

*Washington Update*⁸

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Government Accountability Office Investigation of Reading First Approval Process of State Plans and Subsequent Implementation Will Have Significant Implications on Current and Future Reading First Activities and Will Likely Influence Other Education Initiatives

High ranking Senate Republicans and Democrats have instructed the Government Accountability Office to investigate the implementation of the Reading First program regarding numerous concerns, “including concerns regarding guidance from U.S. Department of Education on the approach to teach reading used by states, districts, and individual schools under the program.” The letter to GAO signed by Senator Michael Enzi (Chairman) and Senator Ted Kennedy (Ranking Member) of the Senate HELP Committee, stated, “In examining the implementation of Reading First program, we would like GAO to address the following questions:

- What requirements related to curriculum and scientifically-based research does the U.S. Department of Education require from states and other grantees as a condition for receiving Reading First grants?

- What guidance, particularly related to curriculum and technical assistance, does the U.S. Department of Education provide to states and other grantees to help them develop successful grant proposals for implementing Reading First programs?
- How does the U.S. Department of Education select and oversee consultants and contractors that provide technical assistance and other services to Reading First grantees?”

The investigation directive stems from allegations of conflict of interest, favoritism, and the use of an “unofficial list” of approved materials, primarily basal text programs, required for use in Reading First. These have also resulted in complaints, filed with the USED Office of Inspector General, by the Success for All Foundation, Reading Recovery, and another publisher; the bipartisan senatorial group evidently felt the need to have an independent group such as GAO conduct a more thorough investigation. As reported in the August TechMIS Washington Update, the Senate Appropriations Committee, in its accompanying Committee Report, provided clear guidance to USED to correct some of the bases for the allegations, including instructing Reading First Technical Assistance Centers to:

- consider scientific evidence of other types of effectiveness in rating programs for use under Reading First (in its October “Summary of Evidence: Mismanagement of Reading First,” The Success for All Foundation alleged that the centers currently only assess whether the five essential elements exist in a program while not taking into account scientific evidence of effectiveness);
- expand the list of allowable programs giving preference to schools that select programs with strong scientific evidence of effectiveness; and
- allow comprehensive reading programs that have scientific evidence of effectiveness to be implemented in full as they had been researched without modification to conform to other models of instruction (the Success for All Foundation has provided evidence that state Reading First directors were instructed by USED to not approve Success for All unless it was modified to conform to the “three tier model” developed by the Texas Reading First Technical Assistance Center).

The request to GAO and the language in the Senate Appropriations Committee report is supported by the Summary of Evidence report recently compiled by

the Success for All Foundation. Some of its allegations include,

- “In practice, the U.S. Department of Education and its contractors administering Reading First have not only ignored programs with strong evidence of effectiveness, they have actively worked to exclude the few reading programs that do have strong evidence....There is a very limited research base for the achievement affects of traditional basals. Of the five top-selling basal textbook programs [Scott Foresman, McMillan, Harcourt, Houghton Mifflin, and Open Court], only Open Court has ever been evaluated, and this evaluation consists of a single experimental-control comparison published in a selecting journal.”
- “Reading First is now specifying specific instructional practices to be used at the classroom level. In the jargon of Reading First, this is called a ‘three tier model.’ The Department of Education is promoting this model nationwide, strongly suggesting that schools receiving Reading First funding must implement it, even though nothing in the authorizing legislation said anything about it....This model provides one way of structuring instruction, but there is no evidence that it enhances children’s achievement. The outcomes of the three-tier model have never been evaluated in comparison to control groups.” (The Foundation argued that the

three-tier model was more appropriately developed for use in special education rather than in a program such as Reading First.)

- “One of the most remarkable elements of Reading First is its promotion of a single professional development model for schools across the country....Reviewer comments uniformly questioned the qualifications of anyone other than a set of “national experts.” In practice through reviews of state Reading First proposals, Federal reviews of these proposals, correspondence, and state Reading First directors and invoices for payment, it is clear that the states primarily used three professional development providers: Louisa Moats and her LETRS program published by Sopris West; Edward Kame’enui and Deborah Simmons and their Institutes on Beginning Reading; and Sharon Vaughn and the adaptations of her Texas Reading Academies. No other national or local professional development program was apparently acceptable.”
- “The story of the mismanagement of Reading First is one of extraordinary disregard for commonsense ethical standards regarding conflicts of interest. Reading First contractors are authors of major basal series that have benefited enormously from Reading First funding.”

Jack Jennings, President of the Center for Education Policy, whose Reading First study reported (see August Washington Update) “remarkable” statewide adoption of only a limited number of assessment instruments and basal text interventions, noted that the impending GAO investigation is serious as “It asks some serious questions....There’s weight behind it,” according to Education Week (October 12). “An investigation by the GAO is more significant than the review undertaken by the Inspector General,” Mr. Jennings said, “Because the congressional agency is detached from the executive branch and the GAO’s head, the controller general, is viewed as having greater independence in conducting such inquiries. GAO studies generally review actions and policies,” he added, “and not the roles of individuals or groups....The final report is usually a document that creates pressure on the administration to clean something up if there are problems.”

In response to formal complaints, the flurry of recent coverage in the media, and the anticipated GAO investigation, Secretary Spellings in a letter to Senator Richard Lugar -- who has criticized USED for mismanagement of the Reading First program -- stated that two policy guidance letters had been sent: (a) one, dated October 11 by Christopher Doherty, Director of Reading First, to Reading First State Directors, stated, “The Department has not developed or endorsed any list of instructional programs as appropriate for use nor has the Department indicated the preference for certain kinds of instructional programs, such as basal textbook based

programs. Consistent with our unequivocal message from the earliest days of this program, I will remind you that the critical issue is that any and all reading programs and instructional materials used in your Reading First program must be based upon scientifically-based reading research and must meet the criteria for selection in each state's approved plan," and (b) another letter from Doherty, dated October 11 to Dr. Everett Barnes, Principal Investigator for the National Center for Reading First Technical Assistance (under which the three regional Reading First technical centers operate), reiterated the above points and added the following, "In providing this assistance, it is essential that the National Center avoid all conflicts of interest among employees, subcontractors, and consultants who may have connections to particular instructional programs or materials used under Reading First. Although I understand that the National Center does not recommend programs or materials, it is important that steps are taken to avoid the appearance of conflicts of interest in this area. Individuals associated with the National Center or the three regional centers must recuse themselves from participating in technical assistance activities that appear to benefit commercial entities with whom they are personally connected."

Certainly, USED has been consistent in denying the existence of any "approved list," and preferences for certain types of instructional programs (such as basal texts) over others. If indeed the USED Office of Inspector General, which had been conducting its own investigation

before the recently-filed formal complaints or even if the GAO finds that the USED-state approval process was flawed and/or violated the Law, these recent letters could further indict USED, particularly those involved in approving state plans, especially in cases where states may have requested USED approval to expand their state adoption lists to include, for example, some supplemental materials.

Another possible repercussion could be to limit use of the three Regional Reading First Centers (e.g., University of Oregon, University of Texas, Florida State University) to providing technical assistance to state directors of special education to assist in the implementation of the yet-to-be finalized "interim" policy for the development of modified instruments aligned with grade level content under the so called "two percent cap" for determining AYP for academically disabled students (e.g., gap students). Previous statements by Deputy Secretary Ray Simon indicated these three centers, which have received several million dollars in additional USED funding, would take a lead role in helping states select and/or develop assessment instruments and possibly interventions. During the first meeting involving state special education directors in Washington, D.C. in August which addressed early intervening services and modified assessments, the "three-tier model" developed by the University of Texas, as noted above, was demonstrated as a model approach.

Katrina Relief: Funding Update

Beyond the first two supplemental appropriations for Katrina relief, totaling about \$60 billion, most of which goes to FEMA for redistribution, a number of other relief bills have been introduced in the Senate and House subcommittees. Some relief bills are being held up in part due to education group opposition to the proposed use of vouchers. On the other hand, on October 18, the FCC issued rules on how it would disburse Katrina relief funds (but not relief for Hurricane Rita) for districts and libraries. The total relief package amounts to about \$210 million of which about \$130 million would come from the E-Rate program. The final FCC order is similar to that proposed by Chairman Martin in September (see [September Washington Update](#)). The rules issued on October 18 would apply to Federally declared disaster areas in Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi, as well as districts which have enrolled the largest number of displaced students.

One key ruling would reopen the E-Rate application window for funding year 2005 for schools and libraries impacted directly or indirectly by Katrina. Applicants would have to provide assurances and certifications that substantial damage occurred to their telecommunication systems as a result of Katrina; that the applicants would use discounts to restore their networks and not to expand them; and that E-Rate funds are the only source for restoration (i.e., FEMA support or insurance reimbursements are not available). Schools and libraries in districts which

have received substantial increases in the number of displaced students must justify an increased demand for services; they are also eligible to reapply by December 13, 2005.

A second rule, would allow approximately 600 schools and libraries in Louisiana, Alabama, and Mississippi that were directly affected by Katrina to apply for “priority two” services (i.e., internal connections), allowing these schools and libraries to apply for the 90 percent discount level. According to [eSchool News](#) (October 20), allowing these entities to apply for the highest discount level would yield about \$96 million in E-Rate funds that have already been collected from telecommunication carriers and would have no long-term impact on the E-Rate.

Under a third rule, schools impacted by the hurricanes and flooding that receive E-Rate internal connections in funding year 2005 could once again apply for discounts on internal connections for funding year 2006. Normally schools and libraries can receive internal connection discounts no more than two times every five years. Another rule would allow districts to “substitute” services in one broad category or “bucket” to another to replace damaged services or equipment.

And last, applicants receiving unexpectedly “large” increases in displaced student populations can file a supplemental Form 471 to request additional funding beyond the 90 percent discount as long as they certify that the increased products or services are needed to serve such increases in

students; this could amount to about \$36 million in E-Rate funds. During a special service provider conference call on October 31, SLD officials noted that school or district applicants which have enrolled a significant increase beyond the ten percent minimum of displaced students could receive discounts higher than the 90 percent. Also, they noted that applicants will still be required to provide the matching amount in their reapplication, but could use FEMA or insurance money to do so. For program integrity purposes officials during the conference call also noted that any subsequent funding commitment letter of \$1 million or more to an applicant would automatically ensure that program integrity audit would be conducted. Both service providers and applicants were strongly encouraged to go to the dedicated website to receive forms and guidance at www.katrina-usf.org.

An October 19 "Member Alert" from COSN notes that the FCC order does not indicate where E-Rate funds will come from but the expectation is that the money will come from approximately \$365 million of unused E-Rate obligations; however, SLD officials during the October 31 conference call stated that the \$132 million will be reallocated under the \$2.25 billion pot.

The bipartisan Senate Katrina Elementary and Secondary Education Recovery Act (S 1904), sponsored by Senators Lamar Alexander, Edward Kennedy, Michael Enzi, and Christopher Dodd, would provide \$900 million directly to impacted districts; \$50 million to increase the McKinney-Vento Homeless Act funding; and \$100 million

for supplemental services, which includes afterschool programs. Initially, the most controversial provision would have been \$2.4 billion to provide a variety of service options for displaced students ranging from alternative programs, test preparation, job readiness skills development, and other activities under a "one-year-only vouchers program," which would be worth \$6,000 per student with an additional \$1,500 for students with disabilities. However, during the week of October 20, the "parent voucher account" provision was dropped, with the same amount of money proposed for direct allocation to districts, which would receive quarterly installments for each displaced student enrolled in a public or private school in each district's attendance area. The districts would be responsible for reallocating Federal funds to private and religious schools enrolling displaced students. The controversy now relates to how the funds can be used by nonpublic schools, including how to ensure that the funds not be used for religious activities in the nonpublic schools.

Submitted to the House Workforce and Education Committee on October 18, the proposed Family Education Reimbursement Act, sponsored by Chairman John Boehner, would create an account for a family for each affected pre-K to 12 student and would provide up to \$6,700 per child which is reportedly the average per-pupil expenditure in the states enrolling significant numbers of displaced students. Schools would receive direct electronic payment for the period a child is enrolled, on a quarterly basis, to take into account the fact that students may

move three or four times a year enrolling in different schools in different locations. The reimbursement accounts that are provided directly to parents could be used to enroll displaced students not only in public schools, but also in private or charter schools. According to the Committee Fact Sheet, "Funds would be used to provide for the cost of educational services for displaced students. For example, funds could be used for books, supplies, uniforms, transportation, or teachers. Funds would not be used for school construction or renovation." Unlike in the Senate version, a portion of the cost of the House's proposed program would come from the elimination of 14 education programs, estimated to be about \$250 million. Referring to the problems associated over the last couple of months with FEMA, another House Fact Sheet states, "...this proposal moves the reimbursement account program out of the hands of the government. An independent firm with vast experience with this type of technology would quickly design and implement an easy to operate system. Moreover, this firm will provide ample assistance to parents and schools through a staffed help desk." Both House and Senate versions would apparently allow funds and resources to "follow the child."

The resolution of Katrina relief challenges are intricately tied in to where the money will come from to pay for the emergency services. Conservative Republicans in the House appear to be considering offsets ranging from elimination of low-priority education programs in next year's budget (as noted earlier) to rescissions to across-the-board

cuts in all remaining education programs of anywhere between one and three percent. Such across-the-board cuts in programs such as Title I and IDEA would result in increased carryover funds next year to the following year with little funds used for purchasing "things," but rather remaining funds would cover existing teacher salaries. On the other hand, the Senate appears less inclined to pay for the emergency out of offsets in next year's budget. The budget resolution process calls for House and Senate conference reports to be adopted by November 18 at the earliest. As we have stated previously, TechMIS subscribers should plan on carefully targeting several types of districts and various Federal programs that are likely to receive some increases which can be used for purchasing certain types of products and services. Once the appropriations compromises are worked out, we will identify these priority targets for the next year.

Good-Faith Reprieve by USED for States Not Likely to Meet Highly Qualified Teacher (HQT) Requirements Next Year Could Create Opportunities for Certain Products and Services

On October 21, Secretary Spellings sent a policy letter to the Chief State School Officers which allows certain states which are not likely to meet the 2006 deadlines for meeting the highly qualified teacher (HQT) requirement an opportunity to receive a reprieve if the states can justify their meeting four good

faith conditions. As the letter states, “The purpose of my letter today is to assure you that States that do not quite reach the 100 percent goal by the end of the 2005-06 school year will not lose federal funds if they are implementing the law and making a good-faith effort to reach the HQT goal in NCLB as soon as possible.”

Arguing that the good-faith conditions are a “reasonable approach to implementation,” the Secretary stated that USED will examine four elements to determine whether a state is making a good faith effort, including:

“(1) The State’s definition of a ‘highly-qualified teacher’, (2) How the State reports to parents and the public on classes taught by highly qualified teachers, (3) the completeness and accuracy of HQT data reported to the Department, and (4) the steps the State has taken to ensure that experienced and qualified teachers are equitably distributed among classrooms with poor and minority children and those with their peers.

In addition, the Department will look at States’ efforts to recruit, retain, and improve the quality of the teaching force.”

Individual states will have the opportunity to negotiate and implement revised plans for meeting the HQT goals by the end of the 2006-07 school year. For states that are not making a good-faith effort to meet the goals, the Department notes that it has the right “to take appropriate action such as the withholding of funds.”

While the first element or condition (i.e., the definition of a highly qualified teacher) is the responsibility of the SEA; for firms providing products and services meeting the other good-faith conditions or elements, opportunities could be created for certain products and services. In states where neither the SEA nor all districts currently provide parents required reports on the number and percentage of classes in core academic subjects that are taught by highly qualified teachers, public report card technology tools and application should be in high demand. Parents also must be notified if their child has been taught by a non-highly qualified teacher for four or more consecutive weeks. The emphasis in subsequent USED monitoring and auditing of states will be whether the state reporting system fully implements the parents “right to know” standards. Teacher-focused analytical tools and/or systems which meet some of the initial reporting requirements in the statute and regulations (as well as additional requirements which relate to waivers referred to as “rural flexibility” and IDEA flexibility) should be in demand. These “flexibilities” primarily relate to the setting in which the teacher provides instruction and hence, the nature of the requirements in meeting HQT goals. In an attachment to her letter, the Secretary outlines at least eight different categories into which teachers may fall and must be reported in the Consolidated State Performance Report (CSPR) which is submitted annually. A number of data sets relate to the percentage of highly qualified and non-highly qualified teachers of classes with high- and low-poverty enrollments and the level of resources being

allocated to ensure that appropriate percentages of highly qualified teachers are teaching in high-poverty classes. As part of the good-faith reprieve condition, the letter asserts, "States that do not submit the required HQT data as part of the CSPR in a timely manner will be out of compliance."

The last condition reinforces the third condition with an emphasis on the following: "Given the evidence that teachers are a critical factor in improving student achievement, it is in the best interest of each State to ensure that students who need the most academic support receive instruction from the most effective teachers."

USED will be conducting a series of regional data workshops to assist states in developing or refining reporting systems that must be reported in the January 2006 CSPR. As noted in the letter, "If a State is falling short of the HQT goal, but meets all four of the requirements discussed above, the Department will request that the State submit by, May 31, 2006, a revised plan, based on its data, for reaching the HQT goal in the 2006-07 school year."

For a copy of the letter and attachment go to

www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/secletter/051021.html.

Reporters who have been covering HQT issues agree that no pro-NCLB advocacy group is particularly opposed to the conditional reprieve. The two national teacher groups appear to support the additional flexibility yet foresee some perhaps unintended consequences arising in the future. And, as reported in

Education Daily, it would appear that a good faith reprieve does not apply to paraprofessionals; however, many contend that USED monitoring and enforcement related to paraprofessional HQT requirements has been minimal.

Administration Places a High Priority on Reducing the Minority Achievement Gap Over All Students Being Proficient by 2014

Amidst the release of the Nation's Report Card based on the results of the last National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP), high-level Administration officials are increasingly pointing to progress being made in reducing achievement gaps between minority students and White students. Although the gains in mathematics on the NAEP were slight, minority students' fourth grade gains equaled those of White students and improved more at the eighth grade level than did those of White students. In announcing the results President Bush stated, "It shows there is an achievement gap in America that is closing." A press release from the House Education and the Workforce Committee, which is chaired by John Boehner (R-OH), one of the chief drafters of NCLB, pointed to the "larger gains among disadvantaged and minority students who had previously been allowed to lag behind without strong accountability systems focused on high achievement for all students." Later on, the Committee notes, "For fourth grade students, average reading and mathematics scores increased and

the gap between white and African-American students narrowed in both subjects.” In her telephone briefing for reporters as reported in Education Week (October 20), Secretary Spellings stated, “I am very pleased that we are making steady progress, which is driven by increased progress by Hispanic and African-American students, which is the whole point of No Child Left Behind.” : The official USED publication, Education Review (October 21), pointed to the following finding: “The achievement gap between White and Hispanic fourth graders narrowed, reaching an all-time low in reading and matching an all time low in math. The gaps in eighth grade math between White and African-American students and White and American students narrowed to their lowest point since 1990.”

While Administration officials pointed to some of the positive results stemming from the 2005 Nation’s Report Card findings, others have pointed to a rather sobering set of data which could suggest that student progress has actually declined since the implementation of NCLB. In a New York Times article (October 20), Jack Jennings, President of the Center for Education Policy, reportedly said, “From 2000 to 2003, before the federal law took full effect in classrooms, the percentage of fourth graders scoring proficient in math rose eight percentage points, compared with four points this year.” Mr. Jennings said, “...and the percentage of eighth graders proficient in math rose three points before the law compared with the one-point rise this year.” The Northwest Education Evaluation Association

conducted a recent study which also suggested that student progress has been slower than before implementation of NCLB. An Association Spokesman noted, with respect to the achievement gap between Black and White students, “The change is moving too slowly”; he indicated that at current rates, Black students would equal proficiency of White students by 2034.

Tom Loveless of the Brookings Institution, who follows NAEP assessment results closely, stated in the Washington Post (October 20), “Reading scores were flat and math scores on the rise before No Child Left Behind, and reading scores are flat and math scores are still up after No Child Left Behind. It’s impossible to know whether NCLB had an impact -- either positively or negatively.” In previous studies, Loveless has clearly demonstrated that the achievement gap in reading between minorities and White students began to narrow on the NAEP trend test (not the NAEP main test used for assessing students for the recently-released nation’s report card) began to narrow in 1996-1997.

What is even more sobering was revealed during a recent interview with Jan Davidson who co-founded Davidson Associates, an extremely successful publisher of instructional software that teaches basic skills and who, with her husband, Bob, formed the Davidson Institute for Talent Development. As reported in Education Daily (October 25), “Reading scores for top students in the National Assessment of Educational Progress have stalled out for 4th-graders and sunk for 8th-graders since 2000,

according to the 2005 test scores released last week. Top students in both grades are gaining in math, but more slowly than they were in the 1990s and more slowly than their lower-performing peers.” According to Davidson, “It doesn’t surprise me; I’ve seen a lot of anecdotal evidence of this all along. We’re not only harming our students but harming our nation, because we aren’t developing our best talent.”

The Education Daily article points to data indicating that students in the 90th percentile increased their average math scores eight points in the fourth grade and four points in the eighth grade, and in reading, the 90 percentile of student scores remained the same in the fourth grade but decreased by one point in the eighth grade. The article also quotes Jane Clarenbach, Public Education Director of the National Association for Gifted Children, who states, “If you bring down the top, your achievement gap closes. Wow, that’s something to be proud of.” The Education Daily article pointed to the finding that, in reading, seven percent of students nationally reached the advanced level at the fourth grade, but only 4.7 achieved advanced at the eighth-grade level, which supports the argument that gifted and talented students regressed to the norm when programs are curtailed for them beyond the elementary level, which has been happening across the country over the last several years. Of the \$24.4 billion of Federal Education funding for the current year, only \$11 million targets gifted and talented programs, as reported in the New York Times (October 26).

Government Accountability Office Criticizes USED for Not Implementing Its 2002 Recommendation to Evaluate and Disseminate Existing Research on Effective Middle and High School Interventions to Reduce Dropout Rates, Particularly Inadequate Dissemination of Programs That Have Been Rigorously Evaluated

Following its recommendations in 2002, a recent GAO report is critical once again of USED for not evaluating middle and high school interventions and for not disseminating information about interventions which have proven to be effective in reducing dropout rates and otherwise increasing academic performance of middle and high school students. While most of the report addresses the need for more uniform definitions and procedures that should be used by states to report on district and state dropout rates, the GAO team identified five interventions that have shown potential to increase graduation rates and whose evaluations “used a rigorous research design.” Sixteen schools in six states were visited to observe implementation of three interventions and to discuss attributes which appear to reduce dropout rates.

One of the interventions, observed in Minneapolis, was the Check and Connect program which provides mentoring in an alternative learning environment, an intervention first used with middle school students who had learning and behavioral problems. The

program is built around a mentor who is both an advocate and a service coordinator for students and who provides around the clock services.

The second intervention, project GRAD (Graduation Really Achieves Dreams), relies on two components -- a structured model and an instructional model --- which also includes mentoring and tutoring. Instruction “emphasizes specific reading and math programs for students in kindergarten through eighth grade.” In 2004 17,000 students in 29 schools in the Atlanta area used the program, which increased test scores and college attendance and reduced dropout rates.

The third observed intervention was the HOST program which is a structured tutoring program in reading and language arts for low-performing elementary students. In the sites GAO visited, one success criterion was the number of students who successfully transitioned into grade level reading in the regular program after receiving mentoring and tutoring in the HOST program. The GAO report also notes “The program, which has been replicated in schools and districts in twelve states, was cited in the report language of NCLBA as a scientifically-based intervention that has assisted schools in improving student achievement.”

The other two programs which GAO identified as effective with middle and high school students in improving academic performance and reducing dropout rates, were the Talent Development program and the First Things First program, both of which

GAO argued had been evaluated using scientifically-based research designs. Talent Development, developed by the Johns Hopkins University (which also initially developed the Success for All program), includes a separate career academy for all ninth grade students and for some students in tenth through twelfth grades. The First Things First program was launched in Kansas City (Kansas) public schools and since has been expanded to twelve middle and high schools in four other districts. Evaluation results indicate that First Things First had increased reading and math scores, improved attendance, lowered dropout rates, and increased graduation rates compared with schools that did not participate in the program.

The GAO team also observed some programs which they classified as supplemental services interventions and which provided educational and cultural services to students with low levels of English skills and limited formal schooling. One is designed to develop student esteem for Native Americans on a reservation in Wyoming. All of the programs that were observed had empirical evidence of being effective or were based upon effective practices which have been proven to reduce dropout rates.

The report applauds efforts by groups such as the National Governors Association and individual foundations which are supporting middle and high school interventions designed to reduce dropout rates. But in the concluding section, it states, “But Education (USED) has done little to evaluate and disseminate knowledge about inter-

ventions that could help increase such rates (graduation rates).” In its response letter regarding the finding that USED had yet to implement the 2002 GAO recommendations relating to interventions, the USED indicated that, in April 2005, the What Works Clearinghouse initiated a review of studies entitled, “Interventions for Preventing High School Dropouts.” The review of research was designed to determine:

- what dropout prevention programs are effective in keeping students in school?
- what components or types of programs are more effective than others?
- what types of dropout prevention programs are more effective for certain types of students, such as minority or special education students?

Of the 1,038 studies which have met initial standards for more in-depth review, the USED letter states, “So far the review team has identified approximately 15-18 potential interventions. The first release of reports on interventions for preventing high school dropout is planned for the early part of 2006 for dissemination on the What Works Clearinghouse website.”

In its response, USED did not mention some of the recent grant applications funded under Small Learning Communities and the Striving Readers

Program Initiative, which are designed to determine the effectiveness of certain types of interventions. However, thus far, none of the interventions identified by GAO in its report appear to be on the preselected list of interventions to be evaluated using randomized trial control or quasi-experimental designs that are planned.

For a copy of the GAO report go to www.gao.gov/new.items/d05879.pdf.

Year 2 Case Studies of Supplemental Educational Services Actual Implementation Uncovers Some Surprising Findings

The second year series of case studies involving five states, nine districts, and 24 supplemental educational service providers, conducted by Policy Studies Associates under subcontract to SRI International, during the latter part of the 2003-04 school year, unearthed some “interesting” findings as the implementation of SES requirements under NCLB has evolved. The study team, however, cautions that the small number of states and districts were purposively selected and did not constitute a national sample from which many generalizations could be made.

School and district staff reported that available providers were able to accommodate the needs of students in their districts. For example, “In the three sampled districts with significant proportions of English language learners, district and school staff

reported that those students have been able to find tutoring. In none of the sampled sites did district or school staff report problems with special education students' access to services." This is surprising as the Center for Education Policy reported, in its third annual State and District Survey of NCLB Implementation (2005), that the vast majority of NCLB challenges and problems were associated with special education and English language learners who in most cases were the primary reasons for schools failing to meet AYP or otherwise being identified for improvement. Later on, the PSA study quoted a focus group parent of a special education student who said that she decided not to place her child in an SES program because she felt it would not meet the student's special needs. An individual involved in the PSA study noted this finding would probably not hold up during the last school year and certainly in the future, especially because the reauthorization of IDEA allows IDEA funds to be used to provide SES for special education students under certain conditions. Discussions with some service providers during the Education Industry Association's conference in Baltimore in June revealed that many approved SES providers did not encourage parents of eligible students with certain disabilities to participate in their programs because their programs were not designed to help them.

Another interesting finding which suggests how service providers can provide more effective SES programs, is the degree to which successful service providers are very dependent upon the

district and participating schools in several respects. For example, 18 of the 24 service providers included in the sample study provided afterschool tutoring in the identified school, which was convenient and reduced the need for transportation costs. Moreover, the majority of these providers also hired teachers, including those from the school identified for improvement, as tutors, which is allowable under USED Non-Regulatory Guidance. As the report notes, some service providers offered their tutoring services in tandem with other afterschool programs funded by state, Gear Up, or 21st Century Community Learning Centers, which actually allowed certain students to be dually enrolled. One important related finding which emerged during the parent focus groups was, "Parents paid careful attention to teacher and principal recommendations when deciding to sign up their child for services and in choosing a provider; teachers employed by supplemental service providers played a key role in recruiting parents at their schools...Many parents reported they had signed their children up for a particular provider because a teacher who worked for that provider had encouraged them to do so."

During the 2003-04 school year, approximately 25 percent of state-approved service providers were school districts, high-performing schools, and intermediate education units. Recent data provided by USED indicate that that percentage had dropped to 15 percent nationwide, although in four states -- West Virginia, Oregon, New Mexico, Missouri -- the percentage has remained over 30 percent. In three of the nine

case study districts, the districts provided SES; while overall the districts represented just three percent of providers offering services in the nine states, in two of the districts, 49 and 76 percent of students participated in district-operated SES programs. The PSA study notes that district officials explained that the major reason for success in recruiting a large number of students was because these programs employed district and school staff that parents already knew and trusted. A study conducted by the Council of Great City Schools over a year ago found that one additional advantage to district-operated SES was the increased probability that the district-operated SES programs would be more closely aligned to district and state standards and state assessments than were programs offered by independent third-party SES providers. The districts in the PSA study reported that they felt, if the state approved an SES provider, then there was an underlying assumption that the state obtained some assurance that adequate curriculum alignment existed; and hence, most districts did not monitor independent providers in the area of alignment. The six districts that did not apply to be approved for SES felt they would be identified for improvement in one or two years and would then become ineligible to provide SES. As the report noted, "District administrators saw little point in gearing up to offer services only to have to stop providing them later on."

According to individuals in the PSA study, another finding which was considered surprising by some, was that most "tutoring" by providers included small groups where the teacher/student

ratio ranged from 1:5 to 1:10 rather than 1 on 1 tutoring; the number of tutoring hours participants received ranged from 18 to 120 for 2-6 hours a week; and after 10-20 weeks, participants tended to cycle out of supplemental services thereby allowing some providers to serve two cohorts of students during the year.

Among the nine districts included in the study, the per-pupil expenditure for SES averaged around \$1,400 for 2003-04, which was approximately \$300 higher than the previous year's per-pupil cost in the five districts included in both Year 1 and Year 2 samples.

USED Places Higher Priority on Data-Driven Decision-Making Technology Tools and Services Allocating Small Business Innovation Research Funds and Possibly Title II D E²T² State Technology Grants for Such Purposes

A new Small Business Innovation Research Program priority, administered by the National Center for Education Research under IES, will be inviting proposals from eligible small businesses to develop plans, business models, or tools in the areas of education data management, evidence-driven consulting services, financial data services, and technology consulting services with proposals due January 6, 2006. In addition to the new priority, another priority supports the development of empirically-derived education products

in the areas of reading, math, or science, including products supporting teachers and those used directly by students. Products could include software, supplemental education materials, and assessment instruments. The total amount of funds available will likely be stated in the grant application to be announced around November 4 and will include funds specifically appropriated for SBIR and a percentage of funds taken from other USED offices and reallocated for development of technology-related tools and services. In the past, the SBIR program has focused primarily on the development of instructional software interventions, designed to assist students with certain types of disabilities. The new priority appears to go beyond the special education program boundaries.

The announcement in BidRadar provided some examples of what could be considered under the four components of the new priority. For example, under “education data management,” an example would be a service designed to condense test results into readable and easily interpretable language for teacher and principal use. An example of “evidence-driven consulting service” would be to provide a menu of options and strategies that teachers and staff could implement in order to enhance student learning and achievement. Under “technology consulting services” an example would be to assist schools with the selection and implementation of relevant education technologies and to train teachers on how to make the most effective use of these technologies.

This increased priority on data-driven decision-making technology tools and directly related applications can be attributed to the recent appointment of Tom Luce as Assistant Secretary for Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development. Mr. Luce was founder of Just for Kids, which has worked effectively with groups such as the Education Commission of the States, the Education Center for Accountability, Standards and Poors, and the Broad Foundation in developing a huge data base on district and individual school test score performance in basic skill areas. During the 1990s, Luce was directly involved in the two successful Bush campaigns for governor and concurrently developed and expanded Just for Kids in Texas. As reported in the press, Luce has the strong support of key education policymakers ranging from Secretary Spellings to Susan Traiman, Director of the Business Roundtable.

As a possible portent of the future, Deputy Assistant Secretary Ross Santy, who works for Assistant Secretary Luce, during the recent SETDA meeting, told State Technology Directors and others that his office had proposed eliminating funding for E²T² but received a major “pushback” from Congress which indicated that total elimination was not acceptable largely due to advocacy from such groups as ISTE, COSN, SIIA, and SETDA over the last several months. He did indicate that he thought Congress would be amenable to making some changes in terms of allowable uses for E²T² state grant funds. He indicated that his office would support a much higher priority on data management and

accountability tools and services, similar to those in the new SBIR priority. In response to an individual from Wisconsin who asked the question whether his office would recommend limiting such funds only to data management technology, he appeared to “back off” from that issue and, in the end, appeared to be noncommittal in terms of the nature, if any, of the support his office would provide for E²T². It should be noted that technology advocates have been talking with various mid-level USED offices and even staff at the Office of Management and Budget about preliminary data from a number of the research and evaluation studies which have been conducted by SEAs over the last 2-1/2 years; these preliminary findings point out many positive benefits -- with empirical supporting data -- of the use of technology, some of which are noted in state profile updates in this TechMIS issue. For more information about the upcoming SBIR announcement go to www.fedbizopps.gov/spg/ED/OCFO/CP/O/errd080008/SynopsisP.html.