



in a NUTSHELL

RAILROADING READING FIRST

President Bush vowed he would “leave no child behind.” The centerpiece of his education agenda was Reading First, a new federal program aimed at helping poor children acquire basic reading skills. Under the leadership of White House domestic policy chief Margaret Spellings (then LaMontagne) and with support from Congress, Reading First was to provide funding to primary-reading programs that were based on scientific research. Christopher Doherty became Reading First’s new director. His job was to ensure that Reading First schools used only programs that work and shunned those that don’t.

Backlash and brouhaha followed. Aggrieved whole-language program proprietors complained bitterly that their wares couldn’t be purchased with Reading First funds. They found a receptive ear in the Education Department’s Office of the Inspector General (OIG), a bastion of green eyeshade and Dragnet types who weren’t the least bit interested in children learning to read. The OIG launched a witch hunt against Doherty, falsely claiming that he was improperly favoring particular publishers. Despite the lack of evidence and the fact that Doherty was acting with the full knowledge and support of Margaret Spellings, this conscientious and hard-working public servant was forced to resign. Then the administration turned its back on Reading First, allowing the program to be gutted and starved of funding.

“Maybe Secretary Spellings and her team hoped that throwing Chris Doherty over the side would resolve the matter and save the program,” said Chester E. Finn, Jr., president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. “That obviously didn’t happen. Investigation led to investigation, rumor fed rumor, allegations begat hearings on Capitol Hill, and all the while aggrieved commercial interests were bad mouthing Reading First itself. In time, its funding was slashed, leaving thousands of schools and millions of kids without help from one of the few federal education programs that was actually succeeding. This is the sort of tragedy that Shakespeare or Sophocles would have relished. But the scent of ‘scandal’ so misled the media and the pundits that they never got the true story straight.”

The latest report from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, *Too Good to Last: The True Story of Reading First*, by Sol Stern, is an in-depth and alarming study of Reading First’s betrayal.



The Rise and Fall of Reading First

The report cites the real scandals:

- An influential “progressive” lawmaker, Rep. David Obey, chairman of the House Committee on Appropriations, slashed by over \$600 million the budget of one of the most effective programs for poor children in the federal government—the only No Child Left Behind program that has received plaudits from both the Government Accountability Office and the Office of Management and Budget.
- President Bush and Secretary Spellings hung Chris Doherty out to dry, even though he was following their orders and acting aggressively (and heroically) to ensure that only effective programs got money under Reading First.
- Another influential “progressive” lawmaker, Rep. George Miller, chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee, hauled Doherty before his panel and browbeat him for carrying out the very policies that Miller had helped to craft.
- The Education Department’s Inspector General pursued a reckless, one-sided investigation and was not held accountable for his actions. Who inspects the inspectors in today’s Washington?
- Most of all, millions of poor children are suffering from the political games of adults—toying with the Reading First program, its implementation, and its budget.