

# Reading First Initiative in Rural Pennsylvania Schools

Jacqueline Edmondson and Patrick Shannon  
*Pennsylvania State University*

*The Reading First Initiative, as part of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, specifically targets poor schools with low test scores in reading. Reading First in Pennsylvania is a 6-year, \$184 million competitive grant program. In 2002-2003, 13 of the 28 funded schools were rural. In this article, we consider how the Reading First policy is experienced in one rural Pennsylvania school, and we raise questions about the conditions and consequences of this legislation in relation to this school's experience.*

"They're setting us up. That's just what they're doing. They're setting us up." These were the first words out of Shelley Warner's mouth as she stopped by our offices one cold January day to discuss her experiences with Pennsylvania's Reading First Initiative. Nationally, Reading First is part of the Bush Administration's federal initiative, *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB, 2002), the most recent reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, and it represents the most dramatic shift in federal education legislation in decades. Pennsylvania's Department of Education applied for Reading First money through this federal program. Once it was awarded, the state identified districts that were eligible to apply based upon the combination of high poverty rates and low test scores. The Pennsylvania program follows the national intention to transform reading instruction from "an art into a science" (Neuman, as quoted in Schemo, 2002). Shelley is the language arts coordinator for one of those districts, and she was given the responsibility to complete her district's application for this grant.

## The Application Process

As Shelley spoke more about her experiences with the Pennsylvania Reading First Initiative, it became obvious that there were two substantial issues in her claim that her district was being "set up." First, there was the application process itself. Shelley completed and submitted her district's application in September 2002. She proposed that the government support the research-based language arts work already in place in her school by funding professional advisors to identify existing gaps in their current approach and to hire literacy coaches who could help support teachers' classroom instruction. Shelley was optimistic about the chances of her proposal because her district was concluding

a state funded 5-year project to improve reading instruction based on the Ohio State Literacy Framework (see Literacy Collaborative® at Ohio State University, 2002) that resulted in steady gains in student scores on the state tests. By emphasizing reading aloud, shared reading and writing, guided reading and writing, and independent reading and writing, the teachers in her district had helped students raise their test scores considerably on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) tests. The latest third grade scores were two points below the state average.

Just before Thanksgiving, however, the state rejected Shelley's application and the district's reading program, inviting her and other district officials to a meeting in the state capitol. At that meeting, an assigned advisor would help the district to rewrite its application in order to make sure that state officials would approve it. Until that meeting, Shelley would not be privy to reviewers' comments concerning the original application in order to prepare for the meeting. Because of the importance of the funding, the school district sent Shelley, three elementary school principals, and several teachers to Harrisburg. Upon their arrival, they learned that their assigned technical support advisor would not be available that day. In fact, he did not meet them until the 3rd day of the 3-day event, and then he suggested that lack of time prevented him from helping them with revisions to their grant. When Shelley and her colleagues left that meeting, they were unsure of what their next steps might be because their advisor told them to review carefully the original application instructions for Reading First in Pennsylvania and to rewrite the grant by strictly adhering to those guidelines. In spite of repeated requests, the state would not release the original reviewers' comments to Shelley. Instead, her assigned advisor faxed her a 15-point list of recommended revisions.

The state guidelines required districts to: (a) schedule 90 minutes of uninterrupted reading instruction for all K-3 students; (b) purchase instructional materials based on scientifically based research; (c) plan professional develop-

ment of teachers based on the instructional program adopted; and (d) evaluate student achievement through valid, reliable, replicable assessment tools. Shelley thought that her original application had met those guidelines with the Ohio State Framework substituting for the instructional materials. However, her official Reading First technical support advisor explained to her that the "Ohio State Literacy Framework [based on Reading Recovery theory and practice] is not research based, scientific, systematic, direct, explicit improving the instruction of large numbers of students." According to the advisor, "Reading First monies should be spent very soon on actually purchasing a scientifically based reading series from the 5-6 that are available" (e.g., Open Court, Harcourt's Trophies program, and Houghton Mifflin). Shelley explained:

[Pennsylvania] wrote our [state's] proposal to the federal government that said that schools would adopt core reading programs, and their translation of that is book in a box. You'll buy the box of books. Not only will you buy the box of books, you will implement the box of books across the board. . . . [Pennsylvania officials] did not want to know about how things were going [for us]. They did not really want to know. They didn't have to know . . . Pennsylvania has basically put a straight-jacket on their districts. (personal communication, January 17, 2003)

In effect, the state told Shelley that her district's reading program was too artistic, too labor-intensive to be scientific. If the district desired Reading First funding, it must substitute technology for people—a scientific, core reading program for the human expertise and presence that her district proposed. Although the official state policy suggests that schools can provide scientific evidence to support an already existing program, or they can have their program approved using Simmons and Kame'enui's (2001) *A Consumer's Guide to Core Reading Programs*, these were not presented to Shelley as options. Instead, she was told to buy instructional materials and to subcontract professional development to the state approved PaTTAN group. As Shelley explained, the state seemed uninterested in the accomplishments or plans for their local district. Rather, the state and their federal sponsors seek a universal solution, which denies the importance of the local.

We have learned that Shelley's situation is not unique. For example, the *New York Times* recently described G. Reid Lyon's disapproval of a phonics program that New York City school officials intend to adopt in order to qualify for New York State Reading First funding. Lyon who is Director of Research on Learning and Behavior at the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development argued that the program, Month by Month Phonics, had no

scientific evidence to prove its effectiveness, even though the author of the program reports that it is research based. New York City schools stand to lose \$70 million, if they do not cancel their order for Month by Month Phonics (Goodnough, 2003). Perhaps, many school districts across the United States find themselves in similar situations as they attempt to improve reading instruction for their students by competing for the NCLB Reading First Initiative. A very few eligible districts have decided to ignore the possibilities of new federal funding for reading instruction. Most, however, act like Shelley's district, working earnestly to secure the much-needed funding in order to keep their financially strapped districts afloat while they work to find local solutions to the challenges of reading instruction.

Of course, financial incentives have been the lever to secure compliance with federal mandates for nearly 50 years. Although the federal government has no constitutional authority to determine the curricula in local schools, every presidential administration since Johnson has used financial incentives in order to induce compliance with federal laws and policies. In this way, the mechanisms of the Reading First Initiative are nothing new. The Bush administration does appear, however, to be meaner and more aggressive in their application of this financial carrot and stick approach, by restricting who can speak with authority about reading education to a small group of insiders and insisting that this authority determine what happens in every primary grade classroom. Consider that Shelley's district made great progress in their local reading program through the federal and state Reading Excellence and America Reads funding. Now, continuation of that progress is in jeopardy because the district is denied a voice in the defining what will happen during reading instruction in their schools. It appears that New York City will suffer the same fate. Why would Shelley's district or New York City schools choose to contradict their own better judgment in order to adopt a core reading program that they do not want or value? In order to address that question, we return to the story of Shelley's district to find that in fact, their decision may not be based on free choice at all.

#### Shelley's School District

Shelley's rural school district serves approximately 5,000 students and covers an area equivalent to the size of Rhode Island. The poverty rate averages 40% across the district, with some schools serving communities in which as many as 82.7% of their children coming from low-income families. Some children in the poorer regions of the district live in mountain hunting camps, often with dirt floors, no running water, and no telephone. These situations pose unique challenges for teachers. As the government mandates have increased for all students to meet the same standards and to score high on standardized reading

tests, both teachers and students have experienced unequal pressures to cover more information in shorter periods of time than their peers in more affluent school districts.

Gainful employment is hard to find in many of the towns in the Shelley's district. Over the past 50 years, the economy in the district has come to a screeching halt. Logging, coal, and brick making industries that originally attracted immigrants to the region are now largely nonexistent, and the railroad that ushered in economic prosperity in the early part of the 20th century left during the 1950s. In more recent years, the closing of a paper mill and an aircraft plant ended the region's employment in manufacturing and forced many small subcontractors out of business in their wake. The U.S. economy and the state and federal governments which regulate it have not been kind to Shelley's district or the community it serves.

Not only are jobs difficult to come by, the local tax base to support local government and schools is low. Housing in some parts of the school district sells for as little as \$4,000-\$5,000, making real estate taxes minimal at best. There are no large entertainment venues to generate amusement taxes, and the amount of local money derived from state occupational and occupational privilege taxes throughout the region has decreased steadily over the past decade. These points are important to note because Pennsylvania's system for funding schools relies primarily on local sources, including real estate taxes (86%), earned income/net profit taxes (9%), and other taxes (5%). On average, Pennsylvania's public school districts receive 57% of their revenues from local taxes and 38% from the state. Because there is a vastly unequal tax base across Pennsylvania, in the 2000-2001<sup>1</sup> school year, some districts allocated as much as \$11,855 per student, while others could afford as little as \$3,675 per student. Shelley's school district falls a little below the middle of this continuum, spending approximately \$5,404 per student. While at first glance this figure may seem to be a reasonable amount, closer examination of the district's revenue sources shows that only 43% of their general fund is from local sources. The remaining 57% of the district's budget depends on revenues from outside sources—the state and the federal governments or private contracts. In order to economize, the district has consolidated many small community schools, trading the expense of bussing for the savings on the maintenance on aging buildings and duplication of staff support.

#### Toward the Privatization of Shelley's District

We see evidence of the movement to privatize public schools in the NCLB policy as it plays out in Shelley's district. This is the second reason why Shelley thinks that she is being set up. Because the district's budget has been

squeezed dry, and it needs Title I federal dollars to keep its per pupil funding near the state average, the district is under pressure to demonstrate adequate yearly progress on test scores. For Pennsylvania, this means that schools cannot have more than 35% of their student scores at or below the basic level in math or more than 45% or below that level in reading on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment exams. If each school in a district receiving federal money does not meet or make progress toward those selected targets, then the state places sanctions on the failing schools and district until they right themselves. Sanctioned schools enter a "school improvement" sequence. During the first phase, district officials must alert parents that their children's school is failing and inform them that parents can choose to send their children to any public school within their district at district expense. If no adequate improvement on test scores is noted after one year, state sanctions require the addition of private tutoring or other supplemental services (the district pays) to school choice. If again test scores do not improve dramatically, the state intervenes in the administration and curriculum of the school and district, which might include the adoption of a new curriculum, hiring new administration, or replacing staff. If this too fails to raise test scores accordingly, then the state restructures the district. In Pennsylvania, restructuring has meant the subcontracting of some or all school duties to private corporations (see Shannon, 2002). According to NCLB, every student must be above the basic level by 2013 or restructuring is in order.

The absurdity of these sanctions is not lost on Shelley. Notification of school failure (that the school is in "school improvement") is a rhetorical act that undercuts the school's authority within a community. Once labeled and without necessary support in classrooms, schools will find it difficult to accelerate the progress of children from homes that the economy has long ago left behind. The costs for bussing students across her district and the requirement to provide private tutoring or other supplemental services would cut deeply into already inadequate budget. Even if the district could afford the transportation costs, school buildings are already filled to capacity. Shelley explained, "Where are we supposed to put them? Our schools are full. And we've sold a bunch. They've sold all the extra ones they have. They consolidated to try to save money because we're so strapped." State advice and policies have also proved costly in the past. A charter school, full-day kindergarten, and private tutoring for special needs students (who must travel great distances to meet with tutors) without increased funding have substantially weakened the budget, making the district less likely to reach the arbitrary goals of NCLB and more vulnerable to the marketplace for increased funding in the Reading First Initiative. None of these unfunded mandates have been scientifically proven to increase student achievement. While these options may offer different

<sup>1</sup>This is the most recent data available.

solutions for Shelley's community, they are economically costly. The economy has made sure that there can be little increase in the local contribution.

Therefore, if Shelley is not successful in securing the much-needed Reading First funds by accepting the forced purchase of a core reading program, her district, already targeted because of high poverty and low test scores, is likely to enter the school improvement privatization spiral. This is not an expression of the freedom to choose in which, as economist Milton Freedman suggested, the free market will provide for all of us. Freedom is the right to participate in the development of alternative solutions and then to select among them the one that is most likely to work toward the consequences we value. Shelley's district did not and could not participate in the identification of alternatives because the governmental apparatus which is supposed to help them will not allow it, and the district cannot afford to refuse state and federal funding and still keep its schools open. The district, like so many across the country, is being set up as Shelley recognized.

#### What's Going On Here?

We believe the federal and state governments have positioned Shelley's district as a consumer of official scientific solutions that ignore local concerns and needs—a consumer that should blame itself when prescribed solutions do not help the community or its citizens. The teachers and students in Shelley's district do not start with the same chances of success as their more affluent counterparts across that state and nation. Yet, they are required to accomplish the same goals as all others during the same time period with fewer resources. The standardization of outcomes without a standardization of resources seems unfair to us.

State and federal governments share responsibility for a heartless economy. Many of the protections of workers and their families and against corporate market excesses have been repealed or reduced over the last 20 years. If we are to leave no child behind, then this trend must be reversed. We recognize that our solution will not be the free choice of the Bush Administration, nor was it Clinton's. There is no scientific evidence that guaranteed income, healthcare, nutrition, and housing will raise test scores. But there is no scientific evidence that high academic standards, high-takes testing, forced core reading programs, or state takeovers will raise test scores or teach students to use reading wisely. Moreover, there is no conclusive evidence that high test scores mean greater worker productivity and income when social class is controlled (Levin, 1998). All of these are political and moral decisions based on our answers to the question, how do we wish to live together?

The federal government's only solution at this point is the marketplace because the liberal solution of public schooling is too expensive, too independent, and too community based to benefit those in control of the U.S. economy. By cutting public schools' economic security and forcing them to compete for necessary funding, and by setting test scores as the official goal of all schooling, the government creates many new markets and transforms school personnel from educators to consumers. For example, in order to compete for Reading First, funding districts seek expert advice on how to increase the chances of success. Across the country, businesses like Voyager Expanded Learning, incorporate to meet that market. Once funded, educational publishing corporations compete as core reading programs. They employ consultants in order to increase their chances of remaining or being added to the official list of scientifically based programs. State tests to measure continuous progress open another market for Microsoft, Scantron, and others to fill. State takeovers make room for Edison Schools, Inc., and the list goes on.

According to market logic, the effective products and services will drive the ineffective products and services from the market because all consumers will act rationally in their own interests. But what are the real interests of Shelley's district? Certainly the market has already cast its judgment on the adults in that community. What scientific or any other type of evidence do we have that the market will be kinder to their children and leave no child behind?

#### References

- Goodnough, A. (2003, January 24). Bush adviser casts doubt on the benefits of phonics program. *New York Times*, p. B1.
- Levin, H. (1998). Educational performance standards and the economy. *Educational Researcher*, 27(4), 4-10.
- Literacy Collaborative® at Ohio State University (2002). *Literacy framework*. Retrieved from the Ohio State University, Literacy Collaborative Web site: <http://lcosuweb.lcosu.ohio-state.edu/what-is-lc/primary.htm>
- No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Pub. Law No. 107-110, 115 Stat. 1425 (2002). Available online at <http://www.ed.gov/legislation/ESEA02/>
- Schemo, D. (2002, January 9). Education bill urges new emphasis on phonics as method for teaching reading. *New York Times*, p. A16.
- Shannon, P. (2002). Philadelphia freedom. *The Reading Teacher*, 56(1), 48-50.
- Simmons, D., & Kame'enui, E. (2001). *A consumer's guide to evaluating a core reading program grades K-3: A critical elements analysis*. Eugene, OR: Institute for the Development of Educational Achievement.