

"Federation Corner" column
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Are MCPS and the BOE helping to corrupt U.S. education?

by Wayne Goldstein

Two weeks ago, I wrote about how former MCPS deputy superintendent John Q. Porter had been suspended from his new job as Oklahoma City Public School (OKCPS) superintendent after just six months. Last week, Mr. Porter agreed to resign, receiving the equivalent of about 18 months' additional salary to settle the matter. The Oklahoma City District Attorney and the city police are looking into the 21 OKCPS BOE allegations against Mr. Porter that initially led to his suspension in early January.

However, the real issue involves the allegation that Mr. Porter signed a no-bid contract for \$365,000 with Wireless Generation to provide Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Reading Skills (DIBELS) to OKCPS, a program he had supported while with MCPS. Why did our BOE cheer on MCPS to profit from DIBELS when it was becoming a politically-corrupted federal government effort to help teach children to read? MCPS and BOE ended up financially benefiting from the DIBELS program at the exact time that there was a very public upsurge of accusations that led to investigations by two Federal agencies.

If MCPS and BOE weren't paying attention to what was happening across the nation, they have to be seen as clueless and unwitting pawns in the equivalent of a national extortion scheme to force most states to use DIBELS and related products. Are MCPS and BOE like war profiteers, in this case enriching themselves at the expense of states intimidated by federal officials into using DIBELS rather than other preferred alternatives? How will this affect our reputation? What do the people of Oklahoma City now think about us, especially if they consider the royalties they would have had to indirectly pay to MCPS and BOE to use DIBELS?

People in Oklahoma City and Montgomery County are scouring the Internet for links between various parties that they hope will constitute a smoking gun. However, the gun, the fired bullets, the victims, and the smoke can all be found in the archives of Education Week, which has done an exemplary job of researching and reporting the history of national reading initiatives since the '90s, including what went wrong and when, and who is to blame.

What did MCPS and BOE know about the controversies surrounding DIBELS and when did they know it? There were about 40 articles on the subject in Education Week between 2002-2007, with most of them published between 2004-2006. However, there was never a whisper of it by MCPS or BOE in its minutes and its publications during this time period.

The story began in 1994, when some 40 percent of 4th graders who took the National Assessment of Educational Progress in reading did not have basic grade-level skills. This led to the appointment in 1997 of fourteen professionals to the National Reading Panel (NRP). Among the panelists - scientists engaged in reading research, psychologists, administrators, and a pediatrician - was just one reading teacher and an elementary school principal. The panel's report came out in 2000. In 2003, the school principal, who had originally written a minority report challenging the other panel members, blasted "policy makers for distorting the truth to advance political agendas." "In the three years since its publication in 2000, the findings of the [NRP] report have been used to support the research agenda of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD, part of NIH] and the Reading First initiative of the federal 'No Child Left Behind' Act of 2001." While the federal government claimed that this panel looked at 100,000 studies of reading, she said they only looked at 432.

A September 2004 article highlighted the influence of G. Reid Lyon, the director of NICHD: "By all accounts, his intensive campaign to convince lawmakers, educators, and parents that science holds the answers to sound reading instruction has been effective. His zeal has earned him the labels 'guru,' 'catalyst,' 'champion.' It has also made him the target of stinging criticism from researchers and other experts who complain that the former Army paratrooper has commandeered the debate, pushed out alternative opinions, and rewarded a small cadre of colleagues with like views... But some in the field have complained that a select group of researchers-many of them colleagues of Mr. Lyon and some with connections to commercial products-have unfairly benefited. The role of those experts in advising policymakers and school administrators, and their potential to profit from the millions of dollars dedicated to making changes in reading programs, have raised questions about whether the changes are being fueled by science or self-interest."

October 2004: "In Crowd Gets Large Share of Contracting Work... "It's politics. There are 'innies' and 'outies'," as one former federal education official puts it... The success has also touched his University of Oregon colleagues Roland H. Good III and Ruth Kaminski. They've landed important consulting work with the Education Department as well. The practical assessment tools that the two have developed for teachers have also gained national recognition and regular classroom use. ...DIBELS is a set of quick, skill-specific assessments to gauge students' phonemic awareness, word recognition, and reading fluency. The pair recently added DIBELS assessments for reading-comprehension measures... As a required tool under most states' plans for the \$6 billion, 6-year Reading First program, DIBELS has become the most widely used ongoing assessment among grantees nationwide... Despite its widespread use, critics question whether DIBELS makes good sense, primarily because its main measurement is a test of nonsense words."

June 14, 2005: "If the product lives up to the company's sales projections, [MCPS] could reap royalties from the enterprise in the "seven figures" within three years, school officials said... To address those problems [of doing a time-consuming paper assessment], [MCPS] approached Wireless Generation Inc., a New York City-based company that provides assessments on Palm hand-held computers. The company already offered a hand-held-computer version of ...DIBELS, a tool for teachers' observational assessment of reading developed by reading researchers Roland Good and Ruth Kaminski. The new tool, called mCLASS: Reading 3D software, combines DIBELS and portions of the Montgomery County district's reading assessment... In addition to the royalties, the district will receive discounts on its own subscription to the Wireless Generation software, which has an undiscounted price of \$21 per student annually."

June 21, 2005: "The Success for All Foundation has asked the inspector general of the U.S. Department of Education to investigate the \$1 billion-a-year federal Reading First program for alleged mismanagement and seeming preferential treatment of a handful of consultants and products..."

August 5, 2005: "The Reading Recovery Council of North America, which represents a popular nationwide program for struggling learners, has asked the U.S. Department of Education's inspector general to investigate the agency's signature reading initiative, known as Reading First... It charges that Reading First has 'systematically undermined' legal restrictions that forbid the federal government from dictating state and school district curricula."

September 27, 2005: "National Cloud of DIBELS Test Draws Scrutiny. Critics say reading tool's scope fails to justify its broad use... The data-management program has been licensed to Wireless Generation, a New York City-based company selling hand-held computers to schools for assessment and data management."

October 11, 2005: "GAO to Probe Federal Plan for Reading. Senate Education Leaders Request an Investigation... The request to the Government Accountability Office follows allegations that federal officials and their agents may have steered program contracts to favored publishers and consultants, and complaints that the program has not adhered to the principles of scientific evidence outlined in federal law. It also comes

on the heels of at least three requests to the inspector general of the U.S. Department of Education to scrutinize the department's administration of the \$1 billion-a-year reading initiative."

October 19, 2005 Letter to the Editor: "...You report that Roland H. Good III said, 'It is not a coincidence ... that the structure of our work corresponds so closely to Reading First and the National Reading Panel [NRP] report.' Indeed it is not. The same people who were on the NRP are also on the committees that approve Reading First applications, and are also all University of Oregon colleagues. Coincidence? No. Conflicts of interest? Absolutely."

November 8, 2005: "...A federal investigation into Reading First will include several broad audits of the policies and procedures involved in implementing the \$1 billion-a-year program, according to the U.S. Department of Education's inspector general's office schedule of reviews for 2006."

September 29, 2006: "...The findings of a scathing report on the federal Reading First program continued to reverberate last week following its Sept. 22 release, fueling debates in Congress, on the Internet, and among professionals in the field about their gravity and potential impact. Critics of the program's implementation said the conclusions drawn in the report by the U.S. Department of Education's inspector general validate complaints that federal officials may have steered the grant-application process to ensure that particular reading programs and instructional approaches were widely used by participating schools, and that others were essentially shut out..."

"...Education Week has reported since 2002 many of the concerns among researchers and educators that the program favored only a handful of consultants and commercial products, and the potential financial conflicts between them. In an extensive analysis of documents and e-mail correspondence obtained through state and federal open-records requests, as well as interviews with state officials, the newspaper reported last fall [of 2005] a pattern of behavior that suggested federal employees and their representatives had directed or even pressured states to choose specific assessments, consultants, and certain kinds of texts as conditions for getting funding under Reading First."

May 1, 2007: "...Three former and current University of Oregon researchers who served as advisers to the Reading First program reported at a House hearing that they received significant profits from materials they developed that are now widely used in schools receiving the federal grant funding... Roland H. Good III. Developer, Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills, or DIBELS... DIBELS has yielded more than \$1 million in profits for his company, of which he has a 50 percent share... Mr. Good noted that DIBELS is available free to schools on the Internet. But under questioning from committee members, he acknowledged that many schools purchase neatly packaged versions of the test or spend money on hand-held computers with DIBELS software, all of which add profits to his testing company."

There's much more to say about what to do to hold MCPS and BOE accountable for their role in all of this. This year, the state happens to be auditing MCPS. The auditors need to look specifically at this issue. It may be worthwhile for the Maryland State Special Prosecutor to make inquiries. It may even be worthwhile to ask Congress to have the GAO investigate the role of MCPS and BOE in the forced spread of DIBELS, as we receive federal funding. Let's not forget what BOE member Steve Abrams said on January 27, 2005: "Mr. Abrams wanted to know if there were other areas for Entrepreneurial Activities, such as DIBELS... Mr. Abrams pointed out that in the Entrepreneurial Activities the strength is the educational component, but the weakness is in marketing. The best performance measure is profit, and he did not see any reference in the budget."

It may be the success of marketing and the amount of profit that will interest state and Federal investigators.