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**KENNEDY AND MILLER RELEASE GAO REPORT ON IMPLEMENTATION
OF THE READING FIRST PROGRAM**

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(requires Adobe PDF reader)

Today, Senator Edward M. Kennedy and Congressman George Miller addressed the flawed implementation of the Reading First program and the urgent need to end the Department of Education's track record of bias and abuse in administering the program.

"Today's GAO report once again shows us that the Administration is more interested in handing out political favors than in trying to find the best way to teach children to read," said Senator Edward M. Kennedy. "The GAO report confirms that the Department failed to take appropriate steps to give States clear guidance and impartial assistance in implementing Reading First. Our students and teachers deserve better."

"The GAO report highlights, once again, the mismanagement of the multi-billion-dollar Reading First program," said Miller, the chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee. "The Education Department has vowed to prevent future mistakes by taking remedial actions, but the only way we can be sure of the Department's commitment is by conducting vigilant oversight of Reading First."

According to GAO, officials from ten states reported that Department officials advised eliminating specific programs or assessments. Officials from four states also reported recommendations to adopt specific programs or assessments from Department officials. The No Child Left Behind Act explicitly prohibits the endorsement, approval, or sanction of any curriculum by the U.S Department of Education. GAO found that the Department has no policies or internal controls to ensure their employees are complying with these provisions.

"Placing this multi-billion-dollar program in the hands of a small group of people with ties to specific reading programs and publishers was totally irresponsible," said Miller. "We must continue to investigate how Reading First was implemented to learn from past mistakes and prevent future abuses. The program should be run in the best interests of children, not the interests of a handful of publishers that happen to be connected to the right people."

As part of his investigation into the conflicts of interest issue in Reading First, today, Senator Kennedy is issuing formal document requests to the RMC Research Corporation, the contractor hired to administer, monitor and help states implement the Reading First program. Today's GAO report found that RMC officials were improperly involved in the review of state reading programs. This latest request is in addition to the eight document requests Senator Kennedy sent out earlier this month to various Reading First contractors and consultants.

“More information is needed to determine why specific programs or assessments were eliminated under the Reading First program,” said Kennedy. “The program was created to support and enhance the teaching and learning of reading so all students can become proficient readers. That should continue to be the goal. I’m committed to making any changes needed to safeguard the program from abuse.”

The Reading First program was created in 2002 as part of the No Child Left Behind Act to improve reading instruction in kindergarten through third grade. The Department provides formula grants to states with approved applications and then states award sub-grants competitively within the state. The Department and its contractors support states and districts with technical assistance in implementing the programs.

Chairmen Kennedy and Miller requested the study on Reading First, along with Senators Enzi, Bingaman and Lugar. Miller and Kennedy plan a follow-up request to GAO to further study the decisions made by states and schools in selecting curriculum under the Reading First program, and to gain additional insights on how the Department’s interpretation of scientifically-based research comports with the statutory provisions in the No Child Left Behind Act.

Chairmen Kennedy and Miller Release New GAO Report

Better Oversight and Guidance Needed in Implementing Reading First

A Government Accountability Office report released today by Senator Edward M. Kennedy shows that reading instruction has improved in many states under the Reading First program, but the U.S. Department of Education has not adequately or properly worked with states in implementing the programs. The report recommends the Department develop policies and control procedures to ensure its employees comply with statutory provisions regarding their interaction with states.

The No Child Left Behind Act mandates that states adopt reading programs supported by scientifically-based research that contain the five essential components of effective reading instruction: (1) phonemic awareness; (2) phonics; (3) vocabulary development; (4) reading fluency, including oral reading skills; and (5) reading comprehension strategies. The Department provides formula grants to states and oversees states' implementation of their plans and compliance with the No Child Left Behind Act. Under the Act, the Department cannot control or endorse any curriculum used in schools. The Department is further barred from directing or supervising curricular and instruction decisions under the Department of Education Organizing Act.

Nearly 2,100 of the eligible districts applied and Almost 1,200 districts receive Reading First funding, representing 34 percent of districts eligible under the program. These school districts represent 7 percent of all districts nationwide.

The GAO report, entitled "*Reading First: States Report Improvements in Reading Instruction, but Additional Procedures Would Clarify Education's Role in Ensuring Proper Implementation by States,*" finds that officials from 10 states reported receiving direction from the Department that they eliminate specific programs or assessments. Officials in 4 states reported receiving suggestions that they adopt specific programs or assessments. One state official reported that officials in the Department recommended eliminating a specific reading program because it was not aligned with scientifically-based reading research. Another state official reported that the Department notified them that an expert reviewer objected to a specific reading program, which the state was considering using.

GAO also found that states struggled to implement some key aspects of Reading First:

- 22 states reported difficulty in helping districts with reading scores that had not improved sufficiently.
- 17 states had difficulty assessing how districts applied principles of scientifically-based reading research in selecting a program.
- 7 states reported difficulty in implementing 4 or more of six key components of Reading First, which GAO identified. The components are (1) determining whether districts' applications met the agreed-upon criteria to receive funding; (2) identifying reading programs based on scientifically-based reading research; (3) creating professional development curricula; (4) using reading assessment; (5) assessing how districts applied principles of scientifically-based reading research; and (6) helping districts with reading scores that have not improved sufficiently.

The GAO report also included findings regarding states' use of and satisfaction with the Department's assistance. The findings include:

- Overall, 48 states reported that the Department required them to modify their application at least once, and 27 reported modifying them three or more times.

- 33 states reported that the Department required them to address issues in their application related to the use of instructional assessments, and 25 states reported having to modify their application related to instructional strategies and programs.
- Initially, the regional Technical Assistance Centers reviewed some states' pre-Reading First programs to evaluate whether they met the requirements under NCLB. The Department at first allowed this practice, but after concerns were raised about officials expressing their preference for specific programs, the Department advised all Centers not to conduct such reviews.
- Most states reported using and being satisfied with the primary guidance available.
- During implementation, states were more likely to seek guidance and assistance from the Centers than from the Department.

In addition, GAO found improvements and changes under Reading First:

- Nearly 70 percent of states reported that reading instruction has improved greatly or very greatly since the implementation of Reading First.
- At least 39 states reported that Reading First schools incorporated all five components of effective reading instruction into curricula to a great or very great degree.
- Most states reported that use of assessments has changed and improved under Reading First. 45 states have approved the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills assessment.
- Every state reported improvements in professional development because of Reading First, and at least 41 states reported that professional development improved greatly or very greatly in five key instructional areas. Many states also reported increased resources for professional development.
- In selecting reading programs, 22 states have created a state-approved list of programs. The other 29 states require districts to choose programs and determine that they meet the law's requirements. Of these 29 states, 25 provided guidance to districts and schools to identify core reading programs.

The GAO report is intended as a complement to the investigations being conducted by the Department of Education's Inspector General. In September, the Inspector General reported that the Department has used Reading First to promote preferred reading programs and to block states' efforts to use other research-based programs with proven track records. The Inspector General's report found that the Department:

- Developed an application package and guidance that obscured Reading First's statutory requirements;
- Took actions to throw the balance of the expert panel mandated by Congress for review of Reading First program applications;
- Intervened to influence how State's selection of reading programs; and
- Intervened to influence reading programs being used by school districts, after the Reading First application process was completed.

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