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There is no way to tweak Reading First and turn it from what it is to what it should be. It is too negative, too prescriptive, too absolute, too punitive. Rather, a very different federal program is needed.

Characteristics of a successful Federal Reading Initiative

To be successful and to avoid the mistakes which doomed Reading First, a new program must have these characteristics:

1. **It should be positive not negative.** Reading First was defined more by what it was against than what it was for. In opening a Reading First staff development program, the leader said, “The Reading Wars are over and we know who won” This war metaphor is wrong. Reducing reading progress to a choice between two warring ideologies doomed Reading First.
2. **It should not promise more than it can deliver.** Reading First promised that every child everywhere would read proficiently by 2014. A new program should promise progress. It should promise to fit flexibly the needs of the widest range of learners. But it should not be expected to overcome in itself the complex societal realities that influence school success.
3. **It should be inclusive not exclusive.** In adopting Reading First, Congress bet \$6 billion on a single horse. Ironically many successful programs were abandoned because they were on the hit list of the DOE implementers. A new program should fund a wide range of viable alternatives.
4. **Literacy, not just reading.** Any federal effort should be broadened to include not just reading but writing and all the new technologies- some call the new literacies. Nothing in modern society is expanding faster than the uses of literacy, and in the new forms the students are more up to date than their teachers. And it should include all ages including secondary and adult literacy.
5. **A new program should avoid a sense of crisis.** Haste makes waste. Little good comes from putting pressure on teachers and learners for immediate unrealistic results. That only creates resistance and too often cheating. There must be reasonable time for change and progress.

Three kinds of reading research

The NRP only considered a narrow restricted group of experimental or quasi experimental studies of reading instruction done in the United States in the review that led to the National Reading Panel’s recommendations. The most innovative and product areas of modern literacy research were excluded.

In addition to many useful non-experimental studies of reading instruction there are two major

research areas of reading research that have been very fruitful. And there is a lot of useful research going on outside of this country.

A new federal program should fund three kinds of research:

Research on literacy processes: How do people make sense through written languages?
Effective reading instruction needs to be based on understanding what reading really is. In the last half century a lot has been learned about the reading process using a wide range of research methodologies from linguistics, ethnography, psychology and other fields. Most of this research is necessarily non-experimental. It uses a range of methodologies to get at what people are doing to make sense of written language. It is inter-disciplinary involving psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, ethnography and other disciplines. Theories of meaning construction in reading have found support in studies of brain function. Reading First diverted all funding from this research.

Research on Reading Development: How do people become literate?
Another major area of reading research that has been very productive has been the study of how reading is learned- how it develops as children become literate. Much of this research is multinational and most is non-experimental. Some of the most useful studies have been longitudinal and involve intensive studies of only one or at most a few subjects. As a result of such studies a lot is already known about literacy development. This research looks at much more than learning as a response to instruction. It looks at societal, psycholinguistic, and sociolinguistic aspects of literacy development as children grow up in literate societies. In this area also funding stopped when RF began. Grants would need to be multi-year and should encourage international collaboration.

Studies of Reading Instruction

So much money was wasted in Reading First trying to make everybody in the country teach in the same way, ignoring much of what is known about what literacy is and how it develops. So much energy was wasted on forcing conformity. So much ill will developed. And there was so much mean-spirited disinformation.

Progress can come from supporting a wide range of alternatives with examined assumptions and which make use of the research on the literacy processes and literacy development. While such alternatives may use published tests and texts they should not simply be trial and error use of canned programs without an examined rationale. Collaborations between schools and university based researchers should be encouraged. All supported efforts should have on-going third party evaluations built in.

This kind of research is expensive because it involves multiple classrooms and the studies have to be funded for several years. Funding could include phases. In a first phase reading programs could be developed and tried out. In a second phase, all school districts that meet needs criteria

could be eligible to affiliate with one of the successful programs and adapt and use the program. Federal money would supplement what the school district gets from the state and its own taxes to pay for its literacy programs

It would also be useful to fund non-classroom contributions to literacy development such as school libraries, summer programs, and community out-reach.

A fourth dimension: Innovative Evaluation

This positive and inclusive program offers an opportunity to support the production of a state-of-the-art system for evaluating literacy programs. Reading First encouraged self-serving testing based in ideology rather than scholarship. The best minds in the literacy field could come together to design an evaluation system that goes beyond paper and pencil tests and could be used to compare very different instructional programs, being fair to each. The knowledge exists. It needs to be brought together and applied.

While the evaluations could be used to compare programs, the purpose would not be to choose a winner which everybody must switch to but to provide useful information for school decision makers to use in making choices and for developers to produce better programs.

Costs

Funding of this whole program would cost considerably less than the billion dollars a year spent on Reading First. One third might go to research on literacy processes and literacy development Two-thirds could go to implementation of programs in schools. Perhaps a million a year for 5 years could go to developing innovative evaluation.

Promises

If a version of this proposal were authorized in 2009, we could *not* promise to have every child in every school reading proficiently by 2014 or any other year. But we could promise that at intervals of five years, or ten years, or 20 years

- (a) we would continue to learn a lot more than we know now about literacy, how it develops and how to teach in the most effective ways to support learning.
- (b) Students, teachers and school decision makers would be a lot happier and would be achieving at considerably higher levels.
- (c) Some models would become increasingly more popular and widely used and some less.
- (d) There would be far fewer dropouts among students and teachers leaving the profession.
- (e) The flight from public schools would diminish or disappear.