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Report Calls for More Reading First Reform to Assure Program Integrity

As the new Reading First Advisory Committee convenes to restore confidence in a mismanaged billion dollar-a-year federal program, a Reading Recovery Council of North America (RRCNA) capstone report raises questions about program results and about changes that have yet to be made to assure that America's children are improving their reading scores.

The report, "[Reading Recovery and Reading First: Facts, Findings, and Recommendations](http://www.readingrecovery.org/pdf/rrcna/advocacy/Capstone-07.pdf)," synthesizes reports released over the past year by the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) Office of the Inspector General (OIG), the Government Accountability Office, and the U.S. Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee. (<http://www.readingrecovery.org/pdf/rrcna/advocacy/Capstone-07.pdf>). RRCNA's capstone report presents five recommendations that are key to building a credible program and to instilling confidence among taxpayers whose dollars are being used ostensibly to improve the reading skills of our nation's youth.

Though USDE officials publicize reading improvements, reading scholars and policy analysts call into question selective reporting and flawed interpretation of results, the measures used, and what this really means to children's learning.

"Reading First still has the opportunity to fund programs that can make a difference for our nation's most at-risk children," said Robert Schwartz, president of the RRCNA Board of Directors. "But that will require a change of attitude and practice by our federal officers charged with implementing the law."

Despite assurances from USDE officials that they have taken steps to improve administration of Reading First, RRCNA along with other national leaders including members of Congress, believe that the program is still flawed. In order to assure that future education policy is implemented without bias, RRCNA is calling on USDE to

- develop rigorous conflict of interest policies for USDE contractors and subcontractors,
- conduct a fair review process that includes mainstream reading scholars and researchers on expert panels,

- ensure that future technical assistance to states and school districts for all federal programs is fair and free of bias,
- reform implementation of scientifically based reading research to include all programs with proven effectiveness, and
- conduct government education policy with transparency, accountability, and management integrity.

In addition to these recommendations, the report asks Congress to restore its original intent by adding explicit language to a reauthorized Reading First statute for small-group and one-to-one instruction. Reading First administrators discouraged one-to-one instruction despite research evidence that clearly supports the effectiveness of one-to-one tutoring for at-risk readers in Grades 1 to 3.

“This report says that changes are necessary to free the Reading First program from being captive to a narrow ideology that has promoted sales of programs with little or no scientific support,” said Jady Johnson, RRCNA executive director. “What we know so far is that our youngest children have been denied a solid reading program that has received high marks and has solid research evidence that it works.”

Reading First officials actively discouraged states and schools from using Reading Recovery despite its strong scientific evidence of effectiveness. USDE’s own What Works Clearinghouse report of 24 beginning reading programs included very few of the comprehensive or supplemental programs that were widely used and recommended under Reading First. Reading Recovery was the only reading program to receive high marks and achieve large effects across all four domains — alphabets, fluency, comprehension, and general reading achievement.

Reading Recovery, an intervention for first graders in the lowest 20% of their class, uses highly trained teachers who work individually with children in daily 30-minute lessons. More than 20 years of student results for over a million children reveal that 75% of students with a full series lessons reach grade-level standard in 12 to 20 weeks.

The Reading Recovery Council of North America was one of three organizations that requested investigation of USDE’s management of Reading First. OIG reports over the past year validated RRCNA’s concerns about USDE interference in state and local decision making, selective application of criteria for scientifically based reading research, and USDE officials’ bias against Reading Recovery.

For more information visit www.readingrecovery.org.