

IRA Legislative Update

December 8, 2009

Unproved Early-Reading Program Likely to Prevail

Preschoolers at Glenn School in Nashville, Tenn., practice reading. They take part in Early Reading First, a federal program to prepare children for academic success. Few evaluations of it exist, but the crux of the program is likely to continue.

Josh Anderson for Education Week

Literacy Bill Includes Pieces of Federal Program

By Mary Ann Zehr <<http://www.edweek.org/ew/contributors/mary.zehr.html>>

Early Reading First never attracted the same attention as its cousin, Reading First, and proof of its effectiveness is elusive, but advocates of early-childhood education hope the federal government will continue to build on what participants in the grant program have learned.

When Congress zeroed out funding for Reading First—the program authorized by the No Child Left Behind Act for K-3 pupils primarily in disadvantaged schools—it increased spending for Early Reading First, which targets 3- and 4-year-olds from low-income families. Reading First received \$1 billion per year at its peak, but it was plagued by conflict-of-interest charges, and Congress eliminated funding for it in fiscal 2009. That same year, Early Reading First received \$112 million. The Obama administration requested \$162.5 million, an increase of \$50 million, for the 2010 budget for the early-childhood program.

Many components of Early Reading First are included in a comprehensive literacy bill introduced in the Senate last month and also in a similar version in the House of Representatives. The proposed legislation could become a blueprint for reauthorization of reading programs—Early Reading First, Reading First, and Striving Readers, which targets adolescents—in the Elementary...

But the early-reading program proposed in the literacy bill is different in at least one fundamental way from its predecessor. Instead of authorizing a grant competition for districts, child-care centers, state agencies, and other entities, as did the NCLB law, the bill would channel funding only through states. If the funding is less than \$500 million for early reading, the money would flow competitively to states; if more than that amount, it would be distributed by a formula.

Early Reading First aims to prepare disadvantaged children to enter kindergarten with the necessary language and reading skills to succeed.

Unimpressive Outcomes

The preschool program in the literacy bill is an improvement over Early Reading First in several ways, said Matt McAlvanah, the press secretary to Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., a sponsor of the Senate version. He cites in an e-mail a new emphasis on writing, a requirement for grantees to provide training for data-based instruction, and the addition of a peer-review process for applications that includes experts on early-childhood education and literacy, among others.

How members of Congress view the impact of Early Reading First will play a role in whether and how money is authorized for the next reading program.

Susan B. Neuman, who launched Early Reading First as an assistant secretary of elementary and secondary education under President George W. Bush and is now an education professor at the University of Michigan, says the results of the federal government's only national evaluation of the program were "very disappointing."

The independent evaluation was published in 2007 and assessed the impact of funds awarded in 2003, the second of eight rounds of competition. It concluded that Early Reading First had a positive effect on children's print and letter knowledge, but not on phonological awareness or oral language. In addition, Early Reading First neither helped nor hindered children's social-emotional development, according to the study.

"Some people would argue victory," said Ms. Neuman. "I do not." Letter and word recognition alone is insufficient to help children master reading, she explained.

At the same time, Ms. Neuman said, the evaluation didn't show the full picture because it was conducted so early in the program's life. "It has evolved over time and become quite a bit more rigorous. It's on the right track," she said, noting that Congress should authorize funding for a program with similar components.

High Cost?

Perhaps the most interesting finding in the national evaluation was that Early Reading First cost \$80,000 per classroom per year, observed W. Steven Barnett, the director of the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University. "At that cost and with no evidence of large, broad effects on children's literacy and language development, we need to try something else," he said in an e-mail.

Mr. Barnett likes the description of the literacy program for children from birth to kindergarten that's embedded in the proposed comprehensive bill. He said it provides for a more systematic approach than that promoted by Early Reading First and is on target "particularly if the states are required to document progress in both classroom practice and children's learning."

But David K. Dickinson, the chairman of the department of teaching and learning at Vanderbilt University's school of education, disagrees with the proposal to authorize money for states rather than directly fund districts or other organizations carrying out the programs. "This approach will result in uneven quality; excessive, unneeded oversight costs; and a loss of accumulated knowledge and oversight systems that have been created over the last years," he said.

Mr. Dickinson co-wrote a curriculum, *Opening the World of Learning*, used in 24 of the 120-some Early Reading First programs carried out between 2003 and 2006.

A Vanderbilt University analysis of eight programs that used the curriculum shows that on average children achieved significant positive gains on vocabulary across the sample, except for two programs that didn't show gains in the first year of implementation.

In his view, Early Reading First is the right way to go, because it provides substantial amounts of money for a sustained period and requires that approaches be research-based.

"Teachers have become users of data, which is what [U.S. Secretary of Education] Arne Duncan is all about, to get preschool teachers interested in quality data, both about children's performance and their classroom practice," Mr. Dickinson said.

The University of Delaware was one of the entities that received substantial amounts of money—a total of about \$10 million for three grants, each of which lasted for several years.

For the most part, said Carol Vukelich, the director of the Delaware Center for Teacher Education at the university, "projects in a variety of contexts have been able to positively impact young children in language and early reading."

She said the Delaware projects showed it is possible to help preschool teachers, many of whom don't have

bachelor's degrees, be more effective in teaching early-reading skills.

Still, Ms. Vukelich said, finding methods to help low-income youngsters acquire vocabulary remains a challenge.

Coordinating Strategies

President Barack Obama and Secretary Duncan have expressed a strong interest in early-childhood education. They've created a new position in the Department of Education for a senior adviser to Mr. Duncan for early learning, which is being filled by Jacqueline Jones, who had been an assistant commissioner for early-childhood education in New Jersey.

The department is working with the National Institute for Literacy to review the 31 child-care programs implementing Early Reading First grants this school year, and it plans to disseminate conclusions about their best practices and effectiveness.

To better coordinate their early-childhood education efforts, Ms. Jones said the Education Department and the Department of Health and Human Services, which administers Head Start, have set up six study groups on: program standards; data systems; family engagement; health promotion; work force; and standards, curriculum, and assessments.

"If we get this right," she said, "we can set the stage for children to have a really sound foundation for learning."

Vol. 29, Issue 14, Page 8

Improving Low-Performing Schools: Lessons from Five Years of Studying School Restructuring under No Child Left Behind

This report synthesizes five years of CEP's research on state and local efforts to improve persistently low-performing schools in accordance with the No Child Left Behind Act. CEP conducted this research in six states -- California, Georgia, Maryland, Michigan, New York, and Ohio -- and in 23 districts and 48 schools within those states. The report also makes recommendations for improving federal assistance in this area.

<http://www.cep-dc.org/document/docWindow.cfm?fuseaction=document.viewDocument&documentid=300&documentFormatId=4437>

Barbara Tierney