

## Lawmakers seek probe of Reading First program

By Greg Toppo  
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A bipartisan group of lawmakers wants a congressional investigation of President Bush's \$1-billion-a-year national reading program, saying top advisers might have illegally influenced what books schools buy to teach reading.

Lawmakers, including the top Republican and Democrat on the Senate Education Committee, are meeting this week with officials from the Government Accountability Office, the investigative arm of Congress. Committee chairman Mike Enzi, R-Wyo., Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., and three others want to know whether several publishers got preferential treatment because Reading First advisers also consulted for them and in some cases wrote materials. They also are asking whether states were pressured to buy the materials so they could get federal dollars.

Reading First's director, Chris Doherty, denies the allegations. "We know the states don't feel pushed in a certain way," he says.

Education Department investigators already are looking into Reading First, one of Bush's key education initiatives. They expect to probe contracts in, among other places, New York City - which in 2002 adopted a reading program whose then-owner had direct ties to Bush - and in Georgia, where a small publisher says her books were improperly rejected.

Reading First gives schools more than \$1 billion a year over six years to help teach reading to low-income children. Advocates say it has helped them train teachers and purchase materials.

But critics say the program has been mismanaged. "It's an issue of fair access," says Connie Briggs, an Emporia (Kansas) State University education professor and president of a non-profit group that markets a program called Reading Recovery. She accuses Reading First officials of spreading "misinformation" about Reading Recovery, which has seen a drop in use since 2002.

The American Association of Publishers and Sen. Richard Lugar, R-Ind., have complained to Education Secretary Margaret Spellings about apparent conflicts of interest among Reading First officials who have also consulted for textbook companies, and in some cases have even written their textbooks.

The issue first came to light in complaints filed last spring by Robert Slavin, a Johns Hopkins University researcher and chairman of the Success For All Foundation, a Baltimore non-profit that markets its own reading program. Slavin says Reading First has hurt his sales while boosting sales of major textbooks, in many cases for programs whose effectiveness is untested.

The conflict is unusual, since both sides agree that phonics plays a key role in reading. What's at stake is local autonomy and market share. Though reading has always been big business, observers say Reading First could narrow what is used by all schools, because many adopt the same publisher's programs for all grades citywide.

"It's the first time to my knowledge there's been enough money to get the attention of publishing companies," says Cindy Cupp, a former teacher and Georgia education official who now runs a small publishing company in Savannah, Ga. "When you've got \$6 billion hanging out there, you can get the attention of a whole lot of people."