

Too Good to *Last*: the

TRUE STORY

of Reading *First*

By

SOL STERN

Foreword by Chester E. Finn, Jr. *and* Michael J. Petrilli



MARCH 2008

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FOREWORD

CHESTER E. FINN, JR. AND MICHAEL J. PETRILLI

To the casual observer, the Reading First story is just another complicated, ugly, and utterly familiar Washington scandal: *Ethically-challenged political appointee overrides the “merit” process and steers millions of federal dollars to preferred companies, including one that employs his wife, all the while foiling those who would favor a different outcome. The program’s intended beneficiaries – poor, illiterate children – lose out. A courageous federal watchdog investigates, producing an exposé-style report that brings down the arrogant official, who resigns in disgrace and engages an attorney. The opposition party and media exploit the opportunity, score many points, and hold the incumbent administration accountable.*

A compelling tale, of course, and one that fits nicely into the dominant “narrative” of the George W. Bush years. Call it the unholy trinity: Jack Abramoff, Halliburton, and Reading First.

Yet when it comes to Reading First, this tale is almost entirely fiction. As *City Journal* contributing editor Sol Stern reveals in these pages, the true Reading First story is much less salacious – and vastly less formulaic – yet much more interesting. Certainly it’s more important. There were scandals all right, just not the ones that grabbed national headlines.



We at Fordham have been disciples of scientifically based approaches to reading since Jeanne Chall published *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*, back when at least one of us was study-

ing education in graduate school. We’ve proudly published two reports by reading expert Louisa Moats on the phenomenon of “whole language” programs masquerading as “balanced literacy,” and we’ve gladly infused criteria involving scientifically based reading instruction into our reviews of state English/language arts standards (reviews led by Chall disciple Sandra Stotsky). When it comes to the “reading wars,” we’re proud partisans – and battle-scarred veterans.

Four decades of rigorous scientific studies demonstrate that most young children need explicit instruction in phonics and phonemic awareness in order to learn how to read. This is especially true for disadvantaged youngsters.

Four decades of rigorous scientific studies demonstrate that most young children need explicit instruction in phonics and phonemic awareness in order to learn how to read. This is especially true for disadvantaged youngsters. Indeed, there’s not one iota of evidence that little

girls and boys learn to read “naturally” as they learn to speak, that teaching them to “sound out” words somehow harms their intellectual development or deadens them to the joys of reading, or that guessing at word cues is an effective approach for struggling readers.

Yet most ed school professors and many of the education system’s curricular experts cling to “whole language” dogma with ferocity. In a recent column, Lake Wobegon iconoclast – and unabashed political liberal – Garrison Keillor explains this well:

Liberal dogma says that each child is inherently gifted and will read if only he is read to. This was true of my grandson; it is demonstrably not true of many kids, including my sandy-haired, gap-toothed daughter.... Grown-ups who stick with dogma even though it condemns children to second-class lives should be put on buses and sent to North Dakota to hoe wheat for a year.

There was a sense of possibility and of (pre-Obama) post-partisanship. Almost everyone on both sides of Capitol Hill had voted for the program as an element of No Child Left Behind.

It was this flawed dogma that the Reading First program was designed to overturn. The program gave the force of law to the mountains of evidence on effective reading instruction; it asked recipients of federal dollars to choose

reading programs that work. It didn’t say they had to do that – but it said they had to do that if they wanted to share in this particular bucket of money.

At the program’s outset, we were hopeful but guarded enthusiasts. Finn knew from experience as a former federal official the long odds of getting states and school districts to follow Uncle Sam’s lead, yet he was also impressed by the attention that newly-elected President George W. Bush invested in the issue and hopeful that the recent report of the National Reading Panel would finally prove dispositive. Petrilli, then serving in the Bush Education Department himself, became friends with Reading First director Chris Doherty and was awed by the long hours and sincere, selfless commitment that Doherty put into making this new program work. There was a sense of possibility and of (pre-Obama) post-partisanship. Almost everyone on both sides of Capitol Hill had voted for the program as an element of No Child Left Behind. Perhaps the reading wars might finally draw to a close, science might triumph over ideology, and childhood illiteracy might be relegated to the pages of history.

For several years it appeared that our optimism was well-founded. One by one, state education departments embraced Reading First. Thousands of poor schools signed on enthusiastically. The annual program conferences turned into love-fests, with educators giving testimonials about the dramatic gains their disadvantaged students were making. And early implementation studies showed that teachers were in fact altering their instructional practices in positive ways. Research-based reading was on a roll.

However, it was too much to hope. We watched in horror as Reading First was attacked, defanged, and eventually brought to its knees. The program went from a top White House priority to victim of one of the biggest budget cuts ever, all in seven years. We protested and editorialized, but our pleas fell on deaf ears. Few wanted to know the truth about a much-maligned federal program that was once so full of potential.

So we sought out one of the most effective truth-tellers we know, Sol Stern, to put this tragic tale into plain English. He has been writing for the Manhattan Institute's respected *City Journal* for a dozen years, focusing on education reform primarily through the lens of New York City's public schools, which his own children attended. Stern also contributes to *Education Next*, on whose editorial team we both serve, so we knew about his tenacity, his ability to clarify complex material, and his passion for getting the story right. He agreed to dive into this tangled swamp and figure out what really happened to Reading First.

His story may leave you angry or despairing – perhaps both. Almost nothing you've heard about the Reading First “scandal” turns out to be true.

What about the Washington-style shenanigans that landed the program repeatedly on the front pages? The conflicts of interest, the law-breaking, the Halliburton-style self-aggrandizement? False, false, false.

Stern painstakingly reconstructs what *really* happened. Let us summarize:

■ President Bush, his domestic policy advisor Margaret Spellings (then LaMontagne), and his reading czar Reid Lyon originally conceived

Reading First as a strict federal program whose funds would only flow to states and districts using reading curricula whose effectiveness had been *validated* by scientific studies. Plenty of earlier federal reading initiatives had been too lax, had allowed unproven reading schemes to qualify for funding, and had wound up making no difference. Insisting on validation was the way to change that. But there was a problem: just two existing primary reading programs (Direct Instruction and Success for All) would initially qualify. So under pressure from commercial textbook publishers, whole language advocates and others, Congress made the fateful decision to ease the eligibility criteria so that programs “based” on scientific research could qualify too. That opened the door to the possibility that all manner of nonsense might get funded – as it had under the Clinton-era Reading Excellence Act – unless executive branch officials held the line and hewed to the program's intentions.

■ This heavy responsibility fell to young Christopher Doherty, the Reading First program's new director. Chosen because of his success in using Direct Instruction to turn around failing schools in inner city Baltimore, Doherty went to work to ensure that states and districts lived up to the principles of scientifically based reading research. His charge – from President Bush, Spellings, Lyon, and then-Secretary of Education (now Fordham trustee) Rod Paige – was to ensure that Reading First schools used only programs proven to work and shunned those that don't.

■ The inevitable backlash swiftly followed. Aggrieved vendors of whole language programs complained bitterly that their wares couldn't be

purchased with Reading First funds. They found a receptive ear in the Department of Education's Office of the Inspector General (OIG), a bastion of green eyeshade and Dragnet types who weren't the least bit knowledgeable about the ins-and-outs of reading instruction or the intent of the Reading First program. Even with its softer criteria, a faithfully implemented and rigorously managed program would create winners (vendors of proven reading strategies) and losers (vendors of snake oil). But the OIG chose to give the squeaky wheels – many of them purveyors of ineffective programs – some undeserved grease.

■ Meanwhile, Bob Slavin, developer of the phonics-based reading program Success for All, thought he saw a federal conspiracy because few Reading First dollars flowed his way. But rather than blame Congress for softening the program's eligibility criteria, or states and school districts for not choosing his program, he set his gaze on an easier target: the executive branch. He charged the Bush administration with tilting the program in favor of the big commercial publishers, some of which were now peddling scientifically "based" basal textbooks developed with the help of assorted experts, some of whom had ties to Direct Instruction.

■ The Office of Inspector General failed to find any evidence that the Department of Education acted against Slavin's Success for All, though it did allege that Doherty worked to promote Direct Instruction (a dubious charge considering how few Reading First schools adopted that program). Importantly, the OIG did not charge Doherty with any *financial* conflicts of interest. The press fabricated that part from whole cloth. The inspector general found only that Doherty

placed individuals with "professional" connections to Direct Instruction on panels that reviewed state Reading First applications. Never mind that those panels never saw the names of the reading programs the states planned to use; never mind that virtually every qualified reading expert in the land has some connection to the few programs that work. The inspector general invested several years and thousands of man-hours in his investigation and seemed determined to issue a harsh report – and to feed a media frenzy by implying that there was "more to come."

Yes, the emails are unflattering and ill-considered. No, Doherty shouldn't have sent them. But all they really show is an impassioned official doggedly trying to ensure that the federal dollars for which he was responsible were spent on reading programs that worked – and not on whole language programs that he knew would keep millions of poor children illiterate.

■ And that he did. With little to go on besides a *potential appearance of conflict of interest* (not

the financial kind, mind you, but those “professional ties”), he published several titillating emails from Doherty that OIG investigators unearthed after combing through voluminous archives. Yes, the emails are unflattering and ill-considered. No, Doherty shouldn’t have sent them. But all they really show is an impassioned official doggedly trying to ensure that the federal dollars for which he was responsible were spent on reading programs that worked – and not on whole language programs that he knew would keep millions of poor children illiterate. For this, Doherty, a loyal lieutenant in the Bush army if there ever was one, was forced to resign. As for the rest of the OIG’s case, it fizzled into thin air over the course of his next five reports. But the damage had been done.

■ By her actions (or inaction), Secretary Margaret Spellings may have hoped that throwing Doherty under the bus would resolve the matter and save the program. More likely, she thought that in sacrificing her soldier she would protect herself. After all, she had micromanaged Reading First from her West Wing office since day one (she was, in essence, Doherty’s supervisor), and her invisible fingerprints were all over the very decisions that the OIG was questioning. But after the “scandal” broke, her advocacy (and the president’s) on behalf of Reading First all but disappeared. And when Chairmen George Miller piled on with his own unjust investigation, hoping to discredit the Bush administration, Spellings retreated further. Iraq, this battle of illiteracy is not.

■ Meanwhile, Slavin was still aggrieved that nothing (not the media circus, not the OIG’s report, not the Congressional hearings, not Doherty’s firing) had altered the facts on the

ground, and he was angry that most school districts still weren’t using Reading First funds to purchase Success for All. So again he cried wolf. One surmises that he pushed his old friend David Obey, chairman of the House appropriations committee, to slash the program’s budget. Whether that was Slavin’s doing or not, it was definitely Obey’s doing. And as a result Reading First is but a mere shadow of its former self.

What can we learn from this travesty? There’s one major policy lesson that nobody’s talking about – namely, Congress’s error in softening Reading First’s language to allow funds to flow to programs based on rather than *validated* by science. That fateful decision opened the gates to ineffective programs and put the executive branch in an untenable position, trying to navigate the murky waters of the reading program marketplace and discern good ones from bad.

If Uncle Sam wants to continue telling schools how to teach reading in ways that work, then he should do it right: set clear, narrowly-defined criteria, and empower the Department of Education with enforcement authority. He should certainly amend the section of the current law barring the Department from “prescribing” curricula – if indeed prescribing curricula, or at least prescribing a list of acceptable curricula, is what he wants to do.

If this sort of heavy-handedness makes Congress skittish (and we can understand why it might), then it should get the government out of the reading business altogether. Many wise folks doubt that Washington can or should try to do anything so complicated and ambitious as select among programs with rival claims to

instructional effectiveness. They say that Congress should focus instead on getting NCLB's accountability system right. With strong enough incentives to get kids to read proficiently, perhaps schools will choose reading programs that work. Then Washington can focus on results rather than curricula.

It's easier to trade "scandal" barbs than to address a policy failure with big implications for millions of children.

Whether to ramp up the federal government's oversight of reading instruction or get rid of it entirely is a tough call, worthy of full debate. Yet no one in Congress is talking about it, nor is the fading Bush administration (though the White House recently made the gesture of boosting Reading First back to a billion dollars in its FY 2009 budget request). It's easier to trade "scandal" barbs than to address a policy failure with big implications for millions of children.

So let us do our part. The Reading First saga recounted here by Sol Stern indeed reeks of scandal. We see five of them:

1. It's a scandal that an influential "progressive" lawmaker, Chairman David Obey, would slash funding for one of the few effective programs for poor children in the federal government – the only No Child Left Behind program that has received the stamp of approval from both the Government Accountability Office and the Office of Management and Budget.

2. It's a scandal that President Bush and Secretary Spellings hung Chris Doherty out to dry, even though he was following their orders and acting aggressively (and heroically) to ensure that only effective programs received funds under Reading First.

3. It's a scandal that Chairman George Miller (another celebrated "progressive" and an "accountability hawk" to boot) would haul Doherty before his committee and accuse him of being a "criminal" when Miller himself signed off on the very policy decision that cast Doherty in his thankless gatekeeper role.

4. It's a scandal that the Department of Education's inspector general can pursue a reckless, one-sided investigation and not be held accountable for his actions. Who inspects the inspectors in today's Washington?

5. Most of all, it's a *scandal* that millions of poor children are suffering from the political games of adults – toying with the Reading First program, its implementation, and its budget.

After reading the OIG report in September 2006, many editorial writers expressed "outrage" at what had happened. After reading our report, we hope they do the same.

INTRODUCTION

During the 2000 presidential campaign George W. Bush seemed as passionate about achieving fundamental education reform as he was about lowering taxes or combating terrorism. He appeared genuinely moved when he spoke about reducing the academic achievement gap between white and black children and ending what he called “the soft bigotry of low expectations.” He often noted that two thirds of the children in inner city schools were unable to read proficiently by fourth grade, and he promised that as president he would finally do something about that devastating failure. The means would be a new federal initiative to encourage the use of evidence-based approaches to teaching reading in the early grades. The initiative was to be called “Reading First.” The name turned out to be prescient.

On the morning of January 21, 2001, less than 12 hours after the bands stopped playing at the inaugural balls, the new president convened a meeting on reading in the White House’s Roosevelt Room. Present were some of the country’s leading cognitive scientists and reading researchers, including Reid Lyon, Louisa Moats, Barbara Foorman, and Claude Goldenberg – plus first lady Laura Bush and President Bush’s domestic policy advisor, Margaret LaMontagne (who later remarried and took the name Margaret Spellings). The participants discussed how recent advances in reading science might help solve America’s biggest education problem: the fact that 40 percent of all children and two thirds of black children were not reading profi-

ciently by fourth grade, an almost certain predictor of academic failure in the upper grades.

President Bush opened the meeting and stated that under his proposed reading legislation the Department of Education would be able to leverage its spending power to prod state education agencies and local school districts to choose reading programs backed by science and evidence – a historic first for the federal government. As one of the meeting participants recalled, Bush said there was “no need to throw good money into programs that don’t work. We’ve tried that before.”

The president then turned the meeting over to Dr. Lyon, the federal government’s chief reading scientist. Lyon’s official title was a long one – Chief of the Child Development and Behavior Branch of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, a division of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Lyon had served on the Bush transition team and was soon to become a White House reading advisor, while continuing his NIH duties. An ex-paratrooper and special education teacher with a Ph.D. in psychology, Lyon had spent almost his entire professional life promoting the scientific study of reading. A Democrat by party registration, Lyon had previously advised both the Clinton administration and Congress on reading science. But he had also worked with George W. Bush on reading reform well before the 2000 election. In 1996, Lyon received an unexpected call at his NIH office from the first-year Texas governor. “I have lots of kids who are


not reading well,” Bush said. “What’s the science on this that can guide us?” Dr. Lyon then visited Texas several times to advise state education officials on the best approaches to improve reading instruction.

The scientists at the White House meeting were not only looking for a radical change in federal education policy, but also hoping for an end to the “reading wars” that had obstructed progress on classroom instruction for the better part of the past century. It wasn’t just that the new president was an enthusiast for the science of reading. Optimism was also fueled by the fact that Congress was now on the science bandwagon. In no small measure this was due to Dr. Lyon’s efforts during the Clinton years to keep congressional leaders briefed about new developments in reading science, including the findings from a generation of research studies supported by NIH, the U.S. Department of Education and the National Science Foundation.

Those studies were conducted at the nation’s most prestigious universities by highly qualified scientists using randomized field trials – the “gold standard” for scientific research design. Over 40,000 children were followed for at least five years by teams of educators, psychologists, neuroscientists, linguists, and physicians – investigating how children learn to read, and testing intervention strategies designed to remediate reading failure. Some of the medical researchers even used magnetic resonance imaging to measure differences in brain function between strong and weak readers.

In his 1998 testimony before the House Committee on Education and the Work Force, Lyon summarized the most significant conclusion from the research: “While the fundamental pur-

pose of reading is to derive meaning from print, the key to comprehension starts with the rapid and accurate reading of words. In fact, difficulties in decoding unfamiliar words and learning to recognize words rapidly are at the core of most reading problems. These difficulties can be traced systematically to initial difficulties in understanding that the language that is heard by the ear is actually composed of smaller segments of sound.”



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Congress eventually affirmed its own support for reading science by creating the National Reading Panel (NRP) and commissioning it to make recommendations about the best methods for teaching reading. After the most comprehensive review of scientific, peer-reviewed reading research ever undertaken, the 2000 NRP report concluded that beginning readers – especially those from disadvantaged homes – should be taught systematically and explicitly to hear and identify the different speech sounds included in spoken words (phonemic awareness), move on to learning the symbols that represent the speech sounds and how to blend them to sound out whole words (phonics), and

then build fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. The panel also reported that reading science had developed effective new technologies to monitor students' progress in decoding written language. To make an analogy with medical research, reading science developed not only the educational equivalent of a treatment for diabetes but also the diagnostic tools to assess how the treatment was working.

With the scientific consensus now also represented in an official congressional report, an agreement in principle on the administration's new reading legislation was achieved fairly quickly. Dr. Lyon partnered with Robert Sweet, a senior education staffer on the House Committee on Education and the Workforce (and a former official in the Reagan and first Bush administrations) in drafting the Reading First bill. As part of the No Child Left Behind Act, it passed the Congress by overwhelming majorities and was signed into law by President Bush on January 8, 2002. The total authorization for Reading First was almost \$1 billion per year for six years, less than 2 percent of all federal education spending. The funds were eventually distributed to all of the state education agencies, and then to 5,700 high poverty elementary schools nationwide.

A comprehensive independent study to assess Reading First's impact on participating schools and their pupils isn't due until later this year. Still, as the following analysis makes clear, this relatively modest investment in federal funds has already paid significant dividends for at-risk children in a number of states and school districts. According to the Government Accountability Office (GAO), the program is extremely popular in the states and has the potential to

narrow the black-white achievement gap. That's more than can be said about most previous federal education programs. Hundreds of billions of dollars in compensatory Title I funds sent to the states and local districts, with no strings attached, have brought little academic progress over the past 40 years.



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Reading First has already fulfilled its drafters' hopes in another respect. Every state education agency in the country signed on for the new federal reading grants, and each pledged to make sure that the NRP-recommended instructional principles were followed in the 1,500 districts that eventually participated in the program. Close to 100,000 elementary school teachers have been trained in scientifically based reading instruction, thus accomplishing an end run around the nation's science-resistant education schools. It's highly likely that most of those teachers have improved the ways they teach reading.

Yet all that good work is now in danger of being nullified because of a sustained political assault on the Reading First program by an unlikely tripartite coalition. First the program was attacked by organizations representing the nation's education schools and public school English/language arts teachers. Then a wide-ranging series of complaints was leveled at Reading First's implementation by Robert Slavin, the developer of Success for All, a phonics-based reading program. Angered that his program was not widely selected by Reading First schools, Slavin charged that this was due to bias and financial conflict of interest by Reading First's top officials. His complaints prompted an investigation and a series of unfavorable reports on Reading First by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of the Inspector General. Finally, after the 2006 midterm elections, key Democratic lawmakers swooped in for the kill when they saw an opening to discredit President Bush.

Unfortunately, the Bush administration also failed the test of fidelity to a program that was once the apple of the president's eye. The administration committed a handful of blunders in organizing this complex new program, including being insufficiently vigilant against the appearance of conflict of interest in the program's grant review process. But those mistakes were compounded when the Bush administration capitulated to media and political pressures at the first whiff of a potential scandal involving several consultants and the program's first executive director, Christopher Doherty. The administration forced Doherty's resignation in 2006 – despite ample evidence that he was simply following the president's orders and the law's mandate. But even worse, it then refused to expend any of its diminishing political capital to defend the still-valid principles of Reading First,

just when the program had grown more popular than ever with its participants.

Indeed, after the midterm elections the program was left defenseless as key Democratic Congressional leaders hyped the conflict of interest charges into a virtual criminal conspiracy, then slashed Reading First funds by almost two thirds. The \$670 million cut from the successful reading initiative is now being used to boost spending on other education programs with no comparable track record of success favored by the Democratic leadership.



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In the pages that follow, I describe the trials that Reading First has been forced to endure. It's a cautionary tale that raises the question of whether the federal government, which we all know is good at writing checks, is also capable of nudging states and school districts to do the right thing in education – even when the right thing is backed by a broad scientific consensus. President Bush was undoubtedly sincere when he said in the first White House meeting on Reading First that there was “no need to throw good money into programs that don't work.” But his administration did little to protect its signature reading program when it came under attack. It remains to be seen how many of

America's schools, absent some form of external pressure and guidance, can ever be convinced to use evidence- and scientifically based practices to help the millions of children betrayed by unproven teaching methodologies.

Reading Science and Reading Wars

Americans have been arguing about the best way to teach reading almost since the beginning of the republic. In the early 19th century, millions of children were taught to read through the phonetics exercises in Noah Webster's classic *Blue Back Speller*. The method was so successful that Alexis De Tocqueville and other visitors to the United States were amazed by the growth of mass literacy in the new nation. The famous *McGuffey Readers*, mixing phonics lessons with morally instructive children's literature, then became the textbooks of choice in half of the country's classrooms.

The anti-phonics backlash began in the mid-19th century with the intervention of Horace Mann of Massachusetts, acknowledged to be the founder of the U.S. public school system. Anticipating the complaint of progressive educators in the next century, Mann believed that teaching children to read by repetitive phonetic drills was drudgery and referred to the letters of the alphabet as 26 "bloodless" and "skeleton-like" figures. Instead, he argued (and was extremely influential in this) that children could be taught to recognize and memorize whole words before moving on to deciphering the meaning of whole sentences.

The progressive approach to reading instruction came into its own in the 1920s, under the tute-

lage of John Dewey. Progressive educators believed that children could start out reading by recognizing whole words, or pictographs. (Dewey also recommended that children not be taught to read until they were eight years old.) From Dewey on, the progressives dominated the nation's education schools, tilting reading pedagogy away from the unloved phonics method and toward one variant or another of "whole word" instruction.

The whole word reading method was a philosophy of child development as much as classroom pedagogy. It was based on the assumption that learning to read was an inherently natural process, similar to the manner in which children learn oral language, and therefore did not require a great deal of explicit and direct instruction. In reading, as in other subjects, progressive educators came to believe that the teacher should be "a guide on the side" instead of "a sage on the stage." In fact, it was argued that in the right classroom environment and with just enough helpful guidance by teachers, most children could make progress towards deriving meaning from print. This pedagogical approach relies heavily on the child's use of so-called context cues (such as the first and last letters in the word, the length of the word, the other words in the sentence, and even pictures on the page) to identify unknown words. It emphasizes memorizing words as wholes instead of piecing them together from a fixed set of component parts.

The *Dick and Jane* readers, incorporating the whole word approach, were the most popular reading texts in the public schools from the 1930s on. But proponents of phonics began to make a comeback in the 1950s because of agitation by parents who believed their children couldn't wait to guess the meaning of words. The phonics camp received a huge boost with

the publication in 1955 of Rudolf Flesch's anti-whole-word best seller, *Why Johnny Can't Read*. The pendulum then swung back and forth between whole word (also sometimes known as "look-say") and its successor, "whole language," and phonics for the next half century. In 1987, whole language was officially adopted by the California Board of Public Instruction and mandated to be used in every school in the state. By 1994, California's reading scores had plummeted to near the bottom in the nation, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The state education board then did an almost complete about-face and returned to a mainly phonics-based approach to teaching reading in the early grades.

But while the reading was continued in state and local school boards, serious researchers were beginning to look closely at the evidence. In the mid-1960s, the Carnegie Corporation of New

In 1987, whole language was officially adopted by the California Board of Public Instruction and mandated to be used in every school in the state. By 1994, California's reading scores had plummeted to near the bottom in the nation, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

York commissioned Harvard education professor Jeanne Chall, widely regarded as the nation's leading reading scholar, to review all of the empirical research on the most effective methods of teaching reading in the early grades. Her conclusions were published in 1967, in the classic *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*. While acknowledging that there was no one best method for all beginning readers, Chall punctured the theory embraced by progressive educators that learning to read was natural for children. All the available evidence, according to Chall, supported the notion that most children, and particularly children from disadvantaged homes, benefited from being taught the phonetic code of the English language. Chall also recommended that such instruction be systematic and explicit, with teachers using direct instruction, as opposed to being "guides on the side."

More evidence on the superiority of a decoding approach for early readers came in 1977 with the results from Project Follow Through, which was sponsored by the federal government as part of President Johnson's War on Poverty. Project Follow Through remains to this day the largest experimental study ever conducted to compare the effectiveness of different instructional methodologies. The \$500 million research project examined the effects on student academic progress of 22 discreet instructional programs operating at over 180 high-poverty schools around the country. It concluded that only one of the models raised the academic performance of low-income children, the little-known Direct Instruction program headquartered at the University of Oregon and developed by Siegfried Engelmann, one of the unsung heroes of American education.

Direct Instruction today refers to a set of more than 100 curricula and instructional practices

that incorporate Engelmann's tightly-designed, systematic and highly-empirical approach to teaching a range of academic subjects. Its reading program begins with systematic and explicit instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics. Success for All, developed by Robert Slavin at John Hopkins University, is yet another phonics-based reading program that, in numerous studies since the 1990s, has repeatedly been found to be effective in raising reading achievement. In 1999, the American Institute for Research (AIR), one of the nation's leading behavioral and social science research organizations, named Direct Instruction and Success for All as the only two commercial reading programs to have significantly improved reading outcomes in repeated empirical studies using randomized field trials and reported in peer-reviewed professional journals.

Despite accumulating evidence from all the scientific studies, whole language purists nevertheless still insist that learning to read is a natural process and that most children can intuit the alphabetic principle and the meaning of printed words with some guidance (on the side) from a teacher and through pleasant cooperative classroom activities such as "shared reading" and "reading circles." Basically, this approach says that kids learn to read by reading – by immersing themselves in print.

Yet the whole language movement is unable to point to any consistent scientific evidence backing its claims. In response to the overwhelming body of scientific studies confirming the effectiveness of a decoding emphasis in early reading instruction, whole language advocates have instead argued that its theories of how children learn to read cannot be assessed by "positivist" science. Ken Goodman, one of the leaders of

the whole language movement, rejects scientific research in education, arguing that it sets up "artificial experiments." (It was Goodman who defined the process of learning to read as a "psycholinguistic guessing game.") Instead of experimental studies, whole language advocates favor research models based on subjective or "ethnographic" classroom observation. The education schools call this "qualitative" research, to distinguish it from the empirical methods used by scientists. In 2003, the whole-language-dominated National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) passed a resolution attacking Reading First for favoring only "one model" of science. Instead, NCTE called for "implementation of diverse kinds of scientific research, including teacher research." *Translation*: teachers are competent to evaluate instructional methods by observing their own classrooms. Not surprisingly, qualitative research and teacher observations always seem to validate progressive educators' favorite classroom practices.

The progressives' attack on reading science became overtly and unapologetically political. Goodman regularly referred to phonics as the tool of right-wing Christian fundamentalists, this despite the fact that the reading research community, like the rest of academia, is dominated by Democrats. Writing recently in *Teachers College Record*, Pennsylvania State education professor Patricia Hinchey argued that forcing classroom teachers to subject children to "drill and kill" phonics instruction is part of a conservative plot. Its ultimate purpose, says Hinchey, is to make sure that students will become "increasingly valuable 'human capital,' available for use in business and industry," yet never attain the "critical literacy" necessary for active participation in the democratic process. In her presiden-

tial address to the 2002 NCTE convention, Arizona State University professor Carole Edelsky attacked the National Reading Panel report and No Child Left Behind: “It’s no accident. There’s an agenda at work here, and it’s not ours. It belongs in part to the religious right, but mostly it belongs to the Business Roundtable.”

Such fantasies notwithstanding, the whole language movement was eventually forced to pay some lip service to science and the concerns of education consumers. It accomplished this by changing the labeling on its products. More often than not, whole language reading programs in the schools are now called “balanced

literacy.” It’s a deceptive marketing slogan, as Louisa Cook Moats has shown in *Whole Language Lives On: The Illusion of “Balanced” Reading Instruction*. According to Moats, “It is too easy for practitioners, while endorsing ‘balance’ to continue teaching whole language without ever understanding the most important research findings about reading or incorporating those findings into their classroom practice.”

Moats wrote those words in 2000. They turned out to be prophetic in describing the whole language/balanced literacy coup that occurred three years later in the New York City school district, the largest in the country.

Gotham’s schools came under the control of Mayor Michael Bloomberg in 2002. Bloomberg then picked Joel Klein, a former Justice Department official, as chancellor of NYC schools. Because neither Bloomberg nor Klein had an education background, the most fateful decision they made as they organized their new administration was the selection of Diana Lam as Deputy Chancellor for Teaching and Learning. Chancellor Klein gave Lam control over most of the early pedagogical decisions, while he himself focused on structural reforms. It soon became clear that Lam was a fervent advocate for the whole language reading approach. She elevated Teachers College professor Lucy Calkins to become the system’s most important staff developer and teacher trainer. Calkins is perhaps the nation’s leading champion of the doctrine that almost all children are natural readers and writers, and that therefore it is criminal for them to be drilled in soul-deadening phonics lessons and through “teacher centered” instruction.

Deputy Chancellor Lam’s first instructional decision was to ditch the aforementioned Success for All program that had been in use in dozens of low-performing schools, despite the fact that the program was responsible for steadily raising reading scores among thousands of poor, minority children. The core reading program for almost all of the city’s schools now became balanced literacy (with a small dollop of phonics to justify the word “balanced” in the product label). The reading program was practically taken off the shelf from Calkins’s Readers and Writers Project at Teachers College and it was then enforced in near dictatorial fashion in almost all classrooms in the lower grades. Calkins’s institute has received over \$10 million in contracts from the city to spread the gospel of balanced literacy to teachers.

Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein fully backed Lam's choice, despite being warned by scientists from the National Reading Panel that the city's curriculum did not contain a "core, scientifically based reading program." Chancellor Klein not only brushed off these criticisms but disparaged the claims for science in the NRP report and the Reading First legislation. "It's being done in the name of science," he told the New York Times. "And the question is: where's the science?"

Nevertheless, by giving the appearance of using some traditional phonics instruction, balanced literacy disarmed many of the city's parents and elected officials. Even after Lam's departure in 2004, Bloomberg and Klein continued to impose the same approach to the teaching of reading – science be damned. The city has so far spent upwards of \$100 million to re-educate its teachers in the pedagogical doctrines of whole language masquerading as balanced literacy.

Designing Reading First

As mentioned earlier, the authors of the first draft of the Reading First legislation were Dr. Reid Lyon, the head of all reading science studies at the NIH, and Robert Sweet, a veteran education staffer at the House education com-

mittee. Lyon and Sweet accepted as a given that the law would be opposed by the overwhelming majority of education school professors whose instructional doctrines determine the way future K-12 teachers are trained. Those doctrines have been aptly described by E.D. Hirsch Jr. as the "thoughtworld" of American education. It is not a force to be easily moved by one more federal reading program.

It is not altogether surprising that the 2007 federal NAEP tests showed that New York City students made no improvement from 2003 to 2007 in fourth- and eighth-grade reading (despite the fact that 25 percent of the city's test takers received accommodations meant for disabled youngsters, the highest percentage in the nation). However, not a single public official or editorial writer at the city's major newspapers thought to connect the dismal NAEP reading results with the education department's pivotal decision in 2003 to abandon Success for All in several dozen low-performing schools and impose balanced literacy on all the schools. As this episode shows, making instructional choices that fly in the face of the evidence for what works remains all too common among educators. That it happened in the nation's largest school district and with little public comment also reflects the cultural and political resistance that the Reading First program eventually faced.

Interests other than pedagogical were also at stake in the coming struggle over Reading First. A few years ago, the National Council on Teacher Quality surveyed the nation's education schools and found that 85 percent of their elementary education classes didn't even teach future teachers the principles of phonics and scientific reading instruction. If a major shift were to occur in teaching methodologies in the nation's primary schools, pressure for change would mount on the colleges of education, which presently have few professors capable of – let alone inclined toward – teaching phonics and reading science. Professional development contracts from the \$500 billion-plus education industry would suddenly be up for grabs as well.

Lyon and Sweet were also acutely aware of the precedent of the last bungled effort to use federal funds to promote scientifically based reading instruction, a Clinton-era reading initiative that was triggered by the publication of a report supporting reading science issued by the National Research Council. In 1998, Congress

If a major shift were to occur in teaching methodologies in the nation's primary schools, pressure for change would mount on the colleges of education, which presently have few professors capable of – let alone inclined toward – teaching phonics and reading science. Professional development contracts from the \$500 billion-plus education industry would suddenly be up for grabs as well.

“We knew we were battling a culture of hostility to science in the education industry,” recalls Sweet. “Reading First was created to be a catalyst, to provide a financial incentive for schools finally to start doing the right thing for the millions of kids left behind in reading.”

Reid Lyon recently expounded on this point:

“Our analysis of the conditions under which science could inform educational policies and practices indicated that many barriers existed – including, but not limited to, an anti-scientific spirit that pervaded mainstream education, a lack of accountability for results, a tendency toward postmodern and other philosophical positions on teaching and learning, a tendency to implement instructional strategies and programs on the basis of tradition, anecdotes, untested assumptions and a lack of attention to evidence-based instruction in teacher colleges. And we also found that educational practices were rarely changed to any discernible degree by widely read policy papers and reviews and policy studies carried out by major think tanks and universities. The gaps between what we knew scientifically and what was implemented in schools remained. This gap was not a function of difficulties in implementing proven instructional practices. The gap remained because science could not compete with the status quo.”

passed the Reading Excellence Act (REA) with a budget of \$270 million. The language of the law required that the funds be spent on reading programs that produce “measurable, positive results” supported by “scientific research.” Training in reading instruction funded by the REA was also supposed to be based on “reliable, replicable research on reading.” At the time, reading science advocates believed that the law’s language would be sufficient to begin changing instructional practices in the classrooms. But the legislation had no real teeth, no mechanism to ensure that the schools receiving federal reading grants actually implemented the scientific reading approach. Many school districts took the federal money, but in the classrooms it was business as usual. Though well-intentioned, REA sometimes ended up sending more federal money to whole language reading programs.

Aware of the REA debacle, Lyon and Sweet consciously designed Reading First to circumvent teacher training institutions that could be expected to resist any new federal program promoting the systematic teaching of phonemic awareness and phonics as the foundation of reading instruction. “We knew we were battling a culture of hostility to science in the education industry,” recalls Sweet. “Reading First was created to be a catalyst, to provide a financial incentive for schools finally to start doing the right thing for the millions of kids left behind in reading.”

One might say that Reading First was a \$1 billion per year federal bribe to get school districts finally to begin doing what they should have been doing all along. Obviously, there was no expectation by the legislation’s authors that federal money alone could reverse decades of opposition to scientifically based instruction in the nation’s classrooms. However, Lyon and Sweet were convinced that this time around they not

Note that Reading First was not an actual mandate. No state or school district was ever forced to join the program or use a particular reading program.

only had the right language in the law, but also that the President of the United States was personally committed to reading science as the means of narrowing the black-white achievement gap. Under such circumstances, the Reading First planners believed that the administration would be proactive, that it would try to prevent gaming of the system by local education officials keen to use the federal funds to maintain the instructional status quo.

Note that Reading First was not an actual mandate. No state or school district was ever forced to join the program or use a particular reading program. But Lyon and Sweet assumed that a critical mass of schools would apply for the Reading First grants and actually implement the general principles of reading science as required in the law. Districts were going to be offered significant funding to change the reading instruction in their lowest performing schools. This would show that scientifically based instruction was lifting reading achievement in previously struggling schools. Such a real-life demonstration would then, they hoped and expected, ignite a counter-cultural education movement of teachers, administrators and parents who would trumpet the effectiveness of classroom reading instruction shaped by the findings of science.

Ultimately, the success and integrity of Reading First would hinge on state officials making wise judgments about whether programs selected by school districts met the standards of scientifically based reading instruction.

The Reading First legislation provided a thick layer of contractual benchmarks and a two-tiered review process to guarantee that these federal grants would be spent only for reading programs that conform to the principles of “scientifically based reading research,” or SBRR. (The acronym appears dozens of times in the legislation.) In order to qualify for a reading grant, a state education agency was required to submit a detailed proposal to the U.S. Department of Education. States were not required to list the specific reading programs they would use. But a grant proposal had to attest that the state would make sure the principles of SBRR were followed in the schools receiving the funds. State education agencies were then required to conduct their own review process for grant proposals submitted by each school district hoping to qualify for Reading First funds. Each state had the responsibility to make sure that districts receiving funds continued to maintain fidelity to SBRR and to disapprove proposals by districts to use programs that did not conform to the principles of

SBRR. The law granted the Department of Education the authority to step in and cancel reading grants if it found that the purpose of the legislation was being undermined by a state or school district.

Ultimately, the success and integrity of Reading First would hinge on state officials making wise judgments about whether programs selected by school districts met the standards of scientifically based reading instruction. It was obvious that the federal government couldn’t just send money to states and districts and expect elementary teachers to follow the recommendations of the NRP on teaching reading. The vast majority of classroom instructors were ignorant about reading science and unequipped to begin teaching the NRP-recommended approach of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. Teachers would have to receive extensive training in the protocols of reading science. Since the underlying rationale for Reading First was President Bush’s pledge that the federal government would no longer fund instructional programs that “don’t work,” the big program implementation question was how to make sure that the reading programs school districts purchased with their federal dollars really worked – i.e., that they were based on science.

From Gold to Silver

In crafting the legislation, the dilemma for Reid Lyon, Robert Sweet, and other congressional negotiators was clear: if the criterion for funding were that each approved reading program had to show proof – through “gold standard” experimental studies – of its effectiveness, only Direct Instruction, Success for All and per-

haps one other program (Open Court) would qualify. In the early stages of drafting the bill, according to Lyon,

we recommended that federal funding *should* be contingent on program-specific evidence of effectiveness derived from studies employing appropriate research designs and methods.... We felt that this straightforward criterion would honor the science and stimulate the publishing industry and other educational developers to develop proven programs for the kids that Reading First was designed to help. To be sure, there were few reading programs that would have met the criteria. On the other hand, we predicted that by setting the higher standard, vendors would have a clear effectiveness goal to achieve in order to be competitive.

Lyon's program-effectiveness criterion was reflected in early Reading First drafts. However, it soon became clear that key leaders on the House and Senate education committees as well as higher-ups in the Bush administration feared that sticking with the "gold standard" requirement would be too restrictive. Some of the negotiators argued that such narrow criteria might also violate a section of the 30-year-old Department of Education organization law that prohibits it from requiring states and local districts to adopt a particular curriculum or instructional program. Meanwhile, some reading advocacy groups were also pushing for the widest possible criteria for schools to receive funds under the law. "Congressional members were being lobbied heavily by developers of non-SBRR programs who did not want to be excluded from funding despite no evidence of effectiveness," recalls Lyon. That's exactly what had happened under the older Reading Excel-

lence Act, as school districts favoring whole language simply submitted boilerplate applications for federal reading funds and assumed (correctly, as it turned out) there would be little oversight over how the funds were spent.

Lyon and Sweet eventually had to back away from their preferred "gold standard" proof of effectiveness. A looser definition of what would qualify as an acceptable reading program was established. Instead of restricting the funds to programs that had themselves been tested scientifically, the final bill specified that what made a reading program effective and therefore eligible for funding was whether it was "based" on the general findings from scientific reading research as outlined in the National Reading Panel report. In this regard, the key section of

In this regard, the key section of the bill defined scientifically based reading instruction as follows: "explicit and systematic instruction in – (A) phonemic awareness; (B) phonics; (C) vocabulary development; (D) reading fluency, including oral reading skills; and (E) reading comprehension strategies."

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That compromise language (a retreat of sorts from President Bush’s original insistence that only programs proven to work should be funded) was agreed on by the summer of 2001. By the time the president signed the bill six months later, the big commercial publishers were racing to produce new basal readers that had never been tested in randomized field trials, but that seemed to incorporate the general principles of SBRR.

Reid Lyon recently reflected on the decision by Congress and the administration to settle for the looser definition of a “scientifically based” program: “Both Bob Sweet and I were concerned when the criterion for receiving Reading First funding was modified from what we had recommended – which was that funding should be provided for programs with proven effectiveness – to a softer criterion that programs had to be based on Scientifically Based Reading Research. We predicted that this change would stimulate a number of unintended consequences ranging from many programs claiming that they were based on SBRR when they were not and, related to this, states and local districts having difficulty identifying which programs were actually effective with the kids in their districts and schools.”

This change to a “softer criterion” in the language of the Reading First legislation proved fateful. In the early days of the program, it generated confusion in many state education de-

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partments about which reading programs would qualify for federal funding. In a broader sense, it opened up a Pandora’s box that eventually came back to haunt the Bush administration.

The Backlash

Even under the best of circumstances (i.e., without the ideologically motivated push-back that would come from the ed-school professoriate), Reading First was certain to be a complex and difficult program to implement. Department of Education officials in Washington were being tasked with supervising 50 separate state Reading First programs, each with its own procedures for getting approved reading materials and teacher training protocols into qualifying schools. Each of the states, in turn, was required to review the proposals of dozens of school districts and then monitor how the targeted schools were using a host of different reading programs. In addition, the Reading First office in Washington had to oversee regional technical assistance centers set up under the law that, among their other tasks, were expected to provide guidance to the states about the many reading programs available on the market and whether they qualified under the law’s SBRR criteria. The central staff also had to make sure that each state conducted initial training in reading science and then continued professional devel-

opment for the frontline teachers who were expected to deliver instruction in the classroom. Since U.S. education law required that non-public schools be included in most federal compensatory programs for economically disadvantaged students, the Reading First staff also had to make sure that eligible private schools (mostly Catholic) received their fair share of program services, were properly consulted on the districts' choice of reading programs, and then were included in the teacher training.

With the “softer criterion” in the law defining an acceptable reading program, Reading First's Washington staff had to take on still more of the burden of guaranteeing that the federal grant money was used (as intended) to change classroom teaching practices, rather than to underwrite the status quo. In carrying out this mission, Reading First officials had to walk a political tightrope. On the one hand, they needed to make sure that the bad precedent of the Reading Excellence Act wasn't repeated, with districts sneaking in programs that tilted toward whole language. On the other hand, they had to guard against accusations from suspicious members of Congress – Republicans and Democrats alike – that federal bureaucrats were improperly “dictating” to district officials which instructional programs to use in the classroom. Nothing of such complexity and with so many political minefields in its path had ever been tried before by the U.S. Department of Education.

The Bush administration appointed a 35-year-old former Foreign Service officer named Christopher Doherty as Reading First's executive director. Doherty was handed this daunting logistical and political challenge with little guidance, few precedents to follow, and just one other professional to assist him. Doherty's im-

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mediate previous position was running the Baltimore Curriculum Project, which merged two effective elementary school instructional programs, E.D. Hirsch's Core Knowledge and Direct Instruction, in five of the lowest performing schools in Baltimore. Prior to that position Doherty was director of the Baraka School in Kenya, a unique boarding school for disadvantaged Baltimore 12-year-olds.

There was no question about Doherty's passion for education and his concern for helping disadvantaged children. From first-hand experience, Doherty was steeped in reading science and the

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SBRR protocols. He had seen the Direct Instruction (DI) program lift reading scores in some of the lowest performing and poorest schools in Baltimore. He knew that the instructional program was backed by a mountain of scientific studies showing it had successfully raised the reading proficiency of disadvantaged children in school districts all over the country. Since Doherty's wife Laura was also a DI trainer, one might even say the Dohertys were part of the DI family.

Virtually every education official in the administration was aware of Doherty's professional ties to DI, as well as his wife's work for one of the DI programs. They didn't see it as a problem. In fact, it was one of the major reasons he got the job. After all, President Bush himself was convinced that programs like DI could raise reading scores in the nation's schools and narrow the black-white academic performance gap. When the new president made school visits to drum up support for the pending NCLB and Reading First legislation, his staff looked for classrooms that could show the efficacy of sci-

When the new president made school visits to drum up support for the pending NCLB and Reading First legislation, his staff looked for classrooms that could show the efficacy of scientifically based reading programs.



On September 11, 2001, President Bush received word of the terrorist attacks while observing a DI lesson.

entifically based reading programs. That's why, in a scene observed around the world on the morning of September 11, 2001, President Bush was in a second grade classroom in Booker Elementary School in Sarasota, Florida observing a scripted reading lesson (number 60) from the DI instruction manual. Before Bush received the news about the terrorist attacks, he was observing the children reading a story called "The Pet Goat." The story was written by DI program designers to serve as an explicit phonics drill on word pairs and syllables that children often confuse.

Later events would show, however, that the Bush administration was naïve to assume that Doherty's ties to the DI program would present no political problems, though no one could make a case that either Doherty's DI connections or his wife's constituted a true conflict of interest. Simply put, the DI connection became a lightning rod and seemed to add weight to the political attacks directed at Reading First and the Bush administration after the midterm elections.

The fact is that Direct Instruction gained hardly any customers because of Reading First, despite the program director's ties to the program and his awareness of the scientific consensus that the DI approach was a proven way to lift reading scores for at-risk students.

There's an incredible irony in this – one that seems to have escaped the administration's critics on Capitol Hill and the media. The fact is that Direct Instruction gained hardly any customers because of Reading First, despite the program director's ties to the program and his awareness of the scientific consensus that the DI approach was a proven way to lift reading scores for at-risk students. Nor were there any financial benefits for Success for All, the only other reading program shown by several scientific studies to have raised reading achievement. These two highly effective but tightly scripted reading programs are more expensive and harder to implement in the classroom than the basal readers put out by the big publishers that claim to incorporate the principles of SBRR in their lessons. When the language in the Reading First law was changed to allow such commercial products to qualify for funding, despite not having been scientifically tested for effectiveness, those publishers gained an enormous marketing advantage over both Direct Instruction

and Success for All: their products were both cheaper and easier to deploy.

This did not please Sigfried Engelmann, developer of the Direct Instruction program. He criticized the change in the Reading First law that allowed untested programs to be funded so long as they were “based” on the principles of SBRR. “This reasoning,” Engelmann wrote, “seems to be based on the idea that it is morally important to have a large number of programs available, whether or not they have been demonstrated to work.” As a result, according to Engelmann, “the increases in DI sales from new implementations funded by Reading First was not more than 2 percent.”

Success for All's founder and president, Robert Slavin, was even more unhappy when he realized that the big publishers' untested basal readers were getting the lion's share of the sales to Reading First schools. But Slavin didn't attribute this to the language in the Reading First law that allowed basal readers to be funded. Instead, he issued a long formal complaint to the Department of Education and congressional committees, alleging that biased federal Reading First officials were responsible for Success for All's failure to be selected by more states and districts. Slavin charged that Reading First officials had financial conflicts of interest that led them to favor the products of some of the commercial publishers. For good measure, Slavin accused Reid Lyon of interfering in the program selection process to help out his own favored reading programs, a charge that Lyon has vehemently denied.

Unlike Engelmann, Slavin was a significant figure in Washington education circles, with ready access to high-ranking members of key Congressional committees. He was particularly close to

Congressman David Obey (D-Wisconsin), the ranking minority member of the House Appropriations Committee when Reading First was written and now the committee's chairman. In the 1990s, Obey and former Representative John Porter (R-Illinois) had sponsored the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program, which distributed funds for schools to adopt "whole-school reforms," research-driven approaches intended to strengthen entire schools and make their curricula more rigorous. Slavin's foundation received a significant share of those grants and also of the funds set aside for research projects tied to the whole-school initiative.

Given Slavin's stature and his Capitol Hill connections, it was that much more likely that his long list of complaints would be fully probed by the Department of Education's Office of Inspector General (OIG). The results of the OIG's six-part investigation were released, starting in September 2006. However, it was only the first of the reports that received widespread media attention and began the undoing of Reading First. (The other five reports, while critical, mostly dealt with relatively minor issues of program implementation that came up in a few states.)

Remarkably, OIG didn't even mention Robert Slavin or his catalogue of charges in the September report, or any that followed. However, the report did allege that there had been serious improprieties in implementation of the Reading First law. Doherty was held responsible for the fact that a few reading experts with "professional ties" to Direct Instruction were appointed to peer review panels that evaluated state applications for Reading First funds. While the OIG conceded that Reading First officials actually went beyond what was required in the law and drew up protocols for weeding

While the OIG conceded that Reading First officials actually went beyond what was required in the law and drew up protocols for weeding out financial conflicts of interest in appointing reading experts to the review panels, it nevertheless concluded that those procedures did not flag résumés of some reviewers who had "professional links" with some reading programs, including Direct Instruction, and therefore the procedures were not "effective."

out financial conflicts of interest in appointing reading experts to the review panels, it nevertheless concluded that those procedures did not flag résumés of some reviewers who had "professional links" with some reading programs, including Direct Instruction, and therefore the procedures were not "effective." These reviewers had no financial interest in Direct Instruction, however, and the panels they served on never saw the names of reading programs that might be chosen by states or school districts.

The OIG investigators had little understanding of the reading wars or the scientific research that

prompted the Reading First legislation in the first place. Thus the report's charge that it was improper for Reading First to hire reviewers with ties to Direct Instruction because their résumés proved that they had "significant professional connections to a teaching methodology that requires use of a specific reading program," seems entirely strained and violates common sense. *Of course* Reading First encourages use of "specific reading programs" that have been shown to work. That was the point of the legislation and that's what the President of the United States believed when he started all of this.

The section of the OIG report that received the most media attention was its criticism of Doherty for intervening in the review process in several states to prevent some programs he believed did not follow the required SBRR guidelines from being selected for federal grants. These programs included Reading Recovery and Wright Group Literacy, both containing a balanced literacy flavor. (At the time Doherty took this action, he had significant expert opinion at his disposal indicating that Reading Recovery didn't meet the SBRR standard established in the legislation. Several years later, however, the government's What Works Clearinghouse accepted Reading Recovery's claim that there was research backing the program's effectiveness.) Doherty was well aware of how the Reading Excellence Act had fallen apart in the previous administration because the Department of Education failed to prevent programs with no scientific research base from being funded. He believed that the Reading First office had to be particularly vigilant to make sure that school districts that pledged to follow the principles of SBRR actually did so. In exercising that vigilance, Doherty was showing fidelity to the mission of Reading First as

In exercising that vigilance, Doherty was showing fidelity to the mission of Reading First as stated first by President Bush repeated by Secretaries Rod Paige and Margaret Spellings, as well as by the principal authors of the legislation, Reid Lyon and Robert Sweet.

stated first by President Bush repeated by Secretaries Rod Paige and Margaret Spellings, as well as by the principal authors of the legislation, Reid Lyon and Robert Sweet.

Still, Doherty did not help himself or the Bush administration by the manner and language in which he communicated his views to various parties. Probably the most sensational part of the OIG report was its citation of emails Doherty sent to indicate his displeasure when programs that did not follow the principles of SBRR (but pretended to) were about to be funded. In one such message, Doherty instructed a staff member to resist funding for Wright Group Literacy: "Beat the s. .t out of them in a way that will stand up to any level of legal and [whole language] apologist scrutiny. Hit them over and over with definitive evidence that they are not SBRR never have been and never will be." When this email became public in the OIG report and then in hundreds of

newspaper stories, Doherty's fate was sealed. Under pressure from the administration, he tendered his resignation.

Media Frenzy

The OIG's charge that Doherty had exhibited "a lack of integrity and ethical values" in pressuring local officials regarding the selection process was certainly damaging to Reading First and the Bush administration. But it was the publication, *in flagrante*, of Doherty's emails that sparked a firestorm of scathing criticism in the media of a program that the same media had, until then, hardly known existed. For example, a widely circulated Associated Press story on the OIG report stated that Doherty "repeatedly used his influence to steer money toward states that used a reading approach he favored, called Direct Instruction, or DI, a phonic-centric program that was developed by a researcher associated with the University of Oregon." Almost nothing in this sentence is true, either as a description of what the OIG report said or what Doherty did. There is not only no record of intervention by Doherty in

There is not only no record of intervention by Doherty in favor of Direct Instruction, but as indicated earlier, that program received only a tiny share of Reading First funds.

Thus, through its national education reporter, the New York Times declared that, despite reams of scientific studies proving the efficacy of early emphasis on phonemic awareness and phonics, whole language is at least as good and probably a better method of teaching children to read.

favor of Direct Instruction, but as indicated earlier, that program received only a tiny share of Reading First funds.

Among the worst of the media offenders was the *New York Times's* national education correspondent, Diana Jean Schemo. A longtime critic of President Bush and No Child Left Behind, Schemo's coverage of Reading First and of Reid Lyon was consistently hostile. She couldn't seem to grasp that Reading First was not a mandate, that no school districts saw their budgets cut if they didn't choose to participate in the program. Several weeks after release of the OIG report, Schemo penned a front-page *Times* story that carried the headline: "In War Over Teaching Reading, a U.S.-Local Clash." Her reportage started with a visit to an elementary school in Madison, Wisconsin that used whole language reading instruction and that refused Reading First funds once its leaders were told that they would have to change their instructional approach in return.

Schemo's piece reflects an almost offended tone, suggesting that this wonderful school with a perfectly fine reading program was unjustly deprived of federal funds by the rigid, phonics-obsessed Bush administration.

Schemo's piece reflects an almost offended tone, suggesting that this wonderful school with a perfectly fine reading program was unjustly deprived of federal funds by the rigid, phonics-obsessed Bush administration. Moreover, according to Schemo, the OIG report confirmed that similar scandals were happening all over the country.

Schemo began the article with an anecdote that any serious reading researcher would regard as a parody of whole language teaching methods. She described a first grade class in which the teacher was trying to get a student to correctly read one word on a printed page. The child incorrectly guessed that the word was "pumpkin."

The teacher urged the boy to "look at the word" and now offered him a clue. "Using a method known as whole language," Schemo wrote, "she prompted him to consider the word's size. 'Is it long enough to be pumpkin?'"

With this hint that since the word is short, it must represent something smaller than a pumpkin, the boy tried again. This time he correctly said "pea."

Schemo then informed the reader that this exemplified the effective instructional method which, according to Madison school officials, is producing strong reading gains for the district. The subtext of the story was that Madison acted heroically by sticking to its beloved reading program out of principle, even though it meant being squeezed out of a \$2 million Reading First grant.

Schemo accepted district officials' claims about the efficacy of the whole language approach as fact, though she dutifully fulfilled her journalistic obligation to include the other side's point of view via the following sentence: "Federal officials who ran Reading First maintain that only curriculums including regular, systematic phonics lessons had the backing of 'scientifically based reading research' required by the program." In other words, forget about those three decades of NIH sponsored research and the NRP report commissioned by Congress during the Clinton administration. It's only the Bush crowd that claims that instruction in systematic phonics is supported by science.

According to Schemo's understanding, the OIG report proved that "federal officials and contractors used the [Reading First] program to pressure schools to adopt approaches that emphasize phonics, focusing on the mechanics of sounding out syllables, and to discard methods drawn from whole language that play down these mechanics and use cues like pictures or context to teach."

Schemo neglected to inform her readers that "focusing on the mechanics of sounding out syllables" is exactly the method of reading instruction stipulated in the Reading First legislation to qualify for federal grants, as in Sec. 1208 (3): "... reading instruction means explicit and systematic

instruction in – (A) phonemic awareness; (B) phonics; (C) vocabulary development; (D) reading fluency, including oral reading skills; and (E) reading comprehension strategies.”

Thus, through its national education reporter, the *New York Times* declared that, despite reams of scientific studies proving the efficacy of early emphasis on phonemic awareness and phonics, whole language is at least as good and probably a better method of teaching children to read. And if that is true, then it follows that the Bush people were behaving like bullies and fanatics in refusing to fund a good school district’s whole language reading program that actually raised test scores.

An inspiring narrative, except that after Schemo’s story appeared, a well-known Wisconsin education internet site published a devastating statistical summary of Wisconsin’s and Madison’s actual reading performance that raised serious questions about her analysis. Like many other states since No Child Left Behind, it turns out that Wisconsin has seen the difficulty of its tests drop under NCLB. It’s true that Madison’s scores went up on the state tests but they rose at the same rate as the rest of the state. Meanwhile, federal NAEP tests showed that Wisconsin’s fourth-grade reading performance remained flat and there’s every reason to believe that’s true of Madison’s as well.

Like Schemo’s reporting in the *Times*, most of the mainstream media’s coverage of the Reading First “scandal” left out the essential historical context regarding advances in reading science, the support for science-based instruction in the NRP report commissioned by Congress, and any understanding of why the language in the Reading First legislation made clear that grants should only be given to districts using reading

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programs that maintained fidelity with the principles of SBRR. *Washington Post* staff writer Michael Grunewald read the first OIG report and concluded unequivocally that “department [of education] officials and a small group of influential contractors have strong-armed states and local districts into adopting a small group of unproved textbooks and reading programs with almost no peer-reviewed research behind them.” In fact, neither the OIG reports nor subsequent investigations sustained this sweeping charge. Grunewald also neglected to point out that it was Reid Lyon and Robert Sweet who originally put language in the Reading First bill that would have prevented funds from going to “unproved textbooks,” but that they were forced to back down by congressional Democrats and some Republicans.

Nor did the *Post* reporter pause to consider that, if the criterion for funding programs under Reading First had been that such programs had

to have been validated for effectiveness by “peer reviewed research”, there would have been two, perhaps three, programs approved. If that happened, the subsequent howls by representatives of other reading programs claiming federal dictation would have been all the louder by many decibels. And no doubt the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* would have published articles reporting on and endorsing those complaints.

Shark Bait

Given such sloppy media coverage of the GOIG reports, it’s little wonder that politicians on Capitol Hill sought to use the purported shortcomings of Reading First to get in some more licks against the Bush administration. Rep. George Miller (D-California), chairman of the House education committee, expressed his outrage at the OIG reports: “This was not an accident; this was not an oversight. This was an intentional effort to corrupt the process.” Amazingly, neither President Bush nor Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings had anything to say in defense of their once cherished Reading First program. During his first term, President Bush visited the reading scientists at the NIH. He congratulated them for helping to lift reading achievement in the nation’s schools. But after publication of the OIG report, the president became almost mute about his own reading initiative.

A few months after the release of the OIG reports, Chairman Miller hauled Doherty and four Reading First consultants to a hearing in which he made big headlines by saying to Doherty: “That sounds like a criminal enterprise to me. You don’t get to override the law. But the fact of the matter is that you did.”



Despite a five-hour grilling by Miller and his staff, nothing emerged at the hearing to back up the reckless claim that Chris Doherty had violated the law.

The only law Miller could have been referring to was the provision of the 1978 Department of Education Organization Act, repeated in No Child Left Behind, which prohibits federal officials from requiring local school districts to adopt a particular curriculum or teaching methodology. This language was originally

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crafted to assuage historic Republican fears about federal interference in local school governance. Miller was certainly aware of it in 2001, when as the ranking Democrat on the House education committee he supported removing the language in Reading First that would have limited funding to programs vetted for effectiveness by scientific studies. It was this change in the criteria for Reading First funding that Miller originally signed off on that shifted the burden to officials like Chris Doherty to decide which reading programs do or do not follow SBRR. And when he made such judgments, Miller hammered him for it.

Despite a five-hour grilling by Miller and his staff, nothing emerged at the hearing to back up the reckless claim that Chris Doherty had violated the law. Indiscrete emails, yes. But there has been no evidence produced either by Miller's committee or any other investigator that Doherty "strong-armed" a single state or local official to dump a reading program that otherwise met the condition of fidelity to SBRR. Nor is there any evidence that Direct Instruction benefited financially as a result of Doherty's connections to that program.

It *is* true, as Robert Slavin has charged, that few school districts chose to use their Reading First dollars on his Success for All program. But there's no evidence that this was because of actions taken by the federal Department of Education. Both Direct Instruction and Success for All are tightly scripted programs and many teachers and administrators dislike them for that reason, regardless if they work for kids. Once the rules of Reading First were changed to permit funding of untested basal readers produced by the big commercial publishers, those same publishers gained a huge marketing advantage. In retrospect, it now appears a weakness of the Reading First legislation that both Direct Instruction and Success for All, the two programs that have shown to be most effective in the classroom, lost market share to unproven basal readers. But it's worth repeating that no evidence has been produced either in the OIG reports or in Congressman Miller's hearing that there was anything criminal or corrupt about the process that yielded that outcome.

Such subtleties seemed to escape the chairs of Congress's twin education committees, Rep. Miller and Sen. Edward Kennedy. Looking for even more ammunition against the program they once embraced so enthusiastically, they asked the GAO, Congress's investigative arm, to open yet another investigation of Reading First. When the GAO report came out, Kennedy's and Miller's offices highlighted its call for better oversight of the program and its criticisms of Reading First's procedures for avoiding conflict of interest. Less attention was given by Kennedy and Miller – and by the media – to the GAO's finding that Reading First was making solid progress toward its objective of lifting the reading achievement of economically disadvantaged children. The GAO found (according to its ex-

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ecutive summary) that “nearly 70 percent of states reported that reading instruction has improved greatly or very greatly since the implementation of Reading First.” Furthermore, “Every state reported improvements in professional development because of Reading First, and at least 41 states reported that professional development improved greatly or very greatly in five key instructional areas.”

It is now almost a year since Congressman Miller publicly charged that Doherty and some Reading First colleagues had engaged in a “criminal enterprise.” Not a shred of evidence has yet surfaced to sustain that reckless charge, so I recently asked Miller through his press spokesperson if he still stands behind the accusation of criminality. His answer: “It’s unacceptable that the Bush administration allowed a program with worthwhile goals to be completely undermined by severe mismanagement and conflicts of interest. As investigations by the Inspector General and our committee have found, some of the individuals tapped by the Bush administration to serve as stewards of the program had financial,

personal and professional connections to specific reading products and inappropriately promoted those products over others.”

I also asked Congressman Miller if he was troubled by the two-thirds cut in funding for Reading First pushed through by his Democratic colleagues in the House. Miller ducked the part about the cuts and merely reiterated that he “support[s] the goals of the Reading First program” but that “it must be run in the best interests of schoolchildren, schools, the states and taxpayers.”

Despite the *sturm* and *drang* of the hearings (plus six OIG reports and a string of false accusations of criminal conduct), the House education committee, in its draft NCLB reauthorization proposal published in September 2007, suggested only minor modifications to the Reading First program. These tweaks include sensible provisions that would require the education secretary

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to provide greater guidance on how the Reading First peer review panels should review state applications, how feedback should be provided to the states about their grant proposals, and how to improve the process for making final determinations about which programs receive funding. Reading First backers were mildly optimistic that the storm had passed.

Then, like a bolt from the blue, the House appropriations committee, chaired by Congressman Obey, slashed the Reading First budget by two thirds. "This [Reading First] cut will not be restored until we have a full appreciation of the shenanigans that have been going on," said Obey, even as he was also approving the distribution of thousands of funding earmarks to his colleagues. There was virtually no debate in Congress on the evisceration of a program that likely produced one of the rare examples of federal education spending that could demonstrate positive results in student academic achievement.

A news report on NPR from July 2007 provides an unusual insight into the strange disconnect between what Reading First, with all its supposed shortcomings, was producing in the field and the politically driven animus toward the program on Capitol Hill. Reporter Steve Inskeep first interviewed Nancy Grasmick, Superintendent of the Maryland Department of Education (one of the states where Doherty was alleged to have improperly thrown his weight around) about the effect that Reading First was having on the state's children. "The results are stunning," said Grasmick. "We have learned from it. We have accelerated the performance of our students and the performance of our teachers. And we have all of the data to support that."

The reporter next interviewed Congressman Obey, who had no apparent interest in the data

cited by the Maryland superintendent. "The program is being manipulated and ripped off by the people who are running the program," said Obey. "Why should a school district be penalized if they want to use a program which is regarded as being among the most effective in the country simply because it suits the interests of the contractors running the program?"

It's obvious which reading program Obey is referring to, and which he claims school districts are still being penalized for choosing (even after Doherty's departure). It's Success for All, the program Obey lavished with funds throughout the 1990s. In fact, neither in the OIG reports nor at the House education committee's hearing on Reading First was there a shred of evidence that any district was "penalized" for wanting to

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use Success for All. Leaving nothing to the imagination, however, Robert Slavin also appeared on the NPR broadcast to echo the Congressman's unsubstantiated charge and to up the political ante: "With the current Education Department, I think that they have shown no intention whatever to try to fix the program," said Slavin, "and I don't think Congress can force them to do it in any way other than cutting the funding." Shortly after that astonishing public threat against a federal office from a dissatisfied private purveyor of a reading program, the chairman of the House appropriations commit-

tee set the wheels in motion to carry out the threat: Obey cut \$670 million in Reading First funds from the fiscal 2008 education budget.

What about the president? Although his administration made a *pro forma* objection to the proposed Reading First cuts, Bush declined to use his bully pulpit to remind the public of how much was at stake for schools and for millions of kids if Reading First is curtailed. However, the president has since restored \$1 billion for Reading First funding in the administration's submitted fiscal 2009 budget.

CONCLUSION:

LET READING FIRST BE READING FIRST

In judging the value of new political institutions or governmental programs, we should want to know not only whether they are run properly, guard against corruption and conflicts of interest, and come close to achieving their aims, but also what are the alternatives and what was it like before the institution in question was created. In the case of the Reading First program, it is worth thinking about not only the failed model of REA, the previous federal effort to improve reading in the nation's schools, but also what happens every day when school districts around the country are left to their own devices as they try to teach students to read proficiently by fourth grade.

In that regard, a revealing lesson recently emerged in the nation's capital, right under the noses of the politicians who expressed such indignation about the administrative practices

In the case of the Reading First program, it is worth thinking about not only the failed model of REA, the previous federal effort to improve reading in the nation's schools, but also what happens every day when school districts around the country are left to their own devices as they try to teach students to read proficiently by fourth grade.

and alleged conflicts of interest of Reading First officials. As reported by *Washington Post* investigative journalist Joe Stephens, the District of Columbia school district gave a soon-to-be-retired D.C. school principal named Sheila Ford \$2.9 million to bring better reading programs into the city's poorly performing schools. Ford received the money after a 30-minute presentation to D.C. school officials. When she picked up the first check for \$1 million, there was no contract defining the terms of the arrangement, and Ford was only asked to submit a single page expense voucher. She then created a nonprofit called the Teachers Institute which paid her a salary of \$150,000 (in addition to her hefty pension from the district) plus unspecified expenses as the group's executive director. As I learned after the *Washington Post* story came out, the money given to Ford came from federal Title I funds.

The new reading program that Ford brought to the needy children of Washington's faltering public schools was none other than Professor Lucy Calkins's Balanced Literacy, already entrenched in New York City. As it turns out, Ford is a disciple of Calkins and used her programs at DC's Horace Mann Elementary School where she served as principal. Indeed, since New York is now considered the Mecca of balanced literacy programs, Ford has taken dozens of D.C. teachers, principals and administrators to Gotham for training sessions at Calkins's institute at Teachers College. There was practically no accounting for the taxpayer dollars spent on the trips, the fees to Calkins's institute, or the "vast quantity" of books, supplies and electronics" that were stored in warehouses and never made it to the D.C. schools. In all, \$200,000 in federal funds went to

Calkins's institute and another \$100,000 was paid to her for-profit consulting company. One might suppose that the disappointing results from the five-year trial of Calkins's methods in New York would have held a lesson for D.C. But as we have learned from the entire Reading First saga, evidence counts for little when education politics and ideology take charge.

The D.C. story is seedy but hardly shocking in the world of American public education, where hundreds of snake oil salesmen hawk their nostrums for getting poor children to read – a goal we seem to have managed well enough in the 19th century. It would be instructive for Congressmen Miller and Obey to look into the D.C. Balanced Literacy scandal (after all, it involves the misuse of federal Title I funds) and then reflect on the harm they have committed to a federal program that was achieving something rare: actually helping poor kids learn skills that will lift them out of poverty.

Perhaps it's not too late for Congress to reconsider. As with Maryland superintendent Nancy Grasmick, who says that "the results [from Reading First] are stunning" and that "we have all of the data to support that," thousands of education officials, administrators and teachers from all over the country would gladly come to Washington to describe to Congressmen Miller and Obey the promising turnaround in classroom reading instruction that has begun in their states and districts, a turnaround that will be undermined unless the two-thirds cut in Reading First funds is restored. As the GAO report has shown, this large, prescriptive, federal program has been a veritable 5,000 school love-fest.

The educators in those districts and schools are not interested in whether the program's first ex-

ecutive director sent out a couple of inappropriate emails. They are focused on the big prize – the hope that U.S. schools will finally accomplish something that should not be beyond the

resources and ingenuity of the world’s leading industrialized nation: teaching children to read proficiently by fourth grade. Their message to Congress is to let Reading First be Reading First.