

# **Schools Here Spurn Some Federal Funds**

**Say Teaching Would Suffer**

**The Capital Times :: METRO :: 1C**

**Saturday, October 16, 2004**

**By Lee Sensenbrenner The Capital Times**

A federal grant that funded a reading program at five Madison elementary school is expiring because administrators say it is too prescriptive, locking teachers into methods they say are less effective than their own.

That decision, announced to School Board members in a memo Friday by Superintendent Art Rainwater, affects Hawthorne, Glendale, Orchard Ridge, Midvale and Lincoln elementary schools.

It will mean that the district will annually accept, on average, about \$100,000 less in federal Reading First funds for each of these schools for the next two to four years, according to Assistant Superintendent Jane Belmore.

But Belmore said that continuing to take part in the program would mean incrementally ceding control over how reading is taught in Madison's schools. So far, she said, the grant money has not demanded a substantial departure from the methods already in place; next year would be different.

In his memo, Rainwater stresses the successes the district claims in its efforts to improve students' reading. For example, more than 80 percent of third-graders scored proficient or above in the state's last round of standardized reading tests.

He said the district's current approach "is resulting in continual growth in numbers of proficient and advanced readers and is resulting in a continued narrowing of the achievement gap."

At least one board member, though, is concerned that turning

down federal money may draw criticism as the district prepares for one or more referendums this spring, and board members should have been brought into the decision rather than told about it after the fact.

"It's a decision that the board should have made, and we should make it with better information than this," board member Ruth Robarts said, referring to Rainwater's eight-page memo. Dense with educational jargon, the memo, written directly to board members, contained passages such as this: "During September, MMSD created the CLIP Scope and Sequence, CLIP Teacher Planning Guide and CLIP Implementation Monitoring System in response to the concerns noted from Dr. Howe. We felt that these expansions added value to the program." Board member Carol Carstensen said Friday she "got about halfway through" the memo.

Carstensen, though, said the district is wise to be skeptical of some federal grants, which may unnecessarily restrict teaching methods while funneling money to private education companies with political ties.

Belmore said that during the last year, the Reading First grants were used to buy materials and pay for staff development. If the district continued with the program, it would pay for further testing and assessment, as well as "coaches" to direct reading instruction.

"We really don't think it's in the best interest of our kids," Belmore said. "We're closing the achievement gap and we're becoming more and more strategic in how we are teaching our children. That's what we want to continue."

## **School District Turns Down Money Because Of Conditions Attached**

**Wisconsin State Journal :: LOCAL/WISCONSIN :: C1**

**Saturday, October 16, 2004**

## **Nathan Leaf Wisconsin State Journal**

The Madison School District will pass on a potential \$2 million in federal funding for reading programs in five elementary schools, district officials said Friday.

District Superintendent Art Rainwater said the money, which was available through a program called Reading First, would have forced the district to change what he called an already successful reading program.

"I believe very strongly that if we would have accepted the money ... we would have injured the students in our district," he said.

Jane Belmore, assistant superintendent for elementary schools for the district, said Friday that the schools -- Hawthorne, Glendale, Orchard Ridge and Lincoln -- already received \$100,000 each for the 2003-04 school year as part of the program.

The grant guaranteed \$100,000 for each school per year from 2003-04 through the 2005-06 school year.

The schools would have been eligible to reapply for the grants for an additional two years after that.

But Belmore said federal guidelines were changed after the first year and became too restrictive.

The new guidelines would have required teachers to use scripted curriculums rather than choosing the curriculum based on their own assessment of student needs, she said.

"As we reviewed our grant this year, we found that we would have had to make some changes in our program that would not be in the best interest of our students," Belmore said. "The research has shown that instruction based on assessment with a high quality teacher is really what is best for students."

Belmore said the district's own reading program has been successful with 80 percent of students reading at a proficient level. "We just couldn't justify dismantling that," she said.

Rainwater said the grant money was outside of the district's budget. "This would have been totally above anything we budget," he said. "It's not something we could have used anywhere else."

"We actually made some pretty significant enhancement to our

reading program" with the funding and technical support in the first year, Rainwater said. He said the decision to reject the money was his, in consultation with other district administrators and the principals of the five schools.

Madison School Board member Carol Carstensen said she agreed with the decision. "I have felt for a long time that the attempt by the federal government to put every school district in a strait jacket is absurd," she said. "The fact is that we've got a program that works."

"It's never great when you refuse money but I don't think we had a choice," Carstensen said.

Board member Johnny Winston Jr. said he was not familiar enough with the issue to comment. Attempts to reach the other five School Board members were unsuccessful.

## **Reading Program Is A Success**

**Wisconsin State Journal :: OPINION :: A8**

**Monday, December 6, 2004**

**Jane Belmore**

While we strongly believe that the editorial board of the Wisconsin State Journal has every right to take a position critical of the Madison School District, it is vitally important to get the facts right so that readers can accurately make their own judgments. The editorial, "Reading between the lines of rigidity" fails the test.

The editorial contends that third grade reading test scores have actually declined since 2001 at Lincoln Elementary. Not true. In fact, Midvale/Lincoln students have improved in that period. In 2001, 52.7 percent of Midvale/Lincoln third graders were "proficient" and "advanced" while in 2004, 66.9 percent of the students were proficient or advanced, according to the Department of Public Instruction's Web site. This is a 14.2 percent increase.

In fact, since the inception of the district's current classroom reading program during the 1997-98 school year, all of the schools that participated in the Reading First grant have improved:

\* Glendale, from 34.5 percent to 67.3 percent.

\* Hawthorne, from 31.1 percent to 71.2 percent.

\* Midvale/Lincoln, from 44.8 percent to 66.9 percent.

\* Orchard Ridge, from 69.3 percent to 82.6 percent.

The Reading First grant would have required a complete change in the district's classroom reading program. It called for us to dismantle this program which has enabled us to make gains towards eliminating the minority student achievement gap on the third grade reading test -- and then to purchase and implement a program that has no documented record of success.

The editorial confuses the reader by comparing "apples to airplanes" when it implies that the choice for the district was between one of Reading First approved programs and the Reading Recovery program. Reading Recovery has nothing to do with Reading First, aside from the fact that both have "reading" in the titles.

Reading Recovery is an individual intervention program used only with first grade students who need additional instruction outside of the classroom reading program. In contrast, Reading First programs are used as the fundamental classroom reading program for all students.

The editorial says the district should have accepted a grant that would have thrown out our successful reading program at five of our schools, "while simultaneously getting the federal evaluators to take a good, hard look (at the district's current program)." While we didn't throw out our program, we did spend the first year of the grant working with the guidelines and getting the federal evaluators to take a "good, hard look" at our program. We made modifications and improvements and there was give and take, but the bottom line for the U.S. Dept. of Education was to do things their way, or no way. We chose to continue our successful classroom reading program.

We are deeply committed to ensuring that every child in Madison schools can read at or above grade level. It is one of the Madison School Board's goals for the district. We believe it can be done and our data shows it is being done. We work towards that end every day. Disagreement on substance is expected, but please don't muddle the truth to the extent that your readers aren't getting an accurate picture.

# Madison Schools Distort Reading Data

Wisconsin State Journal :: OPINION :: B2

Sunday, December 12, 2004

**Mark S. Seidenberg**

As a taxpayer who believes in the importance of reading, I'm having trouble understanding why Madison schools Superintendent Art Rainwater turned down \$2 million that was supposed to be used to help educationally disadvantaged children in five Madison schools.

The superintendent and Assistant Superintendent Jane Belmore have offered explanations that don't wash. The district accepted funds for the first year of a five-year award under the federal government's Reading First program. After the first year, the program was assessed by an educational consultant hired to evaluate how the funds were being used. The evaluator found that reading programs in the target schools were not adequately documented. She asked for information about "scope and sequence" (educationese for "what will be taught when") and daily instructional activities. The school district in its wisdom decided that rather than comply with these conditions it would give back the money. Why?

Rainwater's explanation of this precipitous decision - echoed in published comments by Belmore and school board member Carol Carstensen - is that accepting the Reading First funds would have required him to "eliminate" the district's current reading curriculum - the one used throughout the district.

These assertions are unequivocally false. The acceptance of Reading First funding has no bearing on the curriculum used in other schools. The evaluator clearly requested changes in the Reading First program at the five schools, not the district as a whole. If the school district administrators were confused about this, they could have requested clarification. If they felt the conditions were unreasonable, they could have appealed.

Rainwater's explanation also emphasized the fact that 80 percent of Madison children score at or above grade level. But the funds were targeted for students who do not score at these levels. Current practices are clearly not working for these children, and the Reading First funds would have supported activities designed to help them.

Madison's reading curriculum undoubtedly works well in many settings. For whatever reasons, many children at the five targeted schools had fallen seriously behind. It is not an indictment of the district to acknowledge that these children might have benefited from additional resources and intervention strategies.

In her column, Belmore also emphasized the 80 percent of the children who are doing well, but she provided additional statistics indicating that test scores are improving at the five target schools. Thus she argued that the best thing is to stick with the current program rather than use the Reading First money. Belmore has provided a lesson in the selective use of statistics. It's true that third grade reading scores improved at the schools between 1998 and 2004. However, at Hawthorne, scores have been flat (not improving) since 2000; at Glendale, flat since 2001; at Midvale/Lincoln, flat since 2002; and at Orchard Ridge they have improved since 2002 - bringing them back to slightly higher than where they were in 2001.

In short, these schools are not making steady upward progress, at least as measured by this test.

Belmore's attitude is that the current program is working at these schools and that the percentage of advanced/proficient readers will eventually reach the districtwide success level. But what happens to the children who have reading problems now? The school district seems to be writing them off.

So why did the school district give the money back? Belmore provided a clue when she said that continuing to take part in the program would mean incrementally ceding control over how reading is taught in Madison's schools (Capital Times, Oct 16). In other words, Reading First is a push down the slippery slope toward federal control over public education.

Parents and educators are right to be concerned about the incursion into local school districts via legislation such as "Leave No Child Behind." However, the place to make a stand was not refusing monies that could have been used in many ways to help children in need. Our school administrators placed their politics above their responsibility to educate all of our children.