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NEWS RELEASE

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Despite Scandals, States & Districts Credit Reading First For Gains in Student Achievement

WASHINGTON—October 31, 2007—Reading First, the billion-dollar federal effort to improve reading skills in high-poverty, low-performing schools, has been beset by scandals involving mismanagement and misconduct at the national level. Still, a new report finds that the program is being implemented as intended, and is widely credited by state and local officials for lifting achievement of students who receive Reading First services.

The report, prepared by the Washington, D.C.-based Center on Education Policy (CEP), is based on surveys of officials in all 50 states and a nationally-representative sample of school districts, as well as school district case studies.

Overall, more than three-fourths of states and two-thirds of districts with Reading First grants reported that the program's assessment and instructional programs were important causes of gains in student achievement.

Reading First remains the most highly-rated No Child Left Behind program in terms of its effect on achievement, according to the report. Nearly two-thirds of districts participating in Reading First and reporting gains in reading said that the program's assessment systems (69 percent) and instructional programs (68 percent) were either important or very important factors in the improved performance.

In contrast, far fewer districts with reading gains gave similar ratings to NCLB's supplemental education services (7 percent) and public school choice requirements (5 percent).

"State and local officials have been consistent and unequivocal in their support for Reading First," said Jack Jennings, president and CEO of CEP. "Given their endorsement, the program should be expanded to reach more districts and schools, but not without first addressing federal administrative misconduct."

All 50 states, the District of Columbia, and six U.S. territories currently receive Reading First grants, which total approximately \$1 billion annually as a part of Title I and the No Child Left Behind Act. According to the report, *Reading First: Locally Appreciated, Nationally Troubled*, 13 percent of all U.S. school districts and 6 percent of all U.S. schools participate in the program.

And the program has had a significant impact in changing approaches to curriculum, instruction, and assessment. According to the report, two-thirds (67 percent) of participating districts made

changes in how teachers teach reading in order to qualify for Reading First grants, including the purchase of new instructional materials.

But the program's impact is felt far beyond just the participating schools. More than half of Reading First districts reported using elements of Reading First in non-Reading-First schools and in the upper grades. Similarly, states reported that more than 3,000 non-Reading-First districts participated in state-led Reading First professional development.

This broader effect may be in part a result of the fact that Reading First and Title I are so closely coordinated, according to the report, allowing some components of Reading First to be expanded without official grants.

Recommendations for Fixing, then Expanding Reading First

The report includes a review of misconduct and mismanagement in the administration of Reading First found by the U.S. Department of Education's Inspector General. The investigated activities include inappropriate intervention in states' selections of reading programs by officials with Reading First and the Department as well as organizations with federal contracts. The Inspector General also found evidence of mismanagement in some states. To address these issues and capitalize on the positive effects of Reading First, the report offers three main recommendations:

- *Congress should continue to fund Reading First. Congress should increase current levels of funding to states so that the program can reach more schools and districts.*
- *The Government Accountability Office should review state criteria for grants. A GAO review of state criteria for distributing and continuing grants could ensure that no instruction or assessment programs are inappropriately promoted.*
- *All recommendations from the Inspector General should be followed. The Education Department's Inspector General issued seven audits of Reading First, six of which found misconduct and/or mismanagement at the state and federal levels. Following the recommendations of the Inspector General is essential to ensuring that future Reading First funds are not misused.*

A copy of *Reading First: Locally Appreciated, Nationally Troubled* is available at www.cep-dc.org.

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