

Testimony on
“Mismanagement and Conflicts of Interest in the Reading First Program”
before the Committee on Education and labor
U.S. House of Representatives

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Chairman Miller, ranking member McKeon, and honorable members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to share Kentucky’s experience in Reading First. My name is Starr Lewis and I serve as the Associate Commissioner in the Kentucky Department of Education’s Office of Teaching and Learning. In this role, I led our efforts during the Reading First grant-writing phase, and my office was and is responsible for the implementation of the Kentucky Reading First plan.

I would like to begin my comments today by saying that Kentucky’s involvement in Reading First has been extremely beneficial to our state. It has allowed us to create a statewide support system for beginning readers, their teachers and administrators. Reading First has shifted our focus onto struggling readers and provided Kentucky with the resources to give teachers the skills and tools needed to help these students. I am extremely proud of the Kentucky schools involved in this program and of the staff at the Kentucky Department of Education who support their efforts. However, there are some issues we faced in Kentucky, which the Committee may want to consider as they prepare for reauthorization of Reading First.

Our introduction to Reading First was in February of 2002 when we attended the Department’s Reading Leadership Academy. The purpose of the Academy was to help states gear up for the implementation of Reading First. Using the knowledge we obtained from the Reading Leadership Academy and other technical assistance provided, we drafted our proposal and submitted it to the Department’s expert review panel for approval in May of 2002. Our Commissioner at the time, Gene Wilhoit, reported to our Board of Education that this proposal was the best thought-out and well-written proposal he had seen. In short, we were confident that we had put together an excellent proposal and that it met the established criteria. We were excited about helping young readers and expected to implement Reading First starting in the fall of 2002. Unfortunately, this proposal was rejected by the Department’s expert review panel, as were our second and third proposals. It was only after our fourth submission that our proposal was approved.

While we have asked for but have not received the expert review panel’s actual comments, the Department’s summary sent to us by the Reading First Director, Chris Doherty, repeatedly pointed to concerns about one of our proposed assessment tools. Our first two proposals did not include the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Literacy Skills assessment tool, which is now commonly referred to as DIBELS and which was developed at the University of Oregon. Instead, we were hoping to build on our existing

experience with another reading assessment tool, Diagnostic Reading Assessment (DRA). We felt that we had strong experience and evidence of success from schools and districts using DRA. After the expert review panel rejected our first two proposals, we contacted Mr. Doherty who referred us to RMC Research Corporation, a Department contractor, to obtain technical assistance. During our conversations with the RMC technical assistance team, we were given advice about a number of issues related to our proposal and we were repeatedly advised to replace our current assessment tool with DIBELS. I mentioned on a conference call with the RMC technical assistance team that endorsing DIBELS appeared to be a conflict-of-interest given the involvement of a number of individuals with connections to DIBELS and who also played roles in the implementation of Reading First in that they served on the Reading First Academy Assessment Committee. The RMC technical assistance team acknowledged the connections, but continued to say that our proposal would likely be viewed more favorably if we included DIBELS. After the call we learned that one of the members of the technical assistance team, Joe Dimino, was a DIBELS trainer.

Commissioner Wilhoit, sent a letter to then Secretary of Education, Rod Paige, appealing the decision to deny Kentucky's funding based on inconsistencies in expert review panel decisions across states and on our concerns related to potential conflicts-of-interest. We received a response from Eugene Hickock, the former Deputy Secretary of Education, assuring us that there were no discrepancies between state reviews and no conflicts-of-interest.

After receiving the response from Mr. Hickok, we worked with two members of the RMC staff. After we had reorganized our proposal to more clearly and explicitly address the concerns of our panel, we resubmitted our proposal in December 2002. In this second proposal, we addressed every concern identified in the summary provided by Mr. Doherty and even included DIBELS, but we did not drop our current assessment tool.

On January 8, 2003, we received notification that our expert panel had again rejected our proposal.

In March of 2003, we had a conference call with Mr. Doherty. We pointed out to Mr. Doherty that we had been reviewing other states' approved plans and that at least one included the assessment tool we wanted to use. Mr. Doherty assured us that the state in question had agreed to remove the assessment tool even after approval. While Chris never actually said the words, "Kentucky will never be funded as long as it includes DRA," we all left the discussion understanding this to be the case. We removed the proposed assessment tool, included DIBELS and resubmitted our proposal in March of 2003. We were approved for funding in the next month.

During the proposal phase, Kentucky did not experience any pressure concerning core reading programs or intervention programs. As we described in our proposal, Kentucky has legislation that gives all curriculum decision-making authority to school councils and explicitly prohibits the Kentucky Department of Education from mandating curriculum materials. However, after we started implementing Reading First and after our first

federal monitoring visit, the monitoring team's report raised concerns about Reading Recovery and Rigby as not being sufficiently grounded in scientific based reading research. In the letter from Mr. Doherty accompanying our monitoring report, he did not name the programs specifically but raised concerns. Again, we had a conference call with Mr. Doherty, during which he suggested that our funding might be in question if we continued to allow schools to purchase these two programs with Reading First funds.

We asked Chris to put in writing that we could not use Reading First funds for Reading Recovery or Rigby. Chris refused, but he did invite us to send him a defense of the two programs. We did so, but we never received a response from the Department.

Since the release of the recent OIG reports and the departure of Mr. Doherty from the Department, we have received emails, letters, and calls from new Reading First staff at the Department inviting us to share any concerns. We have referred Department staff to the letter we sent to Secretary Paige outlining our concerns. Also, we have requested the names of our expert panel members and copies of their responses, but we have not yet received that information.

In closing, I want to repeat that Reading First has been a success in Kentucky. I am here today to give feedback to the Committee on problems we faced in Kentucky so that these issues can be addressed. Addressing these problems now will help ensure that Reading First will be stronger going forward and that it will continue to make a difference in classrooms across America.

Additional written testimony:

Preparing for this hearing gave me the opportunity to review the responses of our expert panel sent to use from Chris Doherty and Sandi Jacobs. In general I found the responses to be vague and not helpful, and they led to very few substantive changes in our proposal. The repeated rejections did lead to substantial delay in implementing our programs. We were a full year behind in getting reading programs implemented in our schools.

The most substantial change we made in our plan related to the removal of our original proposed assessment and the addition of DIBELS. The developers of DIBELS point out that the test is available for free on the web. While this is the case, teachers have to print out the assessment in paper version. This requires teachers to manipulate a variety of tools at one time while at the same time listening to a child's reading performance. In order to have DIBELS available in a form that promotes ease of use and fast turnaround of results, teachers need a handheld device with DIBELS software. In order to have this version of the tests, we contract with Wireless Generation. Following is a list of our contracts with Wireless Generation, totals that do not include the cost of the handheld devices:

- 2004-2005 - \$244,700
- 2005-2006 - \$255,000
- 2006-2007 - \$225,000

I have been asked several times if we would switch to our original assessment if given the opportunity. My answer is that we are now a DIBELS state, and I would not want us to make a decision that would cause that much change for teachers implementing this program.

I mentioned in my oral testimony that Kentucky's Reading First schools have made gains in student achievement. Our Reading First schools made a 15% gain on Group Reading Assessment for Diagnosis and Evaluation (an additional assessment used in Reading First schools) in the number of students scoring at the Kentucky benchmark from the end of the 1st year of implementation to the end of the 2nd year. They are also on pace to make another 10.5% gain this year from last year. Schools have a higher percentage of students at the benchmark at every grade level K-3.

Reading First schools made a 19% gain on DIBELS in the number of students scoring at benchmark from the end of the 1st year of implementation to the end of the 2nd year.

Reading First schools made better gains than the state average on our state assessment.