

**EDUCATION & LABOR COMMITTEE**

**Congressman George Miller, Chairman**

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**Chairman Miller Statement on Mismanagement and Conflicts of Interest in the Reading First Program**

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Below are the prepared opening remarks of U.S. Rep. George Miller (D-CA), chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee, for today’s full committee hearing on mismanagement and conflicts of interest in the Reading First program.

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In 2002, as part of the No Child Left Behind Act, Congress established the Reading First program to help young children become better readers.

Under the Reading First program, the federal government provides grants to states to help them improve reading instruction. States may use this funding for a variety of purposes, including the purchase of: core reading curricula; programs to assess students’ progress towards reading proficiency; and intervention programs to help students who are falling behind in reading.

In September 2006, the Education Department’s Inspector General issued the first of six reports on the implementation of the Reading First program. I am pleased that the Inspector General is joining us today to discuss some of his findings. It is critically important that the Committee has this opportunity to hear directly from the Inspector General about them.

The Inspector General found a number of ways in which the Department of Education failed to act in the best interests of taxpayers, states, schools, and schoolchildren.

The Inspector General’s first report showed that, in a number of cases, Education Department officials and contractors with deep financial and personal connections to specific reading products inappropriately promoted those products over others.

Rather than provide an even playing field on which high-quality programs could compete based just on the merits for business with the states, these officials and contractors created an uneven playing field that favored certain products. Indeed, we know of examples where states were essentially bullied to use these products in order to receive Reading First money.

This uneven playing field was obviously unfair to the companies and publishers that developed the products that were out of favor at the Department of Education. But it was also unfair and costly to states and school districts that were denied the opportunity to use their first-choice reading curricula and assessments.

Today we are going to hear from the former Reading First director, Chris Doherty, who figured prominently in the Inspector General's first report. We are also going to hear from reading experts who served on an Assessment Committee that was set up to offer advice about which reading assessments states could use under the law.

We are going to learn about those experts' bias for a specific reading assessment product and evaluate whether they were capable of being independent brokers in deciding which programs should receive funding under Reading First.

The purpose of this hearing is not to evaluate the effectiveness or strengths and weaknesses of the Reading First program. I support the Reading First program, as do many of my colleagues on both sides of the aisle. As the committee works to reauthorize the No Child Left Behind law, we will evaluate the program to see what we can do to improve it.

But there is no question that this mismanagement and these conflicts of interest undermined the program and the public's confidence in it. In reauthorization, this Committee will act on legislation to explicitly prohibit these types of conflicts.

When states, school districts, and schools were bullied into using reading programs and assessments that were not their first choice, then it meant that officials in Washington, D.C., were overriding the informed decisions of local educators about what was best for their own students.

Too many times in the Bush administration we have seen examples of officials abusing the public trust and misusing tax dollars. And we have seen way too many examples of cronyism and conflicts of interest that have undermined government's effectiveness.

From the multi-billion-dollar contracts for Halliburton in Iraq to the wasteful spending and gross mismanagement in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, this administration has simply failed to be accountable to taxpayers and the public.

Now it appears that we can add Reading First – on which we have spent roughly \$6 billion since 2002 – to that long and growing list of instances of the administration operating outside the law, unaccountable to Congress and the American people.

I do appreciate that our witnesses are here today and prepared to discuss their roles in the implementation of Reading First. I want to assure them that the Committee will give them each the opportunity to voice their perspective on this scandal. We consider their participation to be extremely informative and look forward to their testimony.

Thank you.