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“Reading Disabled” ... not “Learning Disabled.”

By Chris Braunlich

10/11/2010 – Did a federal program encouraging the use of scientifically-based reading methods lead to a decline in students classified as having a “specific learning disability?”

That’s the implication of a story in *Education Week*, citing U.S. Department of Education statistics showing a 10.5 percent drop in students so identified – from 2.9 million to 2.6 million – between the 2000-01 and 2007-08 school years.

The May 2001 book [*Rethinking Special Education for a New Century*](#), argued that many children identified as “Learning Disabled” were really “Reading Disabled,” suggesting that 70 percent of LD students were misidentified in that way. Many of the book’s authors promoted a “Response to Intervention” (RTI) approach, designed to block the emergence of reading problems.

The RTI approach was incorporated into the federal Reading First (RF) initiative, first signed into law as part of the No Child Left Behind Act. Reading First offered schools with a high percentage of educationally at-risk children additional grants if they used scientifically-based reading lessons and curricula. That curricula required using all five components of reading recommended by the National Reading Panel: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension.

[A 2006 Thomas Jefferson Institute paper](#) demonstrated that schools using Reading First saw greater improvement after the program began in the school. Since then, results continued to improve. For example, in Wythe County (where five of six elementary schools used the Reading First program since its inception), the percentage of students passing the third grade English SOL rose by an average of 39.4 percentile points per school, compared with a state average of only 12 percentile points.

Mike Petrilli, Vice President at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, calls the new special education data more evidence that the movement to scientifically-based reading methods was a huge success story.”

The issue is more than just academic. Nationally, school districts spend an average of 1.6 times more on a student with learning disabilities than they do on a general education student. And because the vast majority of that cost in Virginia is borne by local school divisions (additional state aid per special education student is relatively small), an opportunity to provide more cost-effective instruction to students is nothing to be ignored.

So what has happened in Virginia?

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The identification of Virginia students with Specific Learning disabilities appears to have peaked in 2003, when more than 70,000 students were so identified. In 2004, Virginia schools began using the Reading First program. Since then, the Commonwealth has seen a drop of more than 12,600 students identified as “Learning Disabled” – or a decrease of nearly 18 percent.

These numbers are echoed by a 2009 article by Florida State University psychology and education professor Joseph Torgesen, who noted that Florida elementary schools using Reading First saw an even more dramatic drop in identified students (from 10.4 percent of 3rd graders to only 6 percent of 3rd graders) after only three years. And Alexa Posny, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education for special education notes “I believe we over-identify children as learning-disabled. A number of students have just not been taught how to read.”

While a “final report” on Reading First found no statistically significant differences between RF and non-RF schools on student reading comprehension, it also found that RF teachers spent significantly more time teaching the five essential components of reading instruction and RF schools did a significantly better job of providing instructional support to teachers (e.g., help for struggling readers, professional development in scientifically based reading instruction, etc).

And a later look at that “final report” noted that it failed to account for differences between schools that started using Reading First methods early vs. those who used the program later – or that schools using the RF program more intensely produced substantially better results.

Now, there comes evidence of a correlation between the use of scientifically-based reading methods and a decrease in special education numbers.

Reading First was eventually killed off by Congress when Congressman David Obey (D-WI) slashed funding by 61 percent (Virginia lost \$10 million). Yet, the record is increasingly indicating that high poverty students (and previously “identified” special education students) can learn to read with the kind of reading programs Reading First once provided.

This year’s crop of candidates for Congress could do far worse than to make a commitment to revive – and intensify – a program offering the early interventions and scientifically-based reading programs once provided by Reading First.

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