

A Rejoinder to Opuda and Arnold

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Shelley's Reading First experience continues. Since the time we submitted our original manuscript and agreed to participate in this exchange, the Pennsylvania Reading First Director notified her that the district was awarded a Reading First grant. This surprised Shelley because she had not revised her initial proposal according to the state's 15 concerns faxed to her after her rejection notice in November (see Appendix). In our most recent conversations with Shelley, she conveyed her excitement about being funded to expand the guided reading libraries in classrooms and to hire the reading coaches for classroom practice according to the district's version of the Ohio State Literacy Framework. We attribute this change in the district's grant status to one of two possibilities.

First, Opuda and Arnold could be correct—trust the Reading First policies to meet the needs of all U.S. public school teachers and students. Opuda and Arnold's functionalist views of Reading First policy place faith in science, the market, and centralized authority, and make the individual district responsible when things do not turn out as planned. That is why Opuda and Arnold imply that Shelley was at fault when the first proposal was denied and that the school board is to blame for spending money on the unfunded state mandates of charter schools and full-day kindergarten. This top-down view of policy absolves the Reading First system of blame because it is manageable and efficient, and because federal and state policy-makers and officials know better how to improve school reading programs than do the locals. Opuda names this view "the golden rule"—money signifies knowledge and power.

Starting from a different vantage point, we understand policy as the authoritative allocation of values and not necessarily the result of a rational, deliberative process. The Reading First values are presented in the original 15 concerns posed to Shelley's district. Science is mentioned in 3 points—twice as criticism that the Ohio State Framework is not scientific according to the National Reading Panel's Report and once as a curricular suggestion (points 3, 10, and 11). The market is mentioned in six points, all based upon the district consuming private goods and services. Three times the district is told to buy a basal reading series from an authorized selection (points 5, 7, and 14). Two

points require the district to purchase commercial tests (points 4 and 12). Once the district is told to obtain the services of the authorized trainers in order to qualify for Reading First funding (point 6). Clearly, the original Reading First administrators understood Shelley's district as a market for private businesses as well as a competitor in the market place for Reading First and other grants. The two successful rural districts in the first round bought basals from the approved list, proposed to use standardized tests to determine achievement, and signed a contract with PaTTAN, the state's approved subcontractor for professional development. "It was obvious what the state wanted," confided one teacher who worked on a successful proposal from a rural district.

We view policy from the bottom up, and our methods enabled us to escape the "tyranny of the majority" in ways that Opuda and Arnold apparently have not considered. They explain to us that distinctive groups of students respond differently to standards and policies, alluding to the fact that the Reading First policy requires that districts disaggregate their reading test scores accordingly for public view. Opuda and Arnold imply that school districts resist such practices and that we are trying to hide public schools' dirty little secret that the poor, minority students, and second language learners do less well on tests. (Note that NCLB does not ask for economic class data to be disaggregated.) Yet, Opuda and Arnold respond to our argument with statements from the State's Reading First website as if its generalized data explained the particulars of this rural school district community and its relationships with state and federal agencies and policies. Our argument was an attempt to view Reading First from the bottom up by looking at its treatment and consequences for one school district, and our arguments articulate "hard data" on how Reading First's "one size fits all" solution falls apart at the very point where and when it is expected to stand solid. Efficiency, manageability, and central authority are not the criteria with which to judge Reading First policies in this district at this time.

We propose a second explanation for the change in fortune for Shelley's district. The November 2002 state election brought a new governor and political party to the administrative branch of the Pennsylvania state government. Governor Rendell replaced the administrators of the Department of Education, who in turn replaced those in charge of the Reading First program in our state. These new officials seemed to recognize that Shelley's district's use of

the Ohio State Literacy Framework is producing positive instructional results and rewarded their efforts with funding to continue and extend their efforts. This was Shelley's interpretation of her conversation with the new Reading First State Coordinator Corinne Eisenhart, who informed her that her district was awarded \$425,600 for 6 years (approximately \$2.5 million) in order to implement its original plan to improve reading instruction. Because nothing else had changed in the relationship between district and the state, the change in governing party seems to be the more reasonable conclusion than Opuda and Arnold were correct.

Since the grant requirements that reading programs had to be scientifically based did not change, the new Pennsylvania Reading First administration must deem the Ohio State Literacy Program to be sufficiently scientific to warrant funding. Accordingly, they must have a broader or different definition of science than the previous administration. And here is where the politics become most apparent. There are more than one reasonable definitions of science in both the so-called "hard and soft" academic disciplines, and education is not immune to the debates about the definitions of science. In reading education, the gauntlet was tossed down during a federally sponsored public meeting for the National Reading Panel (NRP) when Ed Kame'enui stated that the basic task of the NRP was to determine the single definition of science for reading education in the United States. Since that time, the NRP and the officials at the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development have tried to enforce one definition. Despite their best efforts, multiple definitions continue to circulate.

Finally, we appreciate Arnold's poetic turn, with which he attempts to claim the minority position for NCLB policies in education. This is a rhetorical move which seeks to finesse 100 years of measurement-driven schooling in America. The road or position not taken in the 21st century globalism is the one that attends to rural communities as if they and the people in them matter. NCLB is not a change in direction for business, science, and the government intrusions into public school classrooms in rural and urban America. It's just a more intense, meaner version. Please note that the previous federal interventions into public

schools that Opuda mentions were not attempts to dictate curriculum or instruction. Rather, they were efforts to enforce the 14th Amendment to provide equal protection under the law. The current federal administration seems to be discontinuing and even retracting many of these efforts.

Granted, the new Pennsylvania Reading First administration seems more trusting of local initiatives, and they seem somewhat less wed to the immediacy of the marketplace. They still, however, set up this rural district by not recognizing its unique problems struggling against poor funding, job flight, and diminishing prospects. The area just lost its last large manufacturing plant, and with it 1,000 jobs. Yet, the district must meet the same standards during the same time frame as suburban districts which face none of these challenges. Moreover, the state has not revised the costly steps of NCLB school improvement. However, the current Pennsylvania administration has made statements to distance itself from the overt privatization schemes of our last two governors.

We draw three implications for rural teachers and administrators from our experiences in this study: (a) Don't fold early in your struggles with Reading First officials when your values and theirs do not seem to meet; (b) it does matter who is in control of the state government; and (c) science is a political tool that policymakers and government officials' use to hide their values.

References

- Arnold, M. (2003). Taking the road less traveled: A reply to Edmondson and Shannon (2003). *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 18*, 39-41.
- Edmondson, J., & Shannon, P. (2003). Reading first initiative in rural Pennsylvania schools. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 18*, 31-34.
- 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/>
- Opuda, M. J. (2003). NCLB—A threat or a challenge to public education? A reply to Edmondson and Shannon (2003). *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 18*, 35-38.

Appendix
Technical Assistance Input

Following are the 15 points as they were faxed to Shelley from the technical assistant assigned to help her with the grant application:

1. Number the pages of the grant.
2. On the first page, the first paragraph indicates success with the current approach to reading, but the data show otherwise. The district was selected on the basis of the need to improve reading performance. You need to identify the gaps in performance and practice.
3. Ohio State Literacy Framework is not research based, scientific, systematic, direct, explicit improving the instruction of large numbers of students.
4. Under the instructional assessments, page 2, all reading first [sic] must be used to support outcomes. you [sic] will need to put in another outcome assessment, such as the Terra Nova. For instructional assessments, you need to select from the grid that was distributed at the December inservice and actually name the tests for screening, progress monitoring and diagnostic at the grade levels and then provide for purchase in the budget page. Use the matrix provided.
5. Page 3 - instructional strategies - Reading First monies should be spent very soon on actually purchasing a scientifically based reading series from the 5 - 6 that are available, not to study the situation for a long period of time.
6. Page 4 - no mention of the PaTTAN to provide the professional development. Work provided in the IU should be done in concert with PaTTAN trainers. Link all professional development to state, regional, and local.
7. Page 6 - use this limited time to select and purchase a reading series so that you can use this year's monies to pay for it
8. Page 7 - district leadership team. Does this district have reading supervisors and reading specialists? If so they should [be] considered for the team.
9. Page 9 - it is only the schools identified for reading first [sic] for the grant. Persons from other schools can attend professional development.
10. Page 10 - the [school's current literacy program] is mentioned repeatedly, but it is not scientifically based research reading instruction. It is not to be found in the literature with a research base. Furthermore, the purpose of reading first [sic] is to implement new structures because the current ones are not successful enough. In the full paragraph on page 10, there needs to be mention of how the district will institute a new approach to reading, rather than just trying to enhance its current one.
11. Page 10 - you need to specifically mention how the scientifically based areas of reading instruction will be implemented, rather than just mention that term.
12. Page 12 - Evaluation strategies. Too general. Need to describe how the different selected assessments will be implemented and used to guide instruction. The actual assessment grid from the December training should be evident.
13. Budget page 18 - are the five full time literacy coaches new positions?? Or are they being used to fund already existing positions? This must be clear. For example, do you already have reading specialists and are you proposing five additional coaches?
14. Core reading materials - how did you arrive at the figure?? There is no mention in the grant that you have selected a reading series, and that is acceptable for the very short term, but there should be some basis for the figure, such as the 80.00 - 100.00 per student that it costs to purchase a reading series.
15. Budget does not include payment of substitutes or of teachers to attend inservice?? How will you arrive at this point?