

NEPC REVIEW: TEACHER PREP REVIEW: STRENGTHENING ELEMENTARY READING INSTRUCTION (NATIONAL COUNCIL ON TEACHER QUALITY, JUNE 2023)



Reviewed by:

P.L. Thomas
Furman University

September 2023

National Education Policy Center

School of Education
University of Colorado Boulder
nepc.colorado.edu

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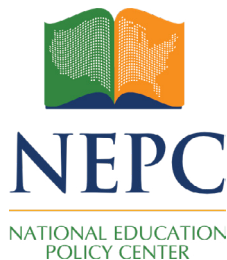
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Summary

Teacher Prep Review: Strengthening Elementary Reading Instruction, released June 2023 by the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ), evaluates 693 out of the 1,146 elementary teacher preparation programs in the US. It claims to identify how well candidates are prepared to teach elementary reading based on NCTQ’s Reading Foundations standards for scientifically based reading practices. The evaluation, drawn simply from analyzing course syllabi and materials, concludes that “[o]nly 25% of programs adequately address all five core components of reading instruction.” Further, the report outlines model programs as well as recommended actions for teacher preparation programs, state leaders, school districts, and advocates, teachers, and parents. While addressing teacher preparation for initial reading instruction is a high priority as states increasingly adopt new reading legislation grounded in the “science of reading,” this report repeats patterns identified in external reviews of previous NCTQ reports over the past two decades. For instance, this report again relies on flawed research methodology grounded in selective use of evidence to promote NCTQ’s narrow education reform agenda. Policymakers as well as the media are strongly cautioned to view this report as narrowly constructed reform advocacy rather than a valid or scientific analysis of the quality of reading content in elementary teacher preparation programs.



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I. Introduction

Since World War II, the US has experienced recurring cycles of media and political claims of a reading crisis.¹ Over the last two decades, the influence of the National Reading Panel (NRP)² in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, which mandated guidelines for high-quality teachers,³ created a high-stakes environment around teacher preparation and reading instruction.⁴ Concurrent with the NCLB era, the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ), founded in 2001 by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute,⁵ has promoted teacher preparation reform through a series of high-profile reports evaluating teacher preparation.⁶

Most states over the last decade have adopted or revised state reading legislation⁷ grounded in the “science of reading” (SOR)—a movement advocating for reading instruction based exclusively on experimental/quasi-experimental research and brain research—reinforced by media coverage⁸ and think tank advocacy such as ExcelinEd (which provides a template for SOR-based reading legislation) and The Reading League.⁹ The media story about the failures of reading achievement, teacher practice, and teacher preparation remains influential even though scholars have noted that SOR advocates’ identified causes and solutions are oversimplified and misleading.¹⁰ The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) testing has also increasingly prompted media and political claims of a reading crisis.¹¹

Teacher Prep Review: Strengthening Elementary Reading Instruction (NCTQ, June 2023)¹² evaluates 693 out of the 1,146 elementary teacher preparation programs in the US. The purpose of the report, based on NCTQ’s Reading Foundations standards for scientific reading practices and an analysis of course syllabi and materials, is to identify “basic evidence that programs are using what is empirically known about how to teach reading—so every child can learn to read.”¹³ The report assigns an A-F grade to programs “based on the number of components of scientifically based reading instruction they adequately cover (phonemic

awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) and instructional approaches (instructional hours, objective measures of knowledge, practice/application, background materials).”¹⁴ The evaluation process has been revised since NCTQ’s last report in 2020¹⁵—increasing the amount of instructional time considered adequate, adding a review of “material for the presence of reading practices contrary to the research,” assessing practice opportunities for candidates, and including an ungraded analysis of “which programs prepare aspiring teachers to teach English learners, struggling readers, and students who speak language varieties other than mainstream English language.”

“[C]ontent contrary to research-based practices” results in programs losing points for covering running records, guided reading, some assessments (DRA, IRI, QRI, etc.), balanced literacy, miscue analysis, reader’s workshop, leveled texts, three-cueing system, and embedded/implicit phonics. The report also includes model programs as well as recommended actions for teacher preparation programs, state leaders, school districts, and advocates, teachers, and parents.

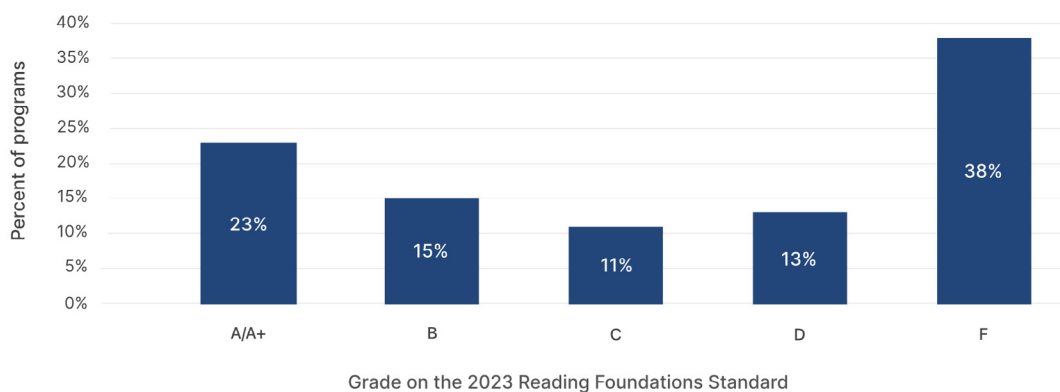
II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The report’s six findings include:

1. One in four programs “adequately address[es] all five core components of reading instruction”;
2. Programs most often fail to cover phonemic awareness;
3. One in three programs doesn’t include practice for core components of reading;
4. State policy can improve teacher preparation quality;
5. Programs remain weak in “preparation in teaching reading to English learners, struggling readers, and speakers of English language varieties”; and
6. More than half of the programs reviewed scored a D or F.¹⁶

Figure 8.

Distribution of grades



Note: n = 693. Percentages are rounded and may not add to 100%.

The report identifies exemplary programs (48 of the 173 programs addressing all five reading components) and recommends action plans for programs failing to meet the Reading Foundations standards established by NCTQ:¹⁷

- Teacher Preparation Programs
 - Revise programs using NCTQ feedback;
 - Include more scientifically based reading instruction;
 - Increase candidate practice time;
 - Adopt high-quality, research-based materials;
 - Remove content contrary to research-based practices;
 - Expand scientifically based reading instruction throughout entire program.
- State Leaders
 - Establish clear standards for preparation in scientifically based reading instruction;
 - Include accountability for preparation in scientifically based reading instruction;
 - Test for reading licensure, including preparation in scientifically based reading instruction, and publish pass rates;
 - “Deploy a comprehensive strategy to implement scientifically based reading instruction and prioritize teacher prep”;
 - Advocate from positions of political power.
- School Districts
 - Recruit new teachers prepared in scientifically based reading instruction;
 - Partner with programs strong in scientifically based reading instruction when providing field experiences;
 - Focus professional development on scientifically based reading instruction;
 - Target curricula and programs that address scientifically based reading instruction.
- Advocates, Teachers, and Parents
 - Advocate for scientifically based reading instruction.

The report concludes by identifying promising practices at six programs.

III. The Report’s Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The rationale for the report’s findings and conclusions dovetails with the broader claims of the SOR movement¹⁸ and the recent trends of state-level SOR reading legislation.¹⁹ The report identifies a national “literary crisis” and claims to offer a clear solution for reading achievement. It makes the following claims associated with this crisis:

- More than a third of students do not meet the achievement level of “basic” defined by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP);

- The “status quo” of 30% failing to be on grade level can be increased to 90% through implementing SOR;
- Based on *Education Week* surveys, over 70% of teachers claim to have been implementing practices “debunked by cognitive scientists decades ago”;
- Reading achievement is strongly linked to life outcomes and inequity;
- Teacher preparation is a key for improving reading achievement.²⁰

IV. The Report’s Use of Research Literature

Although the report²¹ and accompanying technical report²² are heavily referenced, the 2023 report repeats problems identified in prior NCTQ reports.²³ It relies on a narrow set of evidence—the 2000 National Reading Panel (NRP) report, the 2016 Institute of Education Sciences report, The What Works Clearinghouse,²⁴ the National Institutes of Health, and cognitive science. Moreover, it routinely mixes citations of selected scientific research with citations to sources of questionable validity (i.e. media articles, podcasts, and surveys; social media posts; and think tank advocacy) to support absolute statements that are contradicted by a fuller consideration of the literature.²⁵ Acknowledging that broader evidence in a 2023 *Teachers College Record* article, Reinking and colleagues concluded, “there is no indisputable evidence of a national crisis in reading, and even if there were a crisis, there is no evidence that the amount of phonics in classrooms is necessarily the cause or the solution.”²⁶

Also as noted in reviews of prior NCTQ reports,²⁷ citations include selected research from the field of teacher education, but fail to acknowledge standards and research established by organizations of literacy professionals (e.g., the National Council of Teachers of English, International Literacy Association, and Literacy Research Association) or accreditation organizations (e.g., the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation).

The report’s most problematic use of research literature is in its identification of “reading practices contrary to the research” in the program evaluations. It suggests that cognitive science has “debunked” certain teaching practices, ignoring both scholarly challenges to the utility of cognitive science for understanding reading development²⁸ and the warnings of cognitive scientists themselves.²⁹

For example, the selective use of evidence and citations to support absolute statements about “reading practices contrary to the research” is missing recent meta-analyses and international research that reveal a more nuanced and detailed understanding of balanced literacy, phonics instruction, the findings of the NRP, and three-cueing (multiple-cueing) approaches to reading comprehension.³⁰

Overall, the report is characterized by selective citations, failure to distinguish between scientific and non-scientific evidence, and misrepresentation and overstatement of the research base related to the rationale for the report³¹ and the use of “reading practices contrary to the research” to grade teacher education programs.³² These make it more a work of advo-

cacy than a careful technical analysis of the scientific research.

V. Review of the Report's Methods

This report has addressed some methodological concerns raised about previous reports,³³ but ultimately fails to reach the standard of “scientific” evidence promoted by The Reading League (ironically cited approvingly throughout the report) and literacy scholars: experimental/quasi-experimental design, blind independent peer review, and published in scholarly publication.³⁴

A heavily referenced and detailed technical report justifies the methodology:

NCTQ recognizes that given the availability of evidence, we cannot directly measure the mastery of the content and pedagogical knowledge candidates obtain (this is a function typically reserved for state-adopted licensure assessments) or the application to teaching (a function typically reserved for teacher evaluation processes).³⁵

The methods are grounded in analyzing program syllabi and materials based on the revised Reading Foundations standards established by NCTQ (see Section II above). The technical report offers sufficient detail to suggest at first blush that the teacher preparation program analysis is internally consistent, even though the empirical grounding is weak. To identify appropriate courses and syllabi for analysis, NCTQ used an Expert Advisory Panel, a Technical Advisory Group, and an Open Comment Survey, in addition to working with reviewed programs. Unlike earlier reports where noncooperating programs were failed for missing information, this report grades only participating programs (693 out of 1,146). Of the 693, 313 programs cooperated fully, but NCTQ had to send open records requests when allowed by state law for the remaining evaluated programs.

However, relying on published syllabi as comprehensive evidence of course content to grade teacher education programs on reading instruction is a weak design, despite use of inter-rater reliability practices and better explanation of the report's methods. One serious concern is that NCTQ appears to use a self-confirming litmus test for choosing analysts: Its analysts are disproportionately trained in the for-profit programs endorsed within the report (LETRS, Orton-Gillingham, Wilson).³⁶

The most problematic methodological element is the inclusion of “content contrary to research-based practices.” Identifying content and practices as either scientific or not scientific misrepresents the broader body of literature (see Section IV); further, the report mixes as evidence seemingly cherry-picked research studies, media articles and surveys, podcasts, social media, and think tank reports, contradicting the report's narrow expectation for “scientific” practices in the programs being graded.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

The rationale and the inclusion of content contrary to research-based practices are not supported by the full body of evidence in reading science.³⁷ The report's findings lack validity because the standards used to evaluate are oversimplified, absolute claims about what counts as scientific practices, yet the methodology itself fails to meet the basic standards of scientific inquiry.³⁸

Further, the Expert Advisory Panel and the External Reviewers include think tank members (ExcelinEd, Deans for Impact) and scholars with market stakes in the report's findings (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling [LETRS], CORE), raising concerns about conflicts of interest eroding the validity of the report. For example, the report repeatedly endorses LETRS as "scientific," although that program is not supported by scientific research,³⁹ while lowering grades for programs putatively "debunked" by scientific research.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

This report is ambitious and carefully constructed ideological advocacy, but not a scientific analysis of teacher preparation suitable to inform policy or practice. The report recommendations may offer a plausible structure for needed research on student reading proficiency, teacher preparation quality, and the role of reading programs and materials in reading instruction. However, it is rendered inadequate by significant conflicts of interest, ideological claims presented as "scientific," and weak methodology.

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See also:

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Access the current body of research on LETRS at https://docs.google.com/document/d/1HV57h-18km68jirWvkiEDQIyA6GV02JP9LxKt6D_QJU/edit?usp=sharing