National Council on Teacher Quality

STATE POLICY DATA BRIEF

False Assurances: Many states' licensure tests don't signal whether elementary teachers understand reading instruction

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By Hannah Putman

Licensure tests should be an efficient and comprehensive way for policymakers to ensure that all teachers possess the basic knowledge and skills they need to effectively teach students to read. Yet more than half of states use a weak licensure test that fails to adequately measure elementary teachers' knowledge of scientifically based reading instruction. This shortcoming means that annually, nearly 100,000 elementary teachers across the country enter classrooms with false assurances that they're ready to teach reading,[1] and the districts that hire them have false assurances that those teachers are adequately prepared.

One of elementary teachers' core responsibilities is to teach children to read. But in elementary classrooms across the country, roughly a third of children cannot read at even a basic level by the middle of fourth grade.[2] The data does not reflect any failure by these students; rather, these low literacy rates are because we are not giving students access to teachers with the skills and knowledge to teach reading. This lack of reading ability sets these children up for a future in which they're less likely to graduate high school, less likely to have gainful employment, and less likely to be able to build the life they want and deserve.[3] Students of color and those living in poverty are most impacted, widening opportunity gaps. These children, who are already falling behind their white and more wealthy peers in reading,[4] are the most likely to be assigned novice teachers,[5] whose knowledge of reading instruction may not have been adequately evaluated.

Several factors affect whether students learn to read during their elementary years. A primary reason is whether their teachers are well-versed in the fundamental components

of reading and how to teach them. Decades of research have identified these five core components of reading instruction: phonemic awareness (including phonological awareness), phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.[6] Numerous studies have found that with skillful instruction in these core components, the rate of illiteracy can drop from more than three in ten students to less than one in ten students.[7]

These components of reading represent essential knowledge that all elementary teachers need, and teachers' knowledge of them is both teachable and testable *if* the right policies are in place. Research by the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) and others finds that while there are some effective teacher preparation programs, many of the programs preparing aspiring teachers are doing too little to equip them with the knowledge and skills to deliver scientifically based reading instruction.[8]

Recognizing teachers' vital role in student success, most states put in place a final check on teachers' knowledge. In all but one state, teachers must pass a licensure test that incorporates questions about reading and reading instruction before they earn a license and are hired to lead a classroom.

Are those licensure tests doing their job? Often, they are not. More than half of states use a weak licensure test that fails to accurately signal whether teachers understand reading instruction.

NCTQ's new analysis of the quality of reading licensure tests required for elementary teachers reveals not only some bright spots and strong test options used in some states, but also systematic weaknesses in the tests many states use to vet new teachers. While this analysis focuses on tests required for general elementary teachers' certification, every teacher of elementary-age students, including those certified in special education or teaching English learners, should demonstrate their knowledge of reading instruction.

For this analysis, NCTQ examined two key questions:

1. What is the quality of the licensure tests?
2. Which states use acceptable tests?

FINDINGS

Finding 1: Less than half of elementary teacher reading licensure tests adequately assess the core components of scientifically based reading instruction.

Of the 25 different tests that states use to assess elementary teachers' knowledge of reading,[9] our analysis identified just 11 acceptable tests currently in use across the country—only six of which are strong measures of aspiring teachers' knowledge of reading instruction.[10]

What makes a "strong" test?

Strong tests go beyond the criteria to be considered acceptable (described below). Tests designated as *strong* also assess an average of at least 75% of the topics identified within each component, in addition to addressing how to support struggling readers and English learners, as well as either speakers of English language varieties or advanced readers (or both).

Acceptable tests address at least half of all topics identified within each of the five components (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension), do not combine reading with other subjects (e.g., math or science) and include few practices contrary to the research.

Weak tests either address less than half of the topics in one or more components, combine reading with one or more other subjects (e.g., math or science), or include four or more practices contrary to the research (without clearly identifying that these are undesirable teaching practices).

Unacceptable tests cover none of the topics in one or more components, or do not cover all five components adequately and also include four or more contrary practices.

(See *Appendix: Methodology for the review of state reading licensure tests* for more details.)

While no tests were identified as unacceptable in this analysis, 14 tests—the majority of those in use to measure candidates' knowledge of reading—are *weak*. These weak tests include the most commonly used Praxis Elementary Education: Multiple Subjects (5001)

test used in 16 states, as well as the increasingly common Praxis Elementary Education: Content Knowledge for Teaching (7811) test used in seven states.

Across these 14 weak licensure tests:

- Ten do not adequately address all components (one of these also combines reading with another subject).
- Five combine reading with other subjects[11] (e.g., social studies or science), meaning that the test does not offer a clear measure of teachers' knowledge of reading because strength in another subject could mask a limited understanding of reading. (One of these also does not adequately address all components.)

To be clear, states may not select these tests specifically to assess reading. Often, policymakers intend for these tests to serve a multitude of purposes: measuring teachers' knowledge of content, curriculum, and pedagogy, in addition to reading instruction. However, by using one comprehensive test, states glean little information about *any* of these topics. States miss a crucial opportunity to determine whether teachers sufficiently understand scientifically based reading instruction and to signal to aspiring teachers who fail these exams that they need further preparation before they are ready to teach young learners. Or state leaders may choose a single test because it reduces testing fees for teacher candidates. However, states have found numerous creative solutions to help candidates with testing fees rather than dropping these test requirements entirely, which saves aspiring teachers money without sacrificing the quality of their future students' reading instruction. Weak licensure tests cost everyone: students who are not taught by qualified teachers; new teachers who spent time and money to become prepared; and districts that have to make up the gaps in new teachers' knowledge, spending valuable funds to remediate.

NCTQ's analysis found that while 14 tests are weak, these weak tests vary widely in their quality. Some are inadequate in only one component (although effective reading instruction requires that teachers be well-versed in all components), while some are weak across all components. The following three tests are the weakest of those NCTQ reviewed. All three address an average of less than 40% of topics in each component.

1. New York State Teacher Certification Examinations (NYSTCE) Multi-Subject: Teachers of Childhood (Grade 1- Grade 6)
2. Praxis Elementary Education Assessment (5006)
3. Praxis Elementary Education: Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment (5017)

Table 1: Licensure test ratings

Test name	Overall rating	Reason for rating	State(s) using test
Foundations of Reading (190)	Strong	Test addresses more than 75% of topics in each component and does not combine reading/ELA with other subjects	AL, AR, AZ, CT, MA, MS, NC, NH, OH, UT, WI
Praxis Elementary Education: Teaching Reading: Elementary (5205)	Strong	Test addresses more than 75% of topics in each component and does not combine reading/ELA with other subjects	CO, LA,* MD, NM, TN, VA
Praxis Elementary Education: Teaching Reading: K-12 (5206)	Strong	Test addresses more than 75% of topics in each component and does not combine reading/ELA with other subjects	LA*
Reading Instruction Competence Assessment (RICA) - Video Performance Assessment	Strong	Test addresses more than 75% of topics in each component and does not combine reading/ELA with other subjects	CA
Reading Instruction Competence Assessment (RICA) - Written Examination	Strong	Test addresses more than 75% of topics in each component and does not combine reading/ELA with other subjects	CA

The Science of Teaching Reading Exam	Strong	Test addresses more than 75% of topics in each component and does not combine reading/ELA with other subjects	TX
Certification Examinations for Oklahoma Educators (CEOE) Elementary Education, Subtest 1: Reading/Language Arts (150)	Acceptable	Test adequately addresses the five core components of reading and does not combine reading/ELA with other subjects	OK
Idaho Comprehensive Literacy Assessment (ICLA)	Acceptable	Test adequately addresses the five core components of reading and does not combine reading/ELA with other subjects	ID***
Massachusetts Tests for Educator Licensure (MTEL) Reading Specialist (62)	Acceptable	Test adequately addresses the five core components of reading and does not combine reading/ELA with other subjects	MA
Michigan Test for Teacher Certification (MTTC) Lower Elementary (PK-3) [117-120], Subtest 2: Literacy	Acceptable	Test adequately addresses the five core components of reading and does not combine reading/ELA with other subjects	MI
Minnesota Teacher Licensure Examinations (MTLE) Elementary Education (Grades K-6), Subtest 1	Acceptable	Test adequately addresses the five core components of reading and does not combine reading/ELA with other subjects	MN

Florida Teacher Certification Examinations (FTCE) Elementary Education K-6, Subtest 1: Language arts and reading (601)	Weak	Test does not adequately address all five core components of reading (does not adequately address phonemic awareness)	FL**
Georgia Assessments for the Certification of Educators (GACE) Elementary Education Assessment, Test 1 (001)	Weak	Test does not adequately address all five core components of reading (does not adequately address fluency)	GA
Illinois Licensure Testing System (ILTS) Elementary Education (grades 1-6) (305)	Weak	Test adequately addresses the five core components of reading but combines reading with other subjects	IL
Michigan Test for Teacher Certification (MTTC) Upper Elementary (3-6) [121-124], Subtest 2: Literacy	Weak	Test does not adequately address all five core components of reading (does not adequately address phonemic awareness, phonics,	MI
Missouri Educator Gateway Assessment (MEGA): Elementary Education Multi-Content (073 & 074), Subtest II (Field 074)	Weak	Test adequately addresses the five core components of reading but combines reading with other subjects	MO
National Evaluation Series: Elementary Education, Subtest I (102)	Weak	Test adequately addresses the five core components of reading but combines reading with other subjects	OR, WA

New York State Teacher Certification Exams (NYSTCE) Multi-Subject: Teachers of Childhood (Grades 1-6), Part One: Literacy and English Language Arts (221)	Weak	Test does not adequately address all five core components of reading (does not adequately address phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, or vocabulary)	NY
Pennsylvania Educator Certification Test (PECT) PreK-4, Module 2	Weak	Test adequately addresses the five core components of reading but combines reading with other subjects	PA
Praxis Early Childhood Education (5025)	Weak	Test does not adequately address all five core components of reading (does not adequately address phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary)	SD
Praxis Elementary Education Assessment (5006), Reading and Language Arts & Social Studies (5007)	Weak	Test does not adequately address all five core components of reading (does not adequately address phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, or comprehension)	AK, HI, IN
Praxis Elementary Education: Content Knowledge (5018)	Weak	Test does not adequately address all five core components of reading (does not adequately address fluency, vocabulary)	AK, MT

Praxis Elementary Education: Content Knowledge for Teaching (7811), Reading and Language Arts - CKT (7812) subtest	Weak	Test does not adequately address all five core components of reading (does not adequately address phonemic awareness, fluency, or vocabulary)	AK, DE, ID, KS, SC, SD, WV
Praxis Elementary Education: Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment (5017)	Weak	Test does not adequately address all five core components of reading (does not adequately address phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary)	AK, ND, NE
Praxis Elementary Education: Multiple Subjects (5001), Reading and Language Arts (5002) subtest	Weak	Test does not adequately address all five core components of reading (does not adequately address vocabulary)	AK, DC, DE, HI, ID, KY, ME, NJ, NV, OK, RI, SC, SD, VT, WV, WY

**Louisiana will begin requiring that candidates pass either the Praxis 5205 or Praxis 5206 in January 2024. The state previously required that candidates pass the Praxis Elementary Education: Multiple Subjects (5001), Reading and Language Arts (5002) subtest, a weak test.*

***Florida is transitioning to a new test in January 2024. This analysis reflects the quality of this new version of the licensure test. The outgoing licensure test was also rated weak because it did not adequately address phonemic awareness, phonics, or vocabulary.*

****Idaho released an updated version of its ICLA exam. The previous version of this exam was weak; the new version is acceptable (and only falls short of the criteria for "strong" tests because it does not address either speakers of English language varieties or advanced readers).*

For more details about the content addressed in each of these exams, download the Reading licensure test dataset.

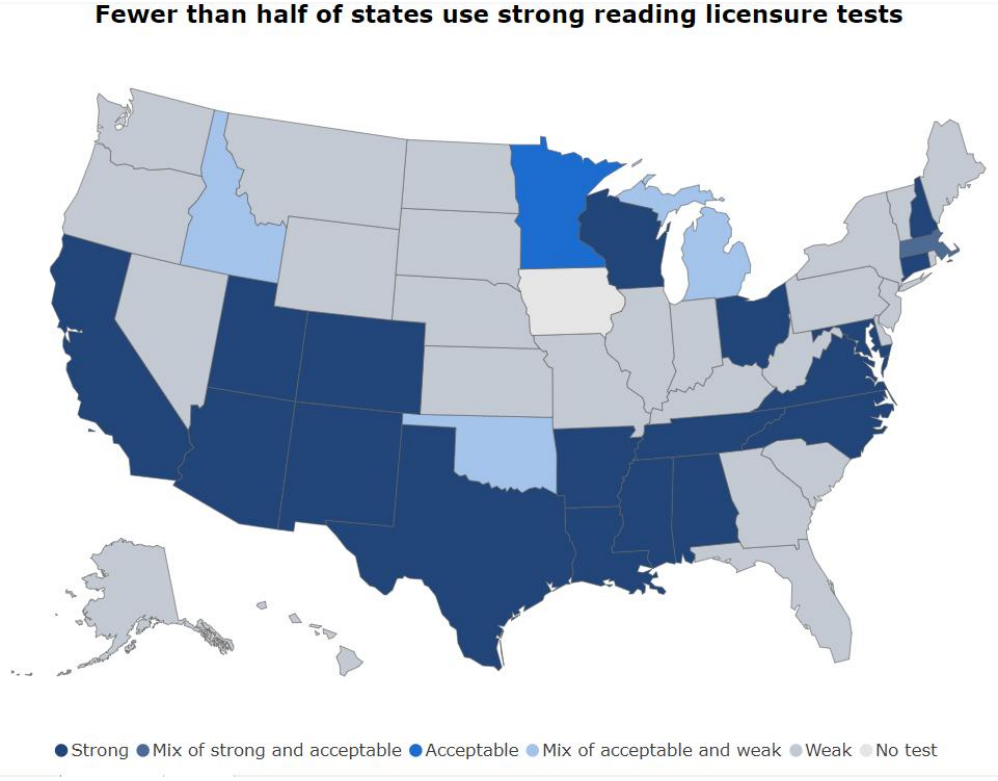
Finding 2: Fewer than half of states use tests that signal whether teachers have the knowledge they need to teach students to read.

On their first day in the classroom, every elementary teacher needs to effectively teach reading, yet only 20 states use either a strong or acceptable reading licensure test. The most commonly used acceptable or strong test is the notably strong Foundations of Reading (190) test,[12] now in use across 11 states.[13] However, 27 states use weaker tests that do not fully signal teachers' preparedness to teach reading. Three others use a mix of both acceptable and weak tests, and one has no elementary teacher reading licensure test at all.

Table 2: Less than half of states use an acceptable or strong test

Test quality	Number of states
Strong test	18
Mix of strong and acceptable tests	1
Acceptable test	1
Mix of acceptable and weak tests	3
Weak test	27
No test	1

In twelve states, candidates can choose from several different tests. In most of these cases, all of the test options are weak,[14] meaning that any test a candidate chooses will not adequately measure their knowledge of reading. In Oklahoma, the state has an acceptable reading test in use, but in 2022, it started letting aspiring teachers instead take a weaker test of their reading knowledge.[15]



Download the Reading licensure test quality by state PDF for a detailed list of each state's reading licensure test(s), rating, and rationale.

Michigan recently updated its licensure structure. This change created separate licenses, with associated tests, for pre-K to grade three and for grades three to six. The test that assesses teachers of earlier grades is acceptable, while the one used for the upper grades is weak. This lack of focus on reading for teachers of older elementary grades is problematic because many children will reach those upper grades still in need of reading support.

Iowa stands out as the only state that does not require a licensure test at all. This is especially concerning because *not one* of the six teacher prep programs NCTQ evaluated in Iowa adequately teaches scientifically based reading instruction.[16] Schools hiring new teachers in Iowa are all but assured that those teachers will *not* be well-versed in how to teach reading.

RECOMMENDATIONS

State leaders

- **Transition to a stronger reading licensure test.** States select and approve the tests that their teachers must pass for licensure. While requiring a stronger test or removing weaker test options may require some effort, doing so will likely lead to better reading instruction in elementary classrooms across the state. How? Preparation programs will be motivated to align their courses with the components of reading addressed in a stronger test, aspiring teachers will have clear guidelines around what they need to know, and districts can be better assured that incoming teachers have a well-established understanding of how to teach reading.
- **Require a strong reading test for anyone teaching students in the elementary grades.** In some cases, states require reading tests for general education elementary teachers but not for special education teachers or for early childhood teachers who are licensed to teach lower elementary grades. These loopholes ultimately hurt the students who most need teachers capable of building a foundation in literacy.

Testing companies

- **Shore up weaknesses in current tests and clearly identify limitations in existing tests.** Both major testing companies, ETS and Pearson, have strong and acceptable reading licensure tests on the market—tests that adequately assess all five components of reading, consider a range of learners, and include little to no content contrary to research-based practices. But both of these testing companies also offer tests that omit numerous topics from the core components of reading, and that combine reading with other subjects, diluting the assessment's ability to verify teachers' reading knowledge.

  Testing companies should revise licensure tests where possible, adding in questions on topics that are currently omitted. And for tests that cannot fully be modified to address reading, these companies should provide clear guidelines to state leaders that these licensure tests should *not* be considered an assessment of teachers' knowledge of reading instruction.

Licensure tests: An essential tool to build a nation of readers

Elementary teachers deserve a fair, accurate assessment of what they do and do not understand about scientifically based reading instruction so that they can act quickly to fill in those gaps.

Teacher preparation programs need accurate and explicit information about whether their candidates complete their preparation program with a well-developed understanding of reading, to inform ongoing improvements to their coursework and instruction.

School and district leaders deserve assurances that every licensed elementary teacher meets this essential expectation of knowing how to teach reading. School districts can ill-afford to retrain new teachers on the core components of reading they should have understood before their first day of teaching.

Elementary students cannot afford to lose a year of literacy instruction with a teacher who is unprepared to teach reading effectively. Those students will never get back that year of school.

Licensure tests are not a panacea to our nation's literacy challenges, but they are a critical tool that is readily available for states to employ. With stronger licensure tests, states can provide real assurances that every teacher enters the classroom with knowledge and skills aligned to the reading research.

METHODOLOGY IN BRIEF

NCTQ analyzed all reading licensure tests currently in use to determine whether they adequately address the five core components of reading: phonemic awareness (coding for this component also incorporates other topics under phonological awareness), phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. We also examined whether these tests devote undue attention to content contrary to research-based practices (e.g., three-cueing), and whether these tests combine reading with other subjects. Using these criteria, NCTQ determined whether tests were strong, acceptable, weak, or unacceptable.

Analysts used official study guides developed by the testing company or state, official sample tests (available for free or for purchase through the licensure test website), and any other preparation materials provided by the state or testing company. This analysis did not consider study aides developed by third-party vendors.

Read more details on the topics considered within each component, as well as the scoring methodology.

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Author
Hannah Putman

Project leadership
Heather Peske & Shannon Holston

Reading Analysts
Alison McKeeman Rice (Lead analyst), Alexandra Vogt, Kelly Ramirez, Jamey Peavler,

State policy analysts
Lisa Staresina, Jamie Ekatomatis, Rebecca Sichmeller, Amanda Nickerson

Data systems
Tina Tibbitts

Communications
Ashley Kincaid & Lane Wright

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ENDNOTES

[1] This represents the 91,682 first-year teachers in states with weak tests or no test (states with a mix of weak and acceptable tests add another 7,000 teachers), using the most recent years of data available, 2017-18. U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights. (2018). Number and percentage of public school classroom teachers (in full-time equivalents), by certification status and years of experience, by state: School Year 2017-18. *Civil Rights Data Collection, 2017-18.* http://ocrdata.ed.gov.
[2] National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). (2022). *National Achievement-Level Results*. https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading/nation/achievement/?grade=4
[3] Hernandez, D. J. (2012). *Double jeopardy: How third-grade reading skills and poverty influence high school graduation*. Annie E. Casey Foundation. Retrieved March 16, 2023 from https://assets.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/AECF-DoubleJeopardy-2012-Full.pdf; Tamborini, C. R., Kim, C., & Sakamoto, A. (2015). Education and lifetime earnings in the United States. *Demography, 52*(4), 1383-1407; Chapman, C., Laird, J., Ifill, N., & Kewal Ramani, A. (2011). *Trends in high school dropout and completion rates in the United States: 1972-2009. Compendium Report*. NCES 2012-006. National Center for Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/dropout/intro.asp#r4
[4]National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). (2022). *National Achievement-Level Results*. https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading/nation/achievement/?grade=4
[5] Goldhaber, D., Quince, V., & Theobald, R. (2018). Has it always been this way? Tracing the evolution of teacher quality gaps in US public schools. *American Educational Research Journal*, *55*(1), 171-201; Goldhaber, D., Lavery, L., & Theobald, R. (2015). Uneven playing field? Assessing the teacher quality gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students. *Educational Researcher*, *44*(5), 293-307; Clotfelter, C. T., Ladd, H. F., & Clifton, C. R. (2023). Racial Differences in Student Access to High-Quality Teachers. *Education Finance and Policy*, *18*(4), 738-752.
[6] National Reading Panel (U.S.), National Institute of Child Health, Human Development (US), National Reading Excellence Initiative, National Institute for Literacy (US), & United States Department of Health. (2000). Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction: Reports of the subgroups. National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institutes of Health. For more about the research on these components, see National Council on Teacher Quality. (2023). Teacher Prep Review Reading Foundations technical report. Retrieved from https://www.nctq.org/dmsView/Teacher_Prep_Review_Reading_Foundations_Technical_Report.

Throughout this report, when we refer to reading instruction, we mean the type of reading instruction that is aligned with this body of research, or "scientifically based reading instruction."
[7] Torgesen describes this finding in Torgesen, 2004. Specifically, the analyses he describes were based on the proportion of students reaching the "low average level" of word reading skills by second grade. While word reading is not the same as reading comprehension, it is a necessary precursor to comprehension, and measures of word reading fluency (and gains in that fluency) are predictive of broader student reading performance (Smith, J. L. M., Cummings, K. D., Nese, J. F., Alonzo, J., Fien, H., & Baker, S. K. (2014). The relation of word reading fluency initial level and gains with reading outcomes. *School Psychology Review, 43*(1), 30-40.). For more on studies finding that 90% or more of students can read with proper instruction, see: Torgesen, J. K. (2004). Preventing early reading failure. *American Educator, 28*(3), 6-9; Torgesen, J. K. (1998). Catch them before they fall: Identification and assessment to prevent reading failure in young children. *American Educator, 22*(1-2), 32-39. www.aft.org/sites/default/files/periodicals/torgesen.pdf; Lyon, G. R. (1998). *Overview of reading and literacy initiatives* (Report to Committee on Labor and Human Resources, U.S. Senate). Bethesda, MD: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institute of Health. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED444128.pdf; Vellutino, F. R., Fletcher, J. M., Snowling, M. J., & Scanlon, D. M. (2004). Specific reading disability (dyslexia): What have we learned in the past four decades? *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 45*(1), 2-40. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1046/j.0021-9630.2003.00305x; Al Otaiba, S., & Fuchs, D.

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[8] Ellis, C., Holston, S., Drake, G., Putman, H., Swisher, A., & Peske, H. (2023). *Teacher Prep Review: Strengthening Elementary Reading Instruction.* Washington, DC: National Council on Teacher Quality. https://www.nctq.org/review/standard/Reading-Foundations; Binks-Cantrell, E., Washburn, E. K., Joshi, R. M., & Hougen, M. (2012). Peter effect in the preparation of reading teachers. *Scientific Studies of Reading, 16*(6), 526-536; Joshi, R. M., Binks, E., Hougen, M., Dahlgren, M. E., Ocker-Dean, E., & Smith, D. L. (2009). Why elementary teachers might be inadequately prepared to teach reading. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 42*(5), 392-402; Kurtz, H., Lloyd, S., Harwin, A., Chen, V., & Furuya, Y. (2020). *Early reading instruction: Results of a national survey.* Editorial Projects in Education.

[9] These tests vary in their attention to reading. Some tests are entirely dedicated to scientifically based reading instruction, some represent subtests that combine reading and English language arts, and some are tests in which reading plays only a small role.

[10] Analysts also reviewed several tests used for special education or early childhood teachers (who often teach elementary grades). Ratings for these tests are available upon request:

- New York State Teacher Certification Exams (NYSTCE) Multi-Subject:Multi-Subject: Teachers of Early Childhood (Birth to Grade 2)
- Praxis Reading for Virginia Educators: Elementary and Special Education (5306)
- Florida Teacher Certification Examinations (FTCE) Prekindergarten/Primary PreK-3 (053)
- Knowledge and Practice Examination for Effective Reading Instruction (KPEERI)
- Praxis Early Childhood Assessment (5026)
- Minnesota Teacher Licensure Examinations (MTLE) Early Childhood (Birth to Grade 3)
- Minnesota Teacher Licensure Examinations (MTLE) Special Education Core Skills (Birth to Age 21)

[11] Tests' ratings are not marked down if reading is combined with English language arts or similarly related subjects like communication arts.

[12] Foundations of Reading (190) covers the highest average number of topics across components of any licensure test that NCTQ reviewed.

[13] Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Ohio, Utah, and Wisconsin.

[14] In seven states, candidates can choose from among multiple weak tests: Alaska, Delaware, Hawaii, Idaho, South Carolina, South Dakota, and West Virginia.

[15] Burkhart, C., & Corbin, E. (2022). *Hofmeister strengthens teacher pipeline with nationally competitive certification tests, free resources.* Oklahoma State Department of Education. Retrieved from https://sde.ok.gov/newsblog/2022-06-01/hofmeister-strengthens-teacher-pipeline-nationally-competitive-certification

[16] Ellis, C., Holston, S., Drake, G., Putman, H., Swisher, A., & Peske, H. (2023).