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# KEEPING WATCH ON

# Reading First

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## Key Points

- **Reading First is having a significant impact.** Participating schools and districts have made many changes in reading curriculum, instruction, assessment, and scheduling, according to the Center on Education Policy’s district surveys, state surveys, and case studies. About 6% of public schools and 12% of public school districts participate directly in Reading First subgrants. Our research also found that Reading First has affected schools and districts that do not participate directly in Reading First. Many districts have expanded Reading First instructional programs and assessment systems to non-Reading First schools. In addition, while the majority of state Reading First grant funding is passed on to districts in the form of subgrants, states may set aside up to 20% of their grants for state activities. These activities include professional development and technical assistance that often benefit not only Reading First districts, but other districts that choose to participate in these state offerings as well.
- **Some states attributed improved achievement to Reading First.** Of the 35 states in our survey that reported reading was improving, 19 said Reading First instructional programs were an important or very important cause of increases in student achievement. Among these 19 states, 16 said Reading First assessments were an important or very important cause of increases. Of the three states crediting the instructional programs for gains but not the assessment systems, two said they did not know the importance of the assessment systems and one said the assessment systems were “somewhat important.” Many other state officials reported they did not yet know the impact of Reading First on achievement; 11 were unsure about the effects of the instructional programs and 13 were unsure of the effects of the assessment system.
- **Most Reading First districts credited the program for gains in student achievement.** The overwhelming majority of Reading First districts in our survey that reported increases in achievement also reported that Reading First was an important or very important cause of this improvement: 97% reported Reading First’s instructional program was an important or very important cause, and 92% reported Reading First’s assessment system was an important or very important cause.

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- **Implementing Reading First required change.** In our survey, 60% of Reading First districts reported they had to change their reading program in order to qualify for a Reading First subgrant. In addition, among districts with Reading First subgrants, 86% required that elementary schools devote a specified amount of time to reading, significantly more districts than the 57% of non-Reading First districts that have this requirement. The average amount of time the two types of districts devote to reading, however, was similar—about an hour and a half. Reductions in time for other subjects were reported by both Reading First and non-Reading First districts and were similar.
- **Most states coordinate Reading First and Title I.** While the federal law does not require the coordination of Reading First and Title I, the two programs have considerable overlap. Most states (76% of 50 states that responded to the question) and 80% of districts with Reading First grants reported they coordinated the two programs. Open-ended questions and case studies showed that coordination at the district level meant changing Title I reading instruction to match Reading First and, at times, expanding Reading First to non-Reading First schools.
- **Often Reading First was not coordinated with Early Reading First.** A federal grant program, Early Reading First is aimed at improving pre-reading and language skills in children before kindergarten. The majority of states (65%) reported that the two programs were not coordinated, while 27% reported the programs were coordinated, and 8% reported they did not know whether the two programs were coordinated.

## Background, Purpose, and Sources for This Study

Over the past four years, the appropriation for the Reading First program has been about \$1 billion annually. Enacted in 2002 in Title I, Part B, subpart 1 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act as amended by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), Reading First aims to improve reading in the early elementary years. All 50 states, the District of Columbia, and several U.S. territories currently participate in Reading First grants. States use competitive subgrants to distribute the majority of funds to local school districts with high poverty and high concentrations of children in grades K-3 who read below grade level.

To receive these subgrants, districts must meet all the requirements of the Act, such as using scientifically based reading programs, materials, instructional strategies, professional development, and assessments. According to the Reading First database maintained by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL), a total of 1,717 districts (12% of public school districts) and 5,666 schools in those districts (6% of public schools) participate in the subgrants (SEDL, 2006). The majority of the schools (96%) are Title I schools, but schools do not have to participate in Title I to receive funding. Title I funds are dispersed on the basis of student poverty levels and other factors, such as state per pupil expenditures, while the factors states use to distribute Reading First funds include lower reading achievement as well as poverty and other demographic information.

In SEDL's database, Nevada is the state with the highest percentage of non-Title I schools receiving Reading First funding—20 out of 30 schools. In addition, a few Reading First schools are non-public schools. Washington State's Web site shows that two Reading First schools are private. States may retain up to 20% of their Reading First funds for state-level activities, such as professional development for teachers, technical assistance to districts, and general administration of the grant. Grants to states continue for six years, pending a mid-grant evaluation.

Reading First guidance and legislation specifies the components of reading that must be explicitly addressed in all funded activities of states, districts, and schools. These essential components of reading include phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Furthermore, all instructional activities, materials, and assessments funded through Reading First at the state, district, and school level must be supported by scientifically based reading research.

Even with the welcome increase in funding, controversy surrounds Reading First. Some have seen the program as a positive call for states, schools, and districts to get strict about using effective, research-based methods and materials to teach reading. As reported in *Education Week* (Manzo, 2002), federal officials said that Reading First would correct the failures of federally funded reading programs of the past that failed to promote research-based teaching.

Others, however, have seen Reading First as too rigid, as promoting a particular philosophy for teaching reading that

relies heavily on phonics and decoding, and as funneling funds to particular consultants and textbook companies. For example, another *Education Week* article reported that some education researchers said the Reading First act has unfairly limited participating districts and schools to using particular materials and assessments (Manzo, 2004), while a later article reported evidence that states had been pressured to redesign their grants to favor particular materials and service providers (Manzo, 2005b). Success for All and Reading Recovery, both reading programs aimed at elementary schools, have called for a federal investigation of the way grants have been awarded in Reading First (Cavanagh, 2005). In addition, Success for All has published a paper detailing evidence of the mismanagement of Reading First (Success for All, 2006).

To help inform the debate about Reading First, CEP published a report in 2005 defining areas of Reading First that policymakers and educators should pay special attention to over the course of the grant. Drawing on CEP's annual surveys of states and districts, CEP's case studies of district implementation of NCLB, reviews of state Reading First grant applications, and other national data and media reports, we identified three areas of concern: 1) whether Reading First will positively revamp or negatively restrict the teaching of reading, 2) whether Reading First will be coordinated with other initiatives or be isolated, and 3) whether state and district officials will find the evaluation of Reading First informative or punitive (CEP, 2005a).

To address these areas of concern, we added items to our annual state and district surveys conducted for our broader 2006 study, *From the Capital to the Classroom: Year 4 of*

*the No Child Left Behind Act*. All 50 states participated in our state survey. We surveyed a nationally representative sample of 417 Title I-participating school districts, with a response rate of 72%. Sampling and weighting in the district survey ensures that the districts surveyed approximate Title I districts nationally.

We also added a section on Reading First to our annual NCLB case study interview protocol. Case studies involved in-depth interviews with staff in 38 districts and 42 schools within 18 of those districts. Districts were selected to be diverse in geography and size and to include a proportion of urban, suburban, and rural districts that roughly parallels the national distribution.

An in-depth explanation of the methodology used in these surveys and case studies is included in *From the Capital to the Classroom: Year 4 of the No Child Left Behind Act* (CEP, 2006), which is available online at [www.cep-dc.org](http://www.cep-dc.org). We also examined state and national testing data, as well as other publicly available evaluations of Reading First grants.

## Revamping or Restricting Reading

### Strict Enforcement

In our 2005 survey of states, the majority reported that Reading First was strictly or very strictly enforced by the U.S. Department of Education (ED). As shown in **table 1**, these ratings were similar to those given in our 2004 survey. These 2005 ratings of strictness were slightly lower than the ratings given ED enforcement of adequate yearly progress reporting, which 48 of 50 states reported was strictly or very strictly

**Table 1. Number of States Giving Various Ratings to the U.S. Department of Education's Enforcement of NCLB Provisions**

	Very Strictly	Strictly	Somewhat Strictly	Not at All	Don't Know
Reading First Program 2004	22	18	2	0	7
Reading First Instructional Program 2005	20	24	1	0	3
Reading First Assessment 2005	19	22	1	1	4

Table reads: In 2004, 22 states reported that the U.S. Department of Education enforced the Reading First program very strictly. In 2005, 20 states reported that the U.S. Department of Education enforced the Reading First instructional program very strictly, while 19 reported that the U.S. Department of Education enforced the Reading First assessment system very strictly.

Source: Center on Education Policy, *State Survey, December 2004, item 41*; *State Survey, December 2005, item 42*.

enforced. The ratings of Reading First in 2005, however, were similar to the ratings given ED enforcement of public school choice and supplemental educational services. Fewer states reported other provisions of NCLB were strictly or very strictly enforced, with fewer than half of states reporting that the use of scientifically based research was strictly or very strictly enforced, as shown in **table 2**. While AYP remains the most strictly enforced NCLB provision in the view of state officials, Reading First continues to be viewed as more strictly enforced than a number of other NCLB provisions.

Districts also continued to report the influence of ED in their choices of instructional materials and assessments for Reading First. In 2005, 60% of districts with Reading First grants reported that they changed their reading program in order to qualify for a Reading First subgrant. An open-ended question asked how districts changed their reading programs. It is important to note that responses to this question were not likely to result in an exhaustive list of changes. Instead, responses shed light on changes that districts decided were important enough to mention.

- Most of the districts responding to this question reported purchasing new textbooks or reading materials. Reading First schools are required to use textbooks that are consistent with scientific findings. Those schools that did not change may have already been using texts that were based on scientific research.
- Several of these districts said they modified the time scheduled for reading.
- Several mentioned hiring some type of reading coach to help teachers change reading instruction.<sup>1</sup>

Other changes reported by several districts included adding or modifying reading assessments, putting more emphasis on the five components of reading advocated by Reading First, and providing teachers with professional development in reading. District officials reported these changes were

extensive, and about a third changed their reading program in more than one way. For example, one wrote, “[We] had to change the program...the scheduling and the purchase of new books. [We] hired a reading coach...new materials and new interventions and more time spent on students in reading.”

Some districts in our case studies also reported they had to change their reading programs to qualify for a subgrant. For example, Boston Public Schools (BPS) first applied for a subgrant four years ago and was turned down by the state because the district proposed using the Reading First funds to help implement Readers and Writers Workshop, which it was going to use regardless of whether it received the grant, explained Ann Deveny, senior program director for elementary language arts. Although BPS was using a Houghton Mifflin off-the-shelf reading program, it was not using it the way the publisher intended but rather incorporating it into the implementation of Readers and Writers Workshop. According to Deveny, the state told BPS that it could not award a Reading First grant to “do business in the same way,” and that the district needed to align its work with NCLB.

The state did invite BPS to reapply, which the district did, making “some accommodations.” In particular, the district decided to drop the Houghton reading program, even though administrators believed that it had a strong guided reading program, and purchase a program developed by Harcourt Brace due to the strength of its teachers’ guide, which administrators believed would increase adherence to the program and continue to implement guided reading for Readers and Writers Workshop. Harcourt has been very helpful with implementation, according to Deveny, by providing professional development and creating a new curriculum for the district that integrates the Harcourt program with Readers and Writers Workshop.

## Effectiveness

Some states and the majority of districts in our surveys reported that their chosen Reading First instructional and assessment programs resulted in improved student achievement. These reports represent the views of state and district officials, rather than a statistical cause and effect relationship between Reading First and student achievement. Of the 35 states that reported reading was improving, 16 said Reading First assessments were an important or very

<sup>1</sup> The U.S. Department of Education’s Reading First Implementation Evaluation (2006) found that 98% of Reading First schools employed reading coaches. This percentage is probably a more accurate percentage of schools that actually have reading coaches. Our finding represents only districts that mentioned coaches in response to our open-ended question about changes to their reading program. It may also be that many districts already employed coaches, so that employing coaches did not represent a change, or it may be that districts failed to mention coaches and that these responses underestimated the percentage of districts that added coaches.

**Table 2. Number of States Giving Various Ratings to the U.S. Department of Education’s Enforcement of NCLB Provisions, 2005**

	Very Strictly	Strictly	Somewhat Strictly	Not at All	Don’t Know
Adequate Yearly Progress	23	25	2	0	0
Public School Choice	21	19	6	1	3
Supplemental Educational Services	20	21	6	0	0
Highly Qualified Teachers	14	25	9	0	1
Paraprofessional Qualifications	12	24	12	0	1
Scientifically Based Research	7	14	15	6	7

Table reads: In 2005, 23 states reported Adequate Yearly Progress was very strictly enforced by the U.S. Department of Education.

Note: Responses are ranked according to the number of states responding “very strictly.”

Source: Center on Education Policy, State Survey, December 2004, item 41; State Survey, December 2005, item 42.

**Table 3. Number of States Using the Following Strategies to Raise Student Achievement in Schools Identified for Improvement**

	To a Great Extent	Moderately	Minimally	Not at All	Don’t Know
Special grants to districts to support school improvement efforts	29	16	3	1	1
Aligning curriculum and instruction with standards and/or assessments	27	17	1	2	3
Offering professional development through Reading First	21	21	4	1	3
Providing curriculum and assessment materials through Reading First	19	20	4	2	5
School support teams	18	10	12	7	3
Educational or management consultants	11	16	9	8	5
Mentor or coach for the principal (e.g., distinguished principals)	10	11	10	14	5
Providing before- or after-school, weekend, or summer programs	9	24	5	5	6
Distinguished teachers	9	5	15	17	3
Additional full-time school-based staff to support teacher development	3	10	10	17	9
Other	6	3			

Table reads: Twenty-nine states reported using special grants to districts to support school improvement efforts to a great extent in order to raise student achievement.

Note: Responses are ranked according to the number of states responding “to a great extent.”

Source: Center on Education Policy, State Survey, December 2005, item 10.

important cause of increased student achievement. The same 16 plus 3 additional states said Reading First instructional programs were an important or very important cause of increased student achievement.

Of the three states endorsing the instructional programs but not the assessment systems, two said they did not know the importance of the assessment systems and one said the assessment systems were only “somewhat important.” Many state officials, however, did not yet have a clear view of the effects of Reading First. State officials are typically not responsible for implementing Reading First in the classroom and observing results. Officials in 11 states reported they “don’t know” how important the Reading First instructional program has been in raising achievement, and officials in 13 states did not know about the importance of their Reading First assessment systems.

District officials, who are typically closer to the implementation of Reading First, overwhelmingly reported that Reading First was an important or very important cause of improvement in student achievement: 97% reported Reading First’s instructional program was an important or very important cause of improved achievement, and 92% reported Reading First’s assessment system was an important or very important cause.

The proportion of districts with Reading First subgrants that reported the grant was an important or very important cause of increased student achievement was significantly larger than the proportion of districts that did not have the subgrant, as would be expected. Non-Reading First districts, however, are often invited to attend state professional development on Reading First, and are often encouraged by states to adopt Reading First curricular and assessment systems. About 8% of districts without Reading First subgrants said Reading First’s instructional programs were still an important or very important cause of increased achievement, while about 10% of districts without Reading First subgrants also said that Reading First’s assessment systems were important or very important causes of increases. These districts found Reading First an important or very important cause of improved student achievement even though they did not participate directly in the subgrant.

Our state surveys showed that many states are using Reading First as one of the main strategies to improve achievement in schools identified under NCLB: 42 states reported offering

professional development through Reading First and 39 reported providing curriculum and assessment materials through Reading First moderately or to a great extent. In our survey only two other strategies were used moderately or to a great extent by more states, as shown in **table 3**.

The majority of states also reported that these efforts supported by Reading First grants were successful in raising student achievement in schools identified for improvement: 31 states reported that offering professional development through Reading First was moderately or very effective in raising student achievement, and 29 reported that providing curriculum and assessment materials through Reading First was moderately or very effective. In our survey, only one other strategy was reported as very effective by more states—matching curriculum and instruction with standards and/or assessments—as shown in **table 4**.

Many case study districts confirmed our survey findings that the majority of districts view Reading First as effective and as broad reaching. For example, officials in the Waynesboro Public Schools said Reading First not only helped turn around an underperforming school, it also affected the districtwide reading program. Similarly, officials in Palmdale Elementary School District in California said Reading First strategies were being applied districtwide. At Palmdale’s Yucca Elementary, which has a subgrant, Principal Anastacia Arnold praised the structure offered by Reading First, especially the uniform pacing, embedded ongoing assessments, and additional support and training the Reading First coach gives all staff members. At first, Arnold said, teachers were overwhelmed by the new curriculum, which they felt was too scripted. Over time, however, she said teachers gained knowledge and competence with the many components of Reading First. This year through Reading First, she said many teachers are better able to diagnose students’ specific academic needs and provide effective instruction.

While districts with subgrants in our surveys and case studies mostly reported that Reading First was effective, not all districts in our case studies completely confirmed this view. In Escondido Union School District in California, for example, three schools have Reading First subgrants and an additional elementary school, Central Elementary, is implementing the program without the assistance of an official subgrant. District officials attributed much of the district’s growth in reading achievement to Reading First;

however, Reading First did not seem to work as well for English language learners. English language learners were among the subgroups that did not make AYP at two elementary schools, yet they made tremendous progress at Central Elementary, which does not have an official Reading First subgrant. One strategy used by Central was to adjust the reading/language arts curriculum for English language learners. Since the school is not officially a Reading First school, it has the freedom to make changes in the strategies. The other three schools are not able to make this change because of their official participation in Reading First, even though the district believes the modification would help students.

In addition, some districts without Reading First subgrants

did not apply for subgrants specifically because they thought the program would not be effective and would not mesh well with existing reading instruction. For example, although Harrison Community Schools in Michigan was eligible to apply for a Reading First grant, teachers chose not to. “We had too many other reading initiatives in place,” said Hillside Elementary School Principal Michele Sandro, noting that a Reading First grant in Michigan would have necessitated a change in reading curriculum and materials. Despite the difficult decision to forgo a direct Reading First grant, Sandro said the district does have some of the components of Reading First in place and will benefit from some of the state grant activities. According to Sandro, the reading programs at the district’s two elementary schools include the five components of reading specified in Reading First: phonemic

**Table 4. Number of States Viewing Various Strategies as Effective in Raising Student Achievement in Identified Schools, 2005**

	Very Effective	Moderately Effective	Minimally Effective	Not at All	Don't Know	N/A: Strategy Not Used
Matching curriculum and instruction with standards and/or assessments	25	12	0	1	12	0
Offering professional development through Reading First	18	13	3	0	16	0
Providing Reading First curriculum and assessment materials through Reading First	16	13	4	0	16	0
School support teams	14	13	6	2	11	4
Special grants to districts to support school improvement efforts	13	23	5	1	8	0
Mentor or coach for the principal (e.g., distinguished principals)	10	12	3	1	13	10
Providing before- or after-school, weekend, or summer programs	7	22	3	0	12	5
Educational or management consultants	7	15	4	1	14	9
Additional full-time school-based staff to support teacher development	7	8	3	1	16	14
Distinguished teachers	5	6	6	3	14	14
Other	4	1	1	0	0	0

Table reads: Thirty-six states reported that using special grants to districts to raise student achievement in schools identified for improvement was moderately or very effective.

Note: Responses are ranked according to the number of states responding “very effective.”

Source: Center on Education Policy, *State Survey, December 2005, item 11.*

awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. The schools also both have 90 to 120 minutes of reading daily. In school year 2005-06, teachers plan to attend state-sponsored professional development funded through the state's Reading First grant.

These examples from our case studies illustrate both the benefits and the challenges of highly structured reforms. On the one hand, they increase the consistency of reforms across settings and populations. On the other, they prevent adaptations that might make reforms more effective in certain settings and for particular populations.

### Expansion Into Upper Grades

We did not ask states and districts about expansion into upper grades in our surveys. Although we have limited information about this topic, our case studies did show that one district is expanding Reading First curriculum, instruction, and assessment beyond grade 3. Officials from the Boston Public Schools reported the district has expanded Reading First to be a schoolwide program in the 12 elementary schools that have Reading First grants as well as in 12 additional elementary schools that do not have official Reading First grants but have used state grants and local funds to implement the program. In addition, Reading First has pushed Boston toward a "more structured" English/language arts program in all grades including high school, according to Chris Coxon, deputy superintendent for teaching and learning at the district.

To move Reading First's research-based instructional goals into upper grades nationally, ED has launched Striving Readers, a new discretionary grant program authorized as part of the 2005 Fiscal Year Appropriations Act under the Title I demonstration authority. The Striving Readers program aims to raise the reading achievement levels of middle and high school-aged students in Title I-eligible schools with significant numbers of students reading below grade level. As explained on ED's Web site, "The program supports new comprehensive reading initiatives or expansion of existing initiatives that improve the quality of literacy instruction across the curriculum, provide intensive literacy interventions to struggling adolescent readers, and help to build a strong, scientific research base for identifying and replicating strategies that improve adolescent literacy skills." Unlike Reading First, however, Striving Readers does not

identify essential components of reading for older readers and does not mandate that any particular components be taught. Instead, one goal of Striving Readers is to identify specific strategies that will improve reading for adolescent students. In addition, the program is much smaller than Reading First. The ED Web site shows that the 2005-06 grants have been awarded to just seven school districts and one state department of youth services. Grants range from \$13,968,272 to \$24,548,234 and average \$17,821,537. The total of all eight grants is \$142,572,295.

### Time Devoted to Reading

As suggested by our case studies in 2004, our 2005 district survey found that significantly more Reading First districts require elementary schools to devote a set amount of time to reading than non-Reading First districts. Among Title I districts with Reading First subgrants, 86% require that elementary schools devote a specified amount of time to reading, while 57% of non-Reading First districts have this requirement. Although many states require schools to devote 90 minutes or more to reading in order to qualify for a subgrant, the district as a whole would not typically be required to do so.

Although more Reading First districts have this requirement than non-Reading First districts, the average amount of time both types of districts require schools to spend on reading is not significantly different. Both require approximately an hour and a half, the same amount of time recommended in ED's Guidance for Reading First (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

As with most Title I districts in our survey, 88% of Reading First districts reported that they had cut time to some extent in elementary schools in one or more subjects to make room for reading and math. Our current information does not allow us to draw conclusions about the effect of reducing time in some subjects to make more time for reading. Our case study districts had mixed views on the topic. For example, in the Orleans Central Supervisory Union in Vermont, Superintendent Ron Paquette said that through Reading First, reading instruction has improved greatly and reading achievement has increased in elementary schools. The emphasis on reading, however, has limited the amount of teaching in social studies and science. "Time is not on our side," Paquette said.

## Coordination with or Isolation from Other Initiatives

### Reading First and Title I

While coordination of Reading First and Title I is not required by law, the two programs both aim to improve reading in the elementary grades and, therefore, should work in concert. All states currently receive both Title I and Reading First funds. In addition, 96% of Reading First schools receive Title I funds, according to data from SEDL, so the majority of districts must manage both programs as well. Most states (76%) reported they coordinated Reading First and Title I, while 24% reported they did not coordinate the two programs.

Of those states reporting they coordinated the two programs, 27 responded to an open-ended question asking them to describe their coordination efforts.

- More than half of these states reported that the state held joint meetings or professional development for Reading First and Title I officials at the state, district, and/or school level.
- Almost half reported that Title I and Reading First officials at the state, district, and/or school level were invited to attend one another's meetings or professional development events.
- About a fifth of states reported that at the state level Reading First and Title I were part of the same "division" or "team" and, therefore, worked together and reported to a common administrator.

Other forms of coordination reported by fewer than 20% of the 27 states included physically housing Reading First and Title I officials near one another, having top administrators work together, and monitoring both programs through the same state NCLB office.

Some states employed more than one coordination strategy. For example, describing a more tightly coordinated effort, one state official wrote, "Reading First is part of the 'School Reform' team in the division of NCLB. This team includes Reading First and 'Needs Improvement' schools [schools missing AYP two consecutive years] and is coordinated by the same supervisor." Other states which reported their Reading First and Title I programs were coordinated had less formal means of coordination. One official wrote, "Program

administrators work together to ensure requirements and information are consistent." While 76% of states reported that the two programs were coordinated, this coordination ranges from requiring collaboration through the state's reporting structure to having less formal agreements to work together.

The majority of districts in our survey that had a Reading First grant (80%) reported that they coordinated Reading First and Title I by adapting or modifying the Title I reading program to meet the requirements of Reading First. The question we asked districts was slightly more specific than the question we asked states. States were asked, "Is the Reading First program coordinated with the Title I program in the state?" Districts were asked, "Has the district adapted or modified the Title I reading program so that it is coordinated with the materials, instruction, and/or assessment of Reading First?" While it is possible that a district would modify Reading First to fit Title I, we believed it would be unlikely, since Reading First has more specific requirements than Title I has for reading instruction, curriculum, and assessment. We did not ask states about modifying the Title I reading instruction, curriculum, and assessment, because the program is administered at the district level.

To collect more information about modifications, an open-ended question on our survey asked districts to describe how Title I had been changed due to Reading First.

Several districts responding to this question reported Title I reading activities adopted all the requirements of Reading First and the programs are now indistinguishable.

Because these districts modified all aspects of Title I to conform with Reading First, they were taken out of the subsequent analysis, which examined how districts changed isolated aspects of their Title I program in reading to conform with Reading First. These remaining districts reported they modified their Title I program in the following ways:

- Many changed the Title I reading curriculum to the Reading First curriculum.
- Several had Title I staff participate in Reading First professional development.
- Several added Reading First assessments to Title I programs.

Other changes reported by fewer than a fourth of these districts were aligning Title I instruction with Reading First

instruction, increasing the time required for reading, increasing collaboration among all staff involved in reading instruction, and using more small group instruction. A strategy reported by only two districts is worth mentioning here, because it departs sharply from the other strategies, all of which changed Title I reading instruction to make it more like Reading First. Two districts reported that Title I no longer does much reading instruction and instead focuses on other subjects because Reading First is taking care of the reading instruction in their Title I schools.

On the one hand, some districts appeared to change Title I for the sake of convenience and unity of programming within the district. For example, one district official wrote, “In every way—we simply took the Reading First work and moved it out across the system’s elementary schools, Title I and non-Title I.” On the other hand, some districts reported they made the change because they found their Reading First programs more effective. One official wrote, “We have two Reading First schools. Because they’ve done a good job, the district mandated it for the rest of the district. So I put a Reading First person [in charge] to implement the program.”

Several of our case study districts shed more light on how districts coordinated Reading First and Title I. In the Boston Public Schools, for example, the district replicated Reading First at 12 schools by using local and state funds. In a less funding-intensive extension of Reading First, some districts include non-Reading First schools in the professional development events held for Reading First schools. For example, in Clark County Schools in Nevada, the district’s Reading First grant allowed Reading First schools to hire an additional Reading First literacy specialist, who works in conjunction with the school’s district literacy specialist, a position funded locally. The district also hired Reading First coaches for each of the district’s five regions. These regional coaches provide professional development for the Reading First literacy specialist as well as the district’s literacy specialists.

### Reading First and Early Reading First

ED began awarding three-year Early Reading First grants to school districts and other organizations in 2003 to improve the language and pre-reading skills of young children before these children enter kindergarten, according to ED’s Web site. Since 2003, about \$370 million in grants has been awarded

to more than 120 school districts and organizations. While the target populations of Early Reading First and Reading First differ by age, both programs aim to improve reading by using research-based curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Theoretically, Early Reading First might build on Reading First. ED’s Web site states that Early Reading First “complements” Reading First. Specific types of coordination are not required by law, and, unlike Reading First, there is no direct state administration of Early Reading First. Instead, Early Reading First grants go directly from ED to school districts and organizations that work at the local level.

According to our analysis of grantee abstracts available from the ED Web site, among 2004 grantees about half are school districts or other government organizations that serve public schools, such as regional education offices; about a third are universities; and the rest are other nonprofits that either provide childcare services directly or support other childcare entities.<sup>2</sup> Early Reading First grant recipients are located in all but 9 of the 50 states.

Among the 41 states that have agencies or organizations with Early Reading First grants, 37 responded to our survey question asking if Reading First was coordinated with Early Reading First. The majority—24 (65%)—reported that the two programs were not coordinated; 10 (27%) reported the programs were coordinated, and 3 (8%) reported they did not know.

In open-ended questions, which officials in 22 states responded to, several explained the non-coordination of Reading First and Early Reading First by pointing out that state departments of education have no official involvement in Early Reading First. For example, one state official wrote, “Early Reading is a program that goes directly from USDE to local educational agencies. The State Agency does not administer the program.” In addition, some state departments of education appeared to have little knowledge of Early Reading First. Three of the 22 states reported the programs were not coordinated because no Early Reading First grants were located within their states, when in fact each of the three did have agencies operating Early Reading First Programs within the state, according to ED’s grantee abstracts.

<sup>2</sup> Due to the small number of total Early Reading First grants nationally and due to the fact that many of these grants do not go to school districts, our survey was unable to collect a large enough sample of districts with Early Reading First grants to ask districts if Reading First and Early Reading First were coordinated.

Other state officials, however, described close collaboration between Reading First and Early Reading First. One wrote, “The Reading First State Director met with the grant writers to design a plan for Early Reading First that was coordinated with the state’s Reading First Program. Early Reading First sites are located at Reading First Schools. The Early Reading First Directors, the Head Start Administrators and the Reading First Program Director and Resource Teacher meet quarterly. Reading First trainings are open to Early Reading First staff.” Similarly, another wrote, “Early Reading First programs are invited to Reading First offerings. The Early Reading First program is housed in a Reading First school. Early Reading First [staff] participated in Reading First Summer Institutes.” Several states also reported that the state helps local entities write Early Reading First grants.

While few states reported coordinating Reading First and Early Reading First, those that describe their coordination of the programs may have lessons for those that do not coordinate. More research is needed to determine the effectiveness of this coordination. Although the 27% of states that coordinate the two programs are clearly doing more than is required by law, these efforts might pay off in smoother transitions between pre-school and kindergarten or in higher achievement once students reach public schools.

### **New Mechanisms of Coordination**

Reading First, Early Reading First, and Title I all aim to improve student achievement, and with the passage of NCLB all seek to accomplish this goal by using curriculum, instruction, and assessment based on scientific research. Because of this focus on improving achievement using scientifically based methods, the three programs have always had considerable overlap. There are no specific federal requirements for coordination, however. Some states and districts have taken it upon themselves to provide more formal coordination. As discussed above, this coordination ranges from putting Reading First and Title I in the same state office to informally sharing information between the three programs. No new formal mechanisms for coordination have been put in place at the federal level in the form of amendments to law or to the Reading First guidance.

A new federal program, Expanding the Reach, may, however, form a bridge between Reading First and Title I. This federally funded program aims to “improve student achievement in

Title I elementary schools by building and sustaining the capacity of teachers to use scientifically based reading research” (National Center for Family Literacy, 2005, p. 8). A collaboration among the National Center for Family Literacy, DTI Associates, and the Wechsler Institute, the program is a pilot program in its first school year of implementation in Tennessee, Washington, and Massachusetts, in a total of 15 districts and 26 Title I schools, according to the Expanding the Reach Web site. Total funding for Expanding the Reach is \$3.73 million.

Like Reading First, Expanding the Reach provides professional development for K-3 teachers in the five components of scientifically based reading research: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension. Unlike Reading First, Expanding the Reach is only in Title I districts and does not focus on curricular materials and assessments. The participating states, however, already have some statewide requirements similar to Reading First that impact curricular materials and assessments. As its title suggests, Expanding the Reach may bring elements of Reading First to more Title I schools that do not officially have Reading First subgrants.

## **Informative or Punitive Evaluation**

### **Individual Student Assessment**

As discussed earlier in this report, the majority of Title I districts in CEP’s survey that had Reading First grants and rising achievement reported that Reading First assessments were an important or very important cause of increased achievement. Our case studies found similar results. For example, in the Chicago Public Schools, teachers at Pope Elementary said their chosen assessment, DIBELS, works well. “It’s able to diagnose deficiencies,” explained Michael McKinney, the school’s librarian who helps administer the assessments.

Other case studies, however, revealed some initial resistance to using Reading First assessments. For example, when teachers were given Palm Pilots to administer the DIBELS reading test required by Boston Public School’s subgrant, the initial reaction was to ask, “Have you lost your mind?” said Ann Deveny, Boston’s senior program director for elementary language arts. Teachers, though, are finding the Palm Pilots very easy to use, said Deveny, and the immediate access to

data has created a sense of urgency. Students are excited about the use of technology, and teachers feel empowered. “Plus,” said Deveny, “I can see immediately what students are being tested and what the results are by student, classroom, and school.” Literacy coaches and principals can view results for the school and can compare with other schools. Ultimately, the district will be able to view data longitudinally and compare the original Reading First schools with the 12 schools that are implementing the model using local or state funds.

In addition, in one case study, district and school officials reported their assessment did not always work well for English language learners (ELLs). In the Chicago Public Schools at Carson Elementary, a school with a large ELL population, bilingual teachers said they complied with giving the DIBELS to Spanish-speaking students in English. Most, however, also gathered the information about the student’s knowledge of letter names and sounds in Spanish, because they said this told them more about the child’s readiness to begin reading in both English and Spanish. Scores from the English-language DIBELS can even be misleading at times. “With some students it’s on target, but with others it isn’t,” kindergarten teacher Rosalba Granados noted.

Three years ago, when the state made the decision to use DIBELS in English only, there was no normed DIBELS in Spanish. Now that DIBELS has a normed Spanish assessment, Carson’s bilingual lead teacher, Rosa Alvarez, said she had hopes that the policy will change, calling the current policy “an injustice.”

The district as a whole supports the use of DIBELS in Spanish, said Audrey Cooper-Stanton, the district’s chief literacy officer. The state of Illinois, however, specifies that the English version must be used in Reading First schools. “We’ve written many letters,” Cooper-Stanton said, but to date the state is not allowing exceptions.

## National Assessments and State Grants

One aim of Reading First is to raise student achievement nationally. Although it is important to compare Reading First schools to non-Reading First schools, it is also important to place Reading First in the context of reading achievement overall. Reading First is being implemented in a time when student achievement on state tests is rising nationally and

other national measures show reading achievement at least holding steady. On our state and district surveys, officials from 35 states (81%) and a large majority of district officials (78%) reported student achievement was improving based on state tests used for NCLB from 2003-04 to 2004-05.

Other national studies examining state test data also found that state tests scores are on the rise, particularly among elementary age students (Education Trust, 2005; *Education Week*, 2006). *The Nation’s Report Card: Reading 2005*, in contrast, showed that from 2002 to 2005 the percentage of students performing at or above proficient in 4th grade on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) stayed steady at 31%. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). However, gains on NAEP tests have typically been more gradual than on state tests. So we can tentatively say that reading achievement appears to be at least holding steady and at best improving. Despite this good news, America’s public schools are far from ensuring that all students are proficient in reading. In about half of the states in 2005 no more than 75% of students were deemed proficient on 4th grade reading tests (*Education Week*, 2006). The question to ask next is how Reading First specifically affects student reading achievement.

What do national studies say about Reading First? As reported in our 2005 study, *Ensuring Academic Rigor or Inducing Rigor Mortis? Issues to Watch in Reading First*, ED has commissioned three national studies of Reading First:

1. *Analysis of State K-3 Reading Standards and Assessments* by RMC Research Corporation and the McKenzie Group
2. *The Reading First Implementation Evaluation* by Abt Associates
3. *The Reading First Impact Study* by Abt Associates, with partner organizations MDRC, Westat, RMC, and Westover Consulting, among others

*The Analysis of State K-3 Reading Standards and Assessments* examined the relationship between state content standards and assessments and the essential components of reading instruction: phonemic awareness,

phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Content standards were evaluated using an expert review of state reading content standards for grades K-3 in a random selection of 20 states. To examine the relationship between state assessments and the essential components of reading instruction, researchers reviewed Reading First state grant applications to determine how many states were able to use their state assessments to evaluate each of the essential components of reading and how many had to use separate assessments (U.S. Department of Education, 2005).

Key findings of this study include the following:

- Comprehension and, to a lesser extent, vocabulary are better represented by sampled states' K-3 reading standards than are the other three essential elements of reading instruction.
- States with larger numbers of K-3 reading standards organized to make the five essential elements more visible were judged to represent these elements better.
- With the possible exception of vocabulary and comprehension in grade 3, statewide reading assessments in 2003-04 do not significantly address expected student outcomes from reading instruction in the five essential areas.
- There is a slight relationship between how state standards and assessments represent the five essential elements of reading instruction; i.e., states that identified statewide reading assessments as Reading First outcome measures tended to have more reading standards that visibly represented the five essential elements of effective reading instruction.

While most states report coordinating Title I and Reading First in our survey, the *Analysis of State K-3 Reading Standards and Assessments* indicates that Reading First's emphasis on the five essential components of reading has not spread to all state policy. State assessments, and to a lesser extent state standards, neglect essential components, especially phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency.

*The Reading First Implementation Evaluation* examined Reading First implementation using national surveys, interviews, and databases containing Reading First grant information. Results suggested that Reading First is being implemented in schools and classrooms in accordance with the legislation (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). In particular, there were significant differences between Reading First and

non-Reading First schools in the following areas:

- Reading First schools reported significantly more non-financial external assistance for K-3 reading than non-Reading First schools.
- Reading First schools were significantly more likely to report using a scheduled reading block, and teachers in Reading First schools said they spent more time on reading.
- Newly funded Reading First schools were significantly more likely to report that they adopted a new core reading program, added new intervention programs, added new supplementary materials, and adopted new materials for ELL students.
- Staff in schools that had more mature Reading First programs were more likely to report having materials and core programs that were aligned with Reading First than teachers in non-Reading First schools.
- Teachers in Reading First schools were more likely than teachers in non-Reading First schools to say they put their struggling readers in intervention programs.
- Although teachers in both types of schools used assessments, teachers in Reading First schools were more likely to report that assessments from their core or supplementary reading programs were useful.
- Reading First schools were more likely to have reading coaches than non-Reading First schools.
- Staff in Reading First Schools reported receiving significantly more professional development than staff in non-Reading First schools.

The researchers have not yet examined how student achievement differs in Reading First and non-Reading First schools or how school-level implementation of Reading First affects student achievement. These subjects will be addressed in the final report due out in the summer of 2008.

*The Reading First Impact Study* had to change its initial experimental design involving randomized assignment of schools to either a Reading First subgrant group (the treatment) or a non-Reading First group (the control). This change was needed because some state grants and district subgrants were awarded before the plan for random assignment could be carried out. The study has been redesigned as a regression discontinuity analysis, a form of

analysis that allows researchers to compare the pre- and post-test data of non-randomized, non-equivalent groups, i.e., the testing data of students in schools that met the state and federal criteria for Reading First subgrants versus those that did not. As of April 2005, researchers had selected sites for the study, collected baseline data, and set up the infrastructure for future data collection (Bloom, Kemple, Gamse, & Jacob, 2005), but no results were available at the time of publication of this report.

Some state-level studies have more definitive findings. For example in Ohio, analysis of first year DIBELS data showed that the majority of the students participating in Reading First for at least two years averaged more than one year's growth annually. Furthermore, the earlier the students were provided with instruction and intervention through Reading First, the greater the students' growth on DIBELS (Salzman, Newman, Rosemary, & Lenhart, 2006). In addition, Latino and African-American students participating in Reading First in Ohio for at least two years closed the gap on white students across the state (Salzman, Newman, Clay, & Lenhart, 2006).

In Tennessee, researchers found similar overall results for student reading achievement. Although schools in their first year of implementation did not show significant gains on reading tests, schools in their second year of program implementation did show significant improvement in reading achievement. Given the positive teacher and literacy leader attitudes and understanding of Reading First as reported through surveys and observations, researchers anticipated that schools in the first year of implementation should begin to see improvements in their second year if they continue to successfully implement the program (Grehan, Smith, & Ross, 2006).

While these national and state studies show promise, it is still too early for definitive conclusions about Reading First. It may not be until 2007 or 2008 that extensive research studies on Reading First are available and made public. At that time, we may be able to draw more conclusions. Clear comparisons of Reading First and non-Reading First schools, however, may still be difficult for researchers to discern, due to the expansion of Reading First into non-Reading First schools as well as the discontinuation of Reading First in schools that do not make significant improvement, as discussed in the next section.

State officials also seem to be unsure of the importance of

Reading First's assessment systems. As discussed above, in states with rising student achievement, officials in 17 states reported Reading First assessment systems were important or very important causes of student achievement, while 13 reported they did not know the importance of the assessments. Most district officials, however, reported these assessments were causes of rising student achievement.

### Mid-Point Evaluation Review

The law requires states to conduct annual evaluations and issue a midpoint progress report to ED three years into the state grant. In addition, the law requires that the midterm reports be reviewed by an expert panel, which under the Reading First guidance, is appointed by the U.S. Secretary of Education and the National Institute for Literacy. On the basis of the review, ED will then determine if the state is making sufficient progress to warrant continuation of the grant.

Although ED began distributing Reading First funds in 2002 and has awarded states funding for four consecutive years, more than half of state grants were first distributed during 2003. The midpoint evaluation, therefore, has not yet taken place. According to ED officials, states will turn in reports for the midpoint review in the fall of 2006 and reviews of these reports will be conducted shortly afterwards.

To date, all Reading First grants to states, territories, and the District of Columbia have been continued. Not all grants to districts and schools have been continued, however, according to SEDL, the regional education lab charged with maintaining a database with information about state, district, and school participation in Reading First. While a SEDL official said the organization does know of districts and schools where grants were discontinued, SEDL does not systematically track this information for the database. Reasons for grant discontinuation, according to the SEDL official, included changes in district or school leadership that resulted in the district or school choosing to end participation; closing, merging, or restructuring of the district or school; or poor performance by the district or school. *Education Week's* review of state annual reports also revealed some discontinued grants, although a total count was not given. For example, six Michigan schools were dropped from Reading First due to failure to make progress, and five schools in Madison, Wisconsin withdrew from Reading First when a review by the Western Regional Reading

First Technical Assistance Center at the University of Oregon recommended a change in reading programs (Manzo, 2005b).

### Adequacy of Funding

For the past four years the annual funding for Reading First has been about \$1 billion. In 2006, state continuation grants awarded to all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and several territories ranged from \$593,275 to \$145,383,383, with an average grant of \$17,467,730 (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). After a large increase in Reading First funding for fiscal year 2003, the funding has grown in accordance with typical inflation rates, with the exception of fiscal year 2006, when funding decreased slightly. **Table 5** shows the exact allocations for Reading First since its inception.

The majority of states reported in our survey that Reading First funds were adequate to carry out the requirements of NCLB: 45 reported having sufficient funds for implementing Reading First activities, while 43 reported sufficient funds for conducting Reading First evaluations. In fact, among the requirements of NCLB that we asked about, Reading First had more reports of sufficient funding than all other NCLB requirements, except for developing and maintaining a list of supplemental service providers, which 44 states said had sufficient funding. This number fell between the two Reading First requirements in the number of sufficient funding responses, as shown in **table 6**.

An important funding difference between other federal education programs, such as Title I, Part A grants to school districts, and Reading First is that programs such as Title I, Part A rely on funds that states and districts received long before the enactment of NCLB in 2002 and allocated to particular uses, while Reading First has a separate and new funding stream. Although Reading First is perceived as having strict requirements, as discussed earlier in this report, the funds used to carry out these requirements are not being reallocated from other uses. Instead, Reading First adds funding to states and districts.

### Continuing the Watch

Reading First is having a significant impact. Our surveys and case studies show that Reading First is changing reading curriculum, instruction, professional development, and assessment in Reading First schools as well as in non-Reading First schools. Most states and districts are coordinating Title I programs with Reading First. Fewer states coordinate Reading First and Early Reading First. While some states and many districts reported that Reading First was an important cause of increased achievement in reading, very little is known about the actual achievement of Reading First versus non-Reading First schools nationally. Given this uncertainty as well as the widespread effects of the program, policymakers, administrators, and educators need to pay close attention to Reading First.

**Table 5. Reading First Funding Grants to States and Territories, 2002-2006**

	Reading First Appropriations	Percent Change from Previous Year
2006	\$1,029,234,000	-1%
2005	\$1,041,600,000	2%
2004	\$1,023,923,000	3%
2003	\$993,500,000	10%
2002	\$900,000,000	N/A

Table reads: In 2006, Reading First appropriations for state grants were \$1,029,234,000, which represents a 1% decrease from 2005.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, [www.ed.gov/programs/readingfirst/funding.html](http://www.ed.gov/programs/readingfirst/funding.html).

The Center on Education Policy will continue to report on key Reading First issues, including the effect on reading programs, coordination with other programs, and evaluation procedures. Our 2006 state and district surveys will continue to gather the types of data analyzed in this report. In addition, our state survey will collect information on the continuation or discontinuation of district and school Reading First grants. Collecting and reporting on this data is an important part of making sure that Reading First runs as well as possible now, so that future reading programs build effectively on the knowledge accumulated from Reading First.

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**Table 6. Number of States Reporting That NCLB Funds Provided to the State Have Been Sufficient to Carry Out Various NCLB Requirements, 2005**

	Number of States Reporting Sufficient Funding	Number of States Reporting Funding Not Sufficient	Don't Know
Implementing Reading First activities	45	2	3
Developing and maintaining a list of supplemental service providers	44	7	
Conducting Reading First evaluations	43	1	5
Developing state academic content standards	34	10	5
Developing state assessments	27	19	4
Ensuring teachers who teach core academic subjects meet requirements for being highly qualified	26	14	9
Providing high quality professional development for teachers	20	21	8
Implementing a system to monitor the quality and effectiveness of SES providers	19	25	6
Providing technical assistance to schools in need of improvement	15	33	2
Other state duties required under NCLB	14	21	9

Table reads: In 2005, forty-five states reported that NCLB funds were sufficient to implement Reading First activities.

Note: Responses are ranked according to the number of states reporting that funds have been sufficient to carry out a certain provision.

Source: Center on Education Policy, *State Survey, December 2005, item 1*.

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## **Credits**

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