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Accountability Integrity Reliability

Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-07-161](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The Reading First program was designed to help students in kindergarten through third grade develop stronger reading skills. This report examines the implementation of the Reading First program, including (1) changes that have occurred to reading instruction; (2) criteria states have used to award sub-grants to districts, and the difficulties, if any, states faced during implementation; and (3) the guidance, assistance, and oversight the Department of Education (Education) provides states. GAO's study is designed to complement several studies by Education's Inspector General (IG) in order to provide a national perspective on some of the specific issues being studied by the IG. For this report, GAO administered a Web-based survey to 50 states and the District of Columbia, and conducted site visits and interviews with federal, state, and local education officials and providers of reading programs and assessments.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that Education establish control procedures to guide departmental officials and contractors in their interactions with states, districts, and schools to ensure compliance with statutory provisions. GAO also recommends that Education establish and disseminate clear procedures governing its monitoring process. Education, in its response to a draft of this report, agreed with GAO's recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-161.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Cornelia Ashby at (202) 512-8403 or ashbyc@gao.gov.

READING FIRST

States Report Improvements in Reading Instruction, but Additional Procedures Would Clarify Education's Role in Ensuring Proper Implementation by States

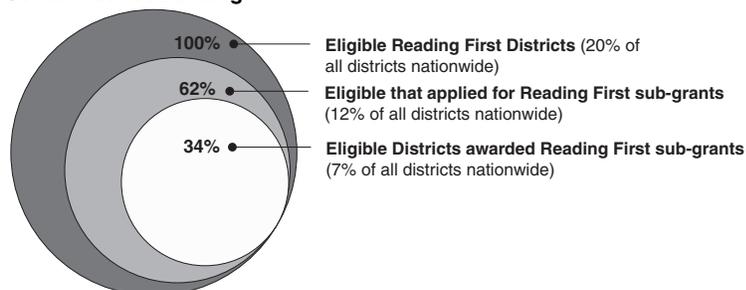
What GAO Found

States reported that there have been a number of changes to, as well as improvements in, reading instruction since the implementation of Reading First. These included an increased emphasis on the five key components of reading (awareness of individual sounds, phonics, vocabulary development, reading fluency, and reading comprehension), assessments, and professional development with more classroom time being devoted to reading activities. However, according to publishers we interviewed, there have been limited changes to instructional material. Similarly, states report that few changes occurred with regard to their approved reading lists.

States awarded Reading First sub-grants using a variety of different eligibility and award criteria, and some states reported difficulties with implementing key aspects of the program. After applying federal and state eligibility and award criteria, Education reported that over 3,400 districts were eligible to apply for sub-grants in the states' first school year of funding. Of these districts, nearly 2,100 applied for and nearly 1,200 districts received Reading First funding. (See figure for percentages.)

Education officials made a variety of resources available to states during the application and implementation processes, and states were generally satisfied with the guidance and assistance they received. However, Education developed no written policies and procedures to guide Education officials and contractors in their interactions with state officials and guard against officials mandating or directing states' decisions about reading programs or assessments, which is prohibited by NCLBA and other laws. Based on survey results, some state officials reported receiving suggestions from Education officials or contractors to adopt or eliminate certain reading programs or assessments. Similarly, the IG reported in September 2006 that the Department intervened to influence a state's and several school districts' selection of reading programs. In addition, while Education officials laid out an ambitious plan for annual monitoring of every state's implementation, they did not develop written procedures guiding monitoring visits and, as a result, states did not always understand monitoring procedures, timelines, and expectations for taking corrective actions.

Percentages of Eligible, Applicant and Awarded Districts Nationwide During States' First School Year of Funding



Source: GAO analysis based on U.S. Department of Education data.