

6-2003


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Repository Citation

Lee, Lea and Gupta, Abha, "The Government's Efforts To Improve Reading of Young Children" (2003). *Teaching & Learning Faculty Publications*. 10.

https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/teachinglearning_fac_pubs/10

Original Publication Citation

Lee, L., & Gupta, A. (2003). The Government's Efforts To Improve Reading of Young Children. *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, 7(2), 194-198.

The Government's Efforts to Improve Reading of Young Children

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Abstract

This paper reviews four major initiatives to improve early reading and literacy programs in the U.S.: (1) Title One Reading, (2) Reading Excellence Act, (3) Even Start Family Literacy Program, and (4) Leave No Child Behind Act. Through these programs, the federal government has provided substantial financial support to achieve the national literacy goal. Neither federal nor state funds or programs are of sufficient unless they successfully involve an adult working side-by-side with a child.

Introduction

A major goal of public school education in the United States is for all children to become competent readers; currently, many children fail to read at grade level. The 2000 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), known as "the nation's report card," revealed that more than two-thirds (68%) of fourth-graders could not read proficiently. Their average score on a 500-point reading test was 217 in 2000, identical to the results in 1998 and 1992, and only slightly higher than in 1994, when the average was 214. Although the test scores showed that 32 % of fourth-graders were proficient in reading, up slightly from the 90s' when it was 29 %, the overall status of fourth-grade reading was stagnant in the 1990s. As students move to the upper grades, a slightly higher percentage are considered proficient -- 32 % of 8th graders and 36 % of 12th graders.

Furthermore, the report indicated, that 40 % of the nation's fourth graders failed to read at the basic level. Sixty-nine % of these were African American and 64 % Hispanic. As students move to upper grades, the number who cannot read at the basic level decreases; however, substantial numbers of students still struggle with basic level reading materials. Thirty % of 8th graders and 25 % of 12th graders cannot read at NAEP's basic level (NAEP, 2000). What constitutes a basic reading level is obviously different for fourth, eighth, and twelfth grade students, but generally speaking it is a demonstration that the student comprehends what is being read. Although the NAEP's report cited in this paper is representative of a fairly reliable source, it is necessary to note that the NAEP's data have been disaggregated with contradictory researches. Some studies (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Haney, 2000) pointed out that gains in students' reading scores were actually posted 2.3 times more often than losses in states with high-stakes testing policies based on the students' data from the NAEP reading exam taken in 1994 as fourth graders and in 1998 as eighth graders. In contrast to the NAEP's report, these studies did not exclude the bottom percentile of students who were qualified for special education.

These data show that the United States faces enormous challenges in teaching its children and adults to read and write, which is seen as necessary to generate productive members of the work force and a more informed and enlightened citizenry (Center for Educational Research and Innovation, 1992; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Sum, 1999; Wingert & Kantowitz, 1997). The purpose of this paper is to review several initiatives by the United States government to improve literacy proficiency for preschool and elementary school children. Four major reading initiatives are described: (1) Title One

Reading, (2) Reading Excellence Act, (3) Even Start Family Literacy Program, and (4) Leave No Child Behind Act. The programs described are major federal initiatives. Additionally, there are a number of programs administered under other pieces of legislation that are directed to reading, not to mention literally hundreds of privately funded programs. The federal initiatives in reading provide services to supplement regular public school instruction for children who fail to make satisfactory progress in reading. Although, the data on the effectiveness of these initiatives is inconclusive, some studies found that these large-scale federal initiatives provided immediate positive effects for students' reading achievement (Ramey et al., 1985; White and Casto, 1985). In contrast, according to Snow et al. (1998), the estimated effectiveness of these initiatives declined over time and was negligible several years after children exited the programs.

1. Title One Reading

The Title One Reading program began in 1965 when Congress passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), a compensatory education program designed to provide extra help to students having difficulty in reading and/or math. The goal of Title One is a high quality education for every child. At more than 8 billion dollars, Title One is the largest program funded under the ESEA; it served 11 million children in more than 14,000 school districts across the United States in year 2000 (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). To receive funds, the local school district must have at least one school with Title One school improvement status. Districts with the highest or second highest number of poor children in the state are eligible to apply for Local Reading Improvement grants.

Title One provides extra assistance and instruction to students who need it most; (i.e., primarily the children of poverty). The program is designed to meet the special educational needs of children in high poverty schools, for neglected and delinquent children, and for those who are homeless. The program also provides funds to support professional development for teachers (Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, 1999). If more than 50 % of children in a school qualify for free or reduced lunch, the school is eligible for a "school-wide" Title One program, which allows for all children in the school to be eligible to benefit from the Title One services and funds. In the beginning of each school year, the classroom and reading teachers in the target schools assess each student using a standardized test of basic skills, individual reading inventories, and teachers' recommendations. Students who have the greatest needs in reading and math are then eligible to be enrolled in the Title One program. A longitudinal study of effectiveness of Title I Reading programs on students' reading achievement indicated that only 12 % of the students improved significantly out of the 29 % who remained in the program for the full four year period from grade two through five. The study also noted that the rest of the students fluctuated in and out of the program during the four-year period, which made it difficult to determine the effectiveness for them (Atlanta Public Schools, 1981).

2. Reading Excellence Act

The Reading Excellence Act, signed by the President Clinton on October 21, 1998, and implemented in 1999, targeted children who were most in need of additional assistance in the primary grades. Its objective was to reach the goal of the America Reads Challenge that every child will read well and independently by the end of the third grade. In order to achieve the American Reads Challenge, the Reading Excellence Act emphasized serving primary grade at-risk children to receive support for improving literacy skills.

The Act includes three key activities designed to improve early reading proficiency: (1) professional development, (2) out-of-school tutoring, and (3) family literacy. Under the Act, the federal government allocated \$260 million (raising to \$460 million in 2002)

per year for competitive grants for states to improve reading. More than 500,000 pre-kindergarten through third-grade children were served in 1999. The program provides for a substantial increase in the number of tutors and mentors available to young children, especially after-school and during the summer. The America Reads Challenge strives to explore the roles citizens can play in improving the reading of young children. For example, as of October 2000, there were 1,403 colleges and universities in the nation involved in tutoring children who need after-school reading instruction (Topping, 1998). The America Reads Challenge program assists colleges and universities by providing an updated Web site, recruitment materials (including posters and brochures), tutor training materials, an on-line directory, an interactive listserv, and electronic Federal Work-Study Updates (Lewis, 1997). The program also emphasizes that parents can instill a love of books by reading with their children everyday. In addition, any individuals can volunteer to tutor with a local literacy program (Wasik, 1998).

3. Even Start Family Literacy Program

The Even Start Family Literacy program was implemented to improve the educational opportunities of children and adults by integrating community early childhood education and adult education for parents into a family literacy initiative. It was first authorized in 1989 as Part B of Chapter I of Title One of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. It was amended in July 1991, when Congress passed the National Literacy Act (P.L. 102-73), lowering the age of children served from birth to age one and allowing community based organizations to receive grants. In 1994, Even Start was reauthorized as Part B of Title One of the ESEA as amended by the Improving America's School Act. The purpose of Even Start is to help break the cycle of poverty and illiteracy by improving the educational opportunities of low-income families by integrating early childhood education, adult literacy or adult basic education, and parenting education into a unified family literacy program. Two hundred fifty million dollars were available for fiscal year 2001 to fund the program (National Institute For Literacy, 2000).

The program addresses the basic educational needs of parents of children up to age eight from low-income families by providing unified programs of (1) adult basic or secondary education and literacy programs for parents, (2) assistance for parents to effectively promote their children's educational development, and (3) early childhood education for children. Most Even Start projects provide, either directly or by working with existing early childhood programs such as Head Start, a center-based early childhood program. The national evaluation of the Even Start Family Literacy program reported positive short-term effects on children and adults, although those effects vary greatly across projects due to implementation and administration differences. The report also indicated that the resulting gains from the Even Start Family Literacy program were no greater than those that similarly motivated families would obtain from locally available services (St. Pierre, et. al., 1995).

4. Leave No Child Behind Act

President Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act On January 8, 2002. The Act is the most sweeping reform of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) since ESEA was enacted in 1965. It redefines the federal role in K-12 education and intends to help close the achievement gap between disadvantaged and minority students and their peers. The Act is based on four basic principles: stronger accountability for results, increased flexibility and local control, expanded options for parents, and an emphasis on teaching methods that have been proven to work. (U.S.

Department of Education (2002). The law directs substantial reforms to state and local educational systems and will annually invest about \$22 billion nationwide to aid implementation. The Act includes ten key areas to be reformed; (1) Annual Assessments, (2) National Assessment of Educational Progress, (3) Accountability, (4) Data Disclosure on Results, (5) Teacher Quality, (6) Math and Science Excellence, (7) Technology, (8) Early Reading, (9) Flexibility, and (10) Alignment.

The Act allocates its funds on early reading, math, science, and technology. According to the Act, all states participate in a new \$1 billion initiative for early reading improvement including both pre-K and grades 1-3 reading programs to ensure all children can read by grade 3. All states also participate in a \$1 billion grant program to integrate technology into education, and up to \$450 million annually dedicated to math and science partnerships in the states. The Act provides states and local school districts with the flexibility to shift diverse federal program funds to match local priorities and achieve results. With the exception of "Title 1" money, which is targeted at economically disadvantaged students, states and localities can decide how to allocate up to 50% of all other funds distributed by the Act.

Conclusions

As reading difficulties in the early grades captured the attention of educators and the general public in the late 20th century, Congress sought to find new ways to provide quality reading programs. New laws were enacted and new policies formulated at the federal and state levels to improve reading achievement because reading was viewed as basic to effective learning in all subject areas. This paper reviewed four of the major initiatives to improve early reading and literacy programs in the U.S. -- (1) Title One Reading, (2) Reading Excellence Act, (3) Even Start Family Literacy Program, and (4) Leave No Child Behind Act. Through these programs, the federal government has provided substantial financial support to achieve the national literacy goal. Although the federal government's support in these programs is an essential component to achieving national literacy, governmental authorities have been cautious in prescribing national standards and instructional guidelines because it could infringe on the autonomy of state and local education agencies. While federal initiatives are useful, each state proceeds with its own plans and strategies to improve reading achievement of young children. State level efforts allow for flexibility to respond uniquely to local situations.

Passing federal laws and regulations, providing funding, and mandating uniform programs throughout the country, cannot solve literacy issues. The federal initiatives of the past several decades have been based on the assumption that fairly substantial amounts of funds from Congress, administered by states, will eliminate or greatly improve students' reading achievement and reduce illiteracy in the United States. The success of such programs, however, has not been impressive. It would be surprising if 20 billion dollars allocated by the federal government into a 600 billion dollar educational industry would have a significant effect. The reading problem and illiteracy might be reduced if comprehensive changes were made in the way schools are financed at the state and local level. The existing system essentially denies inner-city and rural poor children an equal educational opportunity, irrespective of any federal support. But substantial financial reform will not occur. History may record that no amount of government support for public schools at any level of government will be successful. The solution to reading problem and illiteracy may depend less on schooling and more on creating a society where fewer children are born into and forced to remain in poverty.

The lesson learned from reviewing various federal-reading initiatives is that expensive reading programs are not the key elements for reading improvement. Merely labeling and placing children in special reading programs will not reverse the negative impacts

struggling readers experience. What these children need is not only an affluent home environment where literacy education is respected but also an attentive and sensitive adult who can recognize the causes of their reading problems and address solutions to them. Each child is different. An educated adult who could be a teacher, tutor, or parent who is willing to be persistent and believe in a child's potential can improve his reading ability and his quality of life. As America enters the new millennium, all stakeholders -- states, schools, communities, families, and each citizen need to actively participate and take responsibility for improving the reading skills of our nation's children, and the literacy of all citizens.

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