

## READING FIRST

### **NCTE Praises Reading First Audit: Calls for Further Investigation**

<http://www.ncte.org/about/press/key/125668.htm>

Teaching all children to read well, regardless of the literacy skills they bring to school, is an enormous challenge. This is the daily work of more than 500,000 K-12 teachers in America today. These educators truly understand what it means to put reading first: the best instructional tools -- well-planned lessons grounded in research and tested by experience -- and the personal and professional commitment to instill students with a passion to know more, not merely to help them decode texts and comprehend.

The U.S. Department of Education Office of the Inspector General's report of the Reading First Program's Grant Application Process reveals a pattern of corruption and mismanagement that is an insult to everyone who takes literacy education seriously. It tells a story of how individuals in powerful positions manipulated the law to enforce a formulaic version of reading instruction skewed by their own view of scientifically based reading research.

The report reveals that during the crucial implementation years of the Reading First program, high-level Department of Education officials created guidelines that undermined the very principles of evidence-based decision-making. They held states to implementation guidelines not established under No Child Left Behind; they stacked grant review panels with people sympathetic to their own view of literacy learning and, oftentimes, with direct ties to the same commercial programs they recommended; and they took charge of reporting review comments back to state education agency applicants themselves rather than having the review panels do so.

In a 2002 resolution, the National Council of Teachers of English called upon Congress to establish an independent investigatory body to look into the implementation of Reading First. Even then, we could not ignore the teachers and administrators across the country who disclosed that they were being steered toward particular commercial reading programs and were being forced to use poorly-conceived reading methods they knew to be ineffective. The Inspector General's Report documents the tragedy of how Reading First administrators abused the legislation:

State inquiries about guidelines were met with unnecessarily confusing "technical guidance" by Reading First leaders; Funds were pulled from local schools who dared to use programs that, while they initially passed grant review muster, were later judged to be "unscientific" (or the wrong commercial brand); Review panels hand-picked by Department of Education officials intentionally included reviewers with direct ties to publishers whose works were purchased with grant monies; and The Assessment Committee and its report were plagued with similar conflicts of interest.

"Ironically what the Reading First administrators brought into schools is the opposite of accountability," said NCTE President Kyoko Sato. "And unfortunately the real loss lies in the millions of children and their teachers who did not have access to what the full range of literacy research reveals about how children learn to read, write, and communicate fluently."

The Inspector General should be praised for doing a conscientious job of identifying blatant non-compliance with the No Child Left Behind Act and for publishing the findings. The investigation should continue, because the patterns indicated in the report were identified on the basis of a study of only eleven states. But the weight of responsibility is left to Congress, who must reconsider the legislation in light of the unfair implementation process that forces a narrow range of reading programs based on a limited set of research methodologies onto every state and school eligible for Title I funds -- even when those states, schools, and their educators know better. We all want schools to improve. As preparations begin for the reauthorization of NCLB, now is the time to listen to the educators who have been putting reading first -- every day.

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