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MEMORANDUM

May 2, 2002

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TechMIS Subscribers

FROM: Charles Blaschke

SUBJECT: Changes in Reading First Final Guidelines (See Enclosed Analysis)

In January, we included a brief Special Report on the new Reading First and Early Reading First initiatives based upon our analysis of the new legislation. On March 1, USED published draft guidelines on Reading First and, in April, the draft guidelines were modified in the final guidance document. Because Reading First is becoming a very political “hot potato” at USED as a result of recent hearings and a critical letter from the International Reading Association, some of the recent changes may be very important to some of you who have relevant reading and related products and staff development services. Below the major changes are highlighted.

In the March draft guidance, the following was stated, “Reading First focuses much more directly on classroom instruction than previous Federal reading efforts --- Reading First does not aim to remediate small subgroups of children in pull-out programs or to provide instruction in any setting outside the main classroom environment.” The final guidance states “It is the Department’s view that the classroom provides the most important teaching venue for reaching these early readers.” However, conspicuous by its absence, is any statement related to remediation, pull-out programs, or instruction and settings outside the main classroom not being allowable. As reported in Education Week (May 1), during recent hearings, Senator Susan Collins (R-ME) said the guidelines should be revised to ensure that programs such as Reading Recovery be included as an alternative to some of the more “scripted reading” programs which have been cited by USED officials as examples. In response, Assistant Secretary Susan Neuman, has reportedly replied that “Reading Recovery and

other supplemental programs could be included in a state's reading plan as long as they are part of a comprehensive, skills-based initiative." Deletion of the above-referenced key sentence -- which likely would have precluded any supplemental programs from being considered -- now opens the door for states to include at least some supplemental programs as allowable programs if they meet the scientifically-based research criteria. In related changes, the notion of eligible "core" reading programs have now been changed to "comprehensive" reading programs.

Under question C2 in the final guidance (i.e, what practices and strategies for classroom instruction should be evident in implementing a high quality reading program based on scientifically-based reading research?), one new added practice and strategy is "effective classroom management and high levels of time on task are also evident." In a question related to professional development, the following has also been added, "Professional development should also prepare teachers to effectively manage their classroom and to maximize time on task." Such inclusion here suggests that an open architecture instructional management system could be used to supplement a scientifically-based reading approach.

In another change affecting SEA applications, the SEA application must address "district and school-based professional development and district-based technical assistance." Previously the criteria were district-provided, not based. The inference to be drawn here is that many states felt that the previous guidance would force the state agency to provide such professional development and technical assistance directly. Rather, the new definition will provide greater flexibility to have states contract with outside groups to provide such services.

The new guidance regarding what information an SEA that receives a Reading First grant must provide to USED includes a new section which calls for electronic test administration, data collection, progress reporting, and use of online reporting. As with Title I, there is a clear priority being placed upon online assessments now in Reading First, which could affect the nature of the tests which are administered (e.g., embedded in a comprehensive reading solution or other state assessments.) For example, open-ended questions could be discarded while multiple choice questions could be added because current rubrics can score the latter more easily than the former in a quick turnaround manner.

The final guidance also calls for greater targeting of funds to the "most in need" of the eligible districts and schools. For example, the state definition "should be sufficiently targeted to ensure adequate funding and support yet broad enough to ensure only applications of the highest quality are funded."

In another response to a question, the final guidance states, "The expert review panel will consider whether the number of subgrants an LEA proposes to make is likely to result in awards of sufficient size and scope and is unlikely to recommend approval of plans that will result in diluted, insufficient amounts of funding to LEAs."

The final guidance regarding discretion that an SEA has in selecting competitive criteria for subgrants to districts has added the following, "In addition, the Department encourages SEAs to award a competitive priority to LEAs that receive Early Reading First grants." Early Reading First

grants will be administered at the Federal level and awards are not likely to be made before the Fall. Hence, if states go along with this recommended competitive criteria, firms should attempt to “go in with” those districts who are receiving Early Reading First grants in their proposal to apply for Reading First grants as they are more likely than others to receive such Reading First grants.