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This Bush Education Reform Really Works

Reading First, though much maligned, succeeds in teaching kids to read.

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Deep in the winter of the Bush White House's discontent, the education department's inspector general made things worse by issuing a series of reports that slammed the administration's prized Reading First program. The IG charged that Reading First executive director Chris Doherty exhibited a "lack of integrity and ethical values" by trying to strong-arm education officials in some states to adopt a phonics-based reading program called Direct Instruction, while blocking a non-phonics program, Reading Recovery. The report also quoted private e-mails in which Doherty defended his preferred early-childhood reading programs against their progressive critics in language unsuitable for kids. An embarrassed administration forced Doherty to resign.

The inspector general's revelations brought intense media coverage and outraged editorials—having more to do with the domestic political war against President Bush than with the "reading wars" over classroom pedagogy that have raged within American education for decades. Most news accounts didn't even bother to report that a 2005 American Institute for Research study concluded that Direct Instruction and a similar program, Success for All, were the two most effective reading programs available. Nor did they point out that Reading Recovery, favored by progressive educators, hasn't met the test of scientific research. If Doherty's sin was to lean on a state education agency or two to promote a reading program backed by science over one that wasn't, well, that's just what the Reading First legislation intended.

At \$1 billion per year, Reading First, part of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act, accounts for just 2 percent of federal education spending. Yet this program for lifting reading achievement, always the apple of George W. Bush's eye, is already delivering promising results. The commonsense idea informing it—that the best scientific research should guide the teaching of reading—was one of Bush's signature education initiatives since his days as Texas governor, and it makes even more sense today. But the negative publicity surrounding the inspector general's reports could put Reading First under a cloud when NCLB comes up for congressional reauthorization this year. That would be tragic for millions of American kids at risk for reading failure.

To see clearly what's at stake, we need to remind ourselves of the gravity of the national problem that Reading First seeks to solve—and of how it proposes to solve it. That essential context is missing from both the inspector general's reports and much of the media commentary.

After a century and a half of universal public education, and despite the highest per-pupil expenditure on public elementary and secondary education in the world, 40 percent of U.S. fourth-graders are reading below the minimally acceptable level, according to the gold-standard NAEP test. For minority students in inner-city schools, the reading failure rate is a shocking 65 percent. This educational failure bodes ill: children who don't read by fourth grade almost always fall behind in all other subjects, often wind up in costly special education programs, and, as adults, have higher rates of drug addiction, incarceration, and welfare dependency.

Making the situation more tragic, nineteenth-century American children learned to read very well, thank you, in one-room schoolhouses, with nothing more than a single determined teacher wielding Noah Webster's *Blue-Backed Speller* and the McGuffey readers. Even before a public school system existed in America, Alexis de Tocqueville had marveled at the country's extraordinarily high literacy rates.

Happily, recent developments point the way to a solution to the nation's reading woes. For the past several decades, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), a wing of the National Institutes of Health, has sponsored reading research at universities across the U.S., with scientists from cognitive neuroscience, pediatrics, genetics, educational psychology, and child development publishing hundreds of peer-reviewed studies that describe not just how children learn to read but why so many fall behind—and how schools can best keep it from happening.

The converging scientific evidence confirms what our great-grandmothers knew intuitively. The most effective reading instruction for most children—especially

for those from disadvantaged homes—begins by training them to recognize the relationship between letters and the sounds they make (phonemic awareness), moves on to teaching them how to sound out whole words (phonics), and then focuses on fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Reading science has also developed effective new technologies to assess students' progress in mastering the skills they need to decode written language. To make an analogy with medical science, reading science has discovered not only the educational equivalent of treating diabetes but also the technology that monitors how the treatment is working.

Unfortunately, the similarities between reading science and the medical kind end there. A breakthrough in medical research soon leads to new clinical practice. In education, however, the science has collided head-on with the ideologies and economic interests of the panjandrums of public education.

Reading science is a mortal threat to what E. D. Hirsch has called the "Thoughtworld" of American education—the system of "progressive" beliefs about classroom instruction promulgated by the ed schools that monopolize teacher training. The Thoughtworld has a cult-like attachment to a Romantic theory of reading instruction called "whole language," which recently morphed into "balanced literacy" to make it sound more reasonable to dubious parents. Balanced-literacy true believers claim that to subject children to the "drill and kill" of direct phonics instruction is a form of child abuse.

The balanced-literacy cultists believe that learning to read is a natural process and that most children can intuit the alphabetic principle and the meaning of printed words with a little guidance from a teacher and through pleasant cooperative classroom activities such as "shared reading" and "reading circles." Basically, this approach says that kids can learn to read by reading—by immersing themselves in print. And for some children from literate homes, where print and articulate conversation abound, this approach can work.

Progressive educators don't cite scientific research to support their approach, however, because none exists—not one study based on randomized field trials. In 2002, the whole-language-dominated National Council of Teachers of English passed a resolution attacking Reading First for favoring only "one model" of science and called instead for "implementation of diverse kinds of scientific research, including teacher research." Translation: teachers can evaluate instructional methods by observing their own classrooms, science be damned.

The National Council on Teacher Quality, a mainstream public education advocacy group, recently surveyed ed schools and found that 85 percent of their elementary education classes don't teach the principles of phonics and scientific reading instruction. "The resistance from many educators to [teaching phonics] has been palpable," the report concluded. Of course, interests other than pedagogical are at stake. If a major shift occurred in teaching methodologies, tenured jobs and professional development contracts from the \$500 billion-plus education industry would suddenly be up for grabs.

Such was the state of affairs when NICHD's chief reading scientist, Reid Lyon, and House education committee staffer Robert Sweet drafted the Reading First legislation, early in 2001. Lyon had just become President Bush's informal advisor on reading instruction, while Sweet was a former teacher and longtime advocate for science-based reading programs. With the president's encouragement, Lyon and Sweet consciously designed Reading First to do an end run around the deeply entrenched whole-language movement.

"We knew we were battling a culture of intellectual corruption and hostility to science in the education industry, and we had limited weapons to use effectively against it," 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." You could say that Reading First was a \$6 billion federal bribe to get districts to do what they really should have been doing already.

Getting the program enacted required walking a political tightrope between Republicans wary of federal interference in local decisions and Democrats who liked spending more federal education dollars, but with no questions asked. Compromising, the Reading First legislation abandoned the idea of requiring participating districts to use only scientifically tested reading programs. Instead, districts could also use untested ones, as long as they adhered to the principles of scientific reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension.

It wasn't everything Lyon and Sweet wanted, but it was enough—or so they hoped. The two reformers bet that a critical mass of schools would sign on and implement the general principles of reading science, which would then produce evidence that this instructional method was lifting achievement in previously struggling schools. Such a real-life demonstration, they believed, would ignite a countercultural education movement of teachers, parents, administrators, and

education activists who would spread the Reading First gospel.

Four years later, the evidence is starting to come in. More than 5,600 schools in 1,700 school districts nationwide have received Reading First grants. The participation level is impressive in itself. It means that state education agencies and a large number of districts have pledged (in writing) to use Reading First grants exclusively to teach according to the principles of Scientifically Based Reading Research—a phrase that appears so often in the legislation that it has become an acronym, SBRR. So unless officials are lying and just grabbing the money, we now have a critical mass of educators willing to try the pro-science side of the reading wars.

We also know that 100,000 K–3 teachers are receiving training and continuous professional development in reading science. That represents a critical mass, too—one that takes on even greater significance if the Reading First teachers appear to be improving the academic performance of their low-income, at-risk students. Reading First has pulled off something of a coup just in removing all these early-childhood teachers from the ed schools' ideological orbit.

A comprehensive study by an outside evaluator will appear in 2007, measuring Reading First's influence on student achievement nationally. But some states and districts are already seeing significant improvement. When the relevant congressional committees hold hearings on NCLB reauthorization, they might start by looking to neighboring Virginia, where they'll discover a dramatic example of Reading First's power. With apologies to Dickens, we might call it a tale of two school districts—one welcoming Reading First, the other disdaining it.

The first, Richmond, offers a classic profile of an inner-city school district. Of its 25,000 students, 95 percent are black, more than 70 percent are poor enough to be in the free-lunch program, and 44 percent change schools during the year. Until 2001, Richmond's student test scores were among Virginia's worst. Only five of the district's 51 schools achieved the status of full state accreditation.

But 2001 is also when Richmond school officials embarked on an ambitious reform, whose centerpiece was a standardized reading program based on evidence from the NICHD studies. By the time Reading First funds were available in 2002, Richmond was already up and running with a phonics-based reading program called Voyager Universal Literacy. The district channeled the modest \$450,000 Reading First grant into a handful of its lowest-performing schools. But the principles of scientific reading instruction took hold throughout the district.

Since then, Richmond's test scores have skyrocketed. By 2003, the number of the district's schools achieving full state accreditation had climbed to 22. The next year, it rose to 39 and has now reached 44.

Because NCLB requires disaggregation of student performance data by race, we can further appreciate the extent of Richmond's turnaround by comparing the district with the Fairfax district, just across the Potomac from the congressional committees due to review Reading First.

Fairfax, one of the richest suburban areas in the U.S., consistently draws in new residents because of the perceived quality of its public schools. SAT scores for Fairfax's high school graduates stand well above the national average, and 90 percent of those grads go on to some form of higher education. But 17,000 of Fairfax's 164,000 students are African-American, and they're not doing so well; in fact, they're performing far worse than Richmond's black students. In 2004, only 52 percent of black Fairfax kids passed the state's third-grade reading test, compared with 62 percent for Richmond's black students. In 2005, the gap widened to 15 percentage points, with 59 percent of the Fairfax black students passing compared with 74 percent of their Richmond counterparts.

Even more remarkable, Richmond's third-grade reading scores are closing in on wealthy Fairfax's scores for all its students, 79 percent of whom passed the third-grade reading test in 2005. Since enacting its reforms, Richmond has moved from 114th in the state in reading (out of 132 districts) to 50th, compared with Fairfax's 36th.

Fairfax officials have said publicly that they're mystified by the low performance of the district's black students. It certainly has nothing to do with money. Millions of extra dollars for remediation programs have poured into the district's schools with higher proportions of blacks. One thing the district proudly refused to do, though, was take money from Reading First. The then-superintendent said that he didn't want the federal government dictating how his district taught reading and that he preferred the reading programs he already was using. One of these, costing the district \$10 million per year, is Reading Recovery, the same whole-language program that the inspector general accused Chris Doherty of trying to keep from getting Reading First grants—which suggests that Doherty did

something right after all.

The apparent connection between Fairfax's disappointing reading scores and its instructional method wasn't lost on several determined area citizens. Fairfax parent Maria Casby Allen and retired Fairfax teacher and local teachers' union ex-president Rick Nelson teamed up to take the reading problem to the media. They circulated graphs showing how inner-city Richmond was outperforming rich and self-satisfied Fairfax. In one supporting document, Allen noted that "Richmond scores rose dramatically after schools adopted science-based reading programs four years ago," whereas Fairfax "was eligible for federal and state Reading First funding but objected to the science-based reading component."

Last year, Nelson addressed the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors, which oversees the school board's budget, noting that he had warned them for years about the low reading scores of the district's black students and had proposed adopting science-based instruction. "But no one listened," Nelson says. "Fairfax school leaders have chosen to continue fighting the reading wars. . . . School system officials know about the Richmond results. They are refusing to do what works for ideological reasons. The result is abuse of thousands of Fairfax County children."

This tale of two school districts has unfolded something like Reading First's framers had hoped. One district implementing Reading First principles showed dramatic reading improvement in its low-performing schools. As the good news spread, some parents and teachers in another district wanted to know why their schools weren't using the methods that were working magic elsewhere. Nelson and Allen failed to convince district officials, but they're not giving up. "Parents everywhere should compare the performance on third-grade tests of Reading First schools and other schools—then publicize the results," says Nelson. "Parents should also ask questions such as: 'What are your state and locality doing to train teachers in science-based reading instruction?'"

From Alabama comes another Reading First success story. A poor state with lots of low-performing schools, Alabama is exactly the type of environment in which Reading First could demonstrate reading science's power. Alabama enthusiastically welcomed the program, becoming the first state to get its grant proposal approved; Reading First was in place in all eligible Alabama schools by the start of the 2002–03 school year, just eight months after the president signed the bill. The state's \$19 million annual program grant underwrites the instruction of about 33,000 students.

The Alabama schools seem to be getting a very big bang for their relatively few federal bucks. "We were huge supporters of Reading First from the beginning, and it has worked very well for us," says Katherine Mitchell, Alabama's assistant state superintendent of instruction and a former East Harlem elementary school teacher. "Our state is moving up, but our Reading First schools are moving up faster." On state reading tests, Reading First students rocketed from 29 percent at grade level in 2004 to 39 percent in 2005 and 46 percent in 2006. On diagnostic reading tests for early-grade children, the Reading First cohort has—astonishingly, since it encompassed the lowest-performing students in the state—almost reached parity with Alabama's broader student population.

Alabama's experience also shows how Reading First's instructional innovations can have a positive influence on all schools in a state or district, not just on those that participate in the program. For instance, Mitchell tells me that her department will now evaluate all elementary school reading textbooks to determine if scientific reading principles inform them—implying that the department will discourage those that lean toward whole language. And the state now requires all schools to use a highly developed diagnostic test, Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills, to measure children's progress in early decoding skills. Previously, only Reading First schools employed this powerful product of scientifically based reading research.

When Congress takes another look at Reading First, it shouldn't just consider good-news stories like these. It should also draw conclusions from the travesty that the program was allowed to become in New York City. In this chapter of the story, the problem with federal Reading First officials wasn't that they put too much pressure on states and localities, as the first inspector general's report charged, but that they were way too indulgent.

Reading First officials in Washington knew from Day One that the biggest school district in the country was also going to be their biggest headache. In 2003, as the initial Reading First grants went out to states and districts, New York's newly reconstituted Department of Education was marching boldly in the opposite direction. Mayor Michael Bloomberg had taken control of the city's education system. His schools chancellor, Joel Klein, hired über-progressive educator Diana Lam as the deputy chancellor for instruction. Lam swiftly dumped the Success for All reading program that was beginning to show results in about two dozen struggling schools and imposed balanced literacy.

It would have been one thing for Klein and Lam to stand on principle and say no thanks to federal money for a program that they didn't believe in. But Klein

wanted his balanced literacy and \$200 million in Reading First money, too. When he realized that this scenario wasn't going to happen, and after much cajoling from state education authorities, the chancellor and his staff grudgingly settled for a phonics-based commercial reading program, though a relatively loose one called Harcourt Trophies, for 46 city schools and another 36 nonpublic (mostly Catholic) schools, also eligible for funds under the program. (Under the Reading First legislation, grants go first to the states, which then distribute funds to local districts as part of a competitive grant-review process; the nonpublic schools participate through the districts.)

But the outside grant reviewers the state had hired considered the city's pitch so poor that they gave it a failing grade—indeed, one of the lowest grades they gave to any of the district proposals. As the federal inspector general eventually discovered, New York State education officials then jumped in, arbitrarily adding the extra points needed for Gotham to achieve the minimum passing grade. The state education department shredded the relevant documents of the grant review and has fended off press queries about the process and about who was on the outside review panel. An official who declined to be identified for this article told me that the state education department was so anxious to have New York City take the Reading First grant—which meant all those millions flowing through the education department—that it guaranteed Klein approval if he applied.

It's not hard to see why an independent grant reviewer, picked for his knowledge of science-based reading instruction, would find the city's submission troubling. For starters, the city proposed spending a big chunk of the first year's \$37 million grant on things that had zilch to do with science-based reading instruction—\$3 million on library books, for example. (It is balanced literacy, not explicit phonics, that fetishizes the idea of surrounding children with “authentic literature,” believing that the backdrop will stimulate their reading lessons.) Further millions in the proposed budget were to go for school furniture and for textbooks costing around \$350 per student, more than most college students pay for theirs.

In submitting the proposal, Klein signed a statement attesting that the city had fully consulted about program selection with the nonpublic schools included in the grant. But officials in both the Brooklyn and New York archdioceses told me that no one had ever consulted with them. They remember receiving a call from the Department of Education one week before Christmas in 2003, telling them that if they wanted to participate in the Reading First grant they would have to come up with a list of eligible schools within two days. The Catholic school officials said that they had zero input on the selection of Harcourt Trophies as the core reading program—or on any of the other details of the proposal.

Most troubling was the city's extraordinary bad faith, which clearly compromised Reading First's implementation. As part of the grant proposal, Klein signed a “statement of assurances” that included a pledge to “implement classrooms that are grounded in scientifically based reading research.” He also promised that “only instructional materials, strategies, programs and assessments that have been validated by scientifically based reading research will be used in participating schools.” But one day before signing that statement, Klein seemed less than enthusiastic about Reading First's programmatic requirements: “It's being done in the name of science,” he told the *New York Times*. “And the question is: where's the science?” Klein made no bones about it: he signed on to the program for the money, not the pedagogy. “This is a significant amount of money for some of our really highest needs programs,” he noted. “It's a pragmatic decision.”

Thanks to the state education department's inappropriate intervention in the grant-review process, the money that New York City received was much more than a “significant amount.” The Reading First grant adds up to a minimum of \$1,500 per student (about 30,000 kids in total) for the participating Gotham schools—about \$1,000 more per child than Alabama has been spending in its successful implementation of the program. To get further perspective on how much New York is spending, I asked the founders of Direct Instruction and Success for All to estimate what it would cost to bring their programs to the city's eligible schools. Both came up with around \$600 per student. That figure would buy the most comprehensive, scientifically tested reading programs available today. But the city—or rather the federal government—is now spending 150 percent more for a program untested for effectiveness.

How much improvement in New York school children's reading all this spending has brought about isn't clear, partly because the program was so late in getting under way. When the results come in, the picture will likely appear mixed, with better outcomes in those parts of the school system where the leadership has shown some enthusiasm for, and fidelity to, the program.

For example, Kathleen Cashin, the superintendent of Region 5, covering some of the poorest parts of Brooklyn and Queens, is a traditionalist who has always favored tightly scripted phonics programs. She encouraged her schools to participate in Reading First and now has twice as many in the program as the next-highest city region. Not surprisingly, early results in Region 5 are positive, with all of the schools that have gone through the two years of the program so

far seeing their third-grade reading scores go up. The increases range from 10.5 percent at P.S. 215 to 36 percent at P.S. 65.

Unfortunately, in many other city regions the leadership, even when paying lip service to Reading First, remained committed to balanced literacy. Many New York Reading First schools, for instance, began with coaches and consultants provided by AUSSIE, a professional development firm steeped in balanced literacy and disdainful of phonics. According to an administrator and a teacher working in Region 10 in Manhattan, Reading First schools would do reading lessons in the morning using the Harcourt phonics program and then do writing instruction in the afternoon using the balanced-literacy approach—a violation of the spirit, if not the letter, of the assurances that Klein made to get the grant. Several Bronx schools dropped out of Reading First after two years, basically wasting millions of dollars in federal funds, and returned to balanced literacy. And the children still can't read.

One of the lessons that Congress ought to take from this unfortunate episode is the need to reprioritize Reading First funds. More financial help needs to go to places that have really embraced scientific reading instruction, are getting strong results, and are truly needy. Reading First grants are calculated according to a complex formula, linked to a district's previous share of total Title 1 federal education spending. But that formula needs alteration. It's unconscionable that New York City, with its dubious record of Reading First implementation and an \$18 billion education budget, should get funding that on a per-pupil basis dwarfs Alabama's or Richmond's. Reading First's financial rewards should go to states and districts that produce results, not those wedded to business as usual.

Despite New York's wrong turn, the \$6 billion for Reading First has more generally been one of the best investments ever in federal education spending. It has already brought some remarkable reading breakthroughs in many parts of the country and among at-risk students. It has spread awareness of what should be going on in the classrooms and in the teacher-training institutions. It has shown that a comprehensive solution to the nation's reading crisis is right in front of our noses. If, in another decade, an unacceptable proportion of America's children still can't read by fourth grade, don't blame George Bush. Blame the education leaders in our states and cities who, offered the solution, didn't grab it.