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STATE FINANCIAL AID FOR READING SUPPORT

by Roy J. Butz

As this is being written many local school districts are in a quandary about their special reading programs. Their quandary has been induced by changes in reading support legislation and the projected rules promulgated by the Michigan Department of Education (MDE). The legislation passed by the Michigan legislature provides that monies provided under Section 12 (f) of the State Aid Act shall be used to reimburse services provided for students in grades 4 through 12:

APPROVAL FOR REIMBURSEMENT WILL BE GRANTED FOR REMEDIAL READING PROGRAMS SERVING CHILDREN IN GRADES 4 THROUGH 12 ONLY.

R 388.256 provides that, "Rule 6. A school district establishing a remedial reading program under the provisions of this act shall submit to the state board of education a tentative budget, PROJECTED PROGRAM OBJECTIVES, AND EVALUATION DESIGN FOR THE REMEDIAL READING PROGRAM as part of its application for approval. The state board of education shall require such reports and evaluations of such programs as it deems necessary."

This year's legislation provides \$3,400,000 for formula reimbursement of "remedial reading" programs. It should be noted that neither the governor's executive budget, nor the budget prepared by the MDE requested any funds at all

for remedial reading. Those funds which were appropriated are available only because of the hard work of many reading teachers, parents, administrators, and insightfully supportive legislators. However, somewhere in the complex maze of negotiations, the unwanted and unwise, grade restrictive language was included.

Other restrictions in the legislation make it impossible for districts which receive funding under Section 3, compensatory education, to fund any programs through the use of Section 12 (f) funds. This is particularly interesting because Section 3 funds must be expended below grade 7. This means that almost all those districts which are receiving Section 3 funds must either drop secondary reading programs formerly funded, in part, through Section 12 (f) reimbursement, or find other funds to support such programs. In many instances the partial funding received under Section 12 (f) has meant the difference between the existence and the abolition of secondary reading programs.

For the past 20 years we have sought, with much success, to make teachers and administrators realize that it was not necessary to let a child fail for four or five years before intervening on his behalf. In this effort reading specialists have been supported by research study after research study, many direct by-products of studies relating to racial integration and compensatory education for the socially and economically disadvantaged child, all

studies pointing toward one major conclusion -- early intervention is absolutely necessary. With much success, programs funded under Section 12 (f) have sought to implement a wide variety of programs to that end. Programs funded under Section 12 (f) have included special Kindergarten programs for children evidencing significant lack of language and reading readiness; programs have been established to identify the high-risk child in first-grade; a small-group and individualized intervention in grades two and three has become the norm. These changes have resulted in many more children being able to bridge early gaps and enjoy a meaningful and profitable elementary education experience.

Yet, now, after the school year has begun, after teachers have been employed and programs established, we are legally charged to drop all that is supported by both empirical research and practical experience and revert to a pattern which demands successive years of failure for children before we may intervene. It remains unclear as to what the role of the MDE was in regard to the form of the legislation as passed. However, if their personnel were aware of the restrictive phrasing, no current evidence exists that suggests they moved to have it eliminated prior to passage or that they are at this time actively seeking legislative action to remove the restrictive phrasing. When one considers the drive of the MDE for early intervention, was recommended by Dr. Porter to the State Board of Education in a report to the board last January 26th., the failure to request the deletion of the inhibiting language is most puzzling.

The position advanced by representatives of the MDE, at hearings relevant to the Rules and Regulations for implementing this year's Section 12 (f) legislation, was

that the grade restrictive language was legislatively binding and there was nothing that the MDE could do about it. In the strictest technical sense this was most accurate. The MDE cannot abridge legislative law. However, they can and do seek to initiate legislative action for what they deem to be appropriate educational concerns. Therefore, it is within the power of the MDE to recommend to the State Board of Education that the board request that the legislature delete the grade restrictive phrasing. To date, no such action has been forthcoming.

As to specifying program objectives and an appropriate evaluation design, most of the reading leadership in Michigan firmly supports such action. The only concern expressed is that many school districts have not formally defined their programs into documentary form and that the lead time for doing so at this time is inadequate. Additionally, some districts will need the assistance of outside consultants to evaluate and formally designate program objectives and evaluation design in such a fashion that clarity of definition can be welded to validity of evaluation design. Unquestionably administrators and reading leadership personnel must undertake such action, if not already completed, and provide documentation as rapidly as possible.

It is the belief of the writer that there is a basic lack of understanding at the highest levels of the MDE of the varied nature of reading programs operating under the rubric of "*remedial reading*". The blame for this lack of understanding must be divided between the MDE and those of us responsible for implementing programs funded under Section 12 (f). The MDE has failed to undertake either provision of curricular development for funded programs, or any substantive evaluation of funded programs with an eye to disseminating

data therefrom. Reading people have been outrageously remiss in not moving to fill the vacuum left by the operating procedures of the MDE. We should have moved to implement substantive evaluation procedures and program specification and used the results in joint regional or state conferences to identify promising programs and extinguish ineffective ones. Other actions relevant to establishing the need for: staff development activities, curriculum revision and innovation, materials evaluation, and improved preparation for leadership personnel in reading should have been initiated with or without the urging of any entities other than the professional reading associations.

At this time we must move on two fronts: immediately we must, and are, seeking to have the legislature pass amending legislation to delete the

grade restrictive language; and, we must move with dispatch to build an empirical body of data which will provide a realistic rationale for the passage of a basic reading support services bill. If reading personnel in Michigan can deliver the kind of data required it may be possible to move toward the construction of a positive program of reading support services which will go well beyond the myopia of *"remedial reading"*. Reading teachers do not wish to spend eternity with their finger in a dyke. It is our desire to aid in the reorganization of the curriculum, the more efficient use of materials, and in the development and implementation of staff development programs for administrators and teachers which will result in improved educational programming for all children.

(Roy Butz is on the staff of the Oakland Intermediate Schools.)