Focus

Examines the perceived effectiveness of Reading First, the challenges of implementing the program, its coordination with Title I, the expansion of the program, and the accuracy and usefulness of program evaluations.

Methodology

Based on 2006-07 data from an annual survey of 50 states, a nationally representative survey of 349 responding school districts, and case study interviews with district- and school-level administrators in nine school districts.

Major Findings

- **Local value.** Despite misconduct and mismanagement at the national level and in some states, the Reading First program has had a meaningful impact at the local level. Schools and district appear to have implemented Reading First as intended, and some evidence suggests the program may have a positive impact on achievement.

- **Views about effectiveness.** The majority of states (82%) reported that Reading First professional development is very or moderately effective in raising student achievement, while 78% said that Reading First curriculum and assessment materials are very or moderately effective. Among school districts with Reading First grants, 69% reported that Reading First’s assessment systems were important or very important causes of increased student achievement, and 68% said Reading First’s instructional programs were important or very important causes.

- **Changes in reading instruction.** Sixty-seven percent of districts participating in the program reported making changes in how teachers teach reading. These changes included purchasing new materials.

- **Effect beyond participating districts and schools.** The impact of Reading First goes beyond the 13% of districts and 6% of schools nationwide that participated in the program in 2006-07. More than half of Reading First districts reported using elements of Reading First in schools that did not receive Reading First funds and in the upper grades (Reading First targets early elementary students). An exception was the element of a reading coach, which fewer districts used in non-Reading-First schools or grades, perhaps because the cost was prohibitive. Similarly, states reported that more than 3,000 non-Reading-First districts participated in state-led Reading First professional development.

- **Coordination with Title I.** Most states (80%) and most districts (75%) with Reading First grants indicated that Reading First is well coordinated with Title I.

Where to Obtain

wwwf.cep-dc.org
Focus

Discusses the implementation and impact of the federal Reading First program as of 2006.

Methodology

In 2006, conducted a survey of all 50 states and a survey of a nationally representative sample of 417 school districts that were participating in Title I. Did case study interviews with staff in 38 districts and 42 schools. Reviewed state and national testing data and other evaluations of Reading First.

Major Findings

- **Significant impact.** Reading First has had a significant impact on reading curriculum, instruction, assessment, and scheduling in participating schools. The program has also affected non-participating schools and districts. Many districts have expanded Reading First instructional programs and assessments into other schools, and many states have used Reading First state funds for professional development and technical assistance that benefits other districts.

- **Cause of achievement gains.** Of the 35 states that reported student achievement in reading was improving, 19 states cited Reading First instructional programs as an important or very important cause of these gains, and 16 said that Reading First assessments were an important or very important cause. In addition, 97% of districts that received Reading First subgrants and also had achievement gains cited Reading First’s instructional program as an important or very important cause of this improvement.

- **Change in reading programs.** Sixty percent of Reading First districts reported they had to change their reading program in order to qualify for a Reading First subgrant. In addition, 86% of districts with Reading First subgrants required their elementary schools to devote a specified amount of time to reading, significantly more districts than the 57% of non-Reading First districts that had such a requirement. The average amount of time the two types of districts devoted to reading, however, was similar—about an hour and a half.

- **Title I coordination.** Seventy-six percent of responding states and 80% of districts with Reading First grants reported that they coordinated Reading First and Title I

- **Lack of coordination with Early Reading First.** The majority of states (65%) reported that Reading First was not coordinated with Early Reading First, a federal program at improving pre-reading and language skills in pre-kindergarten children.

Where to Obtain

www.cep-dc.org
Focus

Identified issues in the Reading First program in school year 2004-05 that warranted special attention.

Methodology

Collected data through a 2004-05 survey of all 49 states, a nationally representative survey of 314 school districts, case studies of 36 geographically diverse districts and 37 schools, and three national forums. Also conducted an overview of all state Reading First grant applications, did an in-depth review of 15 randomly selected state applications, and reviewed revisions to state grant applications from 10 representative states in the South, East, and West.

Major Findings

- **ED enforcement.** In school year 2004-05, 40 out of 49 responding states said that the U. S. Department of Education was enforcing Reading First strictly or very strictly.

- **Impact of Reading First.** Half of the districts that received Reading First grants reported changing their reading program to qualify for grants. Educators in case study schools also reported that Reading First was affecting reading instruction, although views varied as to how helpful Reading First was in improving reading instruction.

- **Reading First assessments.** States were remarkably consistent in their selection of specific instruments for assessing students’ reading progress. Furthermore, CEP’s review of a 10 initial and final state grant applications showed that several states added two specific instruments to their applications after the peer review process. It was not clear whether this was due to pressure from reviewers or states learning more about the quality of the instruments.

- **Coordination with other reading programs.** Coordination with other reading initiatives was not a priority in 2004-05, although CEP’s review of final grant applications from 15 randomly selected states showed that all of these states had at least 4 other reading initiatives in place and one state had as many as 16.

Where to Obtain

[www.cep-dc.org](http://www.cep-dc.org)
Government Accountability Office, 2007

Reading First: States report improvements in reading instruction, but additional procedures would clarify Education’s role in ensuring proper implementation by states

Focus

Examines the implementation of the Reading First program, including changes in reading instruction, criteria states used to award subgrants to districts, difficulties states faced during implementation, and guidance, assistance, and oversight provided to states by the U.S. Department of Education.

Methodology

Drew from a Web-based survey of Reading First directors in 50 states and D.C.; site visits; and interviews with federal, state, and local education officials and providers of reading programs and assessments. Also reviewed ED data for each state on Reading First districts’ eligibility, applications, and funding awards.

Major Findings

• **Changes due to Reading First.** States reported making a number of changes to, as well as improvements in, reading instruction since the implementation of Reading First. These included an increased emphasis on the five key components of reading (phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension), assessments, and professional development. States also reported more classroom time being devoted to reading activities. However, the publishers interviewed noted only limited changes to instructional material. Similarly, states reported that few changes occurred in their approved reading lists.

• **Award of subgrants.** States awarded Reading First subgrants using various eligibility and award criteria, and some states reported difficulties with implementing key aspects of the program. According to ED, over 3,400 districts were eligible to apply for subgrants in the states’ first school year of funding. Of these districts, nearly 2,100 applied for and nearly 1,200 districts received Reading First funding.

• **ED influence.** ED officials made various resources available to states during the application and implementation processes, and states were generally satisfied with the guidance and assistance they received. However, ED developed no written policies and procedures to guide Departmental officials and contractors in their interactions with state officials and guard against officials mandating or directing states’ decisions about reading programs or assessments. Some state officials surveyed reported receiving suggestions from ED officials or contractors to adopt or eliminate certain reading programs or assessments. Similarly, the Inspector General reported in September 2006 that the Department intervened to influence a state’s and several school districts’ selection of reading programs.

• **ED monitoring.** While ED officials laid out an ambitious plan for annual monitoring of every state’s implementation, they did not develop written procedures guiding monitoring visits. As a result, states did not always understand monitoring procedures, timelines, and expectations for taking corrective actions.

Where to Obtain

Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2008

Does Reading First work? Data trends in five Western states

Focus

Analyzes the impact of Reading First on student achievement and other areas in five western states. Sought to provide a more nuanced picture of the impact of the program than the federally funded Reading First impact study had done.

Methodology

Summarized data from annual statewide evaluations of Reading First implementation and outcomes conducted in 2003 and 2004 by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) in Alaska, Montana, Washington, and Wyoming, and by Arizona State University and NWREL in Arizona. Also analyzed student achievement data from the Dynamic Indicator of Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) test from 2003-04 to 2007.

Major Findings

- **Achievement gains.** The percentage of students performing "at benchmark" on the DIBELS assessment improved steadily. The percentage of students performing at the lowest ("intensive") level on the same assessment decreased over time.

- **Influence in non-Reading First schools.** Across the five states, non–Reading First schools in districts with Reading First grants frequently implemented many Reading First program components.

Where to Obtain

Focus

Examines the impact of Reading First funding on students’ reading achievement and classroom instruction, and the relationship between the degree of implementation of scientifically based reading instruction and students’ reading achievement.

Methodology

Studied a sample of 17 school districts in 12 states and one statewide program (18 sites), as well as 238 schools within these districts (including some schools that received Reading First grants and some that did not). Analyzed scores from the reading comprehension subtest of the SAT-10 for students in grades 1 through 3 over three years (2004-05 through 2006-07). Also analyzed results from an assessment of reading achievement in decoding given to 1st graders in spring 2007. Conducted formal classroom observations of reading instruction over three years (2004-05 through 2006-07). Administered a survey of education personnel in spring 2007 about program implementation.

Major Findings

- **No significant achievement impact except in grade 1 decoding.** Reading First did not produce a statistically significant impact on student reading comprehension test scores in grades 1, 2, or 3. Reading First did produce a positive, statistically significant impact on decoding skills among 1st grade students tested in spring 2007.

- **More time on essential components.** In grades 1 and 2, Reading First produced a positive and statistically significant impact on the amount of instructional time spent on the five essential components of reading instruction promoted by the program (phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension).

- **Impact on reading instruction.** Reading First produced positive, statistically significant impacts on multiple practices promoted by the program, including professional development in scientifically based reading instruction, support from full-time reading coaches, amount of reading instruction, and availability of supports for struggling readers.

- **Exploratory analyses.** The study also explored factors that might account for the impacts observed; these findings are suggestive and were not rigorously tested:
  - There was no consistent pattern of effects over time in reading comprehension at any of the grades studied or in the impact of the program on reading instruction in grade 1. There appeared to be a systematic decline over time in the impact of the program on reading instruction in grade 2.
  - There was no relationship between reading comprehension and the number of years a student was exposed to Reading First.
  - There were no statistically significant variations among program sites in the impact of Reading First on reading comprehension or instruction.
  - There was a positive association between time spent on the five essential components of reading instruction and SAT-10 reading comprehension scores.

Where to Obtain


Reading First implementation evaluation: Final report*

Focus

Evaluates the implementation and impact of the federal Reading First program. Compares instruction and achievement in schools that receive Reading First subgrants and schools that did not. Includes an additional year of follow-up data beyond that available in the interim report of this study.

Methodology

Conducted surveys of K-3 teachers, principals, and reading coaches in spring 2005 and 2007. Surveys were administered to a nationally representative sample of Reading First schools and to non-Reading First schools with Title I schoolwide projects. Also analyzed 3rd and 4th grade reading scores on 2005 state assessments and composite measures relating to schools’ implementation of the program based on 2005 survey questions.

Major Findings

- **Differences in Reading First and non-Reading First schools.** Reading First schools and non-Reading First schools differed in several ways. Reading First schools devoted more time to reading instruction in K-3 classrooms than non-Reading First schools. Reading First schools were also more likely to a) have reading coaches who assisted teachers in implementing their reading programs; b) use reading materials aligned with scientifically based reading research; c) use assessments to guide instruction; d) place struggling readers into intervention services; and e) have their teachers participate in reading-related professional development.

- **Reading First activities.** Non-Reading First schools increasingly reported conducting activities aligned with the principles of Reading First, including a) the provision of assistance to struggling readers; b) teacher knowledge and use of materials and strategies aligned with scientifically based reading research; and c) staff participation in professional development in the five dimensions of reading instruction (phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension).

- **Impact on achievement.** Analyses of states’ reading assessment scores showed limited but statistically significant evidence that successive cohorts of 3rd and 4th grade students in Reading First schools improved their reading performance over time more quickly than did their counterparts in non-Reading First Title I schools.

- **Reading First-aligned activities and achievement.** The study analyzed the relationship between schools’ 3rd grade reading scores and four composite measures intended to characterize schools’ implementation of activities aligned with Reading First: classroom reading instruction, strategies to help struggling readers, participation in professional development, and uses of assessment to inform instruction. Only one of the four composite measures—teachers’ use of strategies to help struggling readers—showed a positive and statistically significant relationship to 3rd grade reading achievement.

Where to Obtain


*Also see the summary for ED’s Reading First Implementation Evaluation: Interim Report of 2006.
Focus
Examines implementation of the Reading First program in districts and schools and difference in reading instruction between Reading First and non-Reading First Title I schools.

Methodology
Conducted surveys in spring 2005 of K–3 teachers, principals, and reading coaches in nationally representative samples of 1,092 RF schools and 541 non-RF Title I schools. Carried out interviews with RF state coordinators. Reviewed states’ applications for Reading First awards, data from the awards database, and data from the U.S. Department of Education’s School-Level State Assessment Score database.

Major Findings

- **General implementation.** Reading First schools appeared to be implementing the major elements of the program as intended by the legislation. Classroom reading instruction in Reading First schools was significantly more likely to adhere to Reading First law than instruction in Title I schools.

- **More intervention.** Reading First teachers in kindergarten, 2nd, and 3rd grades were significantly more likely than their counterparts in Title I schools to place their struggling students in intervention programs.

- **Funding sources.** Reading First schools received both financial and nonfinancial support from a variety of external sources. During school year 2004–05, the median annual amount of funds Reading First schools received to implement their reading program was $138,000. Reading First schools have multiple external resources, in addition to Reading First funds, to implement reading programs.

- **Assessment selection.** Assessment played an important role in reading programs in both Reading First and non-Reading First Title I schools. Reading First schools received more outside assistance in selecting assessments than Title I schools. There were some differences in the types of assessments that teachers in Reading First schools and teachers in non-Reading First Title I schools found useful. Teachers in Reading First schools were more likely to report applying assessment results for varied instructional purposes (such as grouping students, monitoring progress, and identifying struggling readers) than their Title I counterparts.

- **Reading coaches.** Principals in Reading First schools were significantly more likely to report having a reading coach than were principals of non-Reading First Title I schools.

- **Professional development.** Reading First staff received significantly more professional development than did Title I staff.

Where to Obtain


*Also see the summary for ED’s *Reading First Implementation Evaluation: Final Report* of 2008.*

The Department’s administration of selected aspects of the Reading First program: Final audit report

Focus

Determines whether the U. S. Department of Education carried out its role in accordance with applicable laws and regulations in administering Reading Leadership Academies (RLAs) and related meetings and conferences, awarding the National Center for Reading First Technical Assistance (NCRFTA) contract, and administering its Web site and guidance for the Reading First program.

Methodology

Interviewed officials in the ED Reading First Program Office and Office of General Counsel, the National Institute for Literacy, and RMC Research Corporation (an ED contractor). Also interviewed speakers and 17 randomly selected participants involved in the three RLAs. Reviewed RLA handbooks and video footage and the NCRFTA contract.

Major Findings

- **Web site and guidance.** ED generally administered its Reading First Web site and its April 2002 guidance for the Reading First Program, in accordance with applicable laws and regulations.

- **Reading Leadership Academies.** ED did not have controls in place to ensure that the RLAs complied with the Department of Education Organization Act and the curriculum provisions of NCLB. Specifically, the audit found that the “Theory to Practice” sessions at the RLAs focused on a select number of reading programs and that the RLA handbook and guidebook appeared to promote a specific assessment, the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS).

- **Technical assistance contract.** With regard to RMC Research Corporation’s (RMC) technical proposal for the NCRFTA contract, the audit concluded that ED did not adequately assess issues of bias and lack of objectivity when approving individuals to be technical assistance providers before and after the NCRFTA contract was awarded.

- **Recommendations.** The Inspector General’s Office recommended that ED establish controls to ensure it does not promote or appear to endorse specific curriculum in its conference materials and related publications and ensure that it adequately assesses possible bias and lack of objectivity in possible contractors.

Where to Obtain

http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oig/auditreports/a03g0006.pdf

The Reading First program’s grant application process: Final inspection report

Focus

Determines whether the U. S. Department of Education selected an expert panel to review Reading First grant applications in accordance with NCLB and adequately screened the panel members for possible conflicts of interest. Also examines whether the expert review panel adequately documented its reasons for stating that an application was not ready for funding and reviewed the applications in accordance with established criteria, consistently applied.

Methodology

Fieldwork began in September 2005, and concluded in July 2006. Interviewed ED staff in the Reading First program office and the Office of General Counsel and reviewed ED guidance and correspondence related to the Reading First program. Also reviewed the Reading First applications from Connecticut, Georgia, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Michigan, Nevada, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Virginia, Wisconsin, and Puerto Rico.

Major Findings

- **Conflicts of interest.** The process developed by ED to screen expert review panelists for conflicts of interest was not effective. The resumes of six panelists revealed significant professional connections to a teaching methodology that requires the use of a specific reading program. ED did not identify any of these connections in its screening process and, therefore, would not have been in a position to deal with potential conflicts of interest if a state application included this specific program.

- **Peer review process.** The expert review panel adequately documented its reasons for stating that an application was not ready for funding, but ED substituted a Department-created report for the panel’s comments. As a result, ED did not follow its own guidance for the peer review process. Five states’ applications were funded without documentation that they met all of the criteria for approval. ED included requirements in the criteria used by the expert review panels that were not specifically addressed in NCLB.

- **Application review.** The expert review panel appeared to have reviewed applications in accordance with ED-developed criteria and to have applied the criteria consistently. However, these criteria included language that was not based on the statutory language; as a result, state applications were forced to meet standards not required by the law.

- **Failures of accountability.** ED program officials failed to maintain a control environment that exemplified management integrity and accountability. In implementing the Reading First Program, ED officials obscured the statutory requirements of ESEA; acted in contravention of the GAO Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government; and took actions that called into question whether they violated the Department of Education Organization Act, which prohibits ED officials from exercising direction, supervision, or control over curricula or instructional programs. Specifically, the Office of Inspector General found that the Department:
  - Developed an application package that obscured the requirements of the statute;
  - Took action with respect to the expert review panel process that was contrary to the balanced panel composition envisioned by Congress;
Intervened to release an assessment review document without the permission of the entity that contracted for its development;
Intervened to influence a state’s selection of reading programs; and
Intervened to influence reading programs being used by school districts after the application process was completed.

Where to Obtain

http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oig/aireports/i13f0017.pdf

Analysis of state K-3 reading standards and assessments

Focus

Evaluates the degree to which state reading content standards for K-3 students reflected expectations for learning in the five essential areas of effective reading instruction (phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension); and determines the extent to which state assessments administered in grades K-3 played a role in the measurement of Reading First outcomes in the five areas.

Methodology

Conducted an expert review in January 2004 of state reading content standards for grades K-3 from a random sample of 20 states. Also conducted a systematic review of approved Reading First applications for all states and the District of Columbia to determine which K-3 statewide assessments were being used as measures of the five essential areas of reading instruction.

Major Findings

- **Representation of essential elements in standards.** Reading comprehension is the most represented of the essential elements in state K-3 reading content standards with an average of 57 standards per state. This was followed by vocabulary (19 standards per state), phonics (16), fluency (6), and phonemic awareness (6). Most standards representing each element were judged to be placed at the appropriate grade in most of the states studied. A few states were found to have placed standards representing phonemic awareness and phonics at too high of a grade level.

- **Visibility of elements.** States that had organized larger numbers of their K-3 reading standards to make the five essential elements more visible were judged to represent these elements better.

- **Inadequate attention to expected outcomes.** With the possible exception of vocabulary and comprehension in grade 3, statewide reading assessments in 2003-04 did not significantly address expected student outcomes from reading instruction in the five essential areas.

- **Relationship of standards and assessments.** There is a slight relationship between how state standards represent the five essential elements of reading instruction and how state assessments represent them. States that identified their statewide reading assessments as Reading First outcome measures tended to have more reading standards that visibly represented the five elements.

Where to Obtain