

Beyond Reading First Ethics: The Blind Spot in Evidence-Based Programs

In the late 1990's the Department of Education implemented the Reading Excellence Act (REA) through an initiative called America Reads. A top-flight cadre of Department veterans was called upon to administer a nationwide network of local evidence-based reading programs. I recall Secretary Richard Riley celebrating an end to the reading wars.

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act continued the effort with Reading First. This incarnation seemed to improve on the original with increased funding and clearer connections to scientific based research. Again, with much fanfare, Secretary Rod Paige dispatched enthusiastic officials to launch an evidence-based dissemination program.

Five years later, we find Reading First in the throes of controversy. The audit by the Department's Inspector General documents that something went terribly wrong: conflicts of interest, biased review panels, cronyism, and overzealous federal intrusion. Since its release the report has been the buzz of education policy circles in Washington, with the requisite finger pointing of a political scandal in the nation's capital. Who or what is to blame? Was this an extension of the reading wars? Is the program fundamentally flawed? Or was unethical implementation the sole culprit?

One architect of NCLB, Rep. George Miller (D-CA), faults implementation. I agree, in part. Based on the audit, the top-down, compliance-driven way in which the Department chose to manage and implement the program seems to have created a breeding ground for abuse by overzealous operatives. The situation is ironic as well as disturbing. If the scientific evidence behind the Department's preferred approach to reading was so strong, why was the heavy handed approach necessary? And what of programs everyone would agree are backed by good evidence? As the Inspector General speculates, it seems that something other than "what works" motivated implementation

But I agree only in part. The episode also reveals a "blind spot" in Reading First; indeed, in NCLB's approach to evidence-based policy. The law underestimates what it takes to transfer, apply and manage scientifically-based knowledge in specific circumstances and contexts. Effective knowledge utilization is not a simple linear process of "translating research to practice." Mandating the use of scientific evidence - as with Reading First, does not foster sustained improvement overall or over time.

Because scientific evidence does not speak for itself in every situation, more attention should be focused on how a dynamic process of knowledge transfer, application, and use can support school improvement efforts nationwide. End users should be skilled consumers of research-based knowledge, including how to apply what works in their own contexts. This capacity must be built from the bottom up through the continuous engagement of educators, researchers and intermediaries.

The lessons of Reading First are not only about the integrity of agency officials, but also the importance of knowledge utilization processes to evidence-based policy. Embedding this value in the implementation of Reading First and other evidence based programs should be a priority in reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

To paraphrase a well known clothier's advertisement, a knowledgeable consumer is the best customer for evidence-based programs. In fact, it is of vital interest to all of us in the school improvement industry.