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Inspector General Issues Final Critical Report on Reading First

Findings issued today by the Inspector General on the RMC Research Corporation (RMC) complete the picture proving that the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) seriously mismanaged the \$6 billion Reading First program. The current report focuses on the \$36 million single-bidder contract to RMC overseeing technical assistance to states and schools.

“USDE has broken its promise to young children at risk of reading failure. Instead of programs with proven effectiveness, USDE delivered consultants who had not been screened for conflict of interest – consultants and advisers who wrote the programs favored for Reading First funding,” said Jady Johnson, executive director of the Reading Recovery Council of North America (RRCNA).

In three damaging reports, the Inspector General findings revealed bias and conflict of interest at all levels.

“The Reading First Program’s Grant Application Process” (September 22, 2006) found that USDE

- developed an application package for states that obscured the statute’s requirements,
- did not convene expert review panels that conformed to the balanced composition envisioned by Congress, and
- intervened to influence state and local decisions about programs.

“The Department’s Administration of Selected Aspects of the Reading First Program” (February 22, 2007) detailed how federal officials steered states to select favored programs by prominently featuring Direct Instruction, Open Court, and a few others as examples at Reading Leadership Academies.

“RMC Research Corporation’s Administration of the Reading First Program Contracts” (March 7, 2007) finds that RMC did not adequately vet potential contractors for bias or “impaired objectivity” and did not even have a process to deal with conflict of interest issues. Had these individuals been federal employees, they would have been subject to the federal standards of ethical conduct and, potentially, to criminal conflict of interest laws.

The three reports validate RRCNA's complaint filed with the Inspector General in 2005 charging that USDE had

- interfered with state and local control,
- excluded one-to-one instruction despite its proven effectiveness, and
- selectively applied criteria for scientific research.

As a consequence, Reading Recovery and other programs were systematically excluded from consideration in Reading First schools.

Reading Recovery is the oldest, most successful, most researched early reading intervention in America. It serves first graders who are at the bottom 10-20% of their class. To date more than 1.6 million American children have had Reading Recovery lessons in their local schools, and 75% of those who completed lessons met grade-level standards.

"We are encouraged that the OIG's recommendations include mitigating instances of bias in current contracts. We're looking forward to seeing the Department's plan to instill ethics into this poorly managed program," Johnson said.