The dog ate my homework

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Primary and elementary schools are right to focus on the basics, but last week brought troubling news that a multibillion-dollar national initiative to improve reading among young students appears to have fallen flat.

"Reading First" is the program in question. It's a cornerstone of President George W. Bush's signature education policy, No Child Left Behind. Since its passage, a total of about $6 billion ($1 billion per year) has been spent on "scientifically based" reading instruction for children in kindergarten through third grade.

Yet, the U.S. Department of Education's first major assessment of the program, published last week, concludes that Reading First has had no "statistically significant" impact on student reading comprehension scores.

How can you spend that kind of money on reading improvement and fail to move the needle? The Reading First report card sheds little light on that mystery.

Critics of the program have complained that it is rife with cronyism, that ideologues, insiders and profiteering contractors have been making dubious decisions about which consultants and educational publishers to employ.

Did this contribute to the program's apparent lack of impact? Again, it is hard to say.

The Department of Education's inspector general issued a scathing report, finding that the program lacked adequate expert oversight; that it did not adequately screen for conflicts of interest and awarded grants without collecting adequate documentation.

More recently, Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass., who collaborated with Bush on the No Child Left Behind legislation, complained of conflicts of interest. Kennedy reported that some of the contractors employed by the Education Department to advise states and school districts on the Reading First program had financial ties to publishers selling reading-intervention products.

But Reading First advocates say the investigations themselves were politically motivated - sour grapes from publishers, consultants and other special interests also vying to participate in the program financially and otherwise.

This caused the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a conservative education think tank, to commission an investigation into the investigations. The institute published a painstaking, inside-baseball account that concludes that "almost nothing you heard about the Reading First 'scandal' turns out to be true," that it was "Washington-style shenanigans that landed the program repeatedly on the front pages."

Whatever. Plowing through page after page of jargon-filled rancor could make a person regret he ever learned to read.

More illuminating are the excuses being advanced for Reading First's poor evaluation.

Reid Lyon, for example, is a nationally known educator and child development expert who long has been associated with the National Institutes of Health. He was an adviser to the Bush administration on education policy, and is a leading advocate of Reading First.

Lyon criticizes the way the Department of Education assessed the Reading First program. He says the design was delayed, the implementation rushed and that the sample studied was too small to be meaningful. Moreover, he claims the subject matter doesn't lend itself well to testing. The specific measurements don't capture the true value of the program.

All of which may be true. But it sounds like the same frustration that drives educators crazy. Principals question education policy driven by what they see as a tyranny of tests. Teachers consider many of the tests as a poor system of measurement and distraction from things that will excite children's imaginations.

The Bush administration may better understand that frustration now that its prized Reading First has bombed an exam. The shoe is on the other foot, and it pinches.

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