

Statement by

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I want to thank the Committee for asking me to testify today to explain my involvement in the “design and implementation of the Reading First Program.” I do so today with the genuine desire that my testimony will assist this Committee both in learning the true facts behind the development of some important aspects of this Program and in instituting any necessary changes to ensure the continued viability of this important and unprecedented federal program.

The Reading First legislation introduced a transforming requirement, instead of allowing States to receive funds based solely on need, for the very first time this law asked States to describe how they would use evidence or “scientifically based reading research” to mount a systematic and sustained effort to improve literacy in the nation’s most challenging schools. This immense effort required States, districts and schools to take inventory of their current efforts in teaching beginning reading, and in doing so, either change or modify what they were doing. In some cases, this change occurred at an unprecedented scale that provoked a transformation in the professional and ideational culture of schools, districts and, in some cases, states. It meant that states and school districts competing for Reading First funds had to select and implement reading assessments and curricula based on scientific evidence. This transformation from entitlement to “scientific” accountability akin to a Kuhnian paradigmatic shift, has been difficult for everyone—teachers, administrators, school board members, and other stakeholders in States, districts, and schools, including the U.S. Department of Education. After all, how were States to know what beginning reading assessments were valid, reliable and scientifically based? How

were they to know which beginning reading programs were based on the best available science? Whose science and what evidentiary standards of science were education officials to use in carrying out these basic teaching and administrative tasks?

To ensure the success of this initiative, it was imperative that answers to these questions be provided in a short and condensed period of time to comply with the timetable provided in the legislation. As such, it was necessary to rely on researchers from around the country who possessed the knowledge and expertise to do the work. With perfect hindsight, and given the scope of the ongoing inquiries, it is now clear that more should have been required by the U. S. Department of Education and others involved in the program, including me, to prevent the issues that have arisen.

My involvement in the Reading First Program began in August 2001. At that time, I was asked by the Department of Education, initially through a colleague, to put together a committee charged with the responsibility of developing both a process and a product that would provide assistance to State and local educational agencies in selecting “screening, diagnosis, and classroom-based instructional reading assessments” called for by the Reading First legislation. To respond to this request, I selected seven researchers to develop and apply a process, criteria, decision rules and procedures for identifying reading assessment instruments designed for screening, diagnosis, progress monitoring, and outcome evaluation. The need for such a committee may strike those uninitiated to education as peculiar. After all, one could ask, wasn’t this information already established, available and used widely? The short answer is no.

In a period of eight months (September, 2001 to May, 2002), my colleagues and I developed operational definitions of the five “essential components of reading instruction” as

specified in the 2002 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation.¹ These five essential components are phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and reading comprehension. We also developed operational definitions of the four ways to evaluate how well children read, which include screening, diagnosis, progress monitoring, and outcome evaluation. The five essential components of reading instruction and the four purposes of assessment also had to be considered in the context of four grade levels-- Kindergarten through Grade 3 (K-3). In addition, we developed a 34-page coding form that permitted independent reviewers to code the technical information found in the test manuals of the reading assessment measures. As an aside, the independent reviewers spent an average of 6-12 hours coding the technical information for each of these tests. Finally, using the coded information, six members of the committee were paired into three teams to judge the “trustworthiness” or sufficiency of the technical information for each of the assessment measures. To select the assessment measures, the Committee reviewed more than a 100 assessment measures and selected 29 they judged to be the most popular and frequently used instruments and readily available for review. In selecting some of the best assessment experts in the country, it is not surprising that those experts would also be authors of popular and innovative assessment tools, which the committee as a whole selected to review. It is also important to note that it was our understanding at the time that more assessment measures would be reviewed and that technical assistance to support states in the continued review and selection of assessment tools would be ongoing.

What lessons did we learn from this experience? On the technical side of this experience, we learned that if high and rigorous standards were maintained for judging trustworthiness, very few tests would meet those standards. Because so many tests failed to provide information about the required technical features, the committee adopted a set of minimum standards of

¹ See No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Pub. L. No. 107-110, 20 U.S.C. § 6368 (2007).

trustworthiness with the goal of providing the field with the best of what was available. Thus, measures were deemed to be trustworthy if they provided relevant data that met the minimal requirements.

On the non-technical side, I want to note at the outset that we took steps to avoid any conflicts of interests, even though we received no guidance (explicit or implicit) from the contractor or the U.S. Department of Education in this regard. As researchers, we employed traditional academic standards in reviewing and adjudicating the research and technical evidence. The standards we used required each committee member to disclose his or her proprietary interest in assessment instruments, and to not review those particular instruments. Moreover, committee members did not discuss as a group the ratings of any of the assessment measures. In addition, I would like to note that neither I, nor any member of the committee that I know of, violated the conflicts of interests procedures that we had established. Instead, each Committee member recognized the importance of this work and went to extraordinary measures to ensure not only that the work was conducted and completed with integrity in a very short period of time, but that it was done without any conflicts of interests. However, knowing now the various questions that have been raised about the appearance of conflicts, it is apparent that we should have required a different set of standards than the traditional academic standards. There should have been more formalized procedures for defining and identifying conflicts and even appearances of conflicts. Moreover, we should have addressed those in as transparent a manner as possible to ensure the integrity of the process.

In the future, to guard against the perception of conflicts of interests, I recommend that an independent entity, such as the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences, be charged with the oversight responsibility of this task. I further recommend that the Review

Panel be comprised of researchers and technical experts who do not have any proprietary interests in any assessment tools, protocols, and websites or test publishing companies. In addition, I recommend that a clear and unambiguous set of guidelines with concrete examples be provided on what constitutes conflicts of interests. Such a process and guidance should ensure that real and perceived conflicts of interests are not an issue.

In addition to my work on the Assessment Committee, I also served as the Director of the Oregon Reading First Center from September 1, 2002 to July 1, 2005, a period of 2 years and 10 months, and Director of the Western Regional Reading First Technical Assistance Center (WRRFTAC) from October 1, 2003 to July 1, 2005, a period of 1 year and 9 months. The Oregon Reading First Center was responsible for providing technical assistance to the State of Oregon's Reading First grant program. In contrast, the Western Regional Reading First Technical Assistance Center was responsible for providing technical assistance to the western states including, as I recall, Minnesota, Wisconsin, North and South Dakota and American Samoa. As Director of these two technical assistance centers, I was responsible for ensuring that States received technical support that reflected the most current scientifically based reading research available. Again, even in the absence of any explicit or implicit guidance from the U.S. Department of Education or the contractors on what constituted a conflict, we took traditional academic steps to avoid any conflicts of interests in providing technical assistance to States. For example, as an author of a reading intervention program for Kindergarten children, I never promoted or provided technical assistance on that program. Moreover, neither I, nor any staff members that I know of, violated the conflicts of interests standards that were common to our professional practice. Instead, staff members took significant measures to ensure not only that

the work was conducted with respect and integrity, but also that it was done without any conflicts of interests.

Much of the work of these technical assistance centers involves translating research into practical and useable instructional practices that teachers and administrators can implement immediately, and at scale. There is no textbook or driver's manual for doing this work, and doing it in a way that is accessible, sensible and engaging for teachers and administrators who face the realities everyday of teaching struggling readers to read. As such, my colleagues and I relied on our knowledge of the reading research and the collective experience we had gained from our previous work. Thus, for the record, I want to note the experience that I brought to my role as Director of these two technical assistance centers. For example, I was one of 17 members that served on the National Academy of Sciences' Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children, which produced the first "consensus" report on reading problems in 1998, a report that pronounced, yet again, the importance of the teacher's role in teaching children to read in an alphabetic writing system. In addition, my colleague, Deb Simmons, and I wrote the Reading/Language Arts Curriculum Framework K-12 for the State of California, which served as a major influence at the time on publishers and other state reading initiatives. I was also actively involved in the implementation of the predecessors of Reading First, the Comprehensive School Reform Act, and the Reading Excellence Act, which were hallmarks of the Clinton Administration. Finally, some of the materials we used in our Reading First work were developed as part of a 10-year technical assistance center that I co-directed with my colleague, Dr. Douglas W. Carnine, from 1991 to 2002. This center, called the National Center to Improve the Tools of Educators (NCITE), was funded by the Office of Special Education Programs and had as its primary mission working directly with publishers and developers of

reading, language arts and mathematics curricula to ensure that the needs of students with disabilities and low performers were considered in the design and architecture of these materials.

In conclusion, it is my sincere hope that issues regarding conflicts of interest procedures that have arisen in the implementation of Reading First do not irreparably tarnish this important and unprecedented federal program. Without doubt, these issues do not diminish the supreme importance in continuing to use rigorous, scientifically based evidence in making educational decisions so that education can give all children, particularly those who struggle with reading, a foundation in literacy to not just finish high school and perform at a proficiency level on the nation's reading report card, but to flourish as imaginative and productive citizens. I speak for myself and I believe for my colleagues when I tell you that we had good intentions and worked very hard, and we even put in place our own standards for avoiding conflicts of interests. However, it is now clear that good intentions and hard work are not enough. To prevent issues like this from occurring in the future, rigorous evidence and stricter internal controls must guide these good intentions and hard work.

The welfare of our children and our nation requires that we teach our children to read in an alphabetic writing system; it will not come naturally to them in the absence of good, scientifically based reading instruction. Likewise, the stewardship of the Reading First program must deliver on its promise to ensure that all children will become readers at the end of Grade 3.