

# An Initiative on Reading Is Rated Ineffective

5.2.08

By [SAM DILLON](#)

President Bush's \$1 billion a year initiative to teach reading to low-income children has not helped improve their reading comprehension, according to a Department of Education report released on Thursday.

The program, known as Reading First, drew on some of Mr. Bush's educational experiences as Texas governor, and at his insistence Congress included it in the federal [No Child Left Behind](#) legislation that passed by bipartisan majorities in 2001. It has been a subject of dispute almost ever since, however, with the Bush administration and some state officials characterizing the program as beneficial for young students, and Congressional Democrats and federal investigators criticizing conflict of interest among its top advisers.

"Reading First did not improve students' reading comprehension," concluded the report, which was mandated by Congress and carried out by the Department of Education's research arm, the Institute of Education Sciences. "The program did not increase the percentages of students in grades one, two or three whose reading comprehension scores were at or above grade level."

The study, "Reading First Impact Study: Interim Report," analyzes the performance of students in 12 states who were in grades one to three during the 2004-5 and 2005-6 school years. It is to be followed early in 2009 with a final report that will analyze additional follow-up data, the institute's director, Grover J. Whitehurst said.

Secretary of Education [Margaret Spellings](#) and President Bush have consistently extolled Reading First as a highly effective program. But last year, Congressional Democrats reduced financing for the program for this year by about 60 percent, to about \$400 million from the \$1 billion it had received in several previous years.

On Thursday, Ms. Spellings had no comment on the study. Amanda Farris, a deputy assistant secretary of education, said in a statement that Ms. Spellings planned to look at the study "to inform our efforts," and would "look forward to reviewing the final report."

Ms. Farris said that one of the consistent messages Ms. Spellings has heard from educators, principals and state administrators "is about the effectiveness of the Reading First program in their schools and their disappointment with Congress" for cutting its financing.

Senator [Edward M. Kennedy](#), the Massachusetts Democrat who is chairman of the education committee, and who has long criticized the program, said, "The Bush administration has put cronyism first and the reading skills of our children last, and this report shows the disturbing consequences."

In 2006, John Higgins, the department's inspector general, reported that federal officials and private contractors with ties to publishers had advised educators in several states to buy reading materials for the Reading First program from those publishers.

The Reading First director, Chris Doherty, resigned in 2006, days before the release of Mr. Higgins's report, which disclosed a number of e-mail messages in which Mr. Doherty referred to contractors or educators who favored alternative curriculums seen as competitors to the Reading First approach as "dirtbags" who he said were "trying to crash our party."

[Click Here for PDF](#)