The Limits of Science in the Phonics Debate
Patrick Shannon – Penn State University

On August 24, 2007, approximately 2500 members of the International Astronomical Union voted that Pluto wasn’t a planet any longer. Discovered in 1930 by the American astronomer Clyde Tombaugh, recently Pluto had fallen on hard times because it was discovered to lack a roundish shape, to overlap the orbit of Neptune, and to be smaller than other non-planet objects in the solar system. It is an ice ball and not a rock ball or gaseous giant like the other still-planets. Pluto did not go down without a fight, and several members of the IAU confessed that they were teary eyed after the vote. The majority felt, however, that Pluto caused astronomy too many problems to retain its status. If it were to remain after the new discoveries became public, then fifty more objects in the solar system would have to be considered for planet status. Rather than add fifty, IAU members felt it better to tighten the definition of planet a bit and lose one.

The fate of Pluto affords us a unique view of science. Pluto existed as a planet for nearly 80 years because of the scientific culture of instruments (Pluto can’t be seen by the naked eye), scientists, and a particular cosmology. With a change of mind, but not of reality, Pluto ceased to exist as a planet. And the vote was not unanimous. Pluto did not explode or implode with the vote, but its meaning certainly did. Outside of astronomy, Pluto is intelligible only within a framework and narrative of explanation that is associated, but not synonymous, with scientific understanding. Pluto has been embedded for nearly 80 years in professional definition of planetness, and therefore, has occupied a featured place within textbooks and student aphorisms and mobiles. By raising their hands, the IAU changed the web of Pluto’s scientific meaning and its social meaning as well. The reasons for that decision were based on human interests, and not some
objective, natural or disinterested rationale. With that act, the IAU made the limits of science public, demonstrating that it is a rhetorical struggle to determine how people will act on and use the things that exist, rather than a discovery of natural laws and order.

In the United States, reading has suffered a fate similar to that of the solar system. No one disputes the existence of phonics. All theoretical and practical discussions of reading include statements about phonics, its reality, and its definition. The webs of meaning in use that surround phonics are located in and draw significance from cultural and historical settings – even the scientific considerations of phonics. From time to time, collectives of people have come together to cast votes on the place of phonics within reading and the teaching of reading, and the consequences of those votes revolve around the relative power of the groups to command the field in reading education. This power is not limited to coercion through physical force; it also includes the rhetorical frames that capture the imagination and loyalties of participants in reading instruction. As with Pluto, the science and scientists of phonics perform this rhetorical struggle to determine how we will act on phonics and use it in American classrooms.

In what follows, I trace some of these struggles over phonics and science within American reading education during the last century. I begin with Edmond Burke Huey’s *The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading* in 1908 and work through to the 2007 Presidential State of the Union Address. President Bush’s declaration that No Child Left Behind should be reauthorized in 2007 “because it’s working” is an official endorsement of the phonics based reading instruction mandated in American schools since 2002. As all recent reports on the impact of NCLB attest, however, the President’s endorsement and the evaluation are more political, than scientific, statements.
Some Words about History

In 1992, Francis Fukuyama penned *The End of History and the Last Man*, a book in which he argued that the end of the Cold War signaled the end of the linear progression of human history. His premise was that the collapse of the Soviet Union represented the victory of Western liberal democracy over all other forms of government. His theoretical point of origin for this argument was the antagonisms within the Master and Slave dialectic that Hegel posed at the beginning of the 19th century had been substantially resolved in the triumph of the world’s democracies over the world’s dictatorships. The spirit of freedom had finally been realized in the 1990s. Fukuyama based this claim upon what he considered to be irrefutable evidence – the governments in the majority of countries around the world characterized themselves as democracies, governments by the people. Because, at least in theory, democracies provide all individuals the freedom to vote for whom they hope will represent their interests in government, the Master and Slave can coexist, if not live in complete harmony. In Fukuyama’s view, a society’s winners could lie down with its losers in order to form a citizenry secure in the knowledge that they participated in the system that brought about their government. In Hegalian terms, the purpose of history had been realized, and therefore, history had ended.

Fukuyama’s end of history is not Armageddon. Rather, it is the end of the debate over political ideologies because antidemocracies in their many forms had been discredited as unproductive. In Fukuyama’s end of history, the world’s citizens had reached consensus that we have found the one best system of government – Western
democracy. Whether or not Fukuyama is correct about the end of history, his use of Hegelian notions of history fit well with the unfolding of reading education in the United States over the 20th century. For example, Nila Banton Smith's *American Reading Instruction*, considered by many to be the official history of the field, provides a chronology of continuous progress from colonial times to the present. Its "story" tells of American educators' search for the one best method that would bring universal literacy within the United States. The International Reading Association has kept this book in print since the 1960s, with most recent editions including updates by contemporary scholars. Perhaps without intention, Smith followed Hegel's notion of history as the continued progression toward the realization of that spirit of universal literacy. Reading scientists discovered laws of reading, learning and teaching; business produced the technology of instruction based on those laws; and governments supplied the system for delivery of literacy to the populace.

Although Smith and her subsequent editors did not foresee the end of this history for reading education, many current reading experts, the federal government, and publishers proclaim that we have reached consensus within the field concerning how people read, how they learn to read, and how reading should be taught. Most of these claims are based on the National Reading Panel report (2000) that decided that phonological knowledge, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension were the only scientifically verifiable components of reading. The reading wars are over, they declare, and all sides must harness their efforts behind the one best system. According to this logic, No Child Left Behind is the proper mechanism to coordinate all parties in these
efforts by setting a timetable of 2014 to achieve universal literacy in the United States. President Bush believes this end of history should be celebrated.

It so happens this is the fourth anniversary of when I signed the No Child Left Behind Act….I remember when I was the Governor of Texas, there was a lot of debate about different types of curriculum, different ways to teach reading. You might remember these debates. They were full of all kinds of politics. The best way to cut through political debate is to measure. The best way to say, the program I'm using is working is because you’re able to measure to determine whether or not it’s working….The system is working. (Speech at Glen Burnie Elementary School, Maryland, January 9, 2006)

Huey and the Real Rationalization of Reading Instruction

Ignoring the theoretical work of William James and G. Stanley Hall and the praxis of Francis Parker, John Dewey and the women who taught in Quincy, MA schools and the Laboratory School at the University of Chicago, Edmund Burke Huey captured the research and political agenda for a century of educational science in one brief statement. “After all we have thus far been content with trial and error, too often allowing publishers to be our jury, and a real rationalization of the process of inducing the child with the practice of reading has not been made” (1908, 9). By ridiculing trial-and-error methods and deference to textbooks in the classroom, Huey sought to reduce the role of teachers and publishers in future discussions of reading education. He completed his proposed hierarchy of authority by chastising psychologists (the implied “we:” in his statement) for acceding power to publishers. Finally, he identified psychologists as the only group
capable of performing a real rationalization of reading and instruction, and therefore, the primary group to assume authority over scientifically managed reading instruction. Psychologists would develop true understanding of reading and the teaching of reading by subjecting both to scientific scrutiny. Through basic and applied research, psychologists would formulate the guiding principles for both curriculum and instruction. Publishers would translate the principles into technology for classroom use, and then teachers would implement the technology.

The National Society for the Study of Education (NSSE) was among the first to take up Huey’s challenge, by appointing a Committee for the Economy of Time in Education in 1911. This group was charged with translating Fredrick W. Taylor’s system for the standardization of production from industry to schools. Standardization was to be accomplished by dividing the production into its elemental parts, measuring the efficiency and effectiveness of each movement, and then coordinating those movements into the most productive flow by listing the steps of each task on an instructional card that workers were to follow. William S. Gray, Ernest Horn, James Fleming Hosic, and E. L. Thorndike among others began by surveying existing curriculum and practices and subjecting each aspect to the equivalent of time motion studies in order to determine which led to the greatest gain on the crude standardized measures available at that time. As participant Harold Rugg would later report, this work was an orgy of numbers that William S. Gray translated into 48 principles of reading instruction for the Committee’s fourth report (1917). Gray concluded that it was nearly impossible to compare methods of instruction because the variability of effectiveness and efficiency of teachers within methods was at least as great as the differences among methods. A real rationalization of
reading instruction, then, would await technological mediation in which within method variation could be reduced significantly.

In 1918, the NSSE formed the Committee on Materials in Education by combining the Committee on the Measurement of Educational Products and the Committee on the Economy of Time in Education. “At this point, the Society assigned to the present Committee the task of embodying, in concrete materials to be used in classrooms, the principles arrived at by the earlier committees” (Bagley, 1920). To be certain, the reading textbooks of the 1920s began to incorporate principles from Gray’s list – more emphasis on silent reading in upper grades, fewer multisyllabic words in early readers, more repetition of vocabulary across lessons – but the most significant changes were the expansion of teachers guides and the use of a single textbook series across elementary school grades. Prior to the 1920s, it was common practice to use multiple series within and across grades within a school, presenting students with several sets of vocabulary and rules to learn. Moreover, publishers gave few directions on how to use their books – sometimes a single paragraph or page of general instructions were offered. Within the decade, all series included separate teachers manuals ranging from 200 to 400 pages in length, with explicit language for teachers to follow and use during lessons.

Gray became a coauthor of Elson readers (later Scott Foresman Dick and Jane series) in 1930. Under his direction, this basal reading series developed a near monopoly within the field, controlling over 80 percent of the market and directing most of the competing series to ape its content and format. Within these materials, phonics was defined as a whole to part process in which word recognition preceded and directed students’ attention to individual letter/sound relationships. Surveys during the early
1960s found that teacher guidebooks directed instruction in “almost every [school] system” (Austin and Morrison, 1963) and that research and opinions of a very few people directed the field of reading education (Barton and Wilder, 1964).

Jeanne Chall and the First Grade Studies

Following the launching of Sputnik in 1957, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act, which provided substantial funding to improve science and engineering education and acknowledged that American schools in general needed reform, if the United States was to win the Cold War. At that time, the National Conference of Research in English established a special committee on reading in order to reform reading education (Guy Bond, Jeanne Chall, Theodore Clymer, Donald Durrell, William Sheldon, Joseph Soffetti, Ralph Staiger, and Russell Stauffer). That committee decided upon a two-pronged approach, Jeanne Chall would conduct a reinterpretation of existing research on reading instruction (funded by the Carnegie Foundation) and other committee members would begin a large-scale cooperative experiment with clearly defined goals that could provide solid evidence on which method of teaching reading brought the best results (funded by the Cooperative Research Branch of the U. S. Office of Education). Of the 76 applications, 27 projects were selected to compare a variety of experimental curricula against existing basal reading series (with studies directed by J. Chall, E. Fry, A. Harris, A. Heilman, H. Murphy, R. Ruddell, G. Spache and others). Twenty-one of the directors were from universities, five from state departments of education, and one from a school district.
When the studies ended, the coordinators of the project concluded that “reading programs are not equally effective in all situations” because a successful treatment in one setting achieved poor results in another (Bond & Dykstra, 1967, 428). Although most innovative combinations of basal reading series with phonics instruction appeared to be superior to the basal series alone, no combination was found to be effective in all situations. In sum, these researchers of the First Grade Studies concluded that there was no one best way to teach young children to read. From her review of existing research literature, Chall concurred that no single best method could be specified, but she was much more forceful in her endorsement of phonics – “School systems can improve reading standards by using one of the complete code-emphasis programs or a separate supplemental phonics programs as a replacement for the word-perception program in the conventional basal reading series.” (Chall, 1967, 310).

Although unable to determine the one best system of reading, these studies and Chall’s review of literature enhanced the position of synthetic phonics in which instruction on letters and sound would precede word recognition. No one found phonics alone to be the solution to universal literacy, but many found that part to whole phonics improved the efficiency and effectiveness of early instruction. Along with evaluation procedures for Projects Head Start and Follow Through, the First Grade Studies helped to instantiate scores on standardized tests as the primary criterion for judging the success of a particular method or program. The ambivalent results of the First Grade Studies did not provide the market conditions for publishers to make major changes within their programs. As Chall would report over the next decades, the rhetoric within basal
materials would change, but the whole to part orientation of their approach to beginning reading would remain unaltered.

We have guidelines concerning the accuracy of our research. Most of us rely on a statistical significance of 5 percent or 1 percent to indicate that our findings occurred not from chance alone. But we seem not to have guidelines for turning research findings to guides for practice. How much research evidence is needed to turn our research findings into recommendations for practice? Should we rely on the standards of individual researchers, or do we need some common guidelines? How many confirmations of the First Grade Studies do we need before we put its findings to use? (Chall, 1999, 9-10)

Fifteen Years of National Reading Reports

Between 1985 and 2000, the federal government commissioned four state-of-the-science reports on reading in order to inform public policy, curriculum, and instruction. Although the funding agencies varied slightly among the four reports, the pattern of their development and composition were identical. Government officials within the educational bureaucracy subcontracted the report to members of hand picked committees to oversee the gathering, analysis, and reporting of existing research studies. The committees and report writers were not directed on what to conclude or how to deliver those conclusions in any of these reports, however, National Reading Panel member S. J. Samuels’ statement at the International Reading Association Convention in Chicago (2006) cautioned:
The areas of focus and the methods of analyses were decided by who was selected to the panel. The five areas of emphasis in the report do not capture all there is to reading. Rather they are the specialties of panel members. Tom Trabasso in comprehension, Linnea Ehri in phonics, me for fluency. I fought for my topic as did the others. The outcome could not have been otherwise. That does not compromise the report. It simply demonstrates its limits. (Samuels, 2006)

In 1983, The National Institute of Education commissioned the National Academy of Education to convene a panel to survey the research on reading in order to make recommendations that will promote the United States to become a nation of readers (Richard Anderson, Isabel Beck, Jere Brophy, Jeanne Chall, Robert Glaser, Lenore Ringler, David Rumelhart, Dorothy Strickland, and Sue Talbot). In Becoming a Nation of Readers, phonics was addressed in a chapter entitled Emerging Literacy that included a range of topics: parental involvement, oral language development, writing, comprehension and materials. The authors discuss research findings and conclude, “phonics instruction improves children’s ability to identify words” (p 57). They contextualize that statement by referring to the “natural relationship between word identification and comprehension” and make recommendations for revision of early textbooks to take advantage of that relationship. They return to the topic in the Recommendations sections at the end of the report. “Phonics instruction should be kept simple and it should be completed by the end of the second grade for most children” (p 118).
Senator Ed Zorinsky proposed that the Department of Education compile a list of commercial phonics programs that met the standards of the Commission on Reading in order to inform public schools.

Mr. President, this amendment has been cleared on both sides. It simply follows up on last year’s report of the Commission on Reading, *Becoming a Nation of Readers*. It is recommended that well designed phonics instruction be used through the second grade, but it did not indicate specifically which beginning reading programs provide such instruction. (Zorinsky, 1986, 1)

The Department packaged Zorinsky’s request in its call for proposals for a National Center for the Study of Reading. P. David Pearson was candid in his acknowledgement that the Center’s funding was contingent on subcontracting a report on phonics instruction. “We could not ignore this issue.” (Pearson, 1990, ix). Marilyn Adams’s *Beginning to Read* is that report. Adams provided an encyclopedic treatment of phonics, its place in reading, and its teaching. “In summary, deep and thorough knowledge of letters, spelling patterns, and words, and of the phonological translations of all three, are of inescapable importance to both skillful reading and its acquisition” (p. 426). The problem, she found, was that most of the programs to teach phonics were “a waste of time.”

Her report is scholarly, highly technical, and lengthy, and passed through an Office of Educational Research and Improvement advisory panel (Ira Aaron, Jeanne Chall, Bernice Cullinan, Linnea Ehri, Philip Gough, Dorothy Strickland, and Robert Ruddell). Cullinan and Strickland wrote an afterward for the report to place phonics in
its proper context. Before it was released, the Center for the Study of Reading produced an executive summary to help school personal glean the expected message from her exhaustive review. According to all reviewers, the summary reduced Adams’ argument considerably, promoting explicit and direct instruction in phonics more stridently. Even Adams accepted that this summary simplified her message “I guess I agree that it is more firmly centered on the knowledge and processes directly supporting word recognition than the book” (Adams, 1991, 390).

In 1995, the Office of Special Education Programs, the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, and the National Institute on Child Health and Human Development contracted the National Research Council to convene a committee of experts “to conduct a study of the effectiveness of interventions for young children who are at risk of having problems learning to read.” (Snow, 1998, 32). The committee included Catherine Snow (who with colleagues wrote the final report), Marilyn Adams, Barbara Foorman, Edward Kameenui, William Labov, Charles Perfetti, Sally Shaywitz, Keith Stanovich, Elizabeth Sulzby and others. Only one member taught in public schools. According to the report, the committee worked for a consensus model in which definitions of reading and research were reconciled through discussion among members before surveys of existing research were conducted. In this way, the report carries the authority of the committee, the National Research Council and the government agencies. Although the committee was charged to address students at risk, they state, “our recommendations extend to all children” (p. 32).

*Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* reiterates the importance of the role of phonics in learning to read. It couples this conclusion with a stronger statement
about oral language and phonological knowledge. The committee is more confident in its recommendations for direct instruction than either *Becoming a Nation of Readers* or *Beginning to Read*, perhaps echoing Chall's call for heavy code emphasis for all students. Making an inference from research on expert readers, the committee warns teachers that effective readers do not use context when they read -- rather they employ orthographic and phonic knowledge to work through troubling spots in a text. The report does not recommend any specific early reading program. Rather it suggests that phonics instruction must be accompanied by attention to meaning and a lively oral classroom culture.

Before the *Preventing Reading Difficulties* report was published, Congress directed the head of the National Institute for Child Health and Development and the Secretary of Education to convene a National Reading Panel to review and assess the research on teaching reading with direct implications for classroom practice. The charge set empirical evidence as the criterion for judging the value of reading research related to teaching, requiring experimental results as the determiner of causality. Panel members included Linnea Ehri, Michael Kamil, S. J. Samuels, Timothy Shanahan, Sally Shaywitz, Thomas Trabasso, Johanna Williams, and Dale Willows with one school administrator, Joanne Yatvin. The panel distinguished its work from the *Presenting Reading Difficulties* committee activities by including only experimental studies with sufficient statistical power to be included in the meta-analyses for each of the five categories: Alphabetics, Comprehension, Fluency, Teacher Education, and Technology. The Panel's choice to include only experimental findings significantly reduced the pool of possible studies on reading and teaching that could be included in their analyses, enabling the
statistics to do the work of the other committees. That is, the statistical method, and not
the Panel members, seems to have determined the conclusions listed in the report.

The National Reading Panel concluded that direct instruction in alphabettics
(phonological awareness and phonics), fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension were
necessary for successful reading achievement. Because of lack of appropriate
experimental studies, the Panel's recommendations about teacher education and
technology were labeled speculative. The Bush Administration accepted the Report as
the justification for the Reading First Initiative within the No Child Left Behind iteration
of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 2002, which required that each state
receiving federal funds for schooling would develop world class academic standards, test
annually each student from third through eighth grades and then once in high school on
reading (and other subjects), and demonstrate that all students were making adequate
yearly progress toward the goal of 100 percent proficiency by 2014. In order to qualify
for funding, states would ensure that all schools were implementing scientific reading
instruction based on the National Reading Panel Report with sufficient fidelity in order to
reduce the within-method variation among teachers.

The End of History?

In An Elusive Science: The Troubling History of Educational Research, Ellen
Condliffe Lagemann describes the study of education as a continuing process of
specialization in which expertise and authority became defined more narrowly. The
study of reading and reading instruction demonstrate this point. Consider the
memberships of the committees that set the definitions of both across the 20th century.
Huey attempted to rally psychologists to employ science in order to rationalize reading instruction because teachers and administrators had not accomplished the work. Composed of school administrators and professors of pedagogy, the Committee on the Economy of Time in Education worked inductively to survey the schools in order to develop a scientific management of reading instruction. For the First Grade Studies, professors of education used formal experiments in classrooms across the country in order to determine what worked for reading instruction. The federal reports on reading accelerated the process of specialization, squeezing out the professors of education and replacing them with psychologists. The National Academy of Education’s Commission on Reading included four psychologists among its nine members. Psychologist Marilyn Adams worked with an advisory panel with four psychologists. The Preventing Reading Difficulties panel members were primarily psychologists and linguists, and the members of the National Reading Panel were nearly all psychologists as well.

As S. J. Samuels concluded in his remarks quoted above, the backgrounds of the committee members who defined reading and reading instruction for a century do not necessarily compromise their reports. They do, however, speak directly to the reports’ limitations. As the backgrounds became more consistent across members, consensus was easier to reach, however it also became easier to exclude diverse definitions, descriptions and values from consideration. At the beginning of the century, Huey sought to exclude teachers’ knowledge, historical trends, or publishers’ interests. The Committee on the Economy of Time acted to eliminate the craft of teaching. The First Grade Studies and Chall’s The Great Debate assumed that child centered approaches and research had little to offer a definition of reading and reading instruction. The federal reports continued this
process until the National Reading Panel excluded all possibilities that history, sociology, anthropology, feminism, politics, race theory, philosophy, or literary theory could offer anything of value about reading or reading instruction. Like Pluto in the solar system after the IAU vote, the meaning of this considerable body of work on reading has been changed fundamentally by the Panel’s decision. And this final (?) report (seven years since its publication) is expected to end the history of reading education.

Yet as the American and British governments are slowly learning in Iraq, debates about alternative forms of government are not completed concerning Western democracy. Reading education in the United States has a parallel here as well. Teachers and schools did not greet the National Reading Panel report as if the one best system had been discovered. School personnel did not rush to remake their reading programs after the images drawn by the Report. And this pattern has been consistent during the last century. If this were not true, Huey’s challenge would have been sufficient to change American reading education for the century. But that has not been the case. Teachers and administrators have clung to traditions for some reason, claiming with some justification that their work has been successful.

Consider the 2003 Progress in International Reading Literacy report. The United States ranked third statistically when reading test scores were compared for nine and ten year old students among 35 nations. It should be noted that these data were collected before NCLB when the National Reading Panel implied that American teachers did not know how to teach reading. When the report’s test scores were disaggregated by income and race, however, the uneven distribution of success in American reading education becomes apparent. White, non-poor, students scored 24 points above the leading nation,
Sweden, while the scores of racial minorities fell among the lowest nations. Whether these biases affirm or create inequalities across social life depends on the political orientation of the interpreter.

Frustrated with the reluctance of school personnel to reform reading education, the Bush Administration chose to put the force of the federal government behind the scientific authority of the National Reading Panel, inscribing it as the foundation of the Reading First Initiative within the NCLB law. Reading First required all states: 1) to develop high standards for reading education, 2) to test annually between third and eighth grade and once during high school, and 3) to submit such plans and tests for federal approval to insure that it followed the evidence based direction of the National Panel’s report.

Let’s be clear here. The National Reading Panel’s recommendations had to be forced upon schools because its authority could not win in the market of ideas. According to the recent Department of Education Inspector General’s Report, federal pressure to conform has been considerable. The Inspector General concluded that Reading First leadership stacked review panels of state proposals, advocating scripted direct instruction in alphabets through a limited set of commercial programs. Furthermore, the report found that panel members benefited financially from these forced adoptions. Moreover, the deception appeared to be intentional. Reading First Director Chris Doherty wrote to another official. “They are trying to crash our party and we need to beat the [expletive deleted] out of them in front of all the other would be party crashers who are standing on the front lawn waiting to see how we welcome these dirtbags” (p. 24)
Perhaps such Machiavellian means could be justified if NCLB and Reading First was “working” toward its lofty goal to close the gaps between the white and minority and middle and low-income students. According to the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data, however, NCLB is not improving scores in general nor closing the achievement gap, despite five years of phonics first and fast. President Bush’s declaration that NCLB is working appears to be based on the modest optimism of the Education Trust report, *Primary Progress, Secondary Challenge* (Hall and Kennedy, 2006) which listed modest gains in state reading test scores for elementary school students and little improvement for middle and secondary schools. However, President Bush could not have attended to the Education Trust’s concern for the discrepancies between state and national reading test scores. For example, 83 percent of students reached proficiency on the state test in Alabama - 82 percent in New Jersey, and 81 percent in Oregon. The NAEP proficiency rates were 22 percent, 37 percent and 29 percent respectively. It’s clear that phonics-centered instruction is not a natural law, but rather the result of rhetorical struggles between groups with unequal power.

In *Tracking Achievement Gaps and Assessing the Impact of NCLB on the Gaps*, the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University (CRP) argues that the Ed Trust conclusions of early success “rest on misleading interpretations of flawed data” (Lee, 2006, p. 7) – attending only to the raw numbers who reach proficiency and the gaps between races and income levels and jumping to ideological conclusions based on the organization’s support for test driven changes. CRP emphasizes the national data because the states have a vested interest in showing quick gains in order to qualify for more federal funding. The
report's conclusions are direct and devastating to any claims that NCLB and Reading
First are working:

1. NCLB has not had a significant general impact on reading achievement across the
nation or states. At the current rate of growth only 24 to 34 percent of American
students will reach the required proficiency in 2014 as required by law.

2. NCLB is not closing the racial gaps, although slightly more minority students are
reading proficiently. Only 24 percent of minorities will reach proficiency by
2014 at the current rate.

3. NCLB has not succeeded in the first generation states (e.g., Florida, North
Carolina, and Texas) where NCLB type reforms started before 2002. More time
with Reading First conditions does not promise greater success.

4. NCLB state data are misleading, and particularly so for poor and minority
students. For white students, state test proficiency rates overstate success at a 2 to
1 ratio of false positives on NAEP. For Black students, the false positives are 4 to
1 between state and national proficiency in reading.

In his introduction to the CRP report, Gary Orfield concluded “policy makers must be
ready to critically examine why so little has been accomplished, why officials are
making misleading and inaccurate claims, and what can be done to use the invaluable
data and focus created by the NCLB to begin to actually accelerate progress toward
the objectives” (p. 8). By President Bush's criterion, measurement, NCLB has failed.
Clearly, forcing teachers to employ direct instruction scripted lessons in alphabatics
does not accomplish the goals of enhancing reading achievement in general or
overcoming America's historical biases related to class or race to narrow achievement
gaps. The National Reading Panel's decision to exclude all research except
experimental and correlation studies from their report has not served American
schools, teachers and students well. Perhaps Americans should rethink the century of
specialization within the reading education field in order to invite new members into
the groups who vote to determine the nature of reading and teaching. This group
might look back to another pioneer of American psychology William James, who
wrote:

You make a great, a very great mistake, if you think that psychology, being the
science of mind's laws, is something from which you can deduce definite
programmes and schemes and methods of instruction for immediate schoolroom
use. Psychology is a science, and teaching is an art, and sciences never generate
arts directly out of themselves.

Certainly, phonics will appear somewhere in the new definition of reading and within the
curriculum as well. Phonics is important, but it is not the center of the reading instruction
solar system.

References


