Title I, Part B, Reading First; Early Reading First; Even Start and Reading is Fundamental

Committee Views

Background

The Reading Deficit

President Bush has made the improvement of reading instruction a top priority. In March 2000, he said: “We have a national emergency. Too many of our children cannot read. Reading is the building block, and it must be the foundation, for education reform.”

In April of 2001, the National Assessment of Educational Progress once again sounded out the alarm: “63% of African Americans, 58% of Hispanic Americans, 60% of children living in poverty, and 47% of children in urban schools scored ‘below basic’ in reading.” There are many adults who have already been left behind as reported by the National Adult Literacy Survey which found that nearly one half of the American population have some significant limitation in their reading skills.

Americans have almost become numb to such startling statistics. How can it be that a nation that has such vast financial resources dedicated to educating its children could allow so many to be left behind because they have not learned to read? At the dawn of the 21st Century, with technology available for instant global communication, why are so many children not mastering a skill as basic as reading?

This issue is not new to the body politic. For the last third of the 20th Century billions of dollars were appropriated by Congress to improve reading instruction. It is estimated that nearly three quarters of the $130 billion of the Title I funds have been used to attempt to improve reading instruction, and yet student’s reading scores have remained flat since 1972 when the NAEP began collecting such statistics.

Special Education funding has increased dramatically since the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Act in 1974, a sizeable portion of which is now dedicated to those students placed in the Specific Learning Disabilities category simply because they have not been taught to read.

The private sector pumps millions of dollars into communities to encourage reading through programs like Book It!, sponsored by Pizza Hut, and HOSTS, designed to offer one-on-one tutoring in reading to struggling students. For example HOSTS encourages parental involvement in reading with their children, and have dramatically improved students’ reading levels. When students can read, the impact on their lives is dramatic. There is often a corresponding reduction in academic failure, dropouts, substance abuse, crime and unemployment rates. There are many other dedicated Americans who help adults in organizations like Literacy Volunteers of America, Laubach Literacy, and
scores of other private sector programs and corporations which seek to do the same. Yet, even with all this attention to reading, the problem of illiteracy worsens every year.

The Committee recognizes that the love of books and the wealth of information that can be found in community and school libraries can only be accessed when children learn to read with fluency and ease. Providing books to children from disadvantaged backgrounds through early learning and child-care programs, preschools, Head Start Centers and throughout a student’s school years by including interesting books to read as part of the instructional materials available to them, will help them establish a solid foundation for formal reading instruction. When a student is at the early stages of learning to read, decodable text is often an effective way to provide the practice that is needed to transition to more difficult text.

Reading First and Early Reading First

80 percent of the funds under Reading First will be allocated to states, in five-year grants. There is a limitation on where the funds are to be available. That limitation requires that funds be allocated to areas: where there are the highest percentages of children in kindergarten through grade three who are reading below grade level or whose families have incomes below the poverty line; or which have been designated an empowerment zone or enterprise community; or which have schools in school improvement.

20 percent of the funds are available as discretionary grants that will be available to schools that have made the most progress in reducing the number of students who can’t read proficiently.

A peer review Panel will review all grants submitted by States to determine whether their professional development programs, diagnostic assessment and screening tools, and instructional materials meet the standards of scientifically based reading research and include all the essential components of reading instruction. The Panel will submit its recommendations to the Secretary for his consideration.

States will submit annual progress reports to identify those schools and local educational agencies that report the largest gains in reading achievement, based on valid assessments of reading proficiency. The essential components of reading instruction can be taught in many diverse ways, but to become successful readers, students need to be taught each component effectively. There are many excellent reading programs available for teachers to choose that include these essential components. Well trained teachers, valid diagnostic and screening tools, appropriate instructional materials, and regular measurements of progress in reading can decrease the reading gap between minority students and their non-minority peers. This is one of the critical objectives of Reading First and Early Reading First.
Reading First is Grounded on Nearly a Half Century of Reading Research

There are at least six major research reports on reading instruction that have been funded and released by the federal government over the past two decades. These reports cite findings on which researchers have reached consensus. The Committee is providing a summary of the findings of these major reports here because they provide the foundation for the Reading First and Early Reading First initiatives, and are applicable to reading instruction in classrooms everywhere.

1985 — Becoming A Nation of Readers

In 1983, the National Academy of Education's Commission on Education and Public Policy, with the sponsorship of the National Institute of Education, established a Commission to "locate topics on which there has been appreciable research and scholarship … and gather panels of experts from within the Academy and elsewhere to survey, interpret and synthesize research findings." In Becoming A Nation of Readers, they reached consensus: "that efficient word recognition and comprehension are companion skills from the time a child first learns to read; that phonics instruction is the relationship between letters and speech sounds and that the purpose is to teach children the alphabetic principle. To do that, research evidence tends to favor explicit phonics. Readers must be able to decode words quickly and accurately so that this process can coordinate fluidly with the process of constructing meaning from text.”

1990 — Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print

Marilyn Jager Adams (1990), summarizing sixty years of reading research in Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning about Print, confirmed the importance of the alphabetic principle. Adams found that phonemic awareness (the understanding that spoken words and syllables consist of sequences of elementary speech sounds) is …“more highly related to learning to read than are tests of general intelligence, reading readiness, and listening comprehension …the lack of phonemic awareness is the most powerful determinant of the likelihood of failure to learn to read because of its importance in learning the English alphabetic system or in learning how print represents spoken words. If children cannot hear and manipulate the sounds in spoken words, they have an extremely difficult time learning how to map those sounds to letters and letter patterns--the essence of decoding.”

After examining the accumulated research, Adams confirmed the efficacy of explicit phonics instruction. The vast majority of the studies indicated that approaches including intensive, explicit phonics instruction resulted in comprehension skills that are at least comparable to, and word recognition and spelling skills that are significantly better than those that do not … “Approaches in which systematic code instruction is included along with meaningful connected print result in superior reading achievement overall. Far from interfering with the ability to draw meaning from print, research indicates that the most critical factor beneath fluent word reading is the ability to recognize letters, spelling
patterns, and whole words, effortlessly, automatically, and visually. Moreover, the goal of all reading instruction - comprehension - depends critically on this ability.

1998 – “Reading: A Research-Based Approach”

Over thirty years of reading research, funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), is summarized by Drs. Jack Fletcher and Reid Lyon in the chapter, "Reading: A Research-Based Approach," in *What's Gone Wrong in America's Classrooms* (1998). These studies, conducted in thirty-six sites in North America, support a prominent role for explicit instruction in phonics and phonemic awareness skills (i.e. alphabetic principle) for beginning reading instruction and for intervention with children having difficulty. NICHD studies also support a "major emphasis on reading and writing in environments that include good literature, reading for enjoyment, and other practices believed to facilitate the development of reading skills and literacy."

NICHD not only studied the complex process of reading and how children learn to read, but also what causes them to fail. Findings from research on how children learn to read were applied to the study of reading failure at five research sites: Bowman-Gray Medical School, Florida State University, the State University of New York at Albany, the University of Colorado, and the University of Texas-Houston Health Science Center. Studies with both beginning readers and disabled readers established that problems in word recognition arise from inability to break apart words and syllables into individual phonemes (sounds): “This relationship is apparent in the majority of poor readers, including children, adolescents, and adults at all levels of IQ, and in children and adults from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds.”

They also sought to determine whether disabled readers use the same or different processes as non-disabled readers when learning to read. “The NICHD research has not found the processes underlying reading disability to be qualitatively different from those processes associated with early reading proficiency. Reading problems occur as part of a natural, unbroken continuum of ability. What causes good reading also leads to poor reading when the processes are deficient. In fact most children's reading problems occur at the level of the single word."

As the NICHD research has found: “The majority of children who enter kindergarten and elementary school at-risk for reading failure can learn to read at average, or above average levels, but only if they are identified early and provided with systematic, explicit, and intensive instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, reading fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension strategies. On the other hand, “failure to develop basic reading skills by age nine predicts a lifetime of illiteracy. Unless these children receive the appropriate instruction, over 70 percent of the children entering first grade who are at risk for reading failure will continue to have reading problems into adulthood.” That is
clearly what has happened over the past half century resulting in an unusually high adult illiteracy rate in America.

1998 -- *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*

Once again, the importance of identifying the causes of reading failure led the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Human Services to ask the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) to establish a committee to examine the prevention of reading difficulties. This 400 page report, *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Snow et al, 1998) reviewed research on normal reading development and instruction; on risk factors useful in identifying groups and individuals at risk of reading failure; and on prevention, intervention, and instructional approaches to ensure optimal reading outcomes. The NAS report identified three main stumbling blocks that throw children off course on their journey to skilled reading. “One obstacle is difficulty in understanding and using the alphabetic principle. Failure to grasp that written spellings systematically represent the sounds of spoken words makes it difficult not only to recognize printed words but also to understand how to learn and how to profit from instruction. If a child cannot rely on the alphabetic principle, word recognition is inaccurate or laborious and comprehension of connected text will be impeded. A second obstacle is the failure to acquire and use comprehension skills and strategies. A third obstacle involves motivation. Although most children begin school with positive attitudes and expectations for success, by the end of the primary grades, and increasingly thereafter, some children become disaffected. Difficulties mastering sound-letter relationships or comprehension skills can easily stifle motivation, which can in turn hamper instructional efforts.”

Reaffirming earlier research findings, the NAS report found that: “There is converging research support for the proposition that getting started in reading depends critically on mapping the letters and the spelling of words onto the sounds and speech units that they represent. Failure to master word recognition impedes text comprehension. Although context and pictures can be used as a tool to monitor word recognition, children should not be taught to use them to substitute for information provided by the letters in the word. Children who are having difficulty learning to read do not, as a rule, require qualitatively different instruction from children who learn with ease. There is little evidence that children experiencing difficulties learning to read, even those with identifiable learning disabilities, need radically different sorts of supports than children at low risk, although they may need more intensive support.”

1998 -- *Every Child Reading: An Action Plan of the Learning First Alliance*

Early in 1998, 12 leading national education organizations issued a report entitled, *Every Child Reading: An Action Plan of the Learning First Alliance*. They include: American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education; American Association of School Administrators; American Federation of Teachers; Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development; Council of Chief State School Officers; Education Commission of the States; National Association of State Boards of Education; National
Association of Elementary School Principals; National Association of Secondary School Principals; National Education Association; National PTA; National School Boards Association;

This report asserts that all children need explicit, systematic instruction in phonics and exposure to rich literature, both fiction and nonfiction; and that comprehension instruction, language development and writing instruction are essential from the beginning. The Alliance recommended improving teacher pre-service education, providing ongoing professional development, and basing education decisions on evidence, not ideology.

2000 -- Report of the National Reading Panel

In April 2000, the Report of the National Reading Panel was issued in response to a Congressional directive "to convene a national panel to assess the status of research-based knowledge, including the effectiveness of various approaches to teaching children to read." Building on the work of the National Research Council, the National Reading Panel developed an objective research review methodology. Panel staff identified more than 100,000 research studies on reading since 1966, from which the Panel identified 6007 that were scientifically valid. The findings of a careful analysis of those studies indicated that the following five instructional components are essential for effective reading instruction: phonemic awareness; systematic phonics instruction; oral reading for fluency; vocabulary development; and comprehension strategies.

The Committee heard from Dr. Donald Langenberg, Chancellor of the University of Maryland System and Chairman of the National Reading Panel who reviewed the findings of the NRP. He stated that: “The Panel found that certain instructional methods are better than others, and that many of the more effective methods are ready for implementation in the classroom. For example, there is overwhelming evidence that systematic phonics instruction enhances children’s success in learning to read and that such instruction is significantly more effective than instruction that teaches little or no phonics.”

Listed below are the essential components of reading instruction identified by the National Reading Panel upon which the Reading First and Early Reading First programs are based.

Phonemic Awareness

Correlated studies have identified phonemic awareness, as one of the best predictors of how well children will learn to read during the first two years of instruction. Results of experimental studies led the Panel to conclude "phonemic awareness training was the cause of improvement in students' phonemic awareness, reading, and spelling following training." Furthermore, the effects of such instruction for children of varying abilities lasted well beyond the end of training.
Systematic Phonics Instruction

The Panel reaffirmed previous findings: “Systematic phonics instruction produces significant benefits for students in kindergarten through sixth grade and for children having difficulty learning to read. The ability to read and spell words was enhanced in kindergartners who received systematic beginning phonics instruction. First graders who were taught phonics skills systematically were better able to decode and spell, and they showed significant improvement in their ability to comprehend text. Older children receiving phonics instruction were better able to decode and spell words and to read text orally, but their comprehension of text was not significantly improved.” Although phonics skills are necessary to learn to read, the Panel emphasized that they are not sufficient. They must be integrated with the development of phonemic awareness, oral reading fluency, and text reading comprehension skills.

Oral Reading to Build Fluency

The Panel found that, "fluent readers are able to read orally with speed, accuracy, and proper expression". Fluency, therefore, is another critical factor necessary for reading comprehension, which is often neglected in the classroom. Recent research has led to recognition of its importance and to the need for improved instructional practices for ensuring fluency.

Vocabulary Development

The Panel found that “vocabulary should be taught both directly and indirectly. Repetition and multiple exposures to vocabulary items are important. Learning in rich contexts, incidental learning, and use of computer technology all enhance the acquisition of vocabulary. Direct instruction should include task restructuring as necessary and should actively engage the student.”

Comprehension

The Panel identified three prominent research themes on the development of reading comprehension skills: comprehension is a complex skill that depends on vocabulary development; it is an active process that requires intentional and thoughtful interaction between text and reader; and teacher preparation is intimately linked to students' achievement in comprehension.

The Research is Conclusive

Although knowledge will continue to expand, we now have enough information to help almost all children learn to read, write, speak, and spell accurately and fluently. Dr. Benita Blachman (1996) in a chapter, "Preventing Early Reading Failure," in Learning Disability: Lifelong Issues, explains the current situation well: “The good news is that there have been scientific breakthroughs in our knowledge about the development of literacy. We know a great deal about how to address reading problems even before they
begin. The tragedy is that we are not exploiting what is known about reducing the incidence of reading failure. Specifically, the instruction currently being provided to our children does not reflect what we know from research. Direct, systematic instruction about the alphabetic code is not routinely provided in kindergarten and first grade, despite the fact that, given what we know at the moment, this might be the most powerful weapon in the fight against illiteracy.”

Even though the research findings of the past several decades are conclusive, most teachers colleges still provide professional development for elementary reading teachers which is based upon the “whole language” philosophy; reading instructional materials offered by the major textbook companies remain predominantly based upon the same (though there has been some movement in response to requirements in California and Texas for scientific research based reading instructional materials); many state reading standards and teacher licensing requirements are still based upon the same philosophy; and most of the major professional teachers organizations continue to reflect the philosophy of whole language. The term “whole language” is now generally perceived negatively by the public, so to avoid controversy, the same classroom practices are now called “a balanced approach”.

From Research to Practice

To eliminate the reading deficit, these findings need to become a part of routine elementary teacher pre-service education and in-service professional development. For this reason, the Committee has structured the Reading First and Early Reading First programs to provide both of these opportunities for reading teachers to become informed on how to teach the essential components of reading instruction.

Many of the organizations producing instructional materials offer excellent training in the use of their reading programs. Often this instruction is included with the purchase of a particular reading program. In addition, each State will have funds available to develop programs on how to apply the latest research to the teaching of the essential components of reading instruction. States like California, Texas, Georgia and Virginia have already developed excellent programs for teachers of reading. There are summer institutes such as the Greenwood Institute in Putney Vermont, where teachers can gain the knowledge of reading instruction that is based on the latest research. The most important objective is to provide reading teachers with the background in the alphabetic principle that is fundamental to English language, and how to teach that principle to beginning readers.

The Committee is aware that many public schools currently use instructional practices in reading that are not supported by the extensive body of research that is now available.

Common Practices Not Supported by Reading Research

Listed below are some of the most prevalent principles that are fundamental to whole language or balanced instruction in reading that have been proven false by scientific
research. Dr. Louisa Moats has succinctly outlined these issues in her recent publication titled: *Whole Language Lives On: The Illusion of “Balanced” Reading Instruction.*

“Learning to read is not natural…most children must be taught to read through a rather protracted process in which they are made aware of sounds and the symbols that represent them, and then learn to apply these skills automatically and attend to meaning;

“The alphabetic principle is not learned simply from exposure to print…. phonological awareness is primarily responsible for the development of the ability to sound words out. The ability to use phonics and to sound words out, in turn, is primarily responsible for the development of context-free word-recognition ability. Context-free word-recognition ability, moreover, is primarily responsible for the development of the ability to read connected text and comprehend it;

“Spoken language and written language are very different, and mastery of each requires unique skills and proficiencies….spoken language systems are learned automatically, without conscious instruction, when children share experiences and languages with caretakers…reading and writing require mastery of a special language with a special skill that exceeds our natural abilities;

“The most important skill in the beginning stages of reading is the ability to read single words completely, accurately, and fluently…skill in word reading in turn depends on both phonological awareness and the development of rapid associations of speech to print;

“Context is not the primary factor in word recognition….context is valuable for deciphering the meanings and uses for unfamiliar words once they have been named or decoded.”

Textbooks or tutorial programs that persist in including these unproven practices should not be eligible for funding under the Reading First or Early Reading First programs. In many cases instructional materials include one or more of the essential components of reading instruction, but with some modification these programs could include them all. Such changes alone would be a powerful engine for improving the quality of reading instruction in America and would result in reducing the number of students who might otherwise never learn to read.

As those entrusted with preparing America’s children to meet 21st Century challenges, all of us—policy makers, textbook publishers, administrators, teachers colleges, and classroom teachers—must be willing to adjust our current practices to make them consistent with the findings of the voluminous body of research noted earlier. Reading First and Early Reading First will not be successful in eliminating the serious reading deficit in America unless there is this corresponding change in the prevailing philosophies and practices of reading instruction in America.
Diagnosing and Measuring Progress in Reading

The Committee agrees that states and local schools already use objective ways to measure student progress in mastering the essential elements of reading instruction. Often there is a combination of teacher created, and objective standardized assessment instruments that can be used to measure student progress. Some school districts pre and post test students every year. Others use nationally normed “off the shelf” testing instruments. Still others use criterion-referenced assessments in combination with norm-referenced and State developed tests to measure student progress in reading. It is the Committee’s view that objective measurement of progress in student mastery of the essential elements of reading instruction is necessary, but the determination of what assessment instruments to use should be left to States and local schools.

Most research based reading instruction includes regular assessment instruments to measure student progress in improving their reading skills. The following list is not exhaustive, and should only be considered as illustrative: The Test of Phonological Awareness; the Phonemic Awareness and Phonics Inventory; the Primary Reading Inventory; the Roswell-Chall Diagnostic Reading Test; the Slosson Oral Reading Test; the Yopp-Singer and Degrees of Reading Power Test; the Diagnostic Assessment of Reading; the Auditory Analysis Test; the Decoding Skills Test; the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills Assessment; the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Tests; the Woodcock Diagnostic Reading Battery; and the Iowa Test of Basic Skills Primary Reading Profile. These are just a few of the ways that students’ reading progress is being diagnosed and measured.

Funds to purchase rigorous diagnostic reading and screening assessment tools are included in Reading First Grants because the Committee believes that without an accurate diagnosis and assessment of a student there is no way to determine what skills are missing and still need to be taught, and when a student has gained the ability to read independently, fluently, and with comprehension.

Limited English Proficient Students Learn to Read

At a field Hearing in Bradenton, Florida, the Committee heard from Bertha Zapata, a reading teacher in Broward Elementary School, Tampa, Florida. Most in her class speak little or no English; the majority are Hispanic and Asian. By the end of one year, the majority of her students are speaking, reading and writing English. Ms. Zapata told the Committee: “It is not magic. It is not because all these children are extremely bright, though many of them are. It because the method that I have been using to teach non-English speaking children since 1994 incorporates the essential components of reading instruction to help them become accurate spellers, fluent readers, and accomplished writers.”

The Committee believes that Ms. Zapata is typical of most good reading teachers in America. They love teaching. They love children. They want to do the very best
possible job of teaching all children in their classrooms to read. They often do not have the professional preparation to apply research-based instruction, and don’t have the opportunity to access this most vital information. Reading First is specifically designed to provide this information to teachers participating in this program. The result can be a dramatic reduction in the number of children who are unable to read if there is the will to apply the findings of scientifically based reading research in the classroom.

In a letter to the Committee a first grade bilingual teacher wrote: “I teach first grade in San Jacinto Elementary school. I have 45 students in my class, few of the parents of these children speak English, and one third of them have at least one parent in jail. I teach entirely in English. I began supplementing my regular classroom curriculum with a book I got from the library titled Phonics Pathways, and after only four months ALL of my first-graders read at grade level.” This story is repeated over and over in schools all across America.

Tripling the Federal Reading Budget

The President’s budget provides for the tripling of the reading funds through Reading First and Early Reading First. These programs will offer assistance to States and local educational agencies in: increasing the school readiness of children ages three through five, particularly those from low-income families, through scientific research based professional development for teachers to prepare them to enhance the development of children’s verbal skills, phonemic awareness, pre-reading and basic reading skills, and early language development; in establishing scientific research-based reading programs for all children in kindergarten through grade three; and in providing the necessary professional development programs and other support to ensure that teachers can identify children at-risk of reading failure and implement the most effective beginning reading instructional practices to overcome specific barriers to robust reading development.

Specific Learning Disabilities

Although most all the students placed in the Specific Learning Disabilities category are of normal sight, hearing and intelligence, some students have additional physiological problems as well. A sometimes overlooked, yet obvious, deterrent students have in learning to read is poor sight. The Committee believes that parents and school personnel should make sure that students in need of eyeglasses receive them. Vision screening is an important part of removing possible obstacles to student learning.

Across the United States, there are over 6 million students who receive services under the Individuals With Disabilities Act (IDEA) each year. Although many of these students have severe disabilities, such as mental retardation, over one-third (2.2 million) has a specific learning disability due primarily to reading difficulties. This category is currently the fastest growing population within IDEA.

It is estimated that effective reading instruction could prevent as many as 70 percent, or more than 1.5 million students, from developing a severe reading disability and therefore
having to participate in IDEA. This kind of remarkable success has been documented in research projects conducted over the past thirty years and funded by the federal government.

The average annual cost of educating an IDEA student is estimated to be double that of the national average cost per student. Whereas the national average per pupil expenditure in the United States is $6,300, the cost of educating students participating in IDEA is $12,600. This translates to roughly $43 billion in additional resources necessary to serve these children each year. The federal government picks up about 15 percent of the cost with the remaining 85 percent being supported by state and local governments. In fiscal year 2001, the federal government provided a record $6.5 billion for IDEA, equal to 15 percent of the excess cost of educating students in IDEA. This is still far short of the 40 percent promised when IDEA was established in 1973.

The Reading First initiative will also have a profound impact upon millions of other students not participating in IDEA, but who struggle through the early grades, and then in the later grades never catch up because they have limited reading ability. In fact, of the 10.8 million students in grades K-2 today, if current trends continue, nearly 38 percent will read at a below basic level by the time they enter the fourth grade. Early identification of reading problems and proper instruction based on valid scientific research can reverse the course of failure for these four million children and offer them hope for the future. As a nation we must support the goal of eliminating the reading deficit. The Reading First initiative will help us accomplish this goal.

External Evaluation of Reading First

The Committee believes that it is essential that an external evaluation of the Reading First program be conducted. Objectivity is often lost when agencies evaluate the programs they administer. The Committee believes that the ability to reform or modify federal programs is most effectively done when an external evaluation is conducted. The Reading First program gives the Secretary of Education the funds and the authority to order this External Evaluation of Reading First. The cost and effort required to conduct this review is substantial, but its results would offer the Congress a roadmap for continuing or revising or changing these vital programs for the better.

Early Reading First Develops Important Pre-Reading Skills

Through scientific research, much has been learned about the way children learn to read, and the strong foundation that is important before children are given formal reading instruction in kindergarten and first grade. Child-care centers, public and private, and Head Start centers can help. In addition to caring for the emotional and social needs of children under their care, they can encourage and promote cognitive development activities along with professional development for teachers and staff based on scientific research in reading.
Children who have poor beginning reading skills are less likely to develop better reading skills through their school careers. Children, who start school behind, often stay behind. Early Reading First is specifically designed to help them reverse that trend. There are several generalizations about reading instruction that should be taken into account by preschool and child-care teachers. For example, if children can correctly identify letters of the alphabet before they enter kindergarten, it is more likely they will learn to read words in school faster than children who do not possess this knowledge. Experimental findings consistently confirm that children’s knowledge of the alphabet is a “strong predictor” of their later progress in learning to read words accurately, quickly and automatically.

In fact, automatic recognition of letters is the first aspect of reading instruction those children must learn in order to become able readers. The second aspect of information that children must acquire is the conscious awareness of speech sounds called phonemic awareness. The third aspect of pre-reading instruction that children need to know is that certain letters regularly represent speech sounds. Finally, children need to learn to recognize words automatically, in the shortest time possible. Children must learn how to attach speech sounds to letters in words, and then blend together the sounds they generate to produce recognizable spoken words. Many children begin elementary school ill prepared for success in reading instruction, and Early Reading First can help teachers in preparing pre-school children for formal instruction by providing them with these pre-reading skills.

Putting It All Together

Proper professional development for teachers in reading techniques and methods that are grounded in the abundant scientific research now available is the essential first step in developing an effective reading instructional program. That can be done more efficiently at a State level. Fifteen percent of the formula funds from Reading First are available for such instruction. Proper diagnostic assessments will assist teachers in determining the areas where students need the most attention. Instructional materials that are based on the findings of scientifically based research in reading are critical. There are many products available that include the essential components of reading instruction. Noting these in a Congressional Report is often seen as an endorsement, and that is not appropriate, yet there need to be examples given so that teachers will have some idea of instructional materials that work. Here is a list of some of the programs that are currently being effectively used by teachers in schools today. The list is certainly not intended to be exhaustive, but rather illustrative. Here are several successful programs: Open Court; Sing, Spell, Read and Write; Spalding’s Writing Road to Reading; Action Reading; Merrill Linguistics; Saxon Reading; Total Reading; Reading Mastery; Wilson Reading Systems; Explode the Code; Phonics Pathways; Lockhart Reading Systems; and many classroom reading programs available under the umbrella of the International Dyslexia Society. For students who do need more intensive tutorial instruction, Lindamood-Bell offers professional development and instructional materials.

As President Bush has stated: “The quality of our public schools directly affects us all – as parents, as students, and as citizens. Yet too many children in America are segregated
by low expectations, illiteracy, and self-doubt. In a constantly changing world that is demanding increasingly complex skills from its workforce, children are literally being left behind. If our country fails in its responsibility to educate every child, we are likely to fail in many other areas too. But, if we succeed in educating our youth, many other successes will follow throughout our country and in the lives of our citizens.”

Learning to read is fundamental to all other learning. The Reading First and Early Reading First programs do not have to be “just one more federal reading effort.” They can be the beginning of a new era of instruction based on the best research money can buy. These initiatives can bring hope to the hopeless, and a future to those who otherwise might have none. It will take the cooperation of all sectors in society to bring about this change. Let us all agree so that truly, “No child will be left behind.”

Inexpensive Book Distribution Program

The Inexpensive Book Distribution Program is operated under a single, noncompetitive award to Reading is Fundamental, Inc. (RIF). It supports, through subcontracts, local, private, nonprofit groups or organizations, or public agencies that distribute inexpensive books to children with the objective of motivating children to read. Federal funds pay for up to 75 percent of the cost of books, except that the federal share for programs serving children of migrant and seasonal farm workers is 100 percent. Contractors are to give priority to programs that serve a substantial number or percent of children with special needs, such as children with disabilities, low-income children, and children at risk of school failure.

The Committee has made several minor changes to the Inexpensive Book Distribution Program to improve its ability to operate in low-income and rural communities where it is often difficult to obtain local support.

The first change to the program would allow subcontractors operating programs in low-income communities to use other federal dollars in order to meet the non-federal share of the cost of the program. However, federal dollars could not be used for more than 50 percent of the non-federal share used to meet the cost of acquiring and distributing books. The Committee believes it is important that local communities demonstrate their support of the Inexpensive Book Distribution Program by paying a portion of the cost of the program. The Committee acknowledges there may be instances where local communities support the Inexpensive Book Distribution Program, but have limited resources. In such instances this legislation would permit Reading is Fundamental (the federal grantee) to waive, in whole or in part, the cost sharing requirement for a local program if the subcontractor demonstrates that it would not otherwise be able to participate in the program.

In addition, the Committee understands that there are instances where local private nonprofit groups or organizations operating local programs have difficulty in obtaining local financial support for the Inexpensive Book Distribution Program. This generally happens because there is only a small amount of funding available for a limited period of
time. The Committee bill allows Reading is Fundamental to enter into multi-year subcontracts with small local sub-grantees in order to provide them with additional leverage in seeking local commitments. This legislation would not permit such agreements in instances where it would undermine the finances of the national program. It is the hope of the Committee that this provision will help ensure the operation of the Inexpensive Book Distribution Program in small, rural communities or other communities that have difficulty obtaining support for the program.