

Fine Points: Test-out options and their rationales

Teaching is enhanced by deep knowledge of the content to be conveyed. (For more on the associations between content knowledge and effective teaching, see the Standardsbooks for the standards discussed in this brief: Standards 5, 6, 7 and 8 for traditional programs.) Content knowledge is also an important prerequisite to getting the most out of teacher preparation. For example, if teacher candidates have a poor grasp of the concepts at hand, they may struggle to understand discussions in a methods course about how to teach against common student misconceptions or how to discern the underlying sources of student errors.

How NCTQ evaluates content preparation

Candidates typically enter professional coursework in the junior year of an undergraduate program or at the beginning of a graduate program. Ideally, they would be admitted having completed content coursework or having demonstrated on a rigorous test that they have mastered content. To that end, NCTQ considers both coursework and testing in its evaluations of programs on the four content-preparation standards for traditional programs in *Teacher Prep Review 2016*. This brief addresses the basis on which coursework and testing should each play a role in evaluation is determined.

How coursework and testing are considered in evaluation is determined by the answers to two questions: First, is the content preparation offered as part of professional preparation within the education school? Second, is it realistic for the candidate to complete the content preparation prior to admission to professional preparation?

Answers to these questions are shown in the table below for the four areas of content preparation considered in our standards: 1) early reading; 2) elementary math; 3) elementary language arts, science and social studies; and 4) secondary language arts, math, science and social sciences. (Note that early reading coursework evaluated on the content of the science of reading also contains methods instruction on how to teach reading.)

Area of content preparation	Is coursework part of professional prep in ed school?	How is coursework evaluated?	Can evaluation of testing requirements substitute for evaluation of coursework?	When must testing be completed to allow its evaluation as a substitute for coursework evaluation?
Early reading (for elementary and special education (sped) candidates – Std. 2)	Yes	Requirements and course content	No	Not applicable
Elementary math content (for elementary and sped candidates – Std. 5)	Rarely (<15% of programs)	Requirements and course content	Yes, if <i>program</i> requires adequate licensing test* prior to admission to professional prep	Before admission
Elementary content in language arts, science, social studies (for elementary and sped candidates – Std. 6)	No	Requirements	Yes, if <i>program</i> requires adequate licensing test* prior to admission to professional prep	Before admission
Secondary content in language arts, math, science and social sciences (for secondary and sped candidates – Stds. 7 and 8)	No	Requirements	Yes, if <i>program's state</i> requires adequate licensing test prior to becoming teacher of record	Before candidate becomes teacher of record

* In those states offering multiple-subject tests with each subject separately scored, this can be the licensing test generally required of elementary teacher candidates at the completion of professional preparation.

As the table depicts, content in only one of these areas – early reading – is *always* provided as part of professional preparation. Mastery of this content therefore cannot be made a condition of admission to the teacher preparation program. Moreover, reading instruction is the core task for elementary teachers. Although a test can evaluate content mastery, only adequate coursework and its application assignments can ensure that the candidate has had sufficient practice in teaching reading. For this reason, even a rigorous early reading test required at the conclusion of preparation cannot substitute for high-quality coursework. Therefore, a favorable NCTQ evaluation of content in early reading is necessary for any conclusion to be drawn in evaluation that preparation is adequate; the nature and timing of any testing on early reading plays no role in evaluation of preparation in the early reading standard.

In strong contrast to early reading content, elementary teacher candidate preparation across the four core elementary subjects (math, language arts, science and social studies) is entirely independent of professional coursework and can be completed before that coursework begins. To satisfy NCTQ's standards, programs need only require that candidates demonstrate an adequate level of proficiency in these subjects through:

- tests in high school (Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate);
- tests in college (any one of a variety of standardized placement tests like the CLEP);
- one or more of the four subject area tests of the multiple-subject elementary content tests now being used for licensing in a number of states; and/or
- undergraduate coursework.

If a program mandates that candidates satisfy requirements only through coursework, preparation that meets the NCTQ standards can be fulfilled in ten courses. Although this may appear burdensome, all but a few of the courses usually also satisfy “general education” requirements that the candidate must fulfill to graduate, reducing the actual burden.

In summary, NCTQ's evaluation of content in math, language arts, science and social studies can be fulfilled by program requirements that include any combination of coursework and testing.

Because secondary content preparation is also independent of professional preparation, it would ideally be completed prior to admission; this would also allow for its evaluation in the same manner as elementary content preparation. However, this expectation is not realistic, because content preparation at the secondary level typically constitutes completion of an academic major entailing coursework stretching into the junior or senior years, the period in which professional coursework is also taken. NCTQ's evaluation of secondary preparation is therefore based on whether candidates are required by the state to pass a subject-specific test (or several such tests if the certification allows the candidate to teach in more than one subject) prior to becoming the teacher of record in a classroom. NCTQ evaluates secondary program coursework requirements only in cases in which the candidate is not required to pass the requisite licensing test(s).



National Council on Teacher Quality

1120 G Street, NW, Suite 800

Washington, D.C. 20005

Tel: 202 393-0020 Fax: 202 393-0095

Web: www.nctq.org