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State & Local Education Officials Cite Reading First Policies as Important in Lifting Achievement for Struggling Schools

More Than One-Third of Districts Report Lack of Capacity to Take Dramatic Actions for Schools in Improvement

WASHINGTON – July 12, 2007 –The federal Reading First program, facing funding cuts in the Congress, has been identified by state and local education officials as effective in boosting student achievement in schools identified as needing improvement under the No Child Left Behind Act, according to a report from the Washington, D.C.-based Center on Education Policy.

Professional development, alignment of curriculum and instruction with tests, and special grants were also named by states and school districts as the most effective ways of boosting test scores in those schools.

The report, *Moving Beyond Identification: Assisting Schools in Improvement*, also finds that in 2005-06, anywhere from one-third to one-half of districts with schools in improvement lack the capacity to carry out some of NCLB's more stringent actions with regard to identified schools.

For example, 50 percent of districts with schools in improvement lack the capacity to replace all or most of the school staff. Among these districts, 50 percent cite money and 61 percent cite staff as reasons for the lack of capacity to take this action.

"Congress can benefit from the valuable perspective of school leaders on what they believe have been most – and least – effective ways to boost achievement in struggling schools." said Jack Jennings, CEP's president and CEO. "Interestingly, Reading First programs have proven far more popular than NCLB's much-discussed school choice and supplemental service options. But a troubling number of districts do not appear to have the money or the manpower to take on more intensive reforms."

The report is from CEP's *From the Capital to the Classroom* series of reports tracking the implementation of the law in its fifth year, and is based on a survey of all 50 states and a nationally representative group of nearly 350 school districts, as well as 12 in-depth district case studies.

Among the improvement strategies used by states, supports made possible by the Reading First program were rated as very or moderately effective by the greatest percentage of states, including 81 percent of the 48 states offering professional development and 79 percent of the 47 states providing curriculum and assessment materials through the program.

And while significantly more district officials rated their own policies important or very important in boosting achievement in reading (69 percent) and in math (71 percent) than give similar ratings to state policies, Reading First policies were again rated highly. Of the districts that received Reading First grants, 69 percent rated its assessment systems as important or very important, while 68 percent gave a similar rating to its instructional program.

A third NCLB-related policy, the requirement that schools create improvement plans, was rated important or very important by 64 percent of districts in reading.

However, no federal policy was rated as an important contributor to increased student achievement in math. In addition, NCLB policies requiring supplemental education services and public school choice were deemed not at all or somewhat important by more than 90 percent of districts in reading or math, and were cited important or very important by less than 10 percent of districts in either subject.

According to the report, 18 percent of districts reported having at least one Title I school listed in need of improvement, relatively unchanged from 20 percent of districts the previous year. A greater proportion of urban districts report having schools in improvement (47 percent) than do suburban (22 percent) or rural districts (11 percent).

Based on five years of research of improvement efforts and other aspects of how implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act has affected states, districts and schools, the report includes the following recommendations to improve the way that assistance is provided to struggling schools:

- **Significantly increase funding for improvement efforts through Title I** – Because state education agencies need greater resources to provide quality assistance to schools in improvement, federal support for these activities should be increased.
- **Encourage a triage approach to assist schools in improvement** – Because the needs of schools in improvement vary considerably, NCLB should be revised to encourage states and districts to provide differentiated assistance to groups of schools organized according to their specific needs.
- **Provide funding to allow for external monitoring of improvement efforts** – Because districts and states do not appear to have the capacity to monitor improvement efforts, Congress should provide funding to allow outside groups to determine which strategies are effective and how they might be improved.

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Based in Washington, D.C. and founded in January 1995, by Jack Jennings, the Center on Education Policy is a national, independent advocate for public education and for more effective public schools. The Center works to help Americans better understand the role of public education in a democracy and the need to improve the academic quality of public schools. The Center does not represent any special interests. Instead the Center helps citizens make sense of the conflicting opinions and perceptions about public education and create conditions that will lead to better public schools.