. How is the peer review process being used to assess state progress? How useful and fair do states find the peer review?
4. What sanctions or other actions will USED take if states show insufficient progress, and what awards, such as targeted assistance grants, does USED provide to states with excellent progress? How are these sanctions and other actions viewed by states and districts?
5. States are allowed to set aside 10% of the total 20% of Reading First funds allocated for state purposes to be used for administering and reporting on Reading First. Are these funds adequate to cover the reporting requirements of Reading First?

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