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.  

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.

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, our analysis identified just 10 acceptable tests currently in use across the country—only six of which are strong measures of aspiring teachers’ knowledge of reading instruction.
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, 15 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 15 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\(^\text{11}\) (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.)
One test would be acceptable, but it includes too much emphasis on content contrary to research-based practices without indicating that these are counterproductive practices, which might encourage prep programs to teach these problematic practices and aspiring teachers to learn and then implement them.

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 15 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
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test name</th>
<th>Overall rating</th>
<th>Reason for rating</th>
<th>State(s) using test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foundations of Reading (190)</td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>Test addresses more than 75% of topics in each component and does not combine reading/ELA with other subjects</td>
<td>AL, AR, AZ, CT, MA, MS, NC, NH, OH, UT, WI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Praxis Elementary Education: Teaching Reading: Elementary (5205)</td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>Test addresses more than 75% of topics in each component and does not combine reading/ELA with other subjects</td>
<td>CO, LA, MD, NM, TN, VA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Praxis Elementary Education: Teaching Reading: K-12 (5206)</td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>Test addresses more than 75% of topics in each component and does not combine reading/ELA with other subjects</td>
<td>LA*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading Instruction Competence Assessment (RICA) - Video Performance Assessment</td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>Test addresses more than 75% of topics in each component and does not combine reading/ELA with other subjects</td>
<td>CA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading Instruction Competence Assessment (RICA) - Written Examination</td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>Test addresses more than 75% of topics in each component and does not combine reading/ELA with other subjects</td>
<td>CA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Science of Teaching Reading Exam</td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>Test addresses more than 75% of topics in each component and does not combine reading/ELA with other subjects</td>
<td>TX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certification Examinations for Oklahoma Educators (CEOE) Elementary Education, Subtest 1: Reading/Language Arts (150)</td>
<td>Acceptable</td>
<td>Test adequately addresses the five core components of reading and does not combine reading/ELA with other subjects</td>
<td>OK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts Tests for Educator Licensure (MTEL)</td>
<td>Acceptable</td>
<td>Test adequately addresses the five core components of</td>
<td>MA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test Description</td>
<td>Rating</td>
<td>Notes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading Specialist (62)</td>
<td></td>
<td>reading and does not combine reading/ELA with other subjects</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michigan Test for Teacher Certification (MTTC) Lower Elementary (PK-3) [117-120], Subtest 2: Literacy</td>
<td>Acceptable</td>
<td>Test adequately addresses the five core components of reading and does not combine reading/ELA with other subjects MI</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota Teacher Licensure Examinations (MTLE) Elementary Education (Grades K-6), Subtest 1</td>
<td>Acceptable</td>
<td>Test adequately addresses the five core components of reading and does not combine reading/ELA with other subjects MN</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida Teacher Certification Examinations (FTCE) Elementary Education K-6, Subtest 1: Language arts and reading (601)</td>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>Test does not adequately address all five core components of reading (does not adequately address phonemic awareness) FL**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia Assessments for the Certification of Educators (GACE) Elementary Education Assessment, Test 1 (001)</td>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>Test does not adequately address all five core components of reading (does not adequately address fluency) GA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idaho Comprehensive Literacy Assessment (ICLA)</td>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>Test adequately addresses the five core components of reading, but also includes four or more contrary practices ID***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois Licensure Testing System (ILTS) Elementary Education (grades 1-6) (305)</td>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>Test adequately addresses the five core components of reading but combines reading with other subjects IL</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michigan Test for Teacher Certification (MTTC) Upper Elementary (3-6) [121-124], Subtest 2: Literacy</td>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>Test does not adequately address all five core components of reading (does not adequately address phonemic awareness, phonics, MI</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missouri Educator Gateway</td>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>Test adequately addresses the                                                                                                   MO</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment (MEGA): Elementary Education Multi-Content (073 &amp; 074), Subtest II (Field 074)</td>
<td>five core components of reading but combines reading with other subjects</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Evaluation Series: Elementary Education, Subtest I (102)</td>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>Test adequately addresses the five core components of reading but combines reading with other subjects</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York State Teacher Certification Exams (NYSTCE) Multi-Subject: Teachers of Childhood (Grades 1-6), Part One: Literacy and English Language Arts (221)</td>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>Test does not adequately address all five core components of reading (does not adequately address phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, or vocabulary)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania Educator Certification Test (PECT) PreK-4, Module 2</td>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>Test adequately addresses the five core components of reading but combines reading with other subjects</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Praxis Early Childhood Education (5025)</td>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>Test does not adequately address all five core components of reading (does not adequately address phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Praxis Elementary Education Assessment (5006), Reading and Language Arts &amp; Social Studies (5007)</td>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>Test does not adequately address all five core components of reading (does not adequately address phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, or comprehension)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Praxis Elementary Education: Content Knowledge (5018)</td>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>Test does not adequately address all five core components of reading (does not adequately address fluency, vocabulary)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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 phonemic awareness, fluency, 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 has been revising its ICLA exam and will provide an updated version of this exam for review shortly.

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, now in use across 11 states. However, 28 states use weaker tests that do not fully signal teachers’ preparedness to teach reading. Two 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**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test quality</th>
<th>Number of states</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strong test</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mix of strong and acceptable tests</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptable test</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mix of acceptable and weak tests</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak test</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No test</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In twelve states, candidates can choose from several different tests. In most of these cases, all of the test options are weak, 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.

**Less than half of states use strong licensure tests**

![Map of the United States](image-url)
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. 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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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.”


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: 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.
