

# *Meeting the Texas A&M University System Quality Standards for Teacher Preparation Through an Intensive Field-Based Experience*

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## **Abstract**

*The Texas A&M University System recently developed six quality standards for educator preparation programs, the Texas A&M Quality Standards for Educator Preparation, that are to be implemented and met by all system schools. These standards are: quality of selection of teacher candidates; quality of content knowledge and teaching methods; quality of clinical/field placement, feedback, and candidate performance; quality of program performance management; quality of partnership performance management; and expanding the community of practice. In this article, the authors describe how the Islanders Helping the Early Acceleration of Readers Together (IHEART) program exceeds all of these standards by working with a partner school to provide early reading intervention to first grade students and field experience opportunities to preservice teachers.*

**Keywords:** *field experiences, school partnerships, quality standards, teacher preparation*

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In 2018, the first author met with a local primary school principal to discuss how our school/university partnership might be enhanced, and, more importantly, how the university could help the school faculty raise reading achievement for its students, who reside in a high-needs area. The principal's immediate response was, "We need more assistance with providing reading intervention." At this request, the author set out to develop and locate funding for an in-school reading tutorial program, which she called IHEART, Islanders Helping the Early Acceleration of Readers Together. The Islander

is the University mascot; for the idea was that the preservice teachers (PSTs) at the university would serve as volunteer tutors. The tutors would help first-grade children who were experiencing difficulties with print and would in turn gain the valuable experience of putting into action what they were learning in their educator preparation coursework.

The Texas A&M University System recently developed six standards, the Texas A&M Quality Standards for Educator Preparation, that are to be implemented and met by all system

schools. These standards are: quality of selection of teacher candidates; quality of content knowledge and teaching methods; quality of clinical/field placement, feedback, and candidate performance; quality of program performance management; quality of partnership performance management; and expanding the community of practice. The IHEART program exceeds all of these standards, and the program coordinators recently received group admission into the Texas A&M Academy of Teacher Educators for its excellence in promoting the standards.

### **Careful Selection of Preservice Teacher Tutors**

What sets IHEART apart from other tutoring opportunities is that the tutors offer children literacy lessons that mirror the instruction an in-service reading interventionist might provide. These tutoring experiences build upon what the undergraduate students are learning in their courses about working with emergent readers who have difficulty with print and can be adjusted to fit future classroom settings (Duffy & Atkinson, 2001). Because we, the IHEART coordinators, would like the tutors to have had some instruction in early literacy, we recruit undergraduate students who are currently enrolled in or have taken the course Principles and Practices of Early Reading Instruction and are recommended by their course instructors. We also seek out students who are interested in exploring what it is like to teach in the primary grades.

During the initial training session for tutors, we make clear the understanding that they will be working with children who need intervention, which is an essential experience for PSTs (Barrio et al., 2015). We strive to retain strong tutors from semester to semester by showing our gratitude through emails, videos, and on-site visits. By inviting the same tutors back in subsequent semesters, we are ensuring that our selection process is robust and that we are building continuity and mentoring opportunities in the program. We are friendly to the tutors, greeting them with smiles and providing positive comments about their work in the program.

Also, the schools' faculty are extremely warm and welcoming, which has been instrumental in retaining tutors.

### **Applying the Content of Reading Courses into Practice**

Prior to tutorial sessions with children, the tutors are required to attend an initial professional development session where we present information regarding assessment and instructional methods. In order to build upon the information that they have studied in their reading courses, we present them with instructional strategies they are expected to utilize with emergent and early readers who display difficulties with print. Even though the tutors engage the children in some isolated work with letters, sounds, and words, the largest portion of the lesson is spent on continuous text reading. The children are provided with texts that are matched to their instructional reading levels, thereby giving them multiple opportunities to be successful (Allington, 2006; Clay, 2005; Fountas & Pinnell, 2017), while having some problems to solve in order to expand their repertoire of strategies to use with text.

The IHEART program is fully aligned with the student learning objectives in all six of the reading courses our EC-6 Reading Generalist students take. These include the foundational course, Principles and Practices of Early Reading Instruction, and our service learning course, Reading Assessment and Intervention, in which PSTs work with a child for eight weeks by administering literacy assessments, analyzing the results, using the results to design a dynamic instructional literacy plan, and implementing this plan.

### **Consistent Feedback and Coaching**

To ensure that our teacher candidates are using the knowledge they acquired during their coursework and IHEART professional learning opportunities, we visit each tutor at least twice during the semester to observe, model, and co-teach lessons and to provide coaching before

or after lessons. We offer feedback to the tutors in the areas of guided reading book introductions, prompting during reading, teaching after reading, letter identification, and word study. Because our tutors are undergraduate PSTs, we make it clear that these visits are primarily for professional learning purposes. Our goal is not to evaluate them, but to help them along their journey of becoming teachers of readers. Coaching sessions revolve around, first, what we notice they are doing well, and second, areas in need of attention. During this model, the tutors gradually apply what they have learned in their prior university reading coursework (Welsh & Schaffer, 2017; Zeichner, 2010) with the coach's support (Mosley Wetzel et al., 2017).

Coaching and feedback serve dual purposes: 1) the tutors engage in authentic and guided application of previous learning, and 2) the children they are teaching benefit from the enhanced teaching of their tutors. During the portion of the guided reading lesson where students are reading the text under the guidance of the tutor, we often notice areas that the tutors need to address in order to unleash the full power of the lesson. We reinforce the importance of matching the appropriate level of text to students, reading the book out loud in its entirety while the teacher listens, and prompting students as needed. To ensure best practices in book introductions, we train tutors to scaffold the children's reading of the text. They are encouraged to think about and plan an introduction that supports children's use of sources of information. We provide them with examples over the course of the semester in the form of videos, live demonstration lessons, and co-teaching during their lessons.

Coaching and co-teaching sessions are used to help develop the skills of the tutors for the "after reading" segment of the tutoring sequence. After the children have read the text, two important events must occur: 1) an engaging conversation related to the text that further extends children's thinking and enhances comprehension, and 2) a teaching point that is meant to teach the children

a new strategy they are ready to use on text, reinforce a strategy they are just beginning to use, or celebrate a strategy they are using independently. We help the tutors understand the need to bring relevance to this segment of the tutorial session and execute a teaching point that aligns with what the children need as readers in the moment (Thompson, 2020).

### **Monitoring Program Performance**

A survey is sent to tutors at the end of each semester not only to solicit their feedback about the program, but also to let them know that their opinions and ideas for enhancing IHEART are valued. Participation in the survey allows the tutors to reflect on their teaching, and how their teaching has been enhanced by the relationships they have built with the children. Some of the responses from the most recent tutor and school staff survey (Spring 2022) will be presented here.

The tutors responded favorably to the item "I enjoyed being a tutor this semester" and indicated that they would serve as an IHEART tutor again. They also shared that they enjoyed getting to know the children as readers and that this process of listening helped them plan intervention lessons that would help the children become proficient readers and engage them (Assaf & López, 2012; Falk-Ross et al., 2017). The tutors stated that their initial apprehension and nervousness faded as soon as they began working with the children. The tutors were excited about having opportunities to develop lesson plans and use the strategies they had learned in their coursework. The chance to collaborate with other tutors also appeared on their surveys as they spoke of arriving early or staying late and listening in to others' lessons or chatting with other tutors about their lessons.

The responses collected from the surveys each semester also inform the subsequent semesters of IHEART. For example, after the first semester of implementation, we sought ways to improve communication between the coordinators, tutors, and teachers. We implemented the use of an app

where all parties could post information and helpful tutoring ideas. In another example, after a research study in 2021 where we compared the IHEART children's literacy assessment scores to a control group of children's scores, we found that, even though all the children made gains in their letter and word knowledge and instructional reading level, there was no statistical significance between the scores of both groups. This prompted changes for the current year of IHEART, such as increasing the amount of time the children work on phonological awareness and phonics skills.

The IHEART program has also had an effect on two of our reading courses, Principles and Practices of Early Reading Instruction and Reading Assessment and Intervention. Each semester, when we observe the tutors, we search for patterns across our written observations. As the PSTs implement their literacy instruction, we notice where they are excelling and where there are misunderstandings and missing content and pedagogical knowledge (Massey & Lewis, 2011). For example, the tutors are proficient at providing letter work and word work lessons at children's zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978); however, there is room for growth in the area of teaching, prompting, and reinforcing while children are reading continuous text during guided reading instruction. Thus, the instructors of both of these courses are spending more time during class sessions discussing, role-playing, and practicing prompting.

In recent years, the TAMUCC reading program has engaged in curriculum mapping that has strengthened the preparation of EC-6 certification majors in their reading coursework. IHEART has filled a need that was identified in the program for more intensive training in tutoring small groups and earlier field-work in schools. Gaps were shown in the area of working with early literacy intervention, including tasks and expectations for the newly implemented Science of Teaching Reading (STR) exam. In working with first-grade children who demonstrate difficulty with early

literacy skills, word recognition, and comprehension, IHEART added a layer of rigorous and robust preparation available to the University reading program and its EC-6 certification graduates.

EC-6 reading program preparation is evident in the scores of EC-6 certification majors on state exams required to obtain a teaching license in the state of Texas. For all test-takers and IHEART participants, there was a 100% pass rate on the STR certification exam in 2020-2021. Overall, for reading test-takers in 2020-21, there was a 92% pass rate on the Pedagogy and Professional Responsibilities (PPR) exam, with the IHEART participants scoring higher than the overall rate. IHEART participants also performed above average on the English Language Arts portion of the core content exam, including a higher pass rate on the first attempt.

### **Working with Partner Schools**

Building and sustaining healthy working relationships with schools is a top priority for faculty in our educator preparation program. This particular partnership (IHEART) is mutually collaborative, in that the University provides tutors to supplement classroom instruction for children who need it (Nelson-Royes, 2013), and the school provides the physical space and opportunities for research. There are measures that we take to ensure that our partnership is nurtured. We collaborate with the school faculty to plan for the program and discuss items such as student selection, instructional materials, and scheduling. We visit the school frequently to support the tutors and talk with the faculty about IHEART. We also invite all classroom teachers at the school to an informative meeting each semester that outlines the program's mission and how we might support the work they do in their classrooms and the ways in which they might support the tutors.

### **Conclusion**

The IHEART program supports the educator preparation program at our university by placing preservice teachers in the field early to work with young readers in the communities in which many will teach upon receiving their certification. By selecting our tutors carefully, teaching them to implement best practices into their lessons that they have learned in their coursework, providing coaching and feedback, and collecting and analyzing program data for both children and tutors, we are meeting the standards for quality educator preparation that the Texas A&M system has prioritized. What makes IHEART even stronger is that our preservice teacher tutors are having a positive impact on student reading achievement. These qualities make IHEART a productive and fruitful school and university partnership.

Link to IHEART website:

<https://www.tamucc.edu/education/departments/cils/iheart.php>

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