

Written Testimony of
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to the
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Education and Labor
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Chairman Miller, Ranking Member McKeown and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to address you today about my role in the management and implementation of the Reading First program. I worked tirelessly for nearly five years to implement one of the largest educational initiatives ever undertaken by the Federal government, and my sole motivation was to help the children of this country learn how to read. Too many of our nation's children are denied the opportunity to achieve to their full potential because they do not become proficient readers. The Reading First program offers millions of our most disadvantaged children the benefit of effective early reading instruction, and the limitless possibilities that come with being a literate citizen.

I took my responsibility toward these children seriously every day, and all decisions were based on compliance with the law and maximizing the program's impact on children learning how to read. That these efforts were successful is evidenced by the performance of Reading First schools and in states' satisfaction with the implementation of the program, documented by multiple sources. These facts notwithstanding, a distorted story has been written over the past few months based on the worst possible interpretation of events that occurred during the early days of the Reading First program. I am pleased to have the opportunity today to offer a different interpretation of those events, the one that I know to be true.

The Reading First section of the No Child Left Behind law broke new ground for Federal education programs. This landmark legislation placed very clear requirements on the instructional materials that could be used in connection with the Reading First

program. The statute details in numerous places that all instructional materials must be based on scientifically based reading research. This limitation was not added by the Department; it is very prominent in the legislation crafted by this Committee and authorized into law.

Improving the quality of reading instruction in our nation's most disadvantaged schools is what the law charged us to do. The requirements of the law recognized that some instructional programs and materials are based on scientifically based reading research and some are not. The suggestion that has been put forth by some recently that it was inappropriate to question grantees about programs that did not appear to be based on scientifically based reading research is stunning. In fact, we were questioned by Congressional committees in 2003 and again in 2004 about what the Department was doing to ensure that Reading First funding was not going to programs that were not aligned with the research.

We did monitor implementation, and we did question the use of programs that did not appear to be based on scientifically based research. The point in doing this was never to direct which particular scientifically based instructional materials grantees or subgrantees must use – the point was to comply with the law and maximize the program's impact on children learning to read. The law was clear that programs must align with the research, and the research is clear that programs that are most effective in teaching children, especially disadvantaged children, how to read feature explicit and systematic instruction in five areas of phonemic awareness; phonics; fluency; vocabulary and comprehension. The importance of explicit and systematic instruction must be underscored – many vendors claim their programs are aligned with the research because

they include the instructional components I just named. But a program is not aligned with the scientific findings about how children learn how to read if it does not include explicit and systematic instruction.

The Department worked hard to dispel the belief held by some that there was a ‘secret’ approved list of programs. It is asserted in the Inspector General’s report that a practitioner panel during the Secretary’s Reading Leadership Academies – one short session within a multi-day event – convinced states that they could only use the handful of programs identified during that panel. The Secretary’s Academies were held in the earliest days of the program and were an introduction to scientifically based reading instruction. Although no mention is made of this in any of the Inspector General reports, the Academies were followed by Writer’s Workshops, attended by all the states, which were specifically about the Reading First application. The point was made repeatedly at the Writers’ Workshops that there was no approved list of programs, and that states did not have to identify programs in their applications – they had only to identify the criteria they would use to select programs.

There is clear evidence that states got this message – only three state educational agencies – California, Michigan, and American Samoa -- specifically identified the core reading programs that their subgrantees would use in their Reading First applications. It has been repeatedly and falsely asserted that the approval of Michigan’s application sent a message to other states that they had to include certain programs in their applications. The fact is Michigan was among the first six states to receive its Reading First grant, and the other five states did not identify programs. It has been similarly asserted that the expert review panel tried to steer states toward certain programs, and would not

recommend applications for approval until this occurred. The fact that only three states identified programs shows this simply did not happen.

I believe much misunderstanding has arisen from confusion about the timing of events. The first Inspector's General report, which purports to be about the application review, includes events that occurred after states had begun to implement their approved plans. As I noted earlier, questioning of programs was done to ensure that grantees were complying with the requirements of the law. But no one was ever told they must use a certain program or programs instead of others.

Much has also been made of the fact that a technical assistance provider appears to have become somewhat persistent in recommending a particular instructional assessment on two occasions. Yes, this occurred, and as the Inspector General's report shows, it was immediately addressed by the program office. Technical assistance providers had hundreds of contacts with states. That two isolated incidents of this kind could be identified among hundred of contacts is evidence of a very good track record of technical assistance, not a pervasive pattern of inappropriate activity.

The same conclusions can be drawn about the Reading First program as a whole: while not perfect in every detail, the program has a very good track record. It has been well implemented and is making a real difference for states, districts, schools, and most importantly, children throughout the country. Reading First is one of only four Department of Education programs to receive an effective rating from the Office of Management and Budget – and the only program that is part of the No Child Left Behind Act to receive this distinguished rating. As you know, OMB's assessment is based on

program performance and management, and only 17% of Federal programs reviewed across the government have received an effective rating.

The data from Reading First schools – which have been painfully and surprisingly absent from this debate about the program’s administration -- speak for themselves. Reading First is a very large program – implemented in nearly six thousand schools – and despite its size there is clear evidence of its positive impact. Based on the data available when I left the Department, Reading First schools have shown dramatic gains on reading outcome measures across all grades and across all disaggregated subgroups. Sixty percent of third grade students in Reading First schools were reading at the proficient level on measures of reading comprehension – up from 28% when the program began, and as you know, Reading First schools are by definition the most disadvantaged and lowest performing schools in their districts and states.

These impressive increases hold for all subgroups across the same time period – third grade economically disadvantaged students have increased from 20% to 58%; third grade English language learners from 13 to 59%; and students with disabilities from 12 to 33%. To give just two of the many examples of increases in State level data – students in Reading First schools doubled the gains of non-Reading First schools in Washington State, despite the fact that the poverty rate in Reading First schools is more than twice the rate in non-Reading First schools. Arizona announced that academic gains had “skyrocketed” in its Reading First schools, with students in all grades K-3 making dramatic gains that far outpaced comparison schools. Arizona has also seen the achievement gap close – the entire purpose of the historic No Child Left Behind Act itself. 97% of white students, 96% of Hispanic students and 95% of Native American

students in its Reading First schools finished first grade at grade level. And the Bureau of Indian Affairs – which serves some of the highest needs schools and students in the country – saw the percentage of students at benchmark increase from 28% to 50% in its first two years of Reading First implementation.

There is also clear evidence of the high level of satisfaction states have with how Reading First has been implemented and its impact on students. Reports from both the Government Accountability Office and the Center on Education Policy show not only that the states credit Reading First with improvements in student achievement, but that the states were satisfied with the Department's implementation.

What is perhaps most incongruous about the present controversy is that it has nothing to do with the success or failure of the program for America's children. The complaints against the program were made by a handful of vendors, not by the program's grantees or subgrantees. The Inspector General launched several extensive audits of Reading First based on these vendor complaints, and it became very clear early on that the Inspector General's findings of mismanagement were a foregone conclusion. I was presented with preliminary findings before I had a single interview with the auditors. False findings of this kind are perhaps unsurprising given the climate of mistrust that has afflicted government service in recent decades. As Steve Kelman of Harvard University noted in a recent Washington Post op-ed on the Inspector General Process, there is a consistent focus on the negative, on controls rather than creativity, and on documentation rather than performance. Any shred of evidence that seems to support the investigator's hypothesis – in this case a small number of regrettably coarse emails – can be elevated to the status of gospel.

Let me conclude by returning to my original theme: Reading First has been an extremely successful program and its achievements for the nation's children did not happen by accident. They are a result of faithful implementation of the law and a desire to maximize the program's impact on children learning to read, both of which required ensuring that only instructional materials based on scientifically based reading research were used. I am proud of what the program has achieved and of my role in its implementation. My career has been devoted to public service – beginning in the foreign service, and then working to improve educational opportunities for disadvantaged children in Baltimore. This included being the first director of the Baraka School in Kenya, the subject of the award-winning documentary “The Boys of Baraka.”

When I was asked to serve as director of Reading First, I was honored and humbled by the importance and magnitude of the task. I endeavored always to fulfill my role with integrity. I respected the chain of command at the Department of Education, faithfully executing orders from superiors, which I never had reason to question, and keeping superiors informed about the program. The suggestion that Reading First was mismanaged has deeply hurt me and my family and is completely unfounded.

Did I take my responsibility for rigorous implementation of this program seriously? I respectfully and proudly tell you that, yes, I did, because I wanted to ensure compliance with the law, and maximize the program's impact on children learning how to read. I am pleased to report that the effort has been a success. I can only hope that more children will learn to read as a result of this vitally important program in the years ahead.

Thank you for your attention.