



## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

# NCLB, Reading First, and whither the future?

BY RICHARD L. ALLINGTON

The recent IRA member survey (reported on pages 1 and 4 of *Reading Today*, February/March, 2005) on the impact of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act and the Reading First (RF) initiative was notable for the bimodal distribution of responses to many questions.

There are at least two possible explanations for these substantially different views. First, it seems that these federal programs are not monolithic. By this I mean that the same pool of federal dollars seems to fund very different educational initiatives. In most cases, these differences derive from differences in the state plans approved by the federal officials and from differences in the applications that local school districts submitted and had approved by their state education agencies.

A second possible explanation is that IRA members truly differ in their understanding of the impact of NCLB/RF regardless of the nature of their federally funded state and district plans.

As many of you know, I've not been a fan of NCLB/RF. Let me clarify for everyone. I support the fundamental concerns that seemed to spark the broad bipartisan support the legislation received. The reading achievement gap between the various subgroups of students is untenable in my view of an effective participatory democracy. Thus, the federal requirement for reporting reading achievement in ways that make these differences in achievement both clear and public seems critically important to me.

I have concerns, however, about the NCLB accountability plan and about NCLB's emphasis on programs and packages as opposed to emphasizing the role of expert teachers.

### Testing for accountability

Unfortunately, the NCLB accountability plan does not provide clear indications of whether schools are making progress toward reducing the achievement gap, and it has driven out many assessments that were actually better designed to address the problem of underachievement.

One outcome of effective instructional plans is that the number of students experiencing difficulty is reduced each year. So if 70% of all third graders in a school or district are struggling with reading, effective instructional plans would reduce that percentage to, perhaps, 50% by grade 6, to 30% by grade 9, and to 10% by grade 12. Nothing, unfortunately, in NCLB requires that student achievement data be considered in this longitudinal light.

Revising NCLB so that accountability reports focus on the progress that cohorts of students make over time would provide a better method for estimating school impacts on the achievement gaps. A decade ago, Anne McGill-Franzen and I suggested just such a plan—regularly test the cohort of children who enter kindergarten together—as one way to nullify the effects that flunking has on distorting accountability data. But this cohort-based approach to assessment accomplishes more than just tidying up the accountability data. It also provides clear and longitudinal information on how well school plans continue to meet the needs of children who struggle early.

I also worry that some useful state and local assessment plans had to be modified or wholly replaced to meet the mandates of NCLB. The NCLB accountability plans provide assessment data that are both narrower and less instructionally useful than the data available before NCLB. For instance, several states have eliminated the “extended response” items from their reading assessments so as to meet the timelines required for reporting adequate yearly progress measures. Some have replaced reading assessments that were locally constructed and linked to state reading frameworks with available commercial tests that were approved for use but that provide far less useful information on mastery of state curriculum standards. Some have replaced instructionally useful curriculum-based assessments, such as running records, with commercial curriculum-free assessments of reading rate and accuracy that provide little or no instructionally useful information.

For accountability data to be meaningful, those data must report on the most important aspects of school learning—not just those aspects that are easiest and cheapest to measure. To provide instructionally useful information, assessments must be curriculum specific—not off-the-shelf general assessments. I suggest that NCLB/RF would be improved with less testing using better assessment tools. Those tools are available, but the funds needed to ensure their use are currently used to fund more expansive use of those off-the-shelf tests that provide only the narrowest and most instructionally limited sort of information on reading development.

### Programs and packages vs. expert teachers

Next there is the whole mandate for using a “scientific core reading program” that is a feature of most NCLB/RF plans. There is no scientific research on any of the core programs that have been approved for use, and there is little consistency in the research on the supplemental reading programs. The checklists often used for depicting some programs as “scientific” are not scientific in that programs rated high on such guides have never been contrasted for effectiveness compared to other programs that are rated as inferior or not rated at all.

In fact, I know of no research suggesting that the use of any commercial core reading program reliably produces better results than the use of locally developed core reading programs. Indiscriminate use of any core program such that all children in a grade are placed in a single strand, text, or level contradicts everything research and practice has taught us about matching students with curriculum appropriate to their level of development. The same is true for adoption of a single intervention program for struggling readers. Children differ. Struggling readers differ. Any curriculum decision that fails to acknowledge this must be considered unscientific.

NCLB/RF would be improved if there were less focus on programs and packages and more emphasis on the individual child who struggles with learning to read. There should be more emphasis on ensuring that such children have access to expert reading teachers who can evaluate literacy development, note the strengths and weaknesses of individuals, and then plan expert and intensive interventions that effectively address both.

It is the expert teacher who can modify and adapt curriculum materials such that children are successful. Inexpert teachers can do only what they're told (and then often only with difficulty). When programs and packages do work to enhance struggling readers' development, it is because the teacher fine-tuned the lesson or simply ignored the manual and paid attention to the child. Paraphrasing P. David Pearson, NCLB/RF would be improved if we had fewer teachers looking over their shoulders to see if they did the lesson right and more teachers looking at the child to answer the same question.

### How did you get the NCLB/RF plan that you got?

As I've met with IRA members in 20 states or more during this past year, I've heard both uplifting and heartbreaking stories about how NCLB/RF is affecting teachers and students. In some school districts, NCLB/RF funds support teacher inquiry projects and teachers-as-readers groups in an attempt to build expertise about literacy learning and teaching and what the research says about both.

I've visited schools where a “core reading program” has not been defined as buying a commercial product and where curriculum-based, instructionally useful assessment is providing teachers with the information they need to teach more expertly and more effectively. In some cases, people had to battle to get these efforts approved, but they managed to nonetheless. In other cases, such plans were approved with little or no fuss.

As far as I can tell, there are at least three interrelated factors that explain the differences between the heartwarming and heart-rending episodes: expertise, capacity, and tenacity. The expertise aspect is easy. When schools, districts, or state agencies are staffed with folks who know a lot of about reading instruction and development, especially about what the research says, more effective decisions are made about how NCLB/RF funds are spent. When expertise is low, a reliance on one-size-fits-all mandates seems more common.

Local expertise is one aspect of local capacity, but there are other factors as well. One expert teacher of reading in a school or a district is unlikely to have the same impact as tens of such teachers. Likewise, one expert state agency staffer is unlikely to have the same impact as 10.

Tenacity involves fighting, as Michael Fullan said, for those things that really matter. In many of the schools where NCLB/RF is well received, local expertise and local capacity were behind the local tenacity to use the federal funds to improve and extend well-designed reading programs.

Mind you, this analysis is based on a small sample and nonrigorous data gathering. But I think of the Pennsylvania school district that had its first application rejected but appealed, fighting for funding for its noncommercial core reading program using both the larger research available and local data showing how successful this program design had been in meeting the goals of NCLB/RF over the previous three years. But all three factors—expertise, capacity, and tenacity—were necessary to gain approval from the state education agency.

Do local expertise, capacity, and tenacity in your district or state agency seem to explain why you got the NCLB/RF plan that you got? ❖

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