



# A Closer Look at Elementary Content

## Graduate Elementary Programs

**KEY FINDINGS:** None of the 247 graduate elementary programs reviewed under this standard screen candidates for prior knowledge of the content needed to teach elementary grades. Absent basic screening practices, few graduate programs (15 percent) ensure that their candidates possess the content knowledge needed to teach elementary grades through content coursework completed before or during the program.

### Why teacher prep programs should have strong elementary content criteria

Elementary teachers have to plan lessons, guide students to understanding, and answer the question “why?” on a broad array of topics. In contrast to most middle and high school teachers, elementary teachers must have a foundational understanding of mathematics, social studies, language arts, and the sciences.<sup>1</sup> A fifth-grade teacher, for instance, may have to present the basic concepts of geometry and elements of biology, while also teaching reading fluency, American history, and geography. To prepare a teacher to provide this well-rounded education, elementary teachers’ training should mirror the subjects that they will be expected to teach.

Accepting candidates who will be unable to pass state content knowledge licensing tests is an inefficient use of program resources. To fill gaps without extending the length of the graduate program, programs need to provide targeted direction to candidates who demonstrate weaknesses in specific areas certain to be on the licensing test.

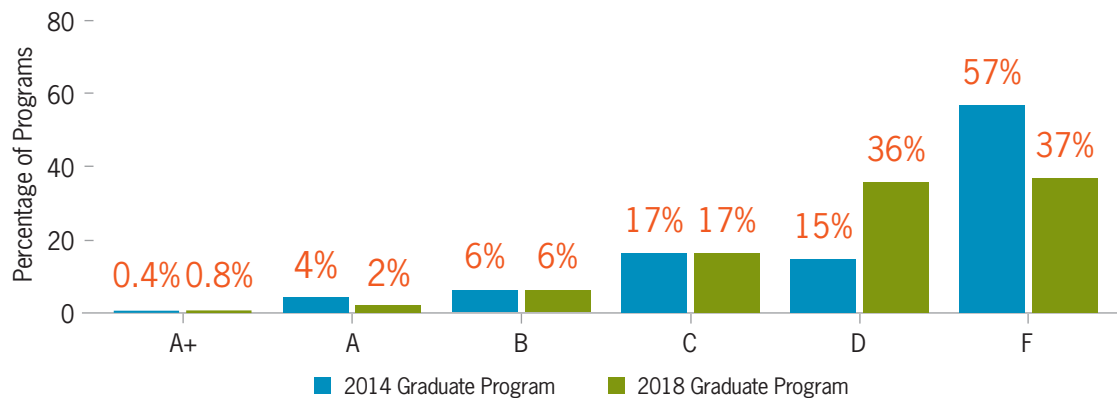
### Methodology

We review course and admissions requirements to determine whether program ensure aspiring teachers know the subjects that they will teach. Specifically, elementary teachers need grounding in literature and composition, history and geography, and the sciences (mathematics knowledge is reviewed under a separate standard). We also consider whether aspiring teachers are required to have a concentration in a subject area that they could teach. To earn an A on this standard, a graduate program needs to verify that applicants enter the program possessing basic content knowledge. Admissions requirements and content knowledge licensing tests taken prior to admission into the teacher prep program all count toward these content areas. Click [here](#) for more information.

<sup>1</sup> Teacher prep programs’ coursework in training teachers to teach elementary math is explored in a separate findings report, [A Closer Look at Elementary Mathematics](#). Coursework in training teachers to teach reading is explored in [A Closer Look at Early Reading](#).

## How many graduate programs either screen for prior knowledge or require minimal coursework in the essential content for teaching elementary grades?

(N=281 2014 graduate programs; N=247 2018 graduate programs)



Compared to the previous review of graduate elementary programs, there was little to no movement on the part of programs in this area. The high number of programs moving from an F to a D in this edition is explained by a change to in our methodology to accommodate more variations in how programs can earn each grade. The three percent of graduate programs earning an A in this edition of the *Teacher Prep Review* represents a slight decline from the nearly five percent of programs receiving a similar grade in 2014. Little difference was found in the distribution of grades for undergraduate and graduate programs under this standard.

A sample of 28 alternative route programs was reviewed under this standard. The results were encouraging, as a sizable majority of programs required passing scores on content knowledge tests as a condition of program admission, though this is largely due to state requirements that licensing tests must be passed prior to becoming a teacher of record.<sup>2</sup> In total, 21 alternative route programs earned an A, three programs earned a C, and four programs earned an F.

### Key components of analysis

As is it uncommon for graduate programs to conduct a transcript review that would require applicants to complete additional coursework to address gaps in content knowledge, this standard primarily considers the number of credits required for program admissions in each of three content areas that are comprised of *literature and composition*, *history and geography*, and *the sciences*. Programs satisfy this standard through the requirement of at least nine credits in each of these three subject areas for a total of 27 credits, and by additionally requiring either a concentration in one teachable subject area or specific courses in all three subject areas.

More detailed information about the criteria for each grade can be found in the *Understanding program grades* section at the end of this document.

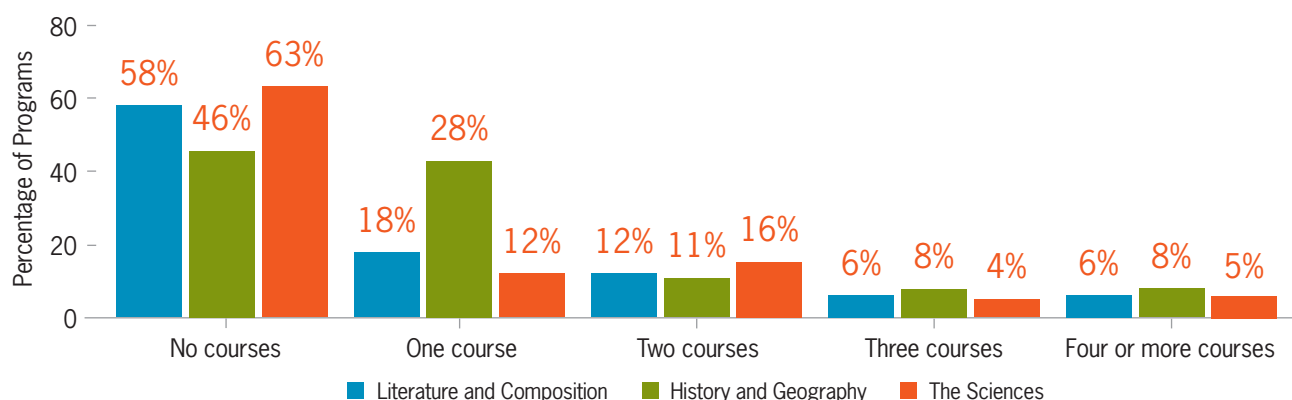
### A closer look at graduate elementary content subjects

Graduate programs set a low bar for program admission. None of the 247 programs in the sample require applicants to pass a licensing test prior to enrollment. As seen below, more than half of programs do not require applicants to have completed even a single English or science course. Further, only four programs (less than two percent) require program applicants to have earned an undergraduate major in one teachable elementary subject.

<sup>2</sup> By virtue of the structure of alternative route programs, many teacher candidates are considered the teacher of record (the teacher responsible for a classroom) while still in their training program, necessitating the need to pass state licensing tests at the onset of the program.

## How many courses do graduate programs require elementary teacher candidates to have completed in each subject area?

(N=247 graduate secondary programs)



On average, just a quarter of graduate programs require two or more courses in each of the three content areas. This paints an overly optimistic picture, though, as only 15 percent of programs independently meet a two course threshold for each subject. This suggests these programs simply presume college graduates possess adequate knowledge to teach each of the core subjects, as basic thresholds are typically not established.

The lack of oversight is further highlighted by the finding that no graduate programs require content knowledge licensing tests to be passed as a condition of program admission, even while such tests are required in many states in order to be certified. This would be understandable if graduate programs required content coursework to be completed while enrolled, but that is very rarely the case.

### Exemplary programs

Programs earning an A+ satisfy the requirements for this standard and additionally meet the criteria for undergraduate programs, which includes:

#### Literature and composition content

Courses covering world literature, American literature, composition, and children's literature provide elementary teachers with broad-based knowledge in writing and literature. Where detailed transcript review information is available, graduate programs should require program applicants to demonstrate knowledge in at least two of these four topics, either through undergraduate coursework or a test taken prior to admission.<sup>3</sup>

#### History and geography content

The five topic areas considered include early American history, modern American history, early world history, modern world history, and world geography. In a review of applicants' undergraduate coursework, graduate programs should require coverage of at least three of these five topics. It is important that these courses focus on content rather than methods of instruction.

#### Science content

Content in the sciences is comprised of biology, chemistry, and physics (which, for the purpose of analysis, includes physical science, geology, earth science, astronomy, climatology, geology, and oceanography). Requiring coursework (including one lab course) in at least two topic areas is considered adequate to ensure that aspiring teachers have the science knowledge they will need.

<sup>3</sup> For each subject area, programs can also ensure that candidates master content if they require a general knowledge exam with subject-specific scores prior to admission into the program, such as the Missouri Educator Gateway Assessments (MoGEA) or the College Basic Academic Subjects Examination (C-BASE) prior to admission to the graduate program. Credit was applied only if the programs accepted or exceeded the qualifying score set by the state.

Only two graduate programs check all of those boxes to earn an A+ under this standard:

- UT – **Western Governors University**
- WA – **Evergreen State College**

### Understanding graduate program grades for elementary content

- A+** Program meets the criteria for a B and specifies topic requirements in all three subject areas that satisfies the criteria for an A under the [undergraduate scoring rubric](#).
- A** Program meets the criteria for a B and earns a score level boost by requiring a concentration (typically a major) in a teachable elementary subject.
  - or -
  - Program meets the criteria for a B and specifies topic requirements in all three subject areas.
- B** Nine or more credits required in all three subject areas
  - or -
  - Nine or more credits required in two subject areas and six to eight credits required in one subject area
- C** Nine or more credits required in two subject areas and three to five credits required in one subject area
  - or -
  - Six to eight credits required in three subject areas
  - or -
  - Six to eight credits required in two subject areas and three or more credits required in one subject area
  - or -
  - Nine or more credit requirement in one subject area and three to eight credits required in two subject areas
  - or -
  - Nine or more credits required in two subject areas and no credits required in one subject area
- D** Three to five credits required in three different subject areas
  - or -
  - Six or more credits required in one subject area, three to five credits required in one subject area, and zero to five credits required in one subject area
  - or -
  - Six to eight credits required in two subject areas and zero to two credits required in one subject area
  - or -
  - Nine or more credits required in one subject area, six to eight credits required in one subject area, and no credits required in one subject area
  - or -
  - Three to five credits required in one subject area, zero to five credits required in one subject area, and zero to two credits required in one subject area
  - or -
  - Six or more credits required in one subject area and zero to two credits required in two subject areas
- F** Zero to two credits required in all subject areas.

*Scoring note: Program grades are boosted by one level when candidates are required to have at least a concentration (typically a major) in a teachable elementary subject*



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