

# Controversy surrounds Reading First

BY CHARLOTTE CORNELL POSTLEWAITE

**R**eading First, the federal grant program that seeks to help schools and districts improve children's reading achievement using scientifically proven methods of instruction, has been at the center of controversy since its inception, evoking commentary against corporate influence and resolutions against a "one size fits all" approach to reading.

Some educators have been critical of the growing federal influence on state curriculum, pointing to a clause in the No Child Left Behind Act that forbids the federal government from dictating curriculum.

States must make their initial application by July 1 and gain federal approval by September 1. After September 1, states that have gained approval can receive additional funding from states' appropriations that were relinquished because they failed to gain approval by the cutoff date.

The two deadlines are placing additional pressure on states to comply with federally prescribed requirements for Reading First, the Title I initiative that anchors much of the NCLB.

Even so, Reading First spokeswoman Sandy Jacobs believes that all states are still capable of gaining their 2002-2003 appropriated funds before the deadlines arrive. As of early May, 31 states and one territory had gained funding approval.

The U.S. Department of Education calls Reading First "a bold, new national initiative squarely aimed at helping every child in every state become a successful reader." Nearly \$5 billion has been appropriated for distribution among the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico over a six-year period.

The funds are specifically dedicated to helping states and local school districts establish high-quality, comprehensive reading instruction for all children in kindergarten through third grade by adhering to scientifically based reading research and by including five major components: phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension.

But states do not receive the funds automatically; they must first meet several criteria specified in the Request for Proposals (RFP's), and assembling those criteria has proven to be a difficult task for many.

Time is running down for funded states that qualify for additional money based on the same formula that qualified them earlier. Time is running out for unfunded states to gain their 2002-2003 appropriations. Some states that gained early funding last year are already in their first and second rounds of awarding subgrants to local districts, while some states are still trying to figure out how to gain federal approval. Some state applications have been revised as many as four times following their review and technical assistance.

A big reason for the slow approval process, according to educators in both funded and unfunded states, has been the absence of direct communication with their review team of five reading experts. One applicant explained, "Trying to figure out what they want has been a guessing game." Another added, "We feel that it would have been helpful to have talked directly with the review panel members rather than USDE staff. While staff have been very helpful, we feel that direct communication with the review panel would have been more effective."

A second problem that appears on the list of state concerns is the professional development criteria. "The review panel questioned the SBRR (Scientifically Based Reading Research) knowledge base of in-state professional development providers, including language and literacy providers from our leading research university. It was apparent that we were going to have to seek out-of-state expertise for professional development in order to be funded," said one applicant.

A third problem that complicates things for some states is legislation enacted prior to NCLB, such as in local rule states where textbook adoption is in the hands of local districts and the assessment requirements written into some state accountability plans. One grant writer told CSG, "We have stayed very clear on what the criteria asked for. But we've also had lots of legislation to address assessment in our state."

A fourth problem is that the re-allotment clause in Reading First grant proposals puts additional pressure on



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## Registration for MLC meeting draws near

The deadline to register for this year's Midwestern Legislative Conference Annual Meeting in Milwaukee is July 18. The four-day event, which will be held August 24-27, will offer policymakers the opportunity to participate in a wide array of public policy sessions, hear from renowned speakers and network with fellow Midwestern state lawmakers.

State-federal relations, the future of Medicaid and the environment are just three of the many issues that will be

addressed during this year's meeting.

Featured speakers will include Jim Miklaszewski, chief Pentagon correspondent for NBC News, and Michael Beschloss, an award-winning author and presidential historian.

Attendees will also have plenty of time to meet with colleagues from across the Midwest, share ideas and forge new relationships during various MLC Annual Meeting events, including: committee meetings, table topics breakfasts, luncheons, professional development

sessions, evening events and afternoon policy roundtables.

Spouses, guests and children will have the chance to enjoy day trips and take part in great evening events, such as an ethnic culinary celebration at the Milwaukee Public Museum and the State Dinner at the renowned Calatrava-designed Milwaukee Art Museum.

For more information on the meeting, visit [www.csamidwest.org](http://www.csamidwest.org) or contact CSG's Midwestern Office at (630) 810-0210.

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states to comply not only with the education department's definition of scientifically based research, but also with the department's list of reviewed and approved assessments. The department's assessment review team admitted in an executive summary last year that the list was hurried and incomplete.

Current assessment legislation in the states sometimes runs afoul of Reading First reviews and technical assistance suggestions.

One example is the absence of the Developmental Reading Assessment in funded Reading First state grants. While DRA has been the assessment tool in several state reading initiatives prior to NCLB – assessments for which states say they have gathered data and found effective results – DRA has been conspicuously absent from all but two funded state grant applications. And on one of those two approved applications, the USDE asked for additional technical information four months after the state gained approval.

Part of the reason DRA's have been absent from state applications is because the Reading First assessment reviewers failed to review DRA and thus it did not appear on the approved list of assessments. And after unfavorable assessment reviews, several states dropped DRA from their applications.

"We selected DRA to help teachers reach at-risk students. It's a valuable source of information," said one applicant. "There seems to be a disconnect to test and sort kids (in previous years) and then not have the information at hand to guide instruction. With DRA, the state had ample information to help direct their instructional strategies. DRA helped us with that using our online database. We could take each single part of the assessment and break it down to find where we needed to individually adjust instruction for a specific child. We thought DRA had met their requirements, but they

told us it was inappropriately placed in our grant."

Several states that initially included DRA have switched to the Dynamic Indicator of Basic Early Literacy (DIBELS) – an assessment named on almost every state application that has received approval and funding. That claim is included in advertising by Sopris West, the official distributor of DIBELS. Respondents to a CSG Reading First survey say that while the education department never directly told the state to use a particular program or test, they were often directed to the University of Oregon education Web site for information concerning analysis of DIBELS and other assessments. The University of Oregon education department Web site also houses the official home page for DIBELS.

And at least two corporate trainers for DIBELS and several University of Oregon education graduates or professors are embedded in the 72-member federal education department's panel of reviewers – reading experts who score the details of other state applications.

But those are not enough numbers to have an impact on states' reviews, according to the U.S. Department of Education.

Department attorneys found no conflict of interest in the selection of Reading First reviewers, said Reading First spokeswoman Sandy Jacobs. "We discussed with attorneys at great length. With five members, no single individual can keep a state from gaining approval. The panel must come to a consensus," said Jacobs. "I can't see that the review panel has had any influence over what states have selected. They've told states that things do not meet standards, but they do not recommend alternatives."

— Charlotte Cornell Postlewaite is chief education policy analyst at *The Council of State Governments*.